

# Positive Youth Development So Far

## Core Hypotheses and Their Implications for Policy and Practice<sup>1</sup>

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POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT (PYD) first emerged as an approach among practitioners working with youth, when they saw the benefits of using strength-based models with children and adolescents. As often happens, this work in the practitioner arena proceeded with little attention from the academic world until relatively recently. The long history of the application of developmental psychology and sociology had been pervaded by a focus almost exclusively on the negative: disadvantaged family backgrounds, risky behaviors, the effects of poverty, rapid social change, and substance use.

“Normal” development was thought not to provide much interest or scope for study, compared with development that was maladjusted or downright aberrant. The pendulum swing away from abnormal development began with the study of resilience—the amazing ability of some adolescents to succeed, even thrive, despite challenges, obstacles, and deficits that led many of their peers to make disastrous choices.

Out of the critiques of deficit models and the calls for “something better” that arose from practitioners dissatisfied with “merely” reducing risky behaviors came what we now call positive youth development.<sup>2</sup> It is the focus on young people’s strengths, skills, and possibilities. Indeed, William Damon of Stanford University argues that positive youth development represents a sea change in psychological theory and research, with observable consequences for a variety of fields, including education and social policy.<sup>3</sup> Damon suggests that PYD takes a strength-based approach to defining and understanding how children influence and are influenced by their contexts over time; it holds up the centrality of community as an incubator of positive development as well as a multifaceted setting in which young people can exercise agency and inform the settings, places, people, and policies that in turn affect their development. Finally, in its efforts to identify the positive attitudes and competencies that energize healthy developmental trajectories, the field is

FIGURE 1

### Core Positive Youth Development Constructs

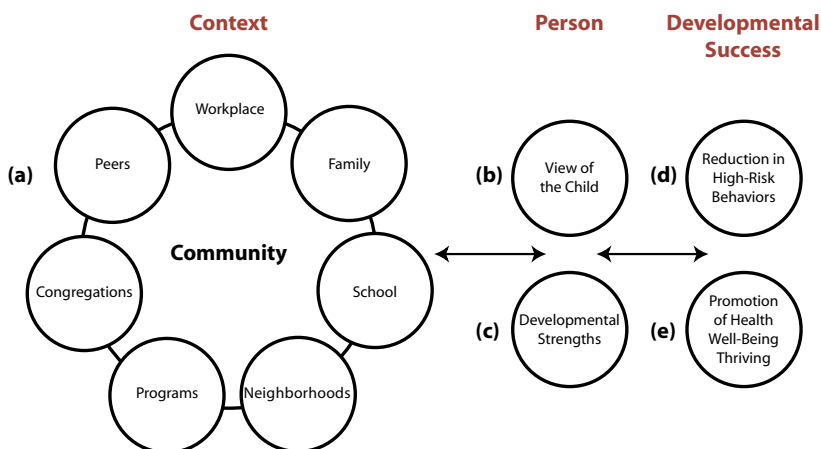


TABLE 1

### Four Vocabularies of Positive Youth Development

	Contexts	Person	Developmental Success
<b>Search Institute (Developmental Assets)<sup>a</sup></b>	External Assets: Support Empowerment Boundaries and Expectations Constructive Use of Time	Internal Assets: Commitment to Learning Positive Values Social Competencies Positive Identity	Thriving Indicators: Helps others Overcomes adversity Exhibits leadership Values diversity Maintains good health Delays gratification Succeeds in school Resists danger
<b>National Research Council<sup>b</sup></b>	Features of Positive Developmental Settings	Personal and Social Assets	
<b>America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth (The Five Promises)<sup>c</sup></b>	Caring Adults Opportunities to Serve Safe Places Healthy Start		Marketable Skills
<b>Forum for Youth Investment (The Five C's)<sup>d</sup></b>	Connection	Character Competence Confidence	Caring/Compassion

<sup>a</sup>Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (2004). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis: Search Institute; <sup>b</sup>National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; <sup>c</sup>Retrieved October 16, 2006, from www.americaspromise.org; <sup>d</sup>Pittman, K., Irby, M., & Ferber, T. (2001). Unfinished business: Further reflections on a decade of promoting youth development. In P. L. Benson & K. J. Pittman (Eds.), *Trends in youth development: Visions, realities and challenges* (pp. 3–50). Boston: Kluwer Academic, p. 8.

not afraid to identify values, moral perspectives, and religious and spiritual worldviews as constructive developmental resources, even though doing so “flies in the face of our predominantly secular social-science traditions.”<sup>4</sup>

As PYD gains credibility in more traditional academic research institutions, and the two strands of practice and research combine to form a basis for future policy, the need to clarify the common ground of both strands becomes paramount. With this examination of PYD's theory, definitions, and hypotheses, we hope to further our joint cause of moving beyond “fixing” young people to taking a solid, strength-based approach to practice, research, and policy alike.

