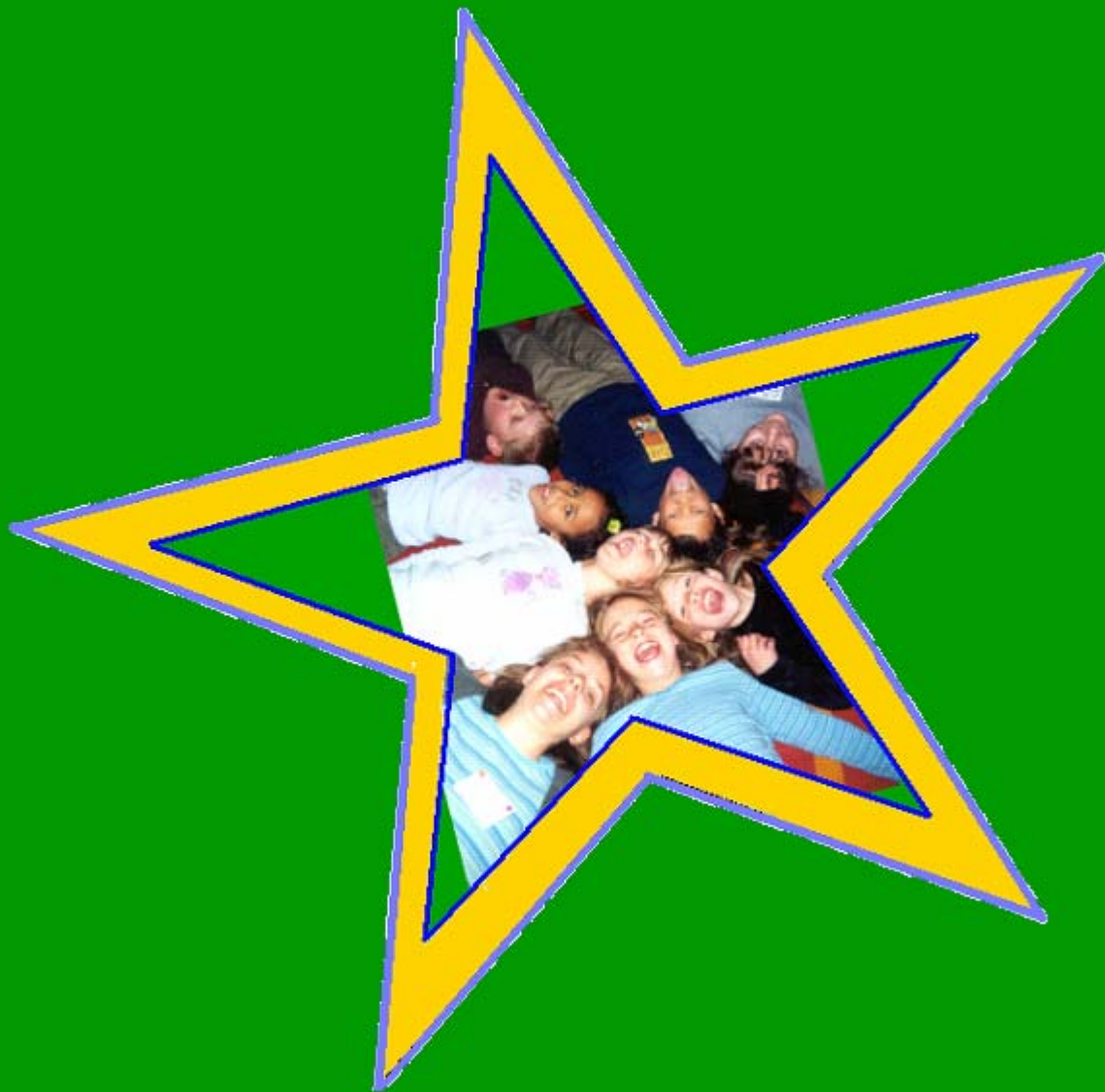


# Positive Youth Development – It's a Community Thing



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*Produced by MCCHD in support of the*  
Missoula Youth Development Network  
*and the*  
Missoula Forum for Children & Youth



All photos courtesy of the Flagship Program.

