



UNH Center on
Adolescence

Positive Youth Development

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What is Positive Youth Development?

Positive Youth Development (PYD) refers to a philosophy about working with young people that is useful in guiding adults' interactions with youth as well as in the structuring of services, systems, and activities. The major goal of a PYD approach is to help young people acquire the knowledge and develop the skills they need to become healthy, responsible, productive, and happy adults. This approach tries to use opportunities presented by adolescents' developing cognitive, physical, and social abilities to influence their attitudes, behaviors, and self concept (Grantmakers in Health, 2002). PYD builds on strengths rather than focusing on problems and stresses the importance of nurturing and promoting the unique talents of *all* youth. This approach recognizes that *all* youth need support and can benefit from healthy decision-making and critical thinking skills and from strengthening connections with families, peers, schools, and communities. This perspective is based on the assumption that all youth can thrive with appropriate information, support, and opportunities. PYD does not assume that youth who are seemingly without problems are necessarily equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to navigate the adult world. In other words, "problem free is not fully prepared" (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). PYD also takes the position that "fully prepared is not fully engaged" acknowledging that youth may need sensitive support in learning how to apply their knowledge and talents in a meaningful, constructive, and collaborative manner (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber).

How does PYD differ from other approaches to working with youth?

Traditional approaches to working with youth have either focused on reducing deficits (risk-reduction models) or building strengths as a reaction to adverse circumstances (resiliency models). Central to both of these models is the focus on risk (Small, & Memmo, 2004). These traditional models often work to prevent problems one at a time, and frequently seem not to recognize the relationship among problem behaviors. Although it is true that some vulnerable youth need additional supports to thrive, PYD is universal, reinforcing the notion that development is an on-going process and that *all youth* benefit from challenging activities, supportive relationships with adults and peers, and opportunities to develop decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership skills (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Instead of viewing youth as problems to be fixed, PYD principles ask that adults, institutions, communities, and policies support optimal youth development by recognizing and validating youth's unique contributions and by creating opportunities and challenges that can empower youth (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

An important aspect of a PYD approach is the central importance of including and engaging youth in important decisions that affect them and in planning for activities in which they are involved. This participatory engagement is seen to make programs more effective and responsive to the needs of youth; provide additional opportunities for youth to connect with caring adults; and contribute to the development of new skills and abilities (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). PYD encourages us to work *with* youth, not just for them (Swisher & Whitlock, 2004).

What are the goals of Positive Youth Development?

Positive Youth Development principles can be applied to families, organizations, schools, communities, and policies. Although the domains for employing PYD principles differ, the goals do not. Often referred to as the 5 C's, the goals of PYD are as follows: (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003).

- Enhance social, emotional, cognitive, and vocational **competence**.
- Improve self-esteem, self-**confidence**, and self-efficacy
- Build and strengthen **connections** with other people and institutions
- Enhance **character** development through increased self-control, decreased involvement in risky behaviors, and respect for society's rules
- Increase capacity for **caring** through empathy and identification with others.

How can families support Positive Youth Development?

Families play an important role in healthy development of young people. Although peer relations gain importance during adolescence, parents continue to have the greatest influence over the major decisions and character development of young people (Bradshaw and Garbarino, 2004). Therefore, it is important that parents have access to information and tools to foster healthy development and assist their daughters and sons in achieving developmental milestones. Parents can benefit from information about normative developmental processes in adolescence and how these processes influence family dynamics. For example, recognizing developmental tasks in adolescence can help parents understand their teen's increasing need for autonomy or how they can best assist them in developing critical thinking and decision-making skills. By helping young people realistically assess their strengths and think about areas for continued improvement, parents help their adolescent develop a sense of confidence and competence (Bradshaw & Garbarino). And because parents are often the primary source of socialization, parents can model conflict resolution and problem-solving techniques at home and assist their adolescent in developing these skills. Here are some other specific suggestions to help families in supporting the healthy development of young people:

- **Reframe “rules and restrictions” as “mutually agreed upon guidelines”.** Adolescence is a critical period for cognitive development. Parents can support this development by recognizing a young person's increased capacity to make decisions and think about consequence. Parents can discuss issues such as internet or TV use, sexuality issues, or violence in the media with their adolescents. By creating a forum for dialogue, debate, and negotiation on these types of issues, parents encourage the development of critical thinking skills, and restrictions and limits can be transformed into mutually agreed upon guidelines. This approach supports the process whereby youth develop their own internalized values and standards that will help them make appropriate decisions and choices independent of their parents as they move toward adulthood.
- **Help young people develop conflict resolution skills.** Parents can model effective conflict resolution skills by remaining calm during disputes and using “I” statement to state opinions. Brain-storming possible solutions with teens not only may mitigate the problems or issues at hand, but also helps develop critical thinking and conflict resolution skills.
- **Become involved in the educational experiences of young people.** Young people spend 1/3 of their days in school-related activities. When parents are active in school activities, monitor homework assignments, or talk with their children about school and learning, they are helping support the educational development of young people. This also helps families feel more connected to schools and their teen's educational experiences.
- **Eat one meal together as a family (or regularly plan “family time”).** Mealtimes are a great opportunity for family members to talk about their day, and listen to one another. Family units become stronger when young people have a safe environment in which to share experiences and when they believe their opinions

and ideas are valued. Young people are also less likely to engage in risky behaviors when they have established healthy lines of communication with their parents or other caring adults.

- **Develop monitoring strategies and encourage honest disclosure.** Youth who are well-monitored are at a decreased risk for engaging in delinquent and problem behaviors such as using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, or associating with delinquent peers (Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004). When young people have supportive relationships with their parents and feel safe and valued, they are more likely to discuss decisions (both healthy and unhealthy) and concerns.
- **Emphasize strengths instead of deficits.** Often parents and other adults focus energies on problem behaviors and what adolescents are doing wrong, instead of celebrating what adolescents are doing right. By paying attention to adolescents' strengths and recognizing and encouraging talents, parents demonstrate genuine interest and support for their teen. When this happens, parents are better able to help connect young people with resources in the home and community to build on these talents and interests. In addition, young people who feel valued and supported by their parents, and whose strengths are recognized or celebrated, are more open to discussing problem behaviors when they occur (Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004).

How can youth-serving organizations support Positive Youth Development?

Youth-serving organizations, including after school programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H Clubs and Girl Scouts, can be excellent resources for young people to enhance social skills and build necessary competencies while having fun. Programs that place preparation and development over prevention and problem reduction embrace the principles of PYD (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). These programs influence the skills, abilities, and knowledge of young people and encourage them to become healthy, responsible, and caring youth. And although PYD programs differ in their approach, successful programs emphasize the strengths and assets of young people, develop values, confidence, and competence, and engender a sense of belonging and a belief in the future (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber). There are many ways that youth organizations can embrace the principles of PYD. Here are some ways that NH programs are supporting the healthy development of youth:

- **Help develop youth voice.** It is important that young people develop skills for self-expression. Programs that encourage the development of youth voice recognize the benefits of assisting young people in building skills in decision making and providing young people with meaningful leadership roles. Many NH programs know the importance of involving youth in the decisions that affect them. Some programs, like the **NH Teen Institute**, mandate youth membership on the Board of Directors to help guide program development and implementation. Other organizations help youth refine communication and public speaking skills by using youth as trainers, such as the Youth-Adult partnership trainings offered by **UNH Cooperative Extension**. Still other programs develop youth voice and self-advocacy through helping youth critically think about issues and advocate for causes. The efforts of **Dover Youth-2-Youth** in sponsoring host-liability legislation focused on reducing underage drinking is an excellent example of how NH youth are becoming involved in legislative decisions that influence their health and well-being.
- **Engender a sense of belonging and a belief in the future.** Youth who hold positive expectations for their future, are connected to their schools and communities, and have opportunities to develop skills and talents are less likely to become involved in delinquent activities (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998). **Reclaiming Futures**, helps reintegrate youth involved in the justice system into the larger community by involving community members in the treatment teams. These community members can assist youth in accessing meaningful employment and educational opportunities or linking to activities that utilize and enhance their unique talents.

