What is Youth Development?
A Parent’s Guide to Youth Programs
Molly Latham, Area Extension Specialist

Many families enroll their children in programs that are identified as being Youth Development programs. These programs, although different in name, location and methods, do have some similarities in purpose and goals.

Understanding the purpose of these programs and something about what youth will learn as a result of participation can prepare families for developmental changes as they occur. The family can then be ready to help the youth gain the full benefit of being in the program.

Youth development programs are designed to give youth opportunities to develop skills and have experiences that will help them become successful adolescents and adults. Youth development is a planned process that both supports young people and provides opportunities for their development. It is a natural process of mental, physical, social and emotional growth. The youth of today are trying to develop in a challenging world of constant change. Development cannot be left to chance in this environment. These programs strive to provide safe environments, positive relationships with caring adults and stimulating learning activities that will enable young people to grow up healthy, socially ready for the world and contributing members of their society.

Young people of all ages are involved in youth development programs, as well as both genders. Some programs are of general interest for all youth and other programs may target certain audiences. Examples of programs include 4-H, Scouting and Campfire programs.

Related Terms

There are many terms used by youth development programs and professionals to describe the programs and processed used to provide these developmental activities and skills. Some familiarity with these terms will help parents and guardians better understand the programs with which their children are involved.

Positive youth development refers to a program focus on developing skills, assets and strengths in youth. This is different from an “at
risk” program that focuses on negative aspects of a youth’s life. However, all youth, including those who might be at risk are welcome and can benefit by youth development programs.

**Resiliency** is a person’s ability to adapt to whatever situations life may bring, even if the situation is very negative. Youth development programs strive to develop resilient youth who can bounce back in tough times and face what the future offers.

**Non-formal education** is organized, systematic teaching and learning that goes on outside the formal school system. Community groups typically sponsor non-formal education. It is not an alternative to formal education, but part of a complete youth development approach.

**Life skills** are abilities individuals can learn that will help them to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life. Examples of life skills are leadership, conflict resolution, critical thinking and self-discipline.

**Developmental assets** are a framework for youth development. The Search Institute has identified 40 assets critical for growth and development. The assets are divided between external (received from others) and internal (qualities from within).

**Core concepts** guide much of the youth development programming within the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. The six core concepts are: self responsibility and social responsibility, problem solving and decision making, goal setting and aspiration building, orientation to the world of work, communication skills, and parenting skills.

**Developmental stages** are recognized by normally typical behaviors based on the age of a youth. Youth develop mentally, physically, socially and cognitively.

**Developmental needs** are expressions of the various stages of developing youth. An example of a developmental need would be increasing independence and recognition from parents that the youth is able to be independent.

**Experiential learning** is used in many development programs. A youth experiences something by doing it, they reflect on what they’ve done and learned and they apply what they’ve learned to something else in life. Do—→Reflect—→Apply.

**Youth/Adult Partnerships** are heavily emphasized in youth development efforts. Youth can benefit from the mentoring relationships of working with caring and responsible adults. The program quality and adults benefit from youth input and creativity.

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**Methods of Youth Development**

Many youth development programs are administered by community organizations of various types. These may be sports organizations, church groups, special interest clubs or educational institutions. They all have in common a close link to the community they serve and the goal of developing the youth in that community. In a well-organized community program with quality programming these various organizations work together to create a network of developmental opportunities for young people.

Although some youth may be mandated to participate in a youth development program, most join voluntarily. Since the youth development organization must depend upon
this interest in joining to recruit participants, the program must have benefits that are obvious to the youth in the community. The methods used to deliver developmental opportunities are often clubs, teams, artistic groups and experiential activities. Most young people view these organizations as fun, with learning being an additional benefit.

Experiential methods of learning are well suited to the non-formal educational settings in youth development programs. Youth are encouraged to think critically and explore ideas on their own and in a group with peers. The emphasis is not only on the learner doing the work, but applying what has been learned and understanding what skills have been attained.

Many youth development programs rely heavily on volunteers who work directly with youth. Since volunteers usually are from the same community as the youth involved in the program, they are ideally suited to know the young people and the community where they live and learn. This results in a program more responsive to the local needs.

Youth development programs often have components that address communication skills. Communication problems are typical to most families and the root cause of many family conflicts. While poor communication can be a challenge for families, the misunderstanding that can result from newly learned communication skills can cause problems too.

Common communication skills often taught in youth development programs are referred to as “I messages”. The format of an I message would look like this: “When you (describe behavior), I feel (describe resulting emotion). I need (describe requested change).” This new skill could result in a youth coming home and saying, “Mom, when you don’t trust me to go out with my friends I feel hurt. I need for you to trust me to be home on time and not get into trouble.”

This is a valuable skill for youth to learn. However, the first time a possibly angry parent hears a message phrased such as this he/she might feel the youth was being sarcastic or insulting. Staying familiar with the youth development program in which your family member participates can avoid misunderstandings such as this. Review any curriculum being used; talk with the youth after meetings to learn what about the program focus and goals. Stay involved.

How Families Can Help

Youth are growing up and changing so fast during their school years that the addition of new skills learned in development programs can make them seem like different people. As they learn new skills and ways of interacting with others, they may try out their new behaviors with those closest to them, their families. It is critical that families be supportive of positive changes and aware of the challenges of growing up and exploring new ways to interact with the world.
For Additional Information on this Topic and References


Center for 4-H Youth Development, University of Minnesota Gateway, www.4h.umn.edu