



# Youth Development Research Briefs

2012

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*Youth Development Research Briefs* is a collaborative project among 4-H youth development faculty and educators at Oregon State University. The goal of the project is to provide concise summaries of current research relative to 4-H youth development program in:

- **Creating and Sustaining Youth-Adult Partnerships**
- **Youth Development Practice**
- **Youth Engagement**
- **Youth Development Profession**

Collaborators participate in the project by reviewing one current article, presenting a summary of the review at the 4-H professional development conference in the spring, and preparing a written review following a proscribed review outline. Each written review contains:

- **Topic area that is covered**
- **A verbatim article abstract**
- **A complete article citation**
- **A research brief that covers the article's contribution to theory and implication for promoting high quality youth development programs and practice**
- **Selected references for additional reading**

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### Reference Citation for Complete Volume:

Arnold, M. E. (Ed.). (2012). *Youth development research briefs 2012 (Research Brief No.1)*. Corvallis, OR: 4-H youth Development; Oregon State University. Available on-line at: <http://oregon.4h.oregonstate.edu/4h-research-briefs>

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# **Developmentally Appropriate Practice to Promote Healthy Adolescent Development: Integrating Research and Practice**

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## **Topic Area(s)**

- Child and School Psychology
- Developmentally Appropriate Practice
- Adolescent Development

## **Abstract**

### *Background:*

Intervention models to promote healthy adolescent development highlight the importance of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP); however, scant resources identifying DAP in relation to the relevant research are available. With the increased professionalization of youth work and the expanding research on adolescent development, more comprehensive, research-based resources are needed for the education and training of persons working to enhance youth outcomes.

### *Objective:*

To review research on adolescent development highlighting the relation of research and practice in promoting healthy youth outcomes through DAP across the developmental stages of adolescence.

### *Methods:*

A two pronged review of the adolescent literature was conducted: (1) Research with a focus on biological, cognitive, and social outcomes by age (9-11, 12-14, 15-17, and 18-19) and (2) Literature reviewing DAP strategies.

### *Results:*

An overview of biological, cognitive, and social developmental outcomes by adolescent age groups highlights the breadth of development that occurs across adolescence. These outcomes are then related to examples of DAP, speaking to the range of skills required by adults engaged in promoting healthy youth outcomes.

### *Conclusion:*

We conclude by exploring future directions to expand our understanding and application of adolescent research with an emphasis on the incorporation of DAP in the development, implementation, and evaluation of youth work.

## **Article Citation**

Meschke, Laurie L., Peter, Christina Renee & Bartholomae, Suzanne (2011). Developmentally Appropriate Practice to Promote Healthy Adolescent Development: Integrating Research and Practice. *Child Youth Care Forum*, 40 (5). Doi: 10.1007/s10566-011-9153-7

## **Research Brief**

A tremendous amount of research has been done on adolescent development specifically on biological, cognitive and social development. There is no doubt that these developmental characteristics need to be considered in youth programming, however there are limited efforts connecting these developmental characteristics to practice. In order to best enhance youth outcomes and promote healthy adolescent development, youth workers need to apply the research based adolescent development theories to their work.

The author's goal in this article is to identify developmentally appropriate practices for adolescents, promote the application of those practices and encourage researchers to further discuss practice implications. A youth workers' ability to use developmentally appropriate strategies will allow for enhanced youth outcomes and guide healthy adolescent development.

## **Contribution to Theory**

This research contributes important information to youth development program theory by analyzing the development characteristics of adolescence using four age groups: young, early adolescence (9-11 years or late elementary school), early adolescence (12-14 years, middle school), middle adolescence (15-17 years, high school), and late adolescence (18-19 years).

### *1. Young, Early Adolescence, Ages 9-11*

- a. *Biological Development:* Biological development for young, early adolescents is focused on pubertal development. This age group also has a lot of energy and experiences hormonal changes that can lead to unpredictable moods.
- b. *Cognitive Development:* The prefrontal cortex is still developing for this age group therefore information may not be processed as quickly. Young, early adolescents are not able to easily identify facial emotions such as anger and fear. This age group is also starting to develop a sense of control and responsibility.
- c. *Social Development:* This age group is still closely attached to parents and their own gender groups. Girls want to spend time with girls and boys with boys; this can lead to cliques or crowds. Young, early adolescents also look to older peers for influence.

## 2. *Early Adolescence, Ages 12-14*

- a. *Biological Development:* Puberty for early adolescence is underway. Youth in this age group will be at different levels of puberty. Changes are occurring in weight, height, hormones, sleeping, activity and mood.
- b. *Cognitive Development:* Changes in the prefrontal cortex may lead to sensation seeking, a common characteristic of adolescence. A shift from concrete to abstract thinking is occurring in this age group, allowing youth to consider values and generalize experiences. Early adolescents are seeking rewards and peer support. Understanding of future consequences of actions remains weak as youth are thinking in the short term. Early adolescents are able develop a plan. Metacognition or an awareness of youth's own thinking and feelings is starting to emerge.
- c. *Social Development:* During early adolescence a movement toward independence occurs. An increase in adult conflicts and a shift toward peer guidance happens. Early adolescents begin to see faults in their parents and tend not to share concerns or dreams with their parents as they fear they will appear childish. Youth rely heavily on peer influence for short term decisions. This age also experiences feelings of self-consciousness and insecurity.

## 3. *Middle Adolescence, Ages 15-17*

- a. *Biological Development:* Biological development for the middle adolescent has leveled off. Some males may be finishing their growth spurt, but for the most part everyone is at the same level and the awkwardness of puberty has disappeared.
- b. *Cognitive Development:* Middle adolescents have a mature reasoning ability; they do not need concrete experiences to learn as they can use critical thinking and reasoning. They appreciate expert opinions on subjects that interest them. They also tend to make decisions based on emotions with the focus on short term benefits.
- c. *Social Development:* Peer influence has begun to decrease, however it is still seen as more important than adult influence. Slang is used to create barriers between youth and adults. Middle adolescents may engage in risk behaviors with their peers. Peers tend to be emotionally supportive and relationship skills are more developed at this age. Middle adolescents may become sexually active, experience depression or even attempt suicide. Sleep deprivation may also impact social interactions.

#### 4. *Late Adolescence, Ages 18-19*

- a. *Biological Development:* Biological development for late adolescents has tapered off by this point physical development has little or no impact on developmentally appropriate practices.
- b. *Cognitive Development:* Late adolescents have reached an advanced level of cognitive development. They are able to assess risk, problem solve, and avoid emotional influence. They are also able to engage in adult-like thinking.
- c. *Social Development:* Late adolescents are independent and want to be treated as adults. Unstructured activities with peers may increase risky behavior. Late adolescents are still searching for their identity. Serious relationships begin to form and/or an increase in sexual activity occurs. Substance abuse is at a peak in late adolescence. This age has the ability to make plans, follow them through and evaluate the results. Plans made focus on what their future outcomes are. Depression and suicide are still of concern.

#### **Contribution to Practice**

This research provides age specific recommendations for developmentally appropriate strategies that youth workers should utilize. The author notes three limitations to consider when applying adolescent research to youth work:

1. The developmental outcomes presented for each age group represent the average. There will be individuals within the age group that are at different stages.
2. Biological, cognitive and social development is interrelated and one might affect the other.
3. Within each age group, the biological, cognitive and social development may not occur at the same time.

The strategies that youth workers should use based on the development characteristics of the four age groups are outlined below:

#### 1. *Young Early Adolescence, Ages 9-11*

- a. *Biological Development Strategies:* Youth workers should separate groups by sex to ensure more participation, provide physical activities for the group, allow for group competition with pre-assigned groups versus individual competition, and avoid competition between adults and youth. Youth workers should also provide

activities that allow for coping abilities to emerge and guide emotional regulation by acknowledging emotional responses.

- b. *Cognitive Development Strategies:* Youth workers should express emotions verbally, present information in small pieces to allow for processing as well as ask questions that guide youth in processing a project or activity. Leadership roles should be given to youth and guided by an adult mentor.
  - c. *Social Development Strategies:* Youth workers should incorporate parental support through family activities, and match peers by male or female groups. Utilization of pre-determined groups will help reduce cliques and selection of team captains can help reduce favoritism. Youth workers should also utilize older peers as they tend to have a positive influence on this age group.
2. *Early Adolescence, Ages 12-14*
- a. *Biological Development Strategies:* To account for the range in biological development youth workers should offer a variety of activities and utilize multiple teaching styles.
  - b. *Cognitive Development Strategies:* Youth workers should break long projects into smaller blocks. Abstract thinking can be enhanced by asking questions providing time for reflection and having youth share their thoughts. Youth workers should also involve this age group in planning activities and allow them to set their own group rules as well as guide metacognition by utilizing problem solving methods.
  - c. *Social Development Strategies:* Youth workers should encourage communication between adolescents and their parents to help improve family relationships and allow time for youth and adults to work with peers so that they can share issues freely. Youth workers should guide the personal skills of youth to help build self-confidence. Games and sports can be used to promote social development but be aware that not all youth enjoy sports and you may need to provide alternative activities.
3. *Middle Adolescence, Ages 15-17*
- a. *Biological Development Strategies:* Youth workers can mix males and females into groups at this age to allow for relationship skill building without the pressure of romantic attachment.
  - b. *Cognitive Development Strategies:* Youth workers can utilize case studies and expert guests to guide youth learning. Youth workers should allow youth to

come to their own conclusions, as well as help youth recognize emotional reactions. Coping exercises like breathing and muscle relaxation can be used to help youth through emotional events. Financial compensation may help optimize retention and recognize youth for their efforts in leadership roles.

- c. *Social Development Strategies*: Peer influence can be used as an advantage for youth workers. Providing opportunities for middle adolescents to cope and express feelings or build a support system is important in addressing depression. Youth workers can utilize peers to guide discussion groups. Depending on the situation the use of slang by a youth worker may enhance or jeopardize the relationship with the youth. Take time to discuss issues youth are facing to help promote self-awareness.
4. *Late Adolescence, Ages 18-19*
- a. *Biological Development Strategies*: Youth workers can utilize the same skills for late adolescents as those used for middle adolescents.
  - b. *Cognitive Development Strategies*: Developmentally appropriate practices for late adolescents remains very similar to that for middle adolescents.
  - c. *Social Development Strategies*: Youth workers should provide structured activities for late adolescents. Identity exploration can be guided by providing leadership or mentoring roles to youth. Programs that provide information on substance use and sexual activity may be appropriate for this age. Youth also benefit from adult guidance in making life changing decisions.

### **Implication for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

Youth workers can contribute to enhancing the likelihood of healthy youth outcomes through continuous research and attention to developmental characteristics. Outlining the four stages of adolescence allows us to see the differences between ages and better understand the importance of designing, implementing and evaluating youth programs for specific age groups.

