

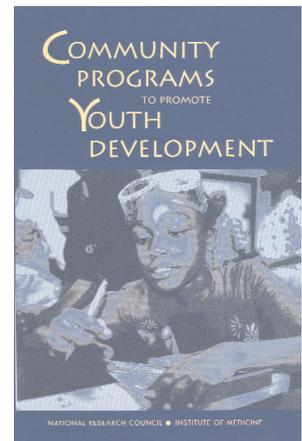
COMMUNITY PROGRAMS TO PROMOTE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

After-school programs, scout groups, community service activities, religious youth groups, and other community-based activities have traditionally been an important part of the lives of many adolescents. But what do such programs contribute in the formation of today's adolescents? Do we know how to design youth programs so that they can successfully meet young people's developmental needs and help them become healthy, happy, and productive adults?

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, a report of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, explores these questions, focusing on essential elements of adolescent well-being and healthy development. It offers recommendations for policy, practice, and research to ensure that programs are well designed to meet young people's developmental needs.

Researchers, educators, and parents agree that many adolescents are still not fully prepared to accept the roles and responsibilities of adulthood in today's increasingly complex, technical, and multicultural world. To meet these challenges, many communities have developed programs that seek to help their youth acquire the education, training, social and emotional skills, and supportive relationships that will help them function well during adolescence and adulthood.

The report examines national and local experiences with community interventions and programs for youth and assesses their strengths and limitations in promoting adolescent health, development, and well-being. It offers a framework and research agenda for a broad audience of policymakers, researchers, service providers, and community leaders to promote the healthy development of the nation's youth.



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PROMOTING ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND RISKS

Personal and social assets that contribute to adolescent well-being and the successful transition into adulthood can be organized into four general categories: physical and mental health, cognitive development, psychological and emotional development, and social development. As shown in Box 1, several indicators can be used to measure selected assets within each category.

Having more assets is better than having few, and life is easier to manage if one has assets in all four domains

BOX 1. Personal and Social Assets that Facilitate Positive Youth Development

Physical Development

- Good health habits
- Good health risk management skills

Intellectual Development

- Knowledge of essential life skills
- Knowledge of essential vocational skills
- School success
- Rational habits of mind—critical thinking and reasoning skills
- In-depth knowledge of more than one culture
- Good decision-making skills
- Knowledge of skills needed to navigate through multiple cultural contexts

Psychological and Emotional Development

- Good mental health, including positive self-regard
- Good emotional self-regulation skills
- Good coping skills
- Good conflict resolution skills
- Mastery motivation and positive achievement motivation
- Confidence in one's personal efficacy
- "Planfulness"—planning for the future and future life events
- Sense of personal autonomy/responsibility for self
- Optimism coupled with realism
- Coherent and positive personal and social identity
- Prosocial and culturally sensitive values
- Spirituality or a sense of a "larger" purpose in life
- Strong moral character
- A commitment to good use of time

Social Development

- Connectedness—perceived good relationships and trust with parents, peers, and some other adults
 - Sense of social place/integration—being connected and valued by larger social networks
 - Attachment to prosocial/conventional institutions, such as school, church, and nonschool youth programs
 - Ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts
 - Commitment to civic engagement

The committee drew three major conclusions from the research literature:

- Individuals do not necessarily need the entire range of assets to thrive, but various combinations of assets across domains and over time are beneficial;
- Having more assets is better than having few, and life is easier to manage if one has assets in all four domains; and
- Continued exposure to positive experiences, settings, and people, as well as opportunities to gain and refine life skills, supports young people in the acquisition and growth of these assets.

The committee observed that the personal and social assets for youth do not exist in a vacuum. The individual assets interact with adolescents' social settings in ways that are not yet well understood. Evidence suggests that the presence or absence of these assets can (1) facilitate the engagement of youth in positive social settings that support continued positive development, and (2) protect them against the adverse effects of negative life events, difficult social situations, pressure to engage in risky behaviors, and academic failures. Despite these protective effects, excessive and prolonged exposure to negative life events, dangerous settings, and inadequate schooling are likely to have significant impact on young people's development.

