

Young Changemaking as the New Norm in Growing Up: The Role of Adult Allies

By: Claire Fallender*, Reilly Brooks*

*Global Director, Youth Years Strategy, Ashoka

*Manager, Partnerships and Youth Activation, Ashoka

Keywords: parenting, education, future of work, empathy, learning, childhood

Abstract

This article looks at data from Ashoka's 2021 Global Fellow Study where Ashoka asked its network of social entrepreneurs what factors enhanced or detracted from their ability to start their changemaker journey at a young age. We look at who, whether parents, teachers, peers, or others, was most influential to those who began their changemaker journey as teenagers and those who started later in life. We notice that there are significant geographic differences in the influence of different adult groups in the lives of social entrepreneurs. However, all over, parents and family members, educators, and other social entrepreneurs play an important inspirational role. Our aim is to use these insights to understand and uplift the ways that our society can embrace and support young changemaking as a critical part of growing up.

Introduction

The often mind-spinning pace of change in the world means that we must be ready to tackle new problems that come our way. The sooner we can exercise those muscles of creativity and problem-solving as tools for adapting to and driving change, the better. These skills will also be a factor determining how our society can steer this change away from division and towards the good of all. With the striking disruption of learning, work, and everyday life, everyone, especially younger generations, is learning how to prepare for this new normal.

For example, we continue to ask young people "what do you want to be when you grow up?" despite the fact that it is impossible to know what professions or trades will even exist when that time of arrives.¹ Imagine instead that around the dinner table or at the family reunion, we ask our kids, nephews, and grandkids, "What problem are you working to solve?" Not in the future tense, but the *present*. Instead of "doctor" you may get, "I am helping people be healthy and well". Instead of "teacher" you may get, "I am working to make sure *all* kids are able to love learning".

This was the question Ashoka Fellow Gonzalo Muñoz, a leading social entrepreneur in the environment and climate change space, posed to his three daughters. Like 43% of Ashoka Fellows taking part in the Global Fellows Study around the world, Gonzalo started his own changemaker journey as a teen in Chile. He is also part of an increasing number of parents and guardians who are demanding a different kind of education and embracing a different approach to parenting that centers the experience of changemaking as critical to success in growing up.²

For Ashoka, a changemaker is someone who imagines a new reality, takes action, and collaborates with others to bring that new reality into being for the good of others. This article looks at data from Ashoka's 2021 Global Fellow Study in which Ashoka asked its network of social entrepreneurs what factors enhanced or detracted from their ability to start their changemaker journey young. We will look at who, whether parents, teachers, peers, or others, was most influential to those who began their changemaker journey as teenagers and those who started later in life. Our aim is to use these insights to understand and uplift the ways that our society can embrace and support young changemaking as a critical part of growing up.

Gonzalo and Ximena's Story

The stories of two Ashoka Fellows from Chile, [Gonzalo Muñoz](#)³ and [Ximena Abogabir](#),⁴ illustrate what it means to raise a family of changemakers. These leading social entrepreneurs have individually changed the face of large-scale recycling and environmental education respectively in Chile. However, they are connected in a powerful way: Gonzalo is Ximena's son. Gonzalo Muñoz got his start making positive change in small but important ways as a child. His mother, Ximena Abogabir, was galvanizing a new culture of civic engagement in post-dictatorship Chile across business, public and citizen sectors by uniting them in a common purpose to improve environmental sustainability in the country.

She founded [Casa de la Paz](#)⁵ and was selected as an Ashoka Fellow in 1995 because of her system change approach to environmental education. Ximena's own upbringing in a family of entrepreneurs shaped the way she naturally gave space to her three children to grow their autonomy and ability to lead. At the same time, it was jarring for her while growing up to see little positive social impact stemming from her parent's business endeavors. This served to cement her commitment to social change and to exposing her own children to questions of social justice.

