

Best Practices: Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development is a policy perspective that emphasizes providing services and opportunities to support all young people in developing a sense of a competence, usefulness, belonging and empowerment. While individual programs can provide youth development activities, the youth development approach works best when entire communities including young people are involved in creating a continuum of services and opportunities that youth need to grow into happy and healthy adults. 1

Youth Development is not a highly sophisticated prescription for “fixing troubled kids.” Rather, it is about people, programs, institutions and systems who provide all youth, “troubled” or not, with the supports and opportunities they need to empower themselves. Youth Development strategies focus on giving young people the chance to form relationships with caring adults, build skills, exercise leadership, and help their communities. 2

Youth Development is both a philosophy and an approach to policies and programs that serve young people. The underlying philosophy of youth development is holistic, preventative and positive, focusing on the development of assets and competencies in **all** young people.

Key elements to the Youth Development *approach* are the following: 3

- Youth are viewed as a valued and respected asset to society;
- Policies and programs focus on the evolving developmental needs and tasks of adolescents, and involve youth as partners rather than clients;
- Families, schools and communities are engaged in developing environments that support youth;
- Adolescents are involved in activities that enhance their competence, connections, character, confidence and contribution to society;
- Adolescents are provided an opportunity to experiment in a safe environment and to develop positive social values and norms; and
- Adolescents are engaged in activities that promote self-understanding, self-worth, and a sense of belonging and resiliency.

Essential Components:

Young people need safe, structured places to learn and links to basic services that, if absent, can prevent them from learning and functioning within our society.

A report by

the National Research Council on Community Programs to Promote Youth Development summarizes what research tells us about adolescent development, the necessary ingredients or “personal and social assets” that support young people’s well being, and outcomes of community program participation. This report includes the expertise of youth advocates, policy researchers and program planners. 4

The following are essential features of effective learning environments and settings that facilitate positive youth development for young people inside and outside of school. 5

These features of positive developmental settings and characteristics of successful positive youth development staff can be used for training staff, designing programs, and developing standards and assessment tools:

Physical and Psychological Safety – Safe and health-promoting facilities; practice that increases safe peer group interaction and decreases unsafe or confrontational peer interactions.

Appropriate Structure – Limit setting, clear and consistent rules and expectations, firm enough control, continuity and predictability, clear boundaries, and age-appropriate monitoring.

Supportive Relationships – Warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, responsiveness.

Opportunities to Belong – Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement and integration; opportunities for socio-cultural identity formation; support for cultural and bicultural competence.

Positive Social Norms – Rules of behavior, expectations, injunctions, ways of doing things, values and morals, obligations for service.

Support for Efficacy and Mattering – Youth-based, empowerment practices that support autonomy, making a real difference in one's community, and being taken seriously. Practice that includes enabling, responsibility granting, meaningful challenge. Practices that focus on improvement rather than on relative current.

Opportunities for Skill Building – Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn cultural literacy, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; opportunities to develop social and cultural capital.

Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts – Concordance, coordination, and synergy among family, school and community.

In addition, successful positive youth development staff have the following characteristics:

- A grounding in youth development principles;
- Genuine respect for youth and adult-youth relationships;
- The skills to empower young people to be involved in the decision-making process;
- Self-awareness and understanding of program goals, strategies and

- outcomes; and
- Conviction and belief that youth are capable and can contribute.

People, programs and institutions who work with youth are engaged in youth development if there is a strong evidence of the following practices: 6

Supports: Motivational, emotional and strategic supports to succeed in life. The supports can take many different forms, but they must be affirming, respectful, and ongoing. Supports are powerful when offered by a variety of people, such as parents and close relatives, community social networks, teachers, youth workers, employers, health providers, and peers who are involved in the lives of young people.

Opportunities: Chances for young people to learn how to act in the world around them, to explore, express, earn, belong, and influence. Opportunities give young people the chance to test ideas and behaviors, and to experiment with different roles. It is important to stress that young people, just like adults, learn best through active participation and that learning occurs in all types of settings and situations.

Quality services: Services in such areas as education, health, employment, and juvenile justice which exhibit: 1) relevant instruction and information; 2) challenging opportunities to express oneself, to contribute, to take on new roles, and be a part of the group; and 3) supportive adults and peers who provide respect, high standards and expectations, guidance and affirmation to young people.

Research done by Karen Pittman (Forum for Youth Investment), Michelle Cahill (Carnegie Corporation) as well as other researchers has shown that young people who have the following competencies are more resilient and less likely to engage in risky behaviors:

Physical competence: Attitudes, behaviors and knowledge that will assure future health and well being.

Social competence: Responsiveness, flexibility, empathy and caring; communication skills, a sense of humor, self-discipline, assertiveness and the ability to ask for support.

Cognitive competence: Good reasoning, problem-solving and planning skills; the ability to think abstractly, reflectively and flexibly.

Vocational competence: A sense of purpose and belief in the future; educational aspirations; adequate preparation for work and family life.

Moral competence: The development of character, values, and personal responsibility; a desire to be ethical and to be involved in efforts that contribute to the common good.

¹

Positive Youth Development, National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth (NCFY), Silver Spring, Maryland, 2001, available at www.ncfy.com

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Center for Youth Development and Policy, "What is Youth Development?" Academy for Educational Development, available at <http://cyd.aed.org/whatishtml>.

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This list of key elements draws on materials from: Teipel, K., *Minnesota Adolescent Health Action Plan*, forthcoming; findings from key informant interviews conducted by Stephen Conley for

the Partnership; *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, National Academy Press, Washington, DC (January, 2002); and the National Youth Development Web site: <http://www.nydic.org/nydic/devdef.html>

⁴ Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, National Research Council, Institute of Medicine, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., (January 2002)

⁵ Nancy Leffert, Ph.D. et al., *Making the Case: Measuring the impact of Youth Development Programs*, Minneapolis: Search Institute, (1996), 9.

⁶ Center for Youth Development and Policy, "What is Youth Development?" Academy for Educational Development, available at <http://cyd.aed.org/whatis.html>

Additional Research Models:

Other research that supports a positive youth development approach includes the Social Development Framework by J. David Hawkins and Joseph G. Weiss. The social development model is a process in which children and youth are influenced sequentially by their families, schools, peers and community. In each of these spheres of influence, three specific things must happen in order for positive development to occur. According to this model, youth must be given an opportunity to be involved in a meaningful way; they must develop skills for successful participation and interaction; and there must be a consistent system of positive reinforcement for desired behavior. 7

The Search Institute, a national youth research organization, has identified 40 developmental assets that enable young people to succeed in life. These findings provide a useful set of measurable building blocks that unify the social development model and the concept of key competencies. These 40 developmental assets are grouped into two major types. External assets include positive experiences that young people receive from people and institutions in their lives. Internal assets focus on nurturing the internal qualities of young people to guide choices and create a sense of self, purpose, and focus (e.g. commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity). This research indicates that the more assets youth have, the less likely they are to engage in risk-taking behaviors and the more likely they are to engage in pro-social behaviors