



***Positive Youth Development:
creating environments where youth thrive***



www.urbanalliance.com

This booklet was prepared by:

Urban Alliance, Inc.
62 Village Street
East Hartford, CT 06108
www.urbanalliance.com

Content prepared by:

Jessica Sanderson, PhD, LMFT; Rosaicela Rodriguez; Angela G. Colantonio, MPH, MS; Rosa McGuire

Suggested citation:

Sanderson, J., Rodriguez, R., Colantonio, A.G., McGuire, R. (2021), Positive Youth Development: Creating Environments Where Youth Thrive (pp1-11); East Hartford, CT; Urban Alliance.

What is Positive Youth Development?

Youth development is a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent.¹

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a framework that focuses on youth's strengths instead of deficits. It recognizes that all youth benefit from supportive programming, not just those previously identified as at risk. PYD serves as a critical foundation for a variety of youth programs.

According to the Group on Youth Programs (2017), positive youth development (PYD) is defined as²:

“an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people’s strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strength”

This approach focuses on building youth assets and strengths and emphasizes the importance of including youth in decision-making and empowerment through service-learning opportunities, serving on an advisory board, or serving in governance.

This framework moves beyond reducing problem behaviors and works to increase access to supportive relationships and build qualities linked to success and thriving later in life. It fits well into a Biblical lens of youth and their need for supportive relationships and environments to support development.

This booklet provides an overview of positive youth development, two frameworks that are paramount in defining characteristics and assets associated with positive youth outcomes. It also describes qualities of youth programs that help youth develop these characteristics and assets. This information can be used to inform and strengthen child and youth serving programs, such as youth groups, after-school programs, and enrichment programs.

Positive Youth Development

*moves beyond reducing
problem behaviors and
works to increase access
to supportive relationships
and build qualities linked to
success and thriving later in
life.*

Table of Contents

What is PYD?.....	1
Principles of PYD.....	2
Lerner’s Cs.....	3
Developmental Assets.....	5
Qualities of PYD Programs.....	8
PYD and Youth Outcomes.....	10
Citations.....	11

Principles of Positive Youth Development

While there are many models describing positive youth development, there is consensus around the following principles³:

CORE PRINCIPLE #1: Youth are actors in their own development

Youth are not just receivers of programming, but are assets able to create environments conducive to positive growth and healthy development. As such, it is important for youth to have a voice and opportunities to speak into important decisions in various settings (school, after-school program, community).

“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.” (1 Timothy 4:12)

“But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ they were indignant. ‘Do you hear what these children are saying?’ they asked him. ‘Yes,’ replied Jesus, ‘have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise”?’” (Matthew 21:15-16)

CORE PRINCIPLE #2: Focus on all youth

Adolescence is a critical period of development and positive youth development programming benefits all youth, not just those with identified risk factors. Therefore, programming and support should be offered to all children and youth.

“But Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.’” (Luke 18:16)

CORE PRINCIPLE #3: All people are responsible for positive youth development

This framework views healthy youth development as the responsibility of all people (teachers, parents, neighbors, community members). It is important for all people to focus on the health and well-being of youth.

“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6)

CORE PRINCIPLE #4: Multiple contexts impact youth development

Multiple systems, both micro (family, school, and community) and macro (broader norms and values of the culture), impact youth development. Each system has the potential to support youth development and youth who receive support across contexts are better positioned to successfully navigate adolescence.

“And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. ‘If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.’” (Matthew 18:5-6)

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 18:10)

Models of Positive Youth Development

The basic models of PYD, the 6Cs and developmental assets describe assets and characteristics of youth linked to positive outcomes, such as academic achievement and emotional health. The more children and youth possess these qualities, the more likely they are to thrive.

Lerner's 6 Cs of Youth Development

The Cs model of Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a framework of PYD that outlines psychological, behavioral, and social characteristics that indicate youth are thriving. The model focuses on the positive characteristics that enable adolescents to lead productive and healthy lives and contribute to the world in ways that benefit themselves, their families and communities, and civil society.⁴

The Cs were developed based upon experience and reports of practitioners as well as a review of literature. It is the goal of programs to foster these characteristics in children and youth.

*Lerner's Cs model
of Positive Youth
Development is a
framework that outlines
psychological, behavioral,
and social characteristics
that indicate youth are
thriving.*



According to Learner (2006), the 6 Cs of PYD include:

Connection:

Having constructive and encouraging relationships in various settings (family, school, peers) that offer a feeling of safety, structure, and belonging.

Confidence:

Possessing a strong sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (having a belief in one's capacity to succeed).

Character:

Respect for rules and a sense of right and wrong that results in taking responsibility for actions, and a sense of independence and individuality and connection to principles and values.

Competence:

Competence is defined as having the ability to act effectively in various areas of life including social, cognitive, academic, and vocational (Phelps et al., 2009).

Contribution:

Youth engage in active participation and leadership in a variety of settings. They have an awareness of their strengths and how they can use them to make a difference in the world.

Caring:

The embodiment of sympathy and empathy for others as well as a commitment to social justice.

*“But seek first
the kingdom
of God and his
righteousness,
and all these
things will be
added to you.”
(Matthew 6:33)*

Reflection Questions



1. Reflect on the children and youth you work with. In which of the Cs are they strong? In which of the Cs are they weak?
2. If you were to set a goal to help youth grow in one of the C areas, which would you choose?
3. What can you do as program leaders to facilitate the development of the Cs you chose in the previous question?
4. Create an action plan detailing what you will do. Consider specifically what you will do, the timeline of activities, which youth or staff are responsible, how youth will inform the process, how you will collect feedback, and how you will measure success and impact.

Developmental Assets

Created by Search Institute, the Developmental Assets are relationships, opportunities, skills, values, and commitments children and adolescents need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. This research-based framework is organized into two types of assets:⁵

- **External assets** refer to the support and opportunities that are provided by family, friends, organizations, and communities.
- **Internal assets** focus on the capacities, skills, and values that young people need to internalize as part of developing their character, identity, and life skills.

The more assets young people experience, the less likely they are to engage in a variety of high-risk behaviors, and the more likely they are to engage in thriving behaviors. The goal is to offer opportunities to youth that foster development assets.

External Assets Summary

Support:

Young people need to be surrounded by people who love, care for, appreciate, and accept them. They need to know that they belong and that they are not alone.

Empowerment:

Young people need to feel valued and valuable. They need to feel safe, to believe that they are liked and respected, and to have opportunities to make meaningful contributions within the hierarchies that surround them.

Boundaries & Expectations:

Young people need the positive influence of peers and adults who encourage them to be and do their best. They need clear rules about appropriate behavior and consistent, reasonable consequences for inappropriate behaviors.

Constructive Use of Time:

Young people need opportunities outside of school to learn and develop new skills and interests, and to spend enjoyable time interacting with other youth and adults.

Internal Assets Summary

Commitment to Learning:

Young people need a variety of learning experiences, including the desire for academic success, a sense of the lasting importance of learning, and a belief in their own abilities.

Positive Values:

Young people need to develop strong guiding values or principles, including caring for others, having high standards for personal character, and believing in protecting their own well-being.

Social Competencies:

Young people need to develop the skills to interact effectively with others, to make difficult decisions and choices, and to cope with new situations.

Positive Identity:

Young people need to believe in their own self-worth, to feel that they have control over the things that happen to them, and to have a sense of purpose in life as well as a positive view of the future.

External Assets

Support:

1. Family Support: Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. Positive Family Communication: Young person and her/his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.
3. Other Adult Relationships: Young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults.
4. Caring Neighborhood: Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. Caring School Climate: School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. Parent Involvement in Schooling: Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

Empowerment:

1. Community Values Youth: Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
2. Youth as Resources: Young people are given useful roles in the community.
3. Service to Others: Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
4. Safety: Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.

