

Positive Youth Development

What Is Positive Youth Development?

Positive youth development is often misunderstood. It is not an alternative to current models of care. Instead, it is a conceptual and practical lens that enhances prevention, intervention and treatment models. Conceptually, positive youth development is an approach that guides communities and organizations in the way that they organize services, opportunities and supports so that all youth can be engaged and reach their full potential.¹ This approach cuts across multiple high-risk behaviors and threats to health and well-being and may be applied to multiple social groups of youth. It is rare to find an evidence-based approach that addresses so many risk factors or behaviors in addition to protective factors.

In *practice*, positive youth development incorporates the development of skills, opportunities and authentic relationships into programs, practices and policies, so that young people reach their full potential. This practical lens depicts youth and young adults as resources to cultivate, as opposed to problems to fix, and is dependent upon the use of the following guiding principles: strengths-based approach, inclusive of all youth, engages youth as partners, collaboration and sustainability.

Positive Youth Development Principles

Positive youth development is guided by the following principles:

1. **Strengths-based:** we take a holistic approach by focusing on the inherent strengths of an individual, family or community, then build upon them.
2. **Inclusive:** we address the needs of all youth by ensuring that our approach is culturally responsive.
3. **Engages Youth as Partners:** we ensure the intentional, meaningful and sustained involvement of youth as equitable partners in the programs, practices and policies that seek to impact them.
4. **Collaborative:** we create meaningful partnerships within and across sectors to effectively align our work.
5. **Sustainable:** we address long-term planning through funding, training, capacity building, professional development and evaluation in order to ensure ongoing support and engagement of youth.

Rationale for Integrating a Positive Youth Development Approach:

Adolescence, defined as young people between the ages of 9 to 25, is a developmental stage comprised of great change and opportunity. Youth are moving from a period of childhood in which they have things done for, and to them, to a period of incrementally becoming more independent and self-reliant. The physical, social and psychological changes young people undergo can not only impact their behavior and how they interact with the world, but can also impact how the adults around them respond to this transformation. During this time of significant transition and increasing independence for youth, resources and systems for youth must be

constructed in a developmentally appropriate approach. Understanding adolescence through a developmental lens:

- guides adults towards supporting adolescents in ways that are developmentally appropriate, with an end goal of helping youth transition into adulthood successfully,
- gives cause for the integration of a positive youth development approach into all the work we do with and on-behalf of young people, as it meets young people where they at, and addresses the needs they have in meaningful and relevant ways.

“Problem free is not fully prepared and fully prepared is not fully engaged.”² Youth programs and policies needs to focus not only on the prevention of problems, but equally so, on the development and engagement of adolescents. This can be accomplished through the integration of a positive youth development approach. This approach is necessary in order to be effective and achieve the desired positive outcomes and benefits for all stakeholders (youth, family and society).

The Evidence-Base for Positive Youth Development

Research demonstrates that youth with more developmental assets, such as positive family communication, caring school climate and sense of purpose, have reduced morbidity and better health outcomes.³ In addition, key protective factors, such as connectedness to parents and family, connectedness to school, and optimism, promote healthy youth behaviors and outcomes while diminishing the likelihood of negative health and social outcomes.⁴ Therefore, a dual strategy of risk reduction and promotion of protective factors through an intentional positive youth development approach holds the greatest promise as a public health strategy to improve outcomes for youth.⁵

Positive youth development has too-often been marketed using only ideological reasons. Often times a description of its practical application to services and programs is missing. Research has shown that components of effective youth development programs include: promoting a sense of safety; providing appropriate structure; creating supportive relationships; providing opportunities to belong; providing positive social norms, such as rules for behavior; giving youth responsibilities and meaningful challenges; providing opportunities for skill-building; and coordinating family, school and community programming.⁶ In addition, it is important to note that a variety of national organizations and initiatives are promoting the use of a PYD approach such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Center for Disease Control, the Health Resources and Services Administration, the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs and the National Association of City and County Health Officials.

¹ National Research Council & Institute of Medicine. (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. J. Eccles & J. Gootman, eds. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences

² Pittman KJ, Irby M, Tolman J, Yohalem N, Ferber T. *Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement*. Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment; 2011.

³ Pittman K. What's health got to do with it? Health and youth development: connecting the dots. *Forum Focus*. 2005;3(2):1-4.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Adolescent and School Health; Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Office of Adolescent Health; National Adolescent Health Information Center, University of California, San Francisco. *Improving the Health of Adolescents & Young Adults: A Guide for States and Communities*. Atlanta, GA: 2004.

⁵ From Richard E. Kreipe, MD, FAAP, FSAM Professor of Pediatrics, University of Rochester. May 2009 presentation, *Youth Development as a Public Health Policy: How to Make it Work*.

⁶ Leffert, N. *Making the Case: Measuring the impact of Youth Development Programs*, Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1996.

