Positive Youth Development:

A Selected Bibliography

The Evidence Base for:

Strengths-Based Intervention with Youth People
Positive Youth Development


Theory and research suggest that structured, out-of-school-time activities, and in particular youth development programs aimed at promoting positive youth development (PYD), are key developmental assets for such development. Using longitudinal data from 945 fifth and sixth graders participating in the 4-H Study of PYD, initial descriptive information is presented about early adolescent participation in youth programs having or not having PYD goals. Within each grade, early adolescents participated in multiple programs (overall mean for Grades 5 and 6 are 3.8 and 2.9, respectively). In Grades 5 and 6, 44.1% and 35.8% of youth, respectively, participated in PYD-related programs, but typically in combination with other program types. Researchers and practitioners should consider implications for healthy early adolescent development of participation in multiple programs, only some of which seek to promote PYD.


The body of knowledge related to positive youth development has grown in the last two decades, yet there have been few, if any, systematic investigations of the research base in the field. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to identify the trends in research topics and approaches within the field of positive youth development over the last 10 years by examining five top-tier research journals plus one research-to-practice journal. Results revealed that only 19% of the manuscripts published in all of the selected journals had a positive youth development focus, and this was reduced to 13% when just the five top-tier research journals were considered. Analyses of the positive youth development manuscripts pertaining to population characteristics, methodology, research setting, and topical areas provide a snapshot of the trends and gaps in the body of knowledge related to youth development, and have implications for future research efforts in the field.


This chapter describes positive youth development (PYD) as an emerging arena of applied developmental science. We show how PYD is both rooted in the theoretical traditions of developmental psychology, and fueled by newer emphases on nurturing the potentialities of youth more than addressing their supposed deficits, and on addressing and helping to shape the roles of developmental contexts, especially that of the community, and youth themselves as agents of their own development. We begin with an historical overview and a presentation on major conceptual frameworks, including the framework of developmental assets, which have significantly influenced PYD theory, research, and programs. The following section of the chapter poses seven broad hypotheses that represent the scientific foundation of PYD (e.g., contexts can be intentionally altered to enhance developmental success and changes in the context change the person), and reviews a wide array of studies that lends support to the hypotheses. After demonstrating the general utility of these hypotheses for understanding and promoting positive development in all youth, we review research that illustrates differences in developmental paths and outcomes across youth diversity in gender, age, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The chapter ends by suggesting those areas of youth development
knowledge where the field is relatively strong (e.g., taxonomies of factors that are correlated with positive outcomes), and those areas where significantly more research is needed (e.g., theories of change that articulate how youth, adults, and community systems move toward greater developmental attentiveness). We conclude by posing a number of theoretical questions, research challenges, and applied needs to be addressed if the promise of PYD as both a scientific and applied field is to be fully realized.


The framework of developmental assets posits a theoretically-based and research-grounded set of opportunities, experiences, and supports that are related to promoting school success, reducing risk behaviors, and increasing socially-valued outcomes including prosocial behavior, leadership, and resilience. A considerable body of literature on developmental assets has emerged in the last two decades, informing research and practice in education, social work, youth development, counseling, prevention, and community psychology. In addition to synthesizing this literature, this chapter discusses: the recent development of the Developmental Asset Profile, an instrument designed, in part, to assess change-over-time; the utilization of asset measures in international research; the expansion of the assets framework to early childhood and young adults; and new research using latent class analysis (LCA) to identify classes or subgroups of youth.


The understanding of positive development across adolescence rests on having a valid and equivalent measure of this construct across the breadth of this period of life. Does the Positive Youth Development (PYD) construct based on the Five Cs model have satisfactory psychometric properties for such longitudinal measurement invariance? Using longitudinal data derived from the 4-H Study of PYD, we assessed 920 youth (61.6% female) from a racially and ethnically diverse sample (67.3% European American) who participated in three waves (Grades 8–10) of data collection. Building on prior findings that the Five Cs (i.e., Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring) model of PYD was a robust measure that could be assessed comparably during early adolescence, we tested a hierarchy of second-order confirmatory factor analysis models to assess the extent to which PYD can be measured equivalently across middle adolescence. Evidence was found for strict measurement invariance across three measurement occasions, including equivalence of first-order and second-order factor loadings, equality of intercepts of observed variables, and equality of item uniqueness and disturbances of the first-order factors. These results suggest that PYD can be measured in the same way across measurement occasions, a prerequisite for the study of development. Implications for research and application of being able to measure PYD equivalently across adolescence are discussed.


This article summarizes a much lengthier one that appeared in Prevention and Treatment. The earlier article grew out of a project initiated by the Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. The Positive Youth Development Evaluation project described why policy makers, practitioners, and prevention scientists
advocated a shift in approach for how youth issues are addressed in this country. The Positive Youth Development Evaluation project sought to define how youth development programs have been defined in the literature and then to locate, through a structured search, strong evaluations of these programs and summarize the outcomes of these evaluations. In the current article, we explain why prevention has shifted from a single problem focus to a focus on factors that affect both positive and problem youth development, describe what is meant by positive youth development, and summarize what we know about the effectiveness of positive youth development programs.


Purpose: To examine the convergence in the critiques and recommendations for the future of programs to promote healthy development and prevent problem behaviors among children and adolescents. Methods: A review of literature captures two streams of thought, those promoting positive youth development approaches to youth programming and those promoting prevention science approaches to youth programming. Results: Results suggest that advocates of positive youth development and prevention science have similar critiques of single-problem-focused prevention programs in the 1980s and early 1990s, and have similar recommendations for the future of youth programming. Further, review of data on youth development suggests that it is important to focus on risk and protection in preventing adolescent problems as well as in promoting positive youth development. Conclusions: These results suggest that both youth development and prevention science approaches have grown from similar roots and make similar recommendations for the future of youth programming. Further, data on precursors suggest that focusing on promoting protection and reducing risk is likely to prevent problems and promote positive youth development. Yet advocates of these approaches often are at odds, suggesting that the approaches provide different paradigmatic approaches to youth programming. We conclude that cooperation between these two approaches would further progress in the field of youth programming.