Boundaries & Expectations:

1. Family Boundaries: Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
2. School Boundaries: School provides clear rules and consequences.
3. Neighborhood Boundaries: Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
4. Adult Role Models: Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
5. Positive Peer Influence: Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
6. High Expectations: Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

Constructive Use of Time:

1. Creative Activities: Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practices for music, theater, or other arts.
2. Youth Programs: Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
3. Religious Community: Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
4. Time at Home: Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.



Internal Assets

Commitment to Learning:

1. Achievement Motivation: Young person is motivated to do well in school.
2. School Engagement: Young person is actively engaged in learning.
3. Homework: Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
4. Bonding to School: Young person cares about her/his school.
5. Reading for Pleasure: Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

Positive Values:

1. Caring: Young person places high value on helping other people.
2. Equality and Social Justice: Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
3. Integrity: Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her/his beliefs.
4. Honesty: Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”
5. Responsibility: Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
6. Restraint: Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

Social Competencies:

1. Planning and Decision Making: Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
2. Interpersonal Competence: Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
3. Cultural Competence: Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.
4. Resistance Skills: Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
5. Peaceful Conflict Resolution: Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Positive Identity:

1. Personal Power: Young person feels he/she has control over “things that happen to me.”
2. Self-Esteem: Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
3. Sense of Purpose: Young person reports that “my life has purpose.”
4. Positive view of personal future: Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.



1. Reflect on the children and youth you work with. In which of the Developmental Assets are they strong? In which of the Developmental Assets are they weak?
2. If you were to set a goal to help youth grow in one of the Developmental Asset areas, which would you choose?
3. What can you do as program leaders to facilitate development of the Developmental Assets?
4. Create an action plan detailing what you will do. Consider specifically what you will do, the time line of activities, which youth or staff are responsible, how youth will inform the process, how you will collect feedback and how you will measure success and impact.

Features of Quality PYD Programs

According to Eccles and Gootman, there are eight qualities inherent in youth programs that lead to the development of the 6 Cs and 40 Developmental Assets in children and youth. Therefore, it is important for programs to embody these qualities so they can have a greater positive impact on the lives of children and youth.⁶



Physical and Psychological Safety

Programs that promote PYD are both physically and psychologically safe and secure. This means that settings are free from unsanitary or unsafe health conditions, such as environmental hazards or unsanitary food preparation practices. Further, children and youth feel safe from emotional harm. The setting supports safe peer group interactions and decreases the likelihood of bullying and unhealthy peer interactions. Interactions between youth and adults, and among youth, are constructive, encouraging, and emotionally healthy.



Appropriate Structure

A PYD approach allows for clear and consistent rules, expectations, continuity, and predictability with clear boundaries and age-appropriate monitoring. These structures are developmentally appropriate, taking into account the age and level of functioning of the child or youth. In many cases, as children move into adolescence, less structure is required. Adolescents need consistency and structure, but also need opportunities to feel autonomous and manage their own behaviors.



Supportive Relationships

Adults and youth experience warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachments, and responsiveness in their relationships with one another. Adults model healthy relationships with one another and in their interactions with youth. Further, they facilitate healthy and supportive relationships between youth by creating an environment where values such as trust, kindness, and empathy are encouraged.



Opportunities to Belong

PYD approaches seek to create opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's race, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, or lived experiences. Consideration is given to creating inclusive environments and fostering sociocultural identity formation and cultural competence. In order to facilitate opportunities for belonging, interactions between the youth must be on an equal playing field. Activities should be cooperative rather than competitive.



Positive Social Norms

Adults recognize and set rules of behavior that promote positive values and morals. Values are openly discussed and connected to rules and consequences. Further, values are modeled by adults in all interactions and when youth embody prosocial values and behaviors they are praised. Further, when a youth acts in contradiction to the program values or expectations adults facilitate dialogue that helps the youth understand their behaviors impact on others and reemphasizes the behaviors that are expected, reasons why, and underlying values.



