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Youth Development and Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention

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What is a Youth Development Approach?

In many ways, adolescence is an obstacle course. For some teenagers, the obstacles are difficult, but manageable – raging hormones, mood swings, perhaps some experimentation with drugs and a few bad grades. These teenagers emerge older and wiser but generally without lasting damage.

For others, the obstacles loom larger, and navigating them seems, at times, impossible. These young people may see their adolescence not as a temporarily difficult phase, but as a precursor to a painful, bleak future. Their sense of the obstacles they face – and of their ability to conquer them – is very different.

Youth development approaches try to help young people navigate the many obstacles of adolescence by:

1. offering continuous **support** from the adults around them,
2. creating a sense of the **opportunities** before them, and
3. providing a chance to develop the **skills** that will help them make the most of both current and future opportunities.

Youth development approaches can help all young people, but it is particularly critical for those who are unlikely to get much in the way of positive support, opportunities, or skills from their families and communities.¹

The premise underlying youth development programs is that young people have basic needs – for example, personal safety, a sense of belonging and contribution to the world around them, self-worth based on achievement, responsibility, and structure. In order for young people to mature into healthy adults, these needs must be met.²

In the past, we have relied on families and communities to meet these needs, but surveys and other research have revealed that astonishingly few young people feel the combination of internal and external support that prepares them for adulthood. For example, the Search Institute has conducted surveys of high school students in 900 communities across the country, ranging from affluent suburbs to low-income neighborhoods. The surveys attempt to measure the number of "developmental assets" among young people in each community – such as connections to adults, feeling valued by the community, being committed to learning, having a sense of self esteem and purpose.

The Search Institute researchers believe that every young person should have between 30 and 40 assets, yet in no community in the country have they found an average of more than 18 among that community's young people.³ (See the [Resources](#) section for more information on the Search Institute.)

A lack of developmental assets has been linked to a number of risk factors: higher use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, early sexual activity, violence, and problems in school. The good news is that a higher number of assets serves as a protective buffer. The more assets young people have, the more likely they are to succeed in school, help others, value diversity, maintain good health, demonstrate leadership, resist danger,

delay gratification, and persevere in times of adversity.⁴

Youth development programs are about building assets for young people that will both protect and motivate them as they achieve the outcomes of a safe, healthy adolescence and a mature, satisfying adulthood.

What's the Problem?

Over the many decades that well-meaning people have tried to address the major social issues facing our society, we have fallen into a trap. The trap is the idea that if we name a problem, we will be able to come up with a solution to that problem. In part, this attitude stems from medical treatment models in which a set of symptoms suggests one disease or another. Once the disease is identified, it can be treated. Therefore, the logic goes, we should identify the problem, figure out how to prevent or cure it, and get to work.

Does this sound familiar? It should. It is the way we have traditionally approached teen pregnancy, crime, drug use, and other problems on a very long and discouraging list.

This approach may work when the problem and the solution are both clear, such as when a physician is trying to fix something that has gone wrong with our bodies. But it has some real drawbacks when we try to apply it to more complex situations, involving people and communities. First of all, it's negative. Focusing on problems is dispiriting not only to those who are labeled with the problem, but also to those of us trying to solve them.⁵ (See the [Staff Assessment Exercises](#) section for a quick way to illustrate this point with your colleagues and board members.)

Secondly, it tends to isolate problems from one another, making it difficult to step back and take a more holistic approach. This is the classic "tip of the iceberg" issue: If we focus on one problem at a time, we may miss the underlying root causes that are actually contributing to a whole host of behaviors and adverse consequences.

Finally, a problem-focused approach sets up one side – the client – as the problem, and the other side – the service provider – as the expert who will solve that problem. Even worse, it sometimes sets up service providers as the finger-wagging nags who must constantly admonish young people: "Don't do this. Don't do that." In most human interaction, this is not a recipe for positive results. It misses opportunities to draw on the strengths of other supportive people in families and communities, and it makes both the person with the problem and the "expert" feel like failures when the problem isn't solved. It fails to nurture the most lasting and important protective factor that a young person can develop: his or her own motivation.

A Positive Frame of Mind

In many ways, youth development approaches represent a reaction to problem-oriented approaches – a mirror image that flips the assumptions behind a "problem-and-solution" mindset. By providing an alternative way of looking at both social issues and at the range of effective responses, youth development approaches really create a different philosophy about the best ways to support youth.