A review of efforts at social system change in 526 universal competence-promotion outcome studies indicated that 64% of the interventions attempted some type of microsystemic or mesosystemic change involving schools, families, or community-based organizations in an attempt to foster developmental competencies in children and adolescents. Only 24% of the reports provided quantitative data on the change that occurred in targeted systems. However, studies containing the necessary information produced several mean effect sizes that were statistically significant, and ranged from modest to large in magnitude. These data indicate that attempts to change social systems affecting children and adolescents can be successful. Future work should measure more thoroughly the extent to which the systemic changes that are targeted through intervention are achieved, and investigate how such changes contribute to the development and sustainability of the outcomes that might be demonstrated by participants of competence-promotion programs.


This report is the product of a 2-year project during which the Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, a 15-member panel, evaluated and integrated the current science on
adolescent health and development with research and findings regarding program design, implementation, and evaluation of community programs for youth. It highlights essential elements of adolescent well-being and healthy development, offering recommendations for policy, practice, and research. It also discusses features of programs that can contribute to successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. Ten chapters include the following: (1) "Setting the Stage" (e.g., committee charge and U.S. youth); (2) "Adolescent Development"; (3) "Personal and Social Assets that Promote Well-Being" (e.g., how to measure wellbeing and theoretical perspectives); (4) "Features of Positive Developmental Settings"; (5) "The Landscape of Community Programs for Youth" (e.g., insights from nonexperimental schools and features of community programs); (6) "Lessons from Experimental Evaluations" (e.g., reviews and meta-analyses of evaluations and three model program evaluations); (7) "Generating New Information" (evaluating community youth programs and questions asked in comprehensive evaluations); (8) "Data and Technical Assistance Resources" (e.g., uses of social indicator data and data sources); (9) "Funding and Support for Programs"; and (10) "Conclusions and Recommendations." Four appendixes include fundamental principles of human development, theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing positive developmental processes, biographical sketches, and related reports from the National Archives.


Objective: To explore relationships among problem and positive youth behaviors, commonalities among their predictors, and implications for prevention. Methods: Review etiology and prevention literatures. Results: Risky/unhealthy/antisocial behaviors, poor mental health, and poor academic achievement are highly prevalent and pose critical dilemmas for parents and educators. All behaviors are highly correlated with, and predict, each other; have many of the same risk and protective factors; and strongly influence success and happiness in life. Some examples of comprehensive programs with positive results in multiple domains are provided. Conclusion: We need to prevent problem behaviors and promote positive behaviors with comprehensive, coherent, and integrated approaches.


Concern about the growth in adolescent problem behaviours (e.g. delinquency, drug use) has led to increased interest in positive youth development, and a surge in funding for ‘after school programs.’ We evaluate the potential of youth sport programs to foster positive development, while decreasing the risk of problem behaviours. Literature on the positive and negative outcomes of youth sport is presented. We propose that youth sport programs actively work to assure positive outcomes through developmentally appropriate designs and supportive child–adult (parent/coach) relationships. We also highlight the importance of sport programs built on developmental assets (Benson, 1997) and appropriate setting features (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002) in bringing about the five ‘C’s of positive development (competence, confidence, character, connections, and compassion/caring: Lerner et al., 2000). An applied sport-programming model, which highlights the important roles of policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches and parents in fostering positive youth development is presented as a starting point for further applied and theoretical research.

Purpose: Positive youth development (PYD) may be a promising strategy for promoting adolescent health. A systematic review of the published data was conducted to identify and describe PYD programs that improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Methods: Eight databases were searched for articles about PYD programs published between 1985 and 2007. Programs included met the following criteria: fostered at least one of 12 PYD goals in multiple socialization domains (i.e., family, school, community) or addressed two or more goals in at least one socialization domain; allocated at least half of the program activities to promoting general PYD outcomes (as compared with a focus on direct sexual health content); included youth younger than 20 years old; and used an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation design. Results: Thirty programs met the inclusion criteria, 15 of which had evidence of improving at least one adolescent sexual and reproductive health outcome. Program effects were moderate and well-sustained. Program goals addressed by approximately 50% or more of the effective programs included promoting prosocial bonding, cognitive competence, social competence, emotional competence, belief in the future, and self-determination. Effective programs were significantly more likely than those that did not have an impact to strengthen the school context and to deliver activities in a supportive atmosphere. Effective programs were also more likely to build skills, enhance bonding, strengthen the family, engage youth in real roles and activities, empower youth, communicate expectations, and be stable and relatively long-lasting, although these differences between effective and ineffective programs were not statistically significant. Conclusion: PYD programs can promote adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and tested, effective PYD programs should be part of a comprehensive approach to promoting adolescent health. However, more research is needed before a specific list of program characteristics can be viewed as a “recipe” for success.
benefit from research recommendations that are commonly made in the treatment and prevention literatures and (b) how prevention science can benefit by incorporating a positive youth development approach. Finally, we suggest that the current field of positive youth development is limited in that it focuses primarily on building strengths to reduce negative outcomes such as substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, and academic failure. An important and exciting goal for future programs is to foster an equally broad range of positive outcomes.


In this chapter, we present a brief review of the developmental literature linking healthy adjustment to five core competencies: (1) positive sense of self, (2) self-control, (3) decision-making skills, (4) a moral system of belief, and (5) prosocial connectedness. A central premise of this chapter and the rest of the volume is that promoting mastery of social and emotional core competencies provides a connection between positive youth development and risk prevention programming. In subsequent chapters, empirical evidence linking these core competencies with prevention of specific risk behaviors is reviewed, and examples of integrated promotion and prevention efforts in the United States and internationally are discussed.