FEATURES OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL SETTINGS

The report highlights certain features in adolescents' daily settings and experiences that promote positive adolescent development (see Table 1). A provisional list of eight features describes the processes or "active ingredients" in community programs that facilitate positive youth development:

- Physical and psychological safety;
- Appropriate structure;
- Supportive relationships;
- Opportunities to belong;
- Positive social norms;
- Support for efficacy and mentoring;
- Opportunities for skill building; and
- Integration of family, school, and community efforts.

DESCRIPTION OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The committee explored the complexity and variation within community youth programs. Some programs focus on the prevention of specific problem behaviors, while others promote positive youth development across multiple domains. Some programs are highly structured, with detailed curriculum and step-by-step guidelines. Others have a looser structure that involves youth in determining program priorities and content. Some programs serve young adolescents (ages 10-14 years). Others focus on high school and older youth who are preparing for transitions to adult life.

Continued exposure to positive experiences, settings, and people, as well as opportunities to gain and refine life skills, supports young people in the acquisition and growth of these assets.

Organizations that offer youth programs can be found in a wide array of social settings. They range from large national youth-serving agencies (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, or the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts) to local youth sports organizations. Youth programs can be found in community centers, schools, libraries, faith-based institutions, museums, arts centers, service clubs, and grassroots organizations. The focus of these programs may be general or specific, such as sports, religion, or academic success.

TABLE 1. Features of Positive Developmental Settings

Feature	Descriptors	Opposite Poles
Physical and Psychological Safety	Safe and health-promoting facilities and practices that increase safe peer group interaction and decrease unsafe or confrontational peer interactions.	Physical and health dangers, fear, feeling of insecurity, sexual and physical harassment, and verbal abuse.
Appropriate Structure	Limit setting, clear and consistent rules and expectations, firm-enough control, continuity and predictability, clear boundaries, and age-appropriate monitoring.	Chaotic, disorganized, laissez-faire, rigid, overcontrolled, and autocratic.
Supportive Relationships	Warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, and responsiveness.	Cold, distant, overcontrolling, ambiguous support, untrustworthy, focused on winning, inattentive, unresponsive, and rejecting.
Opportunities to Belong	Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement, and integration; opportunities for sociocultural identity formation; and support for cultural and bicultural competence.	Exclusion, marginalization, and intergroup conflict.
Positive Social Norms	Rules of behavior, expectations, injunctions, ways of doing things, values and morals, and obligations for service.	Normlessness, anomie, laissez-faire practices, antisocial and amoral norms, norms that encourage violence, reckless behavior, consumerism, poor health practices, and conformity.
Support for Efficacy and Mattering	Youth-based, empowerment practices that support autonomy, making a real difference in one's community, and being taken seriously; practices that include enabling, responsibility granting, and meaningful challenge; and practices that focus on improvement rather than on relative current performance levels.	Unchallenging, overcontrolling, disempowering, and disabling; and practices that undermine motivation and desire to learn, such as excessive focus on current relative performance level rather than improvement.
Opportunities for Skill Building	Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn cultural literacies, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; and opportunities to develop social and cultural capital.	Practices that promote bad physical habits and habits of mind and practices that undermine school and learning.
Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts	Concordance, coordination, and synergy among family, school, and community.	Discordance, lack of communication, and conflict.

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The organizing body for youth programs might be the mayor's office, a local government agency, a community foundation, or an individual charismatic leader. This diversity presents a major challenge, since no single person or group has the responsibility for either monitoring the range and quality of community youth programs or ensuring that community members are aware of existing programs.

Different communities have relied upon a broad array of formal and informal strategies to respond to the needs of their youth, including:

- Community-wide initiatives, such as the Communities That Care initiative in Pennsylvania and the Community Change for Youth activity designed by Public/Private Ventures;
- School-based community centers, such as the multi-service centers developed by two public schools in New York City in partnership with Children's Aid;
- Intermediary organizations, such as the Community Network for Youth Development in San Francisco, The Forum for Youth Investment in Washington, DC, and the Family Research Project at Harvard University that focus on capacity-building, training, and leadership for community-wide youth initiatives;
- Faith-based organizations, such as youth programs that are affiliated with a church, synagogue, or other faith-based group; and
- Cultural ceremonies, including activities celebrating symbolic transitions that accentuate the new roles and responsibilities of youth, such as the *bar mitzvah* ceremony, the *kinaalda* coming of age ceremony for young women in Navajo communities, and Mexican *quinciniñera* ceremonies for young women.

