

Positive Youth Development

A Literature Review

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Learning in Communities / Providence

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TO: Learning in Communities / Providence Leaders
FROM: RI KIDS COUNT and Community Matters
DATE: August 8, 2003
RE: Positive Youth Development

This memo is a companion to the PowerPoint slide deck detailing the best thinking and national best practices of the youth development field.

Why focus on positive youth development?

Historically, programming for this age group confronts particular challenges, including the discordant developmental experiences faced by many adolescents, the gap between current program practice and recent compelling research on what works for youth, and the difficulties encountered by families, communities and larger public institutions (public schools, public recreation facilities, and public safety and juvenile justice programs) when trying to ensure the success of the nation's youth. With older youth there is the additional hurdle of developing, funding and sustaining programs with which young people will reliably form lasting voluntary attachments. Unlike their younger siblings, these are the consumers of OST services who can "vote with their feet," and often do!

Thanks to a surge in research and program innovation, the field of youth development has blossomed in the last decade, offering new strategies for working with older youth between the ages of 13 and 22. Recently, the once unconnected fields of youth development and out-of-school time have begun to converge, with more and more research and programming recognizing common concerns and establishing shared agendas. Communities seeking to improve the quality of out-of-school time programming for older youth, to increase their participation in high quality OST programs, or to develop comprehensive systems of OST care, are well advised to apply the lessons learned from these recent developments.

After defining the topic and exploring its philosophical and research background, this memo details the practical strategies, promising practices, and barriers to expansion of this approach. A brief, preliminary section on the implications for Providence concludes the memo. In time, depending on the emerging strategic thinking of Learning in Communities / Providence, an expansion of this concluding section on implications for the city may be warranted.

What is positive youth development?

Positive youth development is a set of strategies which any program or program model can adopt to help guide youth on a successful transition to adulthood. It is an approach that provides youth with the broadest possible support, enabling them to attain desirable long-term outcomes, including economic self-sufficiency and engagement in healthy family and community relationships.

The positive youth development approach is designed to provide the maximum impact on the life-trajectories of participants. In the short term, using this approach can improve program quality, thereby creating a meaningful experience that will attract and engage youth. In the long

term, the youth development approach has been shown to keep youth away from negative, risky behaviors and on track for a healthy and successful adulthood.

A wide variety of program models characterize themselves as youth development programs. Mentoring programs, drop-in centers, arts programs, community service projects and academic support programs are among those that often work under a youth development framework. The supports outlined by this approach can be delivered in virtually any type of program model.

What is the history of positive youth development?

The positive youth development framework arose in the early 1990s as a response to the single-issue prevention programs for adolescents that had been popular during the prior decade. In the 1980s, deficit based programs that routinely focused on prevention or treatment of one specific risk factor – substance abuse, violence, sexually transmitted diseases, school failure, unplanned pregnancy, for example -- often seemed to view youth as “problems to be fixed.” Some of these programs, such as the federally sponsored D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), showed modest success with short-term results. They did not, however, have deeper impact, or adequately attend to the long-term developmental needs and potential of the youth involved.

Then in the early 1990s, buoyed by research on the role of resiliency in the successful development of adolescents facing serious life challenges, youth advocates successfully argued for a “paradigm shift” in youth development. They began creating programs so that they might begin to address the broad developmental needs of all youth. These advocates sought to provide young people with the supports they need to be successful in a lifetime of facing challenges, rather than coaching them on how to avoid or overcome a single problem.

What is the research basis for positive youth development?

The body of work called “resiliency research” – championed by Milbrey McLaughlin and others – provides the impetus for much of the recent revitalization of the youth development field.¹ The research examines the common characteristics of those youth who have overcome multiple risk factors such as poverty, chronic health problems, trauma, domestic violence and racism. It asks the question, how do young people thrive despite adversity? Who overcomes multiple childhood trauma, and why? What experiences are shared by those who thrive, and how can those experiences be made more commonly available to all youth?