### Defining Positive Youth Development

Many authors have published vocabularies of positive youth development. Various researchers, thinkers, and practitioners have created a rich set of words to name what it is we are studying: strengths, protective factors, developmental nutrients, Developmental Assets, and more (see Table 1 for representative terms).

Yet the current lack of consensus on any particular definition, which reflects the relative newness of the field as well as its profoundly interdisciplinary nature, obscures the amount of common ground that can be found. In fact, a review of numerous definitions reveals that each definition focuses on some combination of (and the interactions among) five core constructs:

- Developmental contexts, i.e., places, settings, ecologies, and relationships in the community that have the potential to generate supports, opportunities, and resources (a);
- Two aspects of the person: the nature of the child, and especially the inherent capacity to grow, thrive, and actively engage with supportive contexts (b); and the child's developmental strengths (attributes including skills, competencies, values, and dispositions important for successful engagement in the world) (c); and
- Two complementary constructs of developmental success: the reduction of high-risk behaviors (d) and the promotion of thriving (e).

Figure 1 illustrates these core constructs; the bidirectional arrows convey the dynamic nature of person-ecology interactions prominent in recent expositions of positive youth development.<sup>5</sup>

Seven hypotheses that arise from these core theoretical ideas—along with the key empirical support for them in research to date—illuminate the interactions of the constructs and establish directions for future innovations in policy and practice.

**Hypothesis 1:** Changes in contexts change young people, and we can intentionally change young people's context(s) to enhance their developmental success.

There is abundant evidence that ecological contexts can be changed to promote positive youth

development, as well as a wealth of data about why such approaches have those positive effects. In most of this research, researchers have (usually, but not always) documented the efficacy of intervention or prevention programs in providing youth with experiences that facilitate developmental outcomes.

### Selected Evidence

One of the most impressive studies illustrating the power of changed contexts on personal change and developmental success is the evaluation of Big Brothers/Big Sisters conducted by Public/Private Ventures.<sup>6</sup> The investigators randomly assigned half of those awaiting placement to a delayed-treatment control group while seeking mentors for the other half. Those in the treatment group demonstrated several advantages over the control group, including lower likelihood of beginning to use drugs and alcohol or to have hit another person, along with better attitudes toward school, and better grades and attendance. In addition, they reported improved relations with family and peers. The causal pathway of mentoring's effects on school performance appears to have been through improved relations with parents.<sup>7</sup>

The Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington conducted one of the most wide-ranging reviews of positive youth development programs.<sup>8</sup> They identified 161 programs and discussed in detail 25 that were well evaluated and showed significant effects on behavioral outcomes. The programs had to have one or more of 15 objectives for building developmental nutrients (see sidebar).

The programs also had to address either multiple "developmental nutrients" or a single nutrient over multiple social domains of family, school, or community. Programs that addressed only a single nutrient in a single domain were excluded. Competence, self-efficacy, and prosocial norms were addressed in all 25 programs, and most programs dealt with at least 8 of the 15 nutrients. Most programs used positive outcome measures as well as reduction of problem behaviors in their evaluations. Nineteen of the 25 programs demonstrated significant effects on positive youth development outcomes, including improvements in interpersonal skills, quality of

## 15 Objectives for Building Developmental Nutrients<sup>a</sup>

- Promote bonding;
- Foster resilience;
- Promote social competence;
- Promote emotional competence;
- Promote cognitive competence;
- Promote behavioral competence;
- Promote moral competence;
- Foster self-determination;
- Foster spirituality;
- Foster self-efficacy;
- Foster clear and positive identity;
- Foster belief in the future;
- Provide recognition for positive behavior;
- Provide opportunities for prosocial involvement; and
- Foster prosocial norms.

<sup>a</sup>Identified by the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington; see note 8.

peer and adult relationships, self-control, problem solving, cognitive competence, self-efficacy, commitment to school, and academic achievement. In addition, 24 of the 25 showed significant reductions in problem behaviors such as alcohol and other drug use, school problems, aggressive behavior, violence, and risky sexual behavior.

