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Positive Youth Development

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Youth development includes all of the essentials necessary for young people to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, certain factors must be present in order to help determine how to best guarantee that this process is not only positive, but productive. Positive youth development has been discussed by many practitioners, policy advocates, and researchers as a key element in creating successful programs. This publication provides insight on how the term "positive youth development" is defined and its prominent role in the field of youth development.

What Is Positive Youth Development?

All young people require access to positive experiences, both in schools and in their communities. Those spending time in communities with a wealth of opportunities encounter less risk and ultimately show evidence of higher rates of successful matriculation into responsible adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Adolescents who have a positive transition from the teen years to adulthood also have the potential to be more civically engaged. This civic involvement, in turn, can result in stronger community ties for them as they work to improve and/or maintain the neighborhoods in which they live. Due to these benefits, the youth development field has seen a shift from focusing efforts solely on preventing youth from engaging in problematic behavior to examining the effects of positive youth development.

Positive youth development focuses on all the resources and assets in a community that offer young people positive choices, experiences, and support (Lerner, 2004; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001). The role of positive youth development is to form affirming relationships between young people and caring adults and to use the skills of both in order to strengthen youth-related programs.

Origins of Positive Youth Development

County extension agents and specialists with 4-H youth development responsibilities are very familiar with the practice of encouraging participants in programs (4-H'ers) to help themselves by addressing their own needs while they work with adult volunteers. However, youth development programs in the past were developed mainly to address risk factors such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and juvenile delinquency via community-based prevention efforts.

Many of these programs, including, at times, 4-H, reportedly had only short-term effects and posed a negative image of young people being plagued with problems. Focusing only on the prevention of problems among youth is not a cure-all; there must also be a promotion of positive asset building and, in turn, using young people as resources (Lerner, 1995).

> *"What sort of message are we sending our children when we speak of them as inevitably destined for trouble …?"*
>
> Dr. Richard M. Lerner
> Tufts University
>
> (Lerner, 2004, p.3)

> *"Problem-free does not mean fully prepared, and preventing high risk behaviors is not enough….. Young people need to be nurtured, guided, empowered, and challenged."*
>
> Karen Pittman, Executive Director,
> The Forum for Youth Investment
> (Pittman, 1992)

Moving from a Prevention Approach toward Positive Youth Development

Needs Assessment	→	Asset Mapping
Risk Factors	→	Protective Factors
Risk Behaviors	→	Thriving Behaviors

As county 4-H youth development agents work to create ways to serve youth, there are three general characteristics of effective youth development programs to keep in mind:

- The more features of the positive youth development framework a program contains, the more likely it will promote positive youth outcomes;
- Caring youth-adult relationships are critical to program effectiveness; and
- Program sustainability is related to program effectiveness; longer-term programs that engage youth throughout the adolescent years are the most effective.

(Source: see Roth, et al., 1997)

There is no specific formula for promoting positive youth development. It is imperative that county 4-H youth development agents continue implementing unique approaches to support young people. Moreover, youth leadership should also be used as a viable asset. Young people are knowledgeable about the issues affecting their peers and the community at large. In most cases, they are capable of addressing local problems and are eager to have a chance to help improve the environment around them.

Funding sources also began reiterating the fact that researchers and practitioners in the youth development field should take a more fervent approach to incorporating methods that highlight the positive aspects of youth. As a result, researchers and practitioners began to examine the role of resiliency—how protective factors in a young person's life could influence the ability of young people to overcome adversity. Some protective factors that have been found to aid youth in recovering from personal setbacks include, but are not limited to:

- Family support
- Caring adults
- Engagement in school and community activities
- Positive peer groups
- Strong sense of self/self-esteem

Moreover, the emphasis on resiliency presented a new focus in understanding how certain factors can play a major part in young people being engaged in their own development. As a result, researchers in conjunction with youth development professionals began to report that young people with a diverse set of protective factors can experience more positive outcomes (see Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000; Masten, 2001; Lerner, 2004; Scales & Leffert, 1999). The diagram that follows indicates the shift from an agenda that focuses only on preventive measures to a more asset-based, strengths-based approach.

This is the first of a four-part series of publications on Positive Youth Development. Upcoming publications will address the following:

- Positive Youth Development and 4-H: Making the Connection
- Applying Positive Youth Development to County 4-H Program Principles
- Positive Youth Development Resources at a Glance

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