

## Exploring Positive Youth Development

### Background

The Administration for Children and Families provides funding for the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP). The goal of PREP is to prepare teens for adulthood by offering programs with proven positive outcomes in counties with high teen birth rates.

### Overview

**Positive Youth Development** (PYD) is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. <sup>1</sup>The PYD framework helps youth workers, educators, and advocates design youth programs and learning opportunities that include positive experiences (high expectations), positive people and relationships (high warmth), and inclusive environments (high structure) while ensuring youth have the space and time to comprehend program content (high understanding). Rather than shaming or blaming youth into compliance, the PYD framework focuses on developing skills youth can use in a future workplace. These skills include; critical thinking and problem solving, effective communication, collaboration and team building, and creativity and innovation. <sup>2</sup>

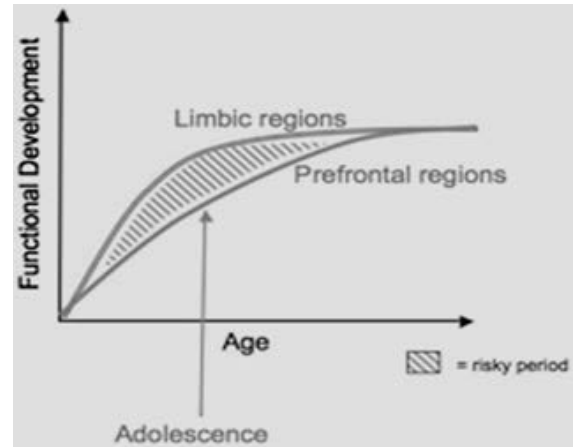


### The Adolescent Brain

Adolescence is a period of “use it or lose it” in brain development. Specifically, the limbic system and pre-frontal cortex regions are essentially still under construction. Many adults struggle when teens seem to lack the ability to demonstrate thoughtful decision making, moderate social behaviors, and control impulses. However, the pre-frontal cortex which controls all of these functions, is still developing. Another malleable part of the brain is the limbic system, which is responsible for pleasure, reward processing, emotional responses and sleep regulation. <sup>3, 4</sup>

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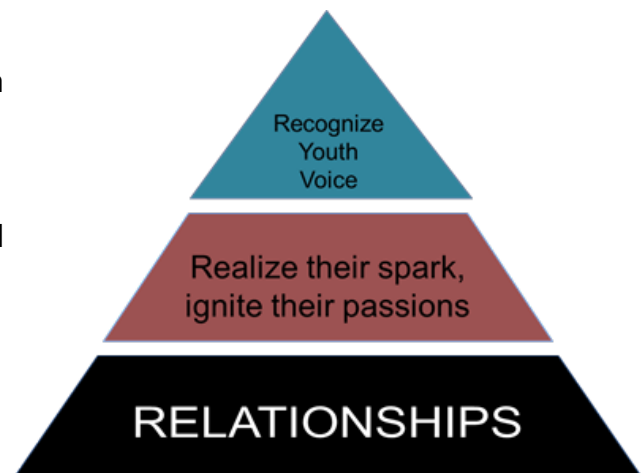
Risk-taking is another common feature of adolescence. Often adults expect teens to consciously weigh the pros and cons of situations; however, in many cases their brains are simply not wired to respond so logically. We do know adolescents take more risks when around their peers, but it's important to recognize that not all risk taking is negative. For instance, the adolescent brain activates in the same way for prosocial behaviors such as joining a team, trying out for a play, or presenting information to peers. Adults can use the PYD framework to provide safe and inclusive spaces for youth to practice prosocial risk taking.<sup>5</sup>



### Engaging the Youth Voice

Many adults who work with youth strive to create programs that promote “youth voice.” **Youth Voice** exists when adults intentionally include adolescent participants as partners in the design or administration of a program. When adolescents have a voice in the program, they often experience a deeper sense of ownership in the content. Additionally, youth who are engaged as partners have unique opportunities to learn skills such as fundraising, facilitation/presenting, planning, outreach, evaluation, budgeting, and many more.

To engage youth voice, adults must spend time developing relationships with youth. Relationships develop over time and are strengthened when adults have clear and consistent expectations for teens. Expectations are often developed alongside youth by creating group agreements, or through structured activities such as ice breakers, that allow youth and adults to learn about each other in a fun, or creative way.



