

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

OHIO
—adult—
ALLIES

INTRODUCTION

Positive youth development (PYD) serves as a critical foundation for a variety of youth programs. PYD's focus on youth strengths instead of deficits, the recognition of the need to serve all youth, not just those previously identified as at risk, as well as the establishment of the community as being responsible for youth development has propelled the field forward. Youth-led programs are rooted in a PYD approach, its core principles and its features of positive developmental settings. It is essential for adult allies to understand the contribution of PYD as we move forward to fully preparing and empowering youth to serve as community change agents.

DEFINING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Karen Pittman stated in the 1990s, "Problem free isn't fully prepared." Being absent of problem behaviors does not necessarily mean that a young person has the ability to demonstrate or articulate their strengths or abilities. How we use the term "positive youth development" and what we mean when we use it must be comprehensive enough to promote not only problem reduction, but also, preparation for adulthood.

The term "positive youth development" began as a vague array of ideas, actions, and practices that connected multiple sectors of the community in an effort to build competent, successful, and healthy youth (Benson & Pittman, 2001). Nationally, the Interagency Working

For more information on youth-led programs, please see the following white papers:

Youth-Led Programs: This paper provides an overview of the two frameworks that inform youth-led programs: the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004) and the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF; SAMHSA).

Conceptualizing Adolescence/ts: Consideration of historical views, culture and personal bias in the conceptualizing of adolescence/ts will assist adult allies to better engage, guide and empower young people.

Prevention and Promotion: As prevention and promotion are the fundamental approaches utilized by youth-led programs, it is important for adult allies to understand what each is and how they relate to each other.

Youth Empowerment: This paper explains youth empowerment, the core construct outlined in the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004), which adult allies use to guide young people in their community change efforts.

Logwood, S. & Thomas, B. (2017). *Positive Youth Development*. Athens, OH: Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs at Ohio University.

Group on Youth Programs (2017) collaboratively built consensus to define positive youth development (PYD):

PYD is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strength (p.1).

In short, PYD is a positive, asset-building orientation that builds youth strengths rather than categorizing them by their deficits (Small & Memmo, 2004). Programs using a PYD approach embrace the notion of youth voice and youth involvement through a variety of models of engagement including community services projects, service-learning opportunities, serving on an advisory board, or serving in governance. Through increased options for involvement and embracing positive developmental strategies, which stretch beyond reducing problem behaviors, (Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2001), progress towards preparation for adulthood can be achieved.

As adult allies support their communities' investment in PYD efforts, it is important to not only understand a base definition of PYD, but also to understand the core principles that define this approach.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF A POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

While PYD concepts may appear as vague and muddy in the field of prevention, there are core principles that link this approach and field of study and it is essential that adult allies of youth-led programming have a solid foundational understanding of these principles.

CORE PRINCIPLE #1: Youth are actors in their own development

PYD advocates that youth are not passive receivers of youth development programming, but rather are resources capable of creating the environments that promote their own healthy development. This core principle embraces the notion that young people have a right to be heard and respected on issues that affect their lives (Collura, 2016).

CORE PRINCIPLE #2: Focus on all youth

PYD targets the development of the positive strengths of all youth, not just those considered at risk. PYD recognizes that all youth have the ability to grow and change (Collura, 2016). In short, this promotion-based approach is viewed as beneficial in enhancing the healthy development of all youth.

CORE PRINCIPLE #3: All people are responsible for positive youth development

PYD believes in the notion that “it takes a village” to raise healthy youth. This principle asserts that it is the responsibility of every citizen (family members, neighbors, schools, and community members) to focus on the health and wellbeing of young people.

CORE PRINCIPLE #4: Multiple contexts impact youth development

PYD asserts that there are multiple systems, both micro (family, school, and community) and macro (broader norms and values of the culture), which impact youth development. Each contextual setting has the potential to nurture PYD. Youth are more successful in navigating adolescence when the contextual settings are aligned and there is continuity across the settings with similar messaging and expectations.

FEATURES OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL SETTINGS FOR ALL YOUTH

What do these core principles look like in practice? How can adult allies create positive developmental settings for all youth? This can be achieved when adult allies focus on two factors: 1) the young person’s interaction with the setting; and 2) the process of the interaction. According to the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002), for maximum positive development and engagement of the youth, the following features should be present in youth programs:

Physical and Psychological Safety

Programs that promote PYD are both physically and psychologically safe and secure. This means that settings are free from unsanitary or unsafe health conditions, such as environmental hazards or unsanitary food preparation practices. In addition, program participants need to feel safe and free from the threat of violence or harm. The setting psychologically increases safe peer group interactions and decreases the likelihood of confrontational peer interactions. Interactions between youth and adults, and among youth, are constructive.

