

Reconnecting Youth & Community: A Youth Development Approach



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Administration for Children and Families
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Family and Youth Services Bureau

Reconnecting Youth and Community

The problems confronting this country today are in many ways overwhelming, in both number and complexity. When we face such staggering issues as crime, poverty, racism, and violence, it is critical to develop strategies for change that are based on logic. That logic, however, must be tempered by an understanding of the human condition.

Unfortunately, the path to social change increasingly has been filled with rhetoric, partisan politics, fear, and the need to debate rather than discuss the issues. In the absence of real dialog, people look for panaceas or one-step solutions to problems.





While there are no simple solutions to this country's difficulties, effective approaches do exist. Challenging problems demand analysis, a willingness to develop comprehensive strategies, and the courage to invest resources in the future.

The youth service field has for many years understood the need to explore options for investing in the potential of young people. Youth are resources, both for enhancing the quality of community life today and for building strong communities for the future.

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Out of that understanding has emerged a philosophy about helping youth. It is called the Positive Youth Development approach.

The Positive Youth Development Approach

The Positive Youth Development approach was designed more than 30 years ago when researchers and practitioners developed a delinquency prevention strategy based on why most young people stay out of trouble. In other words, they looked at what kept the “good kids” on track and identified four ingredients necessary for youth to develop in a positive way:

- A sense of competence: being able to do something well
- A sense of usefulness: having something to contribute
- A sense of belonging: being part of a community
- A sense of power: having control over one’s future

The Positive Youth Development model emphasizes offering young people a complement of services and opportunities. Moreover, the Positive Youth Development model involves youth in their communities in ways that build on young people's strengths and give them hope for the future.

The Positive Youth Development approach also offers a strategy for creating communities in which young people are active and valued contributors. This is especially critical today as people bemoan the loss of a sense of community and neighborhood, and the comfort of being among others who know and care about them. This breakdown in community networks and neighborhoods has forced policy-makers and practitioners to revisit how the social linkages of yesteryear were maintained.

Rebuilding Communities

The best strategy for rebuilding communities is a community empowerment approach that views community members as partners in the rebuilding process. This “community as partners” approach is known by various names across the country, but its philosophy is based on the following principles:

- Community members are in the best position to develop effective strategies for dealing with neighborhood problems.
- Even communities with concentrated poverty and serious crime comprise individuals and organizations with tremendous strengths and talents.
- The community empowerment process offers the best chance for lasting, positive change.

While some of the factors contributing to community building may be inapplicable in certain areas, some key elements are transferable to any setting:

- A shared purpose
- An inclusive planning process
- Leadership development rather than service delivery
- Opportunities for community empowerment through a learning process
- Financial stabilization
- Strategies for reconnecting people of all generations and backgrounds



Linking the Youth Development Approach to Rebuilding Communities

Clearly, the community empowerment strategy and the Positive Youth Development approach share common themes of participation, empowerment, and accountability. Both accentuate the positive attributes of communities and young people and the need for different generations to work together.

Combining the community empowerment and Positive Youth Development models, therefore, offers tremendous opportunities to effect positive, long-lasting change. The community empowerment approach ensures more permanent social change, which can come only from within the community and must be based on

the self-assessed needs, values, and goals of the community. Involving youth in the empowerment process strengthens their skills and their ties to others. Through that process, neighborhood leaders invest in both immediate personal growth among young people and long-term community change.

The Positive Youth Development–community empowerment approach does the following:

- Concentrates energy on young people's strengths rather than on their problems while providing them with a safe place to deal with the typical issues and concerns of adolescence, as well as difficulties specific to their lives
- Emphasizes lasting social change over situational change, while valuing individual development

- Establishes a balance between youth, family, and community responsibility for young people's actions and supports youth, families, and the community simultaneously
- Acknowledges that in the American culture, young people tend to have less privilege or status, and offers them opportunities to contribute
- Protects against “youth empowerment models” that provide young people with situational leadership opportunities but do not teach them how to exercise that leadership or handle the associated responsibility



- Focuses more on positive youth and community outcomes and less on program processes
- Involves young people in activities that enable them to access opportunities to learn and grow while building relationships that strongly root them in the community

Conclusion



To implement the Positive Youth Development–community empowerment approach requires rethinking some basic cultural assumptions. The American culture is predicated on a competitive environment in which, far too often, winning is more important than learning, the

route to a quick dollar beats involvement in meaningful work, and the personal takes precedence over the political.

Today, with disintegrating cities, a deteriorating environment, and overcrowded prisons, however, it is clear that the political is personal. Real change requires action by entire communities; communities of people who are connected, caring, and committed.

At the core of rebuilding communities, therefore, is the challenge of involving youth and community members in meaningful work that reconnects them to others, that employs their talents, and that provides them with the satisfaction of contributing to the greater good.

Too often in the past, efforts to help young people have been fragmented by funding streams, ideological differences about prevention and punishment, and plans that continually focused on restructuring programs rather than on redeveloping communities. Over the past decade, we have learned that prevention is less costly than intervention and that instilling a sense of accomplishment and accountability in young people is more productive than punishment.

Today, we need to begin applying those lessons to ensure that the next generation shares a set of positive, normative adolescent experiences. We can do so by listening to communities in need and educating the public about the best approaches to providing young people with

opportunities to develop into healthy, contributing adults.

The Positive Youth Development–community empowerment approach presents far-reaching possibilities for producing change in other arenas, such as creating economic stability, strengthening families, and improving the environment. By using a Positive Youth Development–community empowerment approach, communities can take control of the circumstances of today and can work in tandem with young people to build a stronger tomorrow.



For more information on Positive Youth Development, please contact the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth:

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Reconnecting Youth & Community: A Youth Development Approach was developed by Johnson, Bassin, & Shaw, Inc., for the Family and Youth Services Bureau; Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; under contract No. 105-97-1734 to manage the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth.