Positive Youth Development in Practice
Positive Youth Development

Definition of Positive Youth Development

- Positive youth development is a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences, which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. It addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models, which focus solely on youth problems (National Collaboration for Youth Members, 1998).

- Positive youth development strives to help young people develop the inner resources and skills they need to cope with pressures that might lead to unhealthy and antisocial behaviors. It aims to promote and prevent, not to treat or remediate. Prevention of undesirable behaviors is one outcome of positive youth development, but there are others including the production of self-reliant, self-confident adults who can become responsible members of society (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992).

- Positive youth development is a strengths-based macro concept that directs the programs and services available in communities to all young people, rather than targeting only those with defined problems or in high-risk situations. Services and activities are voluntary. They provide formal and informal opportunities and experiences that support youth in making a successful transition to adulthood. This differs significantly from current systems that prioritize and fund problem-prevention and crisis-intervention services (Robertson, 1997).

- Positive youth development refers to an ongoing growth process in which all youth endeavor to meet their basic needs for safety, caring relationships, and connections to the larger community, while also striving to build academic, vocational, personal, and social skills (Quinn, 1999).

Adapted from Integrating a Youth Development Perspective into Transition Planning: A Curriculum for Child Welfare Workers developed by Boston University School of Social Work in collaboration with the Department of Social Services. Award number: 90CT0062.
Key Characteristics of a Positive Youth Development Approach

**Asset Based:** The assets and strengths of youth are emphasized rather than problems or deficits.

**Collaborative:** Youth are involved as collaborators in their own plan and development.

**Community-oriented:** Activities take place in the community with an emphasis on the development of strong linkages to community institutions.

**Competence-building:** Activities are aimed at mastering a wide variety of skills.

**Connectedness:** Social relationships and connections with community are central.

**Cultural Membership:** A key aspect of all developmental processes and activities for youth is their understanding of cultural membership and its relationship to identity.

**Holistic:** Positive youth development emphasizes all aspects of healthy personal growth, i.e., physical, social, moral, emotional, cognitive, etc.

**Long-range:** Focus is on long-term plan rather than short-term solutions.

**Normative:** The activities and outcomes of a positive youth development approach emphasize normative functions.

**Promotive:** Philosophy/activities of a positive youth development approach emphasize the promotion of healthy pro-social development.

**Universal:** Activities are not targeted to youth with problems but are generally universally available and desirable to all youth.

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References


Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development has many discrete elements. An extensive literature review conducted by Building Partnership with Youth (2002) uncovered a comprehensive list of 21 elements that support positive youth development. The challenge for you as supervisors is to empower your staff to creatively utilize a unique balance of these elements to support each individual youth as they strive toward adulthood. Most of these elements will be necessary for youth to successfully rise to the challenges of adulthood. Some elements will be required in different amounts, depending on the needs of the individual youth, on his or her background, the future to which he or she aspires, and what foundation he or she has already built. The majority of the elements listed here are undeniably necessary for young people to confidently grow up to be self-sufficient adults in our contemporary world.

Twenty-One Elements that Support Positive Youth Development

- **Academic success**
  Encourage youth to love learning and to seek to achieve the skills and experience that will help them analyze and solve problems in any setting: academic or social.

- **Citizenship and contribution**
  Promote with youth the value of civic awareness and encourage in them a desire to contribute to and support their community and nation.

- **Close relationship with caring adults**
  Support youth as they build links with adults who can provide them with emotional support, and who are not necessarily professional youth workers.

- **Communication skills**
  Encourage youth to express their thoughts and ideas clearly; to say what they really mean, to ask what they really want to know, to develop skills for effective non-violent conflict resolution and interpersonal negotiation.

- **Community connection**
  Introduce youth to useful links to community resources, agencies, and institutions, such as schools, houses of worship, and civic or hobby organizations.

- **Creativity**
  Help youth explore and develop imaginative self-expression through drama, art, music, writing, hobbies, and reading.

- **Decision making/reasoning skills**
  Help youth learn to perceive and evaluate potential outcomes of their decisions and actions.
• **Emotional health and well-being**  
  Support youth as they learn self-discipline, self-respect, and self-reliance; help them realize that it is not a weakness to ask for assistance with problems.

