

# Creating Healthy Opportunities: Conversations with Adolescent Health Experts



An Interview with Shay Bilchik, JD, Conducted by Karen Brown

A PROJECT OF THE PARTNERS IN PROGRAM PLANNING FOR ADOLESCENT HEALTH (PIPPAH) INITIATIVE

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# Author and Interviewee Biographies

### KAREN BROWN

Karen Brown is a public radio reporter and freelance writer who specializes in health care. Her work frequently appears on NPR and in national magazines and newspapers. She has also produced several radio documentaries on mental health topics, including childhood bipolar disorder, siblings of the mentally ill, and post-traumatic stress disorder. She has won numerous national awards, including the Edward R. Murrow Award and Daniel Schorr Journalism Prize, as well as journalism fellowships, most recently the 2008-09 Kaiser Media Fellowship in Health. Her work is featured online at [www.karenbrownreports.org](http://www.karenbrownreports.org).

### SHAY BILCHIK, JD

Shay Bilchik is the founder and Director of the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute in Washington, DC. The Center's purpose is to focus the nation's public agency leaders, across systems of care and levels of government, on the key components of a strong juvenile justice reform agenda. This work is carried out through the dissemination of papers on key topics, the sponsorship of symposia, and a Certificate Program at Georgetown providing public agency leaders with short, but intensive study, and ongoing support in their reform efforts. Prior to joining the Institute on March 1, 2007, Mr. Bilchik was the President and CEO of the Child Welfare League of America, a position he

held from February of 2000. Shay led CWLA in its advocacy on behalf of children through his public speaking, testimony, and published articles, as well as collaborative work with other organizations. Prior to his tenure at CWLA, Shay headed up the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the U.S. Department of Justice, where he advocated for and supported a balanced and multi-systems approach to attacking juvenile crime and addressing child victimization. Before coming to the nation's capital, Mr. Bilchik was an Assistant State Attorney in Miami, Florida from 1977-1993, where he served as a trial lawyer, juvenile division chief, and Chief Assistant State Attorney. Mr. Bilchik earned his B.S. and J.D. degrees from the University of Florida.

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## Creating Healthy Opportunities: Conversations with Adolescent Health Experts

### PROFILE:

# Shay Bilchik

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM  
AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE



*“If you don’t know that the family with whom you are working had three other children in the system in the last three years who had all been abused and neglected,” he says, “and now you’re disposing of a case in the juvenile justice system where the young person has committed their first delinquent act, how are you going to possibly order the services that young person and family [are] going to need?”*

When a young person is brought handcuffed to a juvenile detention center, people often cannot see beyond the crime the youth has been accused of committing. Most find it hard to look at the factors that first put a child on a path to delinquency, from educational resources in the community, to health services available in the neighborhood, to the age of the parents when the youth was born.

Shay Bilchik, a longtime child welfare and juvenile justice professional, is an exception. By understanding that juvenile delinquency is often a result of life circumstances over which that young person has little or no control, Bilchik believes advocates and policy makers can better focus their efforts and develop strategies that will help the next young person live a healthy, safe, and fulfilling life and stay out of the criminal justice system.

“I think one of the main challenges today is the lack of equity across our society for the 40 million adolescents in terms of the opportunities they have for positive youth development,” says Bilchik. [For more information about positive youth development, see box page 5.]

Bilchik has dedicated his professional life to reforming the juvenile justice system and addressing the societal factors that feed into it. Bilchik headed the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) under President Clinton. He went on to become President/CEO of the Child Welfare League of America, and now runs the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University’s Public Policy Institute.

His reformist outlook began during his early career as an intern in the Public Defender’s Office in central Florida and

then as a prosecutor in Miami working mostly in the juvenile court. When he looked into the background of the young defendants his agency represented, he found a number of worrisome influences and missed opportunities.

