

# What Is Positive Youth Development?

By  
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This article explores the recent approach to youth research and practice that has been called *positive youth development*. The author makes the case that the approach grew out of dissatisfaction with a predominant view that underestimated the true capacities of young people by focusing on their deficits rather than their developmental potentials. The article examines three areas of research that have been transformed by the positive youth approach: the nature of the child; the interaction between the child and the community; and moral growth. It concludes with the point that *positive youth development* does not simply mean an examination of anything that appears to be beneficial for young people. Rather, it is an approach with strong defining assumptions about what is important to look at if we are to accurately capture the full potential of all young people to learn and thrive in the diverse settings where they live.

*Keywords:* identity; resilience; moral emotion; community-child relations

Every child has talents, strengths, and interests that offer the child potential for a bright future. The field of *positive youth development* focuses on each and every child's unique talents, strengths, interests, and future potential.

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Positive youth development contrasts with approaches that have focused on problems that some young people encounter while growing up—problems such as learning disabilities; affective disorders; antisocial conduct; low motivation and achievement; drinking, drug use, or smoking; psychosocial crises triggered by maturational episodes such as puberty; and risks of neglect, abuse, and economic deprivation that plague certain populations. Models of youth that focus on such problems have long held sway in the child care professions, the mass media, and the public mind. In such models, youth is seen as a period fraught with hazards, and many young people are seen as potential problems that must be straightened out before they can do serious harm to themselves or to others. This problem-centered vision of youth has dominated most of the professional fields charged with raising the young.

In education and pediatric medicine, for example, a huge share of resources has been directed to remediating the incapacities of young people with syndromes such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. In child psychology, intense attention has been directed to self-esteem deficits, especially among girls; to damage created by childhood traumata such as poverty, abuse, and early separation; and to destructive patterns such as violence and aggression. Phrases such as “the at-risk child,” “the learning-disabled child,” “the juvenile delinquent,” “the bully,” “the man girl,” and even “the super-predator” have filled professional journals as well as the popular press. The old suspicion that there are bad seeds, or (switching metaphors) that there are rotten apples that will spoil the barrel if not removed in time, has been kept alive in the guise of scientific theories that propose a genetic determinism for youth crime. The job of youth professionals has been seen to be identifying the problem early enough to defray and then patch up the damage.

This focus on problems and deficits is part of a mental-health model left over from the work of child psychoanalysts such as Fritz Redl (Redl and Wineman 1951). It is also drawn from a criminal-justice model that has stressed punishment over prevention. One of the legacies of this problem-youth tradition has been its influence on the way young people have been portrayed in the mass culture and, as a consequence, in the popular mind.

It is well-known that the media portray young people in a consistently negative fashion. When adolescents appear on local television news, it is often in the guise of a criminal or other kind of miscreant. The following is a release titled “The Media Watches Kids,” from The Communitarian Network Update of December 1, 2000. The release cited some data collected in October 2000 by *Media Monitor*, an independent Washington-based research center. “According to a recent examination of a month of network and local TV news coverage of American youth . . . just 2% of teenagers were shown at home, while only 1% were portrayed in a work setting. In contrast, the criminal justice system accounted for nearly 1 out of every 5 visual backdrops.” (Communitarian Network 2000). Nothing has changed in the years since this observation was made; in fact, many media observers believe that the situation has gotten worse.

## The Positive Youth Development Approach

Partly as a reaction to media distortions such as those noted above, during the past decade, a new approach to youth development has introduced a more affirmative and welcome vision of young people. This new approach envisions young people as resources rather than as problems for society. The positive youth development perspective emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people—including young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories.

While the positive youth development approach recognizes the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that may affect children in various ways, it resists conceiving of the developmental process mainly as an effort to overcome deficits and risk. Instead, it begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world. The positive youth development approach aims at understanding, educating, and engaging children in productive activities rather than at correcting, curing, or treating them for maladaptive tendencies or so-called disabilities.

The radical change brought about by this shift to a more positive vision of youth potential has taken place in a number of research areas. In each area, concepts that clearly were not valid have been discarded and replaced with ideas that have reversed the old way of thinking. This alteration in perspective has transformed the questions that researchers are asking, the insights that they have been able to discover in their research, and the practice recommendations that have been implemented in all varieties of youth-related work, from education to social policy.

