



What We Can Learn from Tom and Huck

“TOM!”

No answer.

“TOM!”

No answer.

“What’s gone with that boy, I wonder? You TOM!”

No answer.

—Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)

I think we can all empathize with poor Aunt Polly. How many times have we called to our adolescent children repeatedly, our voices growing louder and louder, and still received no answer? More than a quarter century before adolescence even became a field of scientific study, Mark Twain captured what for many parents was a universal view of teenagers: they were troublesome and troubled. And if Aunt Polly had a problem dealing with young Tom, well then, when it came to his friend Huck Finn, there was just no hope.

Yet one of the features that makes Mark Twain’s novels endure is that their author surprised us each time we turned the page, following these two young adolescents on their adventures. Yes, both boys

were more than a handful to deal with. Aunt Polly was always at her wits' end contending with all the mischief her nephew and his friend kicked up. However, by the time we finish *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we discover that Tom's and Huck's problem behaviors were only a part—and a very small part—of who they were. Sure, the boys were mischievous, but they also showed great courage. At great risk to their own lives and even in the face of social disapproval, they stood up against crime and racial discrimination. They had character; they were loyal to friends and to family. They were also ingenious and able to solve problems, and they had enough “stick-to-it-iveness” to keep their promises and commitments, even against great odds. And they possessed the ability to love.

We can easily appreciate why Twain was such a captivating storyteller. He roped us in by making us believe that he was going to recount the adventures of two problem-filled adolescents. Instead, what he showed us was that although the boys had problems and flaws, they possessed extraordinary strengths. He encouraged us to overcome our own stereotypical expectations of teenagers and see these two boys as complete human beings. Overall, they were young people to admire and to value.

A METAPHOR FOR OUR TIMES

Twain's novels about Tom and Huck may be regarded as a metaphor for all American youth and perhaps all Americans. More than a century ago, his books conveyed the message that we should look beyond what may be an annoying characteristic or a shortcoming of our children and even of ourselves. Twain reminds us to keep our eyes wide open and allow the breadth of the person to be understood and appreciated. There is more to young people than just those irksome aspects of their behavior that may cause you worry. America and its youth had problems in the post-Civil War years during which Twain wrote these novels. Yet the individuals in this

nation, and the nation itself, had considerable strengths, and these strengths, he believed, outweighed the problems.

Twain gave us this message of hope more than 125 years ago. Today, there are exciting results coming in from new research about America's youth. Much of this research comes from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, a research project within my own laboratory, the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University. Over the course of this book, I will tell you about the results of my research and, as well, the research of my colleagues across the nation who are learning similar things about the strengths present in all young people and about our hope for enhancing the positive development of all our children.

These innovative findings reinforce Twain's wisdom. Unfortunately, in the years that have passed between the publication of Twain's novels and the emergence of today's new data, many of us—parents and scientists included—have lost sight of the lessons we learned about young people from Tom and Huck.

All too often, parents have acted as if the only important aspects of their children's behaviors were those that caused problems. We think of adolescence as a time of storm and stress. Scientists, too, have regarded young people as lacking, as deficient, as unable to behave correctly and in a healthy manner. We characterize them as dangerous to others and as endangered themselves (because of their self-destructive behaviors).

Given this perspective on teenagers, researchers devoted their energies to finding ways to prevent young people from becoming all the bad things they could become. Therapists, too, used this deficit approach when treating young people. If their problems could not be prevented, then therapists searched for ways to reduce the impact of their shortcomings. Everyone focused on the problems. Experts of all types did not look to see if, in succeeding chapters of life, there were unnoticed strengths and admirable qualities that should be reinforced.

The Good Teen seeks to correct this imbalance. We do not need to see our young people as, essentially, repositories of problems.

Instead of dwelling on their weaknesses, we can concentrate on their strengths.

There's no denying that adolescence can be a tumultuous time and that teenagers sometimes act out, at times egregiously. It's not all smooth sailing. Just ask Aunt Polly—Tom gave her fits. All children do, at times. No adolescent is free of problems. So what's the best way to handle this reality?