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# Dilemmas of Practice: Challenges to Program Quality Encountered by Youth Program Leaders

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## **Topic Area(s)**

- Youth Program Quality
- Professional Development of Youth Workers

## **Abstract**

*To create and sustain high quality youth programs it is important to understand the challenging situations and dilemmas that emerge in program leaders' daily work with youth. In this research the experiences of leaders in 12 programs were followed over a 2-9 month period, which led to the identification of 250 dilemma situations. Qualitative analysis indentified 5 categories and 12 subcategories of dilemmas that reflected distinct types of considerations (e. g. youth's personalities, relationships with the community). The analyses also found that the experienced leaders in the study typically responded to these dilemmas in ways that were youth-centered and that balanced multiple considerations. It is argued that researchers need to go beyond identifying features of high quality programs, and more fully examine how effective leaders create and sustain high quality in response to the challenging situations of practice.*

## **Article Citation**

Larson, R. W. & Walker, K. C. (2010). Dilemmas of practice: Challenges to program quality encountered by youth program leaders. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 338-349.

## **Research Brief**

A great deal of attention has been paid recently to identifying the elements that create and sustain high quality youth programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gun, 2003; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2007). There is little question that paying attention to these elements can serve to create positive program environments where youth are supported in their development. Even the highest quality programs, however, have ups and downs, largely because of the complexity of the programs. Every youth development program professional periodically encounters programming situations that can be views as "dilemmas." Dilemmas occur in situations where competing program demands make a clear-cut response to the

situation difficult. Take for example, a youth with significant emotional needs who is disruptive to the rest of the youth in a program. The dilemma arises in how to address the competing demands of the situation: the youth's emotional needs and potential to benefit from being in a structured social situation, and the needs and rights of the remaining youth to a high quality program atmosphere.

Despite their difficulty, the authors point out that dilemma situations and educators responses to them are important to negotiate carefully. Such situations can be turning points for program quality, and can have a lasting negative or positive impact on the program and the youth who participate in it.

### **Contribution to Theory**

This research contributes important information to youth development program theory through the discovery, examination and taxonomical presentation of five categories and 12 sub categories of common dilemmas faced by youth development educators. The taxonomy consists of the following:

1. Supporting youth's participation in program activities
  - A. Guiding, structuring and directing youth's work: *Dilemmas that are results of tension between providing sufficient support and oversight without doing the work for the youth.*
  - B. Creating and sustaining youth's motivation: *Dilemmas involved in captivating youth to engage in learning the educator knows is important for youth and recognizing the importance of the youth's initiative for the learning to come from them.*
2. Cultivating program norms and enforcing rules
  - A. Addressing violations of rules and expectations: *Some rule violations are black and white, but many are in the grey area. Dilemmas arise when having to decide on appropriate repercussions for youth actions. For example a youth who does not follow through and contribute to a project as he or she promised, and thus let down other team members.*
  - B. Cultivating group norms: *Dilemmas in this category are exemplified by situations where the educator wants to establish group norms based on program mission and expectations, and yet at the same time, allow youth to establish their own norms and cultures.*
  - C. Maintaining professionalism and consistency in interactions with youth: *Dilemmas in this area relate to the relationship of the educator to the youth, particularly in maintaining a youth- centered democratic atmosphere with differing roles of the educator, such as adult mentor, friend, leader, and authority figure.*

3. Responding to youth's personalities and relationships
  - A. Youth personalities and personal issues: *Dilemmas in this area arise when educators struggle with addressing and balancing the multiple and often complex issues and needs of youth, most of which originate outside the program, but nonetheless impact the youth and his or her experience in the program.*
  - B. Problematic youth-youth relationships and group dynamics: *Educators often face dilemmas involving how to negotiate youth to youth interactions within the group, such as off-task behavior, conflict, the forming of subgroups or cliques, immaturity, and romance.*
4. Reconciling organizational systems and youth development
  - A. Adapting top-down policies and organizational requirements: *Dilemmas in this category emerge when educators and supervisors or organizational leaders have competing priorities and expectations for the program.*
  - B. Limited time and resources: *Educators encounter frequent dilemmas related to juggling multiple responsibilities, scarce program funding, and efficient program delivery.*
  - C. Different leadership styles and philosophies of staff members: *Educators who work with others, such as program assistants or volunteer leaders, to deliver the program often find themselves in dilemmas related to differing styles and philosophies of co-leaders.*
5. Interfacing with external worlds
  - A. Tensions between program and youth's outside lives: *Dilemmas in this area are created by the multiple contexts in which youth live and interact outside the program. Parents, peers, schools, family issues and concerns, and time demands on youth all create situations that have to be negotiated carefully by educators.*
  - B. Mediating youth's relationships with community members and institutions: *Dilemmas of this nature are encountered with educators have to mediate youth understanding and desires with those of the "real-world."*

### **Contribution to Practice**

This research highlights that an educator's response and skill in handling dilemmas is critical to maintaining program quality. Furthermore, the authors argue that more experienced educators handle dilemmas in ways that include two important qualities. First, experienced educators approach each dilemma with a youth centered focus. Skilled educators look for ways to solve dilemmas by engaging with youth to arrive at a solution, such as gathering information from multiple youth voices. They also look for ways to turn dilemmas into an opportunity for youth development (teachable moments). They also try to incorporate youth into the solutions, such as asking the youth to determine a solution and take responsibility for making it happen. In addition, skilled educators will advocate for youth in situations where youth voice is not easily represented.

Second, skilled educators seek solutions to dilemmas by recognizing and balancing multiple demands and perspectives. For example, educators see the importance of challenging youth in some situations while balancing that with the need to provide support for youth. Skilled educators also balance product with process, allowing youth autonomy in the work they do, yet at the same time, guiding youth toward a positive end result. Skilled educators also balance multiple and often competing demands, from youth, parents, organizations and supervisors. Finally, skilled educators understand the complexity of the dilemmas they face and address them from multiple fronts. This may involve visiting one on one with a youth member, talking parents or groups of parents, establishing policy for the benefit of all, and communicating reasons behind decisions to multiple stakeholders.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

The authors argue that the ability of a youth educator to balance, weigh, and address diverse dilemmas while keeping youth at the center, is vital for creating and sustaining program quality. As such, the development of this ability should be a focus of the professional development of youth educators. Specifically they suggest:

- Creating places for open discussion and ongoing training on the many dilemmas that staff encounter, in order for educators to develop in responding skillfully and appropriately to the situation.
- Working to support the development “deliberate practice” by helping educators become more aware of the nuances, assumptions, values, principals, and options that are present in most dilemmas.
- Using challenging case studies for training, such as is done in other fields to build expertise (e.g. education, law, medicine, business). Doing so can help develop educator’s critical thinking skills, and strengthens educator confidence to make sound decisions.
- Helping educators see that there is no one right answer in most dilemma situations, and instead focus on developing educator ability to see the underlying complexities of the situations and expand their repertoire of responses.
- Providing opportunities for staff to exercise these skills
- Cultivating a atmosphere in which open discussion of dilemmas and how to address them is part of the program culture

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## **New Horizons: Understanding the Processes and Practices of Youth Development**

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### **Topic Area(s)**

- Youth Development Practice
- Evaluation

### **Abstract**

*This article presents new horizon of research on youth development by focusing on the challenges youth face in learning teamwork and in coming to terms with diversity. These are both essential competencies for navigating the “real world” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We examine how youth experience these challenges within programs; also how they present second-order challenges to practitioners. The underlying message of this article is that it is essential for researchers to see programs from the point of view of the people in them. Researchers have learned quite a bit of what can be learned from arm’s length: that programs can make a difference in youths’ lives and that certain features of settings are associated with these changes. To go further, researchers need to work side-by-side with practitioners and youth to understand their complex worlds as they experience them.*

### **Article Citation**

Larson, R.W., Perry, S.C., Kang, H., & Walker, K. (2011). New Horizons: Understanding the process and practices of youth development. *Journal of Youth Development, 6(3)*, 156-166.

### **Research Brief**

In this article, the authors acknowledge that youth programs can and do change young people’s lives. They recognize and appreciate the quality research that has identified the elements youth programs need to have in order to be effective and positive life changers for the youth. However, the authors also acknowledge that researchers know very little about how these life transformations actually occur or how to reliably create the conditions needed for positive changes to happen. What are the developmental processes through which youth change and how do youth practitioners best support these processes? Researchers recognize the

complexity of processes and practices in programs; therefore the authors suggest a systematic, descriptive research aimed at understanding the complexities especially as they are experienced by practitioners and youth. This would include the challenges (problems, obstacles, tasks and dilemmas) encountered by program staff and by the youth in the program. Of special interest are the challenges faced by youth as researchers and society in general under appreciate the complexity of the developmental tasks youth face on their journey to adulthood.

The article calls for a new research focus on the developmental processes through which youth change and the staff practices that support them. Two examples are used to showcase the “challenge” focus: learning teamwork and coming to terms with cultural diversity.

### **Contribution to Theory**

This article suggests an additional focus for researching youth development. It recognizes the important contributions researchers have accomplished thus far in defining the elements needed for youth development programs to be effective, and now are calling for a shift towards appreciating the complexity of the challenges youth face as they struggle to become adults. The new horizon of research can help forward the understanding of the difficulties in the obstacles, dilemmas, and problems with which youth struggle.

The present study offered two examples as an argument for their new dimension in research. One focused on learning to work in collaboration with others as a vital skill set for adulthood. This important skill simply called “teamwork” actually breaks down into several interpersonal skills such as effective communications, reciprocal exchanges, finding common ground, self-assertion, and constructing shared rules that facilitate collaboration (Angus, 2008; Larson, 2007). Researchers know what interpersonal skills need to be acquired and know what conditions within a program lead to the most favorable outcomes. What they do not know is what processes a youth goes through to acquire the needed skills. The authors acknowledge that skilled practitioners know a lot about the dynamics and complexities that lead to young people acquiring interpersonal skills and call for researchers to contribute by learning from the practitioners, listening to youth and through close observation of how the processes that lead to the skill acquisition unfold over time.

Another example deals with coming to terms with diversity. Young people bring with them challenges from the outside. They may be expected to act one way at home, another at school and yet another with their peers. Every day they are confronted with diverse values, codes of behavior, and meaning systems. To navigate these challenges, they need to develop people skills such as understanding others, how to relate to others and how to act across the different worlds in which they navigate. Researchers can help with the understanding of the many variations in the challenges youth face. Comprehending the breadth and depth of these challenges, obstacles, dilemmas and problems faced by youth is crucial to helping our field support youth’s dealing with them.

In a nutshell, the article suggests that researchers can further contribute to the study of youth development by helping describe, chart, and unpack the many forms of complexity faced by adolescents as they develop the skills necessary to thrive in our modern world.

### **Contribution to Practice**

This article contributes important thinking to the field of positive youth development. The authors acknowledge that programs can provide a safe place and the right conditions for youth to work on these complex developmental tasks. The challenges for programs and their staff include how to support these types of learning processes as creating and sustaining the positive conditions is not simple or static. They state: “no regression equation is going to answer the questions, but research can help practitioners better understand their choices, based on information collected across different programs and types of youth”.

They call for researchers to help by studying how different practices help youth learn to address the challenges and for researchers to have a role in describing the various peer scenarios, when they are likely to occur, and effective strategies used by youth practitioners. Research can contribute by describing different approaches taken by program staff, evaluate effectiveness in addressing youth’s challenges and help with the understanding of the youth’s experience and the interface with their family.

