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# Youth Development FOCUS

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## *Elements of Effective Community-Based Youth Programs*

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### *Introduction*

As youth development professionals, as parents, and as friends and neighbors in a community we are acutely aware of the suffering and loss of human potential that accompany young peoples' decisions to engage in problem behaviors (e.g., drugs and alcohol, delinquency, unsafe sex and failure in school). When we consider this loss on a national level the concern we feel for the individuals caught up in high risk behavior must become a concern for the society as a whole. Whether the youth of today participate in high risk behavior or not, they will be affected by living in a society where so many other youth have minimized their chances to become healthy productive adults. It is not surprising that as the percentage of today's youth identified as "at risk" grows to shocking proportions, we often hear this generation referred to as the "lost generation" or as a generation in crisis. A crisis is generally defined as "any sudden interruption in the normal course of events

in the life of an individual or a society that necessitates re-evaluation of modes of action and thought" (Reber, 1985, p. 166).

To identify a situation as a crisis we must first ask ourselves what is normal: What do we regard as the *normal course of events* for youth within the context of American society? Ideally, the response to this question is, "With caring families, good schools and supportive institutions they grow up reasonably well educated, committed to family and friends and prepared for the workplace and. . . to become contributing members of society" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995, p. 9). For growing numbers of youth and the communities in which they live the *normal course of events* has been seriously "interrupted." During the latter half of this century adolescents find themselves growing to adulthood in environments with fewer social supports and far less guidance than past generations (Carnegie Council, 1995). Problems of

school failure, drugs, teen pregnancy, delinquency, suicide and poor mental health derail up to 50% of American adolescents from achieving their potential as healthy and productive adults.

In response to this growing crisis, intense efforts have been made to understand the needs of youth in our changing and increasingly complex society, and how those needs can be met through community-based programs. The purposes of this monograph are to: (1) briefly review the identified needs of youth in relationship to youth development programs, (2) discuss the components effective youth programs have in common, and (3) suggest some organizing themes for youth development programs.

### ***Identified Needs of Youth***

The interrelated problems of changing family structure and child poverty have left many young people without the positive social support networks to promote their education, health and social development. In spite of these and other changes in our society, all adolescents still have the same basic human needs as past generations (Hamburg, 1990); needs that must be met if they are to reach their potential as healthy, productive adults. As identified by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995), all youth must:

- Find a valued place in a constructive group
- Learn how to form close, durable human relationships
- Feel a sense of worth as a person
- Achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices
- Know how to use the support systems available to them

- Express constructive curiosity and exploratory behavior
- Find ways of being useful to others
- Believe in a promising future with real opportunities

In addition to fulfilling these basic needs, the Carnegie Council (1995) also points out that in today's technologically advancing society youth should also have the opportunity to:

- Master social skills, including ability to manage conflict peacefully
- Cultivate the inquiring and problem-solving habits of mind for lifelong learning
- Acquire the technical and analytic capabilities to participate in a world-class economy
- Become ethical persons
- Learn the requirements of responsible citizenship
- Respect diversity in our pluralistic society

Youth development is an ongoing process. The services, opportunities and supports (Zeldin, Tarlov & Darmstadler, 1995) that will help fulfill young peoples' needs cannot be embodied in any one agency or program. Young people grow up in environments, not programs, but programs can be an important and vital part of their environment (Pittman, 1993).

### ***Components of Effective Youth Programming***

Researchers and practitioners in the field of youth development have endeavored to identify those factors which account for the ineffectiveness of many programs and to shed more light on the characteristics of successful programs. Programs that have

been successful in meeting the basic needs of youth and helping them develop the competencies to become healthy, productive members of society have certain elements in common. Certain components are directly related to the structure and management of the organization while other components relate more directly to the program design and content. (Whether viewed from an organizational perspective or a programmatic perspective, key components of all successful programs is the quality of personnel and the quality of personal interactions that take place between staff and program participants.)

