

Positive Youth Development Fact Sheet

What is positive youth development?

Positive youth development (PYD) is an approach, not a program, that can be used to complement and enhance current models of care across the spectrum of prevention, intervention and treatment. Conceptually, this evidence-based public health approach guides communities and organizations as they organize services, opportunities and supports so that all youth can be engaged and reach their full potential. PYD 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 jointly reduces risk factors and promotes 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.¹ This practical lens depicts youth and young adults as resources (and not problems!). This approach depends on the use of five guiding principles.

Principles of positive youth development:

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



Why integrate 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 does 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, resources and systems for youth must be constructed in a developmentally appropriate approach.

Understanding adolescence through a developmental lens:

- Guides adults in 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 are 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 need 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 to be effective and achieve 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 outcomes⁴ while diminishing the likelihood of negative health and social outcomes. 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

A variety of national organizations and initiatives are promoting the use of a PYD approach such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Health Resources and Services Administration, the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs and the National Association of City and County Health Officials.

Components of effective youth development programs:⁶

- Promoting a sense of **safety**
- Providing appropriate **structure**
- Creating supportive **relationships**
- Providing opportunities to **belong**
- Providing positive **social norms**
- Providing youth with **responsibilities and challenges**
- Providing opportunities for **skill-building**
- Coordinating family, school and community **programming**

¹National 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

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

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

⁴Centers 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.

⁵From 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.

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