



# Module 9: Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts Research Review

It takes a village to raise a child. The proverb sends a clear message that the whole community plays a significant role in youth development. There are several important environments in youth's lives. Family, for example, is one of the most essential environments, and it has the most profound influence on children's and adolescents' development. However, family alone is not enough to ensure positive youth development, and it cannot fully protect youth from risks (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Other settings that may influence youth include school, community, peer groups, religious groups, hospitals, media, and policies affecting families, youth, and parents' work (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Among these settings, family, school, and community are most closely related to youth development, and they should not be viewed separately but as a whole (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In fact, meaningful communication and effective collaboration between family, school, and community can greatly facilitate positive development of youth (Nitzberg, 2005; Patrikakou, 2016; Ward & Parker, 2013). Youth programs play an important role in integrating family, school, and community efforts because they usually have close connections with all three settings. Therefore, youth programs may serve as catalysts for bringing different settings together (Jeynes, 2012; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

## **What is Family, School, and Community Integration?**

Family, school, and community integration represents the relationships and collaborations between family members, school personnel, and staff of community-based organizations such as libraries, universities, religious groups, and social service agencies (Bryan & Henry, 2012). The parties work together to plan, advocate, and implement activities with the mutual goal of building youth's strength and resilience and improving youth's physical, emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2012). Due to a lack of resources, skills, or capacities, it is sometimes difficult for a single party to achieve the best results on its own; therefore, collaborations between different settings provide greater resources and maximize positive outcomes (Griffin & Steen, 2010; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Furthermore, integration of family, school, and community efforts supports youth in a holistic manner by attending to their various needs across several domains (Kolodny, 2001).

It is difficult to classify the wide and various formats of activities that fall under the concept of family, school, and community integration (Bryan & Henry, 2012). In fact, integration of family, school, and community efforts can manifest in different ways. For example, parents may volunteer at family-friendly events in the community, teachers may work with parents on school councils, and community mental health organizations may set up information booths at school fairs (Kolodny, 2001). Ideally, the collaborations are not superficial but deeply grounded in shared goals, principles, and values, and they should potentially benefit every party that participates.

## **Theoretical Foundations of Family, School, and Community Integration**

The theoretical foundations of family, school, and community integration are evident in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000). Ecological systems theory illustrates how communication and synergy between contexts play a vital role in youth development, and social capital theory explains why integrating family, school, and community efforts can maximize social resources available to youth.

## **Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that the healthy development of children is determined not only by settings that directly impact the child (e.g., family, school, community), but also by the interactions between different settings and with the broader society (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The theory proposed five nested environmental systems that influence child development. The microsystem refers to settings that have an immediate impact on children's lives such as family, school, peers, neighborhood, and religious groups. The mesosystem is made up of the interactions between microsystems (e.g., the relationship between parents and teachers). The exosystem consists of events or settings that indirectly affect children such as parents' workplaces and social networks. The macrosystem is defined as an overarching pattern of social norms, values, and identity common to a particular culture. Lastly, the chronosystem consists of life transitions and environmental changes over time such as school entry, a death in the family, and changes in education policy. Youth live and interact simultaneously within multiple environments, and their development is shaped by each system (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Among these systems, the mesosystem includes the interaction of important environments in youth's lives, and exemplifies the concept of family, school, and community integration (Patrikakou, 2016). The stronger the links between settings, the better development outcomes youth can potentially achieve; therefore, partnerships between family members, school teachers, and community staff (components of the mesosystem) are vital for positive youth development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Patrikakou, 2016).

## **Social Capital Theory**

Social capital describes the resources that are available to people due to positive social relationships and strong social connections within and between groups or organizations (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000). For example, supports from family members, teachers, peers, and community members are all considered important social capital for youth. It is believed that social resources are just as important as physical resources (e.g., food, shelter) for positive youth development, and acquisition of social capital is associated with good academic, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes (Ballard & Syme, 2016; Ferguson, 2006). There are two distinct components of social capital: association and trust. Association refers to people's bonding in a social context, and trust describes the reciprocal beliefs and positive emotions shared between people (Mellin, Belknap, Brodie, & Sholes, 2015; Paxton, 1999). Therefore, collaboration among family, school, and community is a great way to increase social capital for youth because it encourages the sharing of resources and addresses youth's interrelated needs across family, school, and community systems while also promoting associations and trust in the community (Mellin et al., 2015).

