

POLICY PAPER ON THE VALUE OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Why Youth Development and Prevention Services are Essential in Critical Services to Youth

New York State Youth Bureaus Serve Over 2 Million Youth



Research and Impact

The ground breaking work from the Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth established by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, issued the report "Community Programs to Promote Youth Development"¹. The report considers programs with a primary focus on prevention as well as those with an explicit youth development framework from the fields of mental health, violence prevention, teen-age pregnancy prevention and youth development. The committee developed a conceptual framework which describes the **specific components of positive development and identified the features of "positive developmental settings", described below.**

The study by Catalano and colleagues², funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, identified and summarized the results of positive youth development (PYD) interventions. The 25 programs designated as effective, based on the evidence presented in the evaluation met the criteria of: use of a control or strong comparison group with measures of behavioral outcomes, including at least one of the PYD objectives noted below; and having at least one significant effect. The most effective programs used skills-building and environmental/organizational change among their strategies, and targeted a combination of settings. **Twenty-four of the programs found a significant reduction in problem behaviors that ranged from alcohol and other drug use to high-risk sexual behavior and violence.**

The first results of a large scale meta-analysis of youth development program evaluations will be completed shortly by Weisberg and Durlak³; although their research is not complete, they have begun to share their findings and to develop and share recommendations. The researchers have reached the following conclusion:

- PYD yields significant effects in the short and long term.
- A broad array of outcomes is positively influenced.
- Some socially/clinically significant changes are impressive.
- PYD programs work equally well for children with and without presenting problems.

Outcomes Identified with a Youth Development Approach

Academic Outcomes	Social/Emotional Outcomes	Health and Wellness Outcomes
<p>Academic outcomes associated with participation in YD programs with SEL focus include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better attitudes toward school and higher educational aspirations • Higher school attendance rates and less tardiness • Less disciplinary action (e.g., suspension) • Lower dropout rates • Better performance in school, as measured by achievement test scores and grades • Greater on-time promotion • Improved homework completion • Engagement in learning 	<p>YD programs with SEL focus include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased behavioral problems (aggression, non-compliance, and conduct problems) • Improved social and communication skills and/or relationships with others (peers, parents, teachers) • Increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy • Lower levels of depression and anxiety • Development of initiative • Improved feeling and attitudes toward self, school, community • Reduced drug use • Reduced teen pregnancy • Positive social norms 	<p>Associated with participation in YD programs with SEL focus include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better food choices • Increased physical activity • Increased knowledge of nutrition and health practices • Reduction in BMI • Improved blood pressure • Improved body image

Positive Youth Development Outcomes Identified with OCFS Core Functions

Juvenile Justice System

There is evidence that the joining of risk/resiliency and strength-based positive youth development as it applies to juvenile justice has a strong impact on reducing or preventing juvenile crime and/or its reoccurrence¹⁰. Strength-based wrap around and mentoring programs reflect promising results in terms of reduced residential placement and lowered recidivism.⁵ Youth involved in the juvenile justice system lack social and emotional competencies that provide a foundation for success in school and life. ***Evidence-based skill training approaches utilizing a youth development approach are consistently effective in producing multiple benefits for youth⁶.***



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Aftercare programs that support development of pro-social competencies for youth and connect to educational, employment, civic and cultural opportunities and supports, all elements of effective PYD, **increase the likelihood for successful re-entry and avoidance of problematic behaviors.**

Child Welfare

As public systems grapple with the mandate to provide protection for all children and youth in their care, attention to preparation for independence and adulthood remains challenging. Helping foster youth and those aging out of foster care become successful adults requires more than addressing their immediate needs for food, shelter and safety. It also requires that they acquire the knowledge, skills, and connections to become productive and self-supporting adults. Studies suggest: that more than half of youth aging out of foster care have not graduated from high school; only 1 in 8 has graduated from a four year college; 12 to 18 months after leaving the system, only about 38% are employed, and fewer than half have ever had a full-time job; more than 1/3 of young people leaving foster care suffer emotional disturbances and the behavioral problems that often accompany them, including truancy, social withdrawal, running away from care, and engaging in risky behaviors; youth in foster care at the age of 17, entering the system prior to age 16, had disproportionately high rates of sexual activity, pregnancy, and teen parenthood than compared to all teens; and at age 19 foster youth who leave the system are at a higher risk for teen pregnancy and birth than both their peers who remain in the system and youth who have never been in the system. **Programs and initiatives to help foster youth and young adults leaving foster care achieve economic success are likely to be more effective if they incorporate basic principles of youth development in their design strategies for youth⁷.**

After School Programs

Numerous research and evaluation studies of effective after-school programs reveal **after school programs are one example of high quality youth development programs⁴** that reflect the key objectives, features and outcomes of youth development.

Youth Employment

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 is the **first federal youth employment legislation that recognized the importance of incorporating youth development principles and practices in services to unemployed youth⁸**. The language of WIA encourages a comprehensive youth focused developmental approach⁹.

Mental Health and Health; Cross-Systems Approach

Youth in juvenile facilities and foster care struggle with a variety of emotional issues, often due to family and life experiences. Due in part to the National Academy of Science report on positive youth development a Positive Youth Development Commission was established as a component of the of the Adolescent Mental Health Initiative of the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnyslands. **The PYD Commission found evidence that well-designed, well-implemented, youth centered programs that consciously uses a**



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youth development model have positive outcomes for young people and their communities¹¹.

The NYS Office of Mental Health, in its development of The Children’s Mental Plan, is utilizing a strength-based youth development framework in its plan.

The NYS Department of Health has actively incorporated a youth development framework into their public health improvement strategy¹⁴.

PYD takes a holistic view of young people within the context of family, school and community to reach and involve youth in meaningful activities that build on their assets and potential.

- PYD programs both help some young people maintain safe and healthy behaviors, and redirect others toward healthier and more positive actions.
- Despite differences in settings and activities, programs that follow a PYD approach all share a common purpose: to build on young people’s strengths, helping them cultivate their interests and talents, practice new skills, gain personal and group recognition by building youths’ skills and competencies, increase feelings of self-worth and use the confidence and skills they gain to make positive and healthy decisions, and increase the supports available throughout their lives.

Objectives of PYD²	Key features of PYD programs¹
Promoting bonding with family, peers, school and community	physical safety
Nurture a belief in the future	psychological safety
Foster a positive identity	appropriate structure
Facilitate healthy social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and moral development	modeling of pro-social behavior
Cultivate self-efficacy and self-determination	supportive relationships with adults and peers
Support pro-social norms	opportunities to gain a sense of belonging
Foster resilience	meaningful challenges and experiences
Nurture spirituality	opportunities to build skills

Cost: Every dollar invested in youth development results in \$10.50 gain for society¹²

Dr. James Heckman and Flavio Cunha, two Nobel economists, utilizing an econometric model¹³, simulated the effects of different investment strategies to project developmental outcomes for a population of boys born to young women from disadvantaged backgrounds who were part of a federal longitudinal study begun in 1979. The investment strategies included: early childhood investments, early childhood investment combined



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with investment during adolescence and a balanced investment strategy throughout early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence. The results were striking. As investments in these underserved children increased, projections showed that high school graduation and college enrollment would rise dramatically. Meanwhile, conviction for crimes, probations and welfare enrollment would fall dramatically. For example, early childhood investments produced a 66% high school graduation rate and a 13% college enrollment rate, whereas a balanced intervention throughout childhood, middle childhood and adolescence produced a 91% graduation rate and a 38% college attendance rate.

Endnotes

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