



UNLEASHING TEEN BRAINPOWER!

**Our most valuable
untapped resource**

How a computer scientist uses the magic of electronic brainstorming and collaborative technology to release, harness, and leverage the brainpower of American teenagers to learn why kids are killing kids and to stop the violence in our schools.

**By Brice F. Marsh, President
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Foreword by Pat R. Odom, Ph.D.

Foreword

In the life of every person, the teen years are the time of transition from childhood to young adulthood. It is a time of rapid learning and a time of preparation for the wide array of experiences and opportunities that life will offer. Teens know a great deal about what is happening in the world through the Internet, television, and print media, in addition to their own formal education and life experiences. They form opinions and ideas that are very valuable, but unfortunately often not heard by parents, teachers, churches, and government leaders.

This book is about an important initiative to listen to the opinions and ideas of teens through the innovative use of electronic meeting systems technology. As a computer scientist, Brice Marsh has developed an exciting way for groups of teens to get together, each with a laptop computer, and electronically brainstorm any given subject of concern to them, such as the problem of school violence. Each collaborative session produces an organized, written and prioritized set of insights and ideas or solutions from the teens' perspective. These results have already been found to be valuable input to local and state education and government leaders around the United States.

If it is true, and I believe it is, that America's most important untapped source of brainpower is our teens, then the approach to giving them a voice as documented in this book is important reading for anyone who works with young people, or who needs their thinking.

Pat R. Odom, Ph.D.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Children should be seen and
not heard”

WRONG!



“Mr. Marsh, I’m 18 years old and this is the first time in my life an adult has ever asked for my opinion about anything. My parents give me orders, my teachers give me assignments, my coach barks at me, and my preacher preaches at me ... but nobody listens to me!”

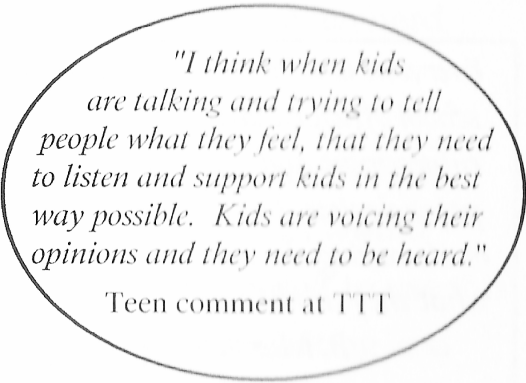
That comment, coming from a student who had just participated in a two-hour Teen Think Tank about ways to stop school violence, was the inspiration for our motto: *“Giving Teens a Voice!”*

Another teenager said, **“Nobody is interested in what a 14 year old boy has to say ... until he shoots somebody. Then, everybody wants to know what’s on his mind!”**

Those two comments have haunted me and have driven me to devote a great deal of time and effort to seek ways to give an ear to what our kids have to say, and to let them know we are genuinely interested in their opinions and ideas. Some people seem to think that kids are capable only of thinking and doing silly things; but I have learned that they can be innovative, creative, crafty, clever, sincere, intellectual, sophisticated, and amusing. Sometimes I’m downright intimidated by the depth and breadth of their knowledge and insight about a broad range of topics. They can leap suddenly from a discussion about teen “stuff” to an in-depth discussion about some technical or highly intellectual subject, and never miss a beat.

Just stop and think about it. Do you have any idea what teenagers really talk about when they are talking with other teenagers, espe-

cially other teenagers whom they regard as intimate friends and allies? If you could listen in, you might very well be surprised to discover they are engaged in a very respectable conversation about global economics, religion, social injustice, politics, terrorism, the stock market, spiritual values, automobiles, computer technology, psychology, music, and other issues. Of course, when adults or other “unfriendly” teenagers come around, they will often revert to joking around and “acting like kids”, because they do not feel their profound thoughts and observations about serious matters will be given any respect or serious consideration.



"I think when kids are talking and trying to tell people what they feel, that they need to listen and support kids in the best way possible. Kids are voicing their opinions and they need to be heard."

Teen comment at TTT

One teen remarked, “Adults say they want kids to act like adults, but they always treat us like kids. If they want us to act like adults, they should give us credit for being able to do something other than childish things. We want to be recognized. We want to be respected. We want to be heard. Let us be what we can be!”

The Advent of Teen Think Tanks of America, Inc.

As one of a relatively few certified professional facilitators of electronic meetings using computer-assisted collaborative technology, it is my pleasure and privilege to facilitate electronic meetings for NASA scientists, engineers, and administrative personnel. To be more specific, I am a senior computer scientist employed by Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC), one of the major contractors to NASA at Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

But, more importantly, as a former school teacher, an IBM employee, a father, a grandfather, and one who has worked many

years with youth groups in church and community activities, I have a deep and abiding compassion for teenagers everywhere. It breaks my heart to see what is happening to our teenagers all

Everyone is talking to school officials, law enforcement and psychologists, but no one is asking the kids what they think"

B. Marsh

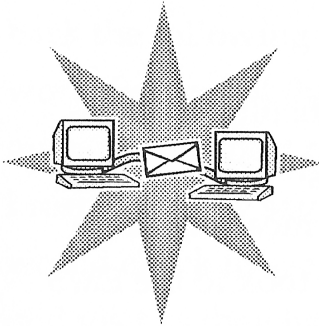
around us in the most prosperous and most advanced nation on the earth. We make sure that our children have the best of everything ... the best house, the best food, the best clothing, the best automobile, the best school, the best medical care, the best computer, the best toys ... but we are not giving them our time or our attention. We may think they want us to "butt out", but they are crying for us to be a

part of their life. They want *us* ... not what our money can buy for them. One boy remarked, after receiving a brand new sports car from his dad, "I think it's a guilt offering ... he feels guilty because he can't spend any time with me."