I will organize this article around the following areas in this radical transformation: (1) the nature of the child; (2) the manner in which young people interact with their communities as they grow up; and (3) the way in which young people work out their moral identities and perspectives on society and their present and future roles in it.

### The Nature of the Child

Are children by nature hardy or delicate? The popular mind is split about this, reflecting generational or cohort differences. Young parents who worry about their children often find themselves reassured by a grandmother (real or apocryphal) who counsels “Don’t worry, kids are resilient.” This advice may reflect the grandmother’s greater experience, or it may reflect a modern trend toward increased child centeredness, in contrast to the more traditional view that young people are capable of bearing life’s burdens without breaking (Damon 1995).

Despite the familiarity of “grandmotherthly” folk wisdom about the hardiness of children, psychology has tended to promote a more modern vision of children as fragile, easily traumatized, and vulnerable to a host of dangers. Some of these dan-

gers are seen to threaten particular populations of children—the poor, the abused, the neglected—but others are seen to arise from the fabric of everyday experience: separation from parents, failure to master difficult tasks, puberty, transitions to new school environments, and so on. From the perspective of many child psychologists, it seems that the very processes of living and growing place children at risk, and to make matters worse, children are by nature easily wounded by such psychological challenges.

The first body of psychological research to directly contest this fragile child assumption came out of a series of longitudinal studies conducted in the 1980s. In one study, Norman Garmezy (1983) introduced the notion of the invulnerable child. Some—not all, but some—of Garmezy's research subjects showed resistance to life's most severe stressors, flourishing in spite of every prediction to the contrary. In a cross-cultural study conducted in Hawaii and the mainland United States, Emily Werner (1982) found much the same thing. Werner adopted the classic term *resiliency* to describe the quality that enables many young people to thrive in the face of any adversity. In a monograph that became enormously influential in the practice-oriented sectors of the youth-development field, Bonnie Benard (1991) extended Werner's findings to virtually all young people, making the claim that every child possesses the potential to develop resiliency. Benard wrote that resilience is simply one of a cluster of adaptive response patterns that can be learned by anyone during childhood. Associated with resilience, according to Benard, are persistence, hopefulness, hardiness, goal directedness, healthy expectations, success orientation, achievement motivation, educational aspirations, a belief in the future, a sense of anticipation, a sense of purpose, and a sense of coherence. Such claims and data created underpinnings for the positive youth development approach.

Although research on youth invulnerability and resiliency played an invaluable role in pointing to the decided strengths of young people, this research was limited by the defensive connotations of the concepts that it employed. The terms *invulnerability* and *resiliency* assume a background of danger, stress, and deficit in young people's lives. Such difficulties, it is proposed, must be overcome by personal qualities of invulnerability or resiliency that result from various protective factors. Certainly, this is a plausible account of some children's lives, but it casts too negative a light on the conditions under which most young people are raised in today's world. And it suggests that personal strength is a response to unfavorable circumstances rather than a normal adaptation to the challenges (many of them enjoyable and welcome) of human development.

The child who learns to drive a car, or to care for an elderly neighbor, or to go on a first date, must acquire a number of personal virtues to accomplish these things successfully, but this learning is not usually done under duress or out of a desperate survival struggle. To the contrary, most children eagerly seek such opportunities to learn and test themselves.

For this reason, although the resiliency research put a number of important positive youth attributes squarely on the psychological map, it did not provide a suffi-

cient basis for a universal model of youth development. A more solid basis was established in the mid-1990s by the work of Peter Benson (1997) and his colleagues at the Search Institute in Minnesota. With its focus on what Benson has called “developmental assets,” The Search Institute approach emphasizes the talents, energies, strengths, and constructive interests that every young person possesses. Benson and his colleagues at Search have examined “external” assets (see the discussion of community below) and “internal” assets. Internal assets are personal characteristics of young people and specifically positive ones, such as commitment to learning, positive values, social skills, and positive identity.

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Benson and the large number of researchers and practitioners who have been influenced by his work hinge their youth-development efforts on sustaining these positive strengths and building upon them, rather than on extinguishing young people’s maladaptive tendencies. Benson’s approach assumes that the nature of the child—every child—is marked by considerable resiliency and vast potential. The agenda is to maximize this potential, not only as an essential end in itself but also as a means of preempting any self-destructive or antisocial tendencies that can arise when there is a vacuum of positive activity. In this way, it is an approach that embodies the familiar sports adage that “the best defense is a good offense” (Lerner and Benson 2003).

