



## YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

In the past decade, how we think about supporting young people at both the policy and the practice levels has undergone a radical shift. A great number of youth funders, policymakers, and service providers are now concentrating on promoting the overall healthy development of young people instead of “fixing” specific problem behaviors through programmed solutions. While the significance of this shift in thinking in terms of principles, theory, and values has become increasingly clear, we continue to explore how these values and principles are put into practice and what types of specific changes are required throughout the system—at program, organizational, policy and funding levels—in order to effectively support young people’s development.

This paper reflects the work of the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD) in close partnership with youth development researchers, and with youth agencies, public institutions, policymakers and the funding community throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. In the following pages, we provide an historical context for understanding this shift to a youth development approach and hope to consider some of its implications, both for practice and for larger system change.

### THE DEFICIT APPROACH

Over the past forty years, economic changes have eroded the base of social support available for young people. With the erosion of support for youth, we began to see a rise in problem behavior: increased youth violence, drug and alcohol abuse, higher school failure and drop out rates, and teen pregnancy. Driven by escalating citizen concern over these problems, policymakers began calling for programs targeted to



address these specific behaviors. This approach called for intervening when young people had problems, as well as identifying young people “at risk” and providing services focused on preventing the onset of specific, negative behaviors.

This narrow focus on young people’s “deficits”—their participation in or potential for problem behavior—led to the creation of a youth services system that has been largely fragmented and comprised of programs focused on isolated problems. As in the traditional Western medical model, practitioners have sought to identify and isolate particular problems or behaviors and treat or inoculate young people against them. Program success has been defined as the reduction of these specific behaviors in the target population. Furthermore, this approach has divided young people into two groups, those exhibiting problems or at high risk for problems and everyone else; and instead of providing more supports for youth at higher risk, our focus on isolated problems has led us to provide different supports for this group.

### THE SHIFT TO A YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Resiliency research has provided a compelling rationale for shifting to a youth development approach in policy and practice. First, as long term evaluations of these “deficit” focused programs became available, it was clear that single programs rarely achieved the success they envisioned in eliminating problem behaviors. Second, long-term studies of youth raised in high-risk environments had consistently documented that a majority of these young people grew up not only avoiding involvement in problem behaviors, but developing into healthy and successful adults. This body of research also—and most importantly—clearly identified the environmental supports and opportunities that tipped their

lives from risk to resilience. Resiliency research shifted our attention to the larger environment surrounding young people, asking what this environment must provide to enable young people to succeed. We began to more closely examine the role of the different layers of support and influence surrounding young people: their families, schools, and communities. Research on resiliency consistently underscored the importance of caring relationships, high and positive expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution in all of these settings: home, school, and community.

The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (CYD), led this movement, launching a national mobilization campaign designed to transform concern about youth problems into public commitment to youth development. Academic research, such as Milbrey McLaughlin's (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman 1994) ten-year study examining the roles of community-based organizations in promoting youth development, also helped shift thinking in the field. Public/Private Ventures and the Search Institute, further fortified the research and evaluation base by developing and evaluating large-scale youth development demonstration projects.

These groups have successfully influenced policy nationwide. At the end of the past decade local and national foundations have adopted youth development principles. State departments such as education and human services, have begun shifting from strictly categorical funding to supporting broader based youth development efforts. Federal agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have embraced the approach and shifted research and program dollars toward community supports for youth development. Even historically risk-focused federal programs such as the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention and Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities have responded to the compelling research on resilience and to the pressure from practitioners to implement a more positive—and effective—approach. A large-scale movement toward a new way of working with young people is underway.

## **YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: THEORY APPLIED TO PRACTICE**

Young people are seen as active participants in their ongoing development process which, rather than occurring “in a vacuum,” is naturally influenced by the young person's environment and the supports they receive from family, peer group, school, and the larger

community. Shifting to a youth development approach means that, as a field, we redefine our vision of success. We no longer define success in terms of the prevention or elimination of negative behaviors, but in terms of young people's healthy development. And while we continue to employ a wide range of measures of young people's success in transitioning to adulthood, as a field we agree on the ultimate long-term outcome we want for all young people:

*A successful transition to adulthood, where young people are able to support themselves financially, engage in healthy family and other social relationships, and contribute to their self-defined community.*

But what are the implications of shifting to this long-term outcome for the youth service system? It effects how we work and how we measure our success. This calls for change at all levels of the system—youth programs, youth organizations, and policymakers and funders.