# Positive Youth Development – It's a Community Thing

## What Is Positive Youth Development?

Young people are not problems to be solved. Even kids with several strikes against them – poverty, problems with drug and alcohol use, bad grades – are more than the sum of their bad luck and poor choices. Everybody wins when a caring community devotes time and energy to helping its young people grow and develop. We think Missoula is this kind of caring community.

Positive youth development refers to activities and programs that nurture young people and help them build on their strengths. Positive youth development is *not* about fixing kids' problems. Rather, it helps young people find positive things to say *yes* to. Positive youth development happens anytime an individual or a program teaches young people skills, connects adults and young people in a meaningful way, involves young people in the life of the community, and gives them a sense of belonging and accomplishment.

Positive youth development happens in programs designed for youth. But more often it happens in less formal ways. Someone who takes care of neighborhood kids after school for a couple hours is promoting positive youth development. A garage owner who lets a youngster hang around the shop and learn about cars promotes positive youth development, too.

There are thousands of different ways to be involved in positive youth development. Almost everyone who has regular contact with young

## Positive Youth Development Happens in Many Ways, Many Places

- Mentors** — academic and nonacademic
- Community Service** — volunteer projects of all kinds, including formal and informal services to young children, older people, or any other part of the community
- Religious Communities** — youth groups, worship services, caring for other members
- Music** — lessons or performance
- Theater** — on- or off-stage involvement
- Dance**
- Visual Arts**
- Writing** — shared with others, with emphasis on the process
- Computers**
- Interpersonal Activities** — dispute resolution, personal growth, leadership programs
- Working with Animals** — learning to care for, train, breed, or work with animals
- Sports & Fitness** — team and individual sports, lessons, fitness classes
- Life-Long Learning Activities** — tutoring from adults, tutoring younger children, following up on interests through Parks & Recreation or adult education services
- Jobs** — when they involve adult interaction and learning new skills, and are balanced with the rest of the young person's life
- Clubs & Organizations** — Campfire, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H, special interest clubs, etc.



people contributes to positive youth development without knowing it. The key is the connection between the adult and the young person, and the learning and growing that happens.

In Missoula, there are many places that young people can find this kind of nurturing, and many adults who are willing to nurture young people. You are probably one of them. Each community has its own unique network of people, groups, churches, clubs, teachers, businesses, and agencies that help young people grow into competent adults. The nurturers might be piano teachers, soccer coaches, neighbors, Big Brothers and Sisters, church youth group leaders, teachers, or grandparents. Some are professional youth teachers and leaders, but many are not. All are community resources for youth – part of the community’s network to promote positive youth development.

When we speak of “prevention” and “youth development,” we must be articulate not just about what we are trying to prevent, but what we are trying to promote. Being problem-free is not the same as being fully prepared.

(Karen Pittman, Center for Youth Development Policy Research)



### Research Shows a Positive Difference

Young people naturally seek out ways to support their own development. The problem comes when the community doesn’t offer reliable, positive ways for all kids to meet their own development needs. When kids try to meet these needs on their own, many choose ways that become destructive to themselves and the community – for example, sexual activity, or peer activities that involve alcohol, other drugs, or violence.

Research shows that community youth development programs have a strong effect in helping young people avoid negative behaviors. More importantly, these programs help young people grow into strong, community-minded adults. This is true even among groups of young people who are considered “at risk” for a variety of reasons. In one recent study, youth involved in community-based organizations were 26% more likely to have received recognition for good grades than the average young American. They were also 20% more likely than the average youth to rate their chances of graduating from high school and

The following list includes assets that positive youth development programs foster. The items are excerpted from research done by the Search Institute, which conducted surveys of more than 100,000 young people in 213 U.S. towns and cities.

#### External Assets

- ♦ **Other adult relationships** — Young person receives support from three or more adults who are not his or her parents.
- ♦ **Community values youth** — Young people perceive that adults in the community value them.
- ♦ **Youth as resources** — Young people are given useful roles in the community.
- ♦ **Service to others** — Young person serves in the community one or more hours per week.
- ♦ **Adults role models** — Parents and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
- ♦ **High expectations** — Parents, teachers, and others encourage the young person to do well.
- ♦ **Creative activities** — Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
- ♦ **Youth programs** — Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school or in the community.
- ♦ **Religious community** — Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
- ♦ **Time at home** — Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.

