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Positive Youth Development Assets as a Strength-Based Approach to Healthy Adolescents

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Abstract

The theoretical approach of Positive Youth Development Assets focuses on developmental assets that play a crucial role in the understanding of the whole person. According to the ecological approach of PYD, factors such as family support school climate, neighborhoods, communities, and the dispositions of adolescents to be more responsible, develop a sense of purpose, altruism, and commitment to education, are considered critical factors that help create a positive climate for adolescents to grow and flourish. This study aims to understand the role of the PYD framework in external and internal assets. This framework holistically saw adolescents, focusing on external and internal assets. External assets like Support, Empowerment, Boundaries, Expectations and Constructive Use of Time help adolescents create a climate that helps them feel supported and have a positive experience with people and other institutions. Internal assets are related to Commitment to learning, Positive values, Positive identity, and social competencies. According to the current theoretical perspectives, the PYD model seems to be a valid method to explore factors that affect the positive

development of adolescents and an excellent approach to building intervention programs for them.

Keywords: Adolescents, internal assets, external assets, theoretical perspectives, review

Introduction

Every parent aims to raise healthy, happy, and strong children. This is not just a parenting goal but also a goal for all societies. According to Seligman (2022), through the ages, conceptualizing and cultivating character strengths have been among the main interests of philosophers, educators, and theologians. However, with but a few exceptions, these topics have been neglected by psychologists. This situation is now changing under psychology, which proposes that the good life can be encouraged by identifying individual strengths of character and fostering them (Seligman, 2022). Every child is unique with his/her talents, strong points, and weak points. The field of positive youth development focuses on every child's unique talent, strengths, interests, and future potential (Tejada-Gallardo, Blasco-Belled, & Alsinet, 2022). Positive youth development (PYD) refers to a broad approach that aims to build the competencies, skills, and abilities of youth that they need to grow and flourish throughout life (Bowers, Larson, & Parry, 2021). PYD is both a philosophy and an approach to adolescent development. As a philosophy, PYD views youth as precious assets to be nurtured and developed rather than as problems to be solved. Multiple factors influence how young people develop. Positive youth development (PYD) engages youth, along with their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential (Holt et al., 2017; Shek, & Chai, 2020).

With the emergence of the positive youth development approach, there is an evolving consensus that adolescent problem behaviors could be reduced by promoting young

people's psychosocial competencies (Chi, Liu, Huang, Cui & Lin, 2020; Zhu, & Shek, 2020), character (Dvorsky et al., 2019) and thriving strength (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Indeed, there is research finding demonstrating that youth possessing the thriving characteristics of competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring, were likely to have lower levels of depression, delinquency, and substance abuse (Sheehan et al., 2022). Coincident with the resilience approach these findings showed that adolescents have the potential to develop resilience which is a vital protective factor (Urke, Holsen & Larsen, 2021; Wen, Ye, Lin & Wang, 2022).

This article aims, through a descriptive literature review to highlight the importance of the 40 developmental assets for empowering children with the necessary capacities to fully develop their personality and to build resilience.

The Positive Youth Development Approach

Positive Youth Development represents a sea of change in psychological theory and research (Tirrell et al., 2022) that focus on a kind of development that fosters positive outcomes; the nature of the youth (with emphasis on the inherent capacity of all youth for positive growth and development) and the identification of his/her developmental strengths (i.e., positive attitudes, skills, competencies, and values that enhance healthy developmental trajectories); and developmental contexts, i.e., interactions with family, school, neighborhood, and societal contexts that provide support, opportunities, and resources (Asheer, Keating, & Crowley & Zief, 2020). The field of positive youth development (PYD) focuses on each child's unique talents, strengths, interests, and future potential. This approach does not focus on problems that some youth encounter while growing up, such as learning disabilities and substance abuse. In these latter models, youth is seen as a period fraught with hazards, and some young people are seen as potential problems that must be

straightened out. From the perspectives of many child psychologists, it seems that the very processes of living and growing place children at risk and that children are easily wounded by these challenges (Woodgate, & Sigurdson, 2015).

A problem-centered vision of youth has dominated most of the professional fields charged with raising the young. PYD is a new approach with a more affirmative and welcoming vision for young people. This approach sees young people as resources rather than problems. PYD emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people, including the most disadvantaged and those with the most troubled histories. It begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute to the world (Gomez-Baya et al., 2022).

The concept of Developmental Assets

According to Benson (2007), developmental assets represent a theoretical construct identifying a wide range of environmental and interpersonal strengths, known to enhance educational and health outcomes for children and adolescents (Benson, 2007).

