

RESEARCH



FINDINGS

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Understanding Youth Development

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Principles and Practices

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Youth Development (YD) is a strategic approach with a focus on practices for engaging entire communities in helping all youth thrive. It builds on traditional youth service approaches by emphasizing long term, systemic strategies for cultivating qualities and traits desirable in young people through the creation of environments that support their developmental needs and capacities. The YD approach is founded on the belief that young people thrive when they are developmentally supported across all sectors of the community — school, youth serving agencies, faith organizations, community governance, business, juvenile justice system and more.

The YD framework is a descendant of *resilience* studies in the early 1980's when scholars began to explore why some children and youth achieved a healthy, even happy, adulthood despite serious adversity (Rutter 1985; Werner and Smith 1992). It also evolved from best practices/lessons learned in the prevention field prior to the 1990's: cross agency collaboration, client-driven program planning and services, loosening of restrictions on categorical funding, and the acknowledgment of the interwoven roles of families, classrooms, schools, peers, neighborhoods, and larger communities in influencing outcomes of children and adolescents (Wynn, Costello, Halpern, & Richman, 1994).

YD stresses the role of communities in creating what has become widely known as “SOS”: *Services, Opportunities, and Supports* (Pittman, et al 2001). However, although SOS has become common place in YD, it is not always clear what “services, supports, and opportunities” look like or how they differ from what most communities already have in place. The remainder of this fact sheet is designed to review key features of the YD framework in hopes of fostering a clearly defined youth development language.

What are Services, Supports, and Opportunities?

The SOS framework articulates principles and practices entire communities can engage in to enhance optimal youth development.

Services: Actions done to or for youth intended to enhance health, safety, performance, and other forms of essential well being and physiological functioning. These are the traditional primary, secondary, and, to some extent, tertiary intervention services provided by public health systems, school districts and recreational projects/facilities. They are critical, but alone, are inadequate for fostering well being.

Opportunities: Simply, these are actions by young people, where youth become actors rather than recipients. The “O” in the SOS trilogy represents the extent to which youth are provided meaningful and real opportunities to practice and expand on what they know and learn – either through work,

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service, or advanced learning. Although youth ideally encounter a diverse array of opportunities, those which are sustained and encourage youth to exercise meaningful decision making roles ultimately foster the greatest number of personal competencies (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Lorens 2001).

Supports: Tangible activities that are done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources. Pittman et al. identify three main categories of support: emotional, motivational, and strategic – all of which work separately and together to foster positive development. Taken as a whole, supports promote a positive *climate* for development. Emotional support facilitates a sense of safety, nurturing and friendship. Motivational support provides positive expectations, guidance and developmentally appropriate boundaries. Strategic support facilitates access to needed resources and information.

A Community Strategy – Not Just a Program Strategy

Because youth and adults are integral to each other’s development and wellbeing (Erikson, 1979) it is important to create developmentally attentive *communities* and not just developmentally attentive programs. Despite our best intentions, youth and adults often lead very separate lives. Keeping youth in places and programs which rarely, if ever, involve sustained contact with adults other than program staff, fails to provide young people realistic opportunities to assess interest in and potential for working or participating in vocations within the broader community. Moreover, no one program can ensure that a young person encounters all of the SOS he or she needs. Youth development is founded on the idea that when schools, youth serving organizations, businesses, civic organizations, community government, and faith institutions intentionally provide services, opportunities, and/or supports to youth individual young people will accrue enough SOS in the day to day interactions of their daily life to support healthy development.

SOS in Programs

Youth serving programs have a critical role to play in providing the SOS that young people need. While they can strive to support a wide and diverse array of services, supports, and opportunities, they can also work with other agencies, youth-serving programs, schools, families, peer groups, and community institutions to promote collaborative strategies focused on:

Positive Outcomes: Emphasize the importance of tracking negative outcomes such as: teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and violence in relation to positive outcomes such as: competence (academic, social, vocational skills), self-confidence, connectedness (healthy relationship to community, friends, and family), character (integrity, moral commitment), caring and compassion.