In a particularly clear illustration of the importance of multiple contexts, investigators in another study used the framework of identity development theory to describe the developmental role played by different kinds of community service.<sup>9</sup> In their view, service provides access to different "transcendent systems of meaning" that enable high school students to connect themselves with historical, religious, ethnic, or political traditions "of which they can legitimately feel a part."<sup>10</sup> Young people were more likely to volunteer if they were in networks in which their parents and friends did service, and if they were connected to youth organizations and religious institutions. That is, service was less an individual and spontaneous act and more the result of a web of positive relationships and norms that together elevated service to a shared social expectation.

In short, intentional efforts to change contexts to improve developmental success among young people can work. Researchers consistently find that a cluster of intervention components makes a difference. These components include:

- Strengthening adult-youth relationships;

- Establishing social norms around desired behavior;
- Learning social competencies; and
- Providing youth with opportunities for involvement and leadership.

This research provides both guidance and encouragement for policy makers and practitioners in attending to the most important factors.

### Policy and Practice Implications

- Emphasize transforming environments, not just “fixing” kids. PYD is as much about the transformation of adults and systems as it is about working directly with young people to make change happen.
- Recognize that transforming environments is different from adding programs. Growing evidence suggests that even “proven” programs have little impact if they are placed in a “toxic” or unhealthy environment, whereas placing a program in a developmentally rich context may actually increase the program’s effectiveness.
- Seek to bring about change in multiple systems and environments, as each has power in young people’s lives.

**Hypothesis 2:** When youth themselves take action to improve their contexts, their efforts are empowering and also improve the contexts for themselves and their peers.

In the same way that young people’s contexts affect their development, young people’s actions also change their environment. Thus, the influence is two-way, with young people being key actors in their own development and in shaping the world around them.

The interplay of person and context means not only that change in context changes the person but also that young people’s own actions inevitably alter the contexts, with related consequences, positive or negative, for development. Two assumptions grow out of this hypothesis:

- The impact of youth action is cumulative, because youth who take action once are more likely to continue doing so and because other youth may be inspired by their example also to take action; and
- Youth participation, engagement, and lead-

ership processes can help strengthen young people’s impact on both themselves and their contexts.

### Selected Evidence

Being engaged in the community and being interested in being involved are related to key youth outcomes. Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi studied a diverse national sample of 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders.<sup>11</sup> They compared adolescents who were “chronically interested” with adolescents who reported being habitually bored. The interested, engaged adolescents had significantly higher global self-esteem, internal locus of control, and optimism about their future, and significantly less pessimism than the bored adolescents.

In an examination of how youth participation in one kind of developmental context—extracurricular or community-based activities—might positively influence youth development, researchers suggested that involvement in extracurricular or community-based activities may facilitate six key developmental processes:

- Identity exploration;
- Development of initiative and goal-directed behavior;
- Growth in emotional competencies;
- Formation of new and varied peer network connections;
- Development of social skills; and
- Acquisition of social capital through developing relationships with nonfamily adults.<sup>12</sup>

The researchers concluded that a common thread connecting these processes was that the young people participating in youth programs were developing a sense of agency and seeing themselves as producers of their own development. This empirical conclusion provides support for one of the tenets of both ecological and, especially, developmental systems theory:

Children and youth help to construct their contexts and do not simply “interact” with them.<sup>13</sup>

When youth provide community service, they participate in an activity that is explicitly intended to alter both person and context. For example, a 1999 study examined the effects of 10th-grade prosocial activity involvement (religious involvement and/or participating in volunteer and community service) on concurrent and

future (2 years later) risk behaviors and academic outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Students engaged in prosocial activities drank alcohol and used marijuana less at both time points than did students not engaged in these activities. Involved students also had higher concurrent and future GPAs than did their uninvolved peers, even after controlling for initial levels of outcome.

These and many other studies illustrate the significance of different kinds of youth engagement on *changes* in developmental outcomes over time. In particular, the results suggest that all youth, regardless of background, may benefit from active participation and engagement.