While we have numerous research-based programs for youth aimed at curbing drug use, violence, suicide, teen pregnancy, and delinquency, we lack a rigorous principle-based psychology of positive youth development. Instead of focusing on fixing what is assumed to be missing or broken in at-risk youth, we need a psychology grounded in fundamental causal principles that reveal clearly how such children and adolescents can become self-motivated, socially competent, compassionate, and psychologically vigorous adults. While the emerging field of positive psychology has attempted to shift the field’s emphasis from understanding and treating youthful dysfunction to facilitating well-being and resiliency in young people, it lacks a principle-based foundation and continues to mistakenly endorse external causes of positive affect and prosocial behavior. This paper offers a unique, principle-based psychology of positive youth development commonly known as health realization (HR). The underlying principles of HR are delineated, contemporary research that supports its major assumptions cited, and the results of applied HR research with at-risk youth in clinical, educational, and community empowerment settings described.


The youth development movement represents a broad trend toward promoting opportunity and resilience over preventing delinquency and failure. While the topic of youth leadership is clearly relevant to this movement, the connection between the two topics remains for the most part unexplored and undefined. With this chapter we examine the ways that youth leadership connects to the much broader context of the youth development movement.

This article describes positive youth development as a process in which young people's capacity for being motivated by challenge energizes their active engagement in development. The first part of the article discusses the conditions under which this motivation is activated and considers obstacles to its activation in daily life. The second part discusses ways in which caring adults, including mentors, can support this process of positive development. Several frameworks that provide models of how adults can provide needed structure and guidance while supporting youth's development as agents of their own growth are discussed.


This article analyzes the development of initiative as an exemplar of one of many learning experiences that should be studied as part of positive youth development. The capacity for initiative is essential for adults in our society and will become more important in the 21st century, yet adolescents have few opportunities to learn it. Their typical experiences during schoolwork and unstructured leisure do not reflect conditions for learning initiative. The context best suited to the development of initiative appears to be that of structured voluntary activities, such as sports, arts, and participation in organizations, in which youths experience the rare combination of intrinsic motivation in combination with deep attention. An incomplete body of outcome research suggests that such activities are associated with positive development, but the developmental processes involved are only beginning to be understood. One promising approach has recorded language use and has found that adolescents participating in effective organizations acquire a new operating language that appears to correspond to the development of initiative.


Using the tripartite conception of positive youth development (PYD) suggested by Hamilton (1999)—as a developmental process, a philosophy or approach to youth programming, and as instances of youth programs and organizations focused on fostering the healthy or positive development of youth—we review different theoretical models of the developmental process involved in PYD. In addition, we discuss the ideas for and the features of youth development programs aimed at promoting PYD and of the youth development programs seeking to enhance PYD among diverse youth. We note several conceptual and practical problems that must be addressed in order to advance the research, and applications pertinent to PYD.


The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical and empirical foundations of a relatively recently emerged conception of youth. Termed the “positive youth development” (PYD) perspective, the orientation to young people has arisen because of interest among developmental scientists in using developmental systems, or dynamic, models of human behavior and development for understanding the plasticity of human development and, as well, the importance of relations between individuals and their realworld ecological settings as the bases of variation in the course of human development. The PYD perspective has arisen as well through the development and, in some cases, the evaluation of interventions designed and delivered within community-based, youth serving programs that have worked to counter what have been seen as steady states across the past five to six decades of substantial incidences of risk behaviors among adolescents. Accordingly, this chapter presents the conceptual foundations of the PYD perspective by reviewing the history of theories about adolescent
development and by specifying the key theoretical ideas defining the PYD perspective. In turn, I will discuss the burgeoning empirical work being done to define the bases and features of the positive development of diverse youth. I will consider the implications of extant research both for future scholarship and for applications of developmental science aimed at improving the life chances of adolescents through the provision of policies and programs predicated on the use of a positive development perspective for understanding and enhancing the lives of adolescents.


Adolescents are not resilient. Resilience is also not a functional feature of the ecology of adolescent development (e.g., as may be represented by the concept of “protective factors”). Rather, resilience is a concept denoting that the relationship between an adolescent and his or her ecology has adaptive significance. That is, the relationship involves a fit between characteristics of an individual youth and features of his or her ecology that reflects either adjustment (change) in the face of altered or new environmental threats, challenges, or “processes,” or constancy or maintenance of appropriate or healthy functioning in the face of environmental variations in the resources needed for appropriate or healthy functioning. As such, the individual–context relationship summarized by the term “resilience” reflects individual well-being at a given point in time, and thriving across the adolescent period, in the face of features within the ecological context that challenge adaptation. In turn, this relationship also implies that, for the ecology or context, there are actions that could maintain or further the quality of its structure (e.g., the family, schools, or community programs for youth development) or its function in the service of supporting healthy adolescent behavior and development (e.g., parenting that reflects warmth and appropriate monitoring; low student–teacher ratios involving engaged students and high quality institutions; and access to competent, caring, and committed mentors in out-of-school-time [OST] youth development programs, respectively).


The five Cs of positive youth development may be best thought of as clusters of individual attributes, for example, intellectual ability and social and behavioral skills (competence); positive bonds with people and institutions (connection); integrity, moral centeredness, and spirituality (character); positive selfregard, a sense of self-efficacy, and courage (confidence); and humane values, empathy, and a sense of social justice (caring/compassion) (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a). When these five sets of outcomes are developed, civil society is enhanced as a consequence of young people becoming adults morally and civically committed to providing the assets they received to succeeding generations. How does one develop and implement a youth policy? At least four interrelated sets of actions need to be taken: First, we need to articulate the principles that should guide our specification of the particular policies that will be derived from our vision of positive youth development and, more concretely, from our theoretical model; Second, we need to develop a set or sets of specific policies that may be derived from our model. Third, we need to devise strategies for translating our vision and specific policy ideas into effective actions.


