

Promote Positive Youth Development

Parents and other caring adults want what's best for their own children and other young people in their communities. But what research has found over the past 25 years is that involving youth in those discussions and decisions that affect them directly is the best way to help them grow into happy, productive adults.

Positive youth development (PYD) is a comprehensive framework outlining the supports young people need in order to be successful. PYD emphasizes the importance of focusing on youths' strengths instead of their risk factors to ensure that all youth grow up to become contributing adults.¹

States and policymakers are beginning to use this framework to develop policies and programs that will ensure that all youth are ready for college, work and life. The holistic approach focuses on engaging families, schools and communities in activities that support education, leadership development and a sense of accountability and ownership in the community among adolescents.³

An example of a successful community-based PYD program is one that was implemented through Big Brothers/Big Sisters and evaluated by Tierney, Grossman and Resch (1995). The study⁴ showed that participation in the program, which focused on establishing a mentoring relationship with prosocial adults, had a powerful impact on the prevention of problem behaviors. Among participants, drug use decreased by 45%, the frequency of skipping a class or a full day of school decreased by 37% and 52%, respectively, and the number of times a child lied to his or her parents declined by 37%.

Rachel Heerema, Executive Director of the Citywide Youth Coalition, which helps develop and connect the work of dozens of youth-serving organizations in New Haven, Hamden, East Haven and West Haven says "some in the field have started referring to their constituency as *youth at promise* rather than *youth at risk*. And, while lower-income areas may experience a more severe lack of programming resources, research shows that the term *youth at risk* applies to young people across the geographic and socioeconomic spectra, from the very affluent to the disadvantaged. One of the goals of area nonprofits is to communicate the PYD philosophy in every community.

Heerema says research shows that even if poverty is a constant, youngsters do better if there are caring adults and supportive institutions in their lives. But looking at the internal characteristics of kids, there are *three keys to resiliency*: initiative, attachment, i.e., growing healthy relationships, and self-control. She says funding often flows into *silos* of pregnancy prevention, drug and alcohol abuse prevention and violence prevention, "but if you do a meta-analysis across all these domains about what works, it's the PYD framework. Rather than focus on preventing bad things, positive youth development prepares kids to navigate difficulties."

Co-founded with the Citywide Youth Coalition in 1994, The Consultation Center's Youth Development Training & Resource Center (YDTRC) works to ensure that a PYD framework is utilized to increase the effectiveness of youth organizations. YDTRC works with local, regional and state funders and networks to secure resources for youth-serving programs. Because of YDTRC, frontline workers and supervisors better understand the youth development framework and current research on best practices for community youth engagement. Staff access new resources to bolster program effectiveness and involve more youth in program planning and development. Staff interaction with young people is more respectful of youth voices, perspectives and abilities. Young people are encouraged to take responsibility and try out new leadership roles.



The National Research Council identified the following characteristics for programs that support and promote the positive development of youth:

- Physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structure
- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Support for efficacy and mattering
- Opportunities for skill-building
- Integration of family, school and community efforts²

Rachel Heerema describes the PYD framework as including three components: services to address deficits, such as tutoring or summer meals; supports, like parents, teachers, coaches and clergy; and opportunities, like summer camp and talented and gifted programs, "where kids can develop their skills, strengths and character."

"The YDTRC training provides youth workers with the knowledge, skills and motivation to work with youth in a way that empowers them. All Solar Youth full time staff go through YDTRC's trainings, because no one does it better than them," says Joanne Sciulli, Solar Youth's Executive Director.

"[Without philanthropy], a lot of these nonprofits wouldn't even exist," says Pam Mautte, Director of VSAAC.

"The role of philanthropists is not just for ongoing support, but also to help support the gathering of data and provide the seed money that helps get these [PYD] programs up and running."

Understanding that this issue cuts across all income levels, we spoke with Laurie Rudefer, the former Coalition Coordinator for Madison Alcohol and Drug Education.

“All the communities in our area should be creating a language and a message [for PYD] across borders,” says Rudefer. “You have the ability when your child is born to make a huge difference in his or her life by beginning to talk from birth. We need to do the same thing with Positive Youth Development.”

“Parents ask, ‘Will my kid be able to stand up against stress, stand up for the right thing, let me know when he or she is struggling?’” Rudefer says. “The science says when kids feel supported, when they have more developmental assets, they’re significantly less likely to do risky things.”

The Search Institute has identified 40 Developmental Assets, a term that represents positive factors in the lives of young people and their families, communities and schools. These are the very things that PYD programs provide. Research shows that these Assets have an important affect on both academic success and healthy outcomes.^{5,6}

The more assets, such as leadership, good health, valuing diversity and succeeding in school, that students have, the less likely it is that they will get involved in risky behaviors such as alcohol, tobacco and drug use, violence and early sexual activity.

Adolescence is a particularly important time to reach out to youth. It is a time when young people begin to experiment with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs and, because of new freedoms associated with their age, begin to participate in behaviors that can have a lasting impact on their futures.

Connecticut high school students completing the Youth Risk Behavior Survey⁷ reported that:

- 44% had used alcohol in the last month
- 24% percent had engaged in binge drinking
- 22% had used marijuana
- 41% had engaged in sex
- 28% had been involved in a fight in the last month

A survey by the Valley Substance Abuse Action Council (VSAAC)⁸ revealed that 45% of Valley students surveyed had been bullied at least once. The study also reported that 62% of 11th graders surveyed had used alcohol and 36% had used marijuana. With this type of information in hand, many local nonprofits are working to provide opportunities for positive growth and empowerment to balance the social pressures that can lead to poor decision making. By facilitating social growth, decision making skills, safe and responsible behavior, and positive relationships, these nonprofits are building Greater New Haven’s future — and philanthropic support is an essential component to ensuring positive outcomes.

With alcohol, drugs, bullying and youth crime often dominating the media headlines, it can be challenging to find encouraging news about our area’s youth. However, the hard work and dedication of many area nonprofits tell a different story — one of hope, opportunity and growth.

What The Community Foundation is Doing

The Community Foundation has long been committed to supporting positive youth development programs for the region’s youth. We’ve been there in the beginning to help launch nonprofits like LEAP, Citywide Youth Coalition, Farnam Neighborhood House and many others.

Liz Gambardella began a youth leadership program 20 years ago at Farnam Neighborhood House in Fair Haven, with grant money from The Community Foundation. “We were the lead agency and brought all the neighborhood groups together,” she says, stressing the value of collaboration in adopting a youth-driven focus. “Years ago we did programming for people but that was a new process that the youth would have a say in what they were doing. We started in middle school, making connections during the critical times of their development; high school is too late.”

What You Can Do

To assist in the work promoting positive youth development, learn about the nonprofits that are working in this area, consider donating to one of them through giveGreater.org, volunteer, or create a permanent fund designated to supporting young people. *Already have a fund at The Community Foundation? Recommend a grant by logging on to DonorCentral. You can create change with just a click of the keyboard.*

1-3 <http://www.ncsl.org/?tabid=16375>

4 Tierney, J.P., J. Grossman, and N. Resch (1995). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

5 *Search Institute Insights & Evidence* · October 2003 · Vol. 1, No. 1

6 *Search Institute Insights & Evidence* · March 2004 · Vol. 2, No. 1

7 2009 CT YRBS <http://www.ct.gov/dph/cwp/view.asp?a=3132&q=38810>

8 <http://www.vsaac.com/publications.html>