Researchers, advocates and program providers agree that a set of characteristics – sometimes called protective factors – is essential. The key categories of protective factors for youth are:²

- Caring relationships
- High, clear, expectations
- Opportunities for participation and contribution

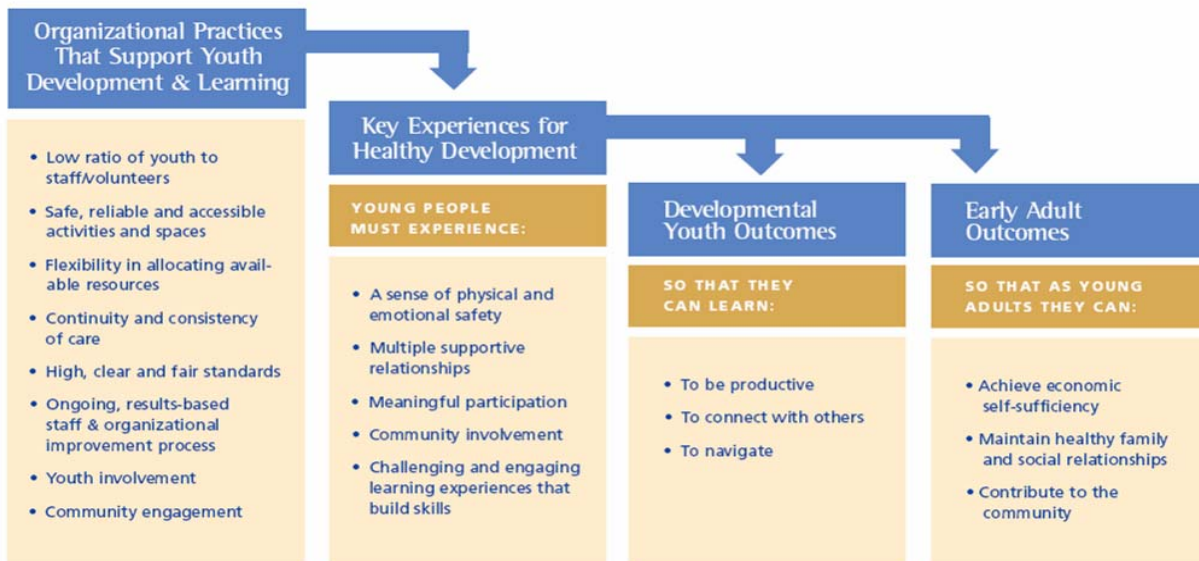
¹ Milbrey McLaughlin, *Community Counts: How Youth Organizations Matter for Youth Development*, Public Education Network, 1998. <http://www.publiceducation.org/pdf/communitycounts.pdf>

² Beth Miller, *Critical Hours*, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, 2003. Appendix A offers an excellent summary of the findings of the field. <http://www.nmefdn.org/CriticalHours.htm>

Two recent comprehensive studies of youth development programs – one sponsored by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine – have shown conclusively that community programs can be effective in enabling youth to achieve physical health, help others, succeed in school, exercise leadership, overcome adversity, and achieve a successful adulthood.³ Youth development advocates and providers have designed a wide range of programs that promote the development of these protective factors in the youth with whom they work.

What is the positive youth development strategy?

The diagram below, developed by the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD) in San Francisco, shows how organizational practices that support resiliency in youth also promote positive developmental outcomes.⁴ The eight organizational attributes in the first column are the key supports necessary create the set of experiences listed in column two, the types of interactions necessary for youth to reach a successful adulthood. In columns three and four, the desired stages of development and ultimate goals are detailed – these positive developmental youth and early adult outcomes serve as the objectives toward which the programs must strive.⁵



This graphic summarizes the relationship between organizational practices and key experiences that prepare young people for success in their adult lives.

³ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine *Community Programs for Youth Development*, (Jacqueline Eccles and Katherine Appleton Gootman, eds.), Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2002. <http://www.nap.edu/execsumm/0309072751.html>. Michelle Gambone, Adema Klemm, and James Connell, *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework*, Philadelphia, PA: Youth Development Strategies Inc, and Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2003. www.ydsi.org/YDSI/publications/. Gambone et al are summarized in Karen Pittman, *Some Things Do Make a Difference and We Can Prove It*. Washington D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment, April 2003. <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/youthtoday/difference.htm>

⁴ Sam Piha, *Youth Development Guide*, San Francisco, CA: Community Network for Youth Development, 2001, page 24. http://www.gse.uci.edu/afterschool/ca/Documents/cnyd/YD_Guide/YD_Guide.pdf

⁵ The National Research Council estimates that as many as 25% of American youth are at serious risk of not achieving a “successful adulthood” as defined above.