It would have been incorrect for Aunt Polly to resort to strict punishment (once the preferred method for managing children's unruliness) or to think of it as her only option for treating Tom's behavior—although of course she certainly considered this alternative throughout the novel. It would be just as wrongheaded today to accept child-rearing options such as “tough love,” “boot camp,” and other flashy practices that advocate punishment to quell what we regard as children's inevitable rambunctious, disobedient, and troubling behavior. Such approaches are misguided and downright dangerous now that we have so much research to support the idea that all youth—no matter what their backgrounds or characteristics—have the potential to develop in more positive and healthy directions.

The Good Teen will explain how you can help your teenagers write an optimistic script for this phase of their maturation. Even if your children remind you of Tom and Huck, they will mostly likely grow up to lead successful, fulfilling lives, contributing positively to their own development and to that of their families, communities, and ultimately our nation and society. By taking to heart the messages emerging from this new research, which we will discuss, you can collaborate with your teenager at home, in school, and in your neighborhood to make certain that the story ends in a positive way. How? Keep your eyes open. Look for the bigger picture—the full story—about your child. Don't draw a conclusion about how the story will end by just reading the first chapter. Keeping this rule in mind may be very difficult at times, but it will pay off.

Consider Nancy. It was a Sunday evening, and Nancy found herself in the kitchen preparing a batch of pancakes for dinner. Ever since they were little, her kids—seventeen-year-old Eric and fifteen-year-old Donna—loved the idea of having breakfast at night. It had

been a family tradition for more years than Nancy could remember. When the kids were younger, they used to help her, adding the ingredients, mixing the batter, and setting the table.

Now her husband, Rob, put out the plates because both kids were busy with more exciting activities. Eric had spent the day with his friends shooting a video for their English class. They'd been holed up for hours in Eric's bedroom—although Nancy couldn't imagine why anyone would want to spend time in his disaster of a room, decorated with dirty socks, laundry, and fast-food containers strewn on every available surface. Eric wasn't a straight-A student, but he loved taking challenging classes, such as AP English and history. In fact, he was talking about becoming a high school teacher after finishing college.

Donna had had a busy day also—soccer practice in the morning, and then her weekly stint at the soup kitchen where she volunteered. She'd just called to say that she'd be a few minutes late. "She left her backpack at soccer practice—again—and has to go back to the coach's house to get it," Nancy told Rob. "She's so forgetful! She knows she's supposed to be home on time for dinner. And I asked Eric to clean his room before his friends came over, and he said that he would. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I know, I know," Rob said. "They're frustrating, each in a different way. But you know what? They're really great kids. Think about it: at least Donna called. And no matter what Eric's room looks like, he's incredibly creative. He's basically directing and producing the video himself."

It was true, Nancy had to admit. Her kids may not have been perfect, but they were terrific. Years ago, Nancy remembered, people warned her about the maelstrom that would overtake family life when her kids became teenagers. "Just wait!" her friends had told her with dark foreboding. "You'll see. It's a roller coaster, a time characterized by endless fights, erratic behavior, endless limit testing, risky experimentation, disrespect, abrasive back talk, loss of academic focus, hair-raising moodiness, and wanton acts of outrageous behavior, not to mention life-threatening experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sex. Little kids, little problems. Big kids, big problems."

But on the whole, adolescence hadn't been as bad as she'd been led to fear. Quite the opposite. In many ways, Nancy was enjoying her children more than she ever had. To watch them grow into people with their own opinions, to take their places in the community and at school, to become aware of and active in the larger world, to forge relationships with new people—it was gratifying in ways Nancy couldn't have imagined and never would have anticipated.

Does this family sound familiar? It could be yours. According to my research, it probably is, even though you may not realize it. Sometimes I think we all resemble Aunt Polly, standing on the porch screaming at Tom to come do his chores—and seeing our teenagers not as they are but as we expect them to be.

IT IS A MISTAKE TO EMBRACE THE STEREOTYPE

Think about it: when was the last time you heard a parent praise his or her teenager? When was the last time *you* did?

