

RESEARCH FACTS and FINDINGS

A collaboration of Cornell University, University of Rochester,
and the New York State Center for School Safety

Best Practices for Youth Development Programs April 2003

While it is true that research in the field of Youth Development has lagged behind practice, a lot of good information is now available. In 2002, the National Research Council published *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, a comprehensive review of available data on community interventions and programs that promote adolescent health and development. Child Trends, with its *What Works in Youth Development* series, and the Forum for Youth Investment have both contributed relevant resources. Public/Private Ventures contributed to the knowledge base with *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges and Directions* (2000), a publication from the Youth Development Directions Project. The most evaluated area of the youth development field is that of programs for youth (Benson and Pittman, 2001; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Youth development is defined as the ongoing process in which young people meet their personal and social needs; building skills and competencies that allow them to be successful in their daily lives and grow to be happy, productive adults (Youth Development Team, Partners for Children, 2000). The key principles of youth development are best defined by the 5 C's: *Competence*

Despite its limitations, research in all settings in the lives of adolescents—families, schools, and communities—is yielding consistent evidence that there are specific features of settings that support positive youth development and that these features can be incorporated into community programs. These features include: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; integration of family, school, and community efforts.

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, National Research Council, 2002

(academic, social, and vocational); *Confidence* (positive self-concept); *Connections* (to community, family, peers); *Character* (positive values, integrity, and moral values); and *Contributions* (active, meaningful role in decision making; facilitating change) (Public/Private Ventures, 2000)

Several recent summaries of research on what works for youth programs has made the task of accessing these study findings more straightforward. In 1999, the American Youth Policy Forum published *More Things That Do Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices, Volume II*, its second volume of evaluations of youth programs and practices. *Growing Absolutely Fantastic Youth: A Re-*

view of the Research on “Best Practices,” was published in 2000 by the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health at the University of Minnesota. In 2001, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change published *Wanted: Solutions for America—What We Know Works*. There is converging evidence from these and other sources (Catalano, et. al. 1999; Resnick, et.al., 1997; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003) supporting the use of certain guidelines for effective youth development programs. These guidelines are also informed by research on youth participation in health compromising behaviors, and by resiliency research on risk and protective factors. (Dryfoos, 1990; Kirby, 2001). The guidelines that follow can be found in a variety of documents and represent recurring themes in the current youth development literature. The language may be different from one resource to the next, but the message is the same.

Relationships are key to adolescent well being; parent-child interactions and bonding greatly influence adolescents’ choices and attitudes; peer relationships—including positive ties among teens—are important; and siblings, teachers, and mentors can provide additional support to young people. Program developers and policy makers should view adolescents as whole people, not just as students, patients, or delinquents. They should also work to engage teens, target desired outcomes, start when adolescents are young, and ensure that programs are well-implemented.

Building a Better Teenager: A Summary of “What Works” in Adolescent Development, Child Trends, 2002

- **Comprehensive, long-term programs that involve all aspects of a young person’s life—home, school, and community** A comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that addresses the teens themselves, their families, peer groups, schools, neighborhood, community, society, and the media--allows for reinforcement of new skills and knowledge in several different contexts. Programs should work in meaningful partnerships with other community institutions, such as schools, and should continue over time to allow participants to complete important activities, as well as reinforce the program goals and objectives.
- **Strong relationships with parents/other adults** Involvement of parents and caregivers reinforce what youth are learning and create opportunities for family communication on teen issues. In addition to family support, youth also benefit from a one-on-one caring relationship with another adult who is warm, friendly, accepting, affirming, shows interest, and is also easily approachable and accessible.
- **New roles and responsibilities for youth** Youth should be offered diverse and quality experiences in order to gain and develop skills that directly relate to their future goals (including career objectives). Youth should be connected to resources that provide them with opportunities and support to help them reach these goals. These opportunities should encourage youth to play meaningful leadership roles and contribute their talents.
- **Attention to specific youth needs in a physically and psychologically safe environment** Effective programs and strategies are housed in a safe environment and are age specific, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive.
- **Highly qualified and diverse staff who are well trained and committed to the youth development philosophy** Staff should have sufficient training and experience to teach and lead.

Program goals promote positive development even when they also aim to prevent problem behavior; they help youth navigate adolescence in healthy ways and prepare for the future; and they recognize youths' need for ongoing support and challenging opportunities.

Leaders and staff promote a *program atmosphere* of hope within a physically and psychologically safe place. Adults convey their belief in youth as resources to be developed not problems to be managed. Supportive and knowledgeable adults empower youth to develop and build competencies; and there is a strong sense of membership, commitment and expectations for youth.

There are opportunities for youth to participate in formal and informal *program* activities to nurture interests, talents, and new skills. Activities allow for youth to receive group recognition; provide challenges and opportunities for active involvement; and provide direct or indirect links to education (but in a way different from school.)

Youth Development Programs: Risk, Prevention and Policy, Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003

They should believe in the program, be committed to the positive development of youth, and specifically the avoidance of “adultism” or presuming that youth are inferior to adults because of their lack of age and experience.

- **Opportunities for critical thinking and active, self-directed learning** This process involves youth gathering information from different sources and experiences, drawing their own meaning from it, and expressing the implications of what they have newly learned to themselves and others. New roles and responsibilities coupled with time for reflection can provide youth with these opportunities.
- **Programs that motivate and convey high expectations for youth** Youth benefit from programs that provide structure and predictability, that is, when there are clear rules and standards that are guided and monitored.
- **Teach specific skills using interactive teaching methods** The use of interactive teaching methods such as discussion groups personalizes the information and encourages youth engagement in setting their own developmental goals. Programs should provide models, as well as opportunities to practice communication, negotiation, and refusal skills.

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