As meaningful relationships develop, adults often discover what sparks adolescents' interests. The Search Institute defines **Sparks** [as] *the activities and interests that truly engage youth to be their best. Research shows that youth who know and develop their sparks and who have adults in their lives to help them develop their sparks have higher grades, better school attendance, and a sense of purpose.*<sup>6</sup>

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### Practicing a Positive Youth Development Approach

All youth benefit from PYD opportunities, especially youth from marginalized groups and communities. One common mistake many program providers make is to hand-pick local students who are successful in academic situations, because less engaged youth are seen as more challenging. In practice, adults who engage a diverse group of teens who demonstrate existing interest in a topic or program find students with lived experience frequently exceed even the highest expectations. Like many adults, when youth feel safe, and have a sense of belonging, it makes opportunities to voice thoughts and opinions even more rewarding.

#### Examples of Relationship Building Ice Breakers:

**Two truths and a lie:** Each person shares three statements about themselves; two are true and one is a lie. The group has to guess which is the lie.

**High/Low:** At the beginning of the program check on how the youth are doing by having each person share something good that happened that day (high), and something not so good (low).

**That's Me!** Have the group form a circle. Have each person go around and share a statement about themselves. For example "I read *The Hobbit*." All other people in the circle who have done the same thing step into the circle and shout "that's me!" The activity helps groups find shared interests and experiences.

Example Strategies		
<b>Relationships</b>	Ice Breakers	Being Authentic
	Group Agreements	Meaningful Praise
	Team Builders	Feedback on work effort
<b>Realizing Sparks</b>	Open ended questions	Providing choice
	Long term projects	Self-guided activities
	Experiential Learning	Discussion
	Leading Activities	Presenting Information
<b>Recognizing Youth Voice</b>	Joining a board	Leading Activities
	Facilitating Meetings	Planning a Project
	Youth Adult Partnerships	Paid Work Experience
	Partnerships	

### Engaging Teens as Leaders

The Wisconsin Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) has adopted the motto "*nothing for us, without us.*" when it comes to engaging the teens served by the program. As of 2016, PREP is developing youth leaders through the Youth Advocates for Health program. The Youth Advocates for Health group includes 15 teens ages 12-21 who represent eight counties. Teen Health Advocates review program content and advise sub-recipient programs on how to better engage teens. PREP works to cultivate youth on many levels, which includes ensuring curriculums, activities, and conferences are based in both the Social Learning Theory and the Positive Youth Development framework. The Got Money! Conferences are one example of how these two approaches combine to spark youths' interest in their own human capital. Read the Adolescent Health Issue Brief called *Got Money?! Promoting teen health through Financial Literacy* to learn more.

### Health Care and Adolescent Development

The Maternal Child Health program is working with teens and health care providers to build trust and promote adolescent well visits. A well visit is an appointment with a health care provider that focusses on keeping teens healthy by addressing health risks before they are a big concern. According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid services all teens ages 12-17 should have a well visit each year. In Wisconsin the following programs are being provided in communities of greatest need:

#### 1.) Providers and Teens Communicating for Health

This is an innovative, teen-delivered peer education program that targets barriers that interfere with the ability of health care providers and teens to communicate effectively with one another about sensitive health topics; thereby improving the quality of care received. Recognizing that teens themselves are the population best equipped to offer providers accurate, authentic advice and insight about adolescent concerns and preferences, this innovative program allows providers the opportunity to gain privileged access to this unique population. At the same time, the program works to empower teens to utilize providers as valuable, trusted resources by harnessing the power of peer education.<sup>7, 8</sup>

#### A Teen Well Visit

##### Includes:

1. Blood Pressure Check
2. Physical Exam
3. Vision and Hearing Screen
4. Weight Assessment
5. Immunizations
6. Depression Screen
7. Alcohol and Drug Risk Screen
8. Some Infection Screen

### 2.) The Adolescent Champion Model

This is a quality improvement model developed by the University of Michigan. The model uses extensive research and draws on the expertise from primary care, public health, social work and youth collaboratives. The model aims to improve outcomes for adolescent patients by increasing training, and enhancing the practices of providers and health care staff through meaningful improvements in health center environments, policies, and services related to the care of adolescents.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Positive Youth Development. Youth info.gov <http://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development>

<sup>2</sup> McNeely and Blanchard, J. (2009.) The Teen Years Explained: A guide to healthy adolescent development. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. <http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/docs/TTYE-Guide.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Adolescence: neurodevelopmental changes, World Health Organization (WHO) 2014

<sup>4</sup> The Adolescent Brain: Casey et al. (2008)

<sup>5</sup> The adolescent brain: Jim Casey Opportunities Initiative, 2011

<sup>6</sup> Search Institute. Sparks and Thriving. <http://www.search-institute.org/sparks>

<sup>7</sup> Providers and Teens Communicating for Health. <http://www.wipatch.org/>

<sup>8</sup> (2014) Paving the road to good health: strategies for increasing Medicaid adolescent well care visits. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

<sup>9</sup> Adolescent Champion Model. University of Michigan Adolescent Health Initiative. <http://umhs-adolescenthealth.org/>

