



National Juvenile Justice Network Policy Platform

Approaching Juvenile Justice with a Focus on Positive Youth Development

An increasing number of practitioners and advocates in the juvenile justice field are adopting a positive youth development (PYD) perspective and other strengths-based strategies that focus on youths' assets rather than their weaknesses or problems. PYD can be described as a youth's development of "a sense of competency, usefulness, belonging, and influence."¹ It has become clear that for the vast majority of youth, the traditional deficit-based, medical model that has commonly been used in the juvenile justice system is misguided and that the use of strengths-based programming,² such as PYD, is a more appropriate and effective means of working with young offenders and their families and successfully engaging youth in their communities.

The traditional juvenile justice model focuses on the failings and downfalls of young offenders and treats most offending youth as if they are sick, rather than struggling and coping with normal adolescent challenges. Most young offenders (75%) have committed low-level, non-violent offenses that stem from generally age-appropriate behavior.³ Such behavior is best addressed by helping youth take responsibility for their actions, providing opportunities for them to restore any harm done through their actions,⁴ engaging them with pro-social peers, and assisting them to make better decisions in the future. Effective PYD programs utilize a comprehensive approach that focuses on significant domains in a youth's life, such as employment, education, art, health, and leadership. This approach should be the cornerstone of juvenile justice systems, guiding work on prevention, rehabilitation, and reentry to the community.

The National Juvenile Justice Network supports and encourages the use of PYD and strengths-based principles within juvenile justice systems and makes the following recommendations:

- Juvenile justice systems must reorient to using positive, strengths-based models with youth and whenever possible make deliberate shifts away from the traditional deficit-based, medical model.
- Youth in conflict with the law should be held accountable in ways that are premised on and adhere to youth development and strength-based principles.
- PYD is most successful, in terms of youth outcomes and cost effectiveness, when it is community-based, community-led, community-owned, and community-operated and involves youth, family and community members in the planning and implementation.⁵
- Institutions for youth should integrate PYD principles and strengths-based models into the institutions' policies, procedures and programming whenever possible.

- Individuals who plan and implement PYD programs must be trained in PYD methods and practice. Juvenile justice systems should provide training to staff on PYD and strengths-based strategies that focuses on assessing positive outcomes, individualized case planning and cultivating community collaborations.⁶
- Juvenile justice programs should engage young offenders who are placed outside of their homes as active participants in the planning and implementation of their rehabilitation and transition back to their communities.
- Federal, state, local, and private funding should be targeted toward effective community-based alternatives to detention and incarceration that are framed in terms of the assets they seek to encourage. Grantmaking agencies should reformulate grant requirements to reward the inclusion of PYD principles and strengths-based strategies in programs that serve youth in the juvenile justice system.

For more information:

- The Search Institute – <http://www.search-institute.org/>
- National Conference of State Legislatures – www.ncsl.org (search “positive youth development”)
- National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth – <http://www.ncfy.com/pyd/>
- Great Lakes Training, Inc.: The Center for Strength-Based Strategies – http://www.buildmotivation.com/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1
- Forthcoming: Jeffrey A. Butts, Gordon Bazemore and Aundra Saa Meroe “Designing Youth Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development,” Coalition for Juvenile Justice – www.juvjustice.org

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¹ Boys and Girls Clubs of America Web site, available at <<http://www.bgca.org/whoweare/>>.

² A strengths-based approach highlights the strengths of the individual and the resiliencies that exist within an individual, family, or larger community. The approach emphasizes that people are more likely to change when they are engaged in identifying their goals and how to go about achieving these goals than when they are told what to do by others. To learn more about strengths-based approaches, see: Charles Rapp, The Strengths Model: Case Management with People Suffering from Severe and Persistent Mental Illness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) or Dennis Saleebey, The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice (New York: Longman Publishers, Inc. 1997).

³ Jeffrey Butts, Susan Mayer and Gretchen Ruth, “Focusing Juvenile Justice on Positive Youth Development,” *Chapin Hall Center for Children at University of Chicago* No. 105 (October 2005): 2.

⁴ Restorative justice aims to repair the harm caused by a crime. Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) emphasizes community safety, accountability and competency development. To learn more about BARJ, see: Howard Zehr, Changing Lenses (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005) or “Balanced and Restorative Justice for Juveniles: A Framework for Juvenile Justice in the 21st Century,” *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention* (August 1997).

⁵ Richard F. Catalano et al., “Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs,” *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* No. 591 (Jan. 2004): 112.

⁶ William Barton and Jeffrey Butts, “Building on Strength: Positive Youth Development in Juvenile Justice Programs,” *Chapin Hall Center for Children at University of Chicago* (2008): 44.