#### Internal Assets

- ♦ **Motivation** — Young person is motivated to do well in school and other activities.
- ♦ **Caring** — Young person places high value on helping other people.
- ♦ **Interpersonal competence** — Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
- ♦ **Cultural competence** — Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people who are different in some way, including cultural, racial, and ethnic background.
- ♦ **Personal power** — Young person feels that he or she has control over things that happen.
- ♦ **Self-esteem** — Young person reports having a high self esteem.
- ♦ **Sense of purpose** — Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
- ♦ **Positive view of personal future** — Young person is optimistic about his or her future.

going to college as “very high.” They reported feeling significantly better about themselves and had a more positive feeling about their futures. (*Community Counts*, Milbrey W. McLaughlin, Public Education Network)

Research has also shown that even kids who have rocky young lives still most often grow up to be adults who do reasonably well. Those who succeed later in life tend to have had several “protective factors” (also called “assets”) in their young lives. These assets might come from outside the young person — from home, school, or the community. Or they may be internal — personal attributes that young people develop as they mature. (See box, following page.) These assets help young people be more resilient — to bounce back from problems and to cope better with difficulties. Communities have much to offer in developing the internal and external assets of young people.

## What Young People Need

We're used to thinking about what young people need in terms of school – kids need job skills, college prep courses, remedial English, smaller classes. Positive youth development happens in schools. But positive youth development doesn't focus on academics.

Positive youth development demands that we think broadly. Young people are doing an incredible amount of learning and stretching. They are growing intellectually, physically, socially, emotionally, and morally. Somehow they need to gain competence in all these areas over the course of their growing-up years.

Young people need to develop:

- ◆ A sense of competence and mastery
- ◆ A sense of usefulness
- ◆ A sense of belonging
- ◆ A sense of identity, self worth, and autonomy

The intellectual focus of the classroom meets only a small portion of young people's developmental needs. In most cases, families can't even meet all these needs by themselves. Growing up means trying to find a place for yourself in the wider world of the community. And the community will help meet young people's developmental needs – intentionally or not, ready or not.



## Putting the Positive in Youth Development

Positive youth development doesn't just happen. It isn't just a matter of opening the gym or the basement recreation room to give young people a place to go. That may be better than having no youth activities at all – but not much.

Researchers have searched for especially vibrant, effective, and popular youth development programs. Despite being in very different settings and serving different populations, the programs have many core similarities. The strategies and qualities they share are also apply to informal positive youth development efforts.

- ◆ Positive youth development happens in *intentional learning environments*. The activities focus on specific interests or skills – rock climbing, community service, woodworking, fitness, singing, chess, starting a small business, computers, you name it. The teachers — informal or formal — are high quality and dynamic. The adults also consciously work in life lessons – such as research before staging a play, sportsmanship on and off the playing field, how to care for tools or animals, or appropriate manners at a restaurant.
- ◆ Positive youth development happens when activities are *youth-centered and flexible*. Programs are based on the specific needs, skills, and interests of the youth they serve. They take into account the cultural and gender make-up of the group. Informal youth development activities follow the lead of young people to a great extent and help them take responsibility for their own growth. No matter what the setting, young people have a real voice.

Communities lose out when they neglect the resources that young people have to offer.

They lose out when they act condescendingly toward youth, or treat them as token participants. Communities gain when youth learn what it means to be members of ‘the village,’ to be citizens.

