

Youth: Preparation for Adulthood

Youth who develop in healthy ways - cognitively, emotionally and socially - are likely to achieve their full potential as adults, becoming our next generation of leaders, hard workers, effective parents and engaged citizens. Reaching their potential requires opportunities to explore a variety of interests, positive relationships with adults, meaningful ways to participate in their communities, and preparation for entry into the world of work or higher education. Our highest risk youth will also need appropriate and effective services and supports, to both address problems and to help them identify and develop their potential. This requires the integration and coordination of services across systems and flexibility and predictability of funding to allow local communities to customize services to meet the needs of their children and youth.

Youth development is a philosophy about engaging children and youth; a perspective that incorporates meaningful interaction with a 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. Youth development 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). The goal of youth development is that all youth be fully prepared to become successful, productive citizens.

A note about recent research into brain development is relevant here. The human brain is a dynamic organ that continues its development through youth and into adulthood with two critical windows of growth. Much attention has been given to the early years when 85% of the brain’s growth occurs. Adolescence offers another critical time period for growth. The frontal cortex, the portion of the brain that affects reasoning, weighing of consequences, and controlling impulsive behavior goes through a major growth spurt in adolescence. While youth may look like adults and are often expected to behave as such, they do not in fact have the skills of reasoning, including appropriate assessment of consequences that they will have as adults. This developmental stage is a time for testing limits, experimenting, taking risks and resisting authority. It is also a time when a positive adult presence is crucial; it is a time when, as adults, we need to provide strong, clear guidance, support, and supervision. Within the context of youth development, the following principles apply:

- The goal is more than prevention.
- The process is enduring, comprehensive, and engages youth.
- Treatments or services go beyond the basics.
- Youth development happens everywhere.
- Vision is required, not just coordination.
- All youth are developing; all youth have needs; all youth can contribute to their communities.

Prevention is the key

Investment in the early years serve to put children on track for success; investment in children as they grow to adolescents builds on their strengths and supports positive development; encouragement and guidance in adolescence move youth to productive adulthood. Without continuity and developmentally appropriate supports and opportunities, earlier investments can be lost, resulting in a range of problems that must then be fixed – academic failure, drug use, violence, dropping out of school, disconnection from community and family, among others. Focusing on promoting healthy development and preventing problems that may develop in the period between childhood and young adulthood represents best practice. Accordingly, children and youth need opportunities to explore their talents and interests, positive out-of-school experiences, positive adults and peers in their lives and appropriate goals for academic success and life. Taken together, these factors will serve to prevent serious issues from developing. When integrated into treatment and intervention programs, they will increase the likelihood of positive outcomes and reduce recidivism.

Therefore, New York CAN Youth Development Committee supports the availability of the following programs and services to youth in each community and the integration of youth development principles into child and youth programs:

- quality out of school time programming;
- quality mentoring programs, based on individual needs and local culture;
- remedial or tutorial supports in and out of school;
- opportunities to explore and develop vocational/career skills, such as internships in local businesses and organizations, part-time employment, career seminars opportunities for youth-run businesses, shadow positions with professionals;
- opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways to their communities through community service experiences, including service learning, volunteer activities, intergenerational projects, etc.;
- programs to engage youth (prevent disconnection); and
- a wide variety of other options that evolve within the local community, including the school.

When intervention services are needed

The transition from youth to adulthood is often erratic and awkward. It is characterized by trial and error, exploration, and frequent false starts, consistent with this stage of brain development. Optimal programs for youth will take into consideration the need for flexibility, especially with youth who are at-risk. While the goal is that all youth will become independent, contributing members of their community, we must also incorporate healthy supports and opportunities into interventions and treatments in order to encourage success. Youth who have initiated negative behaviors need more than just resolution of the immediate crisis; they need effective services and supports. We must stress the potential for success and positive options over failure.

These youth are at risk of becoming disconnected, that is, young adults who are not in school, not working, with no positive connections to society. Many are young people who

are headed into or are already involved with the child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, or substance abuse systems. They may be challenged with mental illness, troubled families, poverty, learning disabilities, etc. Because challenged youth often have more than one of these problems, a holistic, cross systems approach is absolutely essential.

The New York CAN Youth Development Committee supports the availability of the following programs and services to youth in each community and the incorporation of youth development principles into:

- needed mental health and health services;
- educational options;
- alternatives to out-of-home placements that are community-based and coordinated;
- a continuum of care following placements;
- out of school time programming and delinquency prevention programs;
- mentoring programs, both peer to peer and adult to youth;
- community service and service learning opportunities;
- intervention programs, including drug and alcohol treatment, delinquency prevention;
- training for adults involved in out-of-home placements and community-based alternatives to out-of-home placements;
- outreach, support and intervention services for at-risk and disconnected youth.

Unique populations of children and youth may have specific needs that require additional attention. These children and youth include children of prisoners, children of color, children of immigrants, and children whose parents have mental illness. The principles of youth development apply to supports and services within these contexts as well. As a reminder, youth development is for all kids and occurs everywhere and is the responsibility of all concerned with achieving the optimal outcome for every child.

We can measure the effectiveness of our activities and the successful transition of our youth to adulthood by looking at the rates of youth who:

- reach an appropriate level of educational attainment;
- are prepared for productive employment or career or pursue higher education;
- are healthy both physically and emotionally;
- participate in civic life; and
- are adequately prepared for parenthood.

Measuring these outcomes requires an infrastructure for ongoing monitoring, data collection, and analysis.