### Policy and Practice Implications

- Integrate service, leadership, and engagement into all types of programs and settings.
- Make youth engagement and leadership normative, not occasional add-ons, recognizing the cumulative impact of these processes over time and across contexts of effective youth engagement.
- Adopt “best practices” in youth engagement. For example, a growing body of research shows that just having young people do a service project may or may not have positive outcomes. The odds of positive impact increase greatly when best practices in service-learning are incorporated, such as engaging young people in all phases of planning and leadership, providing opportunities for structured reflection on the experience, and engaging in projects that are meaningful for both the young people and the communities being served.<sup>15</sup>

### **Hypothesis 3: Both the person and the context matter.**

Developmental theory posits that person and context are mutually interactive, such that increasing developmental strengths of one kind tends to increase the other. Thus, developmental strengths “in” the person, such as social competencies or positive identity, work together with developmental strengths “outside” the person in her or his various contexts (e.g., family, school, peers, community) to promote developmental well-being and thriving.

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### Selected Evidence

Studies consistently find constellations of both internal and external factors to be associated with various outcomes. For example, using a diverse sample of adolescents from nine California and Wisconsin high schools, researchers reported protection against delinquency and substance use among adolescents who experienced warm relations with parents, came from relatively well-organized households, valued academic achievement, and were engaged at school, felt close to teachers, and performed well in school.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in a study of an aggregate sample of nearly 100,000 youth from more than 200 U.S. communities, investigators reported that a cluster of both internal and external Developmental Assets—positive peer influence, peaceful conflict resolution, school engagement, and safety (at home and at school)—added 30% to the explained variance of engagement in violence, compared to the 8% explained by demographics.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, a study of “commitment resilience” and “academic resilience” followed a group of 8th graders through 10th grade.<sup>18</sup> Both kinds of resilience were fostered by a similar constellation of developmental nutrients. These included family involvement in and supports for schooling (e.g., books in the home, a place for studying, rules about TV watching [for academic resilience only]), teacher responsiveness (listening to and being interested in students), fairness of school discipline policies, and student involvement in school and extracurricular activities.

Such findings underscore the potential benefits of interventions that intentionally comprise both internal and external dimensions—both person and context influences—on development, recognizing that each can influence and change the other.



## Policy and Practice Implications

- Avoid either only focusing on building young people's skills or only changing the environment or contextual variables; the best results occur with simultaneous efforts to do both.
- Reach out to programs and people in other context(s) to provide consistent messages and use good relationship/communication techniques in all contexts; developmental outcomes are likely to be enhanced.
- Enrich your work with young people by equipping them with the social skills (e.g., listening, conflict resolution) to engage positively with teachers, mentors, and parents.

**Hypothesis 4:** Increasing the *number* of developmental nutrients across settings is what matters most, not increasing specific strengths or combinations of strengths in any single setting.

The fusion of context and person in all the multiplicity of settings and the individuality of people creates an infinite diversity of combinations of nutrients that “matter most” for a specific person. It is therefore not possible to single out the best two or three nutrients for all kids in all places. But research shows that simply increasing the number of nutrients in multiple contexts for a young person—without a narrow focus that limits efforts to one or two specifics—enhances that young person's development.

## Selected Evidence

In an elegant illustration of the hypothesis, a 2000 study documented the multiplicative effects of Developmental Assets on the academic achievement of African American students living in poverty and making the transition to middle school. Students with *either* family (high parental involvement) or school protective factors (perceived teacher support or feelings of school belonging) had higher GPAs in 6th grade than classmates who did not experience those nutrients. But students who had *both* family and school assets had higher GPAs than students who had only family or school assets but not both.<sup>19</sup>

Relationships with adults in school and community settings also add valuable sources of protection from risk. For example, in the

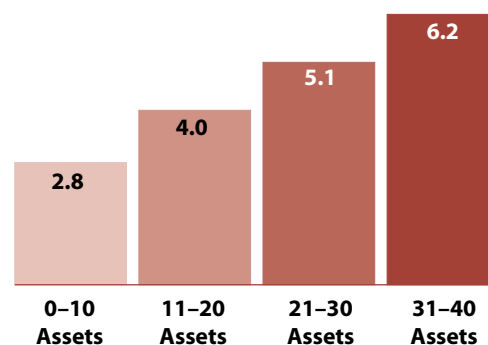
National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, young people who experienced closer connections to their families and schools were significantly less likely than other adolescents to engage in a variety of risk-taking behaviors.<sup>20</sup> Each of the contexts (family and school) by itself explained relatively modest portions (5%–18%) of the variance across outcomes such as emotional distress, violence, and substance use. But when the effects of the other context (family or school) and assets in still other contexts (e.g., religious involvement) were included, the collective contribution of these assets to outcome variance increased by more than 50%.