- **Enhance community connections through service learning and civic engagement.** During adolescence young people explore issues of social justice as they develop their world view. Programs that provide opportunities for service learning and civic engagement increase adolescents' connections with community leaders. These programs also help young people hone critical thinking skills when young people are asked to consider the social issues that affect their communities. Service learning projects also provide young people with real life experiences to discover their talents and develop skills, both of which positively shape their identity. **Creating Positive Change** in Peterborough has a youth advocacy program that provides meaningful opportunities for youth to become actively involved in the larger community. Middle and high school girls in Manchester are engaging in community service to educate community members about social issues through **Girls Taking Control (GTC)**, a program of the YWCA of Manchester.
- **Encourage healthy risk-taking through experiential learning activities.** Risk-taking is a natural part of adolescence. As young people gain autonomy, they begin to test boundaries. Programs that encourage young people to take positive risks and expose them to new activities satisfy the natural risk-taking needs of adolescents while helping them enhance their self-confidence, build skills, and broaden their world view. Experiential learning can also teach young people how to fail courageously and yet empower them to continue to take new risks (Perkins, & Borden, 2003). Both **Merrowvista**, a summer camp in Center Tuftonboro, and the **New Outlook Teen Center** in Exeter provide ample opportunities for positive risk-taking through summer adventure activities.
- **Provide opportunities to engage (positively) with peers and caring adults.** A fundamental task of adolescence is the ability to form and develop mature personal relationships. Programs that provide opportunities for young people to engage with adults and encourage pro-social bonding help young people develop and hone the interpersonal skills necessary for sustaining mature relationships. Positive relationships with adults signal to young people that they are respected and appreciated and can help deter them from making unhealthy decisions. **Annie's Forum** at New Heights in Portsmouth is an intergenerational group in which high school aged and older generations of women come together to share experiences and engage in activities of common interest. The **Pittsfield Youth Workshop** in Pittsfield offers a teen mentoring program where high school teens become mentors to middle school youth, thereby promoting healthy peer relationship and building positive community involvement.
- **Transform "hanging out" time into a time for meaningful engagement.** Unstructured hanging out time with peers can become a breeding ground for delinquency. Instead of unstructured "free time", programs that embrace PYD transform "free time" into structured activities with adults that reflect the interests and passions of the participants. For example, when a scheduled activity in the summer program had to be canceled at the last minute, the staff at **New Heights** engaged the youth in a group activity of their choosing, thus transforming an unstructured moment into a constructive opportunity for engagement.
- **Create a network of caring and concerned professionals.** As illustrated, there are many programs in NH that support the health and well-being of young people. However, like the young people themselves, programs need support and encouragement to develop and prosper. When staff from different programs network, they learn new methods of engaging youth, share program successes, and renew their commitment to the field. **PlusTime NH** hosts monthly meetings with teen center and after school program staff to share success stories and refine program development. Staff from the **Makin' It Happen Coalition** in Manchester coordinates the Greater Manchester Prevention Council, a coalition of Prevention Providers dedicated to streamlining and improving services that prevent youth substance abuse.

• How can schools support Positive Youth Development?

Young people spend more time in school and school-related activities than in any other activity or setting outside of the home. How schools are structured, the supports and services they offer, and the educational experiences they provide foster or impede the healthy development of youth (Ziegler, 2004). Schools that

support positive youth development engage students by providing different types of learning opportunities, have positive expectations for ALL youth, are based on a model of partnership and inclusion, and incorporate collaborations with community resources and opportunities. When schools do this, they become safe places where the competence and character of young people can be developed and supported (Alaska Adolescent Health Advisory Committee, 1995). Listed below are some specific ways schools can support positive youth development.