“I could trace back into their early childhood years either experience with the child welfare or the juvenile justice system,” Bilchik says. “It was my first real eye opener that there was a very long path that a lot of offenders in our criminal justice system had followed. It wasn’t that they turned to crime as adults but rather there was a developmental path that could be studied and understood.”

Among Bilchik’s early actions as an Assistant State’s Attorney was to focus on “diversion,” a concept that aims to keep young people who get in trouble for minor infractions out of the justice system entirely. “Our realization was that if we could keep kids out of the system, that we’d likely be doing ... better [for them] in the long run than if we brought them into it,” he said.

And if that approach does not work for a particular child or offense, the next challenge would be to keep youth from penetrating too deeply into the system. Bilchik would try to keep young people in the least restrictive setting possible and keep them away from adult offenders to improve their chances of integrating back into the community once released.

Bilchik also began to spend time in communities to see how young people were living. He would accompany social workers, public health nurses, police officers, and others into housing projects, schools, and homes. He also went along on public health nurse visits to teenage

parents. From those visits, he began to understand more about the roots of criminal behavior, especially among youth living in poverty.

“What would be most helpful to prevent delinquency would be to make sure [youth] have an opportunity for education, after school programs, and for cultural advancement,” he says. “Their schools should be well staffed with teachers who are excited about teaching and have good teacher to student ratios. And when [adolescents] are looking for general health prevention

in which nurses made regular home visits to teen parents. The practitioners would counsel the new parents about health-related behaviors, including the effects of parental smoking or drug use on fetuses and babies; they would help the young parents manage their anger and depression in order to reduce child abuse; and they would try to steer the mothers and fathers into a better life course through education and skills-building.

That intensive intervention, Bilchik says, “reduced abuse and neglect

for example, where they may feel involved, respected, and included in a way they did not feel in mainstream institutions.

“They will look to gangs who will give them skills, albeit negative skills such as committing crimes, and who will give them the opportunity to use those skills and who will give them recognition for their ‘achievements.’ They will turn the positive youth development frame 180 degrees in a negative way, but use the same construct.”

Wouldn’t it be better, he says, for community leaders to step in instead and

*“I could trace back into [criminal defendants’] early childhood years either experience with the child welfare or the juvenile justice system. It was my first real eye opener that there was a very long path that a lot of offenders in our criminal justice system had followed. It wasn’t that they turned to crime as adults but rather there was a developmental path that could be studied and understood.”*

or health care, they should be able to find it within their community. If we provide young people these opportunities and the stage to use their newfound skills and get recognition for them, we’ve really moved way down the path in terms of reducing delinquency and getting better outcomes for our young people.”

From a policy perspective, Bilchik believes program administrators, legislators, and advocates need to both create opportunities for young people, such as mentoring, tutoring, or arts programs, and provide wrap-around services to ensure that young people get the help they need in a way that promotes their success.

“It has to be in an environment where [adolescents] are surrounded by adults who will support that type of positive youth development,” he says. “They can’t be put in the vacuum-like environment that a program provides and then come back home again to parents and other adults who will not support them. There also needs to be a focus on the family and ways to strengthen the home to which the young person will return after completion of the program.”

Bilchik is a great believer in intervention with teen parents, both for the sake of the young parents, but also for their babies, who are less likely to grow up delinquent if their parents are given strong supports. Bilchik supported a program while at OJJDP, the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP),

committed by the young teen moms who were involved in the program by 50 percent. It was cost effective, so for every dollar spent, several dollars were saved in long-term costs. Fifteen years later, it also reduced the delinquency population by 50 percent for the children of the families that took part in the program.”

What’s more, he says, a study released by the Robin Hood Foundation found that the NFP program helped delay the teen mothers’ second births, which was shown to have an impact on the future prison population. According to the study, the children of older mothers are less likely to engage in the kind of negative behavior that leads them into the criminal justice system. (For more information about NFP, visit [www.nursefamilypartnership.org](http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org).)

“If you’ve got parents who aren’t prepared to nurture you, who have created a chaotic environment in the home where there’s not the stability that you need; you have a higher risk of ending up in the juvenile justice system and eventually into the adult criminal justice system,” he says.