One day it occurred to me that it might be very interesting to introduce some teenagers to the almost magical experience of computerized electronic brainstorming. At NASA, we use a special type of collaborative technology that goes way beyond the concept of Internet chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards and subscription discussion groups. It is called an Electronic Meeting System or "EMS" (not to be confused with emergency medical service) and it uses a special software product, developed by the University of Arizona, called GroupSystems. It includes a variety of collaborative tools and techniques, and it allows a group of people to interact with each other to accomplish high quality collaborative results in a remarkably short time. It is not uncommon for a group of 20 people,



using GroupSystems EMS, to produce results in 2 hours or less that would have taken a week or more using conventional meeting and teamwork techniques. One high level NASA official re-



marked, "I think these folks can even herd cats!"

Well anyway, back to my story about Teen Think Tanks, I wanted to see what would happen if teenagers were permitted to use this space-age approach to communicating and

brainstorming with one another. It allows ... no, it actually *encourages* all participants to speak at once, electronically... with neither confusion nor interruption. Thus, 20 people can "say" 20 times as much, using this method of parallel input, than one person could say in an equal amount of time, if everyone was forced to speak one at a time. All comments may be projected onto a public screen, but it is also anonymous. Therefore, everybody can see what everybody's saying, but nobody knows who said what. All of a sudden, people realize that they can finally say what's really on their mind without being criticized or ridiculed for their ideas.

I thought to myself, this is exactly what the doctor ordered for teen-

agers to overcome their inhibitions and fear of peer pressure to say what they are really thinking about many things that worry them the most. Ironically, these are usually the very things they have the least opportunity to talk about with anyone. I conferred with a former IBM colleague and close friend, Mr. Rod Peek, to see if he would recruit some teenagers to serve as "guinea pigs" in an EMS experiment, if I could get permission to use NASA's EMS facility. And that's exactly what we did. The folks at NASA gra-

"I've really enjoyed working on this topic of school violence without having to argue my side in order to get a word in."

Chris, 17-year-old boy

ciously agreed for us to bring the teenagers into the EMS room on a Saturday when it was not in use. The teenagers were excited to be part of this breakthrough in thinking about teenage collaboration.

Rod and I had been warned that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to hold teenagers' attention long enough or to focus them on one subject long enough to accomplish meaningful results. Well, that was simply not true. These kids took to the EMS work like the proverbial ducks taking to water. We had anticipated that they may become bored with the exercise after a while and we had planned some diversionary entertainment during lunch and after the session. They started at 10:00 a.m. and we had sandwiches brought in at noon. One of NASA's experts on robots and virtual reality gave them a very entertaining presentation during lunch, but one of the students exclaimed, "This is all fun, but when can we get back to the electronic brainstorming? That's what we came here to do!"

*" I liked the feeling that
I was going to make a
difference in society by
dealing with school
violence"*

Adam, 15 year old
sophomore

We also had planned for them to have a VIP tour of the yet unlaunched International Space Station (ISS) and to meet an astronaut at 3:00 p.m. At approximately 2:45, when it became apparent that they were not going to finish all that they had committed to do at the beginning of the day, one of the teenagers inquired, "Do we really have to go on the tour and meet the astronaut? I'd rather stay here and get this done." It was no simple matter to arrange for a VIP tour of the ISS at any time, much less on a Saturday, and the opportunity to meet an astronaut in person is a rare bonus. So we called the people who had come in, on their own time to do the tour, to see if we could delay the visit by 30 minutes. They

agreed and we informed the teenagers that they had a few more minutes to wrap up their work. Before we locked up the EMS facility for the day, the teens wanted to know if they could come back the following Saturday to put the finishing touches on their work. Several of their parents had driven vans more than 100 miles to transport them from Birmingham, Alabama to Huntsville. I responded by saying that if the parents could bring them back, I would check to see if the officials at NASA would approve a second visit as they had requested. They had a delightful visit and a behind-the-scenes tour of the ISS and a most congenial visit with the astronaut, but they were looking forward to coming back to finish the work they had begun. Talk about commitment! Talk about engagement! The naysayers could not have been more wrong when they warned us that teenagers were too flighty and too restless to focus on serious work for any length of time.

Well, they *did* return the following Saturday, with NASA's approval of course, to produce a report of their findings and recommendations. They even used EMS to brainstorm for a name for the report. They called it the *SOS Report* or the *Save Our Schools Report*. They were later invited to a special recognition ceremony at the Governor's Office in Montgomery and their report was presented to the members of the Governor's Task Force on School Violence. While they were in Montgomery they were honored by the Alabama State Legislature where they received a special legislative proclamation for participating in the "World's First Teen Think Tank on School Violence". Portions of the *SOS Report* are included as a section of this book. The entire *SOS Report* may be accessed at the *TTT* web page: www.teenthinktanks.org.



You can quote me on

Teens on school violence

I am sick and tired of being afraid. Thank you for giving us a chance for our voices to be heard.

I see violence everyday where I live and its hard to get away from cause its right there in your face.

Crueler penalties for violence. Teens should be tried as adults when they commit a act of violence.....capitol punishment should be for ALL killers and no more than 2 appeals before the death sentence.....and they can not get off after their date has been set.

Violence is a real problem for some people, but I think that it can be controlled if the people controlling it aren't dumber than

All the violence literally makes me sick. It's not right to make school a place where students wonder if it'll be the last day of their life.

I think school uniforms are a good idea to keep the violence out of school because it

People are too mean to each other now. We should be nicer to each other and respect their rights.

We need to hold a big conference somewhere and listen to other youth who have been hurt by teenage violence. Maybe someone will listen and hear something encouraging. After all of the important things have been discussed, then maybe a big party can be given for all of the participants.