The positive youth development (PYD) perspective is a strength-based conception of adolescence. Derived from developmental systems theory, the perspective stressed that PYD
emerges when the potential plasticity of human development is aligned with developmental assets. The research reported in this special issue, which is derived from collaborations among multiple university and community-based laboratories, reflects and extends past theory and research by documenting empirically (a) the usefulness of applying this strength-based view of adolescent development within diverse youth and communities; (b) the adequacy of conceptualizing PYD through Five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring); (c) the individual and ecological developmental assets associated with PYD; and (d) implications for community programs and social policies pertinent to youth.


Experiencing positive and healthy youth development may be particularly challenging in the face of abrupt, major, rapid, or nonnormative ecological changes. Aligning individual youth strengths and ecological assets may promote youth thriving in the face of these changes.


Theoretical issues pertinent to a dynamic, developmental systems understanding of positive youth development and the thriving process in such development are discussed. Thriving involves relative plasticity in human development and adaptive regulations of person-context relations. An integrated moral and civic identity and a commitment to society beyond the limits of one's own existence enable thriving youth to be agents both in their own, healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society. Thriving youth become generative adults through the progressive enhancement of behaviors that are valued in their specific culture and that reflect the universal structural value of contributing to civil society.


Thriving will more likely emerge when youth develop in such a policy and community action/program context (Benson, 2003; Lerner, et al., 2000; Pittman, et al., 2001; Roth, et al., 1998). In contemporary American society a competent, confident, connected, caring youth, who also possesses character, will have the moral orientation, the civic allegiance, and the behavioral skills to promote in his or herself (and when a parent, in his or her children), behaviors that “level the playing field” for all individuals. Committed -- behaviorally, morally, and spiritually-- to a better world beyond themselves, such youth will act to sustain for future generations a society marked by social justice, equity, and democracy and a world wherein all young people may thrive.


The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD), a longitudinal investigation of a diverse sample of 1,700 fifth graders and 1,117 of their parents, tests developmental contextual ideas linking PYD, youth contributions, and participation in community youth development (YD)


Experiencing positive and healthy youth development may be particularly challenging in the face of abrupt, major, rapid, or nonnormative ecological changes. Aligning individual youth strengths and ecological assets may promote youth thriving in the face of these changes.


Theoretical issues pertinent to a dynamic, developmental systems understanding of positive youth development and the thriving process in such development are discussed. Thriving involves relative plasticity in human development and adaptive regulations of person-context relations. An integrated moral and civic identity and a commitment to society beyond the limits of one's own existence enable thriving youth to be agents both in their own, healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society. Thriving youth become generative adults through the progressive enhancement of behaviors that are valued in their specific culture and that reflect the universal structural value of contributing to civil society.


Thriving will more likely emerge when youth develop in such a policy and community action/program context (Benson, 2003; Lerner, et al., 2000; Pittman, et al., 2001; Roth, et al., 1998). In contemporary American society a competent, confident, connected, caring youth, who also possesses character, will have the moral orientation, the civic allegiance, and the behavioral skills to promote in his or herself (and when a parent, in his or her children), behaviors that “level the playing field” for all individuals. Committed -- behaviorally, morally, and spiritually-- to a better world beyond themselves, such youth will act to sustain for future generations a society marked by social justice, equity, and democracy and a world wherein all young people may thrive.

programs, representing a key ecological asset. Using data from Wave 1 of the study, structural equation modeling procedures provided evidence for five first-order latent factors representing the “Five Cs” of PYD (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) and for their convergence on a second-order PYD latent construct. A theoretical construct, youth contribution, was also created and examined. Both PYD and YD program participation independently related to contribution. The importance of longitudinal analyses for extending the present results is discussed.


Developmental cascades are links across the life span among heterotypic (qualitatively distinct) variables associated with one or more levels of organization within the ecology of human development. Using data from the longitudinal, 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD), we illustrate a developmental systems theory predicated model of cascades in the relations between individuals and contexts that promote positive development among adolescents. Consistent with expectations about the bases of PYD and the role in such development on person and context, ecological resources associated with parenting are linked to individual self-regulatory behaviors that in turn impact PYD, which is then associated with youth community contributions. We discuss the limitations and future directions of this research and the implications of developmental cascades for applications to policies and programs.


Youth in urban environments are exposed to community violence, yet some do well and continue on a positive developmental trajectory. This study investigated the relationships between lifetime community violence exposure (including total, hearing about, witnessing, and victimization), family functioning, and positive youth development (PYD) among 110 urban youth ages 10–16 years (54% female) using a paper and pen self-report survey. This cross-sectional study was part of an interdisciplinary community-based participatory research effort in West/Southwest Philadelphia. Almost 97% of the sample reported some type of community violence exposure. Controlling for presence of mother in the home and presence of father in the home, separate linear regression models for PYD by each type of community violence exposure indicated that gender and family functioning were significantly associated with PYD. None of the types of community violence exposure were significant in the models. Significant interactions between gender and presence of mother in the home and gender and family functioning helped better explain these relationships for some of the types of community violence exposure. Presence of mother was associated with higher PYD for girls, but not for boys. Boys with poor family functioning had lower PYD than girls with poor family functioning. This study helps to better delineate relationships between CVE and PYD by adding new knowledge to the literature on the role of family functioning. Points of intervention should focus on families, with attention to parental figures in the home and overall family functioning.

protective/promotive factors either buffer against risk, or directly lead to lower levels of depressive symptoms. Results indicate that three of the four hypothesized risk factors were associated with elevated levels of depressive symptoms. In addition, the protective/promotive factors had more promotive than protective effects because they were directly related to lower levels of symptoms. Implications for youth-focused programming are discussed.