The developmental implications of such an approach are profound. The assets view addresses key aspects of youth development that are invisible to those who have been blinded by the problem-youth perspective. According to Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000), themselves leading proponents of the positive youth development approach, preventing disease or behavioral problems does not constitute the provision of health or the actualization of positive development. They write, “Preventing the actualization of youth risk behaviors is not the same as taking actions to promote positive youth development (e.g., the inculcation of attributes

such as caring/compassion, competence, character, connection, and confidence). Similarly, programs and policies that prevent youth problems do not necessarily prepare youth to contribute to civil society” (p. 12). Or, as Lerner and Benson have written in another context, “Preventing a problem from occurring does not guarantee that youth are being provided with the assets they need for developing in a positive manner. Even if prevention efforts were completely successful, it is not the case that ‘problem-free means prepared’; that is, preventing problems among young people does not mean that they are capable of making positive, healthy contributions to family community, and civil society” (Lerner and Benson 2003, 7).

The positive youth development vision of the child as naturally competent and inclined toward prosocial engagements has been supported by a host of studies from the infant labs of the late twentieth century. Studies by Colwyn Trevarthen at the University of Edinburgh, Martin Hoffman at New York University, and Nancy Eisenberg at Arizona State University have shown that human newborns experience empathy as soon as they recognize the independent existence of others—often in the first week after birth (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998; Hoffman 2000; Trevarthen 1993). Newborns cry when they hear others cry. They show signs of pleasure when they hear others making happy sounds such as cooing and laughter. By the second year of life, children have been observed comforting peers or parents in distress.

Empathy is the capacity to vicariously experience another person’s pleasure or pain. It is an emotion that provides the child with powerful incentives for positive social interaction. As a part of every child’s native endowment, it is a natural strength (or “virtue”) upon which further prosocial growth can be built. Other early social emotions provide the child with cues that signal respect for norms, as well as displeasure over the violation of social norms. Kagan (1984) has shown that infants express outrage over the violation of social norms and expectations such as a breach in the rules of a favorite game or displaced buttons on a piece of familiar clothing. Damon (1990), in studies of “positive justice,” found that that children as young as two and three years of age acquire a norm of sharing with peers that is functionally autonomous from the norms of obligation to which they submit when with adults.

Developmental theories that proceed from such findings maintain that the elements of positive social behavior consist of emotional dispositions that are biologically hardwired into our species. This implies that while there may be some variability in degree, all normal youth inherit these dispositions, and therefore the capacity for moral awareness and prosocial behavior is universal across cultures. Norma Feshbach has found evidence of empathy among neonates in Europe, Israel, and the United States, and Millard Madsen has reported sharing behavior among preschool children in eleven cultures (Feshbach 1983; Madsen 1971). As far as we know, young children everywhere start life with caring feelings toward those close to them and with adverse reactions to inhumane or unjust behavior. Differences in how these reactions are triggered and expressed emerge only later, once children have been exposed to the particular belief systems and values of their cultures.

## How Children Interact with Their Communities

The second change brought about by the positive youth development approach is the way child-community interaction is understood. For one thing, community itself has not been a level of analysis that psychology has looked to frequently in its examinations of child development, at least in comparison to the multitude of studies on parent-child, child-child, and teacher-child and classroom-child interaction. The positive youth approach is consciously holistic, considering the whole community in relation to the whole child rather than privileging any particular interaction or capacity (Damon and Gregory 2002). For another thing, the positive youth approach sees the child as a full partner in the community-child relation, bearing a full share of rights and responsibilities. I will illustrate these two points with observations from my own experience.

I recall that shortly after I completed my graduate training, in the mid-1970s, I did a brief postdoctoral internship in clinical child psychology. In the course of this internship, I attempted to treat children who were having a wide variety of difficulties, such as learning problems, social isolation, and conduct disorders—including such disruptive behaviors as pyromania, violence, and vandalism. Virtually all of the treatment approaches that I learned were centered around one-on-one therapeutic sessions with the individual child. Occasionally, parents were consulted or advised, usually apart from the child. Otherwise, the interventions focused exclusively on the child's own unique perceptions and mental representations.