The article recognizes that youth practitioners face many challenges of how to support their youth’s quest for learning the skills necessary to meet developmental challenges. Where do they focus their time and efforts, how do they interact with the family, the school and the other worlds in which youth interact, when do they let youth learn from trial and error and when do they intercede on their behalf? The answers to these questions can be used by practitioners to create the fertile ground in their programs needed for youth to rise to the challenges they face and develop the vital skill sets needed to be contributing adults.

Researchers have learned and shared with youth practitioners what they have learned from “arm’s length”: that programs can make a difference in youths’ lives, and that certain features in the settings are associated with these changes. Now, in order to go further and be able to contribute more to practice, researchers need to work side by side with practitioners and youth to understand their complex worlds as they experience them. They need to provide evidence that informs the decision –making of youth workers and youth organizations. (Bialechki & Conn, 2011).

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

Young people have always faced challenges as they make their way into adulthood, however in our modern, diverse world, those challenges have greatly increased. Youth development professionals can ensure their programs have the elements identified by researchers that lead to the safe and fertile environments needed for youth to work on the complex tasks associated with coming of age. Youth development professionals can help further the knowledge of the

processes youth use to acquire life transformation skills by approaching their work with humility and by seeing the programs from the point of view of the people in them. It is important to recognize that in some cases the programs themselves can be part of the problem for youth as they try to come to terms with diversity as some programs are not racially adept and are ethnically blind even though that is not the intention.

Youth professionals are invited to play an important role for interpreting and discussing ways to “unpack” human complexity and in creating meaningful conceptual frameworks that can be used by those working directly with youth. Implications for 4-H youth development professional practice suggests a willingness to be included in the vision described by Bialechki and Conn (2011): research is used to “infuse” youth organization with relevant evidence, including evidence about the challenges, youth processes, and effective staff practices found across varied settings and those which may be unique to a particular program, program model, or population of youth.

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## **Strategies for Sustaining Quality Youth-Adult Partnerships in Organizational Decision Making: Multiple Perspectives**

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### **Topic Area(s)**

- Youth-Adult Partnerships

### **Abstract**

*This article is unique in that it consists of five separate parts, each written by its own author(s). This unusual approach has allowed us to show how youth-adult partnerships are being implemented in four very different environments with different functions. Yet across these environments common themes, strategies, and lessons can be learned about the practices that are most effective in implementing and maintaining youth-adult partnership.*

### **Article Citation**

Zeldin, S., Petrokubi, J., McCart, S., Khanna, N., Collura, J., & Christens, B. (2011). Strategies for sustaining quality youth-adult partnerships in organizational decision making: Multiple perspectives. *The Prevention Researcher*, 18 (Supplement), 7-11.

### **Research Brief**

The article provides insight from multiple perspectives while acknowledging that there are practices and shared themes that are preferable or more common for implementing and sustaining youth-adult partnerships. Each author personally engages in community practices through researching a variety of youth-adult partnerships. Research methods included observation, interviews, and review of materials and resources.

Traditionally, there has been a negative stereotype regarding adolescence within the social construct, which is acknowledged by all of the authors. The adolescent developmental period is viewed as a period filled with negativity and destructive or risky behaviors. Aligning with this stereotype are the policies that seek to isolate and protect youth. Negative views have denied adolescent youth the opportunity to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

The article argues that this view of adolescence is out of date and inaccurate. The authors acknowledge that youth are vulnerable and face serious challenges. But it is also true that the

same youth want to be a part of something larger than them and they deserve the opportunity. Youth-adult partnership not only impact youth; the impact on adults is powerful as well.

Research demonstrates that when youth-adult partnerships are implemented in a positive manner, the youth-adult partnerships lead to: 1) increased competence, connections, and confidence among youth; 2) enhanced skills among adults who work with youth; 3) reduced stereotypes and greater commitment among organizational and community leaders; and 4) more collaboration and inclusive policies across municipalities (Zeldin, Larson, & Camino, 2005; Ginwright, 2010).

Despite the challenges youth face and the stereotypes adults have about adolescence, there are fundamental strategies that organizations can take to sustain quality partnerships among youth and adults.

### **Contribution to Theory**

Fundamental strategies for successful youth-adult partnerships are addressed by all authors in this article. Each author defines major attributes of successful youth-adult partnerships and factors that determine effective programming. The following are the results of the research, which demonstrate strategies for professionals who engage in youth-adult partnerships.

1. Establish a Common Purpose: Grounding Youth-Adult Partnership
  - a. Intergenerational collaboration around a common purpose gives adults and youth issues to address that are related to a larger community.
  - b. Bylaws and a Youth Bill of Rights are important to provide structure and function to the organization, while bringing everyone to a common ground. These prevent potential misunderstandings later in a process, provide a foundation for establishing shared expectations and goals, and keep the group on track to work on their outcomes.
  - c. How to use the common purpose guide when working with Youth-Adult Partnerships:
    - i. *Engage in dialogue around both collective and individual expectations.* Both groups bring their own motivations to the partnership. It is important to discuss these in a non-threatening environment to set the tone to establish a shared vision.
    - ii. *Identify and document roles and responsibilities for all group members.* Through clear articulation of roles and goals, members are able to set a clear path for where they want to go.
    - iii. *Establish systems for accountability and reflection.* Celebrate successes and reflect on lessons learned while moving through the process. Keep a clear guide of mutual learning and accountability.

- d. Youth-Adult Partnerships require attention to detail to prevent the adult voice from taking over and the youth voice being marginalized, all while working towards the desired outcome.
2. Improve Responsiveness and Relevance in Organizational Practice
- a. *Make a Cultural Shift*
    - i. Design a shift through the use of new vocabulary over old vocabulary, which allows both adults and youth to leave behind old ideas about youth-adult interactions.
    - ii. Reading and training alone will not help generations work together smoothly; they must experience working together in new ways for them to leave behind conventional interactions.
  - b. *Articulate Shared Principles and Values*
    - i. The *Four Pillars: Respect, Listen, Understand and Communicate* should be relied upon to allow shared principles and values. These should be shared and reviewed at the beginning of each encounter between the two groups to establish genuine principles and values from which to operate.
    - ii. Use the Four Pillar framework to debrief and reflect at the end of encounters to ensure the framework remained intact during the encounter.
  - c. *Understand Multiple Levels of Involvement*
    - i. It is important to understand the multiple levels at which engagement occurs, and then work in each of the levels to maintain momentum. Organizations are encouraged to understand the factors influencing relationships and the experience of engagement at all three levels: 1. The individual level (for both youth and adults); 2. The social level (youth to youth and youth to adult); and 3. The systems level (organization, school, government, etc.)
    - ii. To help youth and adults successfully work together, they must have a common goal with a legitimate opportunity to make a difference.
  - d. *Create a Common Goal*
    - i. A precondition of respect must be present for the partnership to reach a win-win condition. There must be a genuine respect for what each person and each age group brings to the table.
    - ii. Determining a common goal provides partners with more success in reaching both individual and collaborative goals.

- iii. Moving towards the common goal must be action-oriented, with the overall goal being broken up into smaller objectives that can be visibly accomplished.
  - iv. Success breeds success and regenerates new partnerships and goals.
- 3. *Provide Contextual Supports To Engage Youth On Boards With Elected Officials*
  - a. Create a Position Description Sheet
    - i. There are barriers to youth serving in these positions as they cannot be elected to the positions and the elected officials have specific criteria their constituents expect from them.
    - ii. Expectations for both parties must be explicit. These roles should be created through a joint effort by those involved, but creation isn't enough. Both parties must interpret the role expectations in the same way, so discussions must occur to make sure all understand the parameters of the position.
    - iii. It is important for the elected officials to determine how much responsibility they can legally grant the youth. For instance, the vote of the youth cannot determine policy, but could provide an advisory element from and for youth.
  - b. Host Youth and Adult Trainings
    - i. Both youth and adult training is imperative before participating together on an elected board. Youth need background knowledge about the board to be successful in giving an accurate youth voice to the board.
    - ii. Elected officials should receive training on strategies for listening to the youth voice, as well as on how to solicit youth input during meetings.
  - c. Allow Time For Relationship Building
    - i. It is important to offer opportunities for youth and board members to meet in a social setting to encourage relationship building.
    - ii. Provide for both formal and informal interaction between youth and adults so relationships are formed at multiple levels.
- 4. *Adapt To Youth While Working For Social Change*
  - a. Small alterations in an adult-focused organization can accommodate the interests and concerns of young people. Both youth and adults have a lot to gain from shared time.

- b. Adult organizations can provide space and resources to build a youth affiliate organization. Sub-committees of both organizations can include members from each group to provide a common ground to work together.
- c. A parallel organization creates opportunity for more people to take on legitimate leadership roles in the organization.
- d. Training for adult leaders is important to build skills to make the most of youth collaboration.
- e. A promising strategy for collaboration would be to have several adults from the parent organization to serve as models for the younger people. These adults and youth would then reflect together on how principles to guide their collaborations.
- f. Young people are eager to build connections with adult leaders
- g. It is important for adults to take time for genuine listening to the youth affiliate.
- h. Bridge generations through informal activities, as well as through the formal organization affiliate.

### **Contribution to Practice**

What emerges from the research is a picture of “best practices” that achieve real results, while impacting youth, adults, agencies, organizations and communities. Research shows that youth-adult partnerships require strategies to ensure success and the accomplishment of goals. It is important that youth development professionals employ “best practices” when conducting designing, implementing and delivering youth programs. The recommendations and strategies made by the authors could be easily implemented into several areas of programming, regardless of the setting and structure.

Three common lessons emerged from the research:

- Guiding principles for action must be in place. There are a variety of tools but it is crucial they provide a clear explanation for the purpose of the partnership. Determine details as to *why* it is important to work together to achieve the common goal.
- Roles and Responsibilities may easily get confused when implementing a program which involves youth-adult partnerships. Orientations and trainings are critical because they allow all parties to become comfortable with the new roles.
- Transformation of roles will occur over time and therefore it is important for youth and adults to be open-minded, remove stereotypes about each other, and actively participate in a new approach.

When youth development professionals decide to engage in youth-adult partnerships the following strategies are crucial for success.

- Training for both youth and adults prior to participation in projects is critical to the removal of stereotypes held by both age groups. If training does not occur, each group will return to “business as usual,” which sabotages any future success of the partnership.
- Youth-adult partnerships built on a foundation of common goals and purposes, open dialogue and shared decision making increase opportunities for success and sustained partnerships.
- Provide for both formal and informal interaction between youth and adults so relationships are formed at multiple levels. For example, meals before a board meeting or refreshments after the meeting change the environment to a social setting, which allows time for informal conversations to occur between the two groups. It also allows time for youth to ask questions or clarify information they were unable to in the board meeting.
- A culture shift must occur and requires adults to learn and use new vocabulary which is inclusive. For example, replace terms like “mentor,” “coach,” “train,” and “help,” with ones that imply mutual respect and cooperation, such as “collaborator,” “colleague” and “partner.”
- A common purpose for the group is vital to the success of the partnership.
- Cultivation of shared decision making and nurturing of a collective action provides a strong framework for success.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

The article describes and analyzes some of the fundamental strategies required for developing and sustaining youth-adult partnerships in a way that ensures a positive impact on youth, adults, organizations, and communities. It particularly stresses the need for effective communication; mutual respect; and shared, clearly defined, and achievable goals and plans-of-action. The article can be useful when considering 4-H Youth Development programs and practices, first by showing some of the positive areas that we should develop further, and more importantly illuminating areas for potential improvement.

