

Community Youth Development



Kenneth Jones, Department of Community and Leadership Development

Within the realm of 4-H, most professionals have a solid understanding of the meaning of positive youth development. There is indeed a consensus that young people require the necessary resources if they are going to mature into competent adults. However, as advances continue within the youth development field, there is—now more than ever—an agreement that young people need more than just resources or assets; they need a chance to engage in collective efforts of citizenship. As with positive youth development, community youth development involves this relevant shift—from concentrating on youth problems to moving toward focusing on the strengths, creativity, and engagement in self-development.

Acts of civic engagement aim to perpetuate communities. It has become prevalent in the youth development field to deter from envisioning young people as problems that must be solved and instead focus on how they can be engaged as current community leaders. As world-renowned youth expert Karen Pittman noted, young people not only need to be *fully prepared*, but they also need to be *fully engaged* in the world in which they live. Although it is commendable for young people to be model students who abstain from negative behaviors, this is not enough. Communities, corporations, and organizations alike need future leaders with the capacity to be productive. Youth must have the opportunity to develop skills that will allow them to not only become noble citizens (experiencing positive youth development) but competent, skillful adults (exposure to *community youth development*).

*Youth must have
the opportunity to
develop skills that
will allow them to
not only become
noble citizens but
competent, skillful
adults.*

Several scholars built upon this notion by asserting that community youth development presents a more in-depth approach toward fully engaging youth as community partners and decision-makers. Youth-adult interaction can serve as one possible strategy to provide young people with the guidance they need to enhance life skills (e.g., communication, decision-making, leadership, and social). There is undeniable potential for positive community change when youth and adults engage as partners on community initiatives. Positive youth development is often

described by noting the “5 C’s” (competence, caring, confidence, connection, character), but community youth development adds a sixth C to positive youth development—contribution, invoking young people to serve as the input that connects communities to families and places, which in turn perpetuates community strengths.

Positive Youth Development

The 4-H agent and program assistant identify organizations in the community that offer after-school programs focusing on academics, character building, and leadership development.

4-H youth meet with adults once per week to discuss plans for activities at the local recreational center.

Adult volunteers meet with young people three times a week during the summer months to teach youth about healthy eating habits.

4-H youth have opportunities to develop communication skills by participating in speech and demonstration contests.

Teachers solicit information from students on how to best address issues that are affecting young people at the local high school.

Youth attend a career day at the local community center.

Community Youth Development

The 4-H teen council identifies all organizations in the community that offer after-school programs, using surveys and GIS mapping tools.

Youth partner with adults to plan and implement upcoming community service projects.

After learning about healthy eating habits, youth organize a health and wellness day at the local high school to educate peers about the importance of physical fitness.

Teen council members organize and facilitate workshops on the art of public speaking for middle school students.

Students form a task force to address the poor conditions in the local high school's science lab. They present their case to the school board, convincing its members to work with the youth on developing a plan to upgrade the school's facilities.

Young person serves as an assistant graphics designer while working as an intern at a local marketing firm.

Effective youth development is severely limited without the involvement of positive adults in a young person's life. We have seen the most promising occurrences when these relationships are sustained over time and not just on a temporary basis. Community youth development stresses the establishment of environments that promote encouraging relationships with youth, their peers and adults. Within these relationships, there should be opportunities for youth to enhance skills that are developed within 4-H youth development programs, while learning how to address local needs. Moreover, they should become engaged in the promotion of positive youth development and community endeavors.

*Putting Community Youth Development into Practice—
A Conceptual Model*



In most cases, the ideal learner is active while continuously reflecting on the process as well as the outcomes. If these attributes are relevant to becoming an ideal learner, then community engagement through organizations such as 4-H may potentially give youth the opportunity to develop skills that will allow them to become more productive. Working directly with adults who provide 4-H youth with opportunities to make meaning of their experiences creates the chance for young people to reflect on what they learn, while adult volunteers, in turn, might change their perceptions toward youth leadership. As a result of bringing multiple skill sets and abilities together, the ultimate goal of community empowerment is more readily attained.

Adults are afforded the chance to nurture youth in the process of developing leadership capacities and social skills that are critical to (a young person's) success in life. Moreover, community youth development clearly aims to curtail the frequent criticism that youth often encounter for their alleged lack of civic involvement. In other words, partnering may provide opportunities for youth and adults to become immersed in social and cultural experiences that may lead to positive forms of mutual learning. Below are some helpful hints to keep in mind when considering how to best incorporate community youth development into 4-H youth development programming.

- Active support is required on behalf of adults, organizations, and institutions at the community level. Community youth development builds on strengths rather than the deficits (problems) in a young person's life. However, it is obvious that the need to identify and respond to specific problems (e.g., abuse, violence) is critical.
- Community youth development should be a natural process. It takes time for a young person to comprehend and act upon her/his environment. Therefore, understand that youth will vary in their readiness to take on leadership roles.
- 4-H-related activities should be planned to foster the growth and participation of all young people, allowing them to work alongside adults to address their own needs. Community youth development focuses on youth development that is done *by and with* youth, not *for and to* youth.

- There should be a clear understanding of youth and adult collaborations or partnerships. Youth should be fully empowered to serve as change agents in their communities and not solely as participants with no voice.

Community youth development approaches give birth to meaningful experiences for 4-H youth. From creating youth-adult partnerships to youth-led initiatives, there are opportunities to strengthen the youth development process while perpetuating communities. Don't hesitate to look for ways to promote community youth development in your county today!

The following resources can help agents incorporate community youth development into local programs.

Community Youth Development: Programs, Policies and Practices—*F.A. Villaruel, D.F. Perkins, L.M. Borden, and J.G. Keith, Editors*

Containing an impressive list of internationally known authors and premier scholars in the field of youth development, this book provides insight on research and practice of community youth development. The book also provides practical tools and models for developing community-wide initiatives that strengthen protective factors, build competencies, and focus on thriving indicators among young people. Each chapter contributes to an overall understanding of the needs of various audiences (e.g., key elements to community youth development, minority and disabled youth, the role of gender and sexuality among teens, approaches to job/career placement, and skills/characteristics of successful youth workers).

Community Youth Development Journal—*Available online at <http://www.cydjournal.org/>*

The CYD Journal promotes youth and adults working together in partnership to create safe and healthy communities by building leadership and influencing public policy. The journal is published by the Institute for Just Communities (IJC) in collaboration with the Heller School of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University.

References

Camino, L., and S. Zeldin. 2002. Making the transition to community youth development: Emerging roles and competencies for youth-serving organizations and youth workers. In *Community Youth Development anthology*. Sudbury, Mass.: Institute for Just Communities.

Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development. 2008. *The positive development of youth. A report of the Tufts University Positive Youth Development study*. Medford, Mass.: Tufts University. Available on the National 4-H Council website: <http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/>.

Pittman, K.J. 2000. Balancing the equation: Communities supporting youth, youth supporting communities. *Community Youth Development Journal* 1:33-36.

Villaruel, F.A., D.F. Perkins, L.M. Borden, and J.G. Keith. 2003. *Community youth development: Programs, policies, and practices*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.