Ximena involved her three children, Gonzalo, Juan Carlos, and daughter Ximena, in her work with *Casa de la Paz*. Outside of her professional work, she and her husband also gave them opportunities to connect with members of their community and take on increasing leadership roles. During their vacations, their whole family would support the school in the local town. Ximena recalls hauling art supplies for her children to design posters, inviting kids to participate in activities she would host for the community.

One summer, when Gonzalo was 16, he and his brother organized a fundraiser in partnership with a local church to build a new school.

When Gonzalo started at college at age 18, his arrival coincided with a mass cholera outbreak in Chile due to the use of untreated water in local farming practices. Concerned and curious, he taught himself about hydroponics, a farming technique that uses less water, and then began teaching others in local NGOs and government agencies to use hydroponics as an alternative to unsafe farming practices.

It was some years later, after a time as a successful business executive, that his daughter's fight with cancer made Gonzalo see what really mattered to him. It gave him the urgency to put his

energy into improving the lives of others and the health of our planet. He saw the opportunity to combine his business know-how and knowledge around the sustainable use of natural resources. In 2012, Gonzalo established [TriCiclos](#)⁶ in Chile, the first B-corporation in Latin America that is systematically changing society's relationship with waste. Gonzalo shares, "it is impossible to deny that most of the inspiration my two siblings and I received came from our parents".

Today, Gonzalo's siblings are also exemplar changemakers in Chilean society. His brother, Juan Carlos, is a professor and expert in transportation innovation in the public sector; and his sister, Ximena, is a social innovator in solar lighting initiatives. His mother, Ximena, now a grandmother, continues to grow and evolve her impact. In 2018 she founded [Travesia 100](#)⁷, an organization focused on shifting the conversation around aging and longevity.

"Non-controlling adult allies" in the Lives of Young Changemakers

Ximena and Gonzalo's story demonstrates how important supportive adults, in this case parents and family, can be for setting young people on their changemaking path. The data from the 2021 Global Fellows Study illustrates some of the nuances and aspects of where and how adult allies can be most critical. The data serves to paint a global picture of what Ashoka, through its 25-year Youth Venture program,⁸ has termed "non-controlling adult allies". As the term suggests, these are adults who instead of blocking young people, create space and new roles for them to learn and grow as changemakers without taking over.

As mentioned above, 43% of respondents to the global survey said they initiated their own change project in their communities before the age of 20. For these social entrepreneurs that led young, 66% said that their parents were important to their development as a person who creates social change. For those who did not lead young, that number falls to 45%.

What role are parents and adult allies playing in their child's changemaker journey? If we look at the *ways* a parent like Ximena supported her children, we can start to understand the "non-controlling adult ally" role in action. Ximena deliberately included her children in her purpose-driven professional work. She also encouraged her three children to take on increasing leadership roles related to social change work in their community from helper, to implementer, to creating and running the show. [In an interview with Ashoka](#),⁹ Ximena shared the parenting philosophy that guided her:

"If you are deeply convinced that your child is a changemaker, she will become one. They react to the way we look at them. They may have tough moments along the way but trust them and give them space, be there for them. From me, I think I empowered my kids by believing in their ideas and being willing to help them."