What are the lessons learned? Organizational practices that support youth development.⁶

- 1. Low ratio of youth to staff/volunteers.** Programs must have enough staff so the young people in the program feel safe at the program and build deep and continuous relationships with adults.
- 2. Safe, reliable, and accessible activities and spaces.** Young adults must be able to safely and easily get to and from their programs. Otherwise, they can and will “vote with their feet” and choose not to attend.
- 3. Flexibility in allocating available resources.** Programs must be able to respond to the needs and desires of their clientele (the young people) by allocating resources to those aspects of the program that will attract youth and promote their development.
- 4. Continuity and consistency of care.** Young people need consistent long-term relationships with adults who will provide support and guidance to them throughout their adolescence.
- 5. High, clear and fair standards.** Programs that set high, clear standards, abide by them fairly, and offer sufficient support, will find that the young people will rise to meet these higher expectations.
- 6. On-going results-based staff and organizational improvement process.** The staff of the program must establish the desired outcomes for themselves, their organization and program participants. Then they must monitor progress towards those goals and make continuous improvements in their work.
- 7. Youth involvement and leadership development.** When youth are involved in the planning and execution of the programs in which they participate, they consistently show higher levels of responsible behavior, solve problems and resolve conflicts more readily, and develop and exercise leadership skills.
- 8. Community engagement.** Programs that engage youth and the community in dialogue and action often provide young people with powerful experiences of personal efficacy and rewarding civic engagement. Such alliances also often create positive changes in community institutions, and in prevailing attitudes about young people.

What are the promising practices?

CNYD, building on their own experience and existing research, identified five types of experiences that young people must have in order to be on a path toward healthy development. Each of these experiences contributes to the development of deep relationships and facilitates an environment in which youth can challenge themselves and contribute to their community.

⁶ The list here is taken directly from the Sam Piha’s Youth Development Guide. Similar lists of organizational practices to support youth development can be found in the work of McLaughlin, Gambone, and the National Research Council.

1. Promote a Sense of Physical and Emotional Safety

Youth at a program must feel as though the adults there will protect them from any physical harm. They also must feel they are valued and accepted by the group. Young people who are encouraged to take “positive risks” without negative consequences for their mistakes become less fearful of failure and more likely to pursue “stretch” goals, objectives they might once have rejected as out of their reach.

Promising practices:

- **Celebrate the diversity of the program.**
- **Recognize successes of *all* children.**
- **Create a culture of young people supporting each other through mistakes and challenges.**
- **Ensure that ground rules are designed as a collaborative process between youth and adults.**

2. Encourage Relationship Building

Young people need many supportive relationships to help them navigate their adolescence. They need guidance from adults as well as emotional and practical support from their peers. Research has identified these adult-child and peer relationships as the key to helping young people overcome the obstacles of adolescence.

Promising practices:

- **Young people receive individual attention from adults**, and time for these interactions is structured into the program. A low staff to youth ratio is crucial to implement this practice successfully.
- **Adults offer continuous and genuine praise.** Children, like all people, respond better to praise than to criticism. Praise should be given for small and large accomplishments and for successful process, such as working hard or being prepared. A standard rule of thumb is to offer 5 words of praise for every word of correction.
- **Create a culture where rules are clear and youth resolve conflicts peacefully.** Two strategies towards achieving this goal are designing the program rules with youth involvement, and implementing conflict resolution training for program participants.
- **Develop strong and regular rituals** of appreciation and recognition of success.

3. Foster Meaningful Youth Participation

Simple participation is not enough to promote positive youth development: youth must have an active role in shaping the program. They must have the opportunity to practice and develop leadership skills by planning projects, initiatives, and activities. Giving youth a meaningful role in the program will heighten their sense of belonging to the program, fostering deeper relationships with the adult staff and other youth participants.