Analogous to these findings for risk, a study of more than 800 urban African American students in the 8th grade lends further support to the hypothesis that *strengths* accumulating across ecological domains magnify the protective and thriving effects of positive experiences in single contexts.<sup>21</sup> When three support contexts—family, school, and faith community—were combined, the effect on students' attitudes about themselves and about the importance of school was significantly magnified.

FIGURE 2

### Relationship of Increasing Levels of Developmental Assets to Average Number of Thriving Indicators

Average Number of Thriving Indicators



NOTE: Based on aggregate Search Institute sample of 148,189 students surveyed in 2003. The sample included 202 cities in 27 states.

Figure 2 illustrates the notion that the number of developmental nutrients matters, as well as specific nutrients or combinations thereof.

The data show a clear pattern of increase in thriving indicators matching an increase in the number of Developmental Assets, regardless of which particular assets are added. The effects of positive experience across multiple contexts can also be seen in a more in-depth study of the relations among Developmental Assets and thriving indicators. For example, among white 6th–12th graders, achievement motivation alone explained 19% of the variance in school success (self-reported grades). But school engagement, time in youth programs, time at home, planning and decision making, parent involvement in school, and self-esteem added another 12% of variance.<sup>22</sup> These findings are consistent with those reported by Eccles and colleagues (1997). In their study of middle school students, the explained variance of adolescent outcomes was “substantially increased” when all the contexts studied (family, school, and peers) were added into regressions, leading the researchers to conclude that positive experiences across contexts add “linearly and independently” to contribute to positive development.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, the empirical evidence is consistent and strong for the theoretical relation between the number of assets that adolescents experience in multiple settings and the positive developmental outcomes of both greater thriving and lessened risk behaviors. It is possible that the evidence is not yet fine-grained enough; perhaps a carefully designed study comparing combinations of assets chosen on theoretical grounds might challenge the hypothesis. But the evidence available supports the hypothesis.

### Policy and Practice Implications

- Work to achieve consensus across settings—home, school, youth programs, religious organizations—on important developmental nutrients and how to build them. While certain young people will need special attention to build certain developmental strengths, the most efficient and effective use of scarce resources is to build multiple developmental nutrients for all kids in all their settings. This strategy can also alleviate the frustration that can arise when focusing too tightly on only one or two positive outcomes or when diagnosing individual needs is difficult.

- Create programs and curricula that promote many of the developmental strengths, not just a single one (like self-esteem), and raise awareness among teachers, parents, and other adults of the importance of nurturing multiple strengths.
- Focus on areas where change is possible, recognizing that strength in one area may help compensate for challenges in others. For example, young people who live in dysfunctional families can benefit from other sources of developmental strengths, even if you don’t initially have a direct way to positively influence the family.

### **Hypothesis 5: Building developmental nutrients can have an impact at the time of intervention as well as later in life.**

This hypothesis reflects the multiplicative nature of developmental strengths—that when young people gain developmental strengths, those strengths protect them at the time and also enable them to gain new strengths that contribute to their subsequent protection. Multiple scientific studies have found that high levels of developmental strengths result later in life in (a) lessened risk behaviors; (b) increased academic achievement; (c) increased contributions to school and community; and (d) higher levels of other thriving indicators.

### Selected Evidence

Numerous studies have demonstrated that developmental nutrients contribute to positive youth outcomes, not only concurrently, but also over time. For example, young people who as children and adolescents participated significantly more than their peers in school clubs were especially likely to report positive outcomes in *young adulthood* (ages 18–22). Outcomes included closer relationships with their parents and greater involvement in community affairs or volunteer work.<sup>24</sup> And in a small ( $N = 100$ ) sample of racially/ethnically diverse adolescents from low-income families, it was found that a positive school climate contributed to higher levels of self-esteem 2 years later, over and above the positive effects of family and friend support.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, experiencing developmental nutrients in multiple contexts also is developmentally

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advantageous over time. In a study of changes in early adolescent development, researchers found that the effects of *individual* contexts on development were generally quite modest, but that the *additive* effects of adolescents' multiple positive contexts were considerable.<sup>26</sup> This result is in alignment with other research showing the value of young people experiencing “redundancy” of Developmental Assets across their ecologies.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, the most important “outcome” of development is more development. The findings of the Iowa Youth and Families Project are illustrative. The researchers reported that the nutrients of nurturant and involved parenting experienced in 7th grade helped young people have fewer emotional and behavioral problems and function more competently during adolescence, even when dealing with family economic adversity. But young people who experienced those family strengths during adolescence also were themselves more competent parents and more successful in their romantic relationships years later in *early adulthood* (5 years after high school).<sup>28</sup>

The overall pattern of these results suggests that developmental strengths have a continuing influence over time in addition to their more substantial impact on concurrent developmental outcomes.

