



# Module 1: Positive Youth Development Research Review

From middle childhood through adolescence, youth experience great physical and psychological growth. From being fully dependent on their parents in middle childhood to gaining autonomy and independence in adolescence, youth quickly learn to navigate their many environments, relationships, and experiences to form a positive and coherent identity. This transition to adulthood can prove quite challenging for some youth (Arnett, 2000) as their need for independence may influence their ability to make healthy decisions, resulting in many dangerous or risky behaviors (e.g., substance use, unprotected sexual activity and teenage pregnancy, delinquency; Dryfoos, 1990; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Moore, Manlove, Gleib, & Morrison, 1998). Often, families and communities together can help equip youth with the skills and resources required for healthy decision-making and, in turn, positive development. Therefore, youth programs, particularly those utilizing positive youth development approaches, are an important resource for offering such guidance and support for youth. The present paper will explore this idea, providing an overview of the field of positive youth development, defining the positive youth development approach, connecting it to important youth outcomes, and identifying its implications for youth programs and practitioners.

## **What is Positive Youth Development?**

As a field, positive youth development represents a strengths-based, holistic approach to studying and working with youth. Positive youth development researchers and practitioners believe that youth success requires not just the absence of problematic behavior but also the presence of healthy development (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen 2006; Damon, 2004; Tamar-Mattis, Piha, & Adams, 2001). Rather than intervening only when young people are “at risk” for engaging in problematic behaviors, positive youth development aims to promote optimal youth development by fostering the skills, interests, attributes, and abilities of all youth (Benson et al., 2006; Tolan, Ross, Arkin, Godine, & Clark, 2016). Furthermore, positive youth development recognizes that youth are inherently intertwined with their communities. As such, youth programs will be 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) by working collaboratively with families, schools, and communities to provide youth with positive experiences that promote healthy development (Tamar-Mattis et al., 2001).

In research and practice, the phrase “positive youth development” may specifically refer to one of three definitions: (1) a developmental process, (2) an approach to programming, or (3) a specific program or organization (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). As a developmental process, positive youth development refers to the interactions between youth’s skills, interests, and abilities and the environment that promotes a young person’s positive growth. As a programmatic approach, positive youth development involves designing, implementing, and evaluating programs that aim to promote the skills, abilities, and relationships that foster positive development. Finally, the term positive youth development may also be used in reference to specific programs (e.g., Positive Action, a school-based intervention) or organizations (e.g., 4-H, Big Brothers Big Sisters) that have adopted a philosophy and practice that fosters positive youth outcomes (Lerner, et al., 2011; Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011).

Throughout this document, the term “youth programs” represents any of these types of programs. These programs are referred to as after-school, out-of-school, or youth programs, and they serve diverse youth in a variety of ways. Within youth programs, youth program staff are the volunteers and paid staff who engage in youth development work through direct service or administration (Borden & Perkins, 2006). These individuals are referred to as youth development professionals, after-school providers, and youth leaders, and they work in a variety of settings providing a wide range of services. Within this document, the term “youth program staff” refers to all professionals working in youth programs.

### **How Did Positive Youth Development Become Common Practice?**

Youth programs were first popularized in the United States in the early 1900s. At that time, young people made up a majority of the American population. Consequently, early youth programs focused on supporting the values and addressing the concerns of youth and young adults. More specifically, many youth programs sought to foster healthy behaviors, prepare youth for marriage and parenthood, or create a sense of cultural and national pride all while developing youth’s personal skills and interests (e.g., leadership behaviors, cultural values, and personal development; Walker, Gambone, & Walker, 2011). The first after-school 4-H club, for example, was created in 1902 as “The Tomato Club” or “Corn Growing Club” and aimed to offer practical, hands-on experience and education regarding agricultural challenges and technology to youth living in rural communities (4-H, n.d.).

Beginning in the 1960s, the focus of youth programs shifted to the prevention of risky behaviors, addressing public concern over youth’s potential to engage in immoral and criminal activities. Youth programs during this time tended to focus on the prevention of a single problem behavior such as substance use or pregnancy (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Walker et al., 2011). This approach became known as the deficit perspective, as it focused on youth’s weaknesses rather than their strengths, intervening only to prevent negative, rather than promote positive, outcomes (Walker et al., 2011).