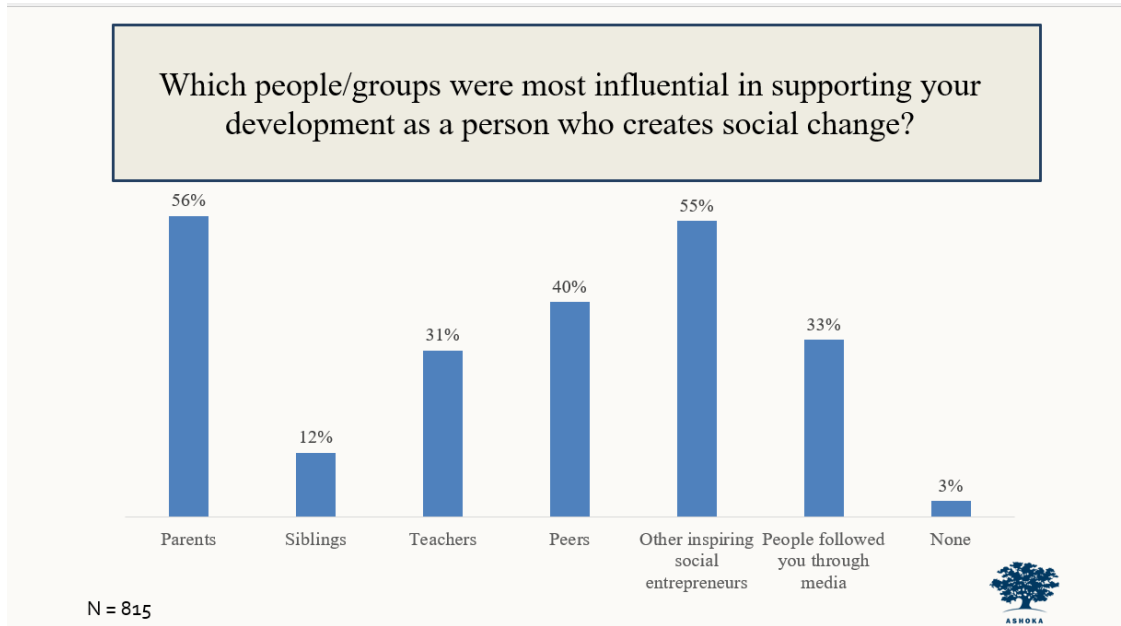


Figure 1: The main influential adults in the lives of Ashoka Fellows from the 2021 Global Fellows Study

Beyond the family, educators can also play a critical role in inspiring young people to embrace their inner power to create change. Those who led young were much more likely to credit teachers (38%) in their development as a person creating social change versus their counterparts who did not lead young (24%). Another Ashoka Fellow, [Nicole Rycroft](#),¹⁰ founder of [Canopy](#),¹¹ a global organization that transforms unsustainable supply chains, described the role of one of her teachers as pivotal in her own early changemaking experience. [In an interview with Ashoka](#),¹² Nicole shared that while her grandmother's love of nature was foundational to her passion for the environment, she took her first steps towards action because of support from one of her teachers at age 9. When she asked her teacher about air pollution in her native Sydney, she said he guided the conversation in an "artful" way: "He asked me some questions that led me to want to take action myself and ask other kids to get involved."

This insight is important to understand the role that all adult allies can play to support young people in their changemaker journey. Instead of stepping in and taking over, the art and skill is to help young people take small steps towards action themselves. It may mean watching them struggle, fail, and try again as part of the process to exercise their muscles as changemakers. "Other social entrepreneurs" was another category of adult ally that was important to Ashoka Fellows' development as people leading social change, in this case, for those who began their changemaker journey later.

For social entrepreneurs who did not identify with leading young, 63% said that other inspiring social entrepreneurs were important versus 47% of respondents for those who did claim that they had experiences leading young. This may be because initiating their changemaker journey later

in life meant that access to ideas and connections with those entrepreneurs was more feasible. But it points to the important role that many leading social entrepreneurs with system changing ideas play both as role models and in providing space, support, and connections to those changemakers just starting out.

The [story of one young changemaker in Hong Kong](#),¹³ named Bailey, illustrates this connection. Bailey saw that there were few spaces for avid readers like herself to recycle or donate books to those without access to affordable books. There were also few places for people to buy second-hand books in Hong Kong. Together with a team of three peers, she created a non-profit e-commerce site to recycle and re-sell books to create a circular economy that increases access to books for those who might not normally be able to afford them. When she entered the program [Kid4Kids](#),¹⁴ an organization helping young people build their changemaking initiatives founded by Ashoka Fellow [Michele Lai](#),¹⁵ Bailey's organization, [reBooked](#),¹⁶ grew and flourished. Both Michele and Kid4Kids' current executive director have been powerful role models and supporters of Bailey in her changemaker journey. They, Bailey shares, "are like mentors to me. They have been a huge source of support and encouragement. In addition, they have connected me to several like-minded organizations."

