# Positive Youth Development I: Foundations

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## Checking In: What is PYD?

Good morning and thanks for joining us. Today we’re beginning our month-long series of webinars on Positive Youth Development, starting with a review of the foundations, research, definitions, and themes that guide this approach.

When you hear the words, “Positive Youth Development” what do you think of?

The term “positive youth development” often generates several different responses. Most commonly people hear “youth development” and think of child and adolescent development, meaning biological, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Or they think of youth services, all the programming and services communities provide to young people to address their needs and foster their growth.

In our work, we understand Positive Youth Development as a distinct approach or philosophy of interacting and working with young people, one that informs programming and promotes adolescent development and guides communities in the way they organize services, supports, and opportunities so that all young people can develop to their full potential.

## Theories and Research

So, let’s dig in to the theories and research that provide the foundation for this approach.

### Urie Bronfenbrenner: Human Ecology Framework

One important theoretical foundation piece for positive youth development is Urie Bronfenbrenner’s 1979 ecological framework of human development. Bronfenbrenner noted that child and adolescent development occurs in interaction with a set of social systems. Young people grow up in families, peer groups, school, work settings, neighborhoods, and within societal structures and norms. And now with the Internet, we can add a global dimension. It is through interaction with various social groups or systems that young people develop competencies and values.

Bronfenbrenner also stated that the interaction between young people and their environment is reciprocal. This means that development does not just happen to children and adolescents. They are actively involved in shaping their own development. Youth are participants, not just recipients. He used the term “agency” to denote the ability to direct or influence events. This is an important concept that we will revisit when we talk about youth voice and engagement.

### Abraham Maslow: Hierarchy of Needs

Another important theory embedded in positive youth development is Abraham Maslow’s 1943 Hierarchy of Needs, focused on the question of what individuals need in order to thrive or do well.

Maslow showed that for healthy development to occur, human beings need to meet foundational needs such as food, water, shelter, and safety. If these are not met, human beings are occupied with survival and not directed toward healthy development. Beyond this, human beings thrive when they feel:

* loved and part of a larger group,
* competent and capable,
* able to understand and meet the basic requirements of their environment,
* capable of finding symmetry, order, and beauty in their environment, and
* self‐actualization and transcendence.

He defined this last need, self‐actualization, as the perception that one has realized their potential and has achieved a high level of personal growth and awareness. Maslow indicated that not all individuals reach the highest level and that healthy development can occur without this need being met.

We know from research that children and youth who don’t have their foundational needs met – are preoccupied with survival and unable to focus on learning or engage in other social interactions. In addition, more recent brain research indicates that belonging is another foundational or essential need to add to the pyramid.

### Social Toxicity

James Garbarino coined the phrase “social toxicity” in 1995 to describe the social factors that interfere with young people’s healthy development. Although some of these social issues have improved over the years, they still have impact on the lives of young people. Most of them are well known.

* **Racism**: leads to a gap in academic performance for African American and Hispanic children, and youth of color are overrepresented in special education classes and in the justice system.
* **Poverty**: leads to fewer opportunities and less support; youth who grow up in poverty often face additional problems such as violence and disrupted family relationships.
* **Sexual exploitation**: refers to the increasingly over‐sexualized representation of young children and youth in the media, social media, and commercial marketing.
* **Health threats**: Exposure to drugs and alcohol leads to early experimentation with substances, potentially resulting in substance abuse and violent behavior.
* **Lack of benevolent adult authority**: Garbarino has pointed out that many young people lack role models who promote positive social and moral values. Many celebrities, who youth may consider role models, promote wealth and materialism.

### Inequity and Adolescence

The social toxicity of our society leads to inequities. A 2019 National Academy report: The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth shows negative trends for poor young people, Black and Latinx youth and LGBTQ youth in outcome areas we usually measure. Their high school graduation and college attendance rates are lower than white middle class youth. Their health outcomes are poorer in the areas of teen pregnancy, STI and HIV infection, and substance abuse. Their detention rate is higher, and so are the chances of being placed in foster care.

### Supportive Research: Prevention

There are three bodies of research that have supported the positive youth development approach and its theoretical foundation.

**Prevention science** has investigated the question: How can we predict and prevent negative behaviors? By identifying risk factors – conditions that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes such as teen pregnancy, substance use, delinquency, school drop out and violence – and protective factors, which buffer against these negative effects. Prevention science has informed many interventions and programs.

Risk factors can be in the community such as living in a violent neighborhood, in the family such as domestic violence, or in school within a peer group.

