Community
Betterment through
Social Action

Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program
"The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct."
Purpose of the Presentation

The purpose of this booklet is to talk about becoming involved in community action for social progress.

We are interested in finding individuals that would like to serve their community by becoming involved as mentors and older friends in a program for a group of early teenagers, also referred to as junior youth.

We believe:

"The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct."

By understanding that the betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds and through a commendable and seemly conduct, the program involves the junior youth through a simultaneous process of individual transformation (conduct) and the transformation of society (deeds).

This presentation will describe:

1. Some concepts and information about the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program
2. Information about how older youth and young adults can develop the capacity to implement a program for junior youth.

First, let’s talk about the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program, its aim, the materials it uses, how it is implemented and the service that older youth can offer in this process.
Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

“Concern for the moral and spiritual education of young people is asserting itself forcefully on the consciousness of humanity, and no attempt at community building can afford to ignore it.”
Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

The aim of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program is to assist junior youth to take ownership for their spiritual and intellectual development, to develop a strong sense of purpose and the volition needed to make good decisions, and to engage in meaningful social action in their communities.

Thus, the Program attempts to:

- Assist them to recognize the moral issues underlying everyday decisions and identify the moral implications of speech and action
- Empower them to channel their energies towards both strengthening their own character and to serving their community

The premise of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program is that creative attention must be devoted to involving junior youth in programs of activity that will engage their interests, mold their capacities for teaching and service, assist them to transform their communities, and involve them in social interaction with older youth.

“Concern for the moral and spiritual education of young people is asserting itself forcefully on the consciousness of humanity, and no attempt at community building can afford to ignore it.”

Junior Youth
Junior Youth refers to a special group with special needs as they are somewhat between childhood and youth when many changes are occurring within them.

Spiritual
Spiritual refers to the universal moral concepts common to all faiths and traditions that exist in the world today, such as truthfulness, unity, justice, cooperation, service to humanity, striving for excellence, and relying on God for guidance and assistance.

Empowerment
Empowerment means to assist young people to take ownership of their personal development and to build capacity for meaningful social action in their communities.

Program
The program consists of trained older youth who facilitate the creation of a Junior Youth Group, a group of some 10 to 15 junior youth who together will participate in various efforts, such as discussions, recreation, activities and service projects.
Junior Youth
Ages 12 to 14

“...a special group with special needs as they are somewhat between childhood and youth when many changes are occurring within them.”
Junior Youth – Ages 12 to 14

“…a special group with special needs as they are somewhat between childhood and youth when many changes are occurring within them.”

The period between the ages of 12 and 14 represents a special time in the life of an individual, for it is during these years that he or she leaves childhood behind and undergoes sudden yet profound change. These changes are not merely physical, but more fundamentally emotional, intellectual and behavioral. It is important to note that these changes do not occur in a vacuum. Environment, culture, upbringing, and relationships contribute to the nature and direction of these changes, influencing young people to think, act and behave in certain ways. Junior youth often begin to question the world around them and recognize the many social issues plaguing their world.

Creative attention must be devoted to involving them in programs of activity that will engage their interests, mold their capacities for service to their community, and involve them in social interaction with older youth.
JUNIOR YOUTH GROUPS

A peer group that meets weekly in order to:

→ Studies materials for development of language and expression
→ Consults on and carry out service projects
→ Engages in artistic activities
→ Participates in recreation and sports activities
Junior Youth Groups

Next, I would like to share how the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program is implemented.

It’s important to note that one of the strongest yearnings of a junior youth is to belong to a group of peers. They find it reassuring to turn for advice to friends who understand and sympathize with them.

It is a natural response to a legitimate need, therefore, to organize the program around the concept of a junior youth group the members of which would meet together regularly and be guided systematically to discover, learn and serve.

Its primary function is to serve as an environment of mutual support for its members, one in which they can develop the spiritual perception and patterns of thought and behavior that will characterize them throughout their lives.

Normally, a junior youth group participating in the program meets weekly and

- Studies materials for development of language and expression
- Consults on and carry out service projects
- Engages in artistic activities
- Participates in recreation and sports activities

In addition to these weekly meetings, the group attends special events and comes together to perform acts of service.

The atmosphere of the meetings, while joyous, friendly and intimate, would not be frivolous, and would contribute to the enhancement of those qualities and attitudes that a life of service to humanity would require.

In their gatherings, the members of the group, free from fear of censure or ridicule, would be able to express their thoughts and look for answers to their searching questions. They would learn to listen, to speak, to reflect, to analyze, to make decisions and to act on their decisions.
THE SERVICE OF THE “ANIMATOR”

“An older person who is a true friend to the youth and can assist them in the development of their capacities.”
**The Service of the “Animator”**

In each group, there is the need for an older person who is a true friend and mentor to the youth and can assist them in the development of their capacities. Those who perform such a function are known as the animators of junior youth groups.

Their presence helps the members of each group to remain hopeful and convinced that they can protect themselves against the negative influences of a disintegrating society surrounding them, and to discuss and act upon ways to advance this society.

