

Speech: Bennett - Youth Mentoring Conference

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Speech: New Zealand Government

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E nga mana, e nga reo, e te iwi o te motu, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

I'm pleased to be here today to open a conference on a subject that's very close to my heart. I understand this conference actually sold out well in advance, which leads me to conclude that so many of you here share my passion for helping to inspire our young people to develop into well adjusted and happy adults.

You might think I'm qualified to talk about this subject because I'm wearing my Social Development and Youth Affairs ministerial hats. But actually, I know more about this because I was a dysfunctional teenager with functional parents. I rebelled with determination and vigour. In fact, I excelled at it.

Congratulations to the Youth Mentoring Network for doing such an excellent job in bringing together some of the best minds in Australasia to share their wisdom with each other over the next two days.

There are three main areas that I want to cover today, and they all fit together quite nicely. The first is the Government's vision for young people in New Zealand. The second is the importance of mentoring, positive role models and how we, as a Government, intend to support and foster this. I want to look how important it is to get our young people engaged in work, and how to best support our youngest workers during this recession. Finally, I'd like to share with you my personal thoughts on mentoring.

I am sure that every single person in this room right now believes our young people deserve the deepest love and the strongest support. We all dream of that perfect world where every young person in this country is raised in a happy home – safe and secure, healthy and loved. As a result, we'd see them with the self-esteem, education and

support required to make a smooth transition from high school into higher education, training, or the workplace.

As a Government, this is our vision for young Kiwis. We want every single one of them to be engaged in education, training or employment.

Where that's not possible, we want to set programmes in place which can help young people attain the skills, self-worth, motivation and desire necessary to help them get a job or further education.

The Youth Mentoring Network, with a little help from the Ministry of Youth Development, recently produced A Guide to Youth Mentoring. As I said in the foreword to this guide, I want to see young people take up challenges, aim high and achieve success.

The reality for some of our young people is that adverse life circumstances, poor choices, difficult family circumstances, or addiction to drugs and alcohol can put them on a path leading in exactly the opposite direction. A path toward conflict with authority, perhaps with their teachers, parents, police – maybe a combination of all three. A path towards poor lifestyle choices. A path towards low skills, under-employment and negative self-worth.

These young people need us. They need a hand up. Someone to listen to them and believe in them. Someone who can guide them toward finding and fulfilling their very best potential. Someone who can model a different way to be – a way that embraces strengths, encourages and provides support.

In short – they need mentors.

The Guide to Youth Mentoring gives one of the best definitions of mentoring that I've read. It describes mentoring as:

“...the process by which a more experienced, trusted guide forms a relationship with a young person who wants a caring, more experienced person in his/her life, so that the young person is supported in growth towards adulthood and the capacity to make positive social connections and build essential skills is increased.”

Mentoring is a crucial intervention required in the lives of our young people, and the more we know about what works and how to best do it – as outlined in this guide – the better job we can do of supporting and working with them.

This Government believes that we get the best out of our youth programmes when we're able to build in strong mentoring components – especially when those mentoring programmes provide on-going support to back the young person in their day-to-day environment. It's important to have someone on hand to reinforce the positive messages which have been learned away from their normal environment – because as you well know, it's often when the young person returns to home turf that the battle really begins to retain those messages.

Ian Williams, who'll be speaking later this afternoon, will be able to provide far more depth about the role of mentoring in adventure-based activities, and I am sure you will all

learn a great deal from him. I also believe my Parliamentary colleague Dr Pita Sharples will share some excellent insight into how young Maori men and women respond to role models in their lives.

Of course, one area where mentoring is vital is where young people have gone “off the rails”. Those who work in the youth justice system will know how much of a difference a mentor can make to a young person in trouble with the law. Now, it’s important to note our youth justice system works well for most young people. Its restorative and collaborative approach effectively holds to account and diverts over 97 percent of young people who come to the attention of police. That is, the vast majority who do not go on to become repeat offenders.

That last 3 percent often share very similar backgrounds, and in many ways are easy to identify early on. Usually adults have been missing in their life – especially male adults – who are able to provide consistent positive influence, support and guidance. Even worse, many of the adults who could be role models are instead modelling a negative lifestyle which leads the young person towards further offending.

While research into mentoring shows outcomes can vary, where it’s focused on the interests and strengths of the young offender it has the greatest chance of success.

And let’s face it – our young people don’t want to fail. They want to succeed. They want a happy and fulfilling life. Where many of them fall down is in not knowing how to achieve that. And that’s where a good mentor can step in.

I know there’s a great deal of debate out there about what makes a “good” mentor. For young, troubled people I believe it has to be someone who cares enough to listen to where these kids want to be and is ready to help them get there. Someone who rolls up their sleeves for what needs to be long term, intensive intervention in their lives. And that’s because when we care enough to listen to what their dreams are, when we let them decide what it is they need to move forward in a positive way, and when we guide and support them through the process, they respond well.

Unfortunately though, youth mentoring programmes alone can’t solve one of the biggest problems facing our young people right now.

