

Features of Positive Youth Development Settings

	Descriptors	Opposite Poles
Physical and Psychological Safety	Safe and health-promoting facilities; and practices that increase safe peer group interaction and decrease unsafe or confrontational peer interactions.	Physical and health dangers; fear; feeling of insecurity; sexual and physical harassment; and verbal abuse.
Appropriate Structure	Limit setting; clear and consistent rules and expectations; firm-enough control; continuity and predictability; clear boundaries; and age appropriate monitoring.	Chaotic; disorganized; laissez-faire; rigid; over controlled; and autocratic.
Supportive Relationships	Warmth; closeness; connectedness; good communication; caring; support; guidance; secure attachment; and responsiveness.	Cold; distant, over controlling; ambiguous support; untrustworthy; focused on winning; inattentive; unresponsive; and rejecting.
Opportunities to Belong	Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement, and integration; opportunities for sociocultural identity information; and support for cultural and bicultural competence.	Exclusion, marginalization; and inter-group conflict.
Positive Social Norms	Rules of behavior; expectations; injunctions; ways of doing things; values and morals; and obligations for service.	Normlessness; anomie; laissez-faire practices; antisocial and amoral norms; norms that encourage violence; reckless behavior; consumerism; poor health practices; and conformity.
Support for Efficacy and Mattering	Youth-based; empowerment practices that support autonomy; making a real difference in one's community; and being taken seriously. Practice that includes enabling, responsibility granting, and meaningful challenge. Practices that focus on improvement rather than on relative current performance levels.	Unchallenging; over controlling; disempowering, and disabling. Practices that undermine motivation and desire to learn, such as excessive focus on current relative performance level rather than on improvement.
Opportunities for Skill Building	Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn cultural literacies, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; and opportunities to develop social and cultural capital.	Practices that promote bad physical habits and habits of mind; and practices that undermine school and learning.
Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts	Concordance; coordination; and synergy among family, school, and community.	Discordance; lack of communication; and conflict.

National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002). Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer A. Gootman, eds. Board on Children, Youth and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

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Effect of Community on Youth

In its broadest sense, improving the environment for youth means strengthening the community—the human habitat. Urie Bronfenbrenner, Jim Garbarino, Moncrieff Cochran, William Lofquist, Peter Benson and many others have argued that a child's environment contributes heavily to his or her behavior and success in becoming a responsible adult. In a child's early years, his/her environment is largely limited to family, friends and often a day care setting. The effect of community is secondary; it is felt mainly through outside support – or lack of it – for the child's family. Do the child's parents have support systems when they need help? Is there good child care when parents are working? What does the community do to ensure this?

As the child gets older and becomes more mobile, the community environment affects him or her more directly. A school age child lives in three worlds—home, school and neighborhood, that together constitute the child's community environment. The school environment becomes critically important, as children function in it nearly every day. Beyond learning academic basics, they must learn and exercise social skills, develop networks, and make friends. By bringing many children together, the school provides a prime setting for children to begin building their own social networks.

The middle school child begins to function in the neighborhood as well, and working parents must think about what happens between the time school ends and the time they get home from work. Will the child be home alone? Watching television or surfing the internet? In an organized after school or sports program? On the street or elsewhere with other children? At this point the neighborhood environment begins to matter a great deal. Are there opportunities for healthy activities with adults and other youth? If so, are these accessible to all children or only some children?

When a child becomes an adolescent and enters high school, the neighborhood becomes still more important. During these years, children tend to “break away” from home in many ways. Establishing themselves in the neighborhood becomes an important and necessary developmental task. They must face profound questions such as, “Who am I?” “Do I matter?” “Where and with whom do I belong?” “Can I meet my own expectations?” “Do I have what it takes to gain respect from others?”

The struggle to answer these questions is one of the most critical tasks for adolescents. How they resolve it depends on the environment in which they live. Who is there for them to interact with? What opportunities are there for youth to make a difference (Do I matter?) What is available for them to belong to? What positive opportunities are there to prove themselves in a safe way? And who is available to help guide them through all this—particularly if they are not getting (or not accepting) effective guidance at home?