

What Kids Can Do, Inc. promotes the value of young people, working with teachers and other adults, on projects that combine powerful learning with public purpose. We collect and share feature stories, student work and voices, research, and resources that expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement, particularly for adolescent students. We believe deeply in the contributions of youth as citizens. We put youth voices and work at the forefront of all we produce.

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Making Youth Known



Making Peace, Restoring Justice

Youth Brings Old Forms into a New Era

WHAT
Kids
CAN DO

**Powerful learning
with public purpose**

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This print publication contains the core narrative for a recent WKCD story posted online at whatkidscando.org. For accompanying materials referred to in the text (including student work and voices, resources, and other relevant information), please go to our website. Original transcripts are available on request from What Kids Can Do, Inc.

Who we are

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What we value

Powerful learning in which young people:

- ⁂ Engage in issues that have meaning to them and their communities, in work that inspires their commitment and effort.
- ⁂ Conduct work that crosses disciplines, connects academics to the real world, requires the application of new information.
- ⁂ Encounter high expectations, plentiful opportunities to gain new skills, substantial support, clear goals and rules.
- ⁂ Experience give-and-take with adults that is truly reciprocal and mutually respectful.
- ⁂ Develop initiative, persistence, flexibility, risk-taking, curiosity, a social conscience.
- ⁂ Have their work assessed as it unfolds and receive opportunities for ongoing feedback and reflection.
- ⁂ Share their results publicly.

Making Peace, Restoring Justice: Youth Brings Old Forms into a New Era

Their very tendency to test the limits also provides young people with an opportunity to develop their drive for justice and their longing for understanding and respect. Youth projects across the country are helping teens restore peace to situations rife with conflict.

Almost any day's headlines will spell out our society's deeply held but contradictory assertions: Young people are the problem, and young people are the solution.

The first belief shows up in news of gang conflicts and school shootings and petty crimes—top-of-the-hour news for most local TV stations. The second typically hides in newspapers' back pages: stories about the political action, community service, and concern for the future that speak of youth's passion for fairness and hopes for peace.

Yet the very tendency to test limits that tends to get young people in trouble can sometimes provide an opportunity for them to develop their drive for justice and their longing for understanding and respect. Across the country, several remarkable projects are bringing young people into dialogue with each other and their communities, restoring peace to situations rife with conflict, and creating non-adversarial solutions in distressing situations.

- The national Youth Court movement, featured here in Harlem, New York, helps teenagers practice the skills of the legal system—evaluating evidence, considering multiple perspectives, deliberating thoughtfully—as they determine appropriate sentences for peers who have committed offenses.
- City at Peace, in the nation's capital, brings together young people from widely diverse backgrounds to create theatre pieces that express their differences and commonalities.
- And peacemaking rituals drawn from native traditions are helping make a safe space for mutual communication that can heal even deep-rooted conflicts young people experience both in school and in the community.

What lies behind the successes of these initiatives, all of which draw on time-honored ways of promoting connection and responsible action? Does their emphasis on honest self-reflection make them especially appealing to adolescents impatient with the hypocrisies of the system? These stories explore the answers, through conversations with the young people involved and the adult mentors who guide them. They also present some of the practical aspects of their challenges, as a generation comes of age whose members will, more than any before, need the courage and skill to make peace and justice take root in our world.

WEB-BASED EXTENSIONS

The following materials accompany—and extend—this story on www.whatkidscando.org:

Youth Court of Harlem New York, New York

- Audio excerpts from interviews with student Youth Court members
- Audio and text of interview with mentor Jabari Osaze
- More about the Harlem Youth Court
- Information and resources on youth courts nationwide

City at Peace Washington, D.C.

- More about City at Peace

Little Singer School Winslow, Arizona

- Paper on Navajo peacemaking rituals and school discipline

Making Things Right: The Youth Court of Harlem

Madamaache has had plenty of arguments in her 17 years, and she is ready to argue again now. A boy of 11 has been suspended from school for making a lewd gesture at a teacher, and she thinks the whole affair has been trumped up by kids who don't like him.

In another life, Madama concedes later, her opinions might have erupted into a shouting match spiced with the street language of her Harlem neighborhood. But on this autumn Thursday afternoon, she stands instead before a black-robed Dena, 14, and uses the language of the court to take the young boy's side.

"Today's case is supposed to be a serious case, but in fact it is nothing but a lie," she declares. "The teacher heard hearsay from students, and I'm going to give you a little outline about how it went. The kids told the teacher; the teacher told the principal; and the principal gave my client a suspension. I ask that you listen to this case clearly and understand that my client is innocent."