Promising practices:

- **Create a choice time** where young people can choose from a range of activities. They can also be involved in the planning of these activities where appropriate.
- **Provide opportunities for young people to help each other.** Teaching back what they have learned is a great way to help young people deepen their own understanding of a topic, develop a sense of importance, and increase their self-confidence. In addition, youth often learn better from their peers than from adults.
- **Involve young people in decision-making bodies.** When young people feel that their needs and views are represented in the program design, they will be more engaged by the activities and more likely to be fully invested in them.

4. Provide Opportunities for Community Involvement

Young people are often looking for a sense of purpose. Creating opportunities for young people to become involved in the community, and for community members to interact with youth, is a powerful way to foster this sense of purpose. It is also a successful and innovative way of advancing community change.

As Karen Pittman, a leading advocate and researcher, observes, “Young people grow up in communities, not in programs.”⁷ She is a proponent of creating programs that encourage a symbiotic relationship between the youth of a community and the community as a whole. By engaging in dialogue and action together, youth can learn more about the community in which they live, giving them greater respect for it, and preparing them to become active and responsible citizens within it. At the same time, the community can overcome negative stereotypes about the young, and gain a greater understanding of the assets of the youth who live there.

Promising Practices:

- **Get out of the building.** This straightforward action is an easy way to create community ties for youth. If a program never leaves its facility, the program participants can only build attachment to a building, rather than to a neighborhood or a community.
- **Engage in youth-led service projects.** Ask youth what they see as the greatest needs of their community. Help them brainstorm solutions and take action to achieve those goals.
- **Facilitate intergenerational interaction.** Very often, youth do not know many adults in their community, and vice versa. Creating activities that facilitate interaction between people of diverse ages can create social capital, and heighten the sense of community among both youth and adults.

5. Challenge and Engage Learning Experiences that Build Skills

Much of the attention that after-school programs have received in the last few years can be directly attributed to their ability to engage students as learners and to help them build skills. After-school and out-of-school time programs can work with youth to develop skills in almost

⁷ Pittman, Karen, *Balancing the Equation: Communities Supporting Youth, Youth Supporting Communities*, Community Youth Development Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter 2000.
<http://www.cydjournal.org/2000Winter/pittman.html>

any area. Developing a sense of mastery and exploring career options are both each important skills for adolescent development. OST programs are well positioned to offer both.⁸

Promising Practices:

- **Link skills taught in after-school programs with to those taught in school.** This important step helps students carry the sense of competence and achievement they have developed in their out-of-school time setting into the more academic, stressful and demanding school setting.
- **Incorporate the interests of young people** into curricula and activities. Using the interests of students as the hook, programs can engage and challenge students to build a wide variety of skills.
- **Teach to multiple learning styles.** Howard Gardner, Mel Levine and others have identified and analyzed multiple forms of human intelligence and ways of learning. Schools spend most of their time teaching within a very narrow band of this learning spectrum. OST programs have the flexibility to engage and challenge students across a wide range of intelligences, aptitudes, and learning styles.
- **Use cooperative or project -based instructional styles.** Cooperative instructional strategies involve students working together to complete a task or solve a problem. In project-based learning environments, students identify a problem or challenge and work for several weeks, or longer, to complete it. Students ideally develop a connection to the work and the final product. The increased collaboration and connection to the work that these methods provide for youth often contrasts with their “traditional” classroom instruction, and constitutes a valuable means for engaging students in skill-building activities during the non-school hours.

What are the barriers to the successful implementation of positive youth development strategies?

The primary barriers to the widespread implementation of the positive youth development approach fall into one of three broad categories:

1. Ignorance that such strategies exist and are effective,
2. Institutional or cultural resistance to empowering youth, and
3. The challenges of translating the theory discussed above into practice.

Adults in contemporary society are often wary of youth. Offering youth more freedom and opportunities can heighten adults’ anxieties about young people. Successful youth development work is hard; the rationale may seem straightforward enough on paper, but doing it well requires resources, experience and a well-trained staff.