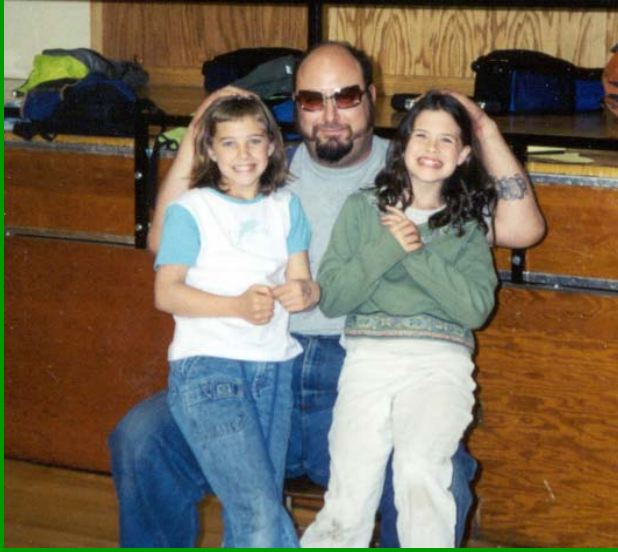
*(What Works: Promoting Positive Youth Development in Your Community, Vermont Agency of Human Services)*



Adults listen carefully and without judgment. In organized activities, young people plan fund-raising, help decide how to spend the budget, help set and enforce the rules, and take an active part in almost all aspects of the organization.

- ◆ Positive youth development gives kids *caring places*. Good youth activities often give young people a second home. Young people feel welcome, like they belong. They feel safe there, partly because there are clear rules and expectations. They have trusting relationships and unconditional support. They get individual attention and have strong relationships with one or more adults, who act as teachers, mentors, and friends.

- ◆ Positive youth development is guided by *passionate, consistent adults*. Kids have the adults’ phone numbers and know they can be depended on to help in a time of need. If the activity is part of a formal program, there are low rates of staff turnover. Often, the programs or informal activities are centered around



an especially dynamic adult with a passion for the subject, young people, or both.

♦ Positive youth development activities most often ***create something***. The creation might be a dance recital, a web site, a rebuilt engine, regular visits to shut-in elderly people, a baseball game, a vegetable garden, or a community clean-up day. Whatever it is, young people are involved in all parts of the process. At many stages in this process, young people get and give feedback and assessment. They get support and coaching from the adults and a response from some part of the community. Built into effective activities is the chance for self-reflection and reviews from peers or mentors. The idea is not to judge, but to

strive for excellence, and to help young people think deeply about the project and their contributions.

- ♦ Positive youth development is ***long-term***. Activities aren't designed as stopgap measures to fit short-term needs.
- ♦ Positive youth development ***does not attempt to address specific problems***, such as alcohol or drug abuse.

In short, positive youth development programs address young people's need to learn, to belong, to be useful, and to form a strong sense of self.

### It's Up to Us

Positive youth development is really a measure of the community as a whole. Positive youth development works best when it includes a deliberate community strategy to nurture and support young people. Ideally, programs throughout a community are intertwined and cooperative, providing lots of different activities for all ages, interests, and abilities.

As important as the formal programs are the informal networks of people who interact with kids. It is crucial that the community as a whole share a belief that its young people are important and deserving of time and attention. The community needs to expect much from its young people and be willing to help them succeed.

Missoula is doing a good job of promoting positive youth development. We're all proud to be part of a community that values young people. Our challenge is to do even better.

In addition to saying 'no' to delinquency, to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, to violence and other harmful behaviors, youth need to say 'yes' to connection, competence, character, and a sure sense of who they are.

(*What Works: Promoting Positive Youth Development in Your Community*, Vermont Agency of Human Services)

# Positive Youth Development – It’s a Community Thing



## Resources

### *In Missoula*

Flagship Program, Rosie Buzzas  
Missoula Forum for Children & Youth, Jeanne Koester  
MCCHD, Health Promotion Division, Greg Oliver, 523-2886

### *On the Internet*

Missoula Forum for Children and Youth, [www.missoulaforum.org](http://www.missoulaforum.org)  
National Youth Development Information Center, [www.nydic.org](http://www.nydic.org)  
Search Institute, [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)  
Resiliency in Action, [www.resiliency.com](http://www.resiliency.com)

### *Publications used to write this report:*

*Community Counts: How Youth Organizations Matter for Youth Development.* M. McLaughlin. Published by Public Education Network. 2000.

*What Works: Promoting Positive Youth Development in Your Community.* Published by Vermont Agency of Human Services, Planning Division. February 2000.

“Vibrancy: Core Vitamins of Positive Youth Development.” Kirk Astroth, MSU Extension