Although serving in this capacity is not an exclusive prerogative of any particular age, older youth tend to make excellent animators as they find it easy to treat the junior youth not as children but as equals, and to encourage them to ask questions, express doubts, and engage in the investigation of reality.

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**Getting Started with a Junior Youth Group**

The requirements for implementing the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program are straight-forward:

- About 10 to 15 youth, between the ages of 12 to 14, that are interested in forming their own junior youth group and in learning together
- A venue or social space for weekly meetings.
- Volunteers trained to serve as animators of the junior youth group.
TRANSFORMATION THROUGH SERVICE

“The transformation… of society will certainly depend to a great extent on the effectiveness of the preparations the youth make for the world they will inherit.”
Transformation through Service

“The transformation which is to occur in the functioning of society, will certainly depend to a great extent on the effectiveness of the preparations the youth make for the world they will inherit.”

The interplay that we have discussed between service, education, and preparation needs to unfold within a particular context. Specifically, it should contribute to two processes of transformation: the pronounced intellectual and spiritual growth of the individual and the transformation of society.

This dual transformation will only occur through conscious effort, and it is essential that young people realize its implications for their lives and become endowed with a strong sense of purpose, both to take charge of their own personal growth and to contribute to the transformation of society. Such a twofold moral purpose will naturally find expression in a life of service.

Examples of service projects are:

- Cleaning up a school campus or a park
- Visiting convalescent homes and performing artistic presentations
- Raising money for a bench in a park or for an orphanage in Nepal
- Plan a bone marrow drive for a fellow junior youth
- Hosting a devotional gathering for the neighborhood
- Being teachers of a virtues class for children
“Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday.”
Striving for Excellence

Central to the aim of spiritual empowerment of junior youth is the concept of striving for excellence—both spiritual and intellectual excellence.

To strive for spiritual excellence, they have explained, we need to develop qualities that belong to our higher nature such as love, generosity, honesty and humility. To strive for intellectual excellence, we need to acquire knowledge and practical skills that would help us improve our lives and the lives of others.

This quotation enhances the concept of excellence: “Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday.”
ACHIEVING SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT

→ Develop spiritual perception
→ Enhance their powers of expression
→ Building a sound moral structure
Achieving Spiritual Empowerment

The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program approaches the aim of spiritual empowerment by helping the junior youth:

**Develop spiritual perception**
There are various levels of consciousness at which a human being can live. To be aware of the divine will and purpose, to understand the forces that influence us and our communities, and to strive to dedicate our mental and spiritual powers to building a new world, implies a higher state of consciousness than a life focused on purely material concerns. One of the main challenges of the program is to help the youth reach higher and higher levels of consciousness. To do so, the youth need to understand the concepts that generate the central themes of a spiritual reality and increase their capacity to reflect on, to analyze and to apply them. Spiritual education of junior youth is of paramount importance to the further progress of the community.

**Enhance their powers of expression**
There is an intimate connection between language and thought. Utterance reveals the power of thought and understanding, but at the same time, our understanding of reality is shaped by and evolves within the context of words. Thus developing the power of expression and fostering understanding of reality go hand in hand. One’s consciousness is raised as one develops the power of expression. Junior youth need to be made aware of the power of their words as well as the need to support their words with action. If youth are to walk the path of spiritual growth and be empowered to serve humanity, they need the language that would allow them to reflect, to analyze and to apply.

**Building a sound moral structure**
To be able to make moral choices, one needs more than a set of rules; an entire moral structure has to be built in the mind of a young person with a strong purpose that connects social concepts, patterns of behavior, and the knowledge of consequences—a structure that stands up by the forces of volition and courage. Such a moral structure, it is believed, is intimately connected with the structure of language that is to operate in the mind of the individual. This language should be rich enough to understand the powerful social, cultural, and ideological forces that are shaping people’s thoughts and values, and the spiritual forces that are needed to transform these values.
Enhancement of the power of expression requires:

→ Read with good comprehension
→ Express profound themes with eloquence and conviction
→ Articulate concepts with reasonable precision
Materials

The materials developed for the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program are designed to improve their power of expression and enhance their capabilities related to making moral choices. The enhancement of the power of expression involves more than the mere acquisition of the mechanical skills of reading, writing and speech. It requires the ability to:

- read with good comprehension,
- express profound themes with eloquence and conviction,
- articulate concepts with reasonable precision.

In the exercise of these abilities junior youth learn to apply relevant scientific, moral and spiritual concepts to the analysis of the world around them and to the formulation of personal convictions upon which a future social ideology can be built.

The series, still in the early stages of preparation, consists of textbooks at three levels of study for the following age groups: 11–12 year olds, 12–13 year olds, and 13–14 year olds. Each level will have texts in the areas of language, mathematics and science, as well as those focused on the challenges of living in present-day society. It is hoped that, in its entirety, the series will provide young people with the elements of a conceptual framework that will guide their choices and actions as they mature into adults.