### Policy and Practice Implications

- Take the long view—what we do with young people has immediate impact as well as impact that may influence them in later adolescence and adulthood.
- Set up feedback systems for teachers that recognize the trajectory of healthy development for young people, not just the current academic year. New systems should acknowledge the building blocks put in place by teachers with younger ages (even if they didn't see the results) while also celebrating the key reinforcing work that is continued by teachers

with later ages.

- In policy decisions about evaluation methods and investment in longitudinal research, strive to achieve a balance between short-term impact and long-term healthy development.

### Hypothesis 6: Community-wide efforts to build developmental nutrients are as important as those on the organization, family, and individual levels.

To venture a prediction, the largest improvements in positive youth development will occur more in response to interventions/initiatives that are aimed at the community level than those aimed at individuals. To clarify, let's consider an analogy to public health. Despite dramatic improvements in medical treatment, “improved sanitation, work environments, and immunization programs as well as safety measures . . . have done more to improve health than one-to-one medical treatment.”<sup>29</sup> Just as it makes more sense to build a system to provide pure water than it does to cure endless cases of dysentery, it makes more sense to make communities healthy places for all youth than it does to try to make every youth resilient. A focus only on “individual treatment” of young people is inadequate to promote their full potential development.

### Selected Evidence

Community mobilization to promote positive youth development must address not only formal organizations and programs but also informal norms and relationships. Studies show that youth do better in communities where adults share some basic values, norms, and expectations, including understandings about what kind of behavior is acceptable and what to do when someone crosses the line.<sup>30</sup>

To illustrate, researchers used ecological theory to predict the results of a 6-year longitudinal study of several hundred African American and Latino adolescent males and their primary caregivers. As predicted, a complex relationship was



reported among community structural characteristics, neighborhood processes, parenting practices, and young people's violent behavior. Neighborhood poverty and high crime levels were found to predict participants' perceptions of neighborhood problems and neighborliness. At the same time, high poverty and crime were related to more restrictive parenting, which reduced violence by limiting young people's gang involvement.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, a wide range of evidence suggests the most effective school-based prevention and youth development approaches are those that "enhance students' personal and social assets" and improve the school-community environment.<sup>32</sup> The focus of effective approaches is not on narrow programs addressing a single issue—programs that often may be more disruptive than beneficial—but rather on comprehensive efforts that try simultaneously to build students' health, character, citizenship and community connection, school orientation, and academic performance. The American Psychological Association's Task Force on Prevention: Promoting Strength, Resilience, and Health in Young People also endorses a broad approach that coordinates problem prevention with efforts to build young people's competence, relationships with others, and contributions to the community.<sup>33</sup>

Much of the impact of community comes from adults outside young people's own families. Recent research has documented clearly the value of formal mentoring relationships for young people.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the limited evidence suggests that only 15% of young people report experiencing a "rich" level of relationships with adults other than their parents.<sup>35</sup>

A particularly useful analysis of community initiatives examined factors critical to the success (or lack of it) in the New Futures initiative and the New York City Beacons project (community centers operating in public school buildings). Although the two initiatives had similar aspirations, they were directed by quite different theories of change and implementation strategies. The authors credit the success of the Beacons project to a clear, understandable, and politically compelling emphasis on co-locating services, supports, and opportunities in neigh-

borhood schools to create "safe havens" for youth. In addition, the Beacons' focus on professionals working directly with youth, and on the grassroots support of volunteers, parents, and neighborhood residents, led to faster achievement of goals than the New Futures' approach of creating collaboratives to plan and coordinate youth services and programs citywide.<sup>36</sup>

A somewhat different theory of change undergirds Search Institute's national Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth movement. With about 600 communities currently engaged,<sup>37</sup> this change strategy invites communities to create multiple innovative "experiments" to transform contexts and ecologies with a particular eye to mobilizing asset-building adult and peer relationships. A number of studies are completed or ongoing in capturing both how transformative community change is made and the connection of such change to adolescent health and well-being.<sup>38</sup> For example, a longitudinal study in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, provides suggestive evidence that sustained community-wide engagement with asset building has population-level effects on several measures of well-being.<sup>39</sup>

## Policy and Practice Implications

- Look for and foster multiple sources of developmental strengths in a community, not just formal programs and activities, and not just families.
- Empower and equip people and systems to cross sector boundaries. Funding and strategic plans that are institutionally focused make it difficult for people to build the needed bridges.
- Seek and develop innovations that help to change social norms and expand engagement across a community.

