

YouthBuild in Brazil: how construction training can improve parenting

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By treasuring each young person's dreams and goals in life, YouthBuild programmes allow participants to feel more valued in their family, among their friends, and in the community at large. Photo • E. Raynes/Bernard van Leer Foundation

In a part of Rio de Janeiro marked by poverty and a long-standing culture of violence, YouthBuild International and CEDAPS are training young people for careers in construction. The Bernard van Leer Foundation supports the programme as it also prepares the young participants to be responsive and responsible parents. This article discusses how.

Gabriel recalls his childhood in Rio de Janeiro:

When I turned 12, I got involved with crime, I was deluded by it.

At that time, in 2002, his father stopped talking to him, and he would walk by his son on the street and pretend he had not seen him. Gabriel thought he had no future and one day, sooner or later, he would simply go to prison or die – he would live the intense and yet short life of those who get involved in ‘the world of crime’.

For as long as Gabriel can remember, his parents have been separated. Gabriel was raised by one of his sisters, as his mother was working and was seldom in the house. However, the sister was neither a mother nor a father to him. Gabriel says:

She didn't have much to teach or to advise me with. Education must come from your parents.

When he was young, his father was either living in other women's homes or working, so he could never pay much attention to his son as he grew up.

Gabriel also experienced violence within his home, as he was hit by his father. According to Gabriel:

Whenever I got home, he came up and beat me. I never had him sit and just talk to me, as a friend, as a father.

It was ‘always beating instead of advice’. To make matters worse, his father kept drug dealers’ weapons in the house, setting a negative example for his son.

At age 15, Gabriel met his wife and soon she became pregnant, but lost the baby. The following year, she got pregnant again and, at 16, Gabriel became a father. The pregnancy had not been planned, as they were both very young, but little by little they matured and learned to deal with the situation. Today, they are still married and have two children.

Looking for an opportunity to learn a trade at age 22, Gabriel decided to join the YouthBuild programme at the Centre for Health Promotion (*Centro do Promoção da Saúde*, CEDAPS), which started in his community of Complexo do Alemão in July 2012. Gabriel’s story suggests how YouthBuild programmes can help encourage responsive and responsible parenting by young people in communities that experience high rates of violence.

YouthBuild in Rio

Located near the commercial centre of Rio, the Complexo do Alemão consists of 13 slums, with population estimates ranging from 69,143 to 89,112, of whom 29% live below the poverty line. The community has the worst Social Development Index ranking in the city, a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.711 (ranked 126th)¹. The infant mortality rate is 40.15 per 100,000 live births, five times higher than the rate of 7.76 per 100,000 live births in the nearby, higher-income neighbourhoods of the Zona Sul (UPP Social, online). The community has the second-lowest educational level in the city, with an average of 5.36 years of study in contrast to the average of 8.29 years of study in other school districts (Carreira and Carneiro, 2008; Instituto Humanitas Unisinos, 2010, online); 14% of residents are illiterate.

Complexo do Alemão was previously controlled by drug traffickers, until the neighbourhoods were taken over by the Brazilian military and police 3 years ago as part of a broader pacification initiative underway in the city. While residents are grateful that trafficking violence has decreased and their community has opened up, they

are facing great uncertainty, because the local economy, which was fuelled by drug trafficking, essentially evaporated overnight.

During this challenging transition in the history of the Alemão *favela*, YouthBuild International and CEDAPS collaborated with a local NGO called Educap (Democratic Forum for Union, Sharing, Learning and Prevention)² to adapt and implement the YouthBuild programme. This programme was made possible with support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Prudential Foundation, and *Oi Futuro*. YouthBuild has been in operation for 35 years and works with partners around the world. The adapted programme model in Alemão provides a holistic experience for young people, including applied basic education classes; counselling; programmes on self-awareness, teamwork and drug abuse prevention; technical skills training including health and safety and workers’ rights; and placement and support services (into jobs, self-employment, or continuing education and training.) For young people going into the building trades, ‘community asset building’ (CAB) offers work-based education necessary for employment, and for those focused on non-construction livelihoods it offers a rigorous and comprehensive introduction to the world of work.

CAB is central to the YouthBuild programme design. Young people transform their communities, while developing their technical and soft skills, by creating or renovating community assets such as housing, community centres and parks. These activities take place in the communities where the young people, their peers, and their families live. As a result, these young people see how their individual actions can improve the world around them, and family members and local residents witness them taking responsibility for the development of their own lives and their community.

In Rio de Janeiro, YouthBuild found a strong alignment in values with CEDAPS, whose mission is to develop the capacity of local leaders and organisations and to empower communities to seek and find solutions to their own problems. So far, outcomes include the following:

- 112 young people have participated.
- 77% of enrolled people completed the programme.
- 75% of graduates were placed in jobs, self-employment, or continuing education.
- 85% of graduates received market-recognized certifications in the construction trades.
- Through community asset-building activities in their neighbourhoods, young people renovated two homes to make them universally accessible, upgraded two community centres, and completed modest construction improvements to 46 homes.

Gabriel's experience

Among the 25 young people, aged 17 to 26, who completed the programme with Gabriel, six were parents before entering the project and one was pregnant. Most of the participants had been involved with drug dealing activities and/or had prior criminal convictions. During sessions in which the young people had an opportunity to discuss the challenges they were facing in their lives, other programme participants shared stories similar to Gabriel's. Gabriel saw that he was not alone, and that some of his peers had experienced or observed violence in their homes, or in the community related to drug-trafficking activities. Many fathers had been absent from their homes for long periods of time, and traditional views of fatherhood did not include a hands-on role in parenting for men.

