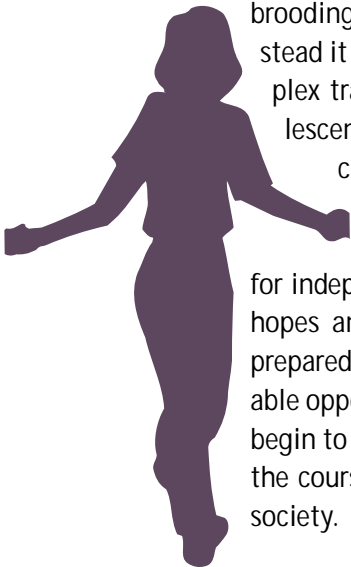


The Youth Development Approach *Looking for what's RIGHT with adolescents*

Teenagers. Does the word immediately bring to mind visions of tasteless clothing, reckless experiments with drugs and sex, delinquency, and bad attitudes? Is there any cohort more famous for pushing the societal envelope? Possibly not! But do these images create an accurate picture of adolescence? Is there a more optimistic and appealing view of this time in life?

According to youth development specialists, good news is here — adolescence is not the brooding way station we once suspected. Instead it is one of the most fascinating and complex transitions in the human life span. Adolescence is a time of accelerated growth and change that is second only to infancy. During adolescence an individual achieves an unprecedented readiness for independence and identity. The enthusiastic hopes and energies that accompany this new preparedness provide youth workers a remarkable opportunity for helping adolescents as they begin to make decisions that will shape not only the course of their own lives, but the future of society.



The media, social policy makers, and even youth themselves often shine a spotlight on the risks associated with adolescence (e.g., gang activity, unwanted pregnancy, and dropping out of school), calling for programs to “fix” what is wrong. However, a growing movement of youth development proponents are successfully shifting the public spotlight away from the problems of adolescence to its positive and transformative potential.

Developing, Not Just Deterring

Youth development is an effort to promote the positive psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual development of young people to help them move towards competent adulthood. Rather than channeling resources into programs that simply deter problem behaviors, youth development proponents encourage youth workers to create activities, programs and environments that will enable youth to build confidence and gain critical life skills while meeting basic human needs.

A youth development approach asks parents, youth workers and youth themselves to expect more from young people than just staying out of trouble. Merely staying out of trouble does not mean that youth will be fully prepared for adulthood. A young person who is alcohol and drug free will not automatically make an effective employee. That youth must also develop vocational skills, a positive attitude toward adults, and the ability to interact with customers and colleagues.

prevention *Tactics* 2:2 (1998)

Tactics (tak'tiks) *n.* 1. a plan for promoting a desired end. 2. the art of the possible.

Adulthood 101

JUST AS A 10TH grader must successfully complete a number of homework assignments to pass from Algebra I to Algebra II, all adolescents must complete a number of specific **developmental tasks** to pass from youth into adulthood. These tasks fall into two categories: **building competencies** (skills, behaviors and attitudes), and **meeting needs**.

According to youth development experts, all adolescents, no matter what their gender, culture or ethnicity, must successfully develop six competencies and satisfy six basic needs before they can move from childhood into adulthood (see box).

Whether they realize it or not, adolescents spend the majority of their energy in an attempt to satisfy their powerful physical and emotional needs. *How* they satisfy those

needs — whether it be in socially acceptable or unacceptable ways — depends on the quality of **supports** (ongoing relationships) and **opportunities** (ongoing chances for development) provided by their families, schools and communities.

For example, an adolescent may attempt to fill the need for group membership and structure by joining the YMCA, 4-H, a music program, or after-school sports. But what

Young people have basic needs critical to healthy development. They also must acquire specific competencies to succeed as adults. Helping youth meet these needs and develop these competencies is the mission of youth development organizations.

KEY CONCEPTS

BUILDING COMPETENCIES

HEALTH: The knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that will assure one's future well-being (e.g., exercise, good nutrition, effective contraception).

SOCIAL: The ability to work with others, develop and sustain friendships, be empathic, negotiate, cope with difficult situations, and use good judgment.

INTELLECTUAL: Good oral and written language skills, problem-solving ability, and capacity to learn and be creative.

VOCATIONAL: Knowledge of available career options and the steps for acquiring employment. An understanding of the value and purpose of family, work and leisure.

CITIZENSHIP: An understanding of one's personal and community history, ethical standards, and desire to contribute to the broader good.

MENTAL HEALTH: The capacity to develop and maintain a sense of personal well-being and the ability to adapt to changing situations.

MEETING NEEDS

SAFETY: Feeling that one is physically and psychologically safe and that there is adequate "structure" in life.

SELF-WORTH: Perception that one is a "good person" who is valued by self and others.

MASTERY: Perception that one is accomplished, has abilities valued by self and others, and maintains some control over daily events.

AUTONOMY: Perception that one is a unique person with a past, present and future, and that one can "make it" in the world.