Bilchik says communities that invest in programs that support families in the home will likely see long-term rewards – and those that do not will encounter the opposite. Without positive influence from responsible adults, he says, young people will seek, and find, support in much less savory environments, on street corners,

use what we already know about how the adolescent brain works to help at-risk kids stay out of trouble?

“We all know the way adolescents in our own homes rebel and detach, but if you combine that with the brain development research we have now, we see that during the same period of rebelling and independence-seeking, adolescents have a limited ability to resist peer pressure.”

“I think that is what’s happening with a lot of young people in today’s society. They’re going through normal adolescent development, but they’re experiencing it in an environment that makes it hard to stay on the right side of the law,” he says, highlighting the particular challenges facing teenagers who have been abused, neglected, or raised in foster care as a result of abuse or neglect – or otherwise been exposed to dysfunctional communities or families. “I don’t want to suggest that young people not be held accountable for their behavior, but I think we as a society and as adults need to understand what that pathway looks like, and feels like, in the societal environment in which it takes place and then consider those factors as we determine an appropriate sanction. We have a responsibility to make sure our families and communities are ones that can actually support adolescent development in a healthy way.”

Bilchik says this positive approach to delinquency prevention has been an

uphill battle, especially over the last two decades when “zero tolerance” has been the dominant attitude, at the expense of positive youth development. Young offenders have often been thrown into the justice system for minor infractions, in many cases, he says, more for the sake of the community who does not want them around, than for the youth themselves. As a result, young people are immediately stigmatized and considered bound for a life of crime, which often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“Once it’s on their record and they’ve been labeled in their community, in their family, in their peer group, in their school as a trouble maker, as a delinquent, as a kid who went into the juvenile justice system, it’s hard to remove that tag,” Bilchik says. “I think we need to avoid such stigmatization as much as we can.”

For instance, schools should think twice before sending young people to the juvenile detention center for minor misbehavior, forcing the parents to travel to what may be a distant and intimidating location, fill out paperwork, and then take the child home. That is likely to lead to great tension in the family, he says, “when it is behavior that doesn’t really require an arrest, like a jostling in the school hallway, maybe even a punch back and forth that traditionally has been handled by a school counselor or a school principal sitting the kids down and saying, ‘Okay, we’re going to work this out.’”

Once a young person does end up in the justice system, Bilchik wants them to get as much education, health screening, and emotional support as possible with an eye toward both rehabilitation and teaching consequences. When they get out, one of the best ways to stop the cycle of delinquency, he says, is to welcome them immediately back into the school system. However, he says there has been resistance to this, especially since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which Bilchik believes gives an incentive to school systems to expel troubled youth rather than work with them.

“If some of these kids who are getting into trouble are borderline academic performers, you now have another layer of concern in the school. Administrators say, ‘I don’t really want him back because he’s a potential trouble maker and he isn’t going to contribute to my scores.’”

“But that’s a sad commentary on the barriers we put in the way of our young people when they do get involved in some misbehavior.” Bilchik continues, “The road we seem to be following is the one governed by the zero tolerance mentality. This means we’re turning young people away from the positive youth development pathway, which absolutely has to include engagement with school and an academic future.”

Even simple access to health care can set a young person on a safer path. He says youth need to be able to find doctors and community clinics in their neighborhoods, they need a way to pay for the health care (through Medicaid, CHIP, or free clinics), and the providers need to know how to interact effectively with the adolescents. Something as simple as regular eye exams can prevent a decline in school performance that eventually leads to disruptive behavior. Counseling about reproductive health can prevent unwanted pregnancies. Mental health screenings can lead to effective treatment for small or serious problems, problems that may have otherwise been mistaken for willful disobedience, a precursor to entering the juvenile justice system. By teaching healthy behaviors, reinforcing youth strengths, and following a positive youth development model, providers can help set young people on a path that bypasses the legal system altogether.