In the late 1980s, youth programs began to refocus their attention from preventing deviance and delinquency to fully preparing youth to be healthy, successful, and contributing members of society (now known as positive youth development). Instead of only working with youth, programs began to draw in the larger community as a means to strengthen youth’s support systems within their families, schools, and communities (Tamar-Mattis et al., 2001). Today, positive youth development has become a prominent approach to studying and fostering healthy youth development and has been adopted in several youth programs, schools, and community organizations across the United States.

### **Theoretical Foundations of Positive Youth Development**

Positive youth development is supported by many different theories, including ecological systems theory and developmental systems theory (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, et al., 2011). In general, systems theories argue that human development is dependent upon the bidirectional relationships between individuals and their changing environments (Lerner, Lerner, et al., 2005; Lerner, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, et al., 2011; Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011; Mueller et al., 2011; Tolan et al., 2016). That is, individuals shape and change their environments and environments do the same for individuals.

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) was the first to recognize the different ways healthy development and well-being of individuals are impacted by the interactions between individuals and their environments. More specifically, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory

identified five environmental systems that interact with individuals: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem consists of the relationships within a youth's immediate environment that influence development, including parents, siblings, teachers, and youth programs staff. The mesosystem consists of the different interrelations that take place between an individual's microsystems (e.g., parents and teachers, youth program staff and parents). The next system, the exosystem, represents formal and informal institutions and other settings that influence the individual indirectly, such as a parent's workplace (e.g., work hours), mass media, government (policies), and the neighborhood in which a youth lives. The macrosystem consists of the overarching patterns (e.g., laws, rules, resources, and customs) and values of a culture or subculture with which a youth identifies. Finally, the chronosystem includes a sense of time and transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides an understanding of the complex relationship between youth and their environments (Tamar-Mattis et al., 2001). Recent research is guided by developmental systems theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992), which emphasizes the mutually influential relationships between a developing individual and the multiple levels of their changing environments (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Vimont, 2012). Therefore, development is a process that does not solely occur within an individual but also within the different environments in which an individual exists. These relationships regulate the course and pace of development as well as the different developmental outcomes (positive or negative) one may experience throughout life (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, et al., 2011). In recent years, Lerner and colleagues (e.g., Lerner et al., 2014, 2017), in efforts to emphasize the mutually influential relations within developmental systems theory, have started referring to this as a relational development system theory or metatheory (Overton, 2015).

In summary, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and developmental systems theory offer a foundation for studying youth. Rather than viewing youth as developing in isolation from the social context in which they live, systems theories recognize that youth are a product of their environments. Consequently, positive youth development approaches attempt to pair youth with contexts (e.g., programs, mentoring relationships, peer relationships) that will facilitate positive growth and healthy development (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, et al., 2011) thereby encouraging adaptive development.

### **Positive Youth Development Frameworks**

Although the theories above provide a useful foundation for understanding youth development, there are several frameworks that expand on these theories for application in youth programs. For this purpose, researchers have developed positive youth development frameworks that identify the many internal and environmental characteristics of youth and youth programs that support healthy development. Though these frameworks are many, two seminal frameworks were identified and are summarized in this review: Search Institute's Developmental Assets framework (e.g., Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011) and Lerner and colleagues' (2005) Five Cs model.

The Development Assets model, first proposed in 1990, identifies 40 personal and environmental assets important for healthy development (Benson et al., 2011; Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011; Tolan et al., 2016). This framework includes 20 internal assets within four larger categories: commitment to learning (e.g., achievement motivation), positive values (e.g., honesty), social competencies (e.g., cultural competence), and positive identity (e.g., self-esteem). The 20 external assets are also organized within four larger categories: support (e.g., caring neighborhood),

empowerment (e.g., safety), boundaries and expectations (e.g., adult role models), and constructive use of time (e.g., youth programs; see <http://www.search-institute.org> for the full list of assets). These assets are cumulative, such that more assets result in more positive outcomes. That is, a youth with 25 assets will likely experience more positive outcomes (e.g., thriving, high academic achievement) than a youth with five assets. Overall, this model has experienced great empirical support across genders, racial/ethnic groups, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic locations and has been implemented in several youth programs across the United States, including the Y (formerly YMCA), Boys and Girls Clubs, Girl Scouts, and The Salvation Army, among others (Benson et al., 2011).