Comprehensive perspectives on well-being that include positive aspects of human life such as subjective wellbeing have recently been proposed. Life satisfaction is the cognitive component of subjective well-being and plays an important role in positive development as an indicator, a predictor, a mediator/moderator, and an outcome. Whereas low life satisfaction is associated with psychological, social, and behavior problems, high life satisfaction is related to good adaptation and optimal mental health among youth. Life satisfaction and positive affect mitigate the negative effects of stressful life events and work against the development of psychological and behavioral problems among youth. Supportive parenting, engagement in challenging activities, positive life events, and high-quality interactions with significant others contribute to the development of life satisfaction. Further longitudinal research into the mechanisms of how life satisfaction plays its role in positive youth development is needed to promote the psychological wellbeing of all youth.


This authoritative text is a must-read for anyone working - or training to work - with young people. It considers how theory, policy and practice intersect and influence one another in today's challenging and rapidly changing social, economic and political contexts. Offering a timely contribution to the debate, it covers key themes and developments, including: how we understand the lives of young people; the principles that underpin work with young people; the policy and practice in a wide range of contexts, both national and international; the key concepts currently high on the policy and practice agenda. An essential companion for the professional training of youth workers, this core text will also be of interest and value to students in a wide range of fields such as education, criminology and youth justice, social work, sociology and social policy.


Using data from Grades 5 to 7 of the longitudinal 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD), this research assessed the structure and development of PYD. Building on Grade 5 findings, that “Five Cs” (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring) could be empirically defined as latent constructs converging on a second-order construct, labeled PYD, we used structural models to assess the fit of this original model for Grades 5, 6, and 7. Results indicated that PYD continued to be a robust construct that can be defined comparably for Grades 6 and 7, as it was in Grade 5. We discuss implications for future research and for applications of the finding that, across the three years of early adolescence that we assessed (about ages 10 to 12), there is continuity in the structure of PYD.
Social policy is typically directed at reducing or preventing problems, and not ordinarily to promoting positive outcomes. In regard to youth development, policy makers or those charged by them with implementing policy-predicated actions, devote more effort to decreasing or preventing problems that are visible and about which constituents agree are bad (teenage pregnancy, school dropout, or substance use and abuse) than in promoting things that may seem to constituents as ephemeral, abstract, or even “impossible” to measure, e.g., self esteem, confidence, or caring for others. The articles in this special issue and, indeed, across the totality of research in the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD) (e.g., see Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009, for a review of the PYD literature) are therefore innovative and, to my mind, exciting. From a policy maker’s perspective, the research from the 4-H Study represents a new, evidence-based approach to promoting good things in young people and not merely to preventing what are often regarded as inevitable problems. The articles in this special issue offer a new vocabulary to policy makers, one that points to facets of youth behavior that constituents might agree are important to promote—for instance the Five Cs of PYD (see Bowers et al. this issue)—and, quite importantly, the research that is reported provides people with ways to measure the presence of these positive characteristics in youth. The research in this issue focuses on the strengths of youth, for instance their intentional self-regulatory behavior (see Gestsdottir et al. this issue), their engagement with school (see Li et al. this issue), and their involvement in and commitment to their communities and civil society (see Zaff et al. this issue), and the potential for developing and leveraging those strengths by linking youth’s strengths with the assets for positive growth present in all communities, even ones having relatively low levels of resources.


This article provides an overview of existing theory and research on the relations between structured youth activities and positive youth development (PYD). Theories of PYD suggest bidirectional associations between contexts of structured activities and features of PYD, including making contributions, engaging in purposeful action, and demonstrating characteristics such as competence, caring, and making connections. Current research provides limited evidence that specific aspects of activity contexts, such as supportive relationships, are related to greater PYD. Even more limited is research on the possible effects of PYD on activity contexts. The article ends with directions for future research and implications for youth programs and policy.


Youth development programs are gaining prominence as a way to help adolescents become competent, engaged, and responsible adults. However, the definition of youth development programs is elusive. Most simply, youth development programs are programs that provide opportunities and support to help youth gain the competencies and knowledge they need to meet the increasing challenges they will face as they mature. Typically, they are community based, rather than school based. In this article, we evaluate the usefulness of the youth development framework based on 15 program evaluations. The results of the evaluations are discussed and 3 general themes emerge. First, programs incorporating more elements of the
youth development framework seem to show more positive outcomes. Second, the evaluations support the importance of a caring adult-adolescent relationship, although these relationships need not be limited to 1-on-1 mentoring. And 3rd, longer-term programs that engage youth throughout adolescence appear to be the most effective. The policy and programmatic implications of these findings are discussed.


The philosophy guiding youth development programs—that resilience and competency building are central to helping youth navigate adolescence in healthy ways—provides the groundwork for an exciting and promising array of programs for adolescents. Despite the number of programs or the importance of their objectives, whether they promote healthy adolescent development remains unclear because the definition of youth development programs is elusive and evolving. Drawing on both the literature and the results from a survey of highly regarded youth development programs, this article examines 3 defining characteristics of the youth development program—program goals, atmosphere, and activities. The results suggest a provisional definition of youth development programs based on the prevalent aspects of the goals, atmosphere, and activities reported by respondents. Youth development programs seek not only to prevent adolescents from engaging in health-compromising behaviors but to build their abilities and competencies. They do this by increasing participants’ exposure to supportive and empowering environments where activities create multiple opportunities for a range of skill-building and horizon-broadening experiences. The operational definitions of the 3 features of youth development programs can serve as the starting point for the development of better measures to assess the type and quality of experiences youth experience through participation in youth development programs, and the programs’ effectiveness at promoting positive developmental outcomes.