### Supportive Research: Resiliency

**Resiliency research** has shifted to the question: Why do many young people do well despite the negative environment in which they live and the risk factors they face? Much of this research is based on longitudinal studies that have followed groups of individuals over years from childhood to adulthood.

Protective factors can be internal such as social competence, sense of purpose and autonomy, or external such as having a caring adult in your life, clear and feasible expectations, and opportunities to make contributions and matter.

There is interplay between risk and protective factors. We know from research that protective factors buffer and counter risk factors; the strongest protective factor is having a caring adult. We also know that a high number of risk factors increase the likelihood of negative behavior – 3-4 risk factors can be the tipping point.

Early adversity has lasting impacts. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) studies has shown that child abuse and neglect and other risk factors in early childhood can have a lasting impact on development, health, and well-being. The more risk factors, the stronger the impact. The study also taught us it is far more common for people to experience adverse and toxic stress during childhood than we ever thought.

### Supportive Research: Youth Development

A more recent body of research has taken a different direction and has investigated the question: What makes young people do well or thrive? The Search Institute synthesized the research on adolescent development and identified 40 assets or building blocks that young people need to thrive – to become successful, productive adults. We refer to this as youth development research. Based on their research administering surveys to young people in a community, we have learned that the more assets young have the better they do in school performance and healthy behavior choices. We also learned that roughly 50% of youth in a community have only about 20 assets, half of what they need to thrive.

### Emerging Science of Learning and Development (SOLD)

In recent years we have seen an integration of learning, development, and brain science. The old debate of nature versus nurture has been decided. The brain is highly malleable and plastic. It can wire and rewire in interaction with the environment. This makes us very adaptable. We learn and grow through experience, through interacting with our environments. And this happens in social context, in relationships. It’s less about genes and our genetic makeup; it is more about nurturing and relationships. This supports Bronfenbrenner’s model of human ecology.

## Defining Positive Youth Development

We define positive youth development as an approach or philosophy that guides communities in the way they organize services, supports, and opportunities so that all young people can develop to their full potential. There are several key, research‐based principles underlying this approach:

* **Focus on positive outcomes**: We shift from preventing or fixing problems to creating positive outcomes such as competencies, connections and caring relationships, positive values and expectations, and meaningful participation. This also means that we use a strength‐based approach.
* **Youth voice/engagement**: We work with young people, not for them. We engage young people as partners, create youth‐adult partnerships, and listen to their expertise and perspective. This usually requires that we as adults become aware of and control the negative assumptions and stereotypes we might have of young people. (We call this negative posture “adultism.”)
* **Long‐term, developmentally appropriate involvement**: As a community we have to support young people throughout their development – about 20 years – while adjusting to their changing developmental needs. Twelve year olds need different support and opportunities than 16 year olds. We also know that young people need extended exposure to programs and supportive adults to thrive; short‐term programs and opportunities are not as effective.
* **Universal/inclusive**: As a community we need to provide support and opportunities to all young people, not just to the high risk, targeted groups or the high achieving group. This does not mean, however, that we cannot provide additional support to young people who face extra challenges. In addition, research tells us that universal strategies are often very effective for high risk or high need youth.
* **Community‐based/collaborative**: As we discussed earlier, young people are interacting with a variety of social environments. For a positive youth development approach to succeed, non‐traditional community sectors such as businesses, faith communities, or civic organizations need to be involved. And this implies that we have to work together collaboratively.

## Adolescent Development: A Time of Vulnerability and Opportunity

Let’s take a look of what’s happening in adolescence, a time of change, vulnerability and opportunity.

### It All Starts with Puberty

While the average age that puberty begins is age 8-10 for females and age 10-12 for males, the onset of puberty varies with each individual in both timing and tempo. Some early puberty has been linked to environmental exposures/chemicals in utero or early childhood, body mass index can also be a factor, and a recent study by the adolescent lab at Cornell explored a connection to childhood sexual abuse. Growing under stressful conditions can lead to accelerated development because being able to reproduce was an early survival strategy.

### Timeline of Brain Development

Over the past 20 years with the onset of new technologies we have learned a lot about adolescent brain development. We see an early growth spurt between birth and age 3. At age 6 the brain structures are developed. And for a long time we thought that brain development was completed. Now we know that with the onset of puberty there is another growth spurt. The brain is making new connections, but also making those connections more efficient. Basically connections that are being used are getting faster and more efficient; connections that are not used much are being cut off.

Consequently adolescence is a great time for learning new skills and getting really proficient in some skills.