Six jurors in Harlem Youth Court t-shirts listen with the cautious air of people who know their hearsay from their hard facts. For months, these teenagers have been practicing their roles twice weekly after school, learning the workings of the justice system and meting out sentences to young offenders.

In the process, says their mentor Jabari Osaze, they acquire valuable skills in critical thinking, active listening, consensus building, and public speaking. They learn how neutral language can de-escalate potentially volatile situations. And they gain a new understanding of balancing rights and responsibilities in an environment where youth voices rarely matter to adults.

Trying to draw the youngster out, the jurors ask questions of the respondent, frustrated at times because his responses, some barely audible, shed little light on the matter at hand:

Juror: Did you at any time put your hands on the teacher?

Respondent: No.

Juror: Do you feel you should be here right now?

Respondent: No.

Juror: How are you feeling right now?

Respondent: Nervous.

Juror: You have a smiling face, do you think this situation is a game?

Respondent: No.

Juror: You had a meeting with the teacher and the principal—when did you find out you were accused of threatening the teacher? They called your house and you couldn't really say nothing?

Respondent: [Inaudible; judge tells respondent to speak up]

Juror: Why do you feel the teacher lied?

Respondent: The kids told her I threatened to kill her.

Juror: Did you have a close relationship with the teacher?

Respondent: No.

Later, in a secluded jury room, jurors puzzle through the pieces of the tangled case before them. Unlike in adult court, their charge is not to determine guilt or innocence but to come up with an appropriate sentence. Respondents appearing in Harlem Youth Court have acknowledged their wrongdoing and agreed to accept the jury's judgment in exchange for bypassing traditional Family Court. Nonetheless, to decide on a suitable sentence, jurors inevitably consider exactly what an offender has done wrong. In the current case, for instance, the panel worries about Madama's contention that the charge is unfair:

Juror (1): I understand that he's 11, in fifth grade. Maybe he was nervous in his reactions. But he wouldn't answer appropriately—just yes or no—when we were looking for more detail. I think he did do what they said he did—he wouldn't be here if he didn't. If he's here, he must have done something.

Juror (2): I don't think he did anything wrong. He was new in the school—he had no friends. And the teacher knew the students who were there already, so she would believe them first.

Juror (3): I think he did it—why would somebody make up a lie about someone threatening a teacher?.

Some think they should assign the boy no punishment at all. Others argue that his attitude speaks of guilt, and warrants a substantive sentence. In the end, they assign the youngster ten hours of community service at the Harlem Art Park, a neighborhood recreation area. Youth Court sentences always entail community service; sometimes respondents must also write essays, offer apologies, or make restitution for the damage they have done.

"I thought the sentence was fair," says Dena, the eighth-grade presiding judge in the

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Youth Court jurors may question a respondent directly to expand their understanding of the offender, his or her motivation, and the circumstances of the misdeed.

proceedings, when the group gathers for a debriefing and critique after the case is closed. “The jury didn’t like his attitude, but he wasn’t here for that. He was here for harassing the teacher.”

Jabari Osaze, who has constantly mentored the court’s proceedings, warmly offers both support for each student’s work and critical feedback. “Judge, I’m getting much more comfortable with the way you run the room,” he says. “I think you organize the room very well. You feel comfortable asking people to speak up, you feel comfortable ad libbing in some cases! You’re doing a very good job of using what you know the authority of the judge is.” He continues in a more critical vein. “A few times you were a little bit harsher on the youth respondent than you should have been. But it’s important that you make sure we can hear what he says.”

Helping Offenders Re-Connect

An initiative of the Harlem Center for Court Innovation, the Harlem Youth Court is just one of some 800 youth courts across the nation. Local programs vary considerably; some work with adult judges, for example, others with youth judges. In Alaska, teen courts actually determine innocence or guilt. But most, like the Harlem Youth Court, review acknowledged offenses to decide on appropriate sentences.

These programs illustrate well the differences between Youth Court and adult court. Youth Court jurors are able to question a respondent directly, to expand their understanding of the offender, his or her motivation, and the circumstances of the misdeed. Soliciting such information, as today’s Harlem case shows, is often a challenge when jurors encounter a reticent or nervous respondent. Despite this difficulty, the approach has its advantages.

“In adult court, it’s like both sides [are] working against each other,” explains Juston, 17, a Harlem court member. “But in youth court we work with each other. The community advocate and the youth advocate and the jury, we’re all here for one purpose, to help the youth respondent be responsible for what he or she has done.”