• **Facing challenges/taking initiative**  
  Encourage youth. Provide them with opportunities to try new activities and take on challenging goals; support them as they evaluate the risks involved in those actions.

• **Family relationships**  
  Help youth enhance their family relationships, both with foster families and with their birth families.

• **Leadership**  
  Encourage and support youth in their quest for opportunities to lead and support others, whether they are younger, older, or peers.

• **Peer relationships and friendship**  
  Help youth develop the skills to play well with others and meet the challenges of ongoing mutually supportive relationships—acknowledge with them that it is hard work to be a good friend.

• **Physical health and well-being**  
  Support youth as they seek to establish and maintain healthy behaviors; encourage them to participate in physical activity, and to seek appropriate healthcare.

• **Respect for diversity**  
  Help youth understand they need to show respect for others, and to not discriminate against those who are different from themselves; support youth as they develop an appreciation for the wonderful variety of differences amongst all people.

• **Sense of autonomy and independence**  
  Support youth as they develop responsibility, self-control, and self-respect; encourage them to understand that ultimately they are in control of their own success.

• **Social justice and ethics**  
  Help youth develop the skills they need to appropriately evaluate and react to a situation that might be something of an ethical dilemma; help them learn empathy, respect for cultural standards, a sense of right and wrong, and to understand moral and social justice.

• **Spirituality/philosophy of life**  
  Encourage youth to find spiritual identity by considering the needs of their spirit with the help of internal reflection, meditation, or exploration of spiritual beliefs.
• **Taking an active role with adults**
  Emphasize to youth that they are partners in this process of growing to adulthood; encourage them to plan, implement, and evaluate their activities, and how those activities will help them achieve what they want out of life.

• **Understanding and valuing yourself**
  Help youth believe that they are good people who have the ability to make a positive contribution to their community and the world.

• **Vision for the future**
  Support youth as they develop confident, positive expectations of the future.

• **Workforce preparation**
  Support youth as they explore their career/vocational options; help them establish goals that will permit them to find satisfaction in their lives.

**SOURCE**

## Significant Aspects of Child Development: Birth to Age 5

### Motor Milestones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Key Milestones</th>
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| By age 1 month| - Makes jerky, quivering arm thrusts  
- Brings hands within range of eyes and mouth  
- Moves head from side to side while lying on stomach  
- Keeps hands in tight fists  |
| By age 3 months| - Raises head and chest when lying on stomach  
- Opens and shuts hands  
- Pushes down on legs when feet are placed on firm surface  
- Brings hand to mouth  |
| By age 7 months| - Rolls both ways (front to back, back to front)  
- Sits with, and then without, support of hands  
- Supports whole weight on his/her legs  
- Reaches with one hand  |
| By age 12 months| - Crawls forward on belly by pulling with arms and pushing with legs  
- Creeps on hands and knees supporting trunk on hands and knees  
- Gets from sitting to crawling or prone (lying on stomach) position  
- Pulls self up to stand  |
| By age 2 years | - Walks alone  
- Pulls toys behind him/her while walking  
- Begins to run  
- Might use one hand more frequently than the other  |
| By ages 3-4 years| - Hops and stands on one foot up to five seconds  
- Kicks ball forward  
- Copies square shapes  
- Uses scissors  |


### Social and Emotional Milestones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Key Milestones</th>
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| By age 3 months| - Begins to develop a social smile  
- Enjoys playing with other people and may cry when playing stops  
- Becomes more communicative and expressive with face and body  
- Imitates some movements and facial expressions  |
| By age 7 months| - Enjoys social play  
- Interested in mirror images  
- Responds to other people’s expressions of emotion and appears joyful often  |
### Developmental Health Watch: Possible Delays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Possible Delays</th>
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| **By age 1 month** | - Sucks poorly and feeds slowly  
- Doesn't blink when shown a bright light  
- Doesn't focus and follow a nearby object moving side to side  
- Rarely moves arms and legs; seems stiff |
| **By age 3 months** | - Doesn't seem to respond to loud sounds  
- Doesn't notice own hands by two months  
- Doesn't smile at the sounds of your voice by two months  
- Doesn't follow moving objects with his/her eyes by two to three months |
| **By age 7 months** | - Seems very stiff, with tight muscles  
- Seems very floppy, like a rag doll  
- Reaches with one hand only  
- Refuses to cuddle |
| **By age 12 months** | - Does not crawl  
- Cannot stand when supported  
- Does not search for objects that are hidden while he/she watches  
- Says no single words ("mama" or "dada") |
| **By age 2 years** | - Cannot walk by 18 months  
- Does not speak at least fifteen words by 18 months  
- Does not use two-word sentences by age 2  
- Does not follow simple instructions by age 2 |

