

## Leadership and Youth Development

The traditional juvenile justice system does not routinely recognize the strengths of youth, nor does it often seek to build on these strengths. Rather, it concentrates on deficits. It asks what is wrong with youth and tries to fix it (Schartz 2000). But in the early 1990s, this traditional “deficit based” approach to juvenile justice was challenged by a new positive approach to delinquency prevention. This new approach—youth development—gives priorities to the development of competencies that improve a juvenile’s ability to be productive and effective at tasks and activities that others value. This approach cannot be identified by a single program or a particular substantive content. Rather, it is the process that is significant. This broad-based strategy includes any intervention that steers juveniles away from antisocial norms and toward conventional adulthood. It emphasizes (but is not limited to) interventions that concentrate on improvements in education, social competencies, employability, and civic and other life skills in order to change the capacity of the youth from a liability to an asset (Bazemore and Terry 2001).

This new approach is based on a small but growing body of research concerning the relationship between asset building (or competency development) and decreased problems during adolescence. For example, a persistent finding in criminological research is that most delinquents eventually “outgrow” their delinquent behavior, regardless of intervention by the juvenile justice system (Elliott 1993). A second source of evidence supporting youth development is the body of research on resiliency suggesting that many youths in high-risk environments manage to grow up normally and even thrive as a result of protective factors (Rutter 1985; Werner 1986). For instance, one common protective influence that distinguishes at-risk youths who succeed in not engaging in risk behaviors is an apparent bonding to conventional adults and to groups that facilitate successful maturation by providing opportunities for young people to gain a sense of legitimacy. A third source of legitimacy for the youth development perspective is research suggesting that more assets lead to fewer risk behaviors and to additional positive outcomes such as school success and physical health (Scales 1999).

The challenge for the juvenile justice system is to use this knowledge of positive development and create environments that are suitable for the successful infusion of these strengths (Bazemore and Terry 1997).

### Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical basis for youth competency development borrows heavily from control theory (Hirschi 1969). Unlike other criminological theories, which assume that people naturally want to do the right thing but are prevented by circumstances from doing it, control theory suggests that it is first necessary to explain why anyone should want to do the right thing. In short, control theory hypothesizes that social controls prevent us from committing crimes. Whenever these controls break down or weaken, deviance is likely to occur.

The theoretical context for youth development programs follows similar logic. Youth development programs are not concerned with why youth commit delinquent acts. Rather, the youth development approach is more concerned with the basic needs and stages of youth development than with simply “fixing problems.” It seeks to provide youth with skills and

social competencies in order for them to be productive and effective at tasks and activities that are valued within legitimate social institutions (e.g., work, family, community).

In summary, the positive developmental process seeks to prevent problem behaviors by preparing young people to meet the challenges of adolescence through a series of structured, progressive activities and experiences that help them obtain social, emotional, ethical, physical, and cognitive competencies. This “asset based” approach views youth as resources and builds on their strengths and capabilities for development within their own community. It emphasizes the acquisition of adequate attitudes, behaviors, and skills as a buffer against delinquent behavior (Bazemore and Terry 1997).

## Outcome Evidence

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that youth development programs can produce individual protective factors that increase successes and decrease problem behaviors (Benson and Saito 2000). For instance, two of the first researchers (Conrad and Hedin 1981) to study the impact of positive youth development studied 4,000 adolescents in 30 experiential education programs, using survey data. Six programs had comparison groups composed of students in nonexperiential programs. The researchers found that students in the treatment group demonstrated improvement in personal and social development, moral reasoning, self-esteem, and attitudes toward community service and involvement. Other early research on positive youth development demonstrated improved ego, moral development (Cognetta and Sprinthall 1978), and sense of social responsibility and competence (Newman and Rutter 1983).

More recently, in a comprehensive syntheses of the scientific literature on positive adolescent development, Scales and Leffert (1999) reviewed several studies concerning the constructive use of time. The authors found that participation in these developmental activities produced several positive outcomes, including

- Increased safety
- Increased academic achievement
- Greater communication in the family
- Fewer psychosocial problems, such as loneliness, shyness, and hopelessness
- Decreased involvement in risky behaviors, such as drug use and juvenile delinquency
- Increased self-esteem, increased popularity, increased sense of personal control, and enhanced identity development
- Better development of such life skills as leadership and speaking in public, decision-making, dependability, and job responsibility

But perhaps the most convincing research to date on youth development is a meta-analysis of 25 program evaluations conducted by the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington (Catalano et al. 1998). The programs included in the analysis all concentrated on promoting competencies and social, emotional, or cognitive development and were evaluated using strong research designs. The meta-analysis found that some of the programs improved many positive behaviors (self-control, assertiveness, problem solving, interpersonal skills, social acceptance, school achievement, completion of school work, graduation rates, parental trust, self-efficacy, and self-esteem). In addition, the analysis found that these programs decreased

negative behaviors (hitting, carrying weapons, vehicle theft, school failure, negative family events, teen pregnancy, skipping classes and school suspensions, and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use).

Finally, in a review of the scientific foundations of youth development, Benson and Saito (2000) argue that the processes for youth development can occur in a variety of settings. These four settings move from the specific to the general and are not necessarily discrete. The settings include programs, organizations, socializing systems, and community.

- **Programs.** Programs are semistructured processes, most often led by adults and designed to address specific goals and youth outcomes. A program can be considered a youth development program when it intentionally incorporates experiences and learnings to address and advance the positive development of children and youth. This category incorporates a range of programs from those that are highly structured, often in the form of curricula with step-by-step guidelines, to those that may have a looser structure but incorporate a clear focus on one or more youth development activities (e.g., service learning).
- **Organizations.** Organizations provide youth development opportunities in which a wide variety of activities and relationships occur that are designed to improve the well-being of children and youths. Examples include school-based afterschool recreation and co-curricular activities, parks and recreation centers and leagues, community centers, amateur sports leagues, faith-based youth development opportunities, and the myriad places and opportunities developed by community-based and national youth organizations (e.g., YMCA, YWCA, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts). These kinds of settings can mobilize a wide range of formal and informal youth development inputs.
- **Socializing Systems.** Socializing systems are an important array of complex and omnipresent systems intended to enhance processes and outcomes consonant with youth development principles. These include schools, families, neighborhoods, religious institutions, museums, and libraries.
- **Community.** Community is not only the geographic place within which programs, organizations, and systems intersect but also the social norms, resources, relationships, and informal settings that dramatically inform human development—both directly and indirectly.

In summary, the evidence concerning the impact of positive youth development programs is small but growing. This growing body of research suggests that youth development programs are a promising tool in the arsenal of programs designed to decrease problem behaviors.

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