

The Pathways to Positive Futures Model: Overview



Over the last few years, researchers at the Pathways Research and Training Center have been collaborating with stakeholders in an effort to better define a positive development (PD) approach for working with “emerging adults” (older adolescents and young adults between the ages of about 17 and 25, or even up to 30) who have serious mental health conditions and related needs. The approach is heavily based on theories of human development, particularly theories of positive development and development during emerging adulthood,^{4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13} in addition to ecological-systems theory and self-determination theory.^{14,15,16} Because of its emphasis on positive development during the period of emerging adulthood, we refer to this work as the Pathways to Positive Futures model.

In reviewing published research, reports, and information from interviews with people who have first-hand experience with programs that are effective in improving outcomes for emerging adults with serious mental health conditions, we came to the conclusion that many (though not all) of the approaches that are being used share a number of common features.¹⁷ Others have come to similar conclusions in examining empirically-supported or “best” practices for working with emerging adults from vulnerable populations more generally.^{18,19,20} In our current work, our goal has been to identify these shared features, and to use them to build a model that represents what goes on when programs successfully use a positive developmental

approach to improve outcomes for young people with serious mental health conditions.

In the next pages, we provide a basic description of the Pathways model. The model conceptualizes what providers do when they are using a PD approach in their work, and explains why this is expected to lead to desired outcomes. A diagram of this model is presented in the figure on the next page. The description begins with the right side of the figure and then moves toward the left side. So, we begin by describing the positive developmental outcomes, key developmental capacities and positive identity and end with a discussion of what providers do, how providers work, and finally, process outcomes. It is important to note that when we say “providers,” we mean anyone working through a formal program or intervention, including peer support providers.

OUTCOMES: What are programs trying to achieve?

Positive Developmental Outcomes

In general, the programs or interventions we learned about have the long-term goal of increasing young people’s skills and assets in one or more of four general areas. The first area is skills and knowledge for adult roles. This is a broad category that includes not only educational/vocational skills, but also general life skills like managing money or cooking. The second area is skills and strategies for managing challenges that are specific to an individual young person who participates in the program or intervention. These include, but are certainly not limited to, challenges that stem from having a serious mental health condition. Other common challenges include those stemming from traumatic experiences and those related to managing family relationships. The third area is ability to meet basic needs, including housing, health, nutrition and safety.

Finally, the programs generally aim to increase the positive and supportive connections that young people have. These include connections to individuals or groups of people (partners, families, friends, community) as well as to formal organizations and institutions (e.g., workplace, college/university, faith organization, advocacy organization, team, or club). Of course, these are outcomes we would like to see for all young people, and this is why the approach is a “positive development” approach: the focus is on achieving developmentally appropriate skills and building assets, regardless of the specific challenges that an individual experiences.

Key Developmental Capacities

Built into our model is the assumption that a key task of emerging adulthood is for a young person to learn how to be the “driver” in her own life. In other words, the programs aim to help the young person increase her own capacity to take steps toward achieving positive developmental outcomes and personal goals. The approach is focused on partnering with the young person as she obtains the tools and experience she needs to drive development toward whatever it is that she finds motivating or compelling.

It is important to note that when we say the young person becomes the “driver” of development, we do not mean that a successfully developing young adult must become completely independent of other people or that he must reject the relationships or values he grew up with. On the contrary, the family, community and cultural contexts of childhood and adolescence are profoundly formative of emerging adult identity, and some young people transition into adult roles that continue to be firmly embedded in these contexts. Even in these circumstances, however, becoming an adult means that the young person becomes committed to these contexts and values, enacting family, community and/or cultural roles from an internal

motivation. Of course, many young people in contemporary US culture do not proceed in an unwavering manner toward the adult roles defined by the contexts of their early lives. The period of emerging adulthood is thus typically a time when young people try out and sort through connections and contexts, eventually settling into the kinds of commitments that characterize a more mature and stable identity.

This key capacity—becoming the driver of one’s own positive development—has four important parts. First, emerging adults need to develop the capacity to find out what is intrinsically motivating for them. In other words, they learn to find their motivation and direction within themselves, rather than from the outside. Again, this does not mean that a young person has to reject motivations he has absorbed during childhood and adolescence from his family, his culture, or other sources. Moving toward adulthood, however, means he comes to “own” the motivation. Gaining this capacity can be hard for young people who have been through child-serving systems. Many of them lack practice in connecting to their internal motivation, because system staff often demand that children and youth be obedient and to comply with what providers tell them to do. As young people grow up in systems, they may therefore learn to become passive. Alternatively, they may reject the authority of providers by refusing to comply. While refusing to comply may not be passive, it is still mainly reactive: in other words, it may be more about reacting to what other people want than about doing something related to the young person’s own values, goals and/or interests.