### **Organizational Characteristics**

***Community wide multiagency collaborative approaches.*** Addressing the problems that confront youth through the coordinated efforts of a variety of programs and services increases the chances of success for several reasons. First, it allows for the development of a consistent, comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing high risk behavior (Hamburg, 1992). Institutions and services throughout the community, such as schools, media, church groups, youth groups, community health and social agencies, and police and courts can support and reinforce each other's efforts. This coordination and integration of effort can effect savings in dollars and duplication of effort on the part of agencies and frustration and fragmentation on the part of those served. Second, it mobilizes the members of the community through participation in advisory councils and other volunteer efforts (e.g., planning, community information, grants, etc.) Finally, it allows problems to be addressed at various levels and from various perspectives (Lerner, 1995).

***Locus in schools and administration of programs within the school by outside***

***agencies.*** Schools have become the institution with the greatest potential for reaching the greatest number of children and youth in a community (Carnegie Council, 1995; Dryfoos, 1990). For most children the school site is the most accessible place in the community. A synergistic relationship develops between the school and other agencies and programs when the school site serves as the focal point for the services, opportunities and supports that may be offered. Dryfoos (1990) suggests that "a healthy, safe school climate and effective school organization contribute[s] to prevention of negative behavior...beyond the education field to the other prevention fields as well" (p. 230). In some cases the program or service may be integrated into the school curriculum or services. Involvement of the principal as a program facilitator, advisory board member or in a variety of other capacities can provide the vital link between the school and the collaborative efforts of other agencies.

***Location of programs outside of schools.*** Having programs that are not identified with school sites is important for two reasons. First, in some instances the types of services and opportunities offered are more appropriately located away from a school campus. For example, for dropouts and other young people "turned off" by the academic system, program options not affiliated with schools can be of vital importance (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Lerner, 1995). Second, youth should feel the social support net is in place in all sectors of the community. It is important that youth have a variety of program options available within their community (Blyth and Leffert, 1995; Saito and Roehlkepartain, 1995). No one agency can offer programs of interest to all youth, recruit staff that appeal to all youth, or have programs that meet all the

needs of youth. Coordination and collaboration among programs and agencies, regardless of delivery site, remains important if the needs of all youth are to be met.

***Arrangements for training.*** To be implemented effectively, many programs require training and ongoing supervision (Dryfoos, 1990; Lerner, 1995). One of the primary problems of seriously underfunded programs is a lack of qualified personnel due to lack of previous experience in the field of youth development or training in the specific program. Personnel should be trained in the specific program, understand the principles of human development and the cultural characteristics pertinent to the children, youth and families participating in the program. Training in social and cultural competence is especially important if personnel and participants do not share a common cultural, racial, socioeconomic or ethnic background. Sincere interest, care and concern is what attracts professionals as well as volunteers to youth development programs. Appropriate training and ongoing inservice and support is what makes them effective in working with youth. Programs that offer quality training send an important message about the value of their staff and the work that they do.

***Sustainability.*** Lerner (1995) emphasizes that "to be successful in continuing a program over time, personnel must have, or be trained to possess, the ability to develop a feasible plan to become self-sustaining in financial support, in facilities and materials, in leadership, and in continuing to address identified needs—successful organizations have staff specifically devoting their time and energy to finances, management, strategic planning and fund raising" (p. 74). Another key element to program longevity

is the development of an organizational framework which incorporates and empowers community members to sustain themselves (Lerner, 1995). Meaningful involvement of community members and resources in designing, funding, and implementing the program increases the possibility of continuing service once startup funding and support have expired.

### **Programmatic Characteristics**

***Intensive individualized attention.*** Regardless of the size or type of program, attention to a child's specific needs from a caring responsible adult is one of the most important factors of a successful program. Program staff in a variety of roles might fulfill this need. Activity and project leaders, counselors, teachers, tutors, social workers or other professionals as well as nonprofessionals such as program volunteers and mentors are potential attachment figures in a young person's social network (Dryfoos, 1990). From the perspective of developmental contextualism diversity of staff regarding race, ethnicity, culture, age and developmental level is very important in providing the attachment figures and role models that will meet the needs of youth (Lerner, 1995; S.W. Morris & Company, 1992).