As part of the CAB activities, CEDAPS gave the students a small budget to improve their own homes. Gabriel recalls how much his home needed renovations and how the project allowed him to practise the new skills he had acquired in the programme. He stresses how the work earned him the respect of his mother, his own children, and his relatives. As they saw him make progress with the home renovation, they asked questions about what was being done. Gabriel says:

As soon as I entered the programme, my mother started to respect me more, to trust me, and to believe I am prospering.

The staff provided role models, and having a forum with his peers to discuss developing healthy relationships, as well as the importance of values such as mutual respect,

partnership and cooperation, may have played a role in Gabriel's growth as a parent. He developed a greater sense of responsibility – about himself, his family, and his community. As he noted:

The programme changed my life, my relationship with my children. While I was working on the house, (my children) asked me what I knew to do. They were observing the improvements and we also played together. For me, it changed for the better.

Gabriel now relates to fatherhood in a very different way from that he experienced himself. He remembers the void he felt as a child and teenager and tries to stay close to his children, providing them with the love and affection he never got. He says:

My children are everything to me, our relationship is as good as it gets.

Every day, he plays his role as a father actively: he helps the children with their homework, cooks, takes them out, and does anything else that might contribute towards the boys' education.

The experience even gave Gabriel's own father a second chance at caregiving. As Gabriel started renovating his home, his father began to help with tiling and flooring. As they worked together, they communicated more:

I started cooking my father lunch. We sat and ate together. Things changed and he became closer.

By witnessing the loving relationship between Gabriel and his children, Gabriel's father realises how different he was as a father. He tries to make up for his absence during Gabriel's childhood by being near his grandchildren, helping his son, and by showing interest in his son's work. The grandfather visits his son, plays with the children and behaves differently than the father he was many years ago. Gabriel says:

Little by little [our relationship] is changing, or already has changed for the better. Now I know I can count on him for a few things.

Lessons learned

CEDAPS values the practical training that the YouthBuild methodology offers to young people, and has been impressed by the changes that the programme

inspires in young people and others in the community. Lucia Cabral, Executive Director of Educap, appreciates that the YouthBuild programme increases the civic engagement of young people, as she observes that the young people 'now they feel like they are citizens'. By treasuring each young person's dreams and goals in life, YouthBuild programmes allow participants to feel more valued in their family, among their friends, and in the community at large. CEDAPS feels that the changes in self-image and behaviour among young people, and their growth during the training, are the critical outcomes of the programme.

YouthBuild's CAB projects broaden the community-based impact of the programme. CEDAPS has emphasised community asset building as the central focus of their YouthBuild programmes, as staff have observed how these tangible experiences allow young people to gain confidence and self-esteem while they develop market-relevant leadership and livelihood skills.

Social projects such as YouthBuild can contribute directly to the reconstruction of young people's life trajectories, despite the patterns of concrete violence that they have faced in their family and community. The practical experiences provided by the YouthBuild programme allow for a structural transformation of concepts and feelings that, although not completely understood, trigger patterns of destructive behaviour towards self and others. The intensive support that young people receive in the programme helps them build healthier, more affectionate relationships with their spouses, children, parents, and friends.

Through the experience of shaping and implementing the adapted YouthBuild programme design in Alemão, CEDAPS learned that the following strategies encourage responsive and responsible parenting among young people who have grown up experiencing violence in their homes or communities:

- Build a dynamic youth network, to which young people refer their friends to participate in social programmes.

'CEDAPS feels that the changes in self-image and behaviour among young people, and their growth during the training, are the critical outcomes of the programme.'

- Provide safe spaces for young people to discuss how to develop healthy relationships with their children, family, and partners, and to share the transformations they experience during the programme.
- Offer community asset-building activities which positively affect relationships within the family and within the community.
- Develop objective strategies aimed at construction (physical or intangible), so that the feeling of achievement and 'positive power' prevails.
- Ensure continuous community outreach and dialogue, so as to strengthen community participation.
- Disseminate the project's positive achievements throughout the community.

Involving role models such as Gabriel, and other young men and women who went through similar life challenges, inspires the engagement of other young parents in similar activities. Gabriel, who is now employed at Educap and also supplements his income through construction jobs, has this message to other young men:

Don't be angry because of how you were raised. Trust the importance of staying close to your children and never avoid doing something just because someone didn't do that for you one day. If you don't wish something for yourself, you also don't wish it for your children. That was terrible and I never wish the same to happen to my children. Otherwise it becomes a cycle.

Through programmes such as YouthBuild, the cycle can change into a positive one.

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Further reading

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Notes

- 1 Data from the 2010 Brazilian Demographic Census. More information on these results from the census is available online (UPPS, 2012). Some residents in the community did not participate in the census, leading some community organisations to calculate a higher population estimate. Further population data are available on the website of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE, online).
- 2 According to Lucia Cabral, head of Educap (Democratic Forum for Union, Sharing, Learning and Prevention), the NGO collaborates with several initiatives that deal with citizens' rights, such as health promotion, education, the environment and others. The purpose is to have people acknowledge their citizenship through rights and duties.