

WHAT DO YOUTH NEED FOR POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT? (AND WHAT CAN 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT DO TO HELP THEM GET IT!)

Part I of a Series:

THE ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: Thoughts from the Research Literature and the Experiential Knowledge of 4-H Youth Development Professionals

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Preface:

The goal of Wisconsin's 4-H Youth Development Program is to mobilize our own resources and those of others across the state so to facilitate the positive development of all young people. In an upcoming series of reports, we will be providing proven strategies for reaching this aim. The strategies will be research-based, they will be practical, and they will be offered with a keen understanding of the strengths and challenges that exist in the settings where we work.

This first report, *The Essential Experiences of Youth Development: Thoughts from the Research Literature and the Experiential Knowledge of 4-H Youth Development Professionals*, provides the foundation for all of the reports to follow. In this report, we highlight research findings from the literature and our own experience as youth and community workers in Wisconsin. Our assumption is simple: If we, as an organization, are unable to articulate the developmental experiences that youth need on a day-to-day basis, it will be impossible for us to be a strong and effective support and ally for youth. We will be unable to meet our organizational goals, and youth will suffer.

In subsequent reports over the next year, we will present additional analysis of experiential data from the February conference. In addition we will provide practical lessons for 4-H Youth Development in Wisconsin, from exploring our "niche" in the community, to making judgements about our priorities and how we say "yes" or "no" to different opportunities. Useful, research-based models of best practice for youth development will be described. We will describe current and planned efforts in Wisconsin to promote these best practices, not only in 4-H Youth Development Programs, but throughout the state in collaboration with other youth organizations. The reports will be clear and concise about the challenges and barriers we face, and we will be honest and direct about the hard work and effort it will take to achieve our goals.

THE ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: Thoughts from the Research Literature and the Experiential Knowledge of 4-H Youth Development Professionals

Let's start with perhaps the most basic question: What is "effective youth development programming"? This question has been asked and answered many times in Wisconsin. It is, and should be, an ongoing conversation among youth workers. This report seeks to provide some useful perspective. Two foci provide a starting point:

- The focus of youth development programming is on promotion of positive youth outcomes - not the prevention of problems or the simple dissemination of new knowledge. The research is clear: youth development programming is the most effective strategy of prevention and of instruction for the long-term well being of young people. When young people achieve a sense of emotional health (security, belonging, identity), and acquire a full range of competencies (social, civic, cultural, academic), then they are less likely to engage in problem behaviors *and* are more likely to do well in school and contribute to their families and communities (Dryness, 1990; Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990; Zeldin, Kimball, and Price, 1995).
- The primary focus of youth development programming is on the provision of "essential" developmental experiences to young people, not simply the delivery of learning or recreational activities. Again, the research is clear – the "quality of the experience" is often more influential than the "content that is taught," when it comes to promoting youth development. It is not what we do; it is how (and how often we do it) that counts in the long run.

Effective youth development programming, therefore, is: (a) the intentional delivery of essential developmental experiences to young people, (b) with the aim being to help youth gain a sense of emotional health, along with the motivation and skill to engage and succeed in school, family and other community settings.

Effective youth development "programming," according to this definition, can occur in all settings where young people live their lives – schools, 4-H clubs, homes, groups homes, youth leadership programs and extracurricular activities.

ESSENTIAL DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES

What are the essential developmental experiences that promote the well being of young people? This is the crux of the matter, and we provide two answers for you in this report – the first answer from the research and evaluation literature, and the second answer from our own voices and experiences during the focus groups and the “technology of participation” process that occurred on the first day of our conference in February, 1999 in Stevens Point.

I. Promoting Positive Youth Development: Lessons from Research and Evaluation

From 1993 to 1995, a nationwide project was launched to answer the fundamental question of what day-to-day experiences are essential for a young person to pass successfully through adolescence into adulthood, allowing the young person to acquire desirable (positive) behaviors, attitudes and skills. The answer, based on evidence from the work of numerous research roundtables, a review of 12 youth-focused task forces and synthesis reports, and a review of more than 200 research studies (see Zeldin and Price, 1995) is simple: Young people need access to safe places, challenging experiences, and caring people on a daily basis.

A more elaborate answer from the research specifies the *opportunities and supports* that adolescents need. Figure 1 identifies these essential experiences. In brief, they are:

- The opportunity to explore and reflect on one’s ideas and choices; to express oneself and one’s vision through different mediums; to be a valued and active group member; to contribute to a community of people; and to experience and learn employment skills.
- The support that comes from being involved in caring relationships with adults and community-wide celebrations, having multiple chances to succeed, being challenged and expected to reach one’s potential, and being offered the structure and resources necessary to excel.

It is noteworthy that these findings have been replicated in more recent works. For example, the American Youth Policy Forum (1997) and Roth and Brooks-Gunn (1998) have reviewed the evaluations that have been conducted on effective youth development programs and initiatives. Their bottom line is worth repeating: it is the quality of the day-to-day experiences, not the content or name of an activity, that leads to positive youth outcomes!