## **Benefits of Integrating Family, School, and Community Efforts**

Extensive research demonstrated the importance of integration between settings and environments for positive youth development (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Nitzberg, 2005; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). This section will first look at the benefits of family, school, and community integration on youth outcomes. Then, it will connect the concept of integration with the other seven features of daily settings that are important for youth development (i.e., physical and psychological safety, appropriate

structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, and opportunities for skill building) and discuss how family, school, and community integration may facilitate these settings to meet the various needs of youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

### **Youth Outcomes**

Fostering family, school, and community partnership is a great way to increase the social capital and developmental resources from which youth can draw. The more support youth have, the greater the opportunities for positive outcomes (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Nitzberg, 2005; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Parental involvement in youth's education can predict higher academic performance, reduce school dropout rates, and improve emotional functioning of youth because parents who are more involved with education have higher expectations of academic achievement for their children and are more likely to discuss the values of education and future plans with their children (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Wilder, 2014). Moreover, parental involvement may provide youth with a sense of love and caring, which is beneficial for youth's mental health and well-being (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Besides being involved in school, parents can also facilitate positive youth development by being involved in the community such as through coaching community-based youth sports or volunteering at community institutions. Youth whose parents are actively involved in the community show good academic performance and healthy peer relationships because they feel connected with their parents and a sense of belonging with the community, thereby improving their social capital (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Warner, Dixon, & Leierer, 2015). Finally, positive youth outcomes can also be achieved through collaborations between schools and communities. For instance, mental health practitioners who serve youth may consult with teachers and other school staff to design and implement treatment plans that are most suitable for youth (Clemens, 2007). Moreover, youth's academic and social-emotional needs can be best achieved through partnership between schools and communities (Van Roekel, 2008; Wilczenski & Cook, 2014). Service learning (e.g., science students collect and analyze river water samples and send them to a local pollution control agency), for example, is a great way to increase youth's civic engagement and promote youth's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Warren, 2012). Altogether, family, school, and community integration are important for positive youth development.

### **The Other Features of Positive Developmental Settings – Taken Together**

Eccles and Gootman (2002) proposed eight essential characteristics of positive youth developmental settings: (1) physical and psychological safety; (2) appropriate structure; (3) supportive relationships; (4) opportunities to belong; (5) positive social norms; (6) support for efficacy and mattering; (7) opportunities for skill building; and (8) integration of family, school, and community efforts. The purpose of the following paragraph is to connect the eight components and examine how the integration of family, school, and community will facilitate a positive youth developmental setting with each feature of youth programs.

First, physical and psychological safety are the basis of positive youth development, and family, school, and community collaborations could be an asset that contributes to both the physical (e.g., voluntary safety patrols by parents in the community) and psychological (e.g., frequent communications between parents and teachers about how to prevent verbal bullying at school) safety of youth. With regard to appropriate structures and supervision, family, school, and community integration will not

only allow for more input of opinions about how the youth development settings are structured but can also impact the amount of structure a youth setting provides by involving adult volunteers. The more adults who are involved to supervise and direct activities, the more structured the program is likely to be (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012). In addition, supportive relationships are vital for youth, and building a non-parental supportive relationship with teachers, coaches, youth workers, and community members can be highly beneficial for youth's social and emotional development (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). In terms of opportunities to belong, school involvement (e.g., participating in club activities at school), community involvement (e.g., volunteering), and the connection between family, school, and community can improve youth's civic engagement and foster a sense of belonging in school and community (Kim, Jang, & Johnson, 2016; Nitzberg, 2005). For youth to engage in positive social norms, it is important for families, schools, and communities to reach agreements and send consistent messages to youth on expectations, values, and healthy behaviors. This way, youth will receive consistent messages about acceptable and adaptive behaviors; more importantly, youth are likely to conform to social norms that are widely accepted, especially by their peers at school and in the community (Beckmeyer & Weybright, 2016). Furthermore, providing youth with the opportunity to engage in school and community reform projects that they care about can foster youth's efficacy and mattering and may potentially make a positive impact on the community (e.g., youth taking and sharing photos of community problems to initiate discussion; Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2008). Finally, integrating family, school, and community efforts will promote youth skill building. Research indicates that when parents, teachers, and community members work together to support learning, youth tend to achieve better academic scores, enroll in higher level school programs, and learn social and emotional skills from people around them (Durlak et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2012; Van Roekel, 2008). Altogether, evidence strongly suggests that family, school, and community integration can facilitate a positive youth developmental setting to meet the various needs of youth.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Several methodological issues need to be considered when examining the literature on family, school, and community integration. First, measurement of family, school, and community integration is usually not well developed or defined. For example, it is difficult to evaluate the extent of collaborations among communities or to examine the level of school-community partnership (Durlak et al., 2007). Without appropriately measuring the level of integration, it is hard to document the impact of mesosystemic change on youth development as well as on the community. Second, there has been limited theoretical and empirical research about integration across community programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hawkins, Catalano, & Kuklinski, 2014). Considering the importance of combining social resources, more research is clearly needed in this area (Smith, Faulk, & Sizer, 2016). Finally, although research has examined the benefits of family, school, and community integration, few studies have collected longitudinal data on this matter (Durlak et al., 2007). Therefore, future research is needed to investigate the long-term effect of family-school-community partnership on positive youth development.