For example, instead of focusing on the problem or problems facing young people, a youth development approach would emphasize young people's potential. Instead of focusing narrowly on one specific problem and the information or skills to conquer it, a youth development approach would step back and try to focus on developing a broader sense of motivation and investment in the future – on building assets. This motivation, in turn, would help young people across the board, not just with one particular problem, such as teen pregnancy.⁶

Youth Development Approaches and Adolescent Pregnancy

Youth development approaches are a natural enhancement of adolescent pregnancy prevention programs. First, as anyone who works with adolescents knows, it is relatively rare for young people to engage in one risky behavior and not others. A youth development approach that tries to motivate young people to think of their own future, their self worth, and their potential can affect a range of behaviors, not just one type of risk.

Many adolescent pregnancy prevention programs emphasize education about sex and about obtaining and using contraception. These types of programs can be effective in reducing sexual risk-taking behavior.

However, a growing body of research suggests that even when these programs work, their effects are relatively modest. As Douglas Kirby of ETR Associates has noted:

"...Youth may have the knowledge, skills, and ability to get and use contraceptives, but if those youth are not connected to family and school and do not believe that their future is promising and worth protecting, then they may not be highly motivated to avoid teen pregnancy; and if they are not highly motivated to avoid pregnancy, they are not likely to take the steps needed to use contraception consistently. Thus, motivation and other non-sexual antecedents must be addressed."⁷

In addition to contributing to reducing adolescent pregnancy itself, youth development approaches have another very appealing feature: they can draw consensus and unified community support, instead of the antagonism and controversy that some adolescent pregnancy programs struggle with on a day-to-day basis. Regardless of one's views on teenage sexuality and access to contraception, everyone tends to agree that supporting young people in positive ways – through adult and community connections, praise, encouragement, and celebration of young people's achievements – is good for young people and for the community as a whole.⁸

Finally, many youth development programs have been in place for years and have well-developed activities and networks within communities. This means that in many states, adolescent pregnancy programs can tap into an existing set of resources that is already well-organized and ready to contribute.⁹ (See the [Resources](#) section for suggestions on identifying youth development programs in your area.)

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Practical Steps

What Does a Youth Development Program Look Like?

In addition to focusing on young people's potential (instead of their problems), several other features of youth development approaches distinguish them from more traditional problem-focused programs:

- Youth development approaches emphasize **substantive youth involvement** – not just "input" or feedback from youth, but actual decision-making power that shapes the content and scope of programs and activities.
- Youth development approaches recognize that they are intervening in a long, tumultuous process of adolescence, and that it is important to **be there for the long haul** – to be committed not just at times of crisis, but constantly. After all, the goal is to make the long developmental process of adolescence a safe passage rather than an obstacle course.
- Youth development approaches try **to build connections and a sense of belonging** for young people by connecting them to other adults and to the community. Some researchers and practitioners believe that this feature of youth development (or any other type of program) is in fact the most critical:

"If school and family systems can learn how to help all kids feel included and of value to significant others in their lives, one of this country's main concerns, anti-social youth behavior, will be turned around."¹⁰

Similarly, a 1995 study of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program found that regular and intensive adult mentoring, friendship, and guidance had a more significant effect on first-time drug use, school absenteeism, and fighting than tutoring, anti-drug counseling, or other "problem-focused" services.¹¹

- Youth development programs **articulate and pursue desirable outcomes for youth**. As Karen Pittman of the International Youth Foundation has observed, these outcomes can include attributes such as confidence, character, connection, and competence in a number of areas: civic and social, cultural, physical and emotional health, intellectual curiosity and learning, and employability.¹²

Specific features of youth development programs

Karen Pittman has suggested that youth development programs can put in place seven key inputs or ingredients that yield positive outcomes for young people.¹³ These inputs are consistent with research from the resiliency field as well as more recent efforts to define developmental assets. They are:

- **A safe, stable place** where young people feel comfortable and unconditionally supported. Ideally, this place is their home, but it can also be another physical location – a school, church, or community center – that offers nurturing and stability.
- **Access to basic care and services**. These should be developmentally appropriate, affordable, and, in some cases, confidential.
- **Healthy relationships** with peers and with the adults around young people.
- **High expectations and standards**. In order to be meaningful and lasting, self-esteem must be earned and based on real achievement.
- **Role models, resources, and social networks**. Like adults, young people respond to the richness of the examples and supports

around them.

- **Challenging experiences and opportunities to participate and contribute.** Being engaged in one's surroundings and community can be a lifetime source of satisfaction. However, these experiences should be meaningful – such as service learning opportunities – rather than "make work" (picking up trash). (For more on service learning, see the [Resources](#) section.)
- **High quality instruction and training.** In order for young people to develop the competencies they need to mature and thrive, we must put in place high caliber opportunities for them to build their skills (including the option of a safe place to make mistakes along the way).

How to Incorporate Youth Development into Your Setting

As the examples above illustrate, youth development approaches are really a philosophy rather than a specific set of activities or programs. This means they can, and should, take different forms, adapting to the needs of youth (indeed, with their active involvement) and to the different contours of each community.