Support for Efficacy and Mattering

Adults promote youth voice by taking young people's ideas seriously and believing that youth are capable of making a real difference in the community. The environment is youth-centered, challenging, and offer opportunities to make a real difference. Youth have opportunities to lead and influence decision making. Youth strengths and competencies are regularly acknowledged and celebrated.



Opportunities for Skill Building

Adults facilitate opportunities for youth to build knowledge and skills through classes, workshops, group discussions, service learning, and other educational opportunities. These opportunities allow youth to build knowledge and skills that support their transition into adulthood. Adults take the time to understand needed skill-sets as well as youth interests.



Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

Adults take the time to learn about the various contexts youth have proximity with. When families, communities, and schools work together, youth are more successful and evidence the strongest positive outcomes. Adults coordinate services and support in a way that benefits the youth and communicate with one another to ensure the youth is thriving and brainstorm when there is a challenge.

PYD and Youth Outcomes

Systematic reviews of research on positive youth development have also indicated that PYD results in positive outcomes. Scales and Leffert (1999) reviewed several studies concerning the constructive use of time and Catalano and colleagues (2004) reviewed 25 program evaluations of youth PYD programs^{7,8}. The authors found that participation in these developmental activities produced several positive outcomes, including:

- Increased safety
- Increased academic achievement, completion of school work, graduation rates
- Greater communication in the family
- Fewer psychosocial problems, such as loneliness, shyness, and hopelessness
- Increased self-esteem, increased popularity, increased sense of personal control, and enhanced identity development
- Increased positive behaviors, such as self-control, assertiveness, problem solving, interpersonal skills, and social acceptance
- Better development of life skills, such as leadership and speaking in public, decision-making, dependability, and job responsibility
- Decreased negative behaviors, such as hitting, carrying weapons, vehicle theft, school failure, negative family events, teen pregnancy, skipping classes, juvenile delinquency, school suspensions, and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use

*Research suggests
that there are
qualities inherent
in youth programs
that lead to the
development of
the 6 Cs and 40
Developmental Assets
in children and youth.*



Citations

1. Benson, Peter L., and Rebecca N. Saito. 2000. "The Scientific Foundations of Youth Development." In *Public Private Ventures* (ed.). Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions. Philadelphia, Pa.: Public Private Ventures.
2. Mernit, S. (2017). Youth Program Impact Report. The Crucible Project, Oakland, CA.
3. Oregon Commission on Children and Families' Best Practices: Positive Youth Development (<http://www.npcresearch.com/Files/Strengths%20Training%20Binder/44.%20Best%20Practices%20Positive%20Youth%20Development.pdf>)
4. Lerner, R. M. , Lerner, J. V. , Almerigi, J. Theokas, C. , Naudeau, S. , Gestsdottir, S. , Naudeau, S. , Jelcic, H. , Alberts, A. Ma, L. , Smith, L. , Bobek, D. , Richman-Raphael, D. , Simpson, I. Christiansen, E. D. , von Eye, A. (2005). Positive youth development, participation in community youth development programs, and community contributions of fifth grade adolescents: Findings from the first wave of the 4-H study of positive youth development. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25 (1), pp. 17-71.
5. Benson, Peter & Scales, Peter & Syvertsen, Amy. (2011). The contribution of the developmental assets framework to positive youth development theory and practice. *Advances in child development and behavior*. 41. 197-230.
6. Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.) (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. Committee on community-level programs for youth. Washington: National Academy Press.
7. Scales, Peter C., and Nancy Leffert. 1999. *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Search Institute.
8. Catalano, Richard F., M. Lisa Berglund, Jean A.M. Ryan, Heather S. Lonczak, and J. David Hawkins. 2004. "Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 98–124.