BELONGING: Perception that one loves and is loved by kin and friends and that one is an important part of a larger social group.

SELF-AWARENESS/SPIRITUALITY: Perception that one is intimately attached to a larger system (e.g., a cultural group, higher deity, philosophy) that provides meaning and purpose to one's life.

Adapted from Pittman and Wright (1991), Ongoing Emotional Support

happens if no appropriate organization or other opportunity exists in his/her neighborhood? Left with the same need for membership, might that same young person instead choose a highly structured and tight-knit neighborhood gang?

Meeting needs and developing competencies are the most critical and challenging assignments adolescents will ever receive. Completing these assignments successfully is not easy. Because of profound changes in our society over the past few decades (e.g., single-parent families, prevalence of drugs/alcohol, breakdown of communities), we cannot assume that youth will have the necessary supports and opportunities needed to develop the skills and emotional strength required for adulthood.

How Youth-Serving Agencies Can Help

IF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT is what *youth* do, what then is the role of youth-serving organizations?

According to youth development specialists, the role of these organizations is to support youths' development by providing activities, opportunities and supports in areas that families and communities define as important. Research clearly shows that when young people are in places rich in opportunities and supports, they are less likely to engage in problem behaviors, more likely to achieve in school, and more likely to attend higher education or secure a full-time job. By providing youth with an environment that challenges them to grow while satisfying their most basic needs for

safety, belonging, autonomy, etc., youth-serving organizations can fill the gaps left by weakened family and community networks.

CONCEPTS IN ACTION

No single institution, organization or program can be solely responsible for assisting young people in using their time and planning their futures. Promoting youth development requires more than just a program here or there. It requires that communities understand, assess, strengthen and integrate the full range of people, places, and institutions that form the environment in which young people live and mature.



WHAT DOES A YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION LOOK LIKE?

What does youth development look like in an organizational setting? Below is a listing of some national and community-based youth development organizations and some of the activities and programs they offer to build youth's competencies while meeting their basic needs.



ORGANIZATION/ACTIVITIES	COMPETENCIES	NEEDS
BOY SCOUTS — camping, survival skills, community service, sports	Intellectual, Citizenship, Health	Belonging, Mastery, Safety
NATIONAL 4-H — project planning, public presentations, record keeping, recreation	Vocational, Citizenship, Social	Mastery, Autonomy, Self-Worth, Belonging
JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT — leadership training, career apprenticeships	Vocational, Social	Mastery, Autonomy
GIRLS INC. — sports, health and sexuality education, cultural events	Health, Social, Mental Health, Citizenship	Autonomy, Belonging, Self-Awareness, Safety

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT CAN take place anywhere that youth congregate — in schools, churches,

clubs, families, on play-

grounds with peers — and also in situations where no adults or peers are present. What is important is not *where* youth development takes place, but *how* it takes place.

How can youth-serving organizations best assure success? According to the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, successful youth development organizations stand apart from other youth-serving organizations through the promotion of 6 key principles and practices (right).

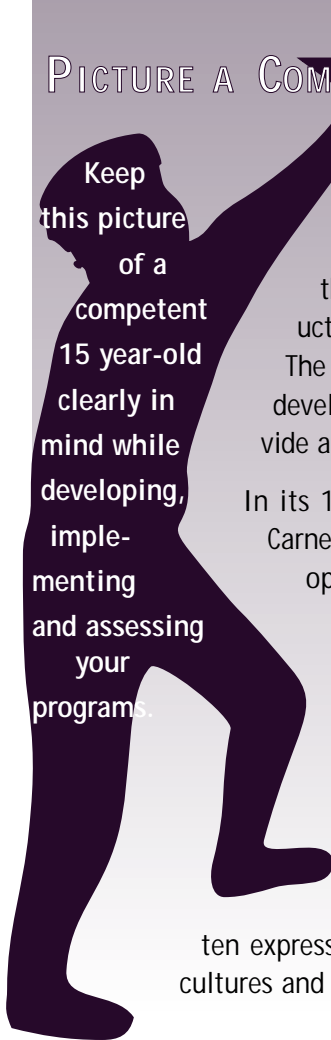
PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES OF SUCCESS

1. OFFER activities that promote developmental growth.
2. USE learning strategies based upon fun, play and action.
3. TEACH life skills rather than academic skills.
4. GIVE youth ownership over program and program space.
5. HOLD profound respect for the youth involved.
6. MAINTAIN consistently positive values.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

PICTURE A COMPETENT 15-YEAR-OLD

Keep this picture of a competent 15 year-old clearly in mind while developing, implementing and assessing your program.



HOW can youth development workers and agencies know if they are reaching their goals? What does the end-product of youth development look like? The gradual and holistic nature of youth development makes it difficult to provide a simple answer.