Developmental asset theory includes another dynamic feature of the organism that is consonant with the process of self-organization: the concept of how persons act in their contexts. Indeed, one of the core tenets of developmental systems theory is the bidirectional nature of influence. The “individual is both the active producer and the product of his or her ontogeny...” (Brandtstädter, 1998, p 78). Action theories of human development seek to explain these dual developmental regulation processes of the action of contexts on individuals and the action of individuals on their contexts. This process by which organisms engage, interact with, and alter their developmental contexts (e.g., peer group, family, school, and neighborhood) is not only a pivotal theoretical notion for positive youth development, but also “the essential intellectual challenge for

developmental science” (Lerner & Lerner, 2013, p. 228; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010, p 32).

During adolescence, the developmental asset theory argues that adolescents bring energy to their relational and social world. Their activity as “co-produces” of their development is guided by three intertwined processes, each of which is rooted in theoretical traditions from within the broader “family” of developmental systems theories (Pressfield, Campa, & Ramstrom Kabadi & Lopez, 2020; Mueller, 2014). Indeed, we think of these three as prime features of the “engine” of development. In combination, the three make possible a purposeful search for positive (that is developmentally rich) contexts.

Brandtstädter’s action theory of development emphasizes the role of intentionality in guiding and regulating one’s engagement with social and symbolic environments. He assumes that persons reflect on, learns from, and use feedback from their social engagements, creating behavioral intentions that guide subsequent behavior. While this proposed dynamic has currency across the lifespan, it is a hallmark of adolescence. These dynamics help frame several strategies and tactical issues germane to community life. These include how well communities provide meaningful opportunities for optimization and how well communities make it possible for youth to create optimization opportunities. A positive development, then, occurs in the fusion of an active, engaged, and competent person with receptive, supportive, and nurturing ecologies. In our terms, this is the fusion of external (i.e., ecological) assets and internal assets. The consequences of these balanced interactions, particularly when they are frequent and sustained, can be seen at both individual and social levels. Among these hypotheses is the advancement of individual thriving and the reduction of health-compromising behaviors (Benson, 2007; Hurtado Choque et al., 2022). As described in a series of publications (Andrade et al., 2018; Cox et

al., 2022; Kabir, Doku, & Wium, 2021) the asset framework establishes a set of developmental experiences and supports hypothesized to have import for all young people during the second decade of life. Because the developmental asset is composed of 40 assets that are placed in categories that have conceptual integrity and can be described easily to the residents of a community. They are grouped into 20 external assets (i.e., environmental, contextual, and relational features of socializing systems) and 20 internal assets (i.e., skills, competencies, and commitments). The external assets include four categories: (a) support, (b) empowerment, (c) boundaries and expectations, and (d) constructive use of time. The internal assets are also placed into four categories: (a) commitment to learning, (b) positive values, (c) social competencies, and (d) positive identity. The scientific foundations for the eight categories and each of the 40 assets are described in more detail in Scales and Leffert (Pereira, & Freire, 2021).

According to Scales, extensive scientific literature spanning hundreds of studies over the past two decades demonstrates that each of the assets has been found to correlate with or contribute to one or more of three desirable developmental outcomes for both adolescents and preadolescents (Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blith, 2000):

- (a) Prevention of high-risk behaviors
- (b) Promotion of thriving, and
- (c) Strengthening of resilience.

Another change brought about by the PYD approach is the way child-community interaction is understood. The PYD approach considers the whole community about the whole child rather than privileging any interaction or capacity.

Research in the PYD developmental tradition has taken seriously the role of moral and religious beliefs in shaping children's identities (Hammond et al., 2022). Research has demonstrated a

strong relationship between religious faith and at-risk children staying out of trouble. When a person decides that the kind of person he or she is or wants to be is dependent upon a moral belief (as opposed to such things as being athletic or smart), he or she has formed the basis of a moral identity, which is just one component of personal identity. Moral identity often takes shape in late childhood with a gradual increase in the use of moral terms to describe the self.

Discussion

The qualitative methodology, used in the current article, through descriptive literature review, aims to better understand and explain positive youth development as a strength-based approach to competence skills development. Based on all above, positive youth development programs are approaches that seek to achieve one or more of the following objectives:

Promote bonding

Bonding is the emotional attachment and commitment a child makes to social relationships in the family, peer group, school, community, or culture. Child development studies frequently describe bonding and attachment processes as internal working models for how a child forms a social connection with others. Strategies to promote positive bonding combined with the development of skills have proven to be an effective intervention for adolescents at risk for antisocial behaviors and factor risk (Moussavi et al., 2021)

Foster resilience

Resilience is an individual's capacity for adapting to change and stressful events in healthy and flexible ways. Resilience has been identified in research studies as a characteristic of youth who when exposed to multiple risk factors, show successful

responses to challenges and use this learning to achieve successful outcomes (Qi, Shi, & Cui, 2022).