These essential experiences are called “opportunities” and “supports.”

Figure 1.

**OPPORTUNITIES AND SUPPORTS
FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:
A Summary of the Research Literature**

Part One:

Youth need challenging opportunities that are perceived as relevant.

A. Youth need opportunities for self-directed and active learning.

Opportunities for Exploration and Reflection

- A chance to learn and practice new skills
- Freedom to critically test, explore, discuss and reflect on one's ideas and choices

Opportunities for Expression and Creativity

- A chance to express ideas and visions through different mediums (voice, arts, writing, action)
- A chance to have one's voice heard and taken seriously by others

B. Youth need opportunities for new roles and responsibilities.

Opportunities for Group Membership

- A chance to be a group member by fully taking on the responsibilities of membership through contributing, leading or actively participating
- A chance to have a place to go where one feels important

Opportunities for Contribution and Service

- A chance to volunteer one's time, interest or skill in order to have a positive influence on other persons in need
- A chance to contribute to a community of people in positive ways to a self-selected social cause

Opportunities for Part-time Employment

- A chance to earn income and be part of the work force
- A chance to learn what it means to be a professional, and to practice and develop appropriate knowledge and skills

Part Two:

Youth need ongoing supports that are present in the context of families, institutions and peer groups.

A. Youth need emotional support.

Nurturance and Friendship

- Caring relationships with adults and peers
- Love, friendship and affirmation from others
- Participation in collective celebrations

Emotional Safety

- Freedom to experience, explore and reflect on a full range of emotions from joy to grief
- Multiple opportunities to succeed and learn from mistakes

B. Youth need motivational support.

High Expectations

- To be expected to reach one's potential and to receive the opportunities, encouragement and rewards necessary to meet high expectations

Standards and Boundaries

- Clear messages regarding rules, norms and discipline
- Opportunities to discuss and modify boundaries as appropriate

C. Youth need strategic support.

Guidance and Decision Making

- Assistance in assessing options
- To be involved in relationships characterized by coaching, feedback and discussion

Access to Resources

- Connections to people and social networks who are able and willing to provide access to necessary resources

II. Promoting Positive Youth Development: Lessons from the Experiential Knowledge of Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development Professionals

On February 2 and 3, 1999, 4-H Youth Development professionals from across Wisconsin worked together to identify essential experiences of youth development. It was an exciting opportunity for everyone to be in one room exploring and learning together. In an effort to structure our discussions a nominal group process called the “Technology of Participation” (TOP) was used. On the first day of the conference this process was used to identify essential day-to-day needs of youth. In order to make the process manageable everyone was assigned to one of nine small groups. Within these groups everyone went through the following procedure:

Earlier in the day everyone was asked to identify and write down eight essential needs of youth on a piece of paper. Then after having been assigned to a group individuals were again asked to complete writing down their ideas. Next individuals met in clusters of three to discuss what they had identified and to select a total of 12 ideas to share with their group. (Once again, in order to make this entire process manageable everyone was assigned to nine small groups that worked through this same TOP process.) The first four of each group’s needs were put on a board and grouped together with “like” items. Eventually all 12 needs (for a total of 40) from each of the groups were posted and organized into categories which, after a period of discussion and reflection, were given titles. The total group continued to shuffle needs until satisfied that they were listed under the appropriate category. Appendix A contains the results from this process for each of the nine groups.

Commonalities and Differences

Commonalities

Regardless of which of the nine groups 4-H Youth Development professionals belonged to, they identified similar “essential needs of youth.” Although the wording varied between groups two essential elements emerged. They can be summarized as:

- Opportunities for challenges, choices and successful experiences (expectations, learning and growth opportunities); and
- Affirmation (positive interaction with peers and adults, respect, belonging, acceptance).

As discussed in an earlier section of this paper the two essential elements that adolescents need, according to the research literature, are also *opportunities and supports*. It is heartening that our experiences as 4-H Youth Development professionals identified these same elements, irrespective of which small group we were part of.

As mentioned above the wording related to “opportunities” and “affirmation” varied somewhat from group to group, however these differences in wording did not point out differences between the groups as much as they tended to bring out the many similarities of these two essential elements. For instance, the title “network of support”, from one of the nine groups, contains wording referring to the need for support from peers and adults.

(See Appendix A)

Other essential elements that received attention included respect, responsibility, and essential (basic) needs. This need, which was listed in six of the nine groups, seemed to be viewed from the standpoint of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In other words, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to address "higher level" needs if basic needs (food, shelter, safety, etc.) are not met.