The economic climate has seen an increase in the number of unemployed in New Zealand, and it’s those aged 16 – 24 who are being disproportionately affected. One of the most common places for young people to come in close contact with an adult who inspires, motivates and encourages them, is at work.

When I was working as a dishwasher at a rest home, it was the professionals I came in contact with there – the nurses and the social workers – who encouraged me to follow my dreams and apply to university. They acted as mentors for me, helping me take that next big step to push my life forward. When our youth aren’t working, they’re missing out on this kind of support and encouragement.

It’s important to remember the younger generation have never seen a recession before, so it’s going to hit them hard. Unlike those of us over 30, they’ve only ever known the good times. We’ve seen a recession before, we know what it means, how it usually plays

out and - most importantly - that it will end. But those young people who are just babies to the job market, face a greater risk of becoming the long-term unemployed if they can't get some work experience under their belt. Young people need to be doing something – gainfully doing something - or they get bored. Because when young people get bored, that's when they're more likely to get up to mischief.

For these reasons, youth unemployment is a priority area for this Government.

We're introducing a range of programmes to target young unemployed people, which we firmly believe will give them the best possible chance to stay off the benefit. We want to provide them with opportunities, which will lead to better choices. If we leave our young people to languish on the Unemployment Benefit, we send the message that we don't care. Well we do care. And here's what we're going to do about it.

The Youth Opportunities Package, launched just over a week and a half ago, is a targeted, time-limited initiative to help young people who are more at risk of unemployment during a recession. Over the next eighteen months, it'll create almost 17,000 jobs or training places for our youth. The programme will also indirectly help businesses by supporting them to fill entry roles with limited risk.

Job Ops halves the cost of hiring a person for 30 hours for six months at the minimum wage. It targets unskilled 16 to 24 year olds with low or no qualifications and gives them that all-so-important foot in the door. Once in, it's up to the young person to work hard and prove their worth, and I have every confidence that our young people will step up to this opportunity.

They'll also gain from a new scheme designed to boost jobs in their communities. Community Max will focus on projects which benefit communities by combining on-the-job-learning with skills training. Again, it targets young people whose qualifications are low or not there at all.

Communities, through local councils, the Mayors Taskforce, iwi, and Pacific groups, are being asked to identify projects for their young people to work on. What exactly are we looking for? Well, projects which could include reforestation, or refurbishing buildings of importance – marae for example. We need people to think outside the box right now. Think laterally. Think both long and short term. What needs doing within your community? What will help provide an opportunity for young people who need a break right now and could also benefit the community as well? We see this as helping young people to get some practical experience and learn new things such as fencing or nursery skills. We include a training subsidy as well to get them on their way. This gives them a head start on skills to take to other jobs.

The Cycle Way project is one of the Government's Job Summit priorities, and we want to ensure that young people have an opportunity to get involved in what we believe will become an iconic New Zealand tourism attraction. We'll be funding up to 500 jobs to help regions get started on the cycleway project.

We're also expanding the Limited Service Volunteer Scheme. This has been running for nearly two decades and has had great success with the participants over that time – half of them have gone into work after completing the six-week training programme. We're

going to boost the numbers of places on the scheme, and start two new programmes as well. Over the next two years, nearly 2000 extra youth will get to improve their self-discipline, build motivation and self-confidence.

All of these Youth Opportunities Package initiatives aim to fulfil the vision that the Government has for young people. It's about making sure that no matter what someone's circumstances, there is an opportunity open to them in education, training or employment. With the added support of mentoring through the many schemes running throughout New Zealand, our youth will have the very best support to make the successful transition into adulthood.

Finally, I don't believe it's just the job of Government or organisations like yours to mentor our younger generation.

It's my personal belief that anyone can be someone's someone.

Let me explain what I mean by that. As a young mum I had a "moment" in the local supermarket while my daughter was going through the terrible twos. As she stood there, full tantrum, I was at my wit's end. I was at breaking point. Then a woman came up to me. She offered to look after my daughter while I stepped outside for ten minutes and took a short time out.

Now, I can't remember that woman's name – in fact I don't think I even asked. But I will never, ever, forget her face. It was her kindness, and her ability to recognise I was at the end of my tether, that has me convinced that mentors come in all forms and can offer that support even for just a short moment in time.

Someone cared enough about my daughter and myself to step in. Someone didn't judge me for that ten minutes that day. The fact that I can still remember what she looks like 20 years on just proves that she has been a significant "someone" in my life – and she just gave up ten minutes.

I guess the point I'm trying to make is that anyone can be the person that intervenes at the right time to help someone out. Anyone can be a mentor – even for the briefest moment. The effects can last a lifetime. Anyone can be someone's someone.

You know better than most people how the positive effects of mentoring can have a profound impact, not just on the young person you're working with, but on their friends and family as well. We know that evidence also tells us that to make a real difference it will take long term positive intervention to have sustained change in young people against the odds. That's why I believe gatherings like these, which share both theory and practical experience are invaluable.

I wish you well for the rest of the conference and I thank you for all the hard work and caring you put into the youth of our country.

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