

# FROM A FATHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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## Unmet Needs Do Not Go Away

During my thirty-one years in the social services profession, primarily in juvenile justice, I have often reflected on the core issues that bring youth and families to the attention of a social services system. While the motivators of human behavior can obviously be complex, a basic understanding of human needs, i.e., need for identity, to belong, for acceptance, etc., can enhance an understanding as to why people behave the way they do. It is from this perspective that I vividly remember a training session early in my career in which the instructor discussed the various basic needs that we all have that are often met by the daily interactions of a healthy family. He went on to describe the benefits healthy families have on our society when these needs are met. His presentation then switched to the subject of gang recruitment which peaked my curiosity as to how he would approach this topic and what viewpoint he would take. Needless to say, when he simply changed the headings on his human needs presentation and stated that we now had his gang recruitment strategy, I was initially taken back a bit. He then stated that “unmet needs don’t go away” and that when families or other positive influences such as school activities, athletics, etc., do not meet these needs, negative influences such as gang involvement will. He explained that other negative consequences of unmet needs included teen pregnancy, drug addiction and dropping out of school.

For over thirty years, I have reflected on this presentation and how it has impacted my involvement with the various programs with which I have been associated. There is often great power in simplicity as this concept illustrates; unmet needs do not go away. In hindsight, I have come into a deeper understanding of this simple truth as it relates to social services systems interactions with youth and families.

While much of my reflection on this concept has been on a professional level in terms of program development, I am cognizant of its application to my family. With two young grandchildren, I cannot help but ponder the experiences that lie ahead of them and what role my wife and I can have in their development. What experiences or activities will meet their developmental needs? What about assisting in the programs or activities that may have a lasting impact on them and the other youth who would benefit as well?

While giving presentations on juvenile justice to community service organizations, church groups and other interested parties, I am often asked what they can do to address this issue. I used to respond by discussing academic or mental health/substance abuse programs on a macro level. However, as I have increasingly realized these needs are addressed one youth at a time, I discuss with them volunteering with youth in an area of interest to them, becoming a Big Brother/ Big Sister, etc. This goes back to that presentation I attended nearly 30 years ago, and I, therefore, tell them that the person who may provide the encouragement and support necessary for a child's healthy self-esteem is not a program but could very well be one of them.

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