

What is Positive Youth Development?

Youth development experts have not yet agreed on a clear definition of positive youth development, but there has been consensus about key components that need to be included in this approach. With this in mind, positive youth development can be described as a philosophy or approach promoting a set of guidelines on how a community can support its young people so that they can grow up competent and healthy and develop to their full potential.

- **Emphasis on positive outcomes:** The approach highlights positive, healthy outcomes (in contrast to reducing negative outcomes such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse, violence). Although most parents have clear ideas what positive characteristics and behaviors they would like to see in their children, there is still a lack of clarity of what exactly positive outcomes are. Since researchers only recently have focused on positive outcomes, definitions and categories of positive outcomes are still evolving. Examples of desired youth development outcomes are competence (academic, social, vocational skills), self-confidence, connectedness (healthy relationship to community, friends, family), character (integrity, moral commitment), caring and compassion.
- **Youth Voice:** It is essential to include youth as active participants in any youth development initiative. They have to be equal partners in the process. Youth involvement presents a great challenge to adults and charges them to rethink how they have engaged in planning and program development and implementation.
- **Strategies aim to involve all youth:** Youth development strategies are generally aimed at all youth. The assumption is that creating supportive and enriching environments for all youth will lead to the desired positive outcomes as well as reduced negative outcomes. However, experts in the field recognize the need to blend universal approaches with approaches that are targeting youth facing extra challenges.
- **Long-term involvement:** Youth development assumes long-term commitment. Activities and supportive relationships have to endure for a long period of time to be effective. They have to accompany young people throughout their growing up years. While short-term positive results may be seen and should be built on, both community-organizing models mentioned below state that positive community-based, youth outcomes may not be measurable for 15-20 years. Youth development strategies have to embrace and ready themselves for long-term engagement.
- **Community involvement:** Youth development stresses the importance to engage the larger social environment that influences how young people grow up and develop. This includes family and friends, but also the community they live in. Community is more than social service and youth organizations, schools, law enforcement agencies; it involves business, faith and civic groups, and private citizens who are not attached to any organization.

Currently there are two popular, researched community organizing models, Search Institute and Communities that Care, that provide strategies and tools to involve large sectors of the community in the task of making the community a better place for young people to grow up in.

- **Emphasis on collaboration:** Youth development requires people from various agencies and community groups to work together. Collaboration can express itself in different forms e.g., agencies coming together to write a grant proposal to community groups forming a coalition to achieve one common goal by sharing resources and expertise.