

Can Positive Youth Development Replace Problem-Specific Prevention?

By Sara Christensen

Why do some children successfully navigate adolescence, while others who are similarly situated adopt “risky” lifestyles, characterized by drug use, violence and other problems? This question is at the heart of most prevention efforts, driving much of the science and practice in the field. We all want children to grow into healthy, successful adults – free from harm, crisis or persistent problems – though we may not all agree about the best way to ensure they reach their full potential. Prevention practitioners are often characterized by their good intentions, but they also have a strong need and desire to be effective. Aiding us is a growing body of research, offering access to best practices and evidence-based programs and strategies. Our challenge, however, lies with deciphering which approaches and strategies are most appropriate and effective.

Historically, prevention efforts have been conducted in silos, with each discipline (substance abuse, violence, bullying, school failure, teen pregnancy, etc.) identifying and isolating the problem-specific factors that contribute to each behavior. Policy and practice then focuses exclusively on impacting those factors to reduce the risk of or to increase avoidance of that single behavior. Some practitioners view this approach as narrow and deficit-oriented, in that it puts the “problem” into the spotlight and aims to “fix” what’s “wrong” with youth.

Recent research has shown that there is a strong link between most problem behaviors, especially as they co-occur within a single child, indicating that there

are shared causal factors of “at-risk” behaviors.¹ Additional research indicates that resiliency (positive adaptation in spite of extreme stress) and the larger environment surrounding young people play a critical role in their development. In fact, “adolescents who spend time in communities that are rich in developmental opportunities . . . experience less risk and show evidence of higher rates of positive development.”² This, and similar research, has elicited a shift in thinking among some experts about how we in the prevention field address youth issues.

The resulting approach, positive youth development, “is an approach that goes beyond traditional prevention, intervention, and treatment of dangerous behaviors and problems. Instead of distinguishing between ‘youth at risk’ or ‘high-risk youth,’ (positive) youth development builds competence, involvement, and connections to the larger society for all young people.”³ The emphasis is placed on fully preparing young people to succeed in adulthood through a comprehensive, asset- or strength-based, holistic strategy, and identifying and addressing individual, family, peer and community factors. Simply put, the positive youth development approach focuses on healthy youth development and assisting youth in realizing their full potential, while traditional prevention efforts are more concerned with the reduction of specific, “at-risk” behaviors.

So, does this indicate that the positive youth development approach should replace the traditional prevention approaches to addressing youth issues and problem behaviors? While the positive youth development approach brings a new perspective to the field about the way we view and approach youth issues, it is not likely a silver bullet or be-all, end-all solution. “This approach is not viewed as replacing the focus on preventing problems, but rather creating a larger framework that promotes positive outcomes for all young people.”⁴ Youth will continue to face certain specific risks that can jeopardize their healthy development if not addressed, and therefore need reliable information, prevention, and perhaps intervention services for those behaviors that put them at risk.^{3,5}

The growing body of research in the field results in a

cumulative wealth of knowledge that can be collectively applied to practice.⁵ The purpose of new research is not to discredit or negate previous research or approaches (unless proven ineffective); it simply increases our ability and confidence to move science to practice, expanding our tool box of effective practices, policies and programs. Practitioners in the field can benefit from awareness and understanding of the various approaches to youth issues. Positive youth development and problem-specific prevention approaches are not incompatible. In fact, they are quite the opposite. They share similar goals, research bases, and practical applications. These approaches can and should converge at a local level for incorporation into a broader, more comprehensive community strategy to address youth issues.

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References

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