***Strong focus on development and enrichment.*** Programs that narrowly focus on ameliorative measures for high-risk youth rather than addressing the need that all youth have for development and enrichment experiences have minimal overall long-term impact (Carnegie Council, 1995; Dryfoos, 1990; Lerner, 1995). All youth need opportunities to develop a sense of competence through learning new skills, to develop confidence as they experience success in setting and achieving goals, to be

exposed to values and ideas that can give meaning and direction to their lives and to develop caring relationships with adults and peers (Lerner, 1995).

***Early identification and intervention.***

Programs that serve families and children of preschool and primary grade level have the opportunity to focus on the antecedents to problem behaviors. Programs such as the Perry Preschool program, have shown both short-and long-term benefits (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993). In programs serving older children and youth where the focus is on the individual and their distinctive needs it may also be possible to become aware of high risk behaviors while they are still in the experimental stage and initiate appropriate intervention. A close supportive relationship can empower the young person to persevere in making choices that lead to long-term changes in behavioral outcomes (Lerner, 1995).

***Contextual "Goodness of Fit."*** As stated earlier, children grow up in environments not programs. Yet programs can be an important and vital part of the context of development. Research by Lerner and Lerner (1989) suggests that when a child's individual characteristics match well with the demands of a particular setting they receive supportive or positive feedback and adaptive outcomes usually result. Lightfoot, and Long and Garduque (Powell, 1990) suggest that a certain amount of discontinuity between the family setting and childcare settings can be beneficial in helping children develop the skills necessary to adjust to diverse situations. Lightfoot distinguishes between *creative conflict*— differences that are an inevitable part of a complex society and which "help children become more malleable and responsive to a changing world" (p. 36) and *negative dissonance*—differences which reinforce

power and status inequities in society. Successful programs seem to take both perspectives into account. Programs should endeavor to create a context that matches the characteristics of the participants as well as encourage positive responses to new situations.

Children and youth also interact with their environmental context on varying levels of intimacy. Program characteristics that help achieve a "goodness of fit" for the children and youth served take into account (a) the individual characteristics and needs of the participants, (b) the involvement of important aspects of a young person's immediate environment (i.e., family, peers, school, and workplace), and © the ethnic and cultural characteristics of their larger community.

At the individual contextual level children/youth need well designed activities which are developmentally appropriate to the age group and the individuals served. Many of the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice in programs serving children from infancy through age 8, as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1993), could be equally applicable to other age groups as well. For example:

- (A) Curriculum should provide for physical, emotional, social and cognitive development through an integrated approach.
- (B) Learning takes place through active exploration and interaction with adults, other children/youth, and materials.
- (C) Learning activities and materials should be concrete, real and relevant to the lives of the children/youth.
- (D) Programs should provide for a wider range of developmental interests and

abilities than the specific age range of the group would suggest. Leaders should be prepared to increase the complexity and challenge of an activity as participants develop understanding and skill.

- (E) Programs should allow for individual choice.
- (F) Experiences should be multicultural and nonsexist.

An understanding of the developmental needs and abilities of children and youth by all staff and volunteers who work within a program should be required.

In a broader context, integration of other important elements of a young person's environment, namely, family, peer group, school, and workplace can facilitate program relevance and reinforcement of program goals (Dryfoos, 1990; Lerner, 1995). Young children benefit directly and indirectly from *parental involvement* in programs. Enhanced competence on the part of the child can be the end result of the increased consistency and security which develops through program-parent interaction. Parents also experience positive development, i.e., better parenting skills, increased feelings of self-worth, attitudes of hope and self-respect, competence in dealing with institutions, and informed consumers of services, when they work closely with their children's programs (Powell, 1990). Parental support of older youth involvement in activities and programs may take on a more "behind the scenes" quality, such as serving on advisory committees or fundraising, than with younger children. Parents are more likely to become involved if their role is well defined and they feel they are making a meaningful contribution to the program. Parents can become valuable resources to programs as volunteers, program advocates, and fund raisers. With parents of high risk

adolescents, home visits which provide parent education and support, as well as parent employment as classroom or program aides, have proven to be successful involvement strategies (Dryfoos, 1990).

The utilization of *peers as teachers, tutors and mentors* is a program strategy that must be used carefully. Some research (cited in Hurley, 1994) suggests that peer counseling on the elementary and secondary schools level "has no or even negative effects on delinquency and associated risk factors" (p. 25). However, using older peers to tutor or mentor younger participants, especially in the areas of academics and health behaviors, has been shown to have a positive impact on the older and the younger youth (Carnegie Council, 1995; Dryfoos, 1990; Price, Cioci, Penner & Trautlein, 1990). Training and continuous supervision by responsible, knowledgeable adults are especially important components of programs incorporating the peer mentor/instructor model (Carnegie Council, 1995). The youth who serve as peer mentors seem to derive the most benefit from this experience due in part to the training, supervision, and individual attention they receive (Dryfoos, 1990).

Opportunities to develop competencies and have *work experiences* that prepare youth to enter the world of work are most beneficial in building self-esteem and feelings of accomplishment (Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, 1989). In a study of youth development programs in Minneapolis conducted by the Search Institute (Saito & Roehlkepartain, 1995) "Get a job for money" ranked first among the activity interests of participants. "In a society based on the work ethic, work helps to define each one of us. To the extent that we do something [which is] useful to the society, we gain a feeling of belonging and

contributing that sustains us" (Howe quoted in Schine, 1989, p. 1). In many programs this need may be addressed directly through opportunities for volunteer community service, combining life planning curricula with school remediation and summer job placement or paying older youth for tutoring and other services related to the function of a program (Dryfoos, 1990). Teaching job application skills such as filling out applications, appropriate dress, and interviewing techniques is another way that older youth can be supported in entering the world of work. Program influence may also be less direct, e.g., through high expectations of personal responsibility, honesty, and doing one's best (Davis, 1995).

Exposure to a variety of people in a variety of occupations can have a direct and indirect influence on a young person's perceptions of the possibilities that exist in the world of work. Young people may be limited in their occupational aspirations by (1) their lack of knowledge of occupational possibilities and (2) their perceptions of themselves in relationship to particular fields of endeavor. Research is being done to determine if having a role model, who is matched for gender and race or ethnicity, has a positive impact on academic and occupational aspirations among minority youth. Interestingly, the preliminary results indicate that such a role model is important to ethnic minorities but so are other factors such as feelings of belonging and good social relations (Zirkel, 1995). Work related experiences help youth to discover a place for themselves in the world and to develop a vision of a personal future, one of the vital goals identified in *A matter of time: Risk and opportunity in the nonschool hours* (Carnegie Council, 1992).

Finally, programs that can contribute to *success in school*, whether directly or indirectly, are targeting one of youth's most urgent needs. School failure has been identified by Dryfoos (1990) as the leading marker of at-risk youth. The importance and value of integrating services and programs into the school curricula and making the school the focal point for programs targeting youth and families have already been discussed.

From a larger sociocultural context the content, strategy, and leadership of the program should be appropriate to the culture of the community. When culturally appropriate knowledge and skills are incorporated into a program it encourages confidence and trust among program personnel and participants (Lerner, 1995).

### ***Organizing Themes for Youth Development Programs***

Program success lies in meeting the identified basic needs of youth and the unique needs of each individual youth as well as fulfilling program goals. So far we have reviewed the basic needs of youth and discussed those elements common to youth development programs that are successful in meeting those needs. In order to incorporate or strengthen these elements within a youth program, the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (Zeldin et al., 1995) suggests that youth development organizations consider their programs in terms of the *services, opportunities and supports* that are offered.

*Services* are resources, knowledge, or goods provided for young people. At the community level, a broad spectrum of services from food and shelter to information, instruction and counseling

should be offered by various public and private agencies and organizations. At the organizational level, it is important to define which services can best be offered through your particular program. Services must be readily available and accessible. Lack of knowledge about programs and transportation problems to program locations can minimize the impact of the services offered. Services must also be of high quality. The National Academy of Sciences (Zeldin et al., 1995) asserts that low quality services, particularly in the areas of academic and vocational education may do more harm than good. Young people are also quickly "turned-off" by programs they perceive as disorganized, unreliable and uninformed. Last but not least, program services need to be affordable to the target population (Dryfoos, 1990; Lerner, 1995; Saito & Roehlkepartain, 1995).

