

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Positive Youth Development: Research, Commentary, and Action is the first of a series of updates to *Getting Results: Developing Safe and Healthy Kids*. *Getting Results, Part I, California Action Guide to Creating Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities* was published by the California Department of Education (CDE) in January of 1998. This update highlights research strategies on positive youth development for use by county- and district-level educators. Like its predecessor, this document was developed by Health & Education Communication Consultants, Berkeley, California, with the assistance of a concept team of educators and a research team of experts who reviewed key research studies and then wrote the personal commentaries on those studies that appear herein.

As this document goes to press, *Getting Results, Part II, California Action Guide to Tobacco Use Prevention Education* is being developed. It is expected to be available in fall, 1999.

Process of Development

Three research and evaluation experts whose work on youth development is highly respected nationally were invited to participate in the development of this update. Michael Resnick is a senior investigator on the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, which is identifying risk and protective factors in the family, at school, and for individuals; Peter Benson conducts research on developmental assets and works with schools and communities to create asset-rich environments; and Fred

The *Getting Results* materials center on national principles of effectiveness set forth in the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act, Title IV of the Improving America's Schools Act. The third of these principles requires schools to design and implement prevention programs for youth that are based on research or evaluation. Future updates, too, will help practitioners become aware of new prevention research. It is not the intent of the California Department of Education to promote one model or research study over another. The Department's goal is to provide an in-depth examination of various relevant perspectives.

The concept of "youth development" was cited in Part I as a prevention strategy, but it was not explored in detail. New research on this topic, however, has generated a great deal of dialogue and sparked widespread interest in its potential in the area of prevention.

Springer is an evaluation and policy expert who is presently conducting a five-year evaluation of the high-risk youth programs funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

These researchers identified and summarized key research on positive youth development and then discussed the research with Health & Education Communication Consultants and CDE staff. Although each researcher brought his

own special perspective to the dialogue, the discussion was remarkable for its points of intersection and complementary approaches.

Each researcher then wrote a personal commentary on the research. They were asked to make the research compelling and concrete to the practitioner and to explain its relevance.

Finally, Norm Constantine, Director, School and Community Health Research, WestEd, who also participated in the research dialogue, contributed a description of a new research tool from WestEd that measures

internal and external assets of youth. The tool, the Resilience Assessment Module of the *California Healthy Kids Survey*, is included in Chapter 3, “Research into Action,” of this document.

The draft of *Positive Youth Development: Research, Commentary, and Action* was reviewed by a concept team of district- and county-level prevention coordinators and health education consultants. Their suggestions for applying the research to the real world of schools and classrooms are also included in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Positive youth development is a relatively new prevention approach. It continues evolving, and terminology is therefore still fluid. Even among the three researchers cited above, there is not a completely uniform use of terms. Table 1 on the next pages defines terms **as they are used in this document**.

There is general agreement in the field that the youth development approach shifts the prevention focus from repairing deficits to building assets. Reducing risks and deficits is an essential strategy, but youth development is a complementary approach that accents building strengths and capacity. It assumes there are many paths to achieving a productive and healthy life.

Getting Results, Part I, California Action Guide to Creating Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities cites Karen Pittman’s view that youth development strategies offer

youth opportunities for membership, social skill building, participation, clear norms, adult-youth relationships, and relevant information and services. She says, “[Our] long-term task is to help families, neighbors, and communities nurture, support, and demand excellence from our youth” (Pittman, 1995).

Part I also includes a research summary by Bonnie Benard about Emmy Werner’s resiliency studies. In the work of Werner, and of Benard herself, the focus is on the protective factors in the environment (e.g., caring relationships, high positive expectations, opportunities for meaningful participation) that promote positive youth development. They believe that supportive adults can foster positive individual outcomes and protect against negative outcomes in youth.

Table 1

Definitions of Terms as Used in *Positive Youth Development: Research, Commentary, and Action*

Term	Definition	Researcher
Assets	A range of relationships, social experiences, social environments, competencies, and skills that help to “inoculate” youth against health-compromising behavior.	Benson
Asset-building community	A community-shared commitment to promoting developmental assets of children and youth through support, boundaries, and opportunities.	Benson
Asset development	A vision that names the core elements of healthy development and the community actors needed to promote these building blocks.	Benson
Asset-oriented approach	A focus on positive youth development and building individual assets that will help youth attain a range of healthy outcomes for themselves and society, rather than a focus on punitive efforts to prohibit negative behavior.	Springer
Caring school community	Schools in which members care about each other, have opportunity for active participation and decision making, have feelings of belonging, and share norms, goals, and values.	Springer
Connectedness	A sense of closeness, affiliation, or bonding to a person(s), group(s), institution(s), or idea(s).	Resnick
Developmental assets	The building blocks of human development—such as family support, creative activities, achievement motivation—that promote health and protect young people from risk-taking behaviors.	Benson
External protective factors	Peer, family, school, and community influences on youth attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. External supports and opportunities such as caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute.	Springer Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment Module (from Benard)