Incorporating youth development approaches into your particular setting may require some adjustments. Even though many service providers moan and groan about the drawbacks of a "fix-the-problem" approach, the truth is that careers, funding streams, and indeed entire organizations are often quite invested in this approach.

The Administration on Children, Youth, and Families suggests that shifting to a youth development approach will require the following types of changes:

- Becoming knowledgeable about the challenges and benefits of moving toward a youth development approach. (See [Challenges and Benefits](#) section.)
- Helping policymakers, practitioners, and community members value youth as cultural and economic resources. (See the [Organizational Assessment Questionnaire](#) for some suggestions.)
- Accepting that youth input is not youth involvement or empowerment.
- Focusing on systemic changes in youth policy.
- Becoming flexible in thinking about new strategies and applying existing resources in new ways.
- Partnering with other youth agencies to design new ways to solicit funding, provide services, and develop and promote improved policies for young people.
- Viewing youth, families, and communities as partners in change, working toward common goals.
- Re-engineering or reinventing (rather than simply reorganizing) the business of youth work.¹⁴

If you and your colleagues are interested in creating or enhancing a youth development approach that you have already launched, consider the following questions together:

- How do we define youth development, both generically and in this community?
- What are our objectives in implementing a youth development approach?
- What are the benefits of implementing a youth development approach?
- What are the possible negative consequences of implementing a youth development approach?
- Is there support for the approach within the community? If so, how can we effectively leverage existing support? If not, how can we begin to build that support?
- What systems already exist that operate on a youth development model, and how can we access the resulting expertise and experience or build on those efforts?
- Within the organization, should we implement the youth development approach through existing programs and services or consider a new structure?
- What will we need to do to move the organization from its current focus to a youth development approach without losing the successful elements of the current structure or operation?
- How will we involve youth and the community in moving to a youth development approach?
- How will we assess whether the new approach truly benefits young

people and the community?¹⁵

See the [Organizational Assessment Questionnaire](#) for a more detailed set of questions.

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Program Examples

Examples of Youth Development Programs

Since youth development programs can take so many different forms, there is no single template or recipe that applies to every community and agency. These two programs illustrate the different possibilities, even within the teen pregnancy prevention world:

New York's **Children's Aid Society Program**.

This comprehensive program illustrates several of the features listed in the Practical Steps section. It is designed to influence many different aspects of youths' lives – ranging from health to the arts, job skills, education, and sports – and to do so continuously, over a long period of time.

The **Seattle Social Development Project**.

As its title suggests, this project focuses on young people's social bonding – particularly bonding with their schools and families. The program includes activities not only for youth but also for the teachers and parents who play such prominent roles in young people's lives.

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Challenges & Benefits in Using the Youth Development Approach

Challenges include:

- Shifting from a "fix-the-problem" approach to a positive focus on assets.
- Changing ingrained negative views of adolescents.
- Involving parents and community groups (imbedded networks) and getting on their radar.
- Involving youth in meaningful (rather than token) ways.
- Staying committed for the long haul and gearing programs and activities to "be there."
- Attracting funding for more generic, asset-building approaches (rather than one problem, one solution).

Benefits include:

- Positive outcomes for young people – more developmental assets, greater feelings of self-worth and belonging, better protection against risky behaviors, a safe passage to adulthood.
- Positive views of young people from adults.
- Increased "social capital" in communities (trust, reciprocity).
- Less controversy associated with programs like adolescent pregnancy prevention.
- Reduced incidence of adverse events (teen pregnancy, drug use, drinking and driving, poor school performance).
- Satisfaction for youth-serving agency and staff of making a difference.

Next: [Staff Assessment Exercise One: From Problems to Assets >>](#)

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Staff Assessment Exercises

Exercise One: From Problems to Assets

To compare the effects of a "problem-solving" approach to other alternatives, gather a group of colleagues and try tackling the teen pregnancy issue in two different ways.

The traditional approach is to ask these types of questions:

- What's wrong?
- Why do we have this problem?
- How long have we had it?
- How does it affect us?
- Whose fault is it?

Discuss these for a few minutes and notice the tone and mood of your group. Is this a depressing conversation? Does it fill you with motivation to do something, or do you feel overwhelmed?

Instead, try these types of questions to reframe the issue and tap into more energy and motivation:

- What do we want?
- When do we want it?
- How will we know when we have it?
- When we get what we want, what else in our lives – in our communities' lives – will improve?
- What assets and resources do we have available to help us with this? (Be creative!)
- How can we best utilize the assets and resources that we have?
- What can we do now to get what we want or to change the situation?

