

IN BRIEF

Positive Youth Development So Far *Core Hypotheses and Their Implications*

The Questions

As positive youth development moves from being primarily a field of practice toward having increased credibility in academic research institutions, how much agreement is there in how it is understood and defined? How might elements of emerging youth development have implications for policy and practice?

The Bottom Line

Although there are many definitions and frameworks of positive youth development in the field, there is also a great deal of common ground growing out of current theory and research. Seven hypotheses have important implications for both policy and practice.

The Evidence

Hypothesis 1: Changes in contexts change young people, and we can intentionally change young people's context(s) to enhance their developmental success. A cluster of intervention components are generally found to make a difference, including a focus on adult-youth relationships, establishing norms, learning social competencies, and engaging youth in leadership and other opportunities.

Hypothesis 2: When youth themselves take action to improve their contexts, their efforts are empowering and also improve the contexts for themselves and their peers. In the same way that young people's contexts affect their development, their actions change their environment.

Hypothesis 3: Both the person and the context

matter. Developmental strengths "in" the person work together with developmental strengths "outside" the person to promote thriving.

Hypothesis 4: Increasing the number of developmental nutrients across settings is what matters most, not increasing specific strengths or combinations of strengths in any single setting.

Hypothesis 5: Building developmental nutrients can have an impact at the time of intervention as well as later in life. When young people gain developmental strengths, those strengths protect them at the time and also contribute to their future development.

Hypothesis 6: Community-wide efforts to build developmental nutrients are as important as those on the organization, family, and individual levels. The largest improvements in positive youth development will occur more in response to interventions at the community level than those aimed at individuals.

Hypothesis 7: Community-level interventions to build developmental supports and opportunities will benefit all or almost all youth. Research helps to illuminate specific areas of need or strength for various groups (based on gender, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, etc.) while also pointing to the overall utility of promoting all developmental strengths for all young people.

This page is condensed from Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. F., & Sesma, A., Jr. (with Hong, K. L., & Roehlkepartain, E. C.). (2006, November). Positive youth development so far: Core hypotheses and their implications for policy and practice. *Search Institute Insights & Evidence*, 3 (1) 1-13, which is available for free downloading at www.search-institute.org/research/Insights.