### **Hypothesis 7: Community-level interventions to build developmental supports and opportunities will benefit all or almost all youth.**

This hypothesis proposes that there are developmental supports and opportunities that enhance developmental success for all youth. And because all young people need developmental nutrients, many community-level interventions will benefit all or almost all youth. Although

youth with few or no developmental nutrients may require targeted interventions, one of the functions of those targeted interventions is to enable disadvantaged youth to benefit from more universal interventions.

Research that looks at similarities and differences in patterns of strength across multiple groups of young people helps to illuminate specific areas of need or strength for various groups while also pointing to the overall utility of promoting all developmental strengths for all young people. We briefly describe here illustrative research pertaining to positive youth development as reflected across gender, SES, and race/ethnicity, noting the need for empirical work relating strengths to other dimensions of diversity, including sexual orientation, family background, and differing exposures to violence.

## Selected Evidence

### Gender

Studies consistently find that females report higher levels of most developmental nutrients than do males, with the exception of self-esteem.<sup>40</sup> Apart from frequency differences, however, numerous studies suggest that assets may operate somewhat differently for males and females.

In a study of 911 7th–12th graders from a mining community in the Southwest, both attachment bonds (connections to parents, unrelated adults, and peers) and involvement bonds (time in school and nonschool activities, including time in religious activities, volunteering, and clubs or organizations) predicted less delinquency and greater academic achievement (self-reported grades) for both boys and girls.<sup>41</sup> Yet the patterns for each gender were somewhat different in degree of effect: Involvement bonds predicted delinquency more for males than females, and attachment bonds predicted grades more for females than for males.

### Race/Ethnicity and SES

A 2003 study that examined Developmental Assets and outcomes among 217,277 6th-through 12th-grade students (including 69,731 youth of color) surveyed in 318 U.S. communities during the 1999–2000 school year also found cross-cutting patterns in developmental

processes.<sup>42</sup> Across all racial/ethnic groups, greater numbers of assets were associated with fewer risk behavior patterns and more thriving indicators. These relations held even after controlling for socioeconomic status. For example, across all racial/ethnic groups, young people who engaged in none of 10 high-risk behavior patterns said they experienced about 23 assets, whereas those who reported engaging in 5 or more of the 10 risk patterns said they experienced 15 or fewer of the Developmental Assets.

At the same time, there were racial/ethnic differences. For example, boundaries-and-expectations assets (e.g., family boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, and adult role models) were important for all youth in helping them avoid antisocial behavior, but were found to have especially strong preventive associations for American Indian, Multiracial, and White youth.<sup>43</sup>

Although developmental nutrients in general appear to have comparable positive relations with developmental outcomes for most groups of youth, how particular nutrients function to promote positive outcomes may well vary depending upon which dimensions of diversity are examined. For example, a study of the relation of components of authoritative parenting to academic achievement (self-reported grades) among 155 African American and European American high school students found that parental support, behavioral control, and psychological control had significantly different relations with grades, depending on parents' race and gender.<sup>44</sup> For African American students, maternal support was significantly related to academic achievement, but the other components were not, and none of the parenting components was significant for African American fathers. But for neither European American mothers nor fathers was support a significant contributor to achievement. For European American students, fathers' use of greater behavioral control, and mothers' use of greater behavioral control and less psychological control were significant predictors of academic success.

Clearly, there are developmental supports and opportunities that enhance success for all youth. How to build the strengths varies, as do individual need, ability, and temperament. An impor-

tant remaining challenge is to determine effective ways to help disadvantaged and marginalized young people benefit from community-wide efforts to aid development.

## Policy and Practice Implications

- Focus community strategies on changing the environment for all young people. But also recognize the need to support and align strategies that actively address individual differences. Balance the general with the specific; no single strategy will work for each young person, even though all kids need more strengths/assets.
- Develop strategies to mobilize community resources for positive development that reach all kids, not just those who are more likely to “show up.” There’s some research to suggest that broad strategies, if not intentionally inclusive, can actually increase the gap between haves and have-nots by increasing the asset base for those who are likely to engage but not actually reaching those on the margins.<sup>45</sup>
- Invest in additional innovation and research to determine specifics of the relationship between broad cultural change and individual impact.

