

**Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development**  
***Feedback and reflections from the Bahá'í Community of Canada***

We would first like to thank the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services for the invitation to comment on its timely and insightful report, “Stepping Stones: A Resource for Youth Development.” We commend the decision of the Ministry to dedicate resources to a study on how to “prepare youth to *thrive* as family and community members, leaders and contributors to the province and our future.” This study will be a tremendous resource to groups and agencies working with children and youth across the province. We hope that the reflections below, based on the Bahá'í community's experience engaging with young people across Ontario, will serve as a helpful contribution to an ongoing conversation concerning youth development and empowerment in our province.

It is clear that efforts to address a myriad of social issues, ranging from gun violence to bullying to poverty must begin with the premise that children and youth are a trust of society; they are the promise and guarantee of our future. In society at large, however, the period of youth is often portrayed as a time of rebelliousness and frivolity. It is assumed that very little can be expected from young people since “teenagers” are incapable of shouldering meaningful responsibilities. We appreciate that the Stepping Stones report has rejected this inaccurate and debilitating paradigm, and has adopted a positive, ‘asset-based’ approach to its study on youth development.

Youth, of course, are sensitive to the expectations placed upon them and are deeply affected by the manner in which they are viewed by their families, friends, teachers, and communities. Mainstream images of youth portrayed by the media also influence the self-perceptions of the young. Our experience has shown that young people have tremendous capacity to champion the cause of justice, promote unity among disparate groups, provide stewardship of the environment, and direct their energies in service to others. The development of these capacities is all too often neglected within the context of a culture steeped in consumerism and the impulse to be entertained. Service to self is exalted above service to others. The result among youth is often a sense of lethargy -- a passivity born of feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. We believe that many youth are not satisfied with the condition of the world, and many desire to make positive changes. However, young people require support from peers and mentors to understand the forces operating in society and to act with a vision of realistic change in their lives and those around them.

The concept of resilience introduced in the Stepping Stones report notes that youth need “a different and larger set of skills ... to ensure success in life and in the workplace.” Indeed, the pace of social, economic and technical change, coupled with the decline of some social institutions presents new challenges to this generation of young people. In addition to developing resilience and flexibility in the face of uncertainty, we believe that young people also need to be empowered to be active participants in changing unjust conditions in society. We view empowerment as a process whereby individuals and communities take charge of their own spiritual and intellectual development. In our experience, in order to do so, young people must participate in an educational process that helps them to identify their unique talents and capacities, and to channel these in service to their communities. In other words, while youth do need a broader skill set to succeed in a dynamic modern society and economy -- as the report notes -- they also need the knowledge and perception necessary to become active participants in the creation of a better world.

As the Stepping Stones report helpfully notes in its breakdown of stages of youth development, the period of youth is distinguished by the gradual appearance of new physical, intellectual, social and emotional capacities. Our work with young people is oriented around preparation for taking on the responsibilities associated with maturity, or the full appearance of innate human powers. The Bahá'í writings refer to the age of fifteen, during the period of adolescence, as the beginning of maturity -- an age when "the lights of comprehension, intelligence and knowledge become perceptible... and the powers of [the] soul unfold."

Between the ages of 12 and 14 -- what the Stepping Stones report refers to as 'early adolescence' -- a young person departs from the conditions of childhood and begins a transition to maturity. This transition is often characterized by some awkwardness and anxiety, but it is during these years that youth develop a new sense of awareness about themselves and their relationships. The standards of parents and other adults are no longer followed automatically, philosophical and profound questions are asked, and a new consciousness begins to awaken. It is a crucial time when fundamental concepts about individual and collective life take shape in the mind of a young person.

Among those concepts that are explored during this age are those around self and identity. We note the positive mention throughout the Stepping Stones report of a 'core self/spirit' that is central to understanding youth development: "it is the 'force of gravity' that connects aspects of development and experience together." This is an important insight and one that is too often absent from discussions about young people that seek to fragment their reality and experience into different categories (eg. emotional vs. intellectual, academic vs. technical, introvert vs. extrovert, etc.). Efforts to promote the development of youth must be concerned with nurturing the entire person, each of whom is a whole individual with many different dimensions, talents and capacities. Youth do not have distinct, unrelated parts or identities -- they are all part of the same individual.