Adapted from Darwin Ayre, Gruffie Clough, and Tyler Norris. 1999. *Facilitating Community Change*. Community Initiatives, Inc. Boulder, CO. www.communityinitiatives.com.

Next: [Staff Assessment Exercise Two: Organizational Assessment Questionnaire](#) >>

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Staff Assessment Exercises

Exercise Two: Organizational Assessment Questionnaire

This questionnaire, developed by the Administration for Children and Families within the Department of Health and Human Services, can help you assess your organization's readiness to implement a youth development approach. Don't be alarmed if your organization currently has few of these types of activities in place. Think of this as a place to start generating ideas and thinking about how everything you do could take on a different tone and lead to different outcomes.

The questions are grouped into four sections:

- A. [Organizational Development](#)
- B. [Programs and Services](#)
- C. [Outreach and Education](#), and
- D. [Collaboration](#).

A. Organizational Development

1. What is the organizational vision or mission regarding implementing a youth development approach? Who was involved in creating that vision or mission? (Specifically, were any young people involved?)
2. What has the organization done so far to ensure that all programs are based on a youth development (rather than problem-centered approach)?
3. What will be necessary to help staff and board members shift their thinking about youth from a "deficit-based" to an "attribute-based" approach?
4. What is the staff and board members' understanding of the life development process, and what has the organization done to help them understand their own on-going development?
5. How has the organization trained staff and board members about the adolescent development process?
6. What has the organization done with regard to examining conditions that exist within the community, how young people experience those conditions, and how negative conditions might be improved?
7. What has the organization done to remove the barriers to healthy youth development that exist within the neighborhood, community, and nation?

B. Programs and Services

1. Does the organization offer young people programs that do the following:
 - a. Provide a full range of services and opportunities?
 - b. Enable young people to develop new skills?
 - c. Teach personal life skills, such as solving problems, making decisions, setting and achieving goals, and creating and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships?
 - d. Connect young people to caring adults (other than staff) and then support those connections?
 - e. Support young people's educational experiences?
 - f. Provide academic and employment preparation and internships?
 - g. Enable young people to consider and plan for their future?
 - h. Address the general problems of adolescence or specific difficulties without labeling youth as "troubled"?
 - i. Mix young people from various backgrounds?
 - j. Expose youth to new events, circumstances, opportunities, and locations?
 - k. Teach young people about what to expect from, or how to handle,

real-life situations such as planning for the future, getting married, having children, maintaining employment, developing hobbies or special interests, celebrating successes, or adjusting to loss?

- l. Place young people in supported leadership positions through which they are exposed to the challenges and satisfactions of collaborating with others to explore options, make decisions, and achieve positive outcomes?
 - m. Connect youth to the community through special projects or links to on-going community efforts or activities?
2. Does the organization offer guidance to youth about how to take advantage of services and opportunities (provided through the organization, through other agencies, and in the larger community)?
 3. How does the organization address young people's need to take part in activities that are functional, educational, and fun?
 4. What characteristics demonstrate that a youth development approach underlies program efforts?
 5. How are the results of program efforts to support adolescent development measured and shared?

C. Outreach and Education

1. What is the prevailing youth policy (state or local), and how has the organization worked to inform the policy process with regard to youth development?
2. How has the organization worked with the community to create and communicate a vision of what is necessary for the positive development of young people?
3. How has the organization addressed the culturally based negative feelings about adolescents? How will it do so in the future?
4. How has the organization used the media to counteract the current projection of negative images about youth that shape public opinion and therefore public policy?

D. Collaborating with Other Youth Services Providers, Young People, and the Community

1. How does the agency collaborate with other youth services providers to develop strategies for moving toward a youth development approach to helping young people within the community? The state? The region?
2. How would other youth services providers characterize the agency's contributions to improving youth policy and practice?
3. What has the organization done to truly involve youth, families, and community members in designing and evaluating programs and developing strategies for rebuilding communities?
4. What types of situations has the organization created in which young people are valued and included?
5. How will the organization help the community to shift its thinking about youth from a "deficit-based" to an "attribute-based" approach?
6. How will the organization help the community to understand and value adolescent development as part of a lifelong developmental process?
7. What real outcomes have resulted from the organization's collaborative efforts in the past?
8. What real outcomes is the organization working toward through its current collaborative efforts?

Source: National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth. Family and Youth Services Bureau; Administration on Children, Youth, and Families; US Department of Health and Human Services. www.ncfy.com

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Boys and Girls Clubs of America
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Child Welfare League of America
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Children's Defense Fund
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Fax: (202) 662-3510
www.childrensdefense.org

Girls Incorporated
120 Wall Street
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The Search Institute
700 S. Third Street, Ste. 210
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800-888-7828
www.search-institute.org

Youth Service America (for more information on service learning)
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