### Sensory Milestones: Birth through 12 Months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Milestones</th>
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| By age 1 month | - Vision focuses 8 to 12 inches away (e.g., looks at parent’s face while feeding)  
- Turns to, and looks longer at black-and-white or high-contrast patterns in preference to other patterns  
- Hearing appears to be fully mature and attends and responds to a variety of voices and sounds (loud, moderate, high pitch, low pitch), other than very quiet sounds |
| By age 3 months | - Watches faces intently  
- Follows moving objects (e.g., will track a toy that you move in front of his/her face)  
- Recognizes familiar objects and people at a distance (e.g., smiles at a parent walking towards him/her)  
- Starts using hands and eyes in coordination (e.g., inspects his/her hands, watching their movements)  
- Begins to imitate simple cooing sounds |
| By age 7 months | - Distance vision matures, so may notice a parent leaving the room  
- Ability to track moving objects improves, and can follow a moving toy with both eyes  
- Can distinguish between lumpy and smooth objects with mouth, so may respond differently to different textures of food; may show preferences |
| By age 12 months | - Pays increasing attention to speech (e.g., will babble long strings in response to sentences directed at him/her by others); takes “turns” in conversations  
- Responds to simple verbal requests (e.g., can you give me that book?)  
- Finger feeds self items such as cheerios  
- Looks at correct picture when image is named  
- Imitates gestures (e.g., waving) |

### Sensory Milestones: 8-22 Months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Milestones</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages 8-14 months</td>
<td>- Can process touch information more efficiently (e.g., will demonstrate reactions to touching different objects/surfaces in recognition of differences, as in touch of sandpaper and touch of plastic)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Ages 12-19 months

- Achieves adult sensitivity to bitter tastes (e.g., will grimace when tasting something bitter)

Ages 12-22 months

- Can see about 20/60 level, gradually reaching a norm of 20/25 (e.g., recognizes objects near and far, such as a speck of dust on the floor or a familiar person coming down the street)


**Sensory Processing Issues**

Some children have difficulty with taking in information through their senses, due to neurological differences. Some children are hyper-sensitive to sound, sight, touch, or smell, or to all these senses. Not being able to “tune out” or turn down a sensory input like sound can interfere with learning, interactions, and other critical components of healthy development. For other children, the challenge is that they are hypo-sensitive, which means they don’t get enough input from sight, sound, smell, or touch. They may seek out brighter, louder, smellier, harder/softer stimulation, which again can interfere with learning and relationships. For other children, the challenge is with the feedback their body gets through its propriocentric sense, having to do with balance and coordination. Here are some examples of typical sensory development and sensory processing issues for young children.

**Infants: Birth to 12 Months**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Development Sensory Processing</th>
<th>Processing Issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infant molds to adult holding him</td>
<td>Infant arches away from adult holding him, avoids cuddling, may prefer being held face out</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explores toys by putting them in his/her mouth</td>
<td>Avoids putting toys in mouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>After 6 months accepts solids and textured foods</td>
<td>Has difficulty with or rejects solid or textured foods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plays with two hands in the mid-body, moves toys hand to hand</td>
<td>Only uses one hand to play with toys (after 8 months)</td>
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**Toddlers: 12-18 Months**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Development Sensory Processing</th>
<th>Processing Issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys touching textures (Note: most toddlers do have a brief phase where they avoid messiness)</td>
<td>Avoids touching textures, messy play, messy finger foods, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts various clothing choices</td>
<td>Has difficulty with new clothes, socks with seams, tags. Won’t wear shoes OR always has to wear shoes on grass, sand, etc.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Older Toddlers: 18 Months-3 Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Development Sensory Processing</th>
<th>Processing Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjusts to various play settings: quiet indoors, active outdoors</td>
<td>Intense need for active movement: swinging, rocking jumping; OR avoids movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explores new play equipment with good balance and body control</td>
<td>Has difficulty getting on and off play equipment; may be clumsy; doesn’t like feet off the ground</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tolerates loud sounds and other unusual stimulation</td>
<td>Is upset by loud noises, hearing distant sounds others don’t notice; Has unusual reactions to light, smells, and other sensory experiences</td>
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Significant Aspects of Adolescent Development

Adolescence can be divided into three stages:

- Early adolescence (ages 11-14)
- Middle adolescence (ages 15-17)
- Late adolescence (ages 18-21)

For some young people, late adolescence may extend into their mid- to late twenties.