### **Youth Development Practice at a Program Level.**

Youth practitioners need to employ strategies that create positive developmental environments. We know from research that environments promoting healthy development must offer young people positive relationships and experiences to:

- gain social support and caring from adults and peers, a sense of belonging and a sense of physical and emotional safety;
- have input into decision-making and to take on meaningful leadership roles;
- become involved in the larger community, giving young people a sense of contributing and broadening their knowledge of their community; and
- expose young people to a wide range of challenging and interesting learning experiences, which build an array of skills and competencies—cognitive, health, and employment.

And how do we know that these strategies have an impact on young people? In a successful youth development program, young people report that, through their participation, they:

- develop positive relationships with adults who provide them with guidance and emotional support;
- have meaningful roles with responsibility;

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- feel that they contribute to their self-identified community (whether school, agency, or broader community);
- are challenged by activities that help them grow; and
- master new skills.

To successfully implement youth development practice requires professional support and resources. Professionals who work with youth must have professional support through effective training and supervision to strengthen their skills. They must also build the capacity for self-assessment, in order to reflect on and continuously improve their practice. In this way we are able, as a field, to demonstrate and be accountable for the impact our work has on young people. Far too often we fail to realize that even the most skilled of practitioners cannot succeed without these concrete supports available from their organizations. Below we outline some of the key resources and structures which organizations must have in place in order to support quality youth development practice.

**Youth Development Practice at an Organizational Level.** For organizations to effectively support their practitioners in creating positive developmental environments for young people, there must be a shared vision and commitment to developmental practice throughout the organization. Everyone in the organization, executive director, board and all staff, must agree on what constitutes effective youth development practice and appropriate developmental outcomes. Concrete structures and practices must be put in place to help practitioners help young people meet these outcomes. Without the support of an organization, those attempting to change practice will ultimately fail. In order to succeed, organizations need to provide training focused on building skills, provide supervision, and facilitate practitioners' reflection on various strategies to improve programs. Other examples of organizational practices that enhance developmental practice include providing :

- low youth to staff/volunteer ratio;
- safe, reliable, and accessible spaces;
- continuity and consistency of care;
- ongoing, results-based staff and organizational improvement processes.

Putting these structures in place requires organizational leaders to reexamine their management structures and how they allocate their human, physical and financial resources. An organization's success in supporting developmental practice can be measured, not only through their achievement of better outcomes for young people, but through their progress in putting these concrete structures in place to enable quality practice.

Just as individual practitioners need organizational support in order to be effective in developmental practice, organizations also need the support of the larger system to be able to offer young people the supports they need. To secure such support, organizations must be able to articulate how their structures support developmental practice and what their impact is on young people.

### YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE AT THE POLICY AND FUNDING LEVEL

Embracing a youth development approach at a systems and community level means creating a coherent youth policy centered on providing young people with continuous developmental support and learning opportunities across institutions throughout a young person's life. *National, state and local policy makers are ultimately accountable for ensuring that such a continuity of support exists for young people, so that they are fully prepared for adult life.* These decision makers must forge the necessary systems accommodations and ensure the flexibility of funding needed to meet these ends.

To support youth development work at the program level, funders and policymakers must consider not only what constitutes high quality youth development, but also what organizations support this work. Funding must:

- be flexible and long-term to provide organizational and program stability;
- target the organization, not just the program;
- support the creation of youth development assessment and evaluation tools, and training to build the capacity of youth care workers; and
- support professional development resources for youth care workers.

The success of funders and policymakers in supporting developmental practice can be judged by the number of young people in a community prepared for

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productive adulthood. This requires the establishment of public-private partnerships, agreement on clear expectations and outcome measures, and the development of flexible funding streams to build capacity within communities.

## CONCLUSION

Adopting a youth development approach requires nothing short of the realignment of the entire system. We must share a unified vision, not only of our ultimate long-term goal, but also of what constitutes developmental practice and what appropriate short-term developmental outcomes are for our young people. All of us—practitioners, organization leaders, funders and policymakers—have an equal responsibility to work within our own arenas to refocus our efforts on promoting, and strengthening supports and opportunities for our young people.

## References

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For more information on this initiative and a way to contact individuals mentioned within this text please visit our website at: [www.rtc.pdx.edu](http://www.rtc.pdx.edu)

**The Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD)** is a nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance, training, and resources to strengthen the field of youth development throughout the Bay Area. CNYD also serves as a technical assistance intermediary for the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, a citywide partnership to establish youth development centers in schools throughout San Francisco.

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