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Internal protective factors	Individual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (e.g., self-efficacy, positive beliefs about self). Resilience traits (positive developmental outcomes).	Springer Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment Module (from Benard)
Positive youth development	A set of developmental targets such as connection and empowerment that are important in the second decade of life.	Benson
Prevention	Any activity aimed at reducing the incidence of harmful behaviors and the possibilities of such behaviors occurring later in life.	U.S. Department of Education
Prevention mission	The creation and support of opportunities for positive behavior and development. Effective prevention must focus on the goal of promoting the positive behaviors that replace the accumulation of behavioral problems and recognize that some “deficit” behavior is normal for young people.	Springer
Protective environment	An environment characterized by caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate in meaningful activities.	Benard
Protective factors	Relationships, social experiences, social environments, competencies, and skills that protect youth from health-compromising behavior and increase positive outcomes. External supports and opportunities for youth, such as caring relationships, high expectations, and meaningful participation in activities, that foster positive developmental outcomes.	Benson Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment Module (from Benard)
Resilience traits	Such individual qualities and characteristics as social competence, autonomy, sense of self, and sense of purpose and future. These traits are enhanced by protective factors.	Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment Module (from Benard)
Resiliency	The ability to bounce back in the face of adversity; the ability to weather the effects of stress, insult, or injury. An area of research and practice grounded in environmental and psychological factors that help children transcend adversity.	Resnick Benson

Terms	Definition	Researcher
Risk	Environmental and personal deficits in the lives of youth that increase the probability of bad personal and social behaviors and outcomes. Most risk factors are beyond the control of youth workers.	Springer
Risky behavior	An act that increases the likelihood of an adverse outcome.	Resnick
Self-efficacy	Combined feelings of self-esteem, positive self-concept, and interpersonal competence.	Kumpfer and Turner
Thriving outcomes	Positive outcomes such as school success, affirmation of diversity, and a proactive approach to nutrition and exercise.	Benson
Youth development	An approach that helps youth build strong relationships with others, learn new skills, and give back to the community.	Pittman

Finally, the dialogue on positive youth development always includes discussion on the interrelated themes of internal and external risk and protection.

In this update, Springer says that terminology is less important than the overall framework and approach, because it is the mind-set or mission that determines what actions are undertaken. An asset-oriented approach creates actions that “help youth attain a broad range of healthy outcomes” throughout their lives, while a deficit-driven approach “focuses attention on eradicating negative attributes of experience and individual attitude and behavior.” Youth development researchers are in

agreement that prevention strategies based on a deficit model do not tend to build life-long healthy behaviors.

Despite the lack of a universal lexicon, California has begun to define the field for educators through the Resilience Assessment Module of the *California Healthy Kids Survey*. The module uses Bonnie Benard’s integration of the research literature, and defines external assets as protective factors and internal assets as resilience traits. The module will enable California educators to measure the protective factors and resilience traits of their youth, and to take action within a youth development framework.

Intersecting Themes

The research summaries and essays all cite the need to complement the dominant deficit-oriented paradigm—which Benson calls “naming, counting, and reducing the negative”—with an asset-oriented paradigm that promotes the positive. The research also emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive “not schools alone” approach—neighborhoods, families, the faith community, and schools must consistently act in concert to help youth feel empowered, affirmed, and connected.

Another significant point is reinforced by each researcher, the idea that **positive youth development is an approach and a way of thinking rather than a fragmented “magic bullet” program**. In this approach the role of adults is not to provide specific

services, but, as Resnick says, to “foster a close sense of connection, and to help open doors of possibility to help young people develop the capacity to enjoy life.” Those who become involved in this approach notice that they are energized and hopeful, rather than overwhelmed by a relentless emphasis on problems and solutions that tend to be restrictive.

There is clear agreement that schools are critical forums for positive human development. As Springer suggests, “teacher warmth and supportiveness, an emphasis on prosocial values, encouragement of cooperation, elicitation of student thinking and expression of ideas, and less reliance on extrinsic control [are] key elements of a caring school.”

Preview of Contents

Following this Introduction are three chapters: Commentaries and Research Summaries, Research into Action, and Resources for Positive Youth Development.

The commentaries and research summaries provide each researcher's perspective and contribution to the dialogue about positive youth development. Each researcher's commentary appears first, followed by his summaries of two key research studies. The summaries provide the underpinnings for the commentary and give the reader a model for critiquing research. The researcher discusses why the research is intrinsically important, what its limitations are, and why schools should be interested in it. Because their work is seminal in this new field, two of the three researchers were invited to comment on their own research.

Chapter 3 offers concrete steps schools can take to put the research on positive youth development into action. Many of the suggestions for how schools can build positive environments for staff, parents, and students were provided by prevention specialists on the *Getting Results* concept team. The Resilience Assessment Module of the *California Healthy Kids Survey*, which provides a way for schools to gauge students' levels of protective factors (external assets) and resilience traits (individual qualities and characteristics), is described next.

Finally, the resources section provides information about organizations and publications that offer further information and technical assistance in creating environments to promote positive youth development.

Reference

Pittman, Karen J. (1995, May). *Preventing problems or promoting development: Competing priorities or inseparable goals?* Paper presented at the 17th Annual Gisela Konopka Lecture. Washington, DC: International Youth Foundation.