The second part of becoming the driver of one’s own positive development is gaining the capacity to be proactive—to take steps toward achieving goals that are personally meaningful. Of course, during emerging adulthood, goals often change; but young people still need the ability to take

proactive steps to accomplish the activities and short-term goals that eventually come together to build toward long-term goals and life direction. Developing the capacity to be proactive means learning skills and strategies related to figuring out what to work toward, knowing how to balance short-term and long-term goals, deciding how to take steps toward a goal, gathering information, accessing resources, anticipating barriers, and so on.

The third part of becoming the driver of one’s own positive development is acquiring the capacity to engage with supportive life contexts. This means that young people are able to seek out, build on, work with and/or get support from people and entities (groups of people, organizations, institutions) in ways that help them attain positive developmental outcomes and personal goals. This involves learning a variety of relationship skills and strategies, including positive communication, negotiation, and reconciling the different values and expectations that are part of different contexts.

The fourth part of becoming the driver of one’s own positive development is building the capacity to manage and learn from uncertainty, setbacks and shifts in perspective. Sometimes, young people are faced with important life choices without clear information about consequences. Work now, school later? This job or that one? Stay or move? Keep this relationship? Abandon something secure and known for something new? At other times, when young people pursue their goals, things do not always turn out as planned. Sometimes they experience failure. They may even achieve goals they have set, and then find that the end result is not actually as positive or rewarding as they had anticipated. Because these things are likely to happen, it is important for young people to be able to maintain motivation to keep being proactive despite changing goals and setbacks, and despite not knowing with any

degree of certainty how things will turn out. Additionally, as emerging adults work through these kinds of difficult situations, they gain insight and self-knowledge that helps them learn how to “drive” in the ways that work best for them as individuals. Part of that is learning about specific challenges that recur for them. One young person may have difficulty reading text, another has trouble concentrating, another experiences anxiety that prevents him from getting to his job, another finds herself losing interest quickly and continually changing her goals. Taking a proactive stance toward these challenges may well involve taking steps to learn specific skills and strategies to manage them. These skills and strategies may be gained from friends and mentors, through mental health treatment, through non-traditional treatments, through learning from cultural guides, or through wellness and self care; or a young person may simply develop them on his own.

Positive Identity

As emerging adults take charge of their own development, and through the processes of defining and moving toward positive developmental outcomes, they gradually develop the stable values and commitments that characterize mature adult identity, or sense of self. This ongoing process is depicted by the circular arrows in the figure. Typically, during emerging adulthood, young people take steps to explore different careers and relationships, or to connect to different groups of people or different institutions. As the period of emerging adulthood unfolds, however, young people begin to settle into jobs, relationships and connections; and they become more committed to the values that are part of or consistent with those different contexts. A successfully developing young person thus drives her development in directions that increasingly reflect and reinforce these values and commitments. Key sources for these values and commitments are the cultural,

spiritual, and social groups that the young person is a member of or connected to, as well as the intellectual ideas that have won her allegiance, and that support her coalescing identity and vision of herself as an adult.

