

The Value of Community Youth Development  
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It may seem trite and rather obvious to say that the community in which young people grow up has a tremendous effect on their success. It is, however, a more powerful influence than most even imagine. Recent research has determined numerous factors present in communities that can protect youth from the ravages of negative peer influences, poor parenting, failure in school and other risks to their long-term well being. Community-based youth programming falls into a category called non-formal education which supplements formal education provided by schools and informal education provided by families, friends and most of the media.

Young people are obviously greatly influenced by their families, friends and schools, but even when all of these influences are positive, much can be gained from additional experiences in community-based programs. This way of thinking is part of the youth development movement in recent years that has transitioned from seeing the purpose of youth programs to “keep kids out of trouble” to the recognition that all youth need opportunities to expand their horizons and that young people have tremendous potential to contribute to their communities right now. When there are problems in families, struggles in school and negative peer influences, the role of community programs takes on an even more significant role in protecting young people from risky behaviors and undesirable outcomes such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, lack of marketable skills and undeveloped potential.

Community-based youth programs such as 4-H, scouting, sports, faith-based programs and numerous others provide an arena in which youth can develop healthy relationships with caring adults, learn new and varied skills, exercise leadership and independence and provide service to their community. An important factor in many of these programs is the fact that adults are volunteering their time. It is powerful for a young person to know that an adult other

than their parents cares about them and is willing to devote valuable leisure time. This relationship with a caring adult may be the single most important factor that a program offers and can be achieved in any community in which adults are willing to spend productive time with their young people. Adults do not need a great deal of training or education or even much time. It is their presence and encouragement that young people need.

A variety of youth development frameworks have been created through research to identify important aspects of positive youth development programs. Some list a number of assets that can be enhanced in young people through participation in community youth programs, others describe the skills that can be gained through participation and one national study identified the eight elements essential to positive youth development. These eight have been synthesized into four elements or senses that young people need to possess – belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. They need to know they have a safe place to belong; that they are competent and possess useful skills; that they can influence their own and their community's present and future; and that they can derive great satisfaction from helping others.

A community that offers opportunities for many youth to acquire these senses can expect a valuable return on its investment in young people who provide service and leadership in the community now as well as throughout their lifetimes. In short, youth development is community development. Any community or neighborhood can make the decision to offer positive youth development programs. By partnering with their young people in organized programs, adults can decide that their community values its youth. Funding to support such programs is helpful and provides stability, but it is the people of a community that sustain these programs and bring about long-term results. It is the neighbors and friends who demonstrate that they care about their youth that make the real difference in the lives of young people and in the community.