Linking Theory and Practice: Community Programs to Promote Youth Development

In early 1999, a committee composed of national youth development leaders launched an initiative to cull lessons learned from adolescent health research and practice; they identified nine features of positive developmental settings. When the following conditions are present in all youth occupied environments, adolescents are best positioned to thrive (Eccles et. al., 2002).

- Physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structures that provide: limit setting; clear, consistent rules and expectations; continuity and predictability; and age appropriate monitoring.
- Supportive relationships characterized by warmth and closeness.
- Connectedness, caring, support and responsiveness.
- Opportunities to belong and for meaningful inclusion regardless of demographics or abilities.
- Positive social norms with clear rules for behavior, expectations, values and morals.
- Support for efficacy and mattering that includes enabling, responsibility and meaningful challenge.
- Opportunities for skill building.
- Integration of family, school and community efforts.

Individual Development: The capacities, perceptions, and needs of youth vary dramatically. Youth development strategies recognize that age combined with individual interest and ability play a strong role in what youth need to thrive. Adults and groups should develop services, supports, and opportunities accordingly.

Youth Voice: Viewing youth as resources rather than as problems or service recipients is a core YD principle. Youth participation can take different shapes – from youth expression, to youth assisting in program planning and implementation, to youth sitting on decision-making boards. Regardless of how youth are involved, youth voice challenges adults to rethink how they engage young people in the process of planning, developing and implementing opportunities for young people.

Long-term Involvement: Activities and supportive relationships have to accompany youth throughout their development to be effective. While short-term positive results should be recognized and built upon, positive community-based youth outcomes may not be measurable for 15-20 years. Consequently, planning youth development strategies should include thinking about how to sustain these efforts.

Community Involvement: Youth development principles and practices can be included in programs but the SOS framework is founded on community-wide mobilization and involvement! Youth are most likely to benefit from services, supports and opportunities when both *the youth-serving and non-youth serving sectors* in their community collaborate. This means that businesses, faith communities, government agencies, and individual community residents all have an important role to play in creating developmentally attentive communities in which youth are connected, valued, guided, engaged and included in the day-to-day exchanges of community life (Scales 2001).

Emphasis on Collaboration: No single agency or service system is able to provide all the support young people and their families need to achieve positive outcomes. Youth development requires inter-agency and cross-system collaboration. It brings together people from public and private agencies and community groups to form a partnership. Unfortunately, it is much easier for individual organizations, usually youth serving organizations, to focus

on infusing the SOS framework into their own programs without targeting other community entities and individuals. Creating developmentally attentive cultures through sustained and broad collaboration across all community sectors is what makes YD different and powerful.

Implications

The SOS framework can be a powerful tool in thinking through the objectives of a program or community wide initiative. When using it in this way, it is important to keep the following things in mind.

- 1) YD can be thought of as a coordinated, community level effort to ensure that all youth have equal access to the array of services, supports, and opportunities they need;
- 2) Services, supports, and opportunities are interrelated but not the same thing;
- 3) YD principles and practices can be included in programs but the SOS framework is founded on community-wide mobilization and involvement;
- 4) Youth serving programs and agencies can best effect meaningful change in the lives of children and youth through working to ensure: a focus on positive outcomes, inclusiveness, youth voice, longevity, community involvement, and cross sector, agency, institution, and program collaboration.

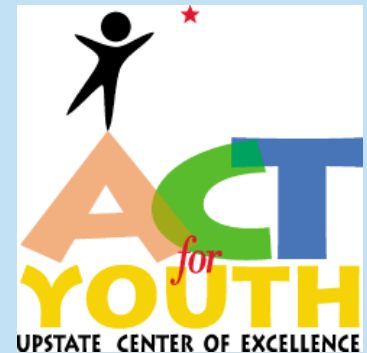


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