- **Create a climate that recognizes and values student contributions.** Schools can help young people develop leadership and critical thinking skills by giving them a voice in decisions that affect them. When schools share the decision-making power with teachers, parents, and students, they establish trust among constituents and demonstrate respect for other's ideas. Many schools elect student representatives to serve on governing boards. Schools can also engage young people in developing rules for conduct and guidelines for behaviors. By understanding what students think, experience, and feel, school personnel are better informed about the issues affecting the students and the school (Ziegler, 2004) For example, students may be best situated to realistically assess bullying and other school climate issues. Using this essential student input can provide school administrators with valuable information and can help shape school policy.
- **Develop pathways to integrate families (parents) with classroom and other school activities.** Schools can help strengthen the ties between young people and their parents, as well as between families and schools by involving them in various aspects of the educational experience. For example, schools can assign homework that actively involves parents or other family members (Alaska Adolescent Health Advisory Committee, 1995). Schools can also develop advisory councils with membership open to students and parents.
- **Share the good news as well as the bad.** We all like to hear about our positive accomplishments and contributions. Oftentimes school personnel (teachers, guidance counselors, and principals) contact parents only when students are experiencing academic or behavioral problems. This may increase tensions between families and schools, causing parents to become defensive and unwilling to be active participants in school-related activities. When schools reach out to families to share the positive contributions students are making in class or to the school climate, they are valuing the individuality of the student and helping enhance his/her assets. Gestures like this also help strengthen family cohesion.
- **Examine and celebrate diversity.** When young people share their experiences with their peers and learn about differences, they breakdown stereotypes and biases. Weave diversity studies into school curriculum in an interdisciplinary fashion and have students share differences. Take time to report on movies or share news reports as a spring board to explore and discuss diversity.
- **Discover the unique contributions of all students.** Schools that embrace a PYD perspective recognize that all young people have potential to make positive contributions and thus strive to include opportunities to appreciate the nonacademic successes. Develop educational opportunities and curricula that are varied in nature and appeal to a wide range of students. Be creative in designing group projects that will underscore and capture students' unique capabilities and talents.
- **Encourage students to use their own language and culture to raise awareness.** During adolescence, young people begin to think critically about issues of social justice. Encourage the development of these critical thinking skills by providing forums for students to discuss or debate current events. Establish an after school club that produces an equivalent to MTV, a student-run production that airs music and video. This is but one suggestion as to how schools can promote media literacy and youth culture while allowing for opportunities for creativity, individualism, discussion, and activism.
- **Make health education comprehensive and meaningful.** Oftentimes schools are the only resource for young people to access quality health information. Comprehensive health education programs that incorporate mental health education, sexuality education, assertiveness training, as well as emphasize

biology and anatomy, provide teens with information to make healthy choices while assisting them in the development of communication, resistance, and help-seeking skills.

- **Establish community-wide partnerships and service learning projects.** Schools can serve as a unifying force in the community. However, oftentimes schools actually alienate community members by not allowing the educational experience to go beyond the walls of the school. When schools establish meaningful relationships with other sectors of the community, education becomes more practical and future-oriented, and students make valuable connections that may help them in attaining their goals. Formalized partnerships between schools and businesses, for example, provide exposure to “real world” experiences, while building connections with caring adults. Formalized internships or service learning projects provide structured opportunities for youth to develop social, personal, and technical competencies while applying academic knowledge (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). These types of experiences are especially useful when they involve problem solving strategies or when the competencies and skills developed can be transferable to other settings (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Ferrari, 2003).

How can communities support Positive Youth Development?

Communities can play an important role in promoting positive youth development and establishing positive expectations for all youth. Neighborhoods matter (Swisher & Whitlock, 2004). Communities that are safe places with meaningful activities and opportunities for youth engagement are critical for promoting enduring relationships with parents and other adults, developing cohesion among community members of all ages, and creating optimism about the future. Communities that value youth provide them with access to a wide range of human capital, like job training, education, leadership, as well as practical knowledge that youth can apply in order to achieve their goals and contribute to their neighborhoods (Swisher & Whitlock). They also expose youth to real-life examples of success stories and thus impart a sense of hope. When communities create bridges to other communities, they help youth feel connected and expand their educational and economic opportunities (Swisher & Whitlock).

- **Partner with youth to create safe places with meaningful activities.** When youth collaborate with adults to create these safe places, they are more likely to respect these areas, use them for their intended purposes, and promote the continued livelihood of these resources. There are many towns in which youth and adults have come together to create skate parks to provide a place for youth to go to after school. These safe places work best when they have a theme (e.g. skate parks, community gardens, music or drama) so that youth who go to these places are presented with concrete activities in which they can become engaged. An ideal theme is focused, indicative of youths’ interests, and incorporates elements of safe, supervised risk-taking and outlets for creativity. Adult supervision is ideal. Often, the only safe youth-centered space is an adolescent’s bedroom, a private place which does not link them to the community or to peers, so it is essential that they have youth-centered places to go outside their homes.
- **Promote activities for youth during the non-school hours.** The after school hours between 3-6 pm are critical for youth development: Youth who are unsupervised during the after school hours are three times more likely to become involved in crime, or engage in sexual activity and substance use (**FIND THIS CITATION**) Communities can support the healthy development of youth by creating opportunities for young people to engage in community service, providing safe places for young people to participate in activities with pro-social peers and adults, or by establishing internships for youth in business or city government.
- **Support parents and professionals working with youth.** Young people need caring adults to help them make healthy decisions and develop interpersonal relationships. Parents and other caring adults may need skills in working with youth, and may need information on adolescent development. They may also need to better understand youth culture. Communities that support positive youth development provide opportunities for parents and professionals to acquire knowledge and skills in working with youth.