Indeed, a growing trend in many youth courts seeks not just to dole out punishment but to help restore young transgressors to a productive role in their community. This emphasis on “restorative justice” focuses less on testimony, procedure, and evidence and more on dialogue and understanding. While taking into account the crime’s impact on the victim, this approach also acknowledges that the offense has harmed the entire community—and attempts to right the wrong, bringing the offender into a more healthy balance with those around him.

Imposing a sentence of community service, for example, youth court jurors often consider how the offender’s strengths could benefit the community as well as how

the service might help the offender along a new path. The youngster sentenced to work in the Harlem Art Park will come into frequent contact with the Youth Court team that operates from the courthouse next door. “This is a young person that just moved to a new school, and he’s a little bit uncomfortable there,” Jabari Osaze notes. “Perhaps being with some people who can be supportive and positive will help him. We’ll even see whether he’s interested in doing Youth Court himself.”

Assigning young offenders to participate as court members is a common tactic. Peter, an 18-year-old student from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, recalled such a sentence in a shoplifting case he helped prosecute in the Peer Review Court of Linn County. During the trial the offender seemed “not to be repentant at all,” he said, but the sentence required her to participate as a juror in at least two youth courts, in addition to her probation or community service. “She went above and beyond that call, and actually became a volunteer. She started going to school more, she stopped hanging around with her old friends, and her life really turned around.”

Another successful strategy of youth courts around the country is the use of mediation—both in training for court members and in sentencing offenders. Oregon teens involved with the Stayton Sublimity Youth Court, for example, receive training in mediation from third-year law students at Willamette University. “It’s a good way to get problems solved,” said Kirsten, a Stayton participant attending a national conference of youth courts last year. Mediation also serves as an effective tool for bringing offenders into productive dialogue with their victims—and importantly with their parents. “One kid stole some items from Buy-Mart, and there wasn’t much trust between him and his parents,” Kirsten recalled, “so part of the sentence was to go through mediation. He had to give an in-court apology to his mom, and they hugged and were both crying.”

Changing Attitudes and Habits

Youth court members recognize and appreciate their power to help turn around their peers’ lives. It is for this reason that Peter, the Oregon participant, most enjoys the defense attorney’s role. “You get to know the person better,” he said. “You get that hands-on feeling that you’re really changing someone’s life, helping them take a step in the right direction.”

But Youth Court aims to help its volunteers as well as the offenders. Many of these young court members freely admit that they themselves have committed the same offenses for which they are now sentencing their peers. But after a time, Osaze says, the typical Harlem Youth Court member “is truant less, acts more appropriately in public, does not hop the turnstile.” As they grow increasingly aware that actions have consequences, Osaze continues, “they begin to look at their options differently.

Assigning young offenders to participate as court members is a common tactic. Another successful strategy is mediation—both in training for court members and in sentencing offenders.

“One of the most difficult things is to teach young people to disagree without being disagreeable,” says a Youth Court mentor. The ability to use “neutral language,” he says, carries over into both business and academia.

They really do learn from each other.”

And they see how they themselves are changing. Madama says she has learned to act differently when conflicts arise within Harlem’s close-knit team. “When we have problems, some of us take the leadership role and just say ‘listen, let’s do this and not have it escalate to a fight.’”

Adult mentors like Osaze play a large part in that process—which is no simple task. “One of the most difficult things in Youth Court training,” he notes, “is trying to teach young people to disagree without being disagreeable. Adults have difficulty with that, and because I believe young people are a lot more honest than adults are, they have even more difficulty. Honesty doesn’t necessarily have to be rudeness, though, and that’s one of the things that we work with them on.”

The ability to use this neutral language, Osaze continues, “is probably the skill that, when they really begin to understand, they use more than others in other environments. A neutral language speaker is a speaker that can be effective in business, in college, in academia—almost anywhere.”

That these young people’s career aspirations have also changed after the Youth Court experience seems to indicate that they get his point. “We actually play out the roles that are real live things that you can be when you grow older,” says Yohany, 17, who now hopes for a career in law enforcement. “If I can do this here I can take it to another level.”

Dena, the 14-year-old judge, bluntly agrees. “In school, I don’t have control. They don’t have to listen to nothing I say,” she says. “Here, you have to listen to me. I want to be a lawyer when I grow up.”

City at Peace: Sharing Stories, Dissolving Barriers on Stage

After three months of baring their souls and sharing their secrets with peers they once would never have dared approach, the three dozen teenagers in the City at Peace rehearsal room are ready to take their stories to the stage.

Since first coming to this unusual program—aimed at bringing together Washington’s youth of all races through the performing arts—Prentice, 16, has gathered the courage to tell of his childhood molestation and his confusion over his sexual identity. “I always grew up thinking white kids can’t understand what we go through,” he says.