Common Elements: What Providers Do Using a PD Approach

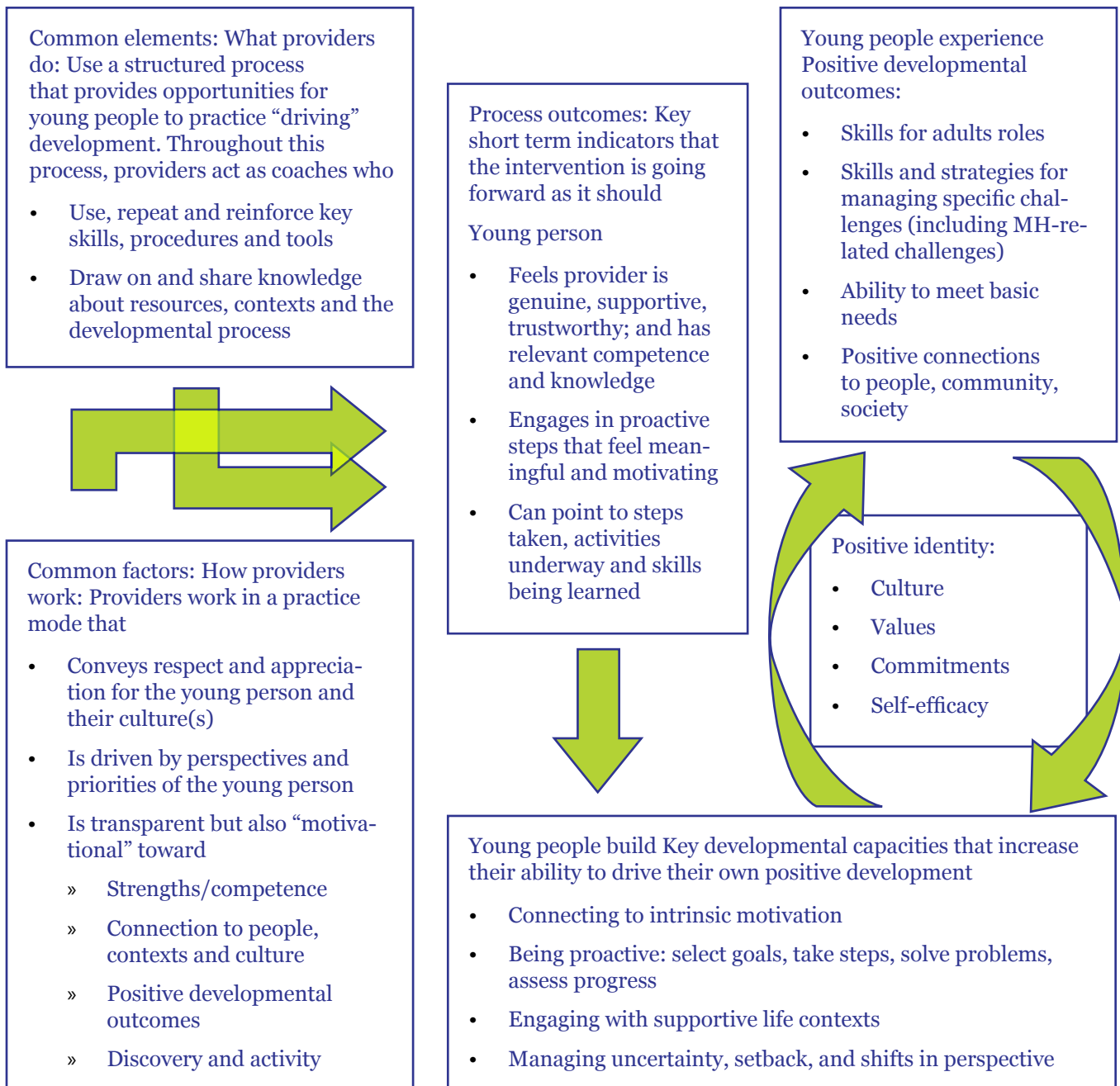
For many young people, the circular process of learning to drive development and achieving outcomes moves ahead, with only the “natural” support that is available from family, friends and others. A positive or “virtuous cycle” develops, in which increases in the key capacities drive increases in positive outcomes, and vice versa (again, the circular arrows in the figure); and a sense of self-efficacy and positive identity emerges.

For some young people with serious mental health conditions (SMHCs), however, the virtuous cycle is not robust. In fact, the process can begin to operate like a vicious cycle with young people having difficulties taking positive steps in their lives and experiencing demoralization and lack of confidence as a result. In turn, this reduces their determination to keep trying.

The difficulty in taking proactive, positive steps can stem from a number of circumstances that are more common among young people with SMHCs than among their peers. For example, as noted above, young people who have spent a lot of time in service systems—like many young people with SMHCs—may have experienced a lot of pressure to be compliant. This means that they may not have much of a sense of what they themselves find intrinsically motivating, and they may lack skills for being proactive. Young people who have experienced trauma—again, like many young people with SMHCs—may have difficulty

Figure 1.

Promoting Positive Development among Emerging Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions



forming positive relationships, which are needed in order to engage positively with life contexts.