Most likely you're like Nancy. Whenever she met a friend in the library who asked how Donna was doing, Nancy would immediately say, "Forgetful and inconsiderate, as always." If she was asked to describe Eric, the first things she thought of were what a slob he could be and how he often lost track of time—as if these constituted his entire personality rather than just two aspects of it. Only during rare moments, such as during her conversation with Rob, was she able to stop dwelling on her children's faults and see their strengths.

Sometimes I am convinced that many parents do not even have a useful vocabulary to describe teens who aren't "troubled." Although we're comfortable acknowledging academic achievement (usually in the form of school grades), when it comes to other aspects of their lives, we mostly describe "good" kids as either those who have learned to manage or cope with their shortcomings or ones who don't have problems. That is, we resort to negatives: good kids *don't* do drugs, *don't* hang out with the wrong crowd, and *don't* engage in risky behavior. To many parents, the absence of bad things is the definition of a good kid. They think, "My child is doing well because she's not in

trouble.” Do we even have enough words to depict all the important, valuable, admirable, and positive things that a young person can do? Have we forgotten how to affirm their positive characteristics?

This collective amnesia is more serious than you may at first realize. Our lack of vocabulary isn't innocuous—it's a symptom of a much larger public and scientific problem that has serious implications, both for individual teenagers and for our society at large. By focusing our conversations with friends on risks and dangers, and by our fascination with reading the incessant media accounts that emphasize the negatives of the teen years, we've implicitly accepted a theory of adolescence that's based on deficits. When we view teenagers as deficient—as if something's wrong with or missing from them—it affects them. Acknowledging our low expectations, hearing nothing but their shortcomings, they feel vulnerable. Ultimately, they may come to believe that it is inevitable that they will become involved in problematic or dangerous behavior. They may incorporate the sense of actually being “at risk” as living only a step away from getting in trouble or creating problems for others, whether it involves taking drugs, dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, or getting caught up in violent behavior.

Imagine if everywhere you turned people thought poorly of you—if every time you read an article or saw a TV news report about people your age, you realized that no one expected very much of you. Surrounded by these impressions, it wouldn't take long for you to feel burdened by the incessant accusations and suspicions. Some teens become convinced that their parents are just waiting to discover incriminating evidence or are always on the verge of asking invasive and accusatory questions: “Are you smoking cigarettes? Are you smoking dope? Are you having sex?”

What a dispiriting, disheartening outlook! Teens who grow up in this atmosphere can have their self-esteem deflated, their motivation and spirit dampened. After all, when people don't expect the best of us, we often respond in kind.

Sheila, for example, wanted her fourteen-year-old son, Andy, to help out with household chores. Since he loved their cat, Star, Sheila asked her son to be responsible for cleaning out the kitty litter box

twice a week. At first, he was fairly responsible. But after a couple of weeks, Sheila found herself having to remind him. Within a month, she was nagging him all the time.

One day Andy was in the kitchen and overheard his mother on the phone talking to a friend, complaining about what a pain it was to constantly remind Andy to do his chores. “I’m sorry that I ever asked him to do this,” he heard his mother say. “We always end up yelling at each other. But what I’m really worried about is that he doesn’t know how to be responsible. He has to learn that life’s not all play, that sometimes we have to do chores that we don’t enjoy.”

Andy waited until later that evening to say to his mom, “I heard you on the phone, and you have it all wrong. It’s not that I don’t want to help out around the house—it’s just that I hate doing the kitty litter. I can’t stand the smell.”

Sheila was speechless. She’d known since he was a baby that Andy was very sensitive to smells. Of course it made sense that being in charge of changing the litter was not the best chore for him. After talking with him and asking about his preferences, they decided together that Andy would do the laundry. And because he had no natural aversion to this job, Sheila almost never had to remind him to do it.