In contrast, graduate training in many leading child clinical programs today is not confined to a university clinic setting but includes the surrounding community agencies and organizations. When trainees initiate interventions, they learn to take into account the multiple and intersecting contexts in which children develop. They address how conflict is handled between family members in the home setting, between teachers and students in the hallways, and between peers on and off the school grounds, and so on. Trainees working in the community purposefully avoid targeting pathology in the individual, aiming instead to strengthen the contexts in which young people's competence can be fostered.

Other youth-related professions have seen similar changes, or at least are beginning to move in the same direction. In education, for example, it is now widely recognized that children require multiple opportunities to learn, spread throughout the entire spectrum of their lives, if they are to become highly motivated students. Enormously expensive school reform efforts that have confined themselves to the classroom alone have come up empty (Steinberg 1996). For all children to bring themselves to the academic task of acquiring intellectual competencies, children need encouragement from parents, from other adults, from peers, indeed from all the important people in their lives. Multiple positive social influences are required for an optimal learning environment. Good teaching is essential, but the teacher's agenda must find support from the community if it is to take.

Benson's (1997) external developmental assets consist of the community influences needed for optimal youth development. Benson's scheme may be the most comprehensive and systematic account of these community influences that we have to date. Benson identifies not only the obvious markers, such as caring families, neighborhoods, and schools, but also some key assets that community-oriented social scientists usually miss.

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Among the external assets commonly missed is the less tangible but equally critical area of community *expectations* for youth behavior. This gets to the second point that I raised at the beginning of this section, the child as a full partner in the community-child relation. An example of this point was once suggested by a comment by Raphi Amram, a prominent Israeli educator of talented high school students. Amram made a much-discussed stir at a U.S. conference on gifted children in the early 1990s. Amram stood up halfway through the proceedings and offered the following comment (recorded in nonverbatim notes): "I have heard many ideas here about what society ought to be doing for gifted children—early stimulation, special intensive programs, more individual attention, and the like. These are good ideas and should be followed. But I have heard nothing about what gifted children should be expected to do for their society, about what they could be contributing with all of their gifts. I say this not just because society needs their talents but also because gifted children, like all children, need to hear such expectations for their own character development."

Today, of course, such a comment does not seem as shocking as it did ten years ago. Indeed, when I made much the same point in my book *Greater Expectations* (Damon 1995), I encountered initial skepticism from critics who believed that young people need less, not more, responsibility and challenge in their everyday lives (Kohn 1999). Such skepticism has largely passed, and the phrases *personal responsibility* and *high standards* have been universally adopted by professionals and policy makers of all ideological persuasions.

In his work, Peter Benson long has included among his developmental assets the notions of responsibility, service, and expectations. For example, Benson considered the following two assets to be critical for youth empowerment: (1) *youth as resources*: young people are given useful roles in the community; (2) *service to others*: young people serve in the community one hour or more per week (Benson 1997, 32). Under the rubric boundaries and expectations, Benson (1997, 32) listed six assets, including “*high expectations*: both parents and teachers encourage the young person to do well.”

Although some of this may sound like common sense from our present vantage point, when Benson first assembled his forty developmental assets, the conventional wisdom was a world apart. The excessively child-centered perspective that had come to dominate the field was adverse to holding children to anything resembling objective standards, placing its emphasis instead on subjective feelings such as self-esteem (see Damon 1995). Benson’s work, among other like-minded efforts, has led the way to a more balanced view of children’s developmental needs.

## Identity and Moral Perspective

Research in the positive youth development tradition has taken seriously the role of moral and religious beliefs in shaping children’s identities and perspectives on the future. Five of the internal assets that Benson lists are personal qualities with an unmistakable moral dimension: caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, responsibility, and restraint. And one of the primary external assets that Benson identifies is religious community, which is indicated by a young person’s participation in the activities of a religious institution (Benson 1997, 32-33).

The proposition that deeply held moral convictions and religious faith can provide young people with crucial resources for their development flies in the face of our predominantly secular social-science traditions, but it has been supported by the developmental studies (unfortunately rare in number) that take such variables into account. Norman Garnezy (1983), for example, reported longitudinal data showing that religious faith was the personal characteristic most likely to keep at-risk youth out of trouble. Hart et al. (1995) found that a major difference between disadvantaged adolescents who were exemplars of prosocial behavior and those who were frequently antisocial was the presence of a strong spiritual sense.