Differences:

On the surface there do seem to be differences between the nine groups; however upon reading the wording beneath each of the titles it becomes evident that these "differences" are usually of wording rather than content. The identified areas of "opportunities" and "supports" are good examples of this. Many types of opportunities are identified within the nine groups, such as opportunities for learning, growth, to be creative, and achieve success. Each of these areas represents types of opportunities. The differences lie in the various emphases placed on each of these opportunities by each of the groups. Similarly, affirmation is referred to as belonging, acceptance, building positive connections, and support. Again the wording of these areas demonstrates similarity, while still pointing out the breadth of support elements that youth need for development.

Emerging Needs

Although there was much similarity in identified needs between groups, there were unique categories of need that emerged from this process. For instance, one of the small groups listed "spirituality" as an area of importance. Another group listed "predictability" which refers to understanding behavioral consequences, sense of control and consistency. This same group listed "self care" referring to physical exercise, spiritual wellness, and self-reflection. Similarly, another group listed "renewal" which was defined as the importance of physical and emotional support and the need for private time. Finally, 'environmental ethics' was listed as an important need in one of the groups.

Some Observations: Common Sense and Surprises About the Data

In reviewing both the research literature and the experiential knowledge of 4-H Youth Development professionals it becomes evident that both bodies of evidence solidly and clearly confirm each other.

Our experience as youth workers supports what the literature says regarding the kinds of opportunities and supports that youth need to develop and thrive. This consistency between the research and experiential knowledge is good.

Some Surprises and Challenges

As we worked together to discuss what youth need and how we are best prepared to respond programmatically, frequent mention was made of youths' need for creative expression through opportunities to participate in experiences and activities that involve music, visual arts, drama and creative writing. This points to some interesting challenges. Just as funding for school-based arts programming continues to be cut, 4-H is experiencing similar difficulties with specialist positions and programs in the arts. Clearly this is an area that merits further discussion and investigation if we hope to provide opportunities for meeting the creative needs of youth through arts-related experiences.

Further Challenges

Some of the things we identified as being important for youth may need to be examined in relation to other aspects of our program. "Leadership" and "leadership development" are good examples. 4-H has an excellent reputation for helping youth develop and practice leadership skills. The Technology of Participation process also affirms our belief that it is important for youth to learn to be "team players." Thus, it would be worthwhile to broaden our definition of leadership to include strategies for sharing the power and control for making leadership decisions in order to work more collaboratively and cooperatively with others.

It is also worth noting the number of references that were made to the importance of providing youth with opportunities for developing critical thinking skills through introspection and reflection. On the one hand we recognize the value of helping youth develop these skills, yet the majority of 4-H experiences and activities are activity driven. This would suggest that in order for youth to think and reflect on what their experiences are teaching them, the *learning* part of the Experiential Learning Model that is advocated in many 4-H publications needs to be as carefully designed as the *doing* part. In addition, we may need to broaden our understanding of what belonging to a group means for youth who are not by nature extroverts. Perhaps there is more we could be doing to respond to the needs and learning styles of youth who are less comfortable than their peers in large group settings.

III. Conclusions And Next Steps (Whose Business Is It, Anyway?)

It is not surprising that the answers are largely consistent. We know what it takes. The challenge is in designing and implementing programming that puts the research and our own wisdom into consistently high quality practice. Positive youth development for all young people is the goal of 4-H Youth Development as an organization. Whether we are supporting a community club, providing technical assistance to an after-school program, or mobilizing a community coalition, our aim is to promote the positive development of young people.

Youth development is everybody's business!

While the goal is straightforward, implementation is not. It is hard work to provide strong and legitimate developmental experiences to young people. We all know that. *We can not fool ourselves by saying, "We do that already all the time."* We know that, also. But fortunately, there are proven ways that we can work together - as a statewide organization and with our local collaborators - to conduct effective youth development programming.

The challenge to all of us in 4-H Youth Development is to review the research literature in Figure 1, to examine our own collective data in the Appendix, and ask ourselves three questions:

- 1) How can we incorporate these experiences – these opportunities and supports – into our programming?
- 2) How can we best teach others how to provide these experiences to the youth that they touch on a day-to-day basis?
- 3) How can we explain this to policy makers and others in our communities?

In the coming months, we will continue to build from the February, 1999, conference, by analyzing additional conference data and preparing resources to supplement the information in this report. The emphasis will be on providing practical models and practical advice. Key products will include:

1. "Best Practices" Checklist

A checklist to use when planning programs, activities and educational experiences in order to determine whether they will provide youth with opportunities and supports needed for positive development.

2. Tips and Strategies for Leader and Volunteer Training

Short, easy-to use-suggestions for how to incorporate youth development principles into on- going leader training and volunteer orientation programs.

3. Program Assessment and Priority Setting Guide

Based on criteria that reflects youth development principles, this resource will include concise, practical tools to help 4-H Youth Development professionals plan and review programs in order to set program priorities and articulate our "niche."

4. On-going Learning Communities

Information and technical support for 4-H Youth Development educators to mobilize and provide technical assistance to each other, and to other youth organizations in their counties.

We look forward to your comments on this series, and hope it will be useful to you.

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