Adolescence is a time of both great risk and opportunity. Buoyed by a belief that today’s adolescents face more obstacles on the way to adulthood, from time-crunched parents, dangerous substances and behaviors, overburdened schools, and a more demanding job market, we as a nation no longer believe adolescents should fend for themselves during nonschool hours. In some communities, an array of school-based extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, art, community service) as well as community-based youth programs provide young people with ample choices for supervised activities outside of school. This is far from the norm. Availability, cost, transportation, and interest limit many youths’ choices during nonschool hours. In a recent opinion poll, 62% of 14- to 17-year-olds agreed with the statement “Adults criticize teens for wasting time but adults don’t realize there’s not much for teens to do after school” [1]. Over half wished for more after-school activities in their neighborhood or community. Growing public support, both ideological and financial, for more structured activities during nonschool hours stems, in part, from the view that these activities and programs do more than fill idle time and keep youth off the streets. They also can provide youth with enriching experiences that broaden their perspectives, improve their socialization, and enhance their skills. A shift in thinking about what youth need for successful (productive) adulthood is behind recent efforts to increase the supply of afterschool activities, such as the federal government’s funding of 21st Century Learning Centers. Over the past 10 years, the youth development movement’s call for a paradigm shift from deterrence to development,
captured by the phrase problem free is not fully prepared, has led to an increase in the acceptance of youth preparation and development, not just problem prevention and deterrence.


Intentional self regulation and hopeful expectations for the future are theoretically-related constructs shown to lead to positive youth development (PYD). However, the nature of their relationship over time has not been tested. Therefore, this study explored the associations between hopeful future expectations and intentional self regulation in predicting positive developmental outcomes. Participants were in Grades 7, 8, and 9 of the 4-H Study of PYD (N = 1311), a longitudinal study involving U.S. adolescents. A cross-lagged panel analysis using Structural Equation Modeling assessed the relations among hopeful future expectations and intentional self regulation across time in predicting PYD. Results indicated that earlier hopeful expectations for the future may be influential for later intentional self-regulation abilities, although both constructs were strong predictors of PYD in middle adolescence. We discuss implications for research and practice of hopeful expectations in adolescents’ constructions of their positive futures.


The present study was designed to examine the association of positive youth development with the likelihood of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, hard drug, and sex initiation between 5th and 10th grades. A national, largely middle-class sample of 5,305 adolescents, participating in a longitudinal study funded by the National 4-H Council (although not all participants were enrolled in 4-H or other after-school programs), completed measures of positive youth development (PYD) constructs and of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and hard drug use once per year between 5th and 10th grades. At the 9th and 10th grade assessments, adolescents were asked whether they had initiated sexual intercourse and, if so, at what age they had first engaged in intercourse. Although the present sample was somewhat lower risk compared to national averages, survival analysis models indicated that PYD was significantly and negatively associated with the initiation hazards for tobacco use, marijuana use, and sex initiation for girls only, and with hard drug use for both genders. PYD was also positively associated with the odds of condom use across genders. Results are discussed with regard to PYD as a preventive process.


The conceptual framework governing the development of a positive youth development program in Hong Kong is outlined. Based on a thorough literature review on: a) risk factors, protective factors and adolescent resilience; b) adolescent developmental assets; c) deficits-based and assets-based models on adolescent development; d) models on positive youth development programs and e) ecological models, 15 positive youth development constructs covered in this project are presented. The following assertions are maintained in the present positive youth development program: ecological assertion, change assertion, holistic assertion, developmental assets assertion, risk factors assertion, protective factors assertion, positive youth development assertion, positive youth development constructs assertion, integration assertion, and evidence-based assertion.
To help adolescents with greater psychosocial needs, the Tier 2 Program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) was designed and implemented by school social workers and teachers. Based on subjective outcome evaluation data collected from the program participants (n = 2,542) in 49 schools, program implementers were invited to write down five conclusions based on an integration of the evaluation findings. With reference to 245 conclusions included in the 49 evaluation reports, secondary data analyses showed that most of the conclusions concerning perceptions of the Tier 2 Program, instructors, and program effectiveness were positive. In addition, difficulties encountered and recommendations for program improvement were highlighted. In conjunction with previous evaluation findings, the present study suggests that the Tier 2 Program was well received and was perceived to be beneficial to the development of adolescents with greater psychosocial needs.

This study attempted to examine correlates of subjective outcome evaluation findings amongst Chinese junior secondary students from 216 schools who joined in a positive youth development program in Hong Kong. With individual students as the unit of analysis, results revealed that three factors (perceived program quality, perceived instructor quality, and perceived effectiveness) were extracted from a 36-item client satisfaction scale. Significant grade differences in the subjective outcome evaluation findings were found, although the effect size was small. Multiple regression analyses revealed that perceived qualities of the program and the program implementers positively predicted perceived effectiveness of the program. The findings suggest that the use of schools vs. individuals as units of analyses would yield different results on the determinants of subjective outcome evaluation.

The design of a new curriculum in a positive youth development program (Project P.A.T.H.S.) in Hong Kong is outlined. The Tier 1 Program of the original phase of the Project P.A.T.H.S. is a universal positive youth development program for students in Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 with the curricula developed by a research team comprising scholars in different disciplines (e.g., social work, psychology, and education). The 120 teaching units are designed with reference to 15 positive youth development constructs identified in the successful positive youth development programs. In the extension phase of the project, a new curriculum with 60 teaching units is developed in accordance with these 15 constructs with specific reference to five major adolescent developmental issues. These issues include substance abuse, sexuality issue, Internet addiction, bullying, and money and success issues. The principles underlying the program development and implementation strategies are outlined.

To promote holistic development among adolescents in Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust initiated a multi-year universal positive youth development program entitled Project P.A.T.H.S. Besides developing Chinese and English curricula for Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 students, training programs for the program implementers teaching Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 programs were designed. For the evaluation of the program, objective outcome evaluation, subjective outcome evaluation, secondary data analyses, process evaluation, interim evaluation, and qualitative evaluation based on focus groups, student weekly diaries and case studies were used. Based on these strategies, existing research findings generally revealed that different stakeholders had positive perceptions of the program and workers, as well as perceived benefits of the program, and that the program was effective in promoting holistic positive youth development among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.