Ignorance that such strategies exist and are effective affects many people, including advocates, parents, youth, educators, providers and policy makers, and obviously slows the adoption of this approach. Leading advocates such as Karen Pittman and research institutions

⁸ Gil Noam, *Learning Beyond School: Developing the Field of After-School Education*, Cambridge, MA: Program in Afterschool Education and Research, Harvard University, 2002. http://icommons.harvard.edu/%7Egse-h281/syllabus/Learning_Paper_1.3.pdf

such as the Search Institute,⁹ National Research Council and the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development¹⁰ have increased awareness, but much of the concerned public still does not know about or adequately understand this approach.

Institutional and cultural resistance often stands in the way of youth development programs. Belief in the positive power of youth, and the desirability of that power, is unusual. The first youth development practitioners were pioneers. A large proportion of their peer practitioners hold a deep attachment to the traditional models of service provision. Many inside and outside the field are resistant to youth leadership, as adults often take the position – sometimes accurately, sometimes not – that they know what is best for young people. While the movement is gaining strength, much work remains before this approach is widely accepted and implemented.

A basic premise of youth development is to challenge the youth to take risks and assume responsibility in ways that may make both youth and adults nervous. For adults, it can be hard to step back and let youth lead. For both adults and young people, there is a clear and inherent risk of youth rejection and adult disapproval – not to mention failure – in the process.

Youth development conflicts with many complex cultural challenges that youth, parents and providers must recognize, respect, and address. Activities which fit well into a youth development paradigm can threaten or appear to threaten traditions and customs of the cultures or societies in which these programs operate. For many people across a broad spectrum of cultures and traditions, it can be difficult to embrace the idea – let alone the practice – of girls as leaders, or youth as leaders. Good youth development practice involves a deep appreciation for the subtle, complex effect of youth leadership on the privilege and special role of elders in many cultures. And in much youth development work across the country, youth and program staff must wrestle with lingering resistance to the leadership of people of color in general, and youth of color in particular.

As youth development strategies become more widely recognized as effective pathways to success for youth, many of the cultural and institutional barriers to implementing the youth development approach will subside. Practitioners must be keenly aware of the subtleties of the institutional and cultural environments in which they operate. They must recognize and acknowledge the value of these cultures even while running programs that may appear to challenge some of their core tenets.

Translating Theory to Practice. The youth development approach can seem deceptively simple in its explanation, but its successful implementation takes extraordinary skills on the part of the adult leaders. Finding, developing and retaining a high-quality workforce is perhaps the largest hurdle facing the out-of-school time field today. This hurdle is even higher for youth development programs, which can – by virtue of the challenges they take on -- require more experienced staff and more extensive training than many other OST models.

⁹ Peter Scales & Nancy Leffert, *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 1999, available from www.search-institute.org.

¹⁰ Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Non-School Hours*, New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1994.

In many cases, programs struggle to find the resources to hire, train, and retain staff capable of delivering high-quality youth development programming. In others, programs cannot find or access the professional development that their staff need and desire. In order for the youth development approach to become more widespread in the field, programs and the systems that support them must generate the resources to offer excellent, ongoing professional development to staff, and offer salaries that will attract and retain a workforce consisting of a community's strongest educators.¹¹

Implications for Providence

Providence institutions boast a wealth of experience in youth development, and several local programs demonstrate a powerful command of both the theory and the practice of this vital work. While it has not been the goal of this memo to review Providence's resources in this area, or to apply the lessons of national best practices and research to the specifics of any future Learning in Communities / Providence venture, such additional work will clearly be needed if a focus on older youth emerges as a strategic priority of LCP.

The LCP research team is generating a series of memos on relevant national best practices. Combined with the emerging local data and analysis generated with by interviews with key local informants and other means, this research will inform any future discussions of the implications for Providence of national trends in positive youth development practices. As the planning process develops, should older youth arise as a probable focus for the "deep" investment elements of the Business Plan, additional research on outstanding, specific program models and citywide older youth strategies may also be warranted.

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¹¹ Karen Pittman and Nicole Yohalem, *Off the Shelf and Into the Field*, Washington DC: Forum for Youth Investment, April 2002. <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/comment/offtheshelf.pdf>

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