In addition to recognizing the existence of a 'self/spirit', however, we also need to reflect on how this 'self/spirit' is developed. In the context of a culture that emphasizes individualism to an extreme degree, care is required to ensure that young people do not acquire a distorted sense of their own nature and relationships. In our work with young people we refer to a 'two-fold moral purpose.' The first concerns the process of personal transformation by developing one's inherent capacities; the second relates to the challenge of improving one's community and relationships. Underlying this view of purpose is a distinct conception of human nature: we all have a higher nature that includes our potential to reflect the human virtues (such as generosity, humility, justice, and so on), but we also have a lower nature that prompts us to serve only ourselves. The development of the self involves nurturing the qualities of the higher nature, through knowledge of self and service to others. As a young person becomes conscious of his or her two-fold moral purpose, he or she is increasingly aware that personal transformation requires active participation in the life of society. One cannot develop the 'core self' independently from relationships with others.

As the Stepping Stones report notes, the development of a 'sense of self' involves the process of identity exploration and formation. In an increasingly diverse society, steeped in individualism, the search for identity has assumed greater and greater importance for many young people. While a sense of one's identity helps to ground an individual in their community or history, it can also be a source of confusion for many young people who feel pulled apart by competing

allegiances. An alternative way of viewing identity is in a unified manner. Every person has an inner reality, the reflection of the Divine in each of us, and we share this primary human identity -- rooted in the reality of the human soul, which has no race, sex, gender or nationality -- with everyone else. Consciousness of one's essentially spiritual nature, a trait shared with all humanity, provides the individual with a lens through which to derive appreciation from the other aspects of identity.

As young people become conscious of their primary human identity, they also interrogate issues of power and prejudice in the world around them. Society imposes identities on young people that represent a distortion of their true nature. For example, women are objectified by the media and sexuality is made the core of their identity. Assumptions about race and class can be just as insidious if young people are not educated to be conscious of the underlying spiritual reality at their heart of an identity that they share with the rest of humanity.

To understand the concept of spiritual reality or spiritual nature, we often turn, as the Stepping Stones report notes, to culture or religious beliefs. This recognition alone in the Stepping Stones report is significant in the context of a broader public discourse about youth that is often characterized by narrow material and biological perspectives on youth development. However, in the discussion of the development of 'spiritual beliefs', the report refers only to the mystical aspect of belief. Equally important to the mystical, however, are the practical elements of belief. For example, one's spiritual beliefs may include certain convictions about the nature of God, but they also imply an understanding of how one is intended to live. Indeed, most religions and cultural traditions connect belief with action; it is impossible to have one without the other. An expression of spiritual belief includes knowledge about the powers of the soul: to appreciate beauty, to discern justice and injustice, to build unity, be of service to others, and so on.

We also note with appreciation the reference in the Stepping Stones report to the importance of young people developing capacities for moral reasoning as part of their social development. In our work with young people we refer to the creation of a 'moral structure' that enables them to independently make decisions about their lives and relationships through the application of principles. A moral structure is not simply a code or a set of rules. Sound moral reasoning requires both an understanding of moral principles (such as fairness, honesty, unity, and integrity) and the motivation to apply them faithfully even when it is not convenient to do so. The 'moral dilemmas' to which the report refers often come up when one faces a situation where one's self-interest is not served by upholding the value of a principle. An essential feature of maturity, therefore, is the ability to subordinate one's own comfort and convenience to the betterment of the community. This requires the development of a moral structure through regular consultation with others and guidance by mentors and peers.

Our motivation to make these comments on the Stepping Stones report is out of a shared interest and concern for the development of young people in Ontario. We were gratified to note that the contents of the report reflected such a sense of optimism about the future of youth in Ontario. We are grateful to the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services for what you have done to contribute to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of youth development, drawing on both scientific literature as well as the experiences of a diverse cross-section of Ontario society. Your efforts to promote the creation of a common language and approach to youth are warmly welcomed and we look forward to working with the Ministry in the future to continue to develop a framework for our public discourse about youth.