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## The Evolving Role of Youth Workers

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### **Topic Area**

- Youth Development Profession

### **Abstract**

*In reviewing the field of youth development, of which youth workers are a part, it is clear it has had a long and complex history that is intertwined with other disciplines. More recently youth workers have experienced a transformation of sorts, with youth programs in the past being seen exclusively as a place to play and have fun, whereas today's expectations include a much broader focus on the overall positive development of young people. This evolution has been heavily influenced by a number of societal changes that have placed increasing demands on youth programs. Today's youth workers are faced with the responsibility to promote a young person's development which often includes supporting academic success and graduation from high school, reducing risk-taking behaviors, increasing positive health attitudes, and more. Youth workers have seen their role change dramatically over the past 20 years with greater demands and increased accountability.*

### **Article Citation**

Borden, L., Schlomer, G., Wiggs, C.B. (2011). The Evolving Role of Youth Workers. *Journal of Youth Development*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 126-138.

### **Research Brief**

The field of youth development has a long and complex past that has often intertwined with other disciplines such as psychology, social work, education, and others. Over time, many of these disciplines have changed and evolved in an effort to effectively respond to societal demands. Youth workers are currently experiencing their own similar transformation. Youth programs of the past were often seen exclusively as a place to play and have fun; however, today the expectations for youth workers and programs include the promotion of the overall positive development of the young people within the program.

Communities now expect a youth worker to offer programs that provide opportunities to engage in activities that encourage their active involvement in their own development (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005). The work of youth workers should put young people on a life path marked by the “Five C’s” of positive youth development (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Caring, and Character). There is literature that supports the role of youth workers in engaging youth and assisting them in their own development as one way to enhance their positive development (Foster-Fishman, Deacon, Nievar and McCann, 2005; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010; Zeldin, 2004). And yet the status, low pay and limited opportunity for advancement of the youth worker still exists and has not kept pace with societal demands of their job.

### **Contribution to Theory**

The call for professionalization of youth workers has been ongoing since the 1970’s and proponents of professionalization have traditionally cited issues related to the perception of low status, low pay, and limited opportunity for advancement for youth workers (Beker, 1975; Christiansen, 1996; Lochhead, 2001). A survey from the Next Generation Work Coalition titled *Growing the Next Generation of Youth Work Professionals: Workforce Opportunities and Challenges* (Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, (2006) indicates that

- (1) career advancement in the youth worker field requires job changes indicating limited opportunities for advancement
- (2) three-fourths of youth workers report that compensation is the primary factor they consider when deciding to leave the field, and
- (3) both youth workers and directors agree that raising wages is the most important factor in advancing the profession (Starr, Gannett, Garza, Goldstein, & Yohalem, 2008).

(Halpern, 2002) states that staff turnover hovers around 40% annually and youth workers tend to be young and leave the occupation early due to a lack of opportunities for advancement. Staff turnover leads to programs with less continuity; youth must repeatedly establish new relationships with new youth workers. Caring relationships between program staff and youth directly influence youths’ decisions to attend programs (Borden, et al. 2006; Rhodes, 2004). Borden, et al. (2006) did a study, particularly with youth of color, to investigate why they chose not to participate in youth programs. The reason frequently cited was a poorer quality relationship with adult staff. Youth-adult partnerships are the foundation that can reduce the barrier to continue program participation by youth.

Currently, “low wages and part-time hours driven by tight budgets, along with the limited supply of qualified youth workers, combine to make staff shortages and retention one of the largest continuing challenges for afterschool programs.” (Grossman, et al., 2002; p.vi). A study of youth program staff showed that only 20% of workers say their organization recognizes or rewards participation in training and only 62% indicate that their organization pays for training

(Yohalem, et al., 2006). The lack of incentives for training may be due to high staff turnover. Youth workers that do not view their work as a profession may have little motivation to seek additional training in their field, especially if the training comes at their own cost. In addition, employers may feel little need to invest in the professional development of their staff due to high rates of staff turnover. (Catch 22)!

Furthermore, even if youth workers received increased training, education, and higher salaries, there still remains limited opportunity for career advancement. These factors make arguments about quality of care and staff turnover a moot point since youth workers are still likely to leave the field to advance their careers. The structure of the current youth worker system needs to be remodeled to provide such an advancement structure.

### **Contribution to Practice**

A structure change could have implications on the quality of care that youth receive. Currently the large majority (81%) of youth workers are satisfied with their jobs and most (84%) plan to continue to work with youth for the next five years (Evans & Sicafuse, 2009). Increasing the level of compensation that youth workers receive may open the door for reduced quality of care by attracting employees who place a greater priority on compensation than on the children and youth they work with. Given the level of job satisfaction under the current system and the quality of care provided by current youth workers, there may be little incentive to further professionalize the field.

What does it actually mean for a youth worker to be a professional? Hahn and Raley (1998) suggest that a professional has “a monopoly of judgment over their clients based on knowledge and expertise” (p.391). The youth worker professional maintains a privileged position with youth that encompasses responsibilities such as trust, loyalty, and confidentiality as a result of their expertise and the relationship that they have developed with the youth. Youth workers not only service in an instructional capacity to youth, but also serve as a confidante, ally, and advocate for youth.

The effort and commitment to youth that it takes to be a successful youth worker is no small task. Individuals who are attracted to this line of work must have an intrinsic want to improve the lives of young people. However, more must be done in the youth worker field to recruit and retain quality youth work practitioners. Walker (2002) said it best: “Passion brings people to youth work, but it takes more than passion to keep them there: (p.382).

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

Youth do not benefit by just participating in youth programs. There is a relation between the positive benefits youth obtain from program participation and the quality of the program. Essentially, youth benefit from high quality programs and may not benefit from programs that

are lower in quality. (e.g. Catalano, Berglund, Ryna, Lonczak, & Kawkins, 1998); Durlak & Weissbeerg, 2007; Vandell & Pierce. 2001). Research implicates the role of the youth worker in creating a high quality program and the training and education of that worker is essential for delivering programs that maximize benefits to youth (Mahoney & Statti, 2000; Pierce, Hamm & Vandell, 1999). One trend that will be observed within the youth worker field is an increase in their training and education.

Along with increases in training and education, the compensation that youth workers receive will also increase. This increase will not be dramatic; indeed the mismatch between youth workers' compensation and their education and previous work experience will likely persist.

One way to reduce this discrepancy is the professionalization of the field. Professionalization centers on increasing the compensation, status, and benefits of the youth worker as well as the structure of the field, i.e. opportunity for career advancement. Barriers to professionalization include the feasibility of such a structural change as well as the limited financial capacity of the field itself. Hopefully, as we move forward, new avenues will open for youth development workers. Historically youth workers are adaptive and will meet these challenges and opportunities with optimism.

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## **Competency in Establishing Positive Relationships with Program Youth: The impact of Organization and Youth Worker Characteristics”**

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### **Topic Area:**

- **Youth Development Profession**

### **Abstract:**

*Frontline youth workers’ ability to form strong, positive relationships with program youth is a key element in maximizing the benefits of program participation. A recent National Collaboration of Youth (2006) report identified six elements associated with youth workers’ competency to complete their professional roles: compensation, training opportunities, supportive work environment, clear work roles, sense that work is valued, and networking opportunities. The current study investigated whether having these elements predicted 459 youth workers’ self-reported job competency in forming positive relationships with youth. Regression analyses revealed that job efficacy, clarity of work roles and benefits significantly predicted competency in forming strong relationships with program youth. Findings are discussed in relation to practice implications for the youth work field.*

### **Article Citation**

Davidson, L., Evan, W.P., & Sicafuse, L. (2011). Competency in Establishing Positive Relationships with Program Youth: The Impact of Organization and Youth Worker Characteristics. *Child & Youth Services*, 32:4, 336-354. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2011.639242>

### **Research Brief**

The term youth development professional is commonly used to define a cadre of professionals working within the field of youth development. This term encompasses professionals in the discipline with job functions ranging from administrators to frontline service providers. The research article *Competency in Establishing Positive Relationships with Program Youth: The impact of Organization and Youth Worker Characteristics* (2011) provides important theory around how youth development professionals at all levels can impact positive youth development through the support and proper management of frontline youth workers.

Research conducted through the aforementioned article clearly defines the innate relationship that must exist between frontline youth professionals and youth program participants in order to create an environment of positive youth development. Relationships between youth and staff serve as the fundamental strength of a program and primary reason for a child's continued participation (Davidson, Evans, Sicafuse, 2011). Success of a program, and therefore the success of youth therein, hinge upon an organization's ability to keep engaged youth participants, as longevity within a program leads to further developmental assets in youth. Continued participation of youth is greatly impacted by the sustained relationships between youth and frontline youth workers. And therefore, long term employment of frontline youth workers is essential to the success of youth programs.

The present study assessed the findings of a 2006 report by the National Collaboration of Youth (NCY) entitled "Capturing Promising Practices in Recruitment and Retention of Frontline Youth Workers" and analyzed it against a broad range of youth development organizations and youth workers. The NCY (2006) report identifies six elements needed to ensure an employee's success and job competency in youth development programs:

1. Adequate compensation and opportunities for advancement;
2. Opportunities for professional development and training;
3. Working in supportive environments and climates that foster success (including adequate supervision and co-worker collaboration);
4. Clear role descriptions and perceived competence to perform that role;
5. A sense that their work is valued; and
6. Opportunities for networking.

The aim was to find which of NCY's six identifiers serve as predictors of the self-reported success of youth development professionals' in the development of forming lasting and supportive relationships with youth participants. By testing whether or not these six identifiers help frontline youth workers form lasting relationships with program youth, organizations can use the findings to more effectively ensure quality and effective youth programs.

### **Contribution to Theory**

Findings of the study suggest that job satisfaction plays an essential role in youth worker's commitment to job performance and longevity as an employee. Therefore, the ability of an organization to successfully employ youth workers for an extended duration of time was found to positively impact the youth development outcomes of a program. Despite there being no clear linkages between job satisfaction and self reported levels of competency within this study, job satisfaction still played an important role in the willingness of an employee to form lasting relationships with youth. Findings of the study indicate an organization's ability to provide employees with clear and concise job descriptions, quality levels of supervision and

management, and who show confidence in their employees' ability to make decisions as it pertains to their roles, proves to be an effective means in promoting job satisfaction.

Interesting to note, the majority of youth workers in the study reported salaries ranging between \$25,000 and \$45,000 despite having worked in the field between three and seven years (Davidson, Evans, Sicafuse, 2011). A relatively lower wage when compared to professions requiring similar levels of training and/or education (National Collaboration of Youth, 2006). Regardless of wage, study participants still recorded high levels of job satisfaction and an intention of remaining in the field. Indicating that frontline youth workers stay in the field for reasons other than financial reasons (Davidson, Evans, Sicafuse, 2011). In support of these findings, is an article by Walker (2003) which suggests that frontline youth workers often engage in youth work and remain for long periods of time out of a desire to give back or make a difference in a program or community because of what someone or some organization has done for them in the past.