Anais, 18, has “changed everything—the way I think, the way I act, the way I talk and walk,” she says. When she arrived here at 14, “I had a lot of attitude. I was the Queen of South East.” Now she serves on the City at Peace governing board and spends several days a week on the production team for the yearly show.

And Miriam, 18, has realized the superficial nature of the diversity at her suburban high school, where kids of different races segregate themselves at lunch and in hallway conversations. Real cross-cultural understanding only happens, she says, when people “get to know each other from the ground up.”

That kind of learning takes place regularly in this rundown second-floor room in a public school building in a largely African-American Washington neighborhood. Launched a decade ago to promote conflict resolution and mutual understanding among young people of different backgrounds, City at Peace has grown into a remarkable effort whose work extends across the city and even the nation.

Today, some 30 Washington-area teenagers of all ethnicities and backgrounds crowd in for their six-hour Saturday session, jostling and hugging and sharing news of school fashion shows and college acceptances.

Since September, City at Peace mentors Sandra Holloway and e’Marcus Harper have led them through demanding training in theatre, music, and dance that promises to change them from the inside out. In April, the work will culminate in a full-length musical based on their own lives, written and performed by the students themselves.

Letting Down the Pose

This day, like every other, starts with dance warm-ups before moving on to acting exercises aimed at breaking down the poses, fears, and self-protective barriers that separate these young people. “Everything serves several purposes,” notes Holloway, who has been the City at Peace artistic director since 1998. “It’s teambuilding, it’s

A demanding training in theatre, dance, and music promises to transform these teens from the inside out. By the end, says one, she “changed everything—the way I think, the way I act, the way I talk and walk.”

“When you’re not posing when you’re centering yourself,” a student reflects, “you can’t help letting people see who you really are. Before you know it, you’re saying ‘I know them.’”

cross-cultural understanding, it’s relationship-building, it’s dance, music, and acting.”

Her low voice warm but authoritative, she keeps the group focused as they follow walking-about routines that have them making contact, then avoiding each other’s eyes. “There’s something emotional that displays itself physically when you try to avoid someone,” she coaches them. “Let that sit with you physically and emotionally. You can’t avoid someone if you don’t see them.”

In a “mirror” exercise, two students face each other and lock eyes, with one mimicking every movement the other makes. “When you’re not posing, when you’re centering yourself,” Miriam says, “you can’t help letting people see who you really are. Before you know it, you’re saying ‘I know them.’”

Prentice describes another exercise called “speak-out,” in which “white and black kids make two facing lines, and then we tell each other three things: what we need to hear, what we never want to hear, what they need to hear.” One thing he never wants to hear, he says, is “that a white kid acts differently around me to fit into my world.”

On lunch break, the students sprawl on the floor eating sandwiches and fruit brought by a parent volunteer. They dance to CDs, pick out chords on someone’s guitar, rest heads on nearby shoulders. And they talk about how the training has changed them.

In her previous life, “everyone just accepted the image I put out of always being on top,” recalls Anais. “Here they accepted me. Here I had to work from the inside out. I could just speak—not use slang. I changed the way I walk. Now I can be the insecure shy person I am and know that’s OK.” She pauses. “It’s a scary place to be, on the brink of opening up and wondering if you’ll be accepted.”

“Even in my school of rich white kids, I don’t feel [this] accepted,” says Alexandra, 16, who lives in a Virginia suburb and goes to a private school. “I thought people wouldn’t talk to me here, but that’s not at all true. Here everyone’s together and real. It’s kind of an escape—but yet the whole world is here.”

City at Peace training, Prentice agrees, has made him “freer, more accepting, open to more things in how I deal with people.” Both at home with his four younger siblings and at school, “I’m taking the skills I’m learning and applying them. It’s tremendously changed me.”

Playing Someone's Life, Telling the Truth

In the last hour of the day the group gathers in a circle on the floor. Just back from an intensive planning retreat, the production team of experienced students and professionals is about to present the outline of the upcoming show—and cast each role. The room vibrates with the silence of three dozen breaths held.

“This outline represents your journey together—what happened here in this room, what you talked about, what happened as a result of that talking,” Sandra Holloway tells them. She lays out the play, scene by scene. In the next weeks, the students will flesh it out themselves—writing their lines, developing the dances and music, heading for the climax of their April performance.

The kids on the floor exchange looks and smiles, touch hands. In the bones of the drama and its fictional characters they recognize their own struggles and traumas, the conflicts and decisions they have shared here with each other.