But what also struck Sheila most painfully was how quickly she’d assumed that Andy had just been defiant and oppositional . . . because that’s how teenagers are *supposed* to act. They’re supposed to rebel, to resist doing chores, or doing anything their parents ask of them. They look for any opportunity to turn a discussion into an argument, and leave their parents no choice but to nag. Because Sheila accepted everything she’d heard about teenagers at face value, she never thought to wonder if there was another reason for Andy’s behavior beyond “being a teenager.”

WHY THE DEFICIT MODEL IS DEFICIENT

The negative implications of relying on a deficit model of teenage development involves more than disheartening individual adolescents and misleading their parents; it also leeches into decisions we

make as a society. If we view teens as “broken,” then it’s our responsibility to “fix” them. This thinking explains the plethora of governmental and private programs designed to help teens who are in trouble, or to prevent problems from developing. Of course, some teens do have problems that require us to act. There are also situations in life that can and should be prevented. But today’s governmental policies and social programs designed to address deficits are flawed in two ways.

First, problems are not the whole story. Focusing on a single “bad” behavior instead of placing it in the context of the whole person is like substituting a piece of a jigsaw puzzle for the completed picture. When we allow ourselves to become caught up in analyzing any single behavior, we never seem to find the time to consider the individual’s totality. In this way, many of today’s programs fall seriously short.

Second, these programs have not been very successful. Despite the hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars—your money and mine—spent each year on problem prevention or problem remediation, the problems are by and large still with us. Although the numbers are decreasing slightly, kids are still taking drugs (although the drug of choice does seem to change periodically), still dropping out of school (especially in urban areas and among kids of color), still engaged in gang- and/or drug-related crime and violence, and still far too often getting pregnant and having babies. While there are some drug- and pregnancy-prevention programs that do help, the vast majority of programs have shown no convincing evidence of their effectiveness.

Because society has not spent enough time identifying factors that apply to teenagers who aren’t at risk, or agreeing on the positive characteristics we would like to see all young people possess, we do not have good tools to fully evaluate the programs or social policies that are aimed at promoting positive change. We can’t measure what we haven’t named.

We need to think about spending tax dollars not just on fixing problems or on preventing them. We should think—as a society and as parents—about how to promote healthy, positive, admirable, and

productive behaviors in our young people. And we need to find a new vocabulary to talk about our young people. Let's name the good things they can and should do. Let's measure these good things. Let's then find ways to make those good things more likely to be present in their lives.

We already have a few words to describe teenagers who are doing well, though as I mentioned earlier, we tend to reserve these for those youth who do well academically, in sports, or at their jobs. But when we talk about teens being good students, talented quarterbacks, or conscientious employees, we're still just talking about a very small portion of their behavior. What about the sense of themselves as competent and able people? What about their moral compass, their integrity, and their sense of spirituality? What about their social relationships, not just with you and their friends but, as well, with their teachers, coaches, mentors, and members of their community? Also, what about their compassion for those who have less than they do, their sense of caring, and their belief in a just world? And what about their commitment to keep themselves on the right track, to contribute to their own health and success and to the well-being of their family, community, and society?

We need words to describe all these characteristics of young people. We need to begin to talk about our teens by using these words, and we need to insist that policies and programs strive to identify, measure, and promote these important characteristics, as well as fix and prevent problems. Only then will we be able to think about teenagers as complete persons: living their lives every day, taking into account their strengths along with their weaknesses, weighing all they do wrong against all they get right. They're not problems to be fixed but resources to be developed. They're not immature or incomplete adults who need constant constraint and direction, but are active partners in their own positive transition to adulthood.

After all, as parents, this is how we thought of our children throughout every earlier stage of their lives. When they were infants, toddlers, and young children, we knew our role: to guide them through their developmental challenges to achieve mastery. We wanted nothing more than to see them walk, learn to use the toilet,

build their vocabularies. We helped them achieve those goals, collaboratively. We thought of them as full of potential, capable of growing in positive ways with our loving guidance. They still are.

Maybe we don't need to change our teens as much as we need to change the way we think about them. Maybe it's time to set aside our preconceived notions of what adolescence is like and see our kids as they really are and as they can be. *The Good Teen* will help you do this.