The Five Cs model is yet another framework of positive youth development. This framework argues that the most important outcome of positive development is thriving, which is defined using the Five Cs: competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection. Competence refers to youth's ability to navigate the many contexts in which they live (e.g., school, home), and confidence involves youth's beliefs in their ability to overcome setbacks and have a positive impact on their world. The third C, character, is defined by youth's tendencies to act in socially appropriate and positive ways, even when they are alone. Youth who thrive must also demonstrate caring, which requires youth to express empathy and sympathy for others and have genuine interest in others' well-being. Finally, connection, the fifth C, includes forming positive, healthy, and lasting relationships with members of a community. Ultimately, the Five Cs model argues that improvements in the Five Cs (thriving) result in several positive, long-term outcomes such as decreased problem behaviors (e.g., substance use) and increased contributions to the self, family, community, and civil society (also known as the sixth "C;" Geldhof et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2005; Tolan et al., 2016).

Positive youth development frameworks identify specific assets, experiences, and skills important for healthy youth development. These models provide guidance for practitioners by identifying different focuses for programming, such as implementing activities that may foster certain internal attributes or identifying ways the environment can be altered (e.g., improving relationships between youth and youth program staff) to encourage positive outcomes. In 2002, the National Research Council, guided by developmental theories and empirical research, released a comprehensive list of eight program features necessary for effective youth programs: (1) physical and psychological safety; (2) supportive relationships; (3) opportunities to belong; (4) positive social norms; (5) appropriate structure; (6) support for efficacy and mattering; (7) opportunities for skill building; and (8) integration of family, school, and community efforts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). These eight features continue to be some of the most cited references within youth development literature and continue to be used as benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of youth programs (Deutsch, Blyth, Kelley, Tolan, & Lerner, 2017). Consequently, the eight essential features listed above will be examined in more depth in the following topic papers.

### **Implications for Youth Programs**

What does this all mean? The positive youth development approach is a useful tool for promoting optimal youth development and well-being. Youth program managers and staff should use the positive youth development approach to guide the structure and interactions of their programs.

Structurally, positive youth development programs should be designed to foster healthy youth development. In practice, this may include ensuring the programs encourage positive (e.g., academic success) and discourage negative (e.g., substance use) outcomes while building on youth's individual skills. Youth programs should be structured such that all activities are challenging, interesting, and

relatable for participants (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). The implementation of engaging activities provides a means of aligning youth skills and interests with their larger environment (thereby maximizing their potential for positive development).

Positive youth development research should also inform the interactions between youth program staff and the participants. This influence should be seen in support of the program structure and in the programs and activities. For instance, the positive youth development approach recognizes that youth do not live in a vacuum but are inherently connected to the many contexts in which they live. Youth program staff can use this knowledge to build connections between different community organizations and participants as a means to provide consistent and supportive messages across youth's many contexts (e.g., at home, in school, in youth programs; Benson et al., 2006; Geldhof et al., 2015; Tamar-Mattis et al., 2001).

Overall, youth program staff should be mindful of the needs, interests, and skills of the youth they serve as well as the nature of the environment in which they work if they are to promote positive youth development.