- **Understand and support youth culture.** Communities can make strides to understand youth culture by providing opportunities and forums for young people to express themselves. Communities that sponsor “battles of the bands” or other youth-centered opportunities not only celebrate the unique talents and contributions of young people, but also demonstrate their support of youth culture.
- **Involve youth in decision-making processes.** When young people are involved in community decisions, everyone benefits. Communities are not made up of only adults. Engaged youth are not just the recipients of services, laws, and programs, but become active, participating members of their community, invested in community outcomes. The issues of debate such as curfews or use of community property that sparked the need for community decisions can act as topics for meaningful discussion between youth and adults within the same community, helping to break down generation gaps and preconceived notions that either age group may have about the other.

How can policy makers support Positive Youth Development?

Many youth feel alienated from policies that are aimed at them, and thus do not “believe in the system.” Policy makers, with youth input, can create a system that is both for, and by, youth, so that the rules that govern their lives make sense to youth and make them feel that they are valued. By including youth in policy development, data collection, and legislation, policy makers ensure that youth are engaged with policies rather than ruled by them. Youth are endowed with a degree of power-sharing, and are more invested in their lives and communities because they believe that the system will work for them. As a result, they are less likely to be impulsive or try to thwart “the system” as a way of asserting their needs. Involving youth early in their lives in the policy-making process increases the likelihood that youth will be interested in civic engagement and will be politically involved as adults.

- **Share the podium and create opportunities for young people to be involved in policy formation.** Help young people develop critical thinking and public speaking skills by involving them in policy formation and public presentations on policies that influence young people. When youth feel as if their voices matter when it comes to the creation of policies, they are more likely to be invested members of their community (Pittman, Diversi, & Ferber, 2002). Youth can add a contemporary perspective to policies that may be outdated or even not needed.
- **Including youth in data collection.** When data is collected from young people, policies become evidence-based and reflective of the youth population for which they are intended. It is also important to include youth on committees that draft surveys and questionnaires that are used in data collection. Youth can give valuable input regarding the vocabulary of the survey, its format, and its value. Researchers can also ask youth which issues are significant in their lives so that the data being collected about them speaks to their own experience (Pittman, Diversi, & Ferber, 2002).
- **When it comes to consequences, focus on rehabilitation instead of punishment.** When youth are punished for minor infractions of policy or law, they often do not see the relevance of the punishment, and as a result tend to view “the system” as an adversary. Punishments can be reframed as rehabilitation by focusing on youth strengths and how those strengths can best serve the community. When consequences are tailored to specific circumstances, they are more meaningful to youth than stringent, universal punishments
- **Provide forums for young people to testify on legislation that influences their health and well-being.** Frequently youth know more about the factors that influence their health and wellbeing than adults do. When youth are offered opportunities to provide adults with information relevant to their lives, policy becomes more youth friendly and there is increased likelihood youth will receive services matched to their lifestyles and needs.

- **Use data to inform decisions and collect data on protective as well as risk factors.** Current and accurate data should be used to guide policy formation. When we rely on data that captures only risky behaviors and deficits we are getting only half the picture. More studies should target the assessment of positive outcomes such as youth development and strengths. These positive outcomes should represent the holistic nature of youth and include success in a variety of dimensions.
- **Provide forums for young people to become involved in political processes.** Young people naturally explore issues of social justice. Help teens think critically about these issues by providing forums for them to discuss current social issues. Despite this emerging interest in social justice, young adults are the least likely to vote. Encourage civic engagement and help young people develop civic responsibility by providing opportunities for them to meet elected officials, share their perceptions, and become engaged in political processes.

For more information on Positive Youth Development, download our Contemporary Issues in Adolescence reference list, or check out these websites:

American Youth Policy Forum: www.aypf.org

Advocates for Youth: www.advocatesforyouth.org

Child Trends; www.childtrends.org

CYFERnet: www.cyfernet.org

Forum for Youth Investment: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

National Youth Development Information Center: www.nydic.org

Public/Private Ventures: www.ppv.org

Search Institute; www.search-institute.org