Promoting Positive Development
In Your Youth Programs

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Today, youth are exposed to a variety of alarming risk behaviors that include youth violence, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and substance abuse. Traditionally, organizations, schools, and communities have conducted programs that seek to prevent or reduce particular risk behaviors. For example, a church program might conduct a smoking prevention class that attempts to reduce youth tobacco use. More recently, research has suggested that a more effective approach is to provide programs and activities that encourage positive development in youth (Werner & Smith, 1992; Schinke, Botvin, & Orlandi, 1991). Positive youth development is highly related to a decreased likelihood of involvement with all types of risk behaviors (Quinn, 1995).

Youth who have experienced positive development have the following characteristics:

- Feel physically and emotionally safe;
- Feel belonging and ownership;
- Feel a strong sense of self-worth;
- Have experienced quality relationships with peers and adults;
- Have the opportunity to discuss and decide upon their own values;
- Have a sense of hope or purpose for their future (adapted from Pittman, 1991).

Youth participation in programs and activities, like organized sports, youth groups, and clubs has been found to be an important part of enhancing positive development as seen in the characteristics outlined on page one (Holland & Andre, 1987; Marsh, 1992). As youth develop, they need positive settings that offer the opportunity to build these important internal resources (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985; Dryfoos, 1998).
These activities, however, have to be carefully organized in order to most effectively encourage the positive development of youth.

Most programs have pieces that encourage positive youth development. The most effective programs that have the greatest impact on developing youth are ones that bring all these important pieces of the puzzle together.

Below are the most important pieces that will help your program promote positive youth development:

**Opportunity for participation**

Participation means youth are given an active role in planning and carrying out an activity or event. Helping to put together a teen newsletter or doing a community service project are examples of participatory activities. Youth also can participate by helping to plan an event or activity. This type of participation enhances a youth’s sense of value and allows he/she to explore his/her own abilities.

**A well trained youth oriented staff**

Youth need caring adults who listen and laugh with them, encourage and challenge them, and steer them away from trouble. It is important to have a training program that develops these skills in staff. Staff should also be well grounded in an understanding of the developmental needs of youth.

**Opportunities for caring relationships**

Programs need to be designed so that they provide opportunities for youth to interact one on one with a caring adult. For example, allowing time in your program so that youth, informaly, can talk with adult staff about their life, experience non-judgmental listening and support, and just be there when needed.

**Fun and interactive activities**

Activities for youth need to be attractive to the youth audience. This means having fun, fresh, and interactive things to do. One way of insuring that activities are going to be appealing to youth is to ask them. Youth often have good and well-developed ideas about how an activity should be organized. Making an activity fun and interactive is an essential way to attract youth and keep them interested in your activity or event.

**Unified vision**

A program with a unified vision has a goal or a set of goals that unite both youth participants and adults together. For example, the soccer team is all united to be its best and go on to the playoffs. A community service club may be focused on making a particular service project beneficial for the community. When a program or an activity has a unified vision, participants feel as if they are a part of something important, and they can gain a sense of accomplishment.
We have given you a brief summary of important pieces of a positive youth development program. There are many resources that can help you incorporate these pieces into your program. These resources contain practical ideas and activities so your program can provide a quality experience for youth. (See list of resources on back page)

With all the pieces of your puzzle in place, a youth program will be more likely to encourage positive youth development. When youth experience positive development, they have greater strength to resist and avoid the risk behaviors that are so prevalent in their world.

Resources

- **Building Assets Together, 135 Group Activities for Helping Youth Succeed**, by Jolene L. Roehlkepartain. This book provides hands on activities and worksheets to help youth discover their ability and responsibility to nurture their own assets and the assets of those around them. Available from Search Institute 1-800-888-7828. http://www.search-institute.org
- **Assets: The Magazine of Ideas for Healthy Communities & Healthy Youth**, offers information and strategies for building assets and promoting positive youth development in kids. The magazine has stories, and resources for individuals, organizations, and community-wide initiatives that care about young people. Available from Search Institute 1-800-888-7828. http://www.search-institute.org
- **Keys to Quality Youth Development**, a simple guide you can use as a working tool to stimulate, challenge, and encourage youth and adults as they work together to plan, conduct, and evaluate quality experiences. Available from the University of Minnesota Extension Service Distribution Center at (612)625-8173
- **Youth Today, the Newspaper on Youth Work**, the only newspaper covering the entire youth service field. Youth Today brings the hard-to-find news, information on grants, successful training techniques, case studies, field results and stories of best practices. They also give reviews of the latest books, videos and commentaries and reactions from experts and practitioners in the field. Available by calling (202)785-0764

For additional information

- **Building Positive Environments for Youth Development: Preparing the Professional and Moving Ahead: What works for Youth...What Works for You?** training, Eric Killian, Area Extension Specialist, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Call (702)222-3130.
- **Conducting Evaluations and Needs Assessment for Your Youth Program**. Educational workshops and technical assistance on how to conduct needs assessments and program evaluation, Randy Brown, Ph.D., Area Extension specialist, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Call (702)222-3130.

References