



Understanding the Youth Development Model

A theoretical connection has always existed between mentoring and what's commonly known as "youth development." Mentoring is frequently referred to as a youth development strategy—one that uses positive youth-adult relationships to provide broad guidance and support rather than aiming to fix a problem or teach a specific skill. Mentoring programs often include basic information about adolescent development during mentor training, encouraging mentors to be "developmental" rather than "prescriptive" in their work with young people. But what exactly does it mean to use a developmental approach when serving young people? What specific skills do mentors and staff need? And what programmatic goals, activities, and environments are needed to fully implement a positive youth development model?

Because youth development is the cornerstone of effective mentoring, the three fact sheets in this series will provide a basic overview of youth development theory and practice and describe ways in which these practices can be more fully incorporated into mentoring programs. It is hoped that this information will help Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS) grantees enrich the mentoring experience for mentors and mentees and ultimately improve outcomes for youth.

What is youth development?

Youth development in its broadest sense refers to the stages that all children go through to acquire the attitudes, competencies, values, and social skills they need to become successful adults. As children move through their developmental stages (see Erikson's Stages of Development on page 2), they acquire a set of personal assets, or supports, that help them face the challenges and opportunities ahead. These assets allow youth to become resilient—able to bounce back

from adversity. Their ability to develop successfully depends to a great extent on the support and assistance they receive from the people and institutions around them.

The "youth development" discussed here is an extension of that asset/resiliency process. In this context, youth development is a discipline in the field of youth work, founded on the belief that young people are best able to move through their developmental stages when they are supported across all sectors of the community—by individuals, family, schools, youth agencies, faith organizations, community governance, business, and more. The youth development model focuses on activities that nurture developmental assets rather than on reducing particular risks or preventing specific problems. Its ultimate goal is to help youth become successful adults—not just problem-free, but fully prepared to be responsible, contributing, and healthy adults.

Background: Resiliency research as the foundation for youth development

Researchers over the last 25 years have delved into the question of resiliency, examining why and how some children and youth from challenging environments and circumstances can survive and even thrive while others do not. A number of landmark longitudinal studies on child development, such as a classic study on the development of poor children and families on Kauai, Hawaii, identified internal and external factors that helped children overcome risks inherent in their lives (Werner and Smith, 1992). What the studies found was that at least 50 percent—and often closer to 70 percent—of youth growing up in high-risk conditions developed social competence despite exposure to severe stress, and overcame the odds to lead suc-

successful lives. They also identified specific protective factors, such as strong cognitive and social skills, high self-esteem, connection to family and community, and coping skills, which were believed to be instrumental in helping these children develop successfully (Benard, 1991).

These research studies and their findings, along with considerable studies of best practices and lessons learned in the prevention field, have helped theoreticians and practitioners define a set of “developmental assets” that are considered to be the building blocks of successful youth development. Probably the best-known work on these assets is the Search Institute’s framework of 40 Developmental Assets, an extensive list of personal and social assets based on the

Erikson’s Stages of Development

Psychologist Eric Erikson (1902–1994) is perhaps the best known theorist in the field of human development. He proposed a model of eight stages of development that all children go through as they move from infant to adult, and built on that theoretical framework to identify critical assets that must be mastered in order for the child to reach successful adulthood. The stages are:

- Trust, which he linked to positive emotional relationships with caring adults
- A strong sense of self-sufficiency
- Ability to exercise initiative
- Confidence in one’s ability to master skills and navigate one’s world
- A well-formed sense of personal identity
- A desire to be productive and contributing for future generations
- The ability to experience true intimacy
- A strong sense of personal integrity

The work of Erikson and other human development theorists has provided important foundations to the positive youth development approach to working with young people.

Child Development Institute:
<http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/development/erickson.shtml>

Institute’s research involving over 100,000 children in grades 6 through 12.

Over the years, youth workers have used this research into resiliency and assets to develop a comprehensive set of strategies designed to help young people achieve their developmental goals. It rejects problem-centered interventions and also goes beyond prevention-focused models that are generally based on preventing specific behaviors or risks, such as teen pregnancy or delinquency. Youth development practitioners help youth successfully navigate the developmental stages they must all go through, allowing them to develop a rich set of assets that will help them cope with risk, overcome personal and external challenges, and become well-adjusted adults. This approach can require a significant shift in thinking for youth workers and programs used to dealing with problem solving, risk reduction, delinquency prevention, and other forms of behavior-focused interventions.