LESSONS FROM EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATIONS

The great variation in the design, approach, and focus of different community programs for youth presents significant challenges to evaluation efforts. Research studies are just beginning to recognize the importance of interactive processes and to design methods that can capture the effects of programs at different stages of adolescence. Not all programs work in the same way. Some programs have special appeal to certain cultural or ethnic populations or youth who share other common characteristics.

The report examines seven high-quality reviews and meta-analyses of prevention and promotion programs for youth from the fields of mental health, violence prevention, teenage pregnancy prevention, and youth development. From this review, three programs stand out as models for the design and evaluation of new youth programs:

- *Big Brothers, Big Sisters*, a national community-based mentoring program for 10 to 16 year olds that fosters the development of a caring and supportive relationship between an adult volunteer and a child;
- *Teen Outreach Program*, a school-based discussion curriculum focused on life skills, parent-adolescent communication, and future life planning as well as an intensive volunteer service experience; and

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- *Quantum Opportunities*, a community-based, year-round, multiyear, and multilevel youth development program for 9th to 12th grade students receiving public assistance. The program provides education, community service, and youth development activities as well as financial incentives for both participants and staff.

These three programs differ in their use of program delivery mechanisms and youth development strategies. But they all illustrate that high-quality experimental evaluations can be done with community programs for youth. The evaluation studies provide sufficient evidence to suggest that these program models offer promise for the design of new youth programs. Each program included several components that were consistent with the framework for positive settings for youth.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

No single program can serve all young people or incorporate all eight features of positive developmental settings. But communities that offer a rich array of developmental opportunities for adolescents have fewer young people who exhibit risky behavior and problems and show higher rates of positive development.

Community-wide approaches are more likely to meet the needs of diverse populations of adolescents, especially if programs have features that can work together and reinforce key components. Programs for youth offered by more than one organization—in schools, community centers, or both—that focus on different areas of interest and through different kinds of curricula provide the greatest opportunity for young people to acquire personal and social assets. Collaboration among researchers, providers, funders, and policy makers is important in developing community-wide approaches and implementing a coordinated approach to designing, delivering, and evaluating community programs for youth.

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development includes 11 recommendations to guide the field of youth services and investments in youth programs. Highlights from these recommendations are summarized below:

- Community programs for youth should support the acquisition of personal and social assets that promote well-being in adolescence and successful transitions to adulthood within a developmental framework.
- Communities should monitor the availability, accessibility, and quality of programs for their youth and provide an ample array of program opportunities to meet the needs of diverse youth, particularly those who are disadvantaged and underserved.
- Private and public funders should (1) provide resources to develop and support coordinated community-wide programming; (2) identify the features of positive developmental settings that are most important in the design and implementation of

programs for an increasingly heterogeneous youth population; (3) require evaluation studies that can examine the relationships among program features, impacts, and positive development outcomes and provide a basis for monitoring program performance and accountability; (4) support research and practice partnerships to advance understanding in these areas; and (5) increase the capacity of individual programs and communities to collect and use social indicator data.

- Federal agencies should (1) support comprehensive longitudinal and experimental research on the personal and social assets that promote healthy development and well-being in adolescence and successful transition to adulthood, and (2) develop new measures that work well across diverse youth populations.

Although the committee determined that many programs can promote healthy development, much less is known about why. Isolating the components and processes of interaction that contribute to success will require more rigorous studies that can control for various programmatic factors and focus attention on the essential ingredients and pathways for success.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION...

Copies of the report, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, are available for sale from the National Academies Press at (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area) or via the NAP homepage at www.nap.edu. Full text of the report is also available at www.nap.edu. This study was funded by the Ford Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the organizations or agencies that provided support for this project.

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