

Transcript: What Is Positive Youth Development?

Applying Positive Youth Development (PYD) to Youth Service Organizations

What is positive youth development? Many professionals working with young people have different things in mind when they hear this term. Some think of youth programs, while others may think of child and adolescent development.

In this brief presentation we will define positive youth development and its key principles.

Next, we will explore what this approach means for youth programs and supervisors and/or program directors who oversee these programs.

Introduction

Welcome, my name is Jutta Dotterweich. I am currently the director of training for the ACT for Youth Center for Community Action at Cornell University.

Over the past 20 years I have been advocating for positive youth development in various capacities. As director of the Advancing Youth Development partnership we have provided training and technical assistance on PYD to counties all across New York State for many years. In more recent years we initiated the PYD Network and provided updated PYD training in person and online across the state.

Objectives

The objectives for this presentation are threefold:

- One, clarify the meaning of positive youth development by providing you with a definition and description of its key principles.
- Two, apply and translate the approach to youth programs and clarify what that means for programs and organizations.
- Three, identify support strategies you can use to promote, strengthen, and integrate a positive youth development approach in your program and organization.

“Problem free is not fully prepared. Fully prepared is not fully engaged.” - Karen Pittman

Let’s take a brief look at history, going back to the 1990s. Karen Pittman of the Forum for Youth Investment, who is considered by many to be the mother of Positive Youth Development, used two statements to distinguish youth development from prevention and to make the point that we need to go beyond prevention to help young people thrive.

“Problem free is not fully prepared.” Imagine a young person coming to you for job and telling you: “I don’t drink, smoke, or use drugs. I am not in trouble with the law. I don’t have pre-marital sex. Please give me a job.” This does not tell you anything about their skills, competencies, values, strengths. You don’t know if they are prepared and have the basics skills for the job. The statement makes it clear that we need to prepare young people for school, work, and life--we need to build skills, not just prevent problem behaviors.

“Fully prepared is not fully engaged.” This statement recognizes the need to prepare young people to be active and engaged citizens and care for the community and society they live in.

Defining Positive Youth Development

So how do we define Positive Youth Development?

“Positive Youth Development is a philosophy or approach that guides communities in the way they organize programs, supports, and opportunities so that young people can develop to their full potential.”

Recognizing that young people grow up in families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities, PYD is a community-based approach. We know from research that social context matters greatly for development. Supportive relationships and environments that offer opportunities to learn and grow are essential. But we also know from research that not all young people have the support and the opportunities they need.

PYD can play a role in addressing these challenges and inequities.

Characteristics of PYD

Let’s take a closer look at the characteristics of a positive youth development approach.

- As we mentioned in the Karen Pittman quote, PYD aims to go beyond addressing and preventing problem behaviors. Instead we want to focus on building positive outcomes for young people – knowledge, skills, confidence, character, values, and connections that prepare them adulthood. Recognizing and building on their strengths will empower and motivate them to grow.
- Engaging youth – giving them a voice – is a key principle of PYD. We work with young people, not for them. We engage young people as partners, create youth-adult partnerships, and listen to their expertise and perspective. This principle recognizes young people’s need to matter, to have agency.
- As a community we have to support young people throughout their development – about 20 years – while adjusting to their changing developmental needs. Twelve-year-olds need different support and opportunities than 16-year-olds.
- As a community we need to provide support and opportunities to all young people, not just to the “high risk,” targeted groups or the high achieving group. This does not mean, however, that we should not be aware and address inequities and access issues.
- As we discussed earlier, young people are interacting with a variety of social environments. For a positive youth development approach to succeed, non-traditional community sectors such as businesses, faith communities, or civic organizations need to be involved. And this implies that we have to work together collaboratively.

We create positive outcomes for youth by changing adults, programs, organizations, and communities

In general, the positive youth development approach aims to create positive outcomes for youth by changing adults, programs, agencies, and communities.

PYD changes:

ACT for Youth: Supervisor's PYD Toolkit resource
www.actforyouth.net/youth_development/professionals/supervisors

- how adults work, engage, and relate to young people
- how programs are conducted, which activities are included, and what program environments look like
- how organizations allocate resources and establish practices and policies to support and value youth
- how community members and agencies collaborate to support all young people and provide the opportunities they need to thrive

What does PYD mean for youth programs and organizations?

Applying this to your program settings we could use this structure or framework. We want to engage in and surround young people with positive experiences, positive relationships, and positive environments. What does this mean?

- **Positive Experiences:** Young people experience quality programming that engages them to learn, expand their horizon, and connect with adults – and programming that provides them with opportunities to matter, to have a voice.
- **Positive Relationships:** Young people experience positive relationships with adults – relationships that focus on caring, support, growth, inclusion, and agency. Young people have the opportunity to experience youth-adult partnerships.
- **Positive Environments:** Young people experience a positive, supportive environment that is safe, inclusive, and welcoming; where they feel a sense of belonging and feel valued. There is also a recognition that young people are connected to many other community agencies or groups; there are connections between the program organization and other community agencies and groups, and they provide a web of support to young people.

Supervisor Strategies

Based on our experience and research, we know that new, innovative strategies such as positive youth development require organizational support to be implemented successfully. Supervisors play a key role in advocating, creating, and sustaining the conditions for young people to have positive experiences, relationships, and environments in youth programs and youth-serving organizations.

They can create and support positive experiences for youth by promoting quality programming, ongoing program improvement--preferably with youth and staff involvement--and developing quality staff.

They can create and support positive relationships with young people by promoting developmental relationships between staff and youth as well as creating opportunities for youth-adult partnerships. They can reimagine supervisory practice and thus their relationship with staff by integrating PYD principles such as a strength-based approach and experiential learning.

Finally, they can create and advocate for positive environments for youth by establishing practices and policies that focus on safe and inclusive program settings, opportunities for youth, and staff engagement and community collaboration.