



# Module 1: Positive Youth Development Fact Sheet

## **Research Overview**

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Positive youth development (PYD) is a strengths-based approach to studying and working with youth. Professionals who use PYD frameworks understand that youth are successful because of the presence of healthy behaviors as well as the absence of problematic behaviors (Benson et al., 2006). As such, the PYD approach promotes optimal youth development by fostering the skills, interests, attributes, and abilities of all youth. In general, systems theories argue that human development is dependent upon the bidirectional relationships between individuals and their changing environments (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, et al., 2011; Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011; Mueller et al., 2011; Tolan, Ross, Arkin, Godine, & Clark, 2016). Professionals who use a PYD approach recognize that youth are connected with multiple groups (e.g., religious, athletic, schools, and youth programs) within their communities and that these groups are most effective when they strengthen youth's existing support systems (e.g., family relationships) and bridge community-based efforts (e.g., align schools with community youth programs; Tamar-Mattis, Piha, & Adams, 2001).

PYD is based on the ecological and relational systems theories, which describe human development in two major parts: growth and development occur as individuals shape and change their environments at the same time as changes in the environments impact individuals. For example, youth who grow up in an environment where they are taught to engage in community service may become more involved in civic issues as adults. Youth who participate in community service during adolescence may positively impact their environment by making their neighborhoods safer, cleaner, and more welcoming.

Many youth who participate in PYD-focused programs and activities experience positive short-term outcomes such as increased academic achievement, improved peer and adult-youth relationships, and reductions in several risky behaviors (e.g., substance use and violence) (Bonell et al., 2016; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Mueller et al., 2011; Tebes et al., 2007). In addition, youth can experience positive long-term outcomes that include economic self-sufficiency, healthy social relationships, and greater community contributions as young adults (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Tamar-Mattis et al., 2001).

Youth programs provide unique opportunities for youth to engage in healthy behaviors and activities because they are based on PYD frameworks such as developing youth's assets (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011) and teaching knowledge and skills to youth to help them thrive (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011).

PYD frameworks identify specific assets, experiences, and skills important for healthy youth development. As a result, these frameworks provide guidance for professionals by identifying different areas for programming. For example, PYD frameworks help with the implementation of activities that may foster internal strengths or with the identification of ways the environment can be altered (e.g., improve relationships between youth and youth workers) to encourage positive outcomes.

## **Implications for Youth Programs**

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**In order to promote PYD in youth programs, the following strategies should be considered regarding program activities:**

- Provide youth with tasks that challenge them, promote learning, and increase self-efficacy
- Motivate youth with tasks that are developmentally- and culturally-relevant and interesting
- Offer tasks and projects that afford youth the opportunity to make a difference within the program or in their communities
- Deliver opportunities for autonomy and decision-making
- Assist youth in collaborative activities that promote inclusivity, empathy, and communication
- Present a wide range of opportunities to meet the needs of all youth
- Foster skills youth need for future success

**The following approaches may be useful for youth workers when promoting PYD in youth programs:**

- Create a welcoming, supportive, and accepting environment for all youth
- Build close relationships with youth as a foundation for providing support and belonging and fostering positive outcomes
- Assist youth in building connections between contexts (e.g., school, home, youth programs) and in transferring skills and competencies from one context to another
- Set clear expectations and program norms and ensure all youth are aware of these norms
- Carefully attend to youth and respond flexibly to their individual needs
- Display clear expectations for respect and valuing others' ideas and opinions both between youth and youth workers and among peers
- Empower youth by involving them in program decision-making and leadership (e.g., activity selection and planning, program expectations)
- Take a strength-based approach, viewing youth as valuable, knowledgeable community assets
- Guide youth-led activities to offer structure and promote progress (e.g., ask guiding questions, assist in setting achievable goals, manage conflict, reframe problems)

**Organizational practices that foster PYD in youth programs include the following:**

- Maintain low youth-to-staff ratios, allowing for individualization of opportunities and activities as well as time for relationship building between youth and youth workers
- Ensure the physical location of youth programs are safe, functional, and facilitate development
- Provide youth workers with safety training, including CPR and first aid
- Engage youth in ongoing training to build skills necessary for the facilitation of high-quality programs (e.g., relationship building, diversity and inclusion, communication)
- Recruit skilled youth workers and provide the resources and incentives to retain high-quality staff (e.g., salary and benefits, supervision, professional development, self-care)
- Continually assess program performance and use assessments to inform program planning

**For a complete discussion of this topic and a full list of references, see the topic paper by the same name.**



This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through grant/cooperative agreement Award No. 2009-48667-05833 with The University of Minnesota.