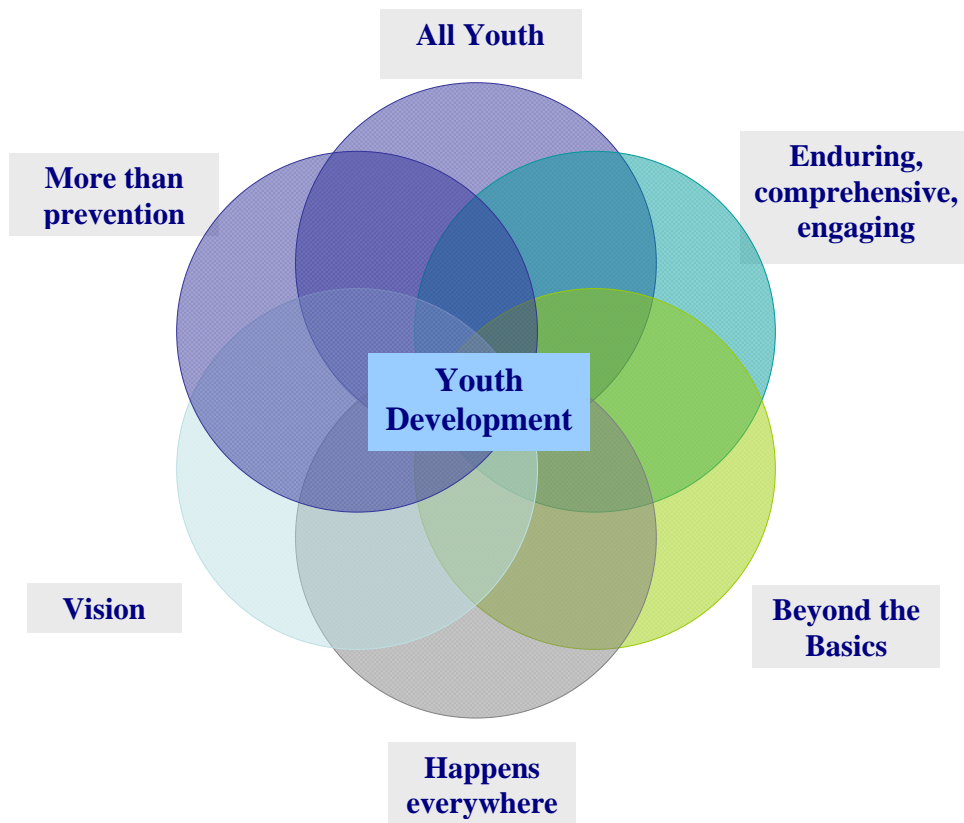


Youth Development

A Functional Definition

Youth development is at once as simple as apple pie and as complex as a rubix cube. Essentially, it is a philosophy about engaging children and youth; a perception that incorporates meaningful interaction with deep respect for children; a process that recognizes the strengths and assets of children and youth; and a set of practices that emphasize and build toward the best possible outcomes for the individual child, his/her family and the community as a whole. While not a program per se, youth development can, indeed should, be embedded in all programs and activities designed for youth - whether to promote a positive outcome (e.g. community engagement), to prevent a negative 'event' (e.g. school failure) or to address a problem, (e.g. juvenile delinquency).

Principles of Youth Development



The principles depicted above underlie virtually all youth development frameworks. These principles define the foundation for decisions to be made in the interest of positive youth development - for all kids in all settings - from positive supports at the family and community levels to intensive treatment and intervention such as rehabilitation and incarceration.

- ✓ **The goal is more than prevention.** While prevention and remediation of young people's problems are critical, youth development aims higher. Its goal is to foster, in all young people, physical and mental health; competence at school, work, and in the community; confidence; character; and connectedness with family and peers, building on the strengths of each child.
- ✓ **The process is enduring, comprehensive, and engages youth.** There are no quick fixes. Youth must be treated as whole human beings with multiple needs and possibilities, not defined by their symptoms and deficits.
- ✓ **Treatments and services go beyond the basics.** Young people need health care, good schools, safe and stimulating places to spend time, and access to transportation. And, they need nurturing relationships and opportunities to try new roles, to help others and to engage in actions that are meaningful to them in their own lives.
- ✓ **Youth development happens everywhere.** It is not the responsibility of a single institution. Schools, families, workplaces, neighborhoods, community organizations, and government agencies all contribute. So do programs that provide intervention and treatment.
- ✓ **Vision is required, not just coordination.** All the parties that contribute to the health and well being of youth should be committed to a common purpose and to rational action toward that purpose. They should be jointly accountable for achieving it.
- ✓ **All youth are developing; all youth have needs; all youth can contribute to their communities.** Labeling youth (e.g., at-risk, substance abusing, delinquent) frequently results in self-fulfilling prophecies and may obscure real strengths in youth who are so labeled at the same time ignoring real needs among youth who are not labeled. Youth are agents of their own development. All youth need the opportunity to take responsible roles and act constructively, regardless of where we find them at any given point in their lives.

Using out of school time and juvenile justice as surrogates for the spectrum of youth programs and services from primary prevention to intervention and treatment, youth development is evidenced in the following features:

| What Youth Development Looks Like | |
|---|--|
| Out of School Time ¹ | Juvenile Justice ² |
| ▪ sensitive to the culture & language of participants | ▪ developmentally appropriate |
| ▪ activities correspond to developmental needs of participants | ▪ cultural diversity |
| ▪ positive adult relationships | ▪ a seamless system of reinforcing interventions |
| ▪ enable participants to develop new life skills | ▪ hold youth accountable |
| ▪ promote creativity & development of participant self-expression | ▪ promote responsible behavior |
| ▪ explore resources & issues in their community | ▪ build youth competencies |
| ▪ maintain positive relationships & interactions among all involved | ▪ encourage family empowerment |

¹ Adapted from *Program Quality Self Assessment (QSA) Tool: Planning for Ongoing Program Improvement*. New York State Afterschool Network, February 2006.

² Adapted from *Summary of Guiding Principles. New York State Youth Violence Reduction Strategy: Goals and Guiding Principles*; New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services; 2004.

A defining element of youth development is that youth have the opportunity to interact with and learn from positive adult role models. Specific characteristics can be identified for adults who work and play with children and adolescents, as well as characteristics of activities that promote healthy youth development.

Adults are:

- supporters, offering emotional support and unconditional positive regard;
- positive role models for children and adolescents; and
- companions, providing time and a genuine presence;
- people who know something youth want to learn and are willing and able to share it;
- challengers who stretch youth, encouraging them to do more than they thought they could.

Activities (programs, projects, initiatives, etc.) are:

- goal directed and purposeful, not merely busy work;
- ongoing, rather than episodic or occasional;
- important, meaningful to both the adult and the child or adolescent involved; and
- challenging, balancing challenge with supports.