Young people who are involved in systems such as foster care or juvenile justice, young people who need to access mental health and other services, young people from impoverished backgrounds, and young people with low levels of social support or of social capital (the benefits of strong social networks), often have less in the way of resources or a safety net, and so the vicious cycle can take on momentum because these young people lack health care, housing, food, access to education, and so on. Furthermore many young people with SMHCs face several of these challenges. Under the Pathways model, a central goal of programs and interventions for emerging adults with SMHCs is to help get the virtuous cycle working in a robust manner, and to use the momentum of the cycle as a means for them to learn about the specific challenges they face and how to manage them productively.

The Structured Process

Programs using a PD approach usually aim to engage young people in a structured process that allows them to practice driving their own development: connecting with their own motivation, taking proactive steps, engaging with positive life contexts, and dealing with setbacks, uncertainty, and change. Throughout this structured process, the provider teaches and models—and the young person learns and practices—the use of key skills, tools, and procedures/processes that are helpful in taking steps toward positive developmental outcomes. The provider coaches the young person, often explicitly labeling the steps of the process and the skills and tools, and helping her learn when is an appropriate time to use which steps/skills/tools. By making this information explicit, the provider helps the young person learn what skills or strategies work best in which type of situation. Thus the young person is not

only practicing the process of taking steps toward personally meaningful goals, but is also learning about the process in a structured way, while being coached in how to apply what is being learned in other contexts beyond the immediate one.

In order to be effective in this coaching role, the provider must have several key types of knowledge that he can share with the young person. First, the provider needs knowledge about the resources that are available to support the young person's plan, and how to access these resources. Thus if the program includes a focus on employment or education, the provider needs knowledge about things like jobs programs, training, financial aid, interest inventories and so on. Providers' effectiveness is enhanced when they also have knowledge about important contexts of the young person's life. Of course, every young person is unique; however, knowledge about the values, expectations and other realities of contexts that are generally important to young people—neighborhood, peer group and family culture, schools and colleges, employers, etc.—provides a vital foundation for building specific understanding about what is important to a particular emerging adult. Finally, the provider needs to have—and share appropriately—relevant knowledge about what it is like to navigate emerging adulthood, the nature of development during that life stage, and how the intervention or project reflects and intersects with that.

Typical Elements of the Structured Process

As far as specific steps go, the program or intervention often begins with a pre-engagement process that focuses on building trust with the young people and on demonstrating the principles of the program in action by “walking the talk.” As trust is gained, the focus typically shifts to a form of person-centered planning, in which the young person works with the provider to create a plan.

The young person takes the primary role in conceiving and carrying out the planned activities. The provider, who can be thought of as a coach or facilitator, supports this process with collaboration and consultation, using knowledge about the young person's life contexts; community resource and social support/social capital development; and support strategies to help the young person create and carry out activities with a good chance of being successful. In some cases, the young person (and the coach or facilitator) works with a larger team to develop and implement the whole plan, or specific portions of the plan. The intervention may encourage the young person to focus primarily on a single or small number of life domains (e.g., career or education), or the intervention may be more comprehensive and have a broader focus, with young people considering a variety of life domains and prioritizing one or more for attention.

A key shared element in these interventions is a focus on strengths, competence, and accomplishment. This often begins with an exploration of the young person's past experience, with the coach drawing out and highlighting personal strengths and assets that the young person may or may not have identified previously. Often, this includes a specific focus on behavior or incidents that providers and systems tend to see as problematic, and discovering in these past experiences genuine examples of the young person's positive efforts to cope, to grow, or to care for others. The exploration also includes attention to other areas of competence and accomplishment, with care taken that the strengths that are highlighted are ones that the young person recognizes as genuine. As the plan is developed and carried out, the focus on competence and strengths is continued, with the coach continually modeling how to recognize, mobilize and build competence and confidence. For example, activities for the plan are often selected because of explicit connection to strengths that have been identified, or because the activities

will help to develop competencies that the young person values.

Another key shared element across interventions and programs is the continual emphasis on helping the young person develop and/or mobilize resources and support available through his or her life contexts. In a manner similar to that used for personal strengths, the coach often begins early in the intervention to explore the young person's past and current situations, including both his or her own personal story, as well as the larger story of the young person's family, community, culture and heritage. Throughout, attention is paid to drawing out and highlighting the various forms of social capital and support that are available or potentially available to the young person from a very wide variety of individuals, groups, organizations and institutions. This inventory of available support is then continually referenced and updated throughout the planning process, and activities that are developed for the plan are designed explicitly to draw on, create, build or strengthen positive connections.