TEENS BY THE NUMBERS

When we open our eyes to all that really characterizes our youth—and when we view them with a new, positive, and strength-based vocabulary—a different picture of adolescence emerges. This picture, according to my research, and buttressed by my own experience as a father of three grown children, indicates that much of what we accept as common wisdom about adolescents is a myth. Adolescence isn't the nightmare it's advertised to be. Most teens—and there are about forty million of them between the ages of ten and nineteen—have an undeserved bad rap.

Much of this gloom-and-doom portrait is derived from studies and statistics that bombard us, regularly showing up in newspapers, in weekly magazines, on television, and on the Internet. Yet these statistics are tethered to the deficit model, reporting on what's wrong with teenagers. The majority of these statistics hone in on four major areas where teens encounter the biggest risks:

- Drug and alcohol use and abuse, including cigarette smoking
- Unsafe sex, teenage pregnancy, and teenage parenting
- School underachievement, failure, and dropout
- Delinquency, crime, and violence

If you were to try to imagine what percentage of today's youth engaged in any one of the above behaviors, or in all four, I'm guessing that your estimate would be pretty high. Most people's would be—and

for good reason: the media are constantly barraging us with doomsday news about our teens.

So when we learn that about 10 percent of all teens engage in all four of the risk categories above, we probably experience that as very bad news. True, 10 percent translates into four million teens. That's a lot of teenagers taking serious risks, right? Wait—there's more bad news. Half of all teens, or 50 percent, engage in two of the four risk categories listed above. That sounds terrible.

I'm not going to say that's wonderful news; it isn't. There are too many kids who are playing Russian roulette with their lives. But before you despair, turn the statistic around: if four million teens are engaging in all four categories of risk, thirty-six million kids *aren't* risking their well-being in all these four areas.

Take drug use, for example. It's down among older teens but on the rise among younger teens. Yet this uptick is very recent and reverses a decade-long downward trend. Similarly, teens today are less likely to smoke than they were a decade ago, although the rates of decline are slowing and, for younger teens, stopping altogether.

When it comes to teen pregnancy, the rates are declining and have been since 1990. Today, about one million female teenagers, or 10 percent of all girls between fifteen and nineteen, become pregnant . . . but 90 percent do not.

Let's talk about the dropout rate, which has also been falling. Today, only about 8 percent of American teens leave high school without a diploma. The bad news here is about inequity: though as many boys as girls drop out, children of color and those who are poor have higher rates of school failure. According to one study, black and Hispanic youth drop out at a rate of nearly 50 percent. A 2006 study from the Economic Policy Institute, however, shows that the rate is much lower, closer to 25 percent.

What about violence? The rates of juvenile crime and arrests for weapons charges, violence, and murder are all decreasing. Only 5 percent of youth are ever arrested and, of these, only 6–8 percent are arrested for violent crimes. Although high-profile school shootings have increased public concern for student safety, school-associated violent deaths account for less than 1 percent of homicides among

school-age children and youth. In a nationwide survey of high school students, 33 percent reported being in a physical fight one or more times in the twelve months preceding the survey, and 17 percent reported carrying a weapon (a gun, knife, or club) on one or more of the thirty days preceding the survey. As for bullying, which has also been in the news, an estimated 30 percent of sixth to tenth graders in the United States were involved in bullying as a bully, a target of bullying, or both.

Teenagers also face “internalizing” problems—that is, problems that affect no one but themselves. Take body image. One-half of teenage girls and one-quarter of teenage boys say that they’re dissatisfied with their bodies. And the rates of obesity among children and teenagers have tripled in the last twenty years. However, the rates of serious eating disorders are lower than you probably imagine. Despite all the media attention focused on anorexia, only one-half of 1 percent of teenage girls develop it.

In terms of mental health, according to *America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being 2005*, nearly 5 percent—or an estimated 2.7 million children—experience emotional or behavioral difficulties, as reported by their parents. These difficulties create problems at home, at school, and with peers. Additionally, boys as well as children from poor families were more likely than girls or children from well-off families to have definite or severe emotional and behavioral difficulties. These are sobering statistics. But if you ask how many children do *not* experience significant emotional or behavioral problems that interfere with their lives, the answer is 95 percent.