Results of this study also indicate job self-efficacy as being a primary indicator of an employee's ability to form positive and lasting relationships with youth. Job self-efficacy or a youth worker's perception that they are capable of successfully completing their job requirements directly correlates to one's feeling of competence within their position. Contributing factors to self-reported high levels of self-efficacy included the ability to receive formal training, the ability to utilize informal training ("street experience") while on the job and the validation of one's work from co-workers and administration (Davidson, Evans, Sicafuse, 2011).

Job self-efficacy was also found to be directly linked to job satisfaction. Some of the strongest contributing factors to job self-efficacy found in the study were (a) the quality of supervision and management; (b) training opportunities; (c) youth workers' involvement in decision making; and (d) the clarity of youth workers' professional role (Davidson, Evans, Sicafuse, 2011). All contributing factors found in the self-reported predictors of job satisfaction.

### **Contribution to Practice**

The importance of this study revolves around identifying which job characteristics impact youth development professionals' abilities in successfully implementing positive youth development practices in youth programs and more specifically which characteristics impact an employee's ability to form lasting relationships with youth. As indicated above, youth development professionals and program administrators managing frontline youth workers, can increase the level of positive youth development in programs by focusing efforts on improving youth workers' job self-efficacy, and by increasing the level of job satisfaction within its employees.

Findings of the study further suggest increased levels of job self-efficacy and job satisfaction in frontline youth workers can be enhance when program managers and administrators:

1. present detailed and appropriate work objectives and expectations;
2. watch for indicators of work overload or lack of role clarity;
3. provide high levels of communication;
4. offer opportunity for validation of work from peers and provide timely performance evaluations;
5. create opportunities for continued training and professional development; and
6. respect an employee's ability to make decisions pertinent to their role.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

The Oregon 4-H staffing model is made up of a variety of youth development professionals. The organization provides youth development programming through a cadre of positions including program administrators, state level youth development specialists, state level program specialists, as well as through county based 4-H faculty and staff. The majority of these positions require some frontline work with youth from across the state.

Another major position present within the Oregon 4-H model that serves as a primary frontline position working with youth is that of 4-H volunteers. 4-H volunteers are charged with delivering program, managing youth and 4-H clubs, and in creating positive lasting relationships with program participants. Therefore, the implications of this study revolve around the ability of program managers and administrators to manage appropriately, not only paid staff but volunteers as well within their role as frontline youth workers.

A youth worker's self-perception of job quality, coupled with positive feelings of job self-efficacy is vital to the organization's ability in producing positive youth development outcomes. Positive self-perception of job quality is heightened when the organization provides timely feedback on job performance, validation of work through various recognition models, networking outlets and training opportunities conducive to the paid employee's or volunteer's time, talent, and treasure. The ability of program managers and administrators at keeping in tune to the needs of their employees and volunteers is a vital component to program success.

Additionally, having clear and concise job descriptions allow youth workers the ability to center on the most essential aspects of their job and reduces the likelihood of undue stress, overload, and aids in the ability to manage their time while focusing on program goals and objectives. Through the use of professional development sessions, through new volunteer orientation programs, and through proper communication outlets, frontline workers will possess the ability to articulate their role and function within the program organization, ultimately leading to higher levels of self-efficacy and therefore improved competency levels in relation to youth development outcomes.

Finally, providing a quality work environment is an essential element in keeping youth workers focused on the developmental needs of youth and in creating an atmosphere conducive to forming lasting relationships with youth. As indicated previously, many frontline youth workers become interested in the field for non-financial reasons but rather for the opportunity to give back. Therefore, when salary and benefits are not the driving force behind employment or in offering volunteer time, the ability of the organization to provide a quality work environment becomes vitally important. Program managers and administrators can create positive work environments through offering high levels of communication, through outlining opportunities for advancement or increased responsibilities, and through a management style where youth workers are given opportunities to make decisions that are both valued and supported.

Frontline youth workers, regardless of serving in paid or volunteer positions offer an organization or program the ability to connect with and offer lasting relationships with youth, ultimately leading to increased outcomes in relation to positive youth development. This study clearly outlines how an organization's ability to achieve program goals and objectives is directly linked to intentional management styles that produce high levels of self-efficacy, positive self-perception of job quality and in creating an environment where job satisfaction is achieved.

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## **The Many Faces, Features and Outcomes of Youth Engagement**

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### **Topic Area**

- Youth Engagement/Youth Empowerment

### **Abstract**

Youth engagement has been called many things over the years: youth leadership, civic engagement, youth participation, and youth voice, to name but a few. And it means very different things to different people. For some, the focus of youth engagement is on ensuring that young people participate in high quality programs. For others, youth engagement is about helping young people find activities. The lack of consensus on conceptual frameworks and definitions of youth participation and engagement has been identified as one of the issues plaguing the field and restricting progress of youth engagement research and practice (O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2002). The authors present a conceptual framework called the Rings of Engagement that captures the myriad ways in which people think about youth engagement. The authors conclude with recommendations for further research which will guide training, stakeholder-driven communication tools created to garner support, ways to act locally while working at the intermediary level to provide the supports necessary to promote and support youth engagement.

### **Article Citation**

Saito, R. N., & Sullivan, T. K. (2011). The many faces, features and outcomes of youth engagement. *Journal of Youth Development: Bridging Research and Practice*. On-line. Article # 110603FA007

### **Research Brief**

This research presents the Rings of Youth Engagement as a new conceptual framework for understanding youth Engagement. The Rings of Engagement visualizes four critical dimensions of youth engagement: participation, passion, voice, and collective action. All are dependent on a core of authentic relationships and a context of engaging people, places and programs. Surround these four rings is the fifth ring. The fifth ring is embedded throughout the first four rings and includes people, places and programs.

Participation is the first. Benefits of participation are strengthened through opportunities for connection to positive people and places. Passion includes commitment to ongoing growth and development in a particular area of pursuit. Voice requires opportunities for youth to have input into decisions that affect them. Collective action includes shared power and decision-making authority among youth and adults.

Three important ideas were woven throughout the literature and practitioners' notions about all the forms of youth engagement:

1. **Youth as Contributors and Leaders** - One fundamental thread through all the forms of youth engagement is the recognition and belief that young people have skills, perspectives and expertise that can be tapped to help make activities and programs relevant, engaging and effective at promoting growth and development.
2. **Developmental Perspectives** - As children become teenagers, the kinds of programs and opportunities they need and want change. Adolescents need to develop their sense of identity and autonomy in the framework of ever-expanding social contexts; practice making important, impactful decisions; and learn attitudes and habits that will impact engagement throughout youth and adulthood. These normal developmental needs influence the types of programs and opportunities to which older adolescents are attracted. Programs that offer opportunities for voice, decision-making, connection to a broader community and action that meaningfully impacts that community fit the needs and interests of this group.
3. **Reciprocal Relationships at the Core** – Engagement depends on ongoing, authentic relationships between youth and adults. While youth engagement is often thought of as a process of adults engaging youth, quality youth engagement involves youth and adults engaging with each other in ways that benefit both.

The following summarizes the rings of engagement.

Participation: Young people participate in a range of programs and opportunities that enable them to connect with positive people and experiences, through which they learn and develop new skills. However, opportunities for experiencing and learning about citizenship are “highly unequal among youth of different backgrounds, cultures, race, and socio-economic status and therefore unique and different strategies must be employed to effectively address the issues and concerns necessary for highly effective youth civic engagement.”

Passion: Passionate engagement happens when youth become engrossed in some activity. It is marked by high levels of attention, concentration, enthusiasm and commitment. The most commonly reported youth sparks, in order of the frequency with which they were reported are: creative arts; athletics; learning an academic subject (e.g.

math, science or history); reading; helping others/volunteering; spirituality/religion; a commitment to living in a specific way (e.g. with joy, passion, caring); animal welfare Research has shown that young people who have identified a spark or passion are more likely than others to do well in school. In addition, youth say that pursuing their spark(s) has helped them learn new things outside of school, including skills that could help them in a career. These outcomes can lead to social approval and increased attention from supportive adults, as well as the satisfaction of mastering challenges, which, in turn, motivate ongoing learning and practice.

**Voice:** Voice refers to opportunities for youth to express their ideas and have input into programs, policies and practices that affect them. While youth do not have full decision-making authority in this type of engagement, they have authentic input. This means they have the power to influence programs and policies by sharing their perspectives, information and/or making a persuasive case to adults who truly consider their ideas as they make decisions. Youth gain new knowledge and skills when they have a voice in programs and policies that affect them. They learn about the structure and politics of organizations and institutions as they figure out how to effectively promote their interests within them. They can also develop problem-solving, communication and advocacy skills. Beyond direct learning from these experiences, youth who express their voice tend to do better overall in terms of academic achievement. Adults are also impacted. When youth have authentic opportunities to share their ideas, adults begin to appreciate their insights, wisdom and commitment, counteracting common adult perceptions.

**Collective Action:** Collective action happens when youth and adults partner to achieve common goals, sharing power and authority to make decisions along the way. There are two distinct types of youth–adult partnerships for collective action, based on the breadth of decision-making power youth and adults share. In the first type of collective action, young people have clearly defined authority to shape policy and make decisions within current systems. In the second, youth and adults share power to change or create new systems. This happens when youth and adults share decision-making authority for overall governance of an organization or when they organize together to make things happen in the broader community. Through this process youth develop real-world problem solving and collaborative skills deemed critical for workers and citizens in the 21st century. And, as diverse youth help to create the kind of organizations and communities in which they want to engage and contribute, they become more connected to these places, they continue to work with others to improve them, and organizations and communities come to more closely reflect the values and meet the needs of all youth. A shift in focus away from individual outcomes to developing a group’s capacity to reach shared goals, what Watts and Flanagan (2007)

call “collective human development” may be the greatest benefit of collective action. And yet social trust is also precursor to participation (Flanagan, 2003). Collective action provides a way for disengaged youth and adults to build trusting relationships within a group while helping to create or shape systems they can trust and in which they want to participate.

### **Contribution to Theory**

Efforts to unravel and understand the many forms of youth engagement is motivated by the need to develop a more comprehensive agenda that advances understanding, support, and promotion of quality youth engagement agendas. The authors conclude that while the Rings of Youth Engagement can be used as a conceptual framework, they largely argue for a discussion of the enduring challenges and possible next steps to ensure that all youth have the opportunities to engage in the programs and activities that they want and need. The authors call for a comprehensive agenda to promote and support youth engagement, which might include these five elements.