In its 1989 report, "Turning Points," The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development offered youth development workers a clear yardstick to measure their work efforts. This yardstick came in the form of a definition of what constituted a "competent 15-year-old":

★ **An intellectually reflective person:** one with good problem-solving skills, good oral and written expression, and an appreciation of other cultures and languages.

★ **A person en route to a lifetime of meaningful work:** one who is aware of career options, understands the importance of formal education, has the ability to learn, and has pursued a course of study that keeps occupational options open.

★ **A good citizen:** one who accepts responsibility for shaping surrounding events, understands the nation's history and values, and feels responsible for and connected to the world community.

★ **A caring and ethical individual:** one who recognizes the distinction between good and bad, understands the importance of developing and maintaining close relationships, embraces virtues such as courage, honesty, tolerance and caring, and demonstrates these through sustained service to others.

★ **A healthy person:** one who is physically and mentally fit, has a self-image of competence and strength based on being good at something, and has developed self-understanding and appropriate coping skills.

STEP 1

Get a handle on youth development.

FAMILIARIZING YOURSELF and your staff with the youth development perspective is the first step in implementing youth development program activities. Ideally, *all* staff in your organization should have time to discuss youth development and its implications for policy and practice before moving ahead. However, this may not be feasible because of time and other constraints. At the very least, key management staff need to be comfortable with a

youth development framework in order to introduce it to other staff.

Two documents developed by the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research provide a good place to start:

- “Definitions, Language and Concepts for Strengthening the Field of Youth Development Work”
- “Introduction to Youth Development Concepts”

NEXT STEPS

Both of these working papers provide a framework for introducing organizations to youth development, including questions and discussions to generate dialogue. Copies are available from the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (see Resources, page 6).

STEP 2

Identify your organization’s strengths and challenges.

BEING COMMITTED to youth development requires that you both understand and apply its principles to your work with youth. The questions at right will help you and your colleagues to assess your organization’s current understanding and use of youth development concepts and practices and to identify your future training and programming needs.

Once you answer these questions, you can develop a list of tasks your organization needs to complete to better promote youth development. This list will become the basis for an action plan that your staff team can carry out.



SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

- How familiar are all staff with the developmental outcomes (i.e., the skills, knowledge, attitudes) your organization is trying to promote with young people?
- Which youth development principles are currently at work in your organization? How familiar are all staff with these principles?
- How does your organization keep up with current research on youth development practice? How is this information disseminated to staff and incorporated in staff development activities?
- Has your organization identified a list of required skills, abilities and experience for its youth workers? If yes, what are they? Have staff agreed on this list?
- To what extent does your organization provide training opportunities that enable youth workers to develop interactive skills that promote desired outcomes?
- What ways do you have to ensure that issues of cultural diversity and other community-specific matters are always on the organization’s training agenda?
- How does your organization involve the voice of young people in its programs?

Questions excerpted in part from *Training for Youth Workers: Assessment Guide*. Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (September 1995).

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

**Academy for Educational Development, Center
 for Youth Development and Policy Research**

The Center publishes documents on youth development that address not only outcomes but strategies as well. For more information, contact the Center at 1875

Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009. Phone: 202.884.8267. Fax: 202.884-8404. cyd@aed.org

California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs

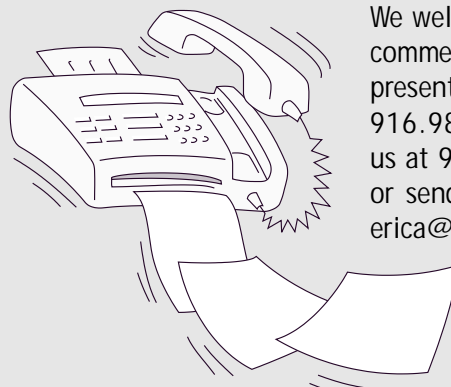
DADP provides technical assistance on issues related to alcohol and other drug prevention, treatment and recovery. For more information, call The EMT Group, Inc., at 916.983.6680. A catalog of FREE publications and materials is available through the department's Resource Center at 1.800.879.2772.

RESOURCES

Youth development ought not to be viewed as a happenstance matter. While children can, and often do, make the best of difficult circumstances, they cannot be sustained and helped to grow by chance arrangements or make-shift events. Something far more intentional is required: a place, a league, a form of association, a gathering of people where value is placed on continuity, predictability, history, tradition, and a chance to test out new behaviors.

The Youth Development Committee of the Lilly Endowment

LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!



We welcome readers' comments on topics presented. Call us at 916.983.6680, fax us at 916.983-6693, or send an email to erica@emt.org

prevention Tactics is published four times per year by The EMT Group, Inc., under its Community Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention contract with DADP. The purpose of this publication is to help practitioners in the prevention field stay abreast of best practices emerging from current research and to provide practical tools and resources for implementing proven strategies.

The information or strategies highlighted in *Prevention Tactics* do not constitute an endorsement by DADP, nor are the ideas and opinions expressed herein those of DADP or its staff.

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Editor Erica Fogle

Writer Selena Polston

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