

## Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) focuses on protective factors or the assets of youth and adolescents (Scales et al. 2005; Schwartz et al. 2007; Lerner et al. 2005; Theokas et al. 2005). PYD embraces the concept of youth as having the capacity to *thrive*, defined as “fulfilling one’s potential and contributing positively to one’s community” (Edberg 2008). In short, PYD emphasizes the potential of each juvenile. This approach represents a fundamental shift away from earlier conceptualizations of youth as broken, dangerous, and “problems to be managed,” as well as a shift away from a “deficit model” that understood positive development as the absence of negative or risk behaviors (such as drug use, truancy, delinquency) [Lerner 2005; Lerner et al. 2013]. Many models of intervention or prevention prior to the early 1990s focused almost exclusively on reducing risk exposure (Lerner 2005).

Deriving in part from developmental systems or ecological systems theories, the PYD approach considers the person–context relationship—that is, the multilayered, ecological web of family, school, and community in which a youth is embedded (Development Services Group Inc. [DSG] 2013; Lerner et al. 2013). This web of interactions has been discussed by a number of theorists (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1979) and suggests that positive youth development can occur across time and across settings (Lerner et al. 2013). In a review of the scientific foundations of youth development, for instance, Benson and Saito (2000) describe four (not necessarily discrete) settings that provide opportunities for healthy youth development. They are *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 youth. 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., Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts,

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YMCA, YWCA). These kinds of settings can mobilize a wide range of formal and informal youth development inputs.

- **Socializing Systems.** Socializing systems are an 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.

One issue that has hampered the development of PYD as a field has been the lack of measures and indicators. However, that gap has started to be addressed more recently. For instance, PYD has been commonly operationalized by Lerner and colleagues (2005) and others (Pittman et al. 2001) to include elements of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring or compassion (the “five Cs”), as well as contribution. Similarly, the Search Institute has developed a list of 40 external and internal developmental assets that form the building blocks for healthy development (<http://www.search-institute.org/assets>).

Programs grounded on PYD constructs concentrate on developing these competencies and assets in the youths they serve, emphasizing the youths’ positive connections to their community and the juveniles’ ability to be productive and effective at tasks and activities that others value. 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 to change the capacity of a youth from a liability to an asset (Bazemore and Terry 1997).

One source of evidence supporting positive youth development is the body of research on resiliency suggesting that many youths in high-risk environments manage to do well, even thrive, as a result of protective factors (DSG 2013; Rutter 1985; Werner 1986). For instance, one common protective influence that distinguishes at-risk youths who succeed in avoiding risk behaviors is their bonding to caring adults and to groups that facilitate successful maturation by providing opportunities for young people to gain a sense of legitimacy (Ahrens et al. 2008; Barnett et al. 2007; Black and Ford-Gilboe 2004; Farineau and McWey 2011; Kelsey, Johnson, and Maynard 2001; Nurius et al. 2009; Owen et al. 2009; Tajima et al. 2011). Additional research on positive youth development suggests that more assets lead to fewer risk behaviors and to additional positive outcomes such as school success and physical health (Catalano et al. 2004; Lerner et al. 2013; Scales 1999).

PYD’s strengths-based positive development approach represents a challenge for the juvenile justice system, for traditionally the system is grounded in the above mentioned deficit model and focuses on preventing, intervening in, and reducing negative behaviors (Bazemore and Terry 1997).

## Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical basis for youth competency development borrows from work done on developmental systems theory. Lerner summarized the defining features of developmental systems theory, which include a rejection of the distinction between nature-nurture; a recognition of the interrelated integration of all levels of an ecology (e.g., the bidirectional nature of influence between individual, family, school, and community); a consideration of the individual in relation to his or her context; and an acceptance that development occurs over time because of the plasticity of humans. He notes that the recognition of plasticity (the capacity to grow, change, and adapt) promotes an “optimistic and

proactive search for characteristics of individuals and of their ecologies that, together, can be arrayed to promote positive human development across life” (2005, 19).

Efforts in recent years have been made to integrate risk and protection models with PYD, since they share a common goal of supporting healthy youth development through the cultivation of individual and social competencies (Catalano et al. 2004; DSG 2013). These models recognize the critical impact of individual, social, and community resources and strengths on healthy development and support interventions that address the “whole person” and that address contextual factors beyond the individual (DSG 2013).

In summary, the PYD approach seeks to prepare 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 youths 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 (Bazemore and Terry 1997). This approach concentrates less on the prevention of delinquent behaviors, although that has been suggested in the empirical research to be an important result of PYD programs (Catalano et al. 2004; Lerner et al. 2013).

## Outcome Evidence

A growing body of evidence suggests that positive youth development programs can nurture individual protective factors that both increase successes and positive outcomes and decrease problem behaviors (Benson and Saito 2000).

Two of the first researchers (Conrad and Hedin 1981) in this area 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).

A more recent series of studies have been published, based on findings from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD), which uses a longitudinal sequential design (Lerner et al., 2005). The first wave of data was collected in 2002–2003 from fifth graders and is designed to follow students through grade 12. As of 2013, the study included about 7,000 youths from 42 states. Findings from this study provide evidence for the 5 C’s constructs, as well as contribution (Lerner et al. 2013).

Systematic reviews of studies on positive youth development have also indicated that PYD results in positive outcomes. 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 life skills such as leadership and speaking in public, decision-making, dependability, and job responsibility

Catalano and colleagues (2004) conducted an analysis of 25 program evaluations done by the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington. 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 analysis found that some of the programs improved many positive behaviors (self-control, assertiveness, problem solving, interpersonal skills, social acceptance, school achievement, completion of schoolwork, 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, school suspensions, and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use). They noted that the themes common to successful programs included methods to

- Strengthen social, emotional, behavioral cognitive, and moral competencies
- Build self-efficacy
- Shape messages from family and community about clear standards for youth behavior
- Increase healthy bonding with adults, peers, and younger children
- Expand opportunities and recognition for youth
- Provide structure and consistency in program delivery
- Intervene with youth for 9 months or longer [Catalano et al., 117]

Durlak and colleagues (2007) reviewed 526 studies that included universal competence-promotion outcomes. Based on the 24 percent of studies that provided sufficient quantitative data to calculate effect sizes, the analysis found that some effect sizes were statistically significant, ranging from modest to large in magnitude. Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of afterschool programs that promoted personal and social skills in children. Their findings confirm the positive outcomes of previous research. They found that, compared with controls, participants of the programs experienced significant *reductions* in their problem behaviors and significant *increases* in their self-perceptions and bonding to school, positive social behaviors, school grades, and levels of academic achievement.

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.

For information on positive youth development programs on MPG, please click the links below.

- [Positive Youth Development Program \(Connecticut\)](#)
- [Families And Schools Together \(FAST\)](#)
- [Positive Action](#)

## Additional Resources

Positive Youth Development Page, *FindYouthInfo.gov*.

<http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/resources/Positive-Youth-Development>

Oregon Commission on Children and Families' Best Practices: Positive Youth Development  
<http://www.npcresearch.com/Files/Strengths%20Training%20Binder/44.%20Best%20Practices%20Positive%20Youth%20Development.pdf>

National Clearinghouse on Family and Youth  
<http://www.ncfy.com/youthdevlp.htm>

Developmental Assets: Preparing Young People for Success Page, The Search Institute  
<http://www.search-institute.org/what-we-study/developmental-assets>

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