## Remaining Questions

These hypotheses and the supporting evidence highlight the critical value of dialogue between research and practice, with the practices in community informing the research agenda, and vice versa. An ongoing challenge is to maintain this conversation in ways that strengthen the theoretical and research foundations while also deepening the effectiveness of how individuals, programs, organizations, communities, and, ultimately, societies nurture young people. A number of vital questions remain:

- What are the strategies that enhance the capacity and will of schools, neighborhoods, families, and congregations to nurture developmental strengths?
- How can we best orchestrate change at multiple levels, including the community level?
- How can we ensure that youth are at the forefront in planning and implementing the

transformation of society?

- What is the interaction between program- and organization-level changes and broader community changes? That is, are programs more effective when they are embedded in a community context that’s intentional in nurturing developmental nutrients? Or, do effective programs and organizations have a “spillover effect” in changing the culture of community?
- What is the influence of “natural” mentors (e.g., neighbors) on young people’s lives and on youth empowerment?
- How do less-studied dimensions of diversity, such as sexual orientation, family background, immigration status, or differing exposure to violence, relate to the delivery of developmental strengths?
- Is there such a thing as too much of particular developmental nutrients, such that they no longer are protective but may even become deficits or risk factors (e.g., family support becoming enmeshment, or high expectations becoming a factor that lessens perceived feelings of competence)?

As researchers and practitioners explore these questions and the innovations that emerge from them, it is important to note the continuing need for evaluations of multiyear, comprehensive youth development initiatives that target multiple outcomes, as well as for more standardized measures of core youth development outcomes, so that results across different studies can more readily be compared.<sup>46</sup>

One of the major contributions of positive youth development theory and research is the identification of the multiple contexts and settings that inform developmental trajectories. As an applied field, positive youth development and its advocates face crucial decision points about how and where to create intentional change. Though the development of and/or enrichment of programs is the primary locus of intervention, we could also improve access to developmental nutrients by transforming socializing systems (e.g., schools and neighborhoods) or mobilizing a majority of adults to create sustained relationships with community youth.

It is here, in the complex space of community and societal change, that new thinking is partic-

ularly needed. The least developed part of positive youth development theory is that having to do with *how* intentional social change can best be understood (and practiced). The complexity of this issue (as well as the societal importance

of promoting positive development) requires an interdisciplinary approach, integrating multiple fields in common pursuit of how to enhance the dynamic fusion of ecological- and individual-level strengths.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. F., & Sesma, A., Jr., Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications. In W. Damon & R. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (vol. 1, pp. 894-941). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2006. This material is used by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

<sup>2</sup>Positive youth development is an umbrella term that covers many streams of work. It is variously a field of interdisciplinary research, a policy approach, a philosophy, an academic major, a program description, and a professional identity (e.g., youth development worker). The "idea" of positive youth development reaches into a number of fields, including child and adolescent developmental psychology, public health, health promotion, prevention, sociology, social work, medicine, and education. Within the past few years, positive youth development has been a focal topic in a wide range of scholarly journals, including the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (January, 2004), *Prevention and Treatment* (June, 2002), *the Prevention Researcher* (April, 2004), and the *American Journal of Health Behavior* (July, 2003). Two established research journals, *Applied Developmental Science* and *New Directions in Youth Development*, help to ground the field.

Two types of social analysis have fueled the rise of positive youth development as a field of science and practice. The first documents a series of pervasive societal changes that inform and shape the processes of child and adolescent socialization. It is common in published treatises on positive youth development strategies to pinpoint the role of rapid social change in altering youth access to developmental resources. In this extensive literature, social changes hypothesized to undermine the capacity of family and community to generate developmental resources include increasing parental absence as a result of changes in the nature of work and the dramatic increase in out-of-home employment of mothers; the rise of civic disengagement; the loss of shared ideals about the goals of development; the growing privatization of recreation; increases in age segregation; the decrease in neighborhood cohesion; teenagers' disconnection from structured programming; the prevalence of negative stereotypes about youth; and the explosion in media access.

The second social analysis common in the youth development literature is a critique of deficit models prominent in the service professions, policy, and research. Indeed, it is a somewhat common refrain that models focused primarily on reducing risk behaviors, for example, are inadequate both theoretically and strategically. These ideas have been discussed in a wide range of positive youth development publications, and there is consensus that adolescent psychology and applied youth areas have been dominated, in recent decades, by explorations of "youth problems."

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