“Now we have to trust the things you’ve said in this room,” Holloway goes on. “You are writing this show. If you’re playing someone’s life, are you going to tell the truth about it? Or are you going to fake it because you feel weird? Can we be honest enough to tell each other’s stories? If there’s one person out there who will see you on stage and say, ‘That’s me!’—and you provide hope or a solution—that’s your reward. You guys have the opportunity to change lives.”

A shiver goes around this circle of young people, who suddenly seem like an ensemble willing to do anything to make that happen. “The more secure I get in what my goals are, the more I’ll know what to do next,” Anais has said earlier, reflecting on whether to go to college after she graduates from high school. “If I don’t feel passionate about something I don’t want to do it. I want to love it, be consumed by it, teach it, grow from it.”

“In every scene, you will be asking yourself, ‘What has to happen? What has been learned? Who learns?’” their coach concludes. “All you have from this point on is each other. Now’s your time to fly.”

“Can we be honest enough to tell each other’s stories?” the director asks. “If there’s one person out there who will see you on stage and say, ‘That’s me!’—and you provide hope or a solution—that’s your reward. You guys have the opportunity to change lives.”

This school serving a tribal community has used the peacemaking ritual to resolve conflicts not just with students but with faculty, parents, and board members.

The Shade of a Schoolyard Tree: Discipline and Peacemaking

In Navajo tradition, two parties in conflict retreat to the shade of a spreading tree, where they work out their differences with the help of a designated peacemaker and anyone else involved in the dispute.

Humbling yet transformative, the ritual rests on the recognition that the bonds of the clan take precedence over any other issue. Everyone has the right to speak, but also the responsibility to bring offenders back into close connection with a caring community.

Now that time-honored Native American peacemaking ritual has made its way to the schoolyard, in an alternative to traditional methods of school discipline at Little Singer Community School in Winslow, Arizona. Rather than removing a young wrongdoer from the community via suspension or expulsion, this technique aims for healing and harmony by “feeling our relationship with one another,” as a Navajo description puts it.

In the past year, this 130-student school serving a largely tribal community has used the peacemaking technique to resolve conflicts not just with students but also with faculty, parents, and board members. And for the first time last spring, instead of the usual springtime spike in the number of disciplinary disruptions, the school had “zero incidents,” according to Mark Sorensen, its executive director.

Connections Trump Anger, Hurt

“Hurt or angry people are often basing their hurt or anger on misunderstanding,” he says. A peacemaking session starts, for this reason, with someone expressing caring and interconnection directly to the person who has disturbed the peace.

In this spread-out rural territory with only 3,500 residents, that connection is often through the family, the tribe, or the clan. Even so, Sorensen asserts, “You can’t start by saying to a youngster, ‘Why don’t you feel connected to me?’ This process must begin with someone expressing to the student that I care about you.”

At Little Singer, peacemaking sessions take place in a traditional small Navajo dwelling built on school grounds. They are facilitated by a designated peacemaker, chosen from the tribal community by the school’s leaders. A crucial element is the participation of others who are somehow important in the wrongdoer’s life.

“What you do matters, what they do matters, how you express yourself matters,” Sorensen says. “You’re part of the fabric of the whole situation.”

In one incident, for example, a sixth-grade boy burst out in angry curses at a teacher

whose instructions were frustrating to him. After an emotional hour with the peacemaker, the youngster returned to the classroom and asked his best friend, who had also been present at the session, to speak for him. "He wanted his classmates and the teacher to know he did care about his connection to them," Sorensen says. After the apology, the whole class agreed to help him continue to be part of their group; and since then, "everyone has noticed a change in the atmosphere of that classroom," he noted.

With Thomas Walker, Jr., the Navajo chairman of Little Singer's board, Mark Sorensen has written a paper that compares the school's peacemaking policies with standard school disciplinary policies and outlines the peacemaking procedures.

To be effective in healing, the authors assert, a peacemaking session requires not just one's physical presence but also full emotional, mental, and spiritual engagement. It begins with a moment of focusing, in which participants call on a higher power for guidance and strength, recognizing that the solution must transcend any one participant.

Sorensen, a non-Navajo who has led the school for ten years, has himself felt the power of the peacemaking ritual when resolving a staff dispute. "As head administrator, I was one of the people who cared about the person involved," he says. "But I was not prepared for how emotional the experience would be."

And far from being too gentle a method to deal with violent or disruptive behavior in schools, "it can be pretty tough," he says. "Some adults who have been through it would rather end up going to jail than do it again, because all their relations come in and hold them to whatever is agreed upon."

This Navajo technique aims for healing and harmony by "feeling our relationship with one another." A session starts with someone expressing caring and connection directly to the person who has disturbed the peace.

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