1. Useful research to deepen our understanding of the benefits of youth engagement, what it takes to do it well, and obstacles we must overcome to put into practice what we know works.
2. Deepen and broaden the practice of youth engagement through the development of useful training, technical assistance, coaching, peer learning, online forums, practitioner and research blogs, and other vehicles for practitioners and other stakeholders to learn from and with each other.
3. Create effective communication and awareness-raising tools that translate research into user-friendly, stakeholder-driven products, tools and messages that pique the interest and meet the needs of a variety of audiences.
4. Build system-level opportunities, resources and technology that support collaborative training, research, communication and connections across people, programs and communities.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

Youth engagement is both a means to an end and an end in itself. It is expressed and experienced through various program models, yet it is more than just a method or a tool. It represents a philosophical shift in the way we think about the relationships, roles, assets, power and opportunities that can exist between young people and the adults, programs and communities that surround and include them. The goal is to ensure that young people are surrounded by multiple, captivating, developmentally-scaffolded opportunities for engagement and leadership in programs and communities. This will require programs and organizations to look for ways to work with young people to achieve shared goals, recognizing the value and resources each brings. Youth engagement also requires a personal commitment. The Rings of

Engagement model provides concrete suggestions for how youth development workers can boost youth engagement within programs. A recent study by Search Institute (Scales, Roehlkepartain, and Benson, 2010) found that the more types of youth engagement opportunities youth experience, the better off they would be. No single organization has to provide all these opportunities. If young people can find and access a range of different opportunities and relationships through their community, over time they can engage in different programs and places to address their changing needs.

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**How Youth Get Engaged: Grounded-Theory  
Research on Motivational Development in Organized Youth Programs**

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**Topic Area(s)**

- **Youth Engagement**

**Abstract**

*For youth to benefit from many of the developmental opportunities provided by organized programs, they need to not only attend but become psychologically engaged in program activities. This research was aimed at formulating empirically based grounded theory on the processes through which this engagement develops. Longitudinal interviews were conducted with 100 ethnically diverse youth (ages 14-21) in 10 urban and rural arts and leadership programs. Qualitative analysis focused on narrative accounts from the 44 youth who reported experiencing a positive turning point in their motivation or engagement. For 38 of these youth, this change process involved forming a personal connection. Similar to processes suggested by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), forming a personal connection involved youth's progressive integration of personal goals with the goals of program activities. Youth reported developing a connection to 3 personal goals that linked the self with the activity: learning for the future, developing competence, and pursuing a purpose. The role of purpose for many youth suggests that motivational change can be driven by goals that transcend self-needs. These findings suggest that youth need not enter programs intrinsically engaged—motivation can be fostered—and that programs should be creative in helping youth explore ways to form authentic connections to program activities.*

**Article Citation**

Dawes, N.P., & Larson, R. (2011). How Youth Get Engaged: Grounded-Theory Research on Motivational Development in Organized Youth Programs. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol 47, No 1, 259-269. doi:10.1037/a0020729

**Research Brief**

America's youth programs provide an important environment for youth to gain developmental benefits (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Duriak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009; Zarrett et al. 2009).

The Child Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative (2007) reports that 82% of youth in the age span of 12 to 17 participate in one or more organized programs. Thus, youth programs have the potential to have impact on the development of many young people. There is evidence that the relationship between program participation and positive outcomes for youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, may be particularly strong.

Every youth participating in a youth program is motivated, extrinsically (e. g., by parental urging, or to fulfill school service requirements) or intrinsically (i. e., to explore career options, enjoy a hobby, or accomplish an exercise goal). Research suggests that when high school youth were intrinsically motivated, they reported having significantly more positive development experiences. For greatest developmental benefits, not only do young people need to participate, but they also need to be psychologically engaged in the program activities.

### **Contribution to Theory**

The goal of the investigators was to use qualitative research methods and tools of systematic analysis to formulate grounded theory (preliminary theory) from the perspective of the youth. This method contributes to the development of theory, rather than test it.

This research contributes valuable information from youth participants in ten high-quality, project-based programs. One hundred youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds were involved in the study. Youth were from urban and rural homes and the majority lived in census tracts with medium to low income households. Data were collected through three interviews and observation over a nine month period.

Overall, this study extended current research on how youth engage in non-school programs and activities, specifically to

- 1) Evaluate and extend existing theory that forming personal connections could explain increased psychological engagement in a youth program.
- 2) Understand what different forms of personal connection might be involved in youth engagement.

A review of related literature informs us that youth development programs already provide multiple ways for youth to become (psychologically) engaged in programs that result in various developmental outcomes. Three theories of youth engagement that speak to the questions posed by these investigators, include, Flow Theory, Interest Theory and Self-Determination Theory.

### *Flow Theory*

This theory suggests that deep engagement occurs when a person (a) believes the this activity has meaning, and (b) experiences the challenges in the activity as matched to his or her skills (i.e., the challenges are not too difficult, nor too easy relative to his/her skill level).

### *Interest Theory*

This theory suggests that tasks need to be meaningful to the individual in order for engagement to occur. The psychological state of *interest* involves focus, mental attention, persistence, and affective involvement. To sustain interest, a person needs to gain a base of knowledge and develop positive feelings about that activity.

### *Self-Determination Theory*

This theory suggests that while psychological engagement requires personal meaning and positive feeling, it also requires that the activity needs to become integrated into the self. It asks: Does the youth, how much does the youth, internalize the goals of the program as his/her own? This theory builds on three basic psychological needs of the self, which are: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

### *Youth Forming a Personal Connection to a Program/Activity*

The analysis of the data in this study showed that youth increased their engagement in a program when there was increased convergence between self and the activity. A majority of youth attributed their increased engagement to experiencing a change in the personal relevance or meaning of the program activities.

Specifically, youth increased their involvement when at least one of three personal connections was present. The three personal connections that youth identified as significant to their sustained engagement were (a) learning for the future, (b) developing a sense of competence for the present, and (c) pursuing a higher purpose. The description of each of the three categories of connections is

- a) Learning for the future - is the connection youth discovered between the skills they were learning through participation in the program activities and their career goals. Their intrinsic motivation increased as they connected the value of this program to its impact on the rest of their lives.
- b) Developing a sense of competence - is the connection a youth felt between immediate skill development in the program and connection to his/her goals. Doing well in program activities, and having that acknowledged by others, provided meaningful self-affirmation. Having the opportunity to repeat these experiences appeared to have increased youth's engagement in program activities.

- c) Pursuing purpose – is when youth attributed their increased psychological engagement to forming personal connections to goals that transcended their own self-interest. These program activities helped youth accomplish something that was personally meaningful and consequential to the larger world beyond self. Youth in leadership programs attributed their increased engagement to the personal connection they formed to the service, civic, and social change goals of their program.

### **Contribution to Practice**

The results of this research suggest that

- Extrinsic motivation (incentives, desire to affiliate with peers, encouragement from guardians or mentors) are valuable to get youth involved initially.
- Youth do not need to arrive to a program or activity, already motivated.
- Extrinsic motivators do not preclude a youth from developing intrinsic, more sustained engagement in program activities.
- Psychological engagement can emerge from the youth's experiences during the program.
- Youth are most likely to increase psychological engagement when a program successfully connects with their 'serious' side (i.e., to a career path, or social change).
- Psychological engagement develops through the youth's internal (or group) conversations about (a) Who am I? What do I want to achieve or become? and (b) What personal and societal goals are served by my participation in these program activities? Youth psychological engagement appears to increase when the answers to these questions are interconnected.
- Many of the developmental benefits that youth programs provide come from learning that occurs through challenges and outcomes of their involvement as compared to the products of their project work.
- Research establishes that young people learn more when they are focused on the tasks and challenges of learning activities.
- More youth reported that they increased their engagement when they connected program activities to their individual future goals.
- When an individual internalizes the goals of the program activity his/her motivation becomes more self-determined, and psychologically engagement becomes stronger.
- People whose connection to an activity is more internalized are more likely to engage in that activity at a deeper level.
- Youth attributed their increased engagement to changes in themselves and their perception of the activity that made the activity personally meaningful.

## **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

Personal connections are important. The authors suggest that for increased youth engagement (involvement), diverse activities can be incorporated into a program to help youth make connections to their future goals, for competencies needed today, and/or to a higher purpose than themselves. Youth may be more engaged in program learning when youth development professionals help them think about their personal values and goals, and help them explore a multiple of opportunities to find and develop authentic personal connections to program activities.

Community service and civic programs provide valuable opportunities for youth to think about important questions, such as “Who am I? What do I want to accomplish? How do I contribute to my community and/or world? For two decades, professionals in the field of volunteer development and youth development have debated whether or not *mandatory* community service has a long term, positive impact on youth; and should a specific number of service hours be required for high school graduation. This debate may no longer be an issue as this preliminary study suggests that motivation for engagement in a program or activity can and does change during the youth’s experience anyway.

Youth want to be challenged at a reasonable level. To obtain the developmental benefits of youth programs, it is important that participants be psychologically engaged in program activities. Research establishes that young people learn more when their attention is absorbed in the tasks and challenges of the learning activities.

The authors challenge educators to find ways for youth to become psychologically engaged in every program activity, but especially when there are youth present who are attending for reasons extrinsic to program activities goals. Youth can think about their future and they want to consider meaning beyond their self-interest. When youth development professionals include these factors in youth program activities, there is opportunity for deeper learning to occur, which enables youth programs to have a greater impact on young learners.

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## Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance

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### **Topic Area**

- Youth Development

### **Abstract**

*Praise for ability is commonly considered to have beneficial effects on motivation. Contrary to this popular belief, six studies demonstrated that praise for intelligence had more negative consequences for students' achievement motivation than praise for effort. Fifth graders praised for intelligence were found to care more about performance goals relative to learning goals than children praised for effort. After failure, they also displayed less task persistence, less task enjoyment, more low-ability attributions, and worse task performance than children praised for effort. Finally, children praised for intelligence described it as a fixed trait more than children praised for hard work, who believed it to be subject to improvement. These findings have important implications for how achievement is best encouraged, as well as for more theoretical issues, such as the potential cost of performance goals and the socialization of contingent self-worth.*

### **Article Citation**

Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 33-52.

### **Research Brief**

Praise for ability has been widely used to motivate youth and encourage them to improve their performance. Most parents (85% in one poll) believed they should praise their child's ability to make them feel smart or talented, and this practice is commonly used by teachers in schools and coaches in sports. The six studies described in this article were designed to determine whether or not this accepted practice of praising for ability does, in fact, increase motivation and performance. Specifically, the studies contrasted the effects of praising for ability and praising for effort, and did so under a variety of conditions. Past studies that appeared to indicate that praising for ability was beneficial were conducted under conditions of success. These studies measured attributes under conditions of both success and of failure.

Other studies have shown the negative consequences of youth having performance goals instead of learning goals (Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Youth that have performance goals don't take advantage of learning opportunities if there is any risk of making errors. They feel great pressure to always do well. These youth also tend to not be able to handle setbacks, and their performance declines when confronted with failure. Youth that have learning goals do not exhibit these characteristics. A major focus of the studies described in this article was to measure the effect the type of praise (ability or effort) has on determining whether a child develops performance goals or learning goals.

### **Contribution to Theory**

The results of the six studies demonstrated that praising youth for ability has many negative consequences compared to praising them for effort. The findings held true across gender, ethnic groups, and rural/urban divides.

The chart below is a comparison of how praising for ability and praising for effort affected several attributes.