“It all comes down to whether you have a provider who is taking the time to talk to an adolescent and explore what’s going on in their life,” Bilchik says. “There may be a tip from the parent or an issue that is relatively obvious such as cutting or an eating disorder. However, it may be something more subtle such as anxiety that has risen up in a child’s life.”

On a more sociological level, Bilchik believes providers need to be made aware of the racial disparities that are glaring in the juvenile justice system but that may originate elsewhere. He says the data clearly show that a disproportionately large number of youth of color end up having contact with the juvenile justice and/or foster care systems compared to whites. He says that is partly a result of the lack of community supports and opportunities as well as high levels of poverty in many minority communities. But he maintains it is also a result of decisions that are made in large-

## Shay Bilchik, on ways to improve the foster care system:

- Improve support of the child welfare and protection workforce through training, supervision, higher salaries and additional tools to help them do their job
- Put resources into recruiting and retaining foster families
- Provide more behavioral health and education services for children in foster care
- Increase support for young people after they “age out” of the foster care system
- Exhibit a stronger commitment to family and youth engagement – including the use of family-finding technology and methodologies



scale systems – from law enforcement and intake workers to schools and courts. As a result, he says it is likely that minority youth are punished more harshly than whites, especially for low-grade misbehavior.

“At every step a decision is made, more and more kids of color are penetrating deeper into the system. It is a matter of how those decisions are made and what to do about addressing structural, institutional, or individual bias or racism that

may exist,” Bilchik says. “So I want to do training with various people, law enforcement, intake workers, detention workers, prosecutors, public defenders, case workers, parole workers, probation workers, on what biases we may bring to our work and how to offset them so we make more culturally competent, equitable, and race and ethnically neutral decisions. But I also want to make sure that we have programs and structures in place that look at where there may be disparities in treatment and what we can do structurally to address it.”

“I think that when you do your work in this manner, you are engaged in cross-systems field building,” Bilchik says. “You are building a field of professional workers who think outside of their own discipline. That takes time to truly build and it will ebb and flow as you run into better or worse economic times during which time people tend to be more protective of resources, turf, and control.”

Moreover, he says it requires a certain enlightened self-interest by stakeholders. They may have to let go of some of their

case in the juvenile justice system where the young person has committed their first delinquent act, how are you going to possibly order the services that young person and family [are] going to need?”

Similarly, he says, why not coordinate information between the schools and the foster care system, or between caseworkers and the police department?

“I’d like to see a worker in the child welfare system come into work in the morning, turn on their computer and see an alert if one of their clients has been

*“I think one of the main challenges today is the lack of equity across our society for the 40 million adolescents in terms of the opportunities they have for positive youth development.”*

All of this points to Bilchik’s overarching paradigm of putting resources into preventing delinquency and keeping adolescents out of the criminal justice system, in order for more young people, and, by extension, adults, to become contributing members of society.

Implementing this paradigm on the scale it requires, he admits, could well take a social movement, and for that to happen, he cites four critical components:

- political leaders willing and able to speak out on the need for prevention programs;
- education for the community about the need for strong programs;
- the availability of staff and infrastructure to set up programs in a community; and
- funding to carry them out.

Instead of any one group launching this movement, he prefers what he calls a multi-systems approach – gathering representatives from different disciplines and institutions, from the child welfare department and the schools to the local police department and state legislature. Some states have created “children’s cabinets” made up of representatives from multiple governmental departments including public health, transitional assistance, substance abuse and prevention, or education, among others.

programmatic territory, and even some control over funding, in order to create a pool of money and staff ready to institute community-wide changes. He says there is precedent for this model, such as a grant program he helped launch as part of the Clinton administration that required collaboration.

“We asked for the schools, the justice system, and the health system in a local community to come together and jointly apply for this money, showing how they would work in a coordinated fashion to reduce school violence. And today, almost 10 years later, that program, called Safe Schools/Healthy Students has funded over a billion dollars worth of local programming. It [moved] from the Clinton to the Bush administration and the evaluations show that there have been effective multi-system strategies jointly funded across systems of care that were implemented as a result [of the funding]. We need to shout this stuff from the mountain tops.”