In the prevention science approach, focus is put on identifying risk and protective factors in adolescent risk behavior. Based on this approach, many research and prevention programs have been generated in the past few decades. Nevertheless, overemphasis of adolescent developmental problems has been criticized as focusing too much on adolescent developmental problems and pathologies. In response to this criticism, an alternative approach highlighting the importance of positive youth development has been proposed. According to Damon [1], the field of positive youth development (PYD) focuses on each child's talents, strengths, interests, and future potential in contrast to approaches that focus on problems that youth display when they grow up, such as learning disabilities and substance abuse. Catalano et al. [2] pointed out that there are several characteristics associated with the positive youth development approach, including emphasis on integrated youth development (i.e., focusing on a range of youth developmental possibilities and problems) rather than dealing with a single youth problem, upholding the belief that "problem-free is not fully prepared," emphasis of person-in-environment perspective, and focus on developmental models about how young people grow, learn, and change.


In view of the intensification of adolescent developmental issues in different Asian contexts, there is an urgent need for developing prevention and positive youth development programs in different Asian communities. In this paper, adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs in Asia which have been evaluated by studies adopting true experimental or quasi-experimental designs are reviewed. Several observations are highlighted from this review. First, compared with Western societies, the number of validated programs in different Asian communities was extremely low. Second, there were comparatively more programs addressing substance abuse than other mental health problems. Third, compared with evaluated prevention programs, there were very few positive youth development programs. Finally, there were very few rigorously designed evaluative studies of prevention and positive youth development programs over a long period of time.


Over the past several years, increased interest in preventing youth problems and promoting healthy youth development has led youth and family practitioners, policy makers, and
researchers to develop a wide range of approaches based on various theoretical frameworks. Although the growth in guiding frameworks has led to more complex models and a greater diversity in the options available to scholars and practitioners, the lack of an integrative conceptual scheme and consistent terminology has led to some confusion in the field. Here, we provide an overview of three approaches to youth development and problem prevention, critically examine their strengths and weaknesses, and offer some elaborations to help clarify, extend, and integrate the models. We conclude by discussing some general implications for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.


Community contexts are important ecological settings related to problem behavior and positive youth development (PYD). While substantial work has focused on neighborhood disadvantage, the current study explores the role of community assets, specifically linkages to important institutional resources and people in those settings. These concepts are explored in a cross-sectional sample of African American and White, male and female adolescent offenders with an eye toward approaches to reducing further delinquency. The findings of confirmatory factor and path analyses demonstrate that personal relationships and linkages to important community resources including recreational, school, faith-based, extended-family, and work-related sources, are related not only to better family functioning but also to positive peer relations and indirectly to youth self-reliance. This study highlights the potential role of community networks and support in the lives of youthful offenders and their families, a population in need of more research identifying potential positive pathways of development.


The purpose of this study was to investigate the presence of the setting features within elite youth sport contexts from a coach’s perspective. Coaches are key aspects to programme delivery and in the physical, psychological and social development of youth. Coaches of elite youth sport participants in particular have the responsibility of developing talented young people and, hence, play an important role in their lives and personal development. A qualitative triangulation approach including interviews and observations was used in the data collection and in the analysis of the practices and techniques of five elite youth sport coaches. Based on these findings and by amalgamating previous knowledge, a new view emerged outlining three key elements: the existence of an appropriate training environment, the provision of opportunities for physical, personal and social skill development, and the presence of supportive interactions. These elements are discussed as a framework for promoting positive youth development within elite youth sport settings.


A shift occurred in research about adolescents in the general population. Research is moving away from deficits toward a resilience paradigm and understanding trajectories of positive youth development. This shift has been less consistent in research and practice with African American youth. A gap also exists in understanding whether individual youth development dimensions generate potential in other dimensions. This study presents an empowerment-based positive youth development model. It builds upon existing research to present a new
vision of healthy development for African American youth that is strengths-based, developmental, culture-bound, and action-oriented. It emphasizes the relationship between person and environment, the reinforcing nature of developmental assets, and the necessity of a sense of community and community engagement for youth.

Ullrich-French, S., et al. (2012). "Profiles of social relationships for low-income youth in physical activity based positive youth development programs." Participants in a physical activity based positive youth development program formed three groups based on patterns of their social relationships, groups had distinct program outcomes.

This article describes a developmental systems approach to applied developmental science (ADS), which provides a framework to design and evaluate technology-rich programs that promote positive development by emphasizing the strengths and assets of young people instead of focusing on diminishing or preventing risk-taking behaviors. Until now, most of the psychoeducational programs conceived within the ADS model have not focused on the role of new technologies in young people's lives. This absence is particularly striking given that, in today's world, new technologies play an important role in different areas of the lives of young people, such as education, entertainment, socialization, and communication. This article presents the concept of identity construction environments (ICE), an interdisciplinary model that proposes guidelines to design and study new technologies purposefully created to promote positive youth development (PYD). Two types of ICE have been developed: one focusing on stand-alone technologies for learning, such as the Zora virtual city; and the other focusing on an approach for developing technologically rich learning contexts, such as the Project Inter-Actions robotics workshops. This article presents both examples of ICE and describes how their design fosters the 6 components of PYD. Initial findings from pilot studies conducted with very different populations of youth engaged in both types of ICE—such as young children, adolescents, and chronically ill children—are presented.