Common Factors: How Providers Work Using a PD Approach

It is clear that simply undertaking a series of steps and creating a plan is not sufficient to produce outcomes. Program descriptions stress the importance of principles or other guidelines that are intended to guide interactions between providers and young people regardless of which specific activity might be underway. In other words, providers are supposed to interact consistently with young people in specific ways, using a practice mode that promotes the key capacities and "feeds" the virtuous cycle of positive development.

For example, it is clearly possible to go through

the steps of strengths exploration in a manner that, rather than leaving the young person with an increased sense of competence and self-efficacy, instead causes the young person to feel more acutely a lack of competence, and leaves him feeling demoralized. It is also quite possible for a provider to undertake an exploration of a young person's connections and contexts in a way that leaves the young person feeling less connected and supported.

But even if the provider can perform a strengths exploration or a social support mapping competently, that is not sufficient to make the intervention strengths based or connections focused. Attention to building and reinforcing confidence and competence, and attention to building and capitalizing on connections to contexts, are ongoing, and appear in ways both large and obvious, and (often) small and subtle. Similarly, an intervention is not driven by the young person's perspectives just because the provider asks a lot of questions.

The principles and practices of PD programs and interventions suggest several core principles underlying this practice mode. First, the provider must be able to convey genuine respect for the young person and appreciation for him/her as a unique individual. This includes respect for the young person's experience, values and culture, and an open-minded appreciation of what motivates and inspires him.

The first principle is closely related to the second, which says that the entire process is to be driven by the perspectives and priorities of the young person. This means that the provider needs to have considerable skill in drawing out what is meaningful and motivating to the young person, helping him or her to clarify perceptions and priorities, and to identify feelings of conflict, ambivalence or ambiguity. Doing this requires patience, skill and self-awareness, so that the provider can elicit and clarify without (intentionally or unintentionally) trying to replace the young person's

ideas, values or perceptions with the provider's own.

A Motivational Approach

Third, the provider needs to be able to take what we refer to as a "motivational" approach. What we mean by this is that the provider is able to allow the young adult's perspectives and priorities to drive the process while also guiding and channeling the process by selectively drawing out, working with, and reinforcing certain things the young person says and does. The provider is thus mildly but intentionally biased, motivational or directive—at all times alert and attuned to opportunities to make specific kinds of reflections or summaries or connections between things the young person has said.

Our use of "motivational" in this context is derived from its usage in a counseling approach called Motivational Interviewing.²¹ Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a method that works to facilitate and engage a client's intrinsic motivation in order to promote behavior change (e.g., problem drinking behavior). While MI is considered a client-centered counseling style, it is more directive than traditional client-centered approaches because the therapist is intentionally biased toward promoting behavior change, and leads the client through a process of considering change and exploring and resolving ambivalence about making change.

Our use of "motivational" in the Pathways model preserves this central idea of the provider as being simultaneously client-driven and directive. However, we apply this idea more broadly, since providers are not just directive about supporting behavior change (i.e., helping young people become more proactive), but also about helping young people understand themselves and their contexts in ways that help engage and sustain the virtuous cycle of positive development outlined earlier. For example, the Pathways model

describes providers as being “motivational” toward the appreciation of strengths and competence. This means that the provider is intentional in working with the young person to draw out authentic talk about his or her strengths or skills, to facilitate opportunities to develop and use these strengths, and to explore and resolve ambivalence related to having, developing and/or using strengths.

Striving to be both person-driven and intentionally biased may appear as a contradiction; however the point is to use the young person’s own perspective as the basis for “bias.” The provider is at pains not to be—or even give the appearance of being—manipulative. To avoid manipulating or coercing, it is important for the provider to be conscious and transparent about exactly what he/she is being biased toward, and to be able to communicate this clearly to the young person during the early stages of the intervention (e.g., by explaining transparently the point of the program or intervention, the outcomes, how it will unfold, the role of the provider in supporting development and change, etc.). This sets the stage for the provider to be transparent about “motivational” comments or reflections made later on, by explicitly reminding the young person of how a particular aspect of the work fits within the parameters of the intervention

The Pathways model describes providers as being motivational or “biased” toward the appreciation and development of strengths and competence. So, for example, rather than telling a young person about all the important strengths he has, a provider works to elicit authentic talk from the young person about accomplishments, successes or assets that he/she finds personally meaningful. Or a provider may offer a reframing of something a young person has described as a failure, saying that it could be understood as a learning experience or even a success in some way—however, this would be offered rather than declared, and described in a way that links to commitments or

values or other incidents that the young person has an authentic belief in, based on what the provider has learned about the young person previously.