<b>Praise for Ability</b>	<b>Praise for Effort</b>
Preferred performance over learning goals	Preferred learning over performance goals
Led youth to want to keep looking smart	Led youth to want to learn new things
Learned that their performance reflected their ability or intelligence	Did not measure their intelligence by how well they did
Didn't want to persist in their task	Wanted to persist in their task
Didn't enjoy their task	Enjoyed what they were doing
After failure, scores dropped on second task	After failure, scores improved on second task
Often lied about their performance so they wouldn't have to admit to a low score	Didn't distort their scores or performance
Attributed failure to low ability, not low effort	Attributed failure to low effort, not low ability
More interested in knowing the scores of others	More interested in learning additional strategies to better understand the problem
After success, chose problems that allowed them to continue being successful	After success, chose problems that promised increased learning
Showed signs of distress at setbacks	Resilient to setbacks
Believed intelligence is an internal, stable trait they either had or didn't have	Believed intelligence is something that can be developed

Children who were praised for their ability tended to have the belief that intelligence is a stable trait that can't be changed. They felt they were either intelligent or they were not. They also believed that their intelligence could be rated based on their performance: if they performed well, they were intelligent; if they performed poorly, they were not intelligent.

Children who were praised for their effort, on the other hand, tended to believe that intelligence was something they could develop. They felt that their performance was related to their effort, not to their level of intelligence. Therefore, poor performance equated to lack of effort, not lack of intelligence. These children also had more adaptive behaviors after failure.

### **Contribution to Practice**

Since research shows that having learning goals leads to more positive attributes than does having performance goals, it is important that educators employ methods that help youth develop learning goals. When working with children, care should be taken to give praise for the youths' efforts and the process of their work rather than for their ability or the finished product as this will support acquiring learning goals.

The authors use the results of their studies to challenge several contemporary strategies used in schools. One is the concept of "Talented and Gifted" programs. Such programs, they hypothesize, may actually be detrimental to youth development. Once identified as talented and gifted, youth may become anxious to justify that placement. Their emphasis becomes doing well and looking smart rather than learning strategies and taking risks. They may develop extreme fear of failure since this would invalidate their placement in the program. This can lead to high stress levels and behavioral problems. The authors recommend that if talented and gifted programs are incorporated into a school, the emphasis of such programs needs to be on teaching youth strategies for learning, giving them constant challenges, and rewarding (praising) their effort in tackling the challenges regardless of whether they are successful.

Another enigma seen in schools is that girls often seem to lose interest in subjects such as science and math when they reach middle or high school. The authors conjecture this might be due, in part, to girls being excessively praised for their intelligence in elementary school. In an effort to get more girls involved in the sciences, teachers may over-praise them, thinking this will be an encouragement. Instead, according to these studies, this ability praise leads to lack of motivation and performance in the future.

One of the authors, Carol Dweck, has used the results of these and other studies to formulate a simple idea she defines in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. She divides people into those that have a "fixed" mindset and those that have a "growth" mindset. Fixed mindset people believe their talents and intelligence are given traits, they are born with a certain level and effort has no effect on that level. These people devote much of their time

endeavoring to prove their ability rather than attempting to improve on or develop that ability. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, believe that their talents can be improved through effort. These are the people who are most successful in life because they are constantly striving to get better and feel there is no limit to what they can accomplish.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

All this has practical implications for 4-H since 4-H is a youth development program, and the research done suggests strategies that can aid in positive development. When working with youth, educators should strive to reward effort instead of ability. By doing so, youth are encouraged to develop learning goals, not performance goals. They learn that they can always improve, making the best better. They learn to stretch out of their comfort zone and not be afraid to fail. They learn persistence.

Ultimately, life skills learned in 4-H will carry on into members' adult lives. Helping youth develop a growth mindset helps them be successful throughout their lives. Instead of viewing things that happen as being fixed (Jane told on me; therefore, Jane is a bad friend), they view events as growth opportunities (what can I learn from this or what can I do to change the outcome?). The skills established by rewarding effort and thus cultivating a growth mindset allow people to survive in times of challenge because they believe that something can be done to improve the situation.

The one caveat to rewarding for effort is that the praise must be sincere. Youth know when they have expended effort and when they haven't. Praise given when effort was not expended does not promote positive youth development. In fact, insincere praise can be damaging (Dewar, 2008; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

Finally, these mindsets start to be developed at a fairly young age. Babies and toddlers have no fear of failure; they will continue to try until they accomplish their goal. At some point, however, praise for every ability they exhibit may start them on the path to valuing performance goals instead of growth goals. Therefore, especially in Cloverbuds and Junior 4-H programs, it is essential that proper praise for effort be the principle strategy used.

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## **Moving Beyond Youth Voice**

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### **Topic Area(s)**

- Youth voice
- Youth-adult partnerships
- Youth engagement
- Program participation

### **Abstract**

*This study combines research documenting the benefits of positive relationships between youth and caring adults on a young person's positive development with studies on youth voice to examine the mechanisms through which participation in youth programs contributes to positive developmental outcomes. Specifically, the study explores whether youth's perceived quality relationships with adults contribute to strengthening of youth voice and in turn how the two combine to affect youth's perception of the benefits of program participation. The findings derived from survey data regarding 748 youth who participated in youth-adult partnership program in 29 states suggest that young people who develop positive relationships with adults perceive they have more voice in the program and in turn perceive more benefits to program participation. Implications for research and practice are presented.*

### **Article Citation**

Serido, J., Borden, L. M., & Perkins, D. F. (2011). Moving beyond youth voice. *Youth & Society*, 43(1), 44-63. doi: 10.1177/00441 18X09351280

### **Research Brief**

Current research highlights the importance of youth voice in promoting positive youth development (Mitra, 2003; Perkins & Borden, 2006; Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000). Research also documents that positive relationships with nonfamilial adults is critical in helping young people acquire skills that they need to thrive in adulthood (Scales, Benson & Mannes, 2006). This study contributes new understanding to the field of positive youth development by examining the associations among youth voice, positive relationships with caring adults and their effects on perceived benefits of program participation.

The participants in this study were part of the National 4-H Council Engaging Youth Serving Communities (EYSC) initiative. This was a web-based nationwide survey conducted to document:

- The effectiveness of local EYSC sites in National 4-H Council's three core program areas
- The national reach of EYSC programs consistent with the core program areas
- The process, strengths, and potential improvements for national initiatives like EYSC
- Understand the perception of program qualities held by individual participants in programs across the nation

Data came from 748 youth who participated in youth-adult partnership programs through the EYSC initiative in 29 states.

### **Contribution to Theory**

Youth voice is documented to be a critical element of positive youth development. When a program promotes authentic and meaningful involvement, youth have opportunities for connection with others and empowerment. Youth need opportunities to feel respected for their ideas and opinions and be encouraged to share them in order to explore and establish self-identity. While older youth want and need independence and time with their peers, this needs to be balanced with adult-mentored experiences that allow youth to explore interests, test abilities and to be challenged. Beyond listening to what youth have to say, promoting youth voice means giving youth opportunities to put their voices into action through program leadership and community engagement.

Through relationships with caring adults, youth are encouraged to voice their thoughts and opinions. They also learn how to express ideas in ways that can be heard both inside and outside the program. Youth-adult partnerships that engage youth in shared decision making, allow youth to socialize and develop a sense of well-being and self-worth. Youth cite positive relationships with nonfamilial adults as a factor in changing the direction of their lives. A caring adult is the most common protective factor among resilient youth.

### **Contribution to Practice**

Youth often have limited decision-making opportunities in family and school settings. Although youth development programs talk about the importance of youth voice, it is often limited to asking youth about their concerns and desires for the program. In contrast, when a program promotes authentic and meaningful involvement, youth have opportunities for connection with others, self-discovery and empowerment.

Youth development programs will be most effective when they foster strong youth-adult partnerships. Through this context, programs should encourage youth to be active participants in the design and implementation of the program itself as well as projects to address

community issues that are meaningful to youth and impact their lives. Ideally, youth should be involved in planning, implementing and problem solving during their experiences. Adults are right beside them to acknowledge their successes and encourage them when they fail. When a program provides positive relationships with caring adults and promotes youth voice, youth perceive greater benefits from program participation.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

This article suggests that it is essential for 4-H faculty, staff and volunteers to establish and foster positive relationships with youth in the program. Youth-adult partnerships set the stage for youth to benefit fully from program participation, explore new interests, and discover new talents. Through the ongoing interactions, youth find their voice. As their voices become stronger, youth develop a sense of belonging that encourages them to take ownership of the program and become more engaged in the larger community. When youth know they matter and make a difference, individuals, programs and communities benefit.

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## **Inside the Black Box: Assessing and Improving Quality in Youth Programs**

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### **Topic Area(s)**

- Youth Programs
- Quality Assessment

### **Abstract**

*Over the past decade, structured programming for children and youth during the non-school hours has expanded exponentially. A confluence of recent research studies and program evaluations backs the publicly perceived notion that after-school programs can positively influence important developmental and learning outcomes. The rapid expansion of the field and the potential of programs to contribute to child and youth development have made defining what high quality programs look like and learning how to improve program quality key challenges facing the field. This paper describes what is known about the relation between youth program quality and youth developmental outcomes, summarizes different quality assessment tools being used in the field, and discusses how such tools are being used to drive systemic quality improvement efforts.*

### **Article Citation**

Yohalem, N. & Wilson-Ahlstrom, A. (2010). Inside the Black Box: Assessing and Improving Quality in Youth Programs. *American Journal of Psychology*, 45, 350-357.

### **Research Brief**

There is a growing collection of developmental research and program evaluations suggesting that after-school programs can improve important developmental and learning outcomes. With an estimate of 6.5 million children enrolled in after-school programs in the United States, parents, practitioners, policy makers and researchers agree investing in after-school programming increases school grades, increases pro-social behaviors, and reduces problem behaviors (Vandell, 2007; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Lauer, 2006; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). However, a recent meta-analysis cautions that not all programs are designed or implemented in such a way that they will necessarily achieve positive

results (Durlak & Weissberg 2007). The positive potential of after-school programs to contribute to youth development, combined with the reality that all programs are not created equal, make defining what high quality programs look like difficult. Identifying what defines a high quality program while learning how to improve programs are key challenges facing the field (Granger, 2007).

In 2002, the National Research Council released a report identifying eight specific program features important in supporting positive youth development:

1. physical and psychological safety,
2. appropriate structure,
3. supportive relationships,
4. opportunities to belong,
5. positive social norms,
6. support for efficacy and mattering,
7. opportunities for skill building,
8. integration of family, school and community.

Since its publication, this list has been widely adopted and cited in the youth development and out-of-school time fields and has contributed to what has been characterized as an emerging consensus about what constitutes program quality (Granger, 2007). Utilizing the above essential elements as features in successful after-school programs, the authors aim to describe the current state of after-school program quality assessment in the youth-serving sector in three sections:

1. What is known about the relation between youth program quality and youth outcomes
2. Overview of the tools used to assess after-school program quality
3. A summary of how the eight program features listed above are being used to drive systemic quality improvement in after-school programming.