The basics of the youth development approach: The Five Cs and SOS

A variety of models has been developed to help practitioners implement youth development in their organizations, most of which have similar principles, goals, and strategies. Because youth development has the rather broad goal of helping youth make the transition to healthy adulthood, there is quite a range of what “success” looks like. Most youth workers and educators consider economic independence, intellectual and social competence, personal satisfaction, and physical and psychological well-being to be significant measures. There is widespread agreement on five key outcomes for youth that are vital for their transition to adulthood. These are known as the “Five Cs”:

1. **Competence:** Positive view of one’s actions in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational.
2. **Confidence:** The internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; positive identity; and belief in the future.

3. **Connection:** Positive bonds with people and institutions—peers, family, school, and community—in which both parties contribute to the relationship.
4. **Character:** Respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), spirituality, integrity.
5. **Caring or Compassion:** A sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

(Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg, 2000)

These five developmental outcomes can only be achieved with significant support from the entire community—family, friends, schools, and other community institutions. Yet, this support is often missing from the lives of many young people, especially those whose environments are unhealthy, unsafe, or lacking opportunities. Organizations using a youth development approach therefore provide services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) that enhance the young person's environment and increase his or her ability to reach these outcomes.

Services are the critical interventions needed to enhance the essential well-being of the young person—the traditional services that are generally provided by public welfare, health, school, and recreational programs. These critical services are a necessary component of a comprehensive youth development approach because they alleviate the immediate needs and barriers that can prevent youth from moving forward. Examples include providing food and shelter for homeless youth, helping a family out of crisis, or meeting mental health needs.

Opportunities are the vehicles that offer youth meaningful and real ways to influence the world around them, nurture their interests and talents, practice and enhance their skills and competencies, and increase their connectedness to community. These may stem naturally from the young person's family or community environment, or may be formalized as part of a program or service. These opportunities are at the heart of youth development—they provide the room for the young person to grow in.

Supports are the ongoing positive relationships that young people have with adults, peers, and organizations that provide the safety, structure, motivation, nurturing, and guidance to allow youth to explore, test, learn, grow, and contribute. Supports catch youth when they trip up and offer encouragement for them to try again. Supportive adults have the challenging role of stepping up when needed and stepping back as often as possible to allow youth to explore on their own. This support allows youth to fully take advantage of their opportunities—doing one without the other is ineffective.

SOS in action

Youth development programs build their services and activities around the SOS structure, ideally using a broad range of community partnerships to implement this multi-faceted model and create the rich environment that youth need to be successful. Organizations implement the youth development approach by:

Providing **services** for youth that

- Ensure that basic needs—physical and psychological health, food and shelter, safety, and other needs—are met, both in the short term and over time
- Provide a foundation of well-being that frees youth to focus on developmental tasks
- Treat youth with respect and involve them in decision making around service delivery

Providing **opportunities** for youth to

- Be involved in decision making
- Develop leadership skills
- Be meaningfully engaged in community life and make real contributions
- Develop and test new knowledge and practical skills
- Experience success

- Develop positive, supportive relationships with adults and peers
- Engage with adults around common goals

Providing **supports** that

- Help youth overcome mistakes
- Create a safe environment for youth, both physically and emotionally
- Encourage a sense of belonging or connectedness
- Establish and maintain clear, developmentally appropriate boundaries and guidance
- Encourage and support youth to build new skills
- Empower youth to make a difference in their communities
- Facilitate supportive youth-adult relationships and partnerships
- Engage family, school, and community as partners with youth

Again, it is important to remember that no single program provides all these services, opportunities, and supports. Rather, successful programs reach out to other community institutions and youth service providers to develop interagency and cross-system collaboration. They also involve families, the youth's peers, and other informal support networks to create a web of opportunities that youth can access. Youth development programs must be engaged in community life—a significant aspect of their work is broadly promoting the youth development approach in the general community.

The second fact sheet in this series will discuss ways in which the field of mentoring is guided by many of these same principles, and how OSDFS mentoring programs can integrate youth development approaches more completely into their programs and services.

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