

GROWING ASPIRATION IN TOUGH ENVIRONMENTS

# THRIVING



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# Growing Aspiration in Tough Environments

When adult guides support youth in working towards their full potential, they may need multiple conversations to help youth “unpack” past traumas in order to open up their capacity for new aspiration framing. In high-stress environments, youth may develop protective shells that help them disassociate from the life aspirations that are common to all of us. They become expert at playing the refrain: “That doesn’t apply to me and my world.”

Live in Peace (LIP), an organization created to advance the prevention of violence with youth facing multiple environmental barriers, developed a set of important conversations to enhance receptivity to thriving concepts. Tips from their curriculum form the basis for this paper.

## Setting the Stage

LIP staff find it important to first acknowledge the norms that exist in a youth’s community, before presenting a vision for a hopeful future. Sometimes acknowledgement of environmental conditions requires speaking a truth that has been “unspoken”. This frank, impactful intervention elevates the bonding between a mentor and youth, growing trust to support the change process. Often a path forward necessitates a youth adopting new norms and behaviors contrary to the majority of the youth’s peers. For instance, if 75% of the students from the community are not graduating from high school, the youth might feel awkward doing the things that it takes to graduate. If many of the youth’s peers are cutting school or getting “high”, the youth may feel lonely or “uncool” going to school everyday, or choosing to not get “high”. By simply articulating some of the unspoken feelings or events in a youth’s world, and articulating the worthwhile price the youth pays to advance a dream, the mentor can break down barriers to taking a

first step to change. In effect, the mentor gives the youth permission and the courage to grow up to be what the youth aspires to be.

It is here that mentors must also implement a paradigm shift. Often we talk about learning the “hard way”, which implies that we learn by making bad choices. Instead, mentors need to explain that we don’t have to learn the hard way. It is possible to absorb life lessons of others, and to apply that knowledge to “staying the course” in a direct route to our dreams. In a season of difficult change, a caring adult plays the critical role of praising effort and reaffirming the youth’s long-term vision and potential.

Here are a few conversations LIP uses to help illuminate community “norms” that have become a hindrance to thriving concepts:

## 1: Dreams and Dream Thieves

When talking to a youth about his or her sparks or dreams, draw out the barriers, including the less obvious ones. Ask the youth what it takes for a particular dream to come true, and what might get in the way. For instance, answers regarding a dream future of “I want to go to college” or “I want to own a big house and two nice cars” may come up against daily actions that do not lead to a youth’s dreams. This disconnect may suggest the youth:

- is not actually motivated by the dream they speak about, or
- is not connecting current actions to future consequences, or
- is unable to navigate the barriers that threaten dreams.

*"Help youth see norms in their community or family that may frequently lead to danger. Label friendships and fearships without bad or good stigmas that trigger loyalty and youth blind spots."*

*Live in Peace Curriculum, '08*

Dismantle the power of "dream thieves"—people who make choices and actions that prevent or discourage a youth from achieving personal dreams or goals. Examples of dream thieves are gangs, friends who introduce danger, drugs or alcohol; or family members who exhibit uncontrolled anger or support negative behaviors, such as skipping class or dropping out of school. Dream thieves may promote a youth's "I don't care" attitude, when in fact the youth is actually saying, "I care so much, but I can't seem to do anything about it."

## 2: Friendship—Fearship

All young people face peer pressure. Give youth a lens to view friends, and those who they would confuse as friends. Emphasize the phrase: "Real friends will never lead you to danger; friends will always protect your dreams. Fearships lead you away from your dreams." Help the youth to clearly identify and avoid fearships, as well as avoid being a fearship to others. When mindsets around loyalty and love are tied to fearships, they need to be challenged and reshaped. A loved brother who encourages violence is a fearship, who resembles someone with a disease. We can

love people with a disease, while still avoiding the disease ourselves. Challenge youth to recognize when they act in friendship or fearship themselves. Youth can gain an appreciation and skills to acquire friends, dream protectors and spark champions.

## Suggested Movie Clips

Messages become increasingly powerful when they are communicated through storytelling. Use film to open up discussions and elevate key messages with your youth. Live in Peace finds youth, through High School, connect with characters in these movies that highlight the concepts of dreams/dream thieves and friendships/fearships:

- 🎬 Akeelah & the Bee (13:02-13:25; 120:25-12:01)
- 🎬 Lion King (12:02-14:40; 101:24-102:5)

## Conversation Questions

- 🎬 How many people do you know that are living their whole dream? Living just part of their dream? Probably not living any of their dreams?
- 🎬 Why do so many people end up so far away from their dreams?
- 🎬 What are strategies to navigate around dream thieves? How can you keep your dream louder than their message?
- 🎬 What natural strengths do you already have, that can build your dream to become who you really are?

### References

1. Heather Starnes, Executive Director, for Live in Peace. Headquartered in East Palo Alto, CA.
2. Live in Peace offers a new community of healing and hope for young people suffering from chronic trauma. This organization helps eliminate violence from within youth lives and their community, by walking youth through a multi-step healing process. Most of the program elements are designed to expose and deprogram the "stinkin' thinkin" of the streets, and to expose youth to life outside the "Hood". As youth experience new and diverse opportunities and vantage points, their hopes and dreams flourish.
3. Curriculum, copyright 2008. Live in Peace

Tips were taken from LIP's curriculum;  
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