By the same token, he says, different institutions should also be encouraged to share information when it might help a young person. For instance, a judge is better positioned to hand down a sentence or an alternative to sentencing if he knows something about the defendant’s history in the child welfare or foster care system and has full access to education records.

“If you don’t know that the family with whom you are working had three other children in the system in the last three years who had all been abused and neglected,” he says, “and now you’re disposing of a

arrested the night before,” he says.

Bilchik has considered re-entering government to put these ideas into practice, but he ultimately decided he could do as much good in the nonprofit sector. One of his main goals at the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University is to train and inspire the next generation of leaders, in and out of government, who can take the positive youth development approach back to their communities to improve outcomes for young people.

“I’m talking about the county commissioners, the directors of Children and Family Services and Juvenile Justice, the city councilors, the state legislators. Those are leaders who can impact appropriations, can impact state law, and can set the stage to do this work in a more meaningful way.” With a unified approach to prevent delinquency and reform the juvenile justice system, he says, it is possible to make America a safer and stronger place for the next generation to grow up in, and by doing so, future generations will be stronger and healthier. ■

# Positive Youth Development

By Kristin Ware

## What is Positive Youth Development?

- A positive youth development (PYD) model creates programs for youth focused on constructive assets that can be developed rather than negative behaviors that should be avoided.

## What are the main attributes of Positive Youth Development?

- Focus on strengths, rather than problems or risk factors.
- Youth voice and true engagement of youth as leaders, partners, and contributors, not simply “clients,” and giving them key roles in actions or organizations.
- Focus on relationships between adults and youth as an essential outcome.
- Involvement of all community members not just those with specific ties to youth.
- A long term approach that “recognizes the importance of ongoing, positive opportunities and relationships to help young people succeed as adults.”

## What does Positive Youth Development look like?

### PYD emphasizes positive outcomes:

- **Traditional:** Programs geared towards prevention tend to focus on common negative outcomes in the lives of teenagers – drug use, pregnancy, suicide, homelessness, and truancy.
- **PYD:** While prevention is still a desirable outcome, these programs focus on highlighting the positive things that youth can accomplish. For example, programs may encourage youth to take on leadership roles, volunteer in the community, or explore their abilities in the arts. These programs focus on highlighting and developing qualities that youth already possess – motivation, compassion, and creativity.

### PYD involves all youth in the community:

- **Traditional:** These programs tend to target youth that have been identified as having risk factors. Examples include programs aimed at youth in foster care or youth who have been truant or involved in the juvenile justice system.
- **PYD:** Programs that are available to all youth promote positive social interaction, encourage leadership, and give youth a chance to feel as though they belong. These programs not only help youth develop confidence and social competency, but they also avoid some of the harmful stigmatization that can occur in traditional programs.

## PYD enables resiliency by providing a network of support:

- **Traditional:** Frequently programs for youth have been run by just one stakeholder in the community, for example, D.A.R.E., a program run by local law enforcement designed to prevent teen drug use.
- **PYD:** These programs aim to make youth more resilient by providing them with a community-wide support network. The programs are not run by one entity, but involve collaboration between schools, law enforcement, businesses, and private citizens. For example, a community could create a young entrepreneurs program that utilizes the support of schools, local businesses, and private citizens and is aimed at encouraging youth to recognize their strengths and interests.

## What does the research say?

A 1998 review of evaluations of positive youth development programs found that many of these programs were able to demonstrate “positive changes in youth behavior, including significant improvements in interpersonal skills, quality of peer and adult relationships, self-control, problem solving, cognitive competencies, self-efficacy, commitment to schooling, and academic achievement.” The programs also led to reductions in unhealthy behaviors including aggression, risky sexual activities, drug and alcohol use, smoking, and violence.

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