What is Positive Youth Development?

Positive youth development is a comprehensive framework outlining the supports all young people need to be successful. Runaway and homeless youth programs that embrace this developmental model provide ongoing and intentional opportunities for young people to participate in meaningful activities. A variety of opportunities, that have real life application, are available for youth to design, implement and evaluate the types of services they receive to best meet their needs. The program environment is caring and supportive, has high expectations and offers youth the chance to develop positive relationships and connection with adults, peers and the larger community. Positive youth development views young people as "resources" who have much to offer rather than as "problems" that need to be treated or fixed.

Given that not all young people have the same needs, some youth may require additional, complementary supports and services to fully benefit from common elements of positive youth development processes. For example, trauma-informed approaches and evidence-based interventions can strengthen the role of positive youth development settings in the lives of especially vulnerable young people.

According to FindYouthInfo.gov, a website on youth development, research suggests positive youth development offer youth the following benefits:

• Increased protective factors; reduction in risky behaviors
• Higher grades and expectation to go to college
• Higher rates of successful transitions into adulthood
• Improved social and emotional outcomes
• Greater likelihood of contributing to their communities
• Less depression

The great news is youth want to participate! The flip side is it takes time and commitment to incorporate young people as active participants, with a genuine voice in programs, rather than mere recipients of services. Youth are capable of contributing vast expertise and creative solutions related to their own lives, the services they receive and their communities. It is also true that being taught skills and new behaviors is one of the essential ingredients to successful youth adult partnerships. Youth rely on adults for guidance and help in learning "how to do" new things in order to navigate the world around them. Having youth as partners means that a host of opportunities must be available for them to try out, experience, reflect upon and gain new information and realizations through their successes and challenges.

Zarret and Lerner, developmental scientists, have suggested that positive youth development encompasses psychological, behavioral, and social characteristics that reflect what they call the "Five Cs."

The Five Cs Are:
Competence
Confidence
Connection
Character
Caring/Compassion
(Child Trends, February 2008)

According to Zarret and Lerner, a youth with the five thriving characteristics is on the path to attaining a sixth C: contribution – to self, family, community, and civil society. It is the sixth C that leads to positive adulthood.

Tips for Developing the Five C's in Young People

Competence:

- Teach young people how to make their own appointments through modeling, role-play and supportive direction and feed- back.

- Offer options for youth to make decisions on a daily basis. Opportunities exist in normal day-to-day life where implementing a formal program is not required. Some examples: meal planning, finding recipes, preparing food or setting the table, selecting outings and researching information about days and times of operation, cost etc.

- Give choices about programming. "Are you ready to wrap up group time or would you prefer to have fifteen more minutes?" "Would you like to finish your case plan today or would you prefer to complete it later?" "Have we selected the best day of the week for community outings or should we change it so more youth can participate?"

- Remember that young people typically do not learn by adults "telling them things." If a youth wants to make a choice that you are concerned with, see if they would be willing to identify the pros and cons of their decision prior to taking action. This demonstrates that you trust their ability to make decisions and provides a method for them to use their critical thinking skills.

Confidence:

- Ask youth to develop a list of "Things I do Well".

- See if they would be interested in teaching other youth a skill they are good at (cooking, their last assigned chore, knitting, sewing, art, etc.) Carve out specific times when youth can teach one another new things.

- Train young people to orient new youth to the program setting and how the service operates. They can serve as "ambassadors" for RHY services. An adult can be present, for support, while youth learn how to do this and if needed to guide appropriate information sharing. Once youth have mastered this, ask them to teach it to someone else.

- Ask youth to either assist in creating outreach materials or providing feedback about the relevance of the materials and likelihood of reaching the intended audience. Provide opportunities for youth to use their voice with others. This can be as informal as a young person gathering youth for a meeting, sharing where it will take place and the topic that will be ad- dressed.

- Notice and reinforce when youth are using pro-social skills with staff and other youth. "I really appreciated you asking the girls to gather to begin group, in such a respectful, mature manner." That type of communication will make people want to listen to you.

Connection:

- Design activities where young people have the opportunity to work in large groups, dyads, triads to expand their social networks. Grouping allows young people to work with peers they may not have selected on their own.

- Identify opportunities where young people can become part of the larger community by "giving back." It may be volunteering at an assisted living program for the elderly. It can also be a letter writing campaign to service men and women or letters of support to sick children in hospitals.

- Identify peer to peer mentoring opportunities such as: older youth reading to younger youth or youth teaching a "where to find resources in this community" workshop.

Character:

- Assist young people in identifying their strengths and how they have utilized them in their life.
- Provide multiple opportunities for leadership development. During house meetings ask each youth to identify two solutions for every problem they bring to the table. Train youth to co-facilitate meetings or activities.
- Provide avenues for self discovery and awareness; such as journaling, art projects, slam poetry nights, or methods to learn about their culture.
- Begin meetings with a ritual such as each youth sharing the following: "One way that I helped another person today was by…"

Caring/Compassion:

- Teach youth skills to care for themselves by setting boundaries and self advocacy.
- Teach youth how to resolve conflict with understanding and compassion.
- Find out if there are any opportunities for youth to help animals in the community.
- Role-play real scenarios that youth face. Demonstrate a hurtful response to the situation and then offer a positive empathetic response. Ask youth to process the role-play.
- Notice and reinforce when youth are treating others in a kind/caring manner.

Additional Resources:

ACT for YOUTH Upstate Center of Excellence, Positive Youth Development Resource Manual (2006) *http://www.positive- humandevelopment.com/uploads/1/0/0/4/1004952/pyd_resource_manual.pdf*

Gambone, M.A., Klem, A.M. & Connell, J.P. (2002). *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development.* Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc., and Institute for Research and Reform in Education. *http://www.ydsi.org/YDSI/pdf/WhatMatters.pdf*

Putting Positive Youth Development into Practice: A Resource Guide (2007). Prepared by the National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth for the Families and Youth Service Bureau. *http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov*

Zarrett, N. PhD & Lerner, R. PhD (2008). *Ways to Promote the Positive Development of Children and Youth. Child Trends. http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2008_02_27_PositiveYouthDev.pdf*

FindYouthInfo an Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP). *http://www.findyouthinfo.org/topic_pyd_evidenceEffectiveness.shtml*

National Resource Center for Youth Services, The University of Oklahoma OUTREACH Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Centers, National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement and the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development. (2008) *Positive Youth Development Toolkit Engaging Youth in Program Development, Design, Implementation, and Service Delivery. http://www.rhyttac.ou.edu/toolkits*

The National Resource Center For Youth Development, Funded By The Administration For Children and Families Children's Bureau, Fosterclub, The National Network For Young People In Foster Care. (2011) *Toolkit 2011: Youth Leadership Toolkit: Youth Engagement. http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/publications/Youth%20Engagement*