What are the statistics really telling us? For the past several years, important trends are headed in the right direction: fewer teens are dropping out, committing crimes, having sex, and abusing drugs. Yes, it’s true that about one million teenage girls still get pregnant every year and 40 percent of these pregnancies end in abortion. But it’s also true that nineteen million girls don’t get pregnant. Yes, more eighth graders are smoking, and this is a problem because the earlier you start, the more likely you are to continue; however, fewer tenth and twelfth graders smoke. More teens may become sexually

active at earlier ages than we'd like, but most aren't getting pregnant. And most teens aren't becoming alcoholics or drug addicts and are staying out of jail to finish high school.

Remember, in baseball, our national sport, a batter who retires with a batting average of .333 most likely receives a ticket to the Hall of Fame. But this sterling batting average means that on more than six out of ten trips to the plate, he made an out. That should help put the statistics in a better light.

Obviously, the snapshot of today's teens that emerges when you study the statistics is decidedly mixed: there's plenty of good news, but some bad news as well. Even in the bad news, however, I see rays of hope.

Take, for example, the statistics on teen voting. It's part of the national conversation that teens don't vote. Some pollsters attribute John Kerry's loss of the presidency in 2004 to the surprising and dismaying fact that despite Rock the Vote and other efforts targeted at getting youth to the polls, they didn't turn out. Statistics back up this claim: according to some studies, only about one-third of those eighteen to twenty-five years old vote.

But wait. When we look at another measure of civic engagement—the rate of volunteerism, for example—a very different picture emerges. About 33 to 50 percent of all youth ages fifteen to twenty-five engage in some type of voluntary community service. And these rates have been rapidly rising since the mid-1990s. In light of this, it's hard to conclude that teens are apathetic and withdrawn from civic life.

In short, the majority of teens aren't in serious trouble. They're works in progress, with strengths and weaknesses, each complex and complicated, each an individual, each possessing some characteristics and behaviors we love and cherish and some that drive us completely crazy. But on the whole, they're good kids who have good relationships with their parents, siblings, families, friends, teachers, and employers. They're upstanding citizens at home, at school, in the workplace, and in their larger communities. We ignore this reality at our own peril.

A POSITIVE VISION AND A NEW VOCABULARY

How do I know this? For the past thirty years, I've been studying adolescent development, much of that time using a new, strength-based theory of human development—Positive Youth Development. This perspective is rooted in a positive vision about youth, one stressing their strengths and potential for healthy growth. Instead of focusing only on preventing problems in children or fixing (treating) problematic behavior, Positive Youth Development strives to identify those conditions under which teens thrive—that is, grow to become model adults, who in turn bolster society's institutions. Boys or girls, able-bodied or disabled, impoverished or wealthy, religious or nonreligious, overachievers or underachievers, gay or straight, college-bound or not, whatever their culture, race, and environment—all have the potential to develop in healthy ways and contribute to society.

The roots of this theory, that our personal, moral, and civic lives are interconnected, arise from ideas as old as America itself. Benjamin Franklin, for example, believed that children who were honest and had integrity grew to be adults who could contribute meaningfully to their communities. We Americans have always believed that we have the capacity to overcome, to transcend our adversities and find ways to prosper and succeed. My research is, perhaps not surprisingly, finding that the wise ideas of the past correspond to the present reality, that there are data supporting this optimistic view of how young people develop—not just American youth, but all adolescents.

Thanks to a grant of several million dollars from the National 4-H Council—an organization that works with thousands of community-based 4-H clubs and programs across the country—I've been surveying thousands of teenagers nationwide. Much of what we have discovered will probably surprise you, as you will soon find out. For example, we've learned that teens who enjoy a healthy adolescence and a smooth transition to adulthood share similar characteristics and outlooks. We call this cluster the Five Cs, and they include competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. When all of

these are present, a sixth C emerges—contribution. Chances are good that most teens already possess at least some of these characteristics. But as you'll learn, there are many ways to enhance the strengths they have and to develop the ones they lack.

