

Strength-Based Positive Youth Development  
and Juvenile Justice Practice

# Accentuate the Positive

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# Preview

- I. The Traditional JJ System Does Harm
- II. Risk, Resilience, and Delinquent Behavior
- III. Adolescent Biological Development
- IV. Positive Youth Development
- V. Positive Youth Justice Framework
- VI. Strength-Based Practice for Case Planning and Interventions
- VII. Transforming Agency Culture

## Traditional Juvenile Justice System – Ineffective & Harmful

- ▶ Many youths in the JJ system have current or prior child welfare system involvement – “dual status youth” – and/or mental health issues
- ▶ Many incarcerated youths are not serious and/or chronic offenders
- ▶ Poor conditions of confinement are common
- ▶ JJ system involvement may foster further delinquency rather than suppress it
- ▶ Punishment vs. treatment dialectic – historically cyclical, disempowering, and ineffective

# Risk and Protective Factors

Adapted from: Kirby & Fraser (1997)

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	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Micro	biomedical problems gender (male) aggression risk taking	“easy” temperament self-esteem competence high intelligence
Mezzo	child maltreatment inter-parental conflict parental psychopathology poor parenting anti-social peers	social support caring adults + parent-child relationships effective parenting prosocial peers
Macro	limited educational or employment opportunities; racial discrimination; poverty; exposure to violence	opportunities for education, employment, growth and achievement low crime rates

## Risk, Resilience, and Juvenile Justice – Better but Still Problematic

- ▶ Attention to criminogenic risks and needs
- ▶ Proliferation of risk assessment instruments
- ▶ Case plans based on reducing criminogenic risks and addressing criminogenic needs
- ▶ Dominance of “evidence-based” programs
- ▶ Practice still emphasizes “doing to” rather than “doing with”
- ▶ When things go wrong, failure attributed to the youth rather than to the plan

## In other words ...

- ▶ The juvenile justice system is **iatrogenic** – i.e., makes things worse
- ▶ Involvement in the system is itself a risk factor for further delinquency and adult crime
- ▶ WHY?
- ▶ Because the system works against the principles of adolescent development!

# What is Adolescence?

*“that awkward period between sexual maturation and the attainment of adult roles and responsibilities”* (Dahl, 2004, p. 9)

- Begins with biological markers – around age 13
- Ends with social roles – varies; age 22-26
- Note varying ages of eligibility: driving, marriage, voting, military service, alcohol, car rental, etc.
- Duration of adolescence has lengthened

# Brain Development in Adolescence

- ▶ Incomplete in adolescence (up to age 25)
- ▶ Frontal lobe: pre-frontal cortex controls “executive functions”
  - Gray matter increases, then decreases
  - Unused synapses “pruned”; frequently used synapses become stronger
- ▶ Myelin coats circuits as they mature, speeding up communication among them
- ▶ Levels of dopamine production change producing increases in risk-taking behaviors
- ▶ Limbic system still maturing – stands in for still-developing prefrontal cortex – decisions based on emotions
- ▶ Testosterone, associated with aggression, increases tenfold in adolescent boys

# The Adolescent Brain & Behavior

- Emotional context affects behavior and decision making
- Peer acceptance becomes more important
- Decisions driven by emotion
- Less control of impulses
- Tendency to make risky choices
- Traumatic victimization slows brain maturation
- In the presence of other risk factors, immature brain sets the stage for delinquency and violence
- Adolescents' personalities not yet fixed – therefore they are **highly amenable to positive interventions**

# The Paradox of Adolescence

- Period of physical strength, rapid cognitive learning, and social resilience ...

*But...*

- Period of great risk
  - High morbidity and mortality rates (suicide, homicide)
  - High incidence of risky behaviors
- Long-term patterns developing – for better or worse – great opportunity/great challenge

# What is Positive Youth Development (PYD)

- Goals
  - all youth gain competence and character
- Practices
  - youth participation in decisions
  - healthy relