Features of Positive Developmental Settings

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Picture a diverse group of American adolescents: girls and boys; rural, urban, and suburban; affluent and disadvantaged; youth living with one parent, two parents, a foster parent, a grandparent, or on their own; adolescents with and without physical disabilities; adolescents who are lesbian and gay; youth who are introverted and extroverted; youth with parents who are Chinese immigrants, Mexican migrant laborers, Laotian, Dakotan, Salvadoran, African American, and European American.

Now picture each of them walking through the front door of a community program. How do we make sure that this program engages all these youth and supports their development? What can a program do to give all adolescents the best chance possible of growing up to be healthy adults? This article summarizes what is known about the daily settings and experiences that promote positive development in young people.

Before starting, we need to recognize that even with the best staff and best funding, no single program is going to succeed in helping every participant. Adolescents have many other, often more powerful influences in their lives. In addition, any given program will work better for some teens than for others. Finally, we need to recognize that there is very little research that directly specifies what programs can do to facilitate development, let alone how to tailor them to the needs of individual adolescents and diverse cultural groups.

Despite these limitations, there is a broad base of knowledge about how development occurs that can be drawn on. Research demonstrates that certain features of the settings that adolescents experience make a tremendous difference in their lives. For example, research on families and classrooms shows that the presence or absence of caring relationships affects whether an adolescent thrives or has problems. We think it is valid to hypothesize that this will be true in community programs as well.

This article employs this wider base of knowledge from developmental science to generate a list of features of adolescents' daily settings and experiences that are known to promote positive youth development. These eight features (see Table 2.1) should be seen as a provisional list—subject to further study—of the processes or "active ingredients" that community programs could use in designing programs likely to facilitate positive youth development. Since it is based on existing research it is likely to have omitted variations in features that are important to specific cultural groups.

Although we describe these as features of settings, this is really shorthand for saying that they are features of the person's interaction with the setting. It is the experience of the adolescent-in-setting—the processes of interaction—that is critical to development. When adolescents walk in the door, it is not what they see that is important, but rather how they become engaged.

And finally, we stress that the implementation of these features needs to vary across programs precisely because they have diverse clientele and different constraints, resources, and goals.

Physical and Psychological Safety

Safety is essential for positive development. Safety is both a physical and a psychological phenomenon. Starting with the physical side, positive settings must be free from violence and unsafe health conditions. The psychological side of safety is also of great importance. Research shows that experiencing, witnessing, or even being threatened with violence can lead to severe and long-lasting psychological problems. Youth who are victims of violence, or who witness violence, show continuing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Experience of violence and harassment in school are related to skipping school, more negative attitudes toward school, lower achievement levels, and fewer friendships (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

In Practice: The objective of some programs is to enable youth to just participate in safe environments free from pressures associated with violence and substance abuse. Programs must be safely accessible or participation will be affected. Some programs are too far away for youth to get to conveniently and safely, others may be near by but require navigating hostile gang territory.

Sometimes maintaining an atmosphere of safety requires denying participation to some young people, including youth who pose a threat to others. One program director explained that they can not serve everyone and still have an environment that is safe and supportive for everyone. This means that the most needy youth — those who should be of most concern to society—are sometimes excluded.

Clear and Consistent Structure and Appropriate Supervision

One of the first things a new participant experiences in a community program is whether the environment is structured or chaotic. Research indicates that appropriate structure is a necessary condition

to positive development. Without stability and order, adolescents cannot engage in physical, cognitive, emotional, or social growth, and they are at risk for the development of negative behavioral patterns. But too much adult control can drive older youth away.

Structure is a critical feature of all settings. Research on families shows that firm parenting and clear behavioral expectations, when coupled with warmth and emotional support, are associated with more positive developmental outcomes than lax parenting (Steinberg, 2000). Similarly in classrooms, maintenance of discipline, control, and organization by the teacher is related to student satisfaction, growth, and achievement. However, as they grow older, students desire increasing opportunity to have input into classroom and school governance and rules (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

It is critical that structure be developmentally, ecologically, and culturally appropriate. As individuals mature, they become increasingly able to create their own structure and to provide adequate self-control over their behavior. Both neighborhood conditions and culture also influence the optimal level of structure and adult control. Greater limits may be necessary in dangerous neighborhoods, where the costs of stepping outside the bounds of authority are higher. Cultures also differ in their expectations regarding appropriate levels of structure. For example, in India, a more hierarchical culture than that of the United States, Cub Scout troops define obedience to leaders as a fundamental obligation; in contrast, in the United States, the Cub Scout pledge focuses on "obeying the law of the Pack."

In Practice: Appropriate structure is often based on the rules maintained by a program. Rules of membership, such as bans on gang colors and weapons, are essential; also important are rules about members treating each other and the adult leaders with honesty and respect. Youth should be given opportunities to have input on setting rules and creating structure, especially as they get older. Youth report that these guidelines for behavior are fundamental to their own feelings of safety and comfort (McLaughlin et al., 1994).

Supportive Relationships

The quality of relationships with adults consistently comes up as a critical feature of any developmental setting. Researchers speak of the importance of warmth, connectedness, good communication, and support. Theorists talk about adults who provide secure attachments, are good mentors and managers, and provide scaffolding for learning. Practitioners talk about caring and competent adults. Adolescents may use more evocative terms— like being loving or "cool."

As a whole, these descriptions suggest a family of related qualities that make for good relationships with adults. They include interrelated qualities of emotional support (such as being caring and responsive) and qualities of instrumental support (such as providing guidance that is useful to young people). On the surface these appear to be objective qualities, but research suggests that these qualities reside less in the adult than in the adolescent's perception of the adult and in the adolescent's experience of interactions with the adult. Therefore, there is not one perfect type of adult for all adolescents and all settings; instead different adolescents are likely to respond to different elements within this family of desirable qualities.

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The largest body of research demonstrating the importance of these qualities focuses on the influence of parents on their children. Longitudinal studies consistently show that parental support is associated with positive school motivation, better mental health, and lower rates of drinking, drug use, delinquency, and school misconduct. In the classroom, positive support from teachers is related to greater educational success, and when teachers have positive expectations for students, they do better.

We stress again that these qualities have to be tailored to the adolescent being served. Different cultural groups have different models of adult-adolescent relationships, and hence support needs to fit with the cultural model of the adolescent's social group. For some, this will involve more deference to authority; for others, it will involve the progressive granting of appropriate autonomy in conjunction with strong emotional support.

In Practice: Community programs for youth provide opportunities to expose young people to caring adults who challenge them, encourage them to participate in positive experiences, and respect their opinions. Programs vary in terms of the characteristics of the staff they employ, but from the perspective of young people, staff attitudes matter more than do questions of race, age, or ethnicity.

For some youth, the strength of relationships may by heightened by interaction with adults who share their background. Staff who are members of the same community as the young people may provide particularly strong support. As one program participant explained in an interview, "The [program] really taught me how to survive on the street. Most of the staff members here grew up just like I did on the street... so they really taught me how to stay out of trouble and protect myself."

Opportunities to Belong

Research across settings substantiates the importance of opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. For example, teachers who provide opportunities for all students to participate and feel valued have students who do better on a wide range of academic outcomes. Conversely, adolescents who perceive peers and adults as prejudiced report higher levels of emotional stress than those who do not.

In a multicultural society like ours, the issue of belonging is especially important. One of the first issues for an adolescent walking through the door or even thinking about trying a community program is whether he or she can belong to this group of people.

Table 2.1
Eight Features Which Promote Positive Youth Development

- Physical and Psychology Safety
- Clear and Consistent Structure and Appropriate Supervision
- Supportive Relationships
- Opportunities to Belong
- Positive Social Norms
- Support for Efficacy and Mattering
- Opportunities for Skill Building
- Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

Features of Positive Developmental Settings

The adolescent may ask, not only is my ethnic group welcome, but also will the people here accept someone of my gender, sexual orientation, disability status, or the peer crowd that people think I belong to (for example, jock, nerd)? These considerations can be significant barriers that keep adolescents from joining youth activities. Beyond the issue of interpersonal comfort, is the role that community programs can play in helping adolescents address underlying developmental issues related to socio-cultural belonging. Whether one is a member of a minority group, the dominant culture, or has not decided, there are important issues to be faced about how one fits into the diverse and sometimes conflicting marketplace of cultural messages and identities. Schools and community programs provide a particularly valuable setting for youth to work on these important developmental tasks.

Cultures provide meaning, and meaning is fundamental to wellbeing. Research shows that youth with a stronger ethnic identity have more positive self-esteem, stronger ego identity, greater school involvement, and are less likely to engage in violence. But a sense of belonging to a group becomes a two-edged sword if it means exclusion or hostility in relation to others. LaFromboise and colleagues (1993) suggest that the desirable developmental outcome is "bicultural competence," which involves development of abilities to function and be comfortable in multiple cultural settings. Although issues of ethnic identity are least salient for European American adolescents, awareness of inter-group processes is important for them, too. The ability of other youth to achieve and enjoy bicultural competence is dependent on whether people in the majority culture are sensitive to and knowledgeable about other cultures and aware of the ways in which their privilege is experienced by others.

As with all other features, issues of person-environment fit are important. Adolescents have different attitudes, past experiences, and levels of readiness. For example, stage theories of ethnic identity formation suggest that some youth from non-majority cultures may need intense periods of immersion in their own culture as a step toward being able to function in a multi-cultural environment. Similar issues can be important for male and female adolescents and for youth with different sexual orientations.

In Practice: Creating a sense of belonging depends partly on the attitudes and behavior of adults and youth in the program. A program's size and membership may also shape its ability to offer opportunities that promote meaningful inclusion. Membership matters not only in its approach to youth development but also in how it organizes itself to facilitate opportunities for youth. The target membership for a program may be broad or it may focus on a particular gender, or a specific ethnic, religious, or age group. Some programs reach out to disenfranchised or at-risk youth; others limit participation to young people who have maintained a certain grade point average or have auditioned to participate. Many programs seek a heterogeneous set of participants to build understanding and tolerance among young people. Other programs are targeted toward homogeneous groups in order to offer specific support, cultural awareness, a sense of belonging, and pride to a particular subgroup of youth. For example, the Center for Young Women's Development offers support and opportunity specifically to young female prostitutes in San Francisco.

Positive Social Norms

Every group of people that has sustained interaction develops a set of habits, norms, and expectations that governs its behavior.

Whether we are talking about a family, a peer group, a classroom, or a community program for youth, the group develops a way of doing things and not doing things. The group "culture" includes not only the formal organizational culture but also the informal habits and expectations that arise from daily interactions; these informal norms may diverge from the official organizational norms and expectations. Adolescents' perceptions of these kinds of social norms have immediate and lasting effects on their behavior.

The impact of peer norms on adolescent behavior has often been demonized under the rubric of "peer pressure." However, research suggests that peer influence is typically more subtle, multidimensional, and positive. Rather than being pressured, adolescents often perceive certain behaviors to be normative and so come to view them as appropriate ways of acting. Research shows that peer influence toward positive behavior (such as finishing school) is much more common than influence toward deviant behaviors.

Research on community programs also indicates that social norms are critical in these settings. On the positive side, Cook et al. (1993) reported that acquiring conventionally positive social norms did a better job of explaining the results of one prevention program than did social skills training. On the negative side, Dishion and colleagues (1999) have shown that adolescents who are grouped together for an intervention with a large proportion of peers demonstrating problem behaviors often show increases in a variety of problem behaviors as a consequence of participating in the intervention. This negative impact has been explained as the impact of the antisocial norms created by the large number of youth heavily involved in problem behaviors. The bottom line is that, whether they are intentionally cultivated or not, community programs have an internal culture of social norms that shapes youths' perception of appropriate behavior either positively or negatively, depending on the social norms that emerge. Program personnel need to carefully consider exactly what social norms are being created and reinforced in their programs.

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It is critical to consider how culture influences social norms. Cultures and subcultures are an important source of social norms, and groups differ in the norms they hold most highly. Many cultures share fundamental moral values (for example, against harm to others), but they vary in norms related to conventions, and these norms often carry moral weight during adolescence, when group belonging is so important. Program leaders need to be sensitive to how congruent the organization's norms are with cultural norms of their participants.

Individual differences are also important. Susceptibility to peer influence is a critical mediator of the effect of peer norms on behavior (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993), and susceptibility to peer pressure is higher among younger adolescents and those with less confidence in their social skills.

In Practice: Some community programs for youth are designed as drop-in activities, where young people can come and go and participate in rotating activities of their choice. These programs can sometimes provide contexts for the dissemination of negative behaviors. Other programs require youth to make a commitment

to the program and as a result have high expectations for their involvement. These programs are more likely to support pro-social norms by teaching youth responsibility to uphold certain rules of behavior, to be accountable to the program and its expectations, and to agree to live up to a set of moral standards and values.

Participants in one program, for example, are required to make a commitment to the program through membership in one of the program's teams or clubs. To become a member of one of these groups, participants have to agree to the programs' values, which encourage self-respect and respect among peers and adults. The objective is to help young people integrate these norms into their character and their behavior in other parts of their lives (McLaughlin et al., 2001).

Support for Efficacy and Mattering

Positive development is not something adults do to young people but rather something that young people do for themselves with help from parents and others. They are the agents of their own development. To foster development, then, it follows that settings need to be youth centered, providing youth—both individually and in groups—the opportunity to be efficacious and to make a difference in their social worlds. We refer to this opportunity as "mattering." There are multiple elements under this feature: the importance of having the opportunity to make a real difference in one's community, the idea of empowerment, and support for increasingly autonomous self-regulation that is appropriate to the adolescents' developmental level and cultural background. The opportunity to experience meaningful challenge is also included, because success at such experiences is critical to developing a sense of personal efficacy. Efficacy results not just from turning power over to youth, but from seeing that they are challenged to stretch themselves in demanding, novel, and creative activities. It must be emphasized that "opportunity" is not experienced as "challenge" unless youth identify with it: adolescents need to be engaged by opportunities for efficacy and mattering that are meaningful to them.

Evidence for the importance of this feature comes from research on multiple settings. Research on families shows that parents' encouragement and acceptance of their adolescent children's desire to take some risks, learn new skills, and take responsibility, combined with consistent parental support, careful monitoring, and good communication, are predictive of growing competence and motivation in adolescents. In community programs participation in decision making is correlated with positive developmental outcomes, such as a sense of sharing and respect for others. Adolescents in youth-centered activities develop new cognitive skills that increase their confidence and ability to make positive decisions.

The notion that support for efficacy and mattering must fit with the adolescents being served is important. For a setting to support efficacy and the sense that one is making a useful contribution, it must be developmentally and culturally appropriate. Most young adolescents are not cognitively or emotionally ready to take full responsibility for a community program. Empowerment involves gradually increasing freedoms and responsibilities as young people mature. Culturally, a setting must be attuned to the level and modes of efficacy and mattering that are normative in the adolescents' larger cultural system. People differ in the amount of value they place on autonomy. Many American Indian tribes, such as the Navajo, place high value on letting children make their own decisions (LaFromboise & Graff Low, 1998), whereas other ethnic minority groups in this country do not (Fisher et al., 1998).

Like structure, support for efficacy and mattering are necessary features for development in any setting. If adolescents do not experience personal engagement and a sense of mattering, they are not likely to grow personally. These features, then, are prerequisite to all types of development but they have a particular relevance to psychological, emotional, and social development. Theory suggests that it is through acting, taking on challenges, and making meaningful contributions that a person's sense of self and identity develops.

Web Resources

Community Matters
www.commatters.org/youth

As part of a Web site of a for-profit training and consultation group, a large number of free resources are available here. Resources include information on youth as stakeholders, engaging the least engaged youth, and developmental assets.

