

Youth Development:

Caring People, Supportive Places and Challenging Possibilities for all Youth

There continue to be high rates of drug use, violence, school failure, and early pregnancy among adolescents. Many young people leave adolescence without the attitudes and skills that prepare them to be successful in the job market or in post-secondary school.

- The research is clear. A high and increasing number of young people are living in families, neighborhoods, or schools that do not sufficiently care for youth nor challenge them to achieve their potential. We should not be surprised; therefore, that so many young people fail to “make it”.

In recent years, the phrases “positive youth development” and the “youth development perspective” have been used to describe an approach and set of strategies for addressing youth problems and for helping young people prepare for their futures. But what is a youth development perspective? At its core, a youth development perspective draws attention to the fundamental needs of young people - a need for caring people, a need for safe places that they can call their own, and a need for challenging possibilities in their lives.

- The research is clear. When young people have access to an array of supports and opportunities, they not only avoid engaging in self-destructive lifestyles, but more affirmatively, they achieve the healthy sense of identity and full range of competencies necessary to succeed as adults.

The challenge facing the United States, therefore, is to ensure that all young people have ready and ongoing access to caring people, safe places, and challenging possibilities.

Purposes and Uses of this Document

Youth development is not a new program or system. It is instead a way of thinking about young people and their needs. A youth development perspective offers a valuable lens through which to plan and implement actions to meet that challenge. It builds directly on the collective wisdom of exemplary youth workers and on a large body of research and evaluation.

To draw attention to people, places and possibilities, a youth development perspective emphasizes five key concepts:

1. Positive youth outcomes
2. Opportunities and supports for development

3. Outreach to underserved youth
4. Healthy "youth-centered" communities and
5. Principles of practice and adult-youth partnerships

This information brief explains the concepts so as to assist community leaders, practitioners and other stakeholders when they seek to gain support for youth development among their constituencies.

This information brief can also be used as a planning tool. At the end of each section are key questions that can be asked and answered by community planning groups. *It is through the process of discussion - asking and answering questions - among stakeholders, including youth that a youth development perspective ultimately draws its power and influence.* As community coalitions begin to define the youth development perspective in their own words, they quickly find that the perspective has significant implications for policies, services, and programs.

It is hard to shift from conventional wisdom to a youth development perspective. Such a philosophical change requires sustained attention, a willingness to experiment, and the motivation to try diverse strategies.

- It is important to take the time to fully debate "youth development issues" prior to designing new programs and services.
- A youth development perspective raises questions that you may not be able to answer quickly and requires data that you may not have. It is important to do the research (formal or informal) to get that information.
- From the beginning, it is necessary to actively gain the advice, feedback and support from all community stakeholder groups. It is important to know how "the general public" thinks about issues. As the process continues, it will be important to create legitimate roles for the active involvement of all stakeholders.
- It is never too early to think about evaluation. It is important to identify how you will assess progress and identify benchmarks of success of the initiative.

Positive Youth Outcomes

The youth development perspective begins with an emphasis on clearly defining the outcomes - attitudes, knowledge, behavior - that we want young people to achieve. Without knowing what we want young people to achieve, it is impossible to design effective initiatives and programs.

Conventional Wisdom

The existing conventional wisdom in this country is (1) that we want to prevent young people from engaging in destructive lifestyles - delinquency, violence, drug and alcohol use, school failure, early pregnancy, and (2) that we want young people to achieve - to graduate high school, to get a job or go to college. Although this second group of actions are desirable youth outcomes, when problem prevention and achievement outcomes become the principal goals that we establish for young people, we are essentially selling young people short.

Youth Development Perspective

We should expect much more from young people. Just because they don't get into trouble does not mean that they are "fully prepared" for adulthood. Achieving in school is not enough. We should expect young people to fully develop social skills, civic and cultural competencies, positive attitudes toward community and a strong sense of identity. After all, research shows that these are the abilities and attitudes that allow a young person to succeed and to avoid using drugs and becoming involved in delinquent behaviors. For example, a good worker is not just a young person with employment skills. It is a person who has positive attitudes toward adults, a sense of civic pride, and the ability to interact with customers and colleagues.

Young people are more than the sum of their problems and their status achievements. Developmental outcomes are what define a healthy and accomplished adolescent - the degree to which they are confident and connected to others, and the degree to which they have the ability to act competently in community settings.

Implications of a Youth Development Perspective

Developmental outcomes are often viewed as "soft" or "of secondary importance". Quite often, education and business leaders will only value academic and job-related abilities. However, unless young people also acquire social, cultural, civic and mental health competencies, they are still at risk for failing in school or the workplace. Furthermore, research shows that the "identity" outcomes are the strongest predictors of adolescent well-being. Like adults, youth cannot develop abilities when they feel insecure or alienated from others.

- The goal is to promote developmental outcomes, not just problem prevention or achievement outcomes. It is important that all aspects of

an initiative be oriented towards developmental youth outcomes. This means that all stakeholders need to agree that such outcomes are legitimate goals. Accordingly, it requires shifts in ongoing planning, program design and implementation, staff development, and evaluation.

- When setting "accountability benchmarks," political and community leaders should not only track indicators such as drug use and graduation rates, but also indicators such as social skills, attitudes towards community, and civic participation.

Basic Questions to Advance Discussions

The challenge is to not tie the initial discussions to specific programs or initiatives. The aim is to get people to define "healthy and accomplished young people" from their own perspective. Then, stakeholders are positioned to address the implications for their organization or initiative.

- How do you know a healthy and successful young person when you see one? What does this young person think about himself and about others? What knowledge and skills does this young person have?
- How do policy-makers typically define Business leaders? School superintendents? Juvenile justice leaders? Parents? Staff in youth organizations? What are the commonalities and differences?
- What are the attitudes and skills necessary to be a good worker? What are the commonalities and differences between a good worker and a good community citizen?