### **Implications for Youth Programs**

Since youth programs are usually imbedded in the context of a larger community and have close connections with various systems (families, schools, religious organizations, etc.), they can serve as

catalysts for bringing parents, teachers, community members and youth together to promote positive youth development and address issues relevant to the whole community (Jeynes, 2012; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). The following implications can inform how youth programs may explore ways to initiate the integration of family, school, and community.


First, youth programs need to identify key stakeholders (e.g., youth, families, schools, community institutions) and gather information regarding each party's interests and needs (Epstein, 2010; Jehl, Blank, & McCloud, 2001). For example, youth programs could discuss youth's developmental progress with parents and schools, and they could hold events that bring all parties together to make decisions on how to improve youth outcomes. This approach would provide an opportunity for important environments of youth's lives to hear each other's voices, reach synergy on their goals, and collaborate to improve youth's well-being.

Second, youth programs could build partnerships with key youth settings and invite all parties to engage (Jehl et al., 2001). Considering youth programs' close connections with each setting, it is sometimes most convenient for a program to spell out the goals and terms of collaboration such as each party's responsibilities and timelines. It is also important for youth programs to reach out to potential partners with specific offers of assistance (Jehl et al., 2001). Once the partnerships are built, youth programs need to engage each party as much as possible. For instance, one great way to engage families and communities is to involve parents and community members as volunteers within the programs (Warner et al., 2015). Another way to engage various partners is to bring them in to help plan, coordinate, and implement events or activities. In order to do so, youth programs should create a welcoming atmosphere for all parties.

Third, youth programs could provide information on additional resources for youth such as different kinds of programs, school clubs, summer camps, and recreational and educational community events. Youth programs could serve as information centers that not only connect various settings and collect useful information for youth but also disseminate the information and provide youth with the best opportunities to participate and learn.

Fourth, it is important to train youth workers to ensure that they have the skills and tools necessary to facilitate family, school, and community integration. Youth workers should have knowledge about important environments in youth's lives, as well as resources for positive youth development, and they should be skilled in working with not only youth but also families, schools, and community agencies. Importantly, youth workers should be aware of the cultural diversity of the community, be sensitive to families' cultural values, and provide opportunities for all families to be involved (Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Vest Ettekal, & Okamoto, 2017). For example, it is a good idea to capitalize on community resources that are culturally diverse (e.g., museums that specialize in cultures of diverse groups such as Latino, African, or Asian).

Lastly, it is sometimes difficult to coordinate family, school, and community activities; therefore, youth programs need to manage challenges as they arise and change approaches when needed (Jehl et al., 2001). For instance, in order to promote communication between parents and youth workers, youth programs should make every effort to accommodate parents' work schedules. The communication methods should also be flexible, including phone calls, text messages, emails, and face-to-face



conversations. Furthermore, youth programs may build out from success by sharing positive outcomes with stakeholders and encouraging continued efforts (Jehl et al., 2001).

### **Conclusions**

Overall, the integration of family, school, and community efforts is very important for youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Theoretically, the optimal development of youth is determined not only by individual settings such as family, school, and community but also by the collaborations between these settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Moreover, youth's social capital may be increased by incorporating resources from various settings (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000). Integration of family, school, and community efforts is essential because it can benefit youth development in several ways. For example, parental involvement in youth's education can predict higher academic performance and improve emotional functioning of youth (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Wilder, 2014). In addition, the integration of family, school, and community efforts can also facilitate positive youth developmental programs' abilities to meet the various needs of youth (e.g., providing physical and psychological safety and cultivating supportive relationships). In order to initiate family, school, and community integration, youth programs need to identify key stakeholders in youth's lives, understand each party's needs, build partnership with these settings so that every party is engaged, provide information on additional resources to youth, and train youth workers to ensure that they are skilled in collaboration and cultural sensitivity (Jehl et al., 2001). In summary, policy makers, youth workers, and researchers should attend closely to the opportunities to increase family, school, and community integration, and youth programs may serve as catalysts for bringing parents, teachers, community members, and youth together to promote positive youth development.

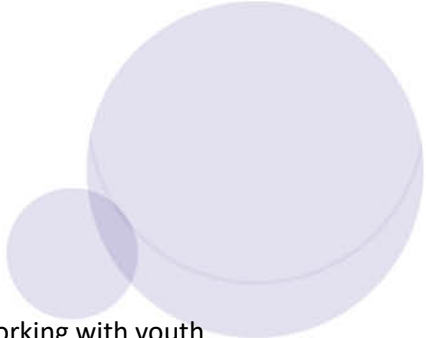
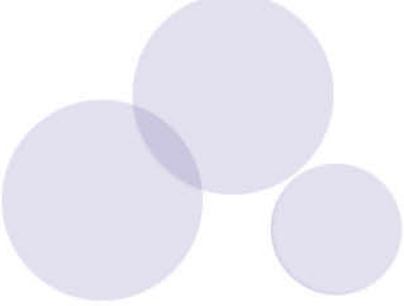
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## Appendix A

### 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 workers:** 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 worker" will be used to describe all professionals who work in youth programs.



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