### **Conclusions**

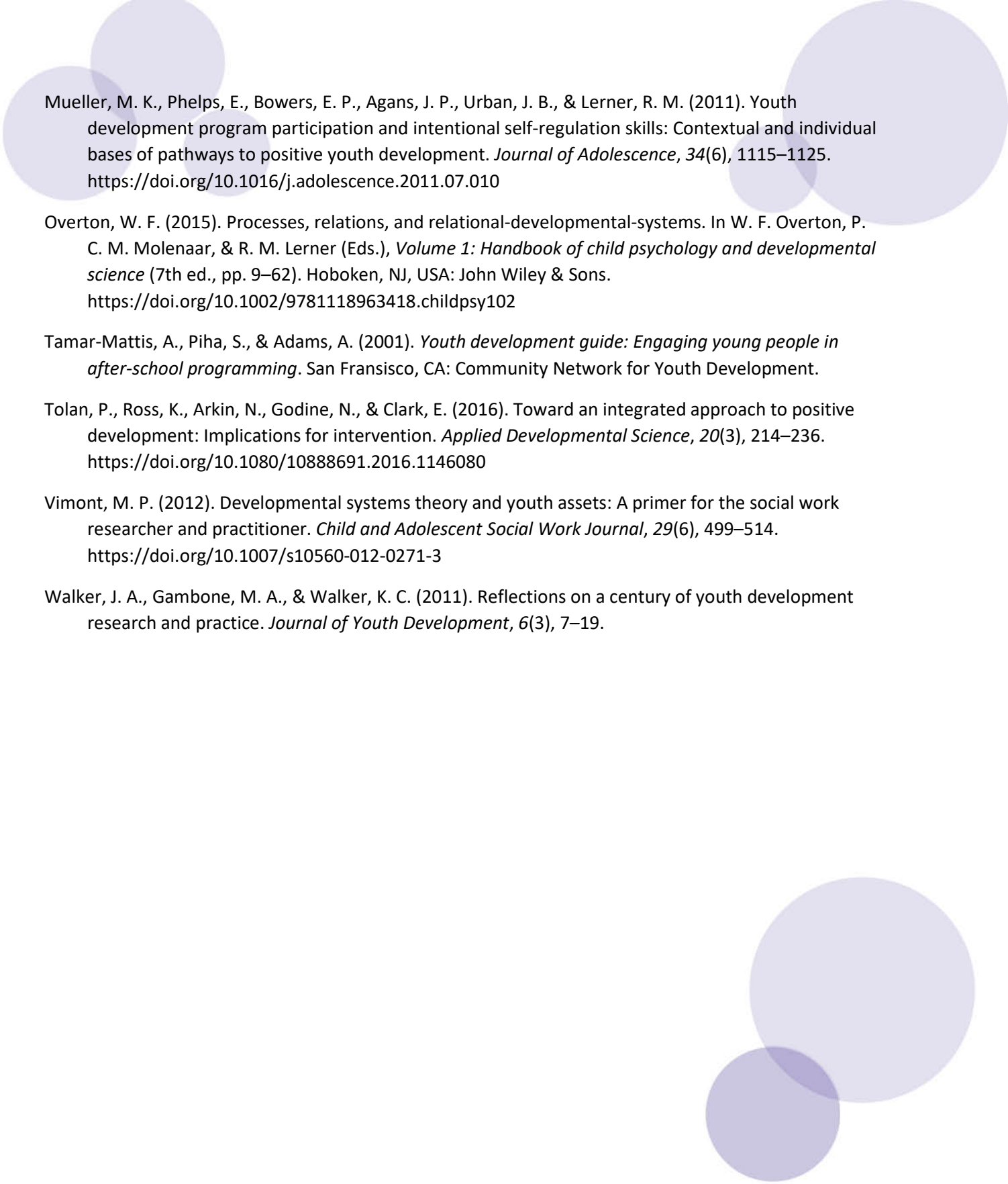
The positive youth development approach aims to promote healthy development rather than intervene only when youth are at risk for or engaging in problematic behaviors. Instead of solely focusing on youth's personal skills and abilities as a means to foster optimal development, the positive youth development approach recognizes the complex nature of development, accounting for the inherent connection between youth and the contexts and communities in which they live and thrive.

Positive youth development guides the creation and maintenance of youth programs, identifying important youth outcomes and emphasizing the importance of focusing on both individual skills and environmental characteristics that may promote these outcomes. The following topic papers will describe in greater detail the implications of positive youth development for youth programs, focusing on the eight essential characteristics of effective youth programs outlined by Eccles and Gootman (2002). In these papers, we will define the characteristic in detail, explain why it is important for positive youth development, and identify how practitioners can implement this characteristic in their programs. By understanding positive youth development and implementing the eight key characteristics into youth programs, we can encourage healthy development for all youth, producing youth that are fully prepared for the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood.

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## Appendix A

### Glossary of Terms

**Positive youth development:** a strengths-based, holistic approach to studying and working with youth that focuses on promoting healthy development. Positive youth development research and practice tends to emphasize environmental rather than internal influences on development, altering systems that may foster positive and healthy youth development. In research and practice, the term “positive youth development” may refer to a developmental process, an approach to youth programming, or a specific program or organization.

**Youth programs:** programs that foster youth’s personal development (e.g., social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies), participation, and empowerment while fostering relationships between supportive adults and young people. Youth programs are diverse in their structure, goals, and the youth they serve. These programs may be referred to as after-school, out-of-school, and/or youth programs; throughout this report the term “youth program” refers to any of these programs.

**Youth Program Staff:** volunteers and paid staff, including administrators and individuals engaged in direct service, who engage in youth development work in a variety of settings and programs outside the regular school day. Similar terms include youth development professionals, after-school providers, and youth leaders. For the purpose of this paper, the term “youth program staff” will be used to describe all professionals who work in youth programs.



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