Damon (1999) has written about the implications of such findings for the young person’s moral identity. A person’s use of moral beliefs to define the self is called a person’s moral identity. When a person decides that “the kind of person I am” or

“the kind of person I want to be” is dependent upon a moral belief (as opposed to, say, a physical characteristic such as being athletic, a material characteristic such as being rich, an intellectual characteristic such as being smart, and so on), the person has formed the basis of a moral identity. (Of course having a moral basis for identity is not exclusive from other bases—people can decide that they want to be honest and athletic, just and rich, beautiful and compassionate, and so on). In the same way that identity formation during adolescence is a process of forging a coherent, systematic sense of self, *moral* identity formation is a process of constructing deeply held moral beliefs that serve as the ideational core for a cohesive moral component of one’s personal identity.

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Moral identity often takes shape in late childhood, when the child acquires the capacity to analyze people, including the self, in terms of stable character traits. During late childhood, self-identifying traits usually consist of action-related skills and interests (I’m smart; I love music). With age, there is a gradual increase in the use of moral terms to define the self. By the onset of puberty, adolescents commonly refer to morally tinged adjectives such as *kind*, *fair-minded*, *generous*, and *honest* as ways of describing themselves. Some adolescents even go so far as to describe themselves primarily in terms of systematic moral beliefs and goals. They speak of noble purposes, such as caring for others or improving their communities, as missions that define their lives.

The surest way for moral beliefs to shape a young person’s social behavior is when the young person begins adopting those beliefs as a central part of his or her personal identity. When a young person moves from saying “people should be honest” to “I want to be an honest person,” the likelihood that he or she will be committed to truth telling in everyday transactions greatly increases. A young person’s moral identity determines not merely what the person considers to be the right course of action but also why the person would decide that “*I myself* must take this course.” One researcher wrote that if people see “a value or a way of life as essential to their identity, then they feel that they ought to act accordingly” (Nisan 1996, 83).

Young people differ greatly in the degree to which they think of themselves in terms of moral beliefs and goals. This difference continues throughout life, with

some people finding moral purposes to dedicate themselves to and others consigning moral concerns to a relatively marginal position in their lives. This difference may be determinative of life outcomes ranging from personal satisfaction (or “authentic happiness,” as Martin Seligman calls it) to altruistic social behavior.

Lawrence Walker et al. have found that “morality had differing degrees of centrality in people’s identities. For some people, moral considerations and issues were pervasive in their experience because morality was rooted in the heart of their being; for others, moral issues seemed remote and the maintenance of moral values and standards was not basic to their self-concept and self-esteem” (Walker et al. 1995, 398). Colby and Damon (1992, 344) found that “people who define themselves in terms of their moral goals are likely to see moral problems in everyday events, and they are also likely to see themselves as necessarily implicated in these problems. From there, it is a small step to taking responsibility for the solution.” In Colby and Damon’s study, people who had strong moral identities were highly committed to moral causes, joyful and positive about their lives, and purposeful and energetic even into advanced old age.

Results such as these have pointed to an essential intervention goal for the positive youth development approach: foster a strong sense of moral identity in young people. As Youniss and Yates (1997) have shown, character education and community-service programs trigger positive development in young people when they succeed in engaging the self and thereby promoting the sense of moral identity. The same can be said for the young person’s positive affiliation with his or her civil society. Civic identity is closely associated with moral identity, acquired through similar developmental processes. Experiences that promote a sense of personal identification with one’s civic society provide a young person with a positive set of aspirations that point the way to a socially and personally productive future. It is this kind of potential—shared by every young person—that the positive youth development approach emphasizes in its scholarly and practice agendas.

As a part of pursuing the agenda of fostering young people’s potential to contribute to their civic society, the positive youth development approach has encouraged many in the field of youth development to recognize the importance of the moral and the spiritual perspectives of youth. Youth professionals have been increasingly willing to use a moral language when working with young people and to draw upon community religious institutions for support. The once-accepted notion that it is necessary to be value neutral out of respect for the child’s autonomy as well as for scientific objectivity has been largely discarded in recognition of children’s undeniable need for moral and spiritual guidance and of science’s inevitable grounding in values. The field is now prepared to help young people with one of their primary developmental challenges, acquiring a moral identity as an essential part of their positive development as future citizens.

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