Promote social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence
The positive youth development construct of competence covers five areas of youth functioning, including social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competencies. The multiple dimensions of competence began to be recognized in the past two decades (Souverein, Mulder, van Domburg, Adriaanse & Popma, 2022). More recently, Telzer, and colleagues (2018) urged that competence should be viewed and measured in research studies as a developmental outcome. While the enhancement of competence can help to prevent other negative outcomes (Lippold, Hussong, Fosco & Ram, 2018), competence can be specified and measured as an important outcome itself, indicative of positive development. In recent years, many competence promotion efforts have sought to develop skills to integrate feelings (emotional competence) with thinking (cognitive competence) and actions (behavioral competence) to help the child achieve specific goals (Hochgraf, Fosco, Lanza & McHale, 2021).

Foster self-determination

Self-determination is the ability to think for oneself and to act consistently with that thought. Tadesse and colleagues (2022) defined self-determination as the ability to chart one's course.

Foster spirituality

Spirituality is defined here as "relating to, consisting of, or having the nature of spirit; concerned with or affecting the soul; of, from, or relating to God; of or belonging to a church or religion" (Settipani et al., 2019). The construct of spirituality has been associated in some research with the development of a youth's moral reasoning, moral commitment, or belief in the

moral order (Barnes, Gilbertson, & Chatterjee, 2018; Okpalauwaekwe, Ballantyne, Tunison & Ramsden, 2022).

Foster self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the perception that one can achieve desired goals through one's actions. Defined as beliefs function and important to set of proximal determination of human motivation, affect, and action this aspect is a main element of self-concept. Others have documented that the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goals people set for themselves and the firmer their commitment to them (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2020).

Foster clear and positive identity

A clear and positive identity is the internal organization of a coherent sense of self. The construct is associated with the theory of identity development emerging from studies of how children establish their identities across different social contexts, cultural groups, and genders. Identity is viewed as a "self-structure," an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history, which is shaped by the child's navigation of normal crises or challenges at each stage of development (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Mastrotheodoros, Kornienko, Umaña-Taylor & Motti-Stefanidi, 2021).

Foster belief in the future

Belief in the future is the internalization of hope and optimism about possible outcomes. Research demonstrates that positive future expectations predict better social and emotional adjustment in school and a stronger internal locus of control while acting as a protective factor in reducing the negative effects of high stress on self-rated competence (Dost-Gözkan, Kozina, Stefenel & Wium, 2021).

Provide recognition for positive behavior

Recognition for positive involvement is the positive response of those in the social environment to desired behaviors by youth. Reinforcement affects an individual's motivation to engage in similar behavior in the future. Social reinforcers have major effects on behavior. These social reinforcers can come from the peer group, family, school, or community (LeBlanc, & Loyd, 2022).

Provide opportunities for prosocial involvement

Opportunity for prosocial involvement is the presentation of events and activities across different social environments that encourage youth to participate in prosocial actions. For a child to acquire key interpersonal skills in early development, positive opportunities for interaction and participation must be available (Rubin, Scanlon, Cechony & Chen, 2021). In adolescence, youth must have the opportunity to interact with positively oriented peers, and involve in roles in which they can contribute to the group, whether family, school, neighborhood, peer group, or larger community (Shek, Leung, Dou & Zhu, 2022).

Foster prosocial norms

Programs that foster prosocial norms seek to encourage youth to adopt healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior through a range of approaches (Aceves et al., 2020).

Conclusion

According to Benson (2007), the health and well-being of children and adolescents require as much attention to promoting developmental strengths as to directly combating risks, environmental threats, and social dysfunctions that obstruct human development. There is evidence that character strengths

play important role in positive youth development. Character-based strengths can be cultivated and strengthened by appropriate parenting, schooling, and healthy communities. In the children/youth people's life, many problems co-occur, so interventions that aim a broader spectrum, therefore have a broad effect. Programs that promote wellness and building strengths among youth may be a way not only to prevent disorders or specific deviant behaviors but also to build emotionally healthy people that overcome more easily life challenges. According to Cox (2022), Dost-Gözkan (2021), Townsend, (2020), and Tirrell, (2022), programs that promote wellness and building strengths such as character strengths among youth, and sustain it across the life span, may pay much greater dividends, not only preventing the short run specific disorders but also building in the long run moral, healthy, and happy people who can overcome challenges. Having certain strengths may directly influence children's use of effective coping strategies, or they may make youth more effective in enacting strategies. As Seligman (2002) implied, positive youth development may be facilitated when institutions, traits (e.g., character strengths), and subjective experiences (e.g., happiness) are in alignment. Positive institutions enable positive traits, which in turn enable positive subjective experiences (Bowers et al., 2021).

We cannot clear all the challenges and problems from our children's life path, but we can make them more resilient and capable of confronting and overcoming them.

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