Physical Development

Physical development in adolescence typically begins with the onset of puberty and its accompanying hormonal and growth changes. Teens experience rapid gains in growth and weight in combination with the development of secondary sexual characteristics. They also experience further development of their brains. Huebner (2000) reports that communication between neurons in adolescents’ brains may not be completely and reliably established until later in adolescence. These ongoing developmental changes in their brains may have an impact on their emotions, as well as their physical and mental abilities, and may even be an explanation for teens’ inconsistent responses in situations that appear to be similar.

All of these changes mean that teens need more sleep, may experience physical awkwardness, and may feel self-conscious, sensitive, and distressed that they are not developing in lock step with their peers (Huebner, 2000). Another challenge for teens may be that those who appear to be more physically mature are expected to be emotionally and intellectually mature, but in actuality may be simply average for their age. Likewise, teens that are small for their age, or younger in physical appearance, may be treated as if they are still children. Youths’ appearances may be deceptive; this can be frustrating for them, and for adults who work with them.

During adolescence, youth may engage in sexual activity and/or experiment with mood altering substances. Adolescence is a time when young people engage in risky behaviors because they believe that bad things are not likely to happen to them. The Monitor on Psychology (2001) reports that unhealthy behaviors are more successfully avoided when teens are encouraged to be involved in productive extra curricular activities, and when they are provided with opportunities for positive interpersonal relationships.
Cognitive Development

During adolescence, teen intellectual capacity expands. They become more able to think about thinking, a process known as meta-cognition (Heubner 2000). In addition to engaging in meta-cognition, teens also become more abstract thinkers, develop advanced reasoning skills with more logical thought processes, and become better able to imagine possible outcomes without having to actually experience the events in question.

Changes in their mental processes mean that teens also become more apt to either blurt out or hide their feelings about the things that they think about. They wonder whether anyone else has ever felt the way they are currently feeling. These aspects of their development also contribute to self-conscious behavior. They develop fixations on social causes, on justice or fairness, on what they perceive as their indestructibility, and on what everyone else might possibly be thinking about them.

Padilla-Walker & Carlo (2006) report that when teens believe that adult reprimands are out of proportion with respect to the severity of their behaviors they tend to tune adults out. While teens typically agree with adults’ perspectives regarding more serious moral behaviors, they feel that adults may be overreacting when they exact punishment for what they perceive to be arbitrary rules. This may relate to teens’ developing perceptions of fairness or justice.

During this time teens also develop self identity. They become more concerned about the future, who they will become, and what they want out of life.

Social/Emotional Development

The teen years are a time in which young people transition from the dependence of childhood to independence, or as Borgen and Amundson (1998) describe it, adolescence is “[t]he last step before becoming an adult.” At this stage in their lives youth are striving to become independently functioning adults, but they still need some support from caring, interested adults. Teens reach the point that they should be on their own but are unprepared for the reality of the experience. They need to have connections with adults who can provide them with emotional support and stability as they negotiate the trial and error process of attaining self sufficiency. Teens will struggle with their desire to be independent, especially when it conflicts with their need for assistance.

Teens need to feel that their needs and feelings are acceptable. They need to feel that they fit in and that other people accept them. At this time in their development, peers can have a significant impact on their behavior. They respond better to positive feedback from adults who support them. Teens’ sense of emotional responsibility develops best in an atmosphere
of honesty, trust and respect. They need opportunities to be independent and assertive. They need to know that there is someone they can talk to when they experience difficulties. It is critical for teens to have responsibilities so that they can develop feelings of competence.

As youth mature during the years from late childhood to early adulthood, they are presented with many different challenges. Even youth who have stable families experience the pitfalls described above. The plight of youth who have no stable family connections is even more challenging.

SOURCES