The 4Cs of positive youth development (PYD; competence, confidence, connection, and character) have been advocated as desirable athlete outcomes of sport participation, and in effect, a useful proxy measure of coaching effectiveness. However, a shortcoming of this framework has been a lack of tangible ways to accurately measure these constructs in athletes. This article reviews the sport literature and presents a concise toolkit made up of existing questionnaires and measurement techniques that can collectively be used to assess coaches' ability to facilitate PYD in athletes in organized youth sport settings. This integrative approach to the measurement of PYD in athletes is not designed to replace similar questionnaires in sport, but is simply a measurement approach grounded in the PYD literature that can be applied across a range of sport contexts. Implications for the use of this framework and toolkit in both coaching research and practice are discussed.

The study of positive youth development (PYD) rests on the integration of sound developmental theory with rigorous developmental methods. To illustrate this link, we focused on the Selection (S), Optimization (O), and Compensation (C; SOC) model of intentional self-regulation, a key individual-level component of the individual context relations involved in the PYD process, and assessed the dimensional structure of the SOC questionnaire, which includes indices of Elective Selection, Loss-Based Selection, Optimization, and Compensation. Using cross-sectional and longitudinal data from Grades 10 and 11 of the 4-H Study of PYD, we estimated three models through bifactor data analysis, a procedure that allows indicators to load both on their specific latent variables and on a superordinate factor that comprises the construct under study. The first model estimated was a standard bifactor model, computed separately for the 10th and 11th graders. In both samples, the same model described the hypothesized structure well. The second model, proposed for the first time in this chapter, compared multiple groups in their bifactor structure. Results indicated only minimal gender differences in SOC structure in Grade 10. The third model, also proposed for the first time in this chapter, involved an autoregression-type model for longitudinal data, and used data from the 609 participants present in both grades. Results suggested that the SOC bifactor structure was temporally stable.


A social ecological understanding of resilience recognizes the important contributions of family and social networks, community services, and cultural influences in the positive development of youth in conditions of adversity. This paper offers relational and systemic perspectives on resilience, first considering how key family bonds in the multigenerational network of relationships can nurture children’s resilience. It then addresses resilience in the family as a functional unit, with ecological and developmental perspectives. It describes the author’s research-informed family resilience framework developed for clinical and community-based practice to strengthen children and families facing adversity. Core principles and guidelines in this family resilience approach are described, suggesting its broad utility for intervention and prevention efforts with vulnerable youth and their families. Key processes in family resilience, culled from findings from research on resilience and effective family functioning, are identified for practitioners to target interventions that enable children and their families to thrive in response to serious life challenges.


Background: Positive youth development (PYD) programs adhere to the notion that all children have strengths and assets to be promoted and nurtured rather than deficits that require ‘fixing.’ The study of PYD programs indicates three aspects which set them apart from other programs for youth: activities, goals, and atmosphere. Of these, atmosphere has been least studied and what is known about atmosphere has been studied from a mostly adult perspective. Interestingly, while student voice is central to any educational process, students are not often consulted directly about their contributions. Aims: The purpose of this study was to examine the atmosphere of a PYD program grounded in self-determination theory (SDT) through the eyes of the participants. SDT suggests that people have the needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence which must be met for successful growth. Method: An ethnographically informed case study was employed. Twenty-three participants from grades four and five (9 males and 14 females) took part in a PYD program using basketball as a medium. Data collection included focus groups, individual interviews, extensive field notes, and artifact collection. Responses
were analyzed through open and axial coding. Trustworthiness strategies included: prolonged engagement, data triangulation, extensive field notes and researcher journal, member checks from both the staff and students, and peer debriefing. Results: Four themes were identified in respect to atmosphere: relatedness, learning, relaxed climate, and enjoyment. Each theme is discussed in terms of how these youth perceived the construct as influencing their participation, and as integral parts of what they viewed as positive atmosphere. Each of these themes indicated that the students were provided with a voice that allowed them to express their ideas and interact positively with the adults and the environment. Discussion: Relatedness, competence, and enjoyment have been found separately as important components of successful programs. However, it is the interaction of these themes within the relaxed structure that is unique to this study. For instance, the students chose a greater level of autonomy over higher competence. This led to a higher level of enjoyment which led to greater engagement in the program and its goals. The data also supported the notion that a program grounded in the principles of SDT could be successful, particularly in promoting opportunities for youth in respect to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Taking into account student voice was a major piece to the success of this program, the student data supported the idea that creating and maintaining a positive atmosphere was good teaching. However, fostering these needs is not automatic but more likely to occur if purposefully implemented through sound pedagogical practices such as the instructional alignment of goals, activities, and assessments.


OBJECTIVE. Emerging evidence about optimal youth development highlights the importance of both reducing negative behavior and promoting positive behavior. In our study we tested a contextual model derived from positive youth-development theory by examining the association of family, school, and community risk and promotive factors, with several outcome indices of both positive and negative adolescent development. METHODS. A sample of 42305 adolescents aged 11 to 17 (51% girls) was drawn from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health. Survey item composites were formed representing promotive and risk factors in the family (eg, closeness, aggression) and school and community (eg, community connectedness, school violence). Outcome composites reflected positive (social competence, health-promoting behavior, self-esteem) and negative (externalizing, internalizing, academic problems) developmental outcomes. Ordinary least squares regression was used to test the overall model. RESULTS. Between 0.10 and 0.50 of the variance in each outcome was explained by the contextual model. Multiple positive family characteristics were related to adolescent social competence and self-esteem, as well as lowered levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior and academic problems. Family communication, rules about television, and parents' own healthy behavior were related to adolescent health-promoting behavior. School and community safety were associated with increased social competence and decreased externalizing behavior. School violence was related to adolescent internalizing and externalizing behavior, as well as academic problems and lower self-esteem. CONCLUSIONS. Our results support the proposition that healthy adolescent development has roots in multiple contexts. Youth who were involved in contexts that provided positive resources from important others (ie, parents, schools, and communities) not only were less likely to exhibit negative outcomes, but also were more likely to show evidence of positive development. These findings provide important implications for intervention and prevention efforts and, more generally, for the promotion of positive, competent, and healthy youth development.