A key aspect of the focus on strengths and competence is the provider’s work to ensure that the young person has genuine experiences of competence—and expanding competence—during the course of the intervention. For example, this often comes up when the young person is taking action steps as part of planned activities. The provider needs to develop a clear understanding of the relevant skills or competencies that the young person already has, and to help the young person prepare to have a successful experience by using existing competence and/or by expanding on existing competence. So, if a young person is planning to visit a community college to talk to an admissions officer, the provider may work with the young person to anticipate what the encounter may be like and to plan accordingly, perhaps by developing questions for the admissions officer, preparing answers to anticipated questions from the admissions officer, planning what to wear, what to bring along, how to record information, and so on. After the visit has taken place, the provider debriefs the young person to help her understand not just the information she has received, but also what she has learned about how to get information in a somewhat formal encounter. Ideally, the visit will have resulted in the young person feeling a sense of accomplishment and new competence. This can be true even when certain aspects of the visit do not go so well, since handling problems is also an important area of competence. In short, a central purpose behind this focus on strengths and competence is to help the young person understand himself as someone who can do things that are intrinsically meaningful or that help in achieving meaningful goals. A provider or coach working with the Pathways model is thus motivational in helping the young person have and recognize these successes.

The provider is also biased and motivational toward acknowledging, building and bolstering the young person's connections to positive contexts, including individual people, groups, organizations and institutions whose values and impact are consistent with promoting the developmental outcomes. The provider is continually alert to the young person's mentions of contexts that could support her positive development. Being "biased" in this way is also how the provider selectively promotes positive developmental outcomes more generally. Without claiming moral superiority—or even a greater knowledge about how the world, or the young person's contexts, work—the provider works with the young person to explore how actions, activities and connections reflect or diverge from the young person's own interests, values and commitments, as well as the values and interests of the key contexts to which the young person is most deeply connected.

Some programs themselves become important life contexts for young people, and thus a developmental spur for cultivating identity and values. Providers in culture-specific programs seem to be the most intentional in this regard, and use a motivational approach to focus directly on identity formation through reflection on cultural values and practices. The program itself serves as an important life context, and young people in the program commit to that context and, by extension, to the values it promotes. In some cases, programs that include a peer support element also work overtly to build values and identity around social activism and social justice issues.

Finally, a provider using a Pathways approach is attuned to and draws out what excites the young person, holds her interest, motivates her, brings joy, arouses curiosity, or brings a sense of well-being. This enables the provider to activate "discovery," the process of expanding opportunities to find intrinsically motivating "hooks" that can not only contribute to the young

person's well-being, but also possibly lead to future strengths and competence. As a part of the discovery process, the provider uses his understanding of the young person's current level of comfort with what is familiar, and supports the young person in exploring something new, taking on some element of risk—for example by going to a new place or meeting or talking to a new person—that enables her to expand her horizons and explore possibilities.

Another facet of discovery is that the provider is biased toward activity. At certain times, particularly when the young person is stuck, the provider may need to be biased or "motivational" toward activity—doing something rather than nothing. Getting unstuck by doing something is an important proactive strategy as well as an opportunity for discovery.

Our own experience has reinforced that working in this "motivational" mode requires a focused intentionality. Openings to explore strengths, competencies, connections or "motivational hooks" (things the young person finds exciting, intriguing, interesting, fun) can be subtle and fleeting, and working to "enlarge" a subtle opening can require a nimble and skilled response from the provider/coach.

Process Outcomes

It should be possible to assess whether or not the "what" and the "how" of the intervention are coming together well as the provider's work with the young person unfolds. According to our model, early success of the approach can be recognized when several things happen. First, the young person feels that the provider is genuine, trustworthy and respectful, and helps the young person to clarify her own thoughts and ideas without trying to replace those thoughts, ideas and perceptions with the provider's own. The young person should also feel confident that the

provider is competent and has knowledge—in other words, that the provider is not just a nice, empathetic person, but that he has the capability to help the young person make positive progress toward valued goals and outcomes.

Additionally, as the intervention or program unfolds, the young person should be able to point to specific ways that she has been engaged in

taking proactive steps that are personally meaningful and motivating, and that demonstrate her ability to make or build on connections to positive contexts. Finally, the young person should be able to describe how working with the provider has helped him learn skills, techniques, or procedures that are useful outside of the intervention as well as within it.