Family and Youth Services Bureau
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb

Part of the Administration for Children and Families, in the Department of Health and Human Services, the Family and Youth Services Bureau includes a section specifically on Positive Youth Development. From this site, users can access many resources including links to programs which support positive youth development, such as Girl Power!

Forum for Youth Investment
www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

According to the Web site, the mission of the Forum for Youth Investment is to "increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement by promoting a 'big picture' approach." This Web site contains a number of white papers, working papers, published reports, articles, and commentary (notably, Karen Pittman's columns from Youth Today) related to their mission. Titles include "Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice: Creating Common Ground in Youth Development," "Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development: Lessons and Voices from the Field," and "When, Where, What, and How Youth Learn: Blurring School and Community Boundaries."

National Youth Development Information Center
www.nydic.org

The mission of the National Youth Development Information Center is to provide "practice-related information about youth development to national and local youth-serving organizations." This Web site provides a variety of resources including information about the basics of Positive Youth Development, links to reports by other organizations, information about public policy related to youth development issues, and other resources.

What Kids Can Do
www.whatkidscando.org

A national nonprofit organization, What Kids Can Do works to document the value of young people working with adults on projects that combine learning with public purpose.

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In Practice: Many community programs for youth incorporate multiple opportunities to build efficacy. Youth participants may help identify needs and set goals; help design the structure, activities, and supports; help staff understand what youth need and how to relate to them; help identify community and family issues that may be barriers for youth participation; and help create an environment for youth to positively contribute to their community. Some programs develop youth councils to systematically generate youth involvement. Others involve youth in responsible leadership positions around program activities, for example, as tutors, peer counselors, and event organizers.

Opportunities for Skill Building

Good settings provide opportunities to acquire knowledge and learn new skills and new habits of mind. We include here cognitive, physical, psychological, social, and cultural skills. Of course, some community programs specialize in promoting the development of specific skills, such as athletic or artistic abilities. But good programs encourage learning in other areas as well. They can encourage the development of good habits and a wide range of competencies and life skills, from media literacy to acquiring job skills through the use of an embedded curriculum[1] and a curriculum that systematically cycles through planning, practice, and performance. The specific skills promoted should vary across cultural groups, depending on the outcomes different groups see as most important. Involvement in activities with embedded curricula leads to gains in both social and cultural capital.

Studies of schools and non-school community-based programs show consistent evidence of the importance of learning new cognitive and life skills. McLaughlin (2000) concluded that having an intentional learning environment was one of the critical characteristics of the successful community-based programs she and her colleagues studied. However, participating in an activity does not automatically mean that adolescents will transfer the habits and dispositions of that activity to other settings in the future. Programs need to be explicitly designed to teach and reinforce these habits as well as other critical life skills. For example, periodic reflection and debriefing sessions can be particularly useful in helping youth transfer ways of thinking and acting to other areas of their lives.

In Practice: At the heart of many community programs for youth are opportunities for skill building. Programs can use a wide variety of activities, such as community service, adventure and outdoor activities, art, drama, music, religious instruction, sports, cultural awareness, academic improvement, and career preparation, to support positive youth development and to meet the program-specific objectives. The exact content or focus (e.g., sports, music, community service) may be designed to attract adolescents to the program, while the curriculum may focus more on developmental skills (e.g., cooperation, creativity, communication).

Programs focusing on a specific activity can support skill building in a number of different areas. An arts program, for example, may involve youth in researching their cultural history and painting community murals to reflect what they learn.

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[1] Embedded curriculum within an organization's programs are activities that build a number of competencies and life skills. An after-school dance program for youth that integrates cultural history into the dance lessons and gives the youths responsibility for program planning, advertising, and marketing not only teaches dance, but also builds skills around responsibility, leadership, persistence, and connection to the family, schools, and the community.

Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

In Bronfenbrenner's model of human development, adolescent development is facilitated when there is meaningful communication and synergy among the different settings of adolescents' lives and among the adults who oversee these settings. Optimal conditions for development exist when there is cohesion and information flow between systems—for example, when parents know what is going on at school and with peers and when principals, community leaders, and parents are in touch and have a shared perception of community standards for behavior. This communication facilitates acquiring social capital, and it increases the likelihood of adequate structure in the setting. It also adds to the fund of developmental resources that adolescents can draw on. When different parts of adolescents' worlds are out of touch and on different wavelengths, there is increased likelihood that developmental opportunities will be missed, that adolescents will be confused about adult expectations, and that deviant behavior and values will take root.

Research substantiates the importance of this integration between the settings and institutions in adolescents' lives. This is evident, first, in the links between family and community. Rural adolescents whose parents were actively involved in the community showed higher academic and peer success (Elder & Conger, 2000). We also see it, for example, in the links between schools and communities. School programs that included one or more community program components have longer-lasting and larger effects on adolescent drug use and smoking than school programs alone (Dryfoos, 2000). On the flip side, a lack of integration among these settings is associated with more problem behavior in adolescents. Conflict between family values and communal values, for example, is related to more adolescent problem behavior (Romo & Falbo, 1996).

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The potential for communication and integration varies widely across communities. Those communities that are small, culturally homogeneous, and have more resources are likely to find it easier to maintain integration. It is a common observation that sense of community is harder to achieve given the fast-paced, anonymous, culturally diverse, urban life-style that has taken over much of the United States. However, there are numerous examples of contemporary communities that have come together to establish communication, bridge differences, and find common ground for facilitating adolescent development (Dryfoos, 2000).

In Practice: Community programs for youth offer many opportunities for the integration of families, schools, and the broader community. Thus far we have described the specific ways in which individual organizations design and operate programs. But youth development depends not only on the independent efforts of programs, but also on these efforts in collaboration with the community as a whole.

Many programs do in fact target the community more broadly, seeking to reach and influence young people, their families, and other community members, organizations, and businesses. HOME, for example, is a community-based youth membership organization

where young people collaborate with each other and adults to create important projects and innovative businesses. The achievements made through these youth-initiated projects pave the way for adults to embrace youth as contributing members of the community and for youth to learn the skills they need to be effective, enterprising citizens.

Agreeing on what communities want for all young people is an important factor in supporting youth development. Youth service providers, in conjunction with youth, parents, and community members, need to develop a shared understanding of the needs of the young people in their community. They must decide what youth need to develop into healthy, self-sufficient, and involved adults and how the community can best meet those needs. Through that collaborative process, they can begin discussing a youth development framework and how it might translate into a vision for young people in their community.

Conclusion

This list of features is a step toward identifying the active ingredients of community programs. These are features that support personal and social development. Findings generally suggest that the more exposure a youth has to these different features, the better off he or she will be. We need to reemphasize the limits of the research used in this article. First, we have drawn primarily on studies of such settings as families and schools and then extrapolated the findings to community programs. Second, our configuration of these features into a list of eight is provisional. The boundaries between features are indistinct, and the titles given to them tentative. It is unlikely that another group of scholars would come up with the exact same list, although the underlying content is likely to be very similar.

Finally, it is important to think not just about the program but also the community as a level of analysis. There is evidence that adolescents in communities that are rich in developmental opportunities experience reduced risk and show higher rates of positive development. This suggests that communities need a menu of different types of programs that provide diverse opportunities and that allow all adolescents to find programs that fit them. There is great diversity in the design, approach, and focus of community programs for youth, and this diversity is a strength.

Although certain features, like safety, are essential for all programs, different programs may emphasize some features more than others. Mentoring programs, for example, may focus on creating supportive relationships and developing a sense of belonging and inclusion. Sports programs may place greater priority of developing athletic skills and teamwork.

Community programs can provide valuable developmental opportunities for youth. They can provide the experience of community involvement and service, and opportunities to form relationships with caring adults. They can provide experiences of personal empowerment and opportunities for youth to address issues of ethnic identity and intergroup relationships. When these programs are rich in the features we have outlined, they can reduce risk and be a context for many forms of emotional, cognitive, and social development. ✦

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