How Youth Contribute to Healthy Communities:

Finding and Building on Young People's Strengths

Working with youth can be both challenging and rewarding. Often, programs and community efforts focus on young people's challenging or risky behaviors. We forget that youth can be valuable assets to our communities. Youth have the potential to make a positive contribution to the community when they are given the support, guidance, and opportunities to use and strengthen their skills. People who work with youth need to learn to recognize their talents and assets and build on those qualities to improve outcomes for youth as well as the community. This publication can help you connect young people's positive assets to programming methods, goals, and outcomes.

The Positive Youth Development Approach

Positive youth development is an approach that adults can use when working with adolescents to help create opportunities for healthy growth and development. It is different than other approaches to working with youth because it focuses on their positive qualities, or assets, rather than on how they might add risks to the community.

These assets can be either internal or external. Internal assets are qualities a young person has such as skills and ideas. External assets are more related to relationships and experiences. Mentors can foster both types of assets to help youth make positive contributions to their communities and show the community their potential to be beneficial and successful. The more assets a young person has, the more likely he or she is to have positive outcomes and fewer risky behaviors.

Developmental Assets of Youth

External	Internal
Support: *positive communication and care from family, school, or neighbors*	Commitment to learning: *motivation and caring about doing well; reading and doing homework*
Empowerment: *given useful roles and feelings of safety*	Positive values: *showing honesty and responsibility; caring for others*
Boundaries and expectations: *clear rules and consequences; positive behaviors are modeled*	Social competences: *good friendship and decision-making skills; comfortable with different people*
Constructive use of time: *involvement in structured activities like sports, arts, or religious activities*	Positive identity: *high self-esteem and positive feelings about the future*

Positive Youth Development Environment

To help youth learn to use their assets to play a positive role in the community, programs should focus on building the "five Cs" of positive youth development:

1. competence
2. confidence
3. character
4. connection
5. caring

Competence
- Model decision-making skills, such as listing pros and cons and thinking about consequences.
- Give youth opportunities to practice making daily choices such as deciding what to eat or planning constructive activities for the day.

Confidence
- Let youth teach a skill or talk about something important to them in front of others.
- Empower youth by verbally recognizing things they do well, whether they are leading a group activity or using good communication with others.

Character
- Allow youth to practice responsibility by designating leadership roles for group projects.
- Guide youth in recognizing how their actions have helped someone else or how they can help find a solution to a problem.

Connection
- Create group activities where youth have to work together or with a mentor to complete a task, learning from each other's ideas.
- Use volunteering projects to help youth interact with others who are different from themselves.

Caring
- Promote positive values by creating opportunities for youth to practice empathy and caring through role-playing or volunteer opportunities.
- Teach youth to practice self-care and set healthy boundaries for themselves and others. For example, guide them in practicing telling someone how they feel or that something is bothering them.

Outcomes

Expanding young people's skills and building their confidence and competence can lead to higher GPAs, less aggression and violence, higher life satisfaction, better mental health, and fewer risky behaviors. When young people pair their assets with supportive resources and opportunities to interact with others, they make positive contributions to their communities. Youth can connect with diverse groups of people in their communities through volunteering and outreach. This gives them a better understanding of how a community is made up of people with different beliefs and needs.

As youth use their assets in productive ways to interact with others, they grow in their ability to recognize ways they can contribute to their environment and make a difference. Youth who have confidence in their abilities and know how to turn their ideas into plans can become productive leaders who initiate action to solve problems in their communities. Ultimately, programs with a positive youth development approach build the five Cs of competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring, which can lead to a sixth C—contribution to self, family, community, and institutions of civil society.

Resources

youth.gov
https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Family and Youth Services Bureau
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/positive-youth-development

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Population Affairs
https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/positive-youth-development/index.html

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