*Opportunities* encompass those chances for "young people to learn how to act on the world around them—the chance to explore, express, earn, belong and influence...test out ideas and behaviors and to experiment with different roles" (Zeldin et al., 1995, p. 11). Learning through participation in activities that the young person perceives as challenging and relevant to their lives can take place in all types of settings. Opportunities which are especially important in meeting the identified needs of youth are:

- Exploration, Practice, and Reflection: The chance to actively learn and build skills, and to critically test, explore and discuss ideas and choices.
- Expression and Creativity: The chance to express oneself through

different mediums and in different settings, and to engage in both learning and play.

- Group Membership: The chance to be an integral group member (e.g., family, school, youth organization), by fully taking on the responsibility of membership.
- Contribution and Service: The chance to have positive influences on others through active participation in formal or informal community- and family-based activities.
- Part-Time Paid Employment: The chance to earn income and to be a part of the work force, when such work is done within a safe and reasonably comfortable setting.

*Supports* consist of the interpersonal relationships that allow a young person to take full advantage of existing services and opportunities. Such relationships should be affirming and respectful, ongoing, and offered by a variety of people within a young person's social network. Important characteristics of program staff and personnel who can provide optimal support have been discussed earlier. These interpersonal relationships may provide emotional, motivational and strategic support. Emotional support involves giving and receiving love, friendship, and affirmation. Motivational support is offered through high expectations. This includes the opportunities, encouragement and rewards necessary to meet high expectations. Standards and boundaries are also motivational when the messages are clear regarding the rules, norms, and discipline related to them. Youth are especially motivated by standards and boundaries they helped create or feel they have the

opportunity to discuss and modify as appropriate. Strategic support encompasses planning, options assessment, and access to resources. Such support involves receiving assistance in assessing one's options and relationships characterized by coaching, feedback and discussion. Strategic help also includes assistance in gaining access to current and future resources through involvement and connections to people and information.

### ***Integration and Application***

In regard to currently existing programs one might use these themes of services, opportunities, and supports as a way of comparing what a program offers with the needs of youth and the identified components of successful programs. For example, in the area of services one might pose the questions: What are the services that a particular program offers to children, youth and families? Do they meet a particular need in the community as a whole and in the lives of the participants in particular? Are the programs services coordinated with services offered by other organizations or agencies in order to avoid unnecessary replication yet provide a comprehensive community program? Are staff trained and competent to offer these services? Is the organization developing their resources in such a way that they will be able to continue offering such services? Are services offered in ways that are appropriate to the ethnic and cultural characteristics of the targeted participants? Are they readily available, easily accessible, affordable and of high quality? Such questions encourage reflection and comparison of the services a program offers with the identified needs of youth and the components which mark successful programming.

As Zeldin et al. (1995) point out the quality of services offered in a program may well be determined by the availability of quality opportunities and supports built into the program. Opportunities may represent the actualization of the program services in the lives of the participants. When one can identify specific ways that a program offers youth opportunities to explore and practice new skills, critically reflect on and evaluate new ideas, be creative and express oneself, have a sense of belonging and responsibility towards the group, and feel they are making a contribution through service and/or employment, then the needs of youth are potentially being met. To make sure that potential is fully realized it is important that a "goodness of fit" exists between these opportunities and the targeted participants. That is, the opportunities are at a developmentally appropriate level and they reinforce or complement other important aspects in a participants' life (i.e., family and peer relations, school and work).

The theme of supports encompasses what many experts in the field of youth development have identified as the most crucial element of any successful program. The quality of the personnel, whether professional or volunteer, and the interpersonal relationships they form with the youth are at the very heart of successful programming. Intense individualized attention from a knowledgeable caring adult with whom youth can relate is the primary source of emotional and motivational support within a program.

Considering a youth program from the perspective of services, opportunities and supports encourages an integration of thought regarding the needs of youth, the identified elements of effective youth programming and the design and organization of current and future youth

programs. The process of identifying and classifying the various elements of a youth program as to their function and relating them with the needs of youth and the elements of effective youth programs may reveal areas of strength and weakness in the program. This may be viewed as a first step toward informally evaluating current programs and may highlight areas in need for more formal evaluation. Such a perspective may also serve as a guide in the preliminary planning stages of future programs.

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