Appropriate Structure

A PYD approach allows for clear and consistent rules, expectations, continuity, and predictability with clear boundaries and age appropriate monitoring. These structures need to be appropriate based on the age and behaviors of youth. In general, as a child grows, less structure and control is needed. Adolescents need consistency and structure, but also need opportunities to feel autonomous and to manage their own behaviors.

Supportive Relationships

Adult allies utilizing a PYD approach recognize the value and need for relationship characteristics including: warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication,

caring, support, guidance, secure attachments, and responsiveness. Adults are ultimately responsible for creating and enacting all of the identified features of positive developmental settings; thus their actions are most fundamental to quality programming.

Opportunities to Belong

PYD approaches seek to create opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or lived experiences. Consideration is given to creating inclusive environments and fostering sociocultural identity formation and cultural competence. In order to facilitate opportunities for belonging, interactions between the youth must be on an equal playing field; activities should be cooperative rather than competitive, and there should be individualized contact by members of the group.

Positive Social Norms

Adult allies using a PYD approach recognize and set rules of behavior and promote positive values and morals. The programmatic culture includes formal and informal ways of doing things that arise through regular interactions. This culture includes the way young people perceive adult expectations and how sanctions for behavior are handled.

Support for Efficacy and Mattering

Adult allies promote youth voice by taking young people's ideas seriously and believing that youth are capable of making a real difference in the community. The setting must be youth-centered, challenging, and offer opportunities to make a real difference.

Opportunities for Skill Building

Programs embracing a PYD approach provide opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional and social skills by exposing young people to experiential learning opportunities and preparing them for adult employment. Skill building can range from broad topics such as media literacy to more person-centered skills, such as public speaking. PYD programs may also seek to build general life skills such as problem solving, coping, and assertiveness.

Integration of Multiple Systems Efforts

PYD works to demonstrate collaboration and synergy across multiple youth-serving systems. When youth interact in multiple environments – such as school, programs, family, and neighborhoods – that have consistent features and messaging, positive youth development is more likely to occur.

While effective PYD programs demonstrate the core principles and actively seek to create positive developmental settings, variations in programming still exist. As adult allies push towards truly engaging and empowering young people, the positive developmental settings must be viewed as a critical foundation.

MOVING BEYOND A POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

While youth involved in programs that utilize the PYD approach are engaged, they are not necessarily empowered, potentially limiting their participation in the public realm by not allowing them the ability to influence social and political systems that affect their lives (Collura & Raffle, 2017). The youth-led programming field must shift from narrowly considering the characteristics, attributes, and conditions necessary to reduce adolescent deficits (problem reduction), to an approach in which there is an obligation of ensuring full preparation of every young person. This shift recognizes that programs once designed to change youth's behavior must be reframed, intentionally and comprehensively, to think more broadly about engaging youth in opportunities to change the environments in which they develop. This shift will require the field to critically examine youth environments through the lens of science, including the utilization of theories, empirical research, and practical wisdom to create a new, common understanding of the term youth development. This understanding is one in which every adolescent has a core set of services, supports, and opportunities to develop competence, confidence, character, connectedness, and offer contributions (Benson & Pittman, 2001).

How adult allies move forward in further defining the role of youth and the contributions they are making to a community will also promote the effectiveness of youth-led programs. For youth empowerment to occur we must stop and evaluate whether many currently operating programs are discrediting the important role that youth-led programs may offer toward community change efforts. Adult allies across sectors must recognize the need for youth to engage in a youth empowerment model as a mechanism to becoming competent, successful, and healthy adults. As adult allies, we must recognize that many youth programs are fundamentally rooted in PYD. However, youth-led programs go beyond this to include an empowerment focus. To advance youth-led programs, we need to demand youth contributions from a youth empowerment approach.

AUTHORS



As the Director of Community Development for the Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol Board of Logan & Champaign Counties and the Champaign County Drug Free Youth Coalition Coordinator, **Stacey Logwood** empowers, educates, advocates for and with young people to create healthier communities.



Beth Thomas currently enjoys her role as the Program Director for a community coalition and working with the youth-led program is the highlight of her job!

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Ohio University's Voinovich School and Leadership and Public Affairs and Drug-Free Action Alliance collaborated with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) to host a series of training and technical assistance (T/TA) activities for adult allies of youth-led programs. This series of white papers was developed by adult allies to support their peers who work with young people to use local data and evidence-based prevention strategies to create meaningful change within Ohio's communities. Dr. Jessica Collura, Ms. Aimee Collins, Dr. Holly Raffle and Mr. Zach Gheen of the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs supported Ohio's adult allies as they developed the white paper series. Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Grant# 1700315 provided funding for the Youth-Led Training and Technical Assistance Project.