### **Contribution to Theory**

In describing youth program quality and youth outcomes, the authors suggest that programs with explicit, sequenced activities, and focused on the development of social skills, were more likely to show effects on academic and behavioral outcomes than programs without these activities. This evidence, combined with the rapid expansion of the field, has led to increased interest among practitioners, policy makers and researchers in finding and developing tools that are designed specifically to assess and improve program quality. Program improvement has become a major focus of the work of state and local organizations in the youth development field, and public funding sources like the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program are allocating resources for quality improvement purposes.

The authors compare and contrast different tools that are currently being used in the field to assess and improve out-of-school program quality. Program assessment tools used in the study were chosen because they shared the following characteristics:

- They included program-level observational measures of quality.
- They can be used in a range of school and community-based program settings.
- They included a focus on social processes within programs.
- they were research-based, i.e.: described in peer reviewed journals.

Most of the assessment tools reviewed were developed with program improvement as a primary goal. An example of one of the assessment programs reviewed was the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) developed by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (2005). With clear, practitioner friendly language, this and other tools like it aim to help programs collect and utilize observational data about staff practice with the explicit goal of using that information to reflect on and improve performance. All of the assessment tools reviewed in the study, including the YPQA address the following 10 core concepts, at varying levels of depth:

1. Relationships: *connections between and among youth and adults in the program.*
2. Environment: *various aspects of the program climate and setting, including physical and emotional safety.*
3. Engagement: *the extent to which children, youth and staff are meaningfully involved in program activities.*
4. Social/behavioral norms: *expectations about and responses to positive and negative behaviors in the program.*
5. Skill building: *opportunities for participants to develop specific skills by participating in intentional learning activities.*
6. Routine/structure: *various aspects of how the overall program is organized including pacing, transitions and routines.*
7. Youth leadership/participation
8. Staffing (ratios, qualifications)
9. Program management
10. Linkages to family and community

When the definitions of quality embedded in each tool was considered, a common emphasis on social processes emerged. This became reassuring given growing evidence that relationships, interactions and engagement, are associated with positive outcomes. With that said, the different assessment tools studied emphasized unique aspects of after-school settings.

The eight specific program features important in supporting positive youth development, also termed the essential elements, are increasingly being used by individual organizations and

networks of youth-serving programs around the country as they look for ways to assess and improve their after-school program performance. Public funding streams and private foundations at both local and national levels are allocating resources for capacity building purposes using assessment tools. In some cases, these tools are specifically helping seed the development of data-driven improvement systems.

### **Contribution to Practice**

The authors outline an example of an assessment program from the Michigan After-School Quality System (QSD) that may be helpful in measuring program quality in 4-H after-school programming. By emphasizing the ten core concepts in 4-H afterschool evaluation instruments, a degree of program quality may be measured. The QSD was implemented by dividing the assessment into four major stages or cycles including staff orientation and training, data collection, data interpretation and planning, and program improvement recommendations. From 2005–2008, program staff in Michigan were trained to use a customized version of the YPQA developed to assure compliance with Michigan’s Out-of-School Time Standards. Within this process, they conducted a self-assessment using the instrument, and developed a program improvement plan based on how they scored. This assessment system also helped provide information for program staff to form a consensus of what makes a quality after-school program.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

As the after-school and youth development fields expand and as more children and youth spend time in formal programs during the non-school hours, consensus is emerging about what program features matter and the tools to measure those features. These assessment tools are becoming increasingly accessible. Practitioners and policy makers are increasing their demand for more comprehensive information about how to improve program quality, and interest among researchers is also on the rise. Information about the purpose, content, structure and technical properties of different quality assessment tools can help program providers make informed decisions about what assessment tool may be most appropriate given local goals and interests.

4-H afterschool program providers could take immediate steps to assess and improve program quality by embedding the ten core concepts in program assessment tools from the Youth Program Quality Assessment. This assessment instrument, along with others in the study, may provide important information that can be used to increase program quality and impact. As 4-H continues its growth as an after-school program provider, research to improve assessment instruments will help define what high quality programs look like.

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# Interweaving Youth Development, Community Development, and Social Change through Youth Organizing

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## **Topic Area**

- Youth Engagement

## **Abstract**

*Community organizing groups that have built coalitions for local change over the past few decades are now involving young people as leaders in efforts to improve quality of life. The current study explores a particularly effective youth organizing initiative through review of organizational documents and collection and analysis of qualitative data. The study finds that this model for youth organizing is effective at producing impacts at multiple levels because it weaves together youth development, community development, and social change into a unified organizing cycle. The initiative encourages participants by promoting psychological empowerment, leadership development, and sociopolitical development. Simultaneously, youth organizing produces community-level impacts, including new program implementation, policy change, and institution building. Social changes include intergenerational and multicultural collaboration in the exercise of power. This interplay between youth development, community development, and social change is discussed in relation to the growing field of youth organizing and other efforts to engage youth in civil society.*

## **Article Citation**

Christens, B. D., & Dolan, T. (2011). Interweaving youth development, community development, and social change through youth organizing. *Youth & Society, 43*(2), 528-548.

## **Research Brief**

Community organizing groups are increasingly engaging with youth and training them to be agents of change. Youth organizing, according to the authors, is gaining recognition as a form of youth community engagement and strategy for positive youth development.

This case study is of a single youth organizing initiative that was designed to help youth cope with the tragic loss of a classmate. The findings from the case study indicate an organizing cycle

(relationship building, research, action, and reflection) that integrates youth development, community development, and social change produces individual and community level impacts. The authors used organizational documents and analysis of qualitative data to answer two questions. One, what are the individual and community-level impacts of effective youth organizing? Two, what are the features of the Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) organizing process that have allowed it to achieve these impacts?

### **Contribution to Theory**

The authors note that youth organizing is a youth development and social justice strategy that engages young people in community organization and advocacy enabling and encouraging them to alter power relations and create institutional change in their communities. Edwards, Johnson, and McGillicuddy (2000) place youth organizing on the opposite end of a youth engagement continuum that starts with youth services. While the youth services approach defines youth as clients; youth organizing dismisses youth services, pays particular attention to culture and identity, and incorporates the continuum's intermediary components of youth development, youth leadership, and civic engagement. Aside from the attributes of the intermediary components identified by Edwards et al., the authors contend youth organizing is a cyclical process that brings together youth leadership development, community development, and social change to produce individual and community level changes. Borrowing from the works of others, the authors add that youth organizing initiatives are also comprised of four unique characteristics. Initiatives take into consideration 1) the conditions faced by youth, 2) the ability of youth to focus collective social power to challenge people and institutions, 3) the collective decision making process used by youth to define issues that are meaningful rather than predetermined, and 4) youth lead decision making processes that are adult supported.

The results of the findings help youth development practitioners understand what practices are necessary to encourage psychological empowerment, promote leadership development, and enhance sociopolitical development as indicators of individual level impact. In addition, the study promotes practices that integrate program implementation strategies, policy change, and institution building necessary to produce community level impacts. Finally, the results of the study call attention to an organizing process that can allow youth and practitioners in other organizations to achieve similar outcomes.

### **Contribution to Practice**

#### ***Individual-level Development***

The ability to engage youth in initiatives that promote psychological empowerment (self-efficacy), leadership development (understanding personal potential), and sociopolitical development (power to impact community) requires persistence and knowing when to step in and out of the picture. Youth, according to the authors, separate adults into distinct profiles. One is the partnerships developed with adults in the process of youth organizing. The second

category is adults in power. Adults unfamiliar with youth civic engagement have low expectations of young agents of change. Youth development practitioners need to push youth to stay the course and continue to meet with adults until the relationship changes from condescending to proactive searches for youth knowledge, opinions, and recommendations. Over time, adult perceptions of youth changes and they begin to see the full potential of youth as agents of change. The youth and adult experiences presented in the study suggest:

- Youth need support of caring adults to help them find their voice, voice their concerns, and act on those concerns,
- Youth gains in self-confidence require opportunities to seek out inter and intra group leadership and speaking roles to produce community level impacts,
- Youth require guidance in learning about issues and how to break them down into manageable pieces,
- Youth produced research reports need to highlight proposed changes and the recommended holistic approaches to improve youth opportunities and community support,
- Youth need adult help to set up opportunities for them to meet with people in positions of power, and
- Youth must begin to understand and learn how government institutions and agencies function.

The authors suggest that as positive individual-level outcomes developed, new found confidence can cause youth to reconsider their life trajectories. Thoughts move away from self-interests to more global social justice concerns. Youth begin to see local issues in a much broader sense. Youth start to realize that their roles begin to transform from students to teachers as they help newcomers to the group build youth organizing skill sets and put them into practice. Also, it is difficult, but not impossible to fully integrate a youth organizing initiative. Issues that cross cultural boundaries will require building relationships that recognize the collective benefits of inclusivity. The inability to build multicultural youth organizing initiatives decreases the ability for youth to actively participate in the political arena.

### ***Community-level Development***

According to the authors, community level outcomes are best achieved when program implementation strategies are made public. Public campaigns and public forums allow youth to present their research reports to political and civic leaders. When political and civic leaders formally acknowledge youth for their use of careful research, effective tactics, and persistence to build community level impacts, youth organizing becomes a powerful community institution. Mass media needs to acknowledge how political and civic leaders and institutions can be pushed to change policy by implementing new programs and mobilizing scarce resources. The

authors note the unfortunate nature of power differentials. Adults in power still doubt the ability of youth to function as partners in local politics. Consequently, finding a place at the table where youth voice is considered and not marginalized will continue to hinder community level impacts. They believe for youth to actively participate in community governance as full partners, youth will need to understand how youth organizing processes (relationship building, research, action, and reflection) create meaningful changes in institutions and communities.

### **Implications for 4-H Youth Development Professional Practice**

The authors believe the key to successful youth organizing initiatives is a unified approach that weaves together the dimensions of youth leadership development, community development, and social change. Systems change and individual development are one in the same. To this end, youth organizing initiatives that favor one dimension over another, specifically to its detriment, are unlikely to be successful. Initiatives must be seen as empowering, building and developing leadership, and producing measurable outcomes. Youth development practitioners will need to become familiar with the tensions between youth organizing cycles and youth leadership development cycles. The authors suggest:

- Youth development practitioners *should not* prioritize development over organizing; doing so forfeits systematic change in favor of individual level development,
- Youth development practitioners *should not* marginalize leadership development in favor of policy change; doing so gives the appearance of top down advocacy motivated by a need for systematic change rather than a need for a sustainable community institution.

Rather, the authors suggest that practitioners need to focus building skill sets that integrate youth civic engagement and experiential learning. More specifically, practitioners will need to understand how to engage youth as learners, researchers, and educators.

It is safe to assume that youth development practitioners will need to:

- Listen carefully to youth expressing concerns over pressing issues,
- Take the initiative to engage youth in addressing those issues,
- Understand how to break down issues into manageable pieces,
- Learn to facilitate research projects and produce research reports,
- Study how government institutions and agencies function, and
- Educate the adults in power about the positive individual and community level outcomes associated with youth organizing initiatives.

Only then, according to the authors and others, will it be possible for youth to change public opinions about them as citizens and agents of change, builders of community capacity and civil society, and creators of understanding and relationships across social barriers.

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