All of the titles are concerned with developing language skills and the power of expression. Though the moral concepts in the materials are drawn from the Bahá’í teachings, they are not religious in nature, nor do they treat subjects that are specifically Bahá’í.

*Breezes of Confirmation* tells a story about a 13 year old girl, Musonda, and her cousin, Rose. An ongoing theme throughout the story is that of making an effort and receiving God’s confirmations. In order to build vocabulary, difficult words are used in different contexts throughout the story.

In *Walking the Straight Path*, 20 stories from different cultures are brought together. Each story is relatively short and is followed by a series of exercises designed to further comprehension, building vocabulary, and enhance moral reasoning. Short quotations for memorization are also provided to assist the youth in remembering key concepts and morals.

*Drawing on the Power of the Word* seeks to enhance the power of expression and explore the moral implications of speech and action. It consists of 20 readings, each of which is complemented by exercises in language skills. The readings begin simply, but gain in complexity both in terms of thought and language. With the help of a tutor, a youth group thinks about the power of enlightened words and pure deeds to bring about social change.
BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH TRAINING

Building capacity involves:
→ understanding certain concepts
→ acquiring certain knowledge
→ developing certain attitudes and spiritual qualities
→ gaining specific skills and abilities
Building Capacity through Training

With that brief description of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program perhaps we can move on to the second objective of this presentation, which is to learn more about how interested youth can build the capacity required to implement an empowerment program for junior youth. Before we move on, do you have any questions about what we’ve learned so far?

Persons wishing to learn how to implement a spiritual empowerment program for junior youth join a worldwide effort whose purpose is the betterment of society. Developing a vision of the scope and aims of the Program is helpful in order to establish the proper context for the concept of capacity building.

Building capacity for service—in this case, service as an animator—is more than a simplistic process of acquiring and applying fragments of information, or trying to learn a formula, or to memorize and re-produce techniques without understanding the underlying principles.

Building capacity involves multiple elements that are coherently interrelated—understanding certain concepts, acquiring certain knowledge, developing certain attitudes and spiritual qualities, and gaining specific skills and abilities.

Building capacity in preparation for walking a path of service has multiple facets that are coherently interrelated—certain concepts pertaining to that act of service, and the protagonists involved, must be explored and conceptual frameworks constructed; specific skills must be acquired and developed through study and practice; exploring the various attitudes with which we approach a given situation defines the nature of our service as does gaining insights into the spiritual qualities.
A training program is available for persons that are interested in learning how to serve as an animator and to eventually form their own junior youth group.
Training Materials

A training program is available for persons that are interested in learning how to serve as an animator and to eventually form their own junior youth group. The materials used for training animators have been developed by the Ruhi Institute in Columbia, a Bahá’í-inspired nonprofit educational organization.

The materials draw on principles and concepts found in the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith. The intention, in this context, is for persons to learn how to *apply* the spiritual principles drawn from the Bahá’í Writings and not necessarily for the purpose of learning about the Bahá’í Faith.

The materials capture a significant amount of learning and experience that has been generated by grassroots efforts aimed at the moral and spiritual empowerment of junior youth. The training materials guide our exploration and learning around topics such as:

- How to study, analyze and apply spiritual principles.
- Developing conceptions of the spiritual nature of human beings and the process of spiritual development.
- Exploring concepts of the ages of junior youth and youth—characteristics, latent capacities, and unique needs.
- The elements of spiritual empowerment.
- The practical implementation of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program.

The training begins with an examination of the spiritual nature of human beings. With this as a foundation, the training moves on to some of the concepts, skills, qualities, and attitudes that experience has shown are required by those wishing to implement a program for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth.

The approach to delivering this training program is a combination of study, action, reflection and consultation—a participatory learning environment that is facilitated by a trained individual who is not a teacher, but rather one guiding the pace of the exploration and discovery of the group and sharing in the learning and knowledge generated by the discussions and experience of the group.

**Getting Started with Animator Training**

Initiating the process of developing capacity in individuals who are motivated to implement a spiritual empowerment program for junior youth is simple and requires:

- Individuals interested in learning how to implement the spiritual empowerment program
- A venue for the weekly meetings
- A couple of persons trained to serve as facilitators
JUNIOR YOUTH SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

AIM OF THE PROGRAM

Is to equip young people around the globe, between the ages of 12 to 15, with the words and a way of thinking that will enable them to engage in meaningful social action as they grow.

INITIATING THE PROGRAM

Is achieved by forming a junior youth group—a group of about 10 to 15 young peers—that meets on a weekly basis for the purpose of:

- Studying materials designed to enhance the powers of expression
- Consulting on, devising, and carrying out service projects
- Engaging in artistic activities
- Engaging in recreational sports

ASSISTANCE OF AN OLDER YOUTH, AN “ANIMATOR”

Each junior youth group is assisted by an older youth who is a true friend and assists with the development of the junior youth. Such persons are known as “animators” and they have received some training to be able to serve in this capacity.

CURRICULUM

The materials developed for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program are designed to improve their power of expression and enhance their capabilities related to making moral choices.