Here is a short video clip exploring adolescent brain development: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dISmdb5zfiQ>

It is important to remember that adolescent brain development is a period of growth, a great time for skill development and exploration. But the brain is still maturing, some brain centers are not fully functioning yet. The prefrontal cortex, the seat of rational thinking and self-control, is not fully developed until age 25. The emotional system, the amygdala, may be in the driver’s seat. Rewards, excitement, thrill may be hard to resist. Risk taking especially within a peer group can be expected and considered normal.

### Vulnerability and Opportunity

Because of this imbalance adolescence is a time of vulnerability but also of opportunity.

On one hand young people are more vulnerable to injury, morbidity, and substance use. Adolescence is often the onset for mental health issues that may last a lifetime.

On the other hand this is the time to try out new things, explore, learn new skills, become competent in some areas.

If we can connect pleasure with positive activities – having fun, learning exciting things, making meaningful contributions, and doing something for others, we can counter some of the need to take risks or use substances (as a way of feeling excited and good).

### Tasks of Adolescence

Reviewing adolescent development as we just did, we realize that adolescents face many tasks and challenges during this time.

* They need to adjust to bodies that nearly double in size and acquire sexual characteristics. This also includes establishing a sexual identity and developing the skills for romantic relationships.
* Their cognitive skills change gradually but profoundly, allowing abstract and hypothetical thinking.
* They acquire the ability to see things from another person’s perspective, increasing their ability to resolve problems and conflicts in social situations and relationships.
* As they confront and handle all the changes that are occurring, adolescents acquire new abilities to cope with risk, stress, and conflict.
* They develop a more complex, personal, and moral belief system that will guide their decisions and behavior.
* They develop more competent and sophisticated ways to understand and handle emotions.
* The quality of their friendships changes; the focus shifts from interests and activities to feelings and understanding.
* They explore and form a stable sense of self. Core roles that are explored are gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity.
* They take on the roles and responsibilities of adulthood with respect to work, family, community, and citizenship.
* They negotiate a new relationship with parents and adults, balancing independence and ongoing connection.

### Identity Formation

One key theme of adolescent development is identity formation. The process of figuring who you are and how you fit in begins in childhood but gains great importance during adolescence. We don’t have time to go into depth here, but we have great resources on the website about this.

Self-identity is how you see yourself; social identity is how others see you. Identity development is a process of exploration and commitment.

### Multiple Social Identities

This is a good time to think back to your adolescence – your middle and high school years. And think about the hats you wore, the social identities others recognized in you. We all have many dimensions that identify us.

Identity is multidimensional, and the adolescent population is increasingly diverse. Beliefs about how individual ethnic and racial background relates to each person’s self-definition is very personal. This is more complex for immigrant youth, negotiating their own culture with the culture in a new country.

Research shows that young people with cross-racial friendships do better with differences, social and emotional competence and wellness.

Adolescence may be a prime time to expose youth to differences, a time for transforming social cognition.

### Sense of Self

A sense of self is linked to self-esteem, goal setting and emotional well-being.

### The New Digital World

Adolescents are leaders in adapting to the new digital world. Recent reports indicate that close to 90% of adolescents have access to smart phones. Now, driven by the pandemic, it may have reached 100%.

And they are spending a lot of time online. According to Commonsense Media:

* The average 8- to 12-year-old American kid spent four hours and 44 minutes looking at screens each day in 2019
* American teens, ages 13 to 18, used entertainment screen media for an average of seven hours and 22 minutes each day in 2019

What are the implications for adolescent development?

The research about the impact of screen time and online engagement on mental health is still ambivalent. Youth with low social and emotional stability are more likely to experience negative impact. (Some researchers argue that the increasing suicide rate among adolescents has to do with the increased use of digital technology.)

Christine Carter in her new book discussed several areas of concern:

* **Connection** - Many teens report loneliness, exclusion and feeling pressured by comparing themselves to people online
* **Focus** – a decrease in deep learning, toxic overuse inhibits dopamine function which increases risk for depression and anxiety
* **Rest** - cognitive overload leads to sleep deprivation Adolescents require 9 hours of sleep; many youth do not get enough sleep. Lack of sleep in turn can lead to depression, anxiety and daily functioning problems.

## Questions?

That was a lot! I’m going to stop for a minute and take some questions. While we do that, here’s where to find the Positive Youth Development 101 manual on our website:

[<http://www.actforyouth.net/youth_development/professionals/manual.cfm>](http://www.actforyouth.net/youth_development/professionals/manual.cfm)

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