Cultural Norms and Leading Young

In each of these examples, we can see the important role adults, particularly parents, educators, and role model social entrepreneurs, play in supporting a culture that embraces early changemaking for young people to navigate and thrive in today's world. Yet, not surprisingly, where you live plays a critical role in when you identify as a changemaker and who supports you. Geographic differences are found to play a role both in when leading social entrepreneurs first started leading change initiatives, as well as in the kind of support they did or did not receive from others. For instance, when looking at social entrepreneurs who led young, there are some significant differences across regions. Social entrepreneurs in North America (59%), in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (51%) and Europe (50%) were more likely than those in other regions to lead young. The lowest incidence of leading young among Ashoka Fellows surveyed is demonstrated in East Asia (21%) and Southeast Asia (29%).

These geographic differences are also found in the kind of support leading social entrepreneurs did or did not receive during their development as a person who drives social change. For instance, the role of parents varies significantly across regions. Only 41% of Ashoka Fellows participating in the study in East Asia and 40% in Europe reported that their parents played an important role in their development as a person who drives social change, in contrast to 70% in MENA. Interestingly, while social entrepreneurs in MENA and North America listed teachers as important to their development at a much higher rate (37% and 38% respectively), teachers' influence on social entrepreneurs in Europe (whether leading young or not) is significantly lower at 23%.

These geographic differences may point to cultural norms around parenting and the education system in different countries that may require different strategies and approaches to shift cultures towards embracing early changemaking. A [related article published in Social Innovations Journal](#)

[in 2018](#)¹⁷ looked specifically at the changemaker trajectories and impact of Ashoka Fellows in Asia. In it, author Irene Wu noted that despite a lower rate of leading young in Asia due in part to parenting and education norms, a higher percentage of leading social entrepreneurs surveyed put young people in charge of their organization's impact initiatives than counterparts in other regions.

In contrast, Europe has a relatively high percentage of social entrepreneurs responding that they led young, indicating a culture that is more supportive of early changemaking. However, both parents and teachers appear rather low on the list of supporters in Europe compared to the global average. This indicates that there are other aspects related to mindsets and culture around young people's autonomy or other factors that may be influencing the societal support for early changemaking experiences, which requires more research.

Shifting Social Demand for Early Changemaking for All

So, what would it take for *all* young people to grow-up practicing changemaking just like they learn and practice math and reading? For starters, our schools would be very different. Young people would learn through real challenges that connect to their passions. They would see they have the power to change something, and this would give them confidence in the face of new challenges. Our parenting would also be different. We would praise children and young people's efforts more than their accomplishments. We would put them in charge of their own experiences, however small, from a young age. And we would stop ourselves from stepping in and taking over.

The 2021 Ashoka Global Fellow Study puts numbers behind what Ashoka has seen over its 40 years of supporting leading social entrepreneurs and 25 years working directly with young people: the role of adult allies is key for changing the way young people grow up to be changemakers. And we can see this through the hundreds of stories of early changemaking across Ashoka's network.¹⁸

Ashoka works with key influence partners across the world (e.g., schools of education, teachers' unions, media partners, education publishers, and governments) to shift social demand for young changemaking to be the critical part of every young person's growing up experience. A key question then is how these partners influence and activate adult allies. Whether parents, educators, social entrepreneurs, or others, how can we value and give space for young people to be changemakers: to have a dream, build a team and change their own world? It is not just a nice thing to do; it is critical for their ability to thrive in our rapidly changing world.

It is up to us, then, to pause and ask our kids, students, nieces, and grandkids that important question: "What problem are you working to solve?"

We must listen to their answers.

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