

The Youth

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School shootings have become an epidemic. As school systems, mental health professionals, advocacy groups, and the federal and state governments engage in efforts to prevent these incidents, it is important to understand the abilities and needs of middle and high school age youth.

In general, “regardless of their social situations, young people aspire for spiritual and intellectual growth and to make a contribution to the fortunes of humanity. They have many wonderful powers, and channeling them properly is an important concern, for when misdirected or manipulated by others, they can cause much social distress,” the Baha’i writings say.

In particular, junior youth - those ages 12 through 14 – “experience rapid physical, intellectual, and emotional changes. Their spiritual powers expand. A new level of awareness fosters in them an increased interest in profound questions and in their talents and abilities. Their faculties of observation are broadened and deepened, and their intellectual capacities are trained and awakened. During this short and critical three-year period, ideas about the individual and society that may very well shape the rest of their lives are formed. However, delight at these new powers is often combined with feelings of worry, discomfort, and doubt that may produce contradictions in behavior. Directing their new abilities towards selfless service to humanity is therefore needed at this age. It requires that they receive the right kind of education and nurturing”

Over 20 years ago, the global Baha’i community adopted a systematic approach for building healthy and vibrant communities. It calls for holding of “study circles” for those age 15 and up, and a “junior youth spiritual empowerment program”, in addition to children’s classes and devotional gatherings. These activities are concerned with the spiritual and moral empowerment of individuals and are open to all.

Study circles consist of a sequence of courses that introduce various spiritual concepts and build capacity for service. The youth learn that “service to humanity is service to God”, that “no deed in the world is nobler than service to the common good”, and that “the highest righteousness is to arise and energetically devote themselves to the service of the masses”. They are encouraged “to draw on the zeal and enthusiasm characteristic of the period of youth and to make decisive contributions to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization.”

Since the junior youth often look to the older youth for examples of how to act, the older youth are trained as the “animators” of the junior youth program so that they can help their younger counterparts strengthen their moral foundations.

Junior youth, in a mutually supportive group of peers, “study texts that introduce various fundamental concepts. They are aided to sharpen their spiritual perception, to identify forces shaping society, and to enhance their powers of expression, which, in turn, enable them to understand and describe with clarity the world around them. Through acts of service, they learn together to tangibly contribute to the well-being of society.”

In 2013, tens of thousands of Baha'i youth and their like-minded friends participated in a series of 114 youth conferences spanning the globe.

The conferences were an opportunity for the youth “to reflect on the astonishing powers and unique capacities associated with the period of youth and to consider deeply those societal forces that exert themselves on the youth—forces that aim to distract them from significant social change, weaken their commitment to service, ensnare them in consumerism, and dissuade them from belief in their own God-given capacity and that of others.”

The youth then considered “practical ways in which to counter those effects, build bonds of friendship and profound connection, promote unity, and equip themselves with the concepts needed to succeed in constructing a new world through collective endeavour.”

Let us unite in our efforts to educate and guide our youth and junior youth. Let us empower them to abandon the path that leads to harm to themselves and others, and instead arise to become conscious builders of a new civilization.