The Good Teen will also explain how we can help young people discover and tap the resources that already exist in their homes, schools, and communities so that they can create their own positive sense of self, enabling them to develop in healthy ways while contributing to society. Rather than turn our backs on our kids and call it “tough love” or send them off to “boot camp,” we need to work with our teens to help them find what nourishes them. When we meet them with hope and optimism, they will respond in kind. By adopting the positive development outlook, we're dismantling the old, crippling myths of adolescence and thinking of this time of life as a period of great promise—a developmental era to be not merely endured or tolerated but truly enjoyed.

Positive Youth Development has been a hot topic in academic circles for about a decade. However, its ideas haven't yet filtered down to the general public. And although this approach grew out of rigorous developmental research and is currently considered to be at the cutting edge of scientific theory and research, it is also a very practical and accessible set of ideas that can be adapted for use in all families. The first step is to understand the core principles of the positive development perspective.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I firmly believe that there's no teen who can't be launched on the course of positive development, and that it's never too late. *The Good Teen* can help you and your teen in many ways. In Chapter 2, for example, “Promoting Positive Development: From Theory to Practice,” we'll explore the origins and theoretical underpinnings of positive development and how I came to embrace this framework. It will also expose one of the most persistent and damaging myths of adolescence: that there is only one stormy path through adolescence.

This particular myth has dogged our understanding of teenagers since they first became a subject of study, and its harmful shadow has handicapped us until very recently. Once we acknowledge the many possible routes through adolescence, it seems logical to help steer teens down the path that promotes their positive development. I'll explain how my colleagues and I first derived and identified the Five Cs and how these characteristics are the building blocks of successful development. I'll also discuss the notion of developmental assets, which are the social nutrients teens need to grow, and show how and why something I call the Big Three, my unique approach to parenting, helps to nurture the Five Cs.

The next six chapters constitute the practical, hands-on heart of the book. Each will explore and define one of the Five Cs (and the sixth C, contribution) individually, according to the positive development framework. You'll be given ways to recognize whether your child is already manifesting one of these characteristics without your realizing it. As we saw with Aunt Polly, it is often the case that if we're not versed in this new, optimistic approach, we can overlook or misinterpret behavior. In addition, each chapter will give you comprehensive and specific suggestions for nurturing and enhancing each characteristic using the Big Three approach.

Sadly, not all teens are able to access the Five Cs. As the tabloids remind us every day, many teens struggle simply to survive. Others face daunting challenges most of us can't even imagine. Yet my research—which involves another longitudinal study, of young gang members in a large urban area of the Midwest—indicates that if given the right support and resources, even the most troubled teen can be launched on the path toward positive development. In Chapter 9, "When Real Trouble Brews," I'll discuss some serious problem situations and tough issues, not just minor annoyances, of living with teenagers, and give advice on how to deal with teens who have difficulty thriving.

Finally, it's not sufficient to address parents within the confines of their homes about their own children. In Chapter 10, "Beyond Our Own Families: A Call to Action," you'll learn how and why positive development needs to move out of our living rooms and into our

national debate. It's not enough for young people, their families, and their communities to enhance youth development. As a nation, we need to generate creative policies that focus on enhancing the positive characteristics of all young people. We need to begin a national dialogue about who young people are and what they can and should become, not merely what they must do. We need to join forces with our teenagers and with like-minded parents across the country so that we can align their strengths with the resources and supports in our own families and communities, and in the process build stronger neighborhoods, a stronger country, and a better world. To my way of thinking, we've spent too much time preventing risky behaviors and not enough time identifying the assets and building the skills of our youth and preparing them for the future. We need to focus less on drug prevention programs than on developing programs and policies that focus on young people's strengths.

As citizens, we need to do a better job of talking about the positive attributes of our young people. As we work together to accomplish this goal, we'll be looking at our teenagers through new eyes . . . and liking what we see.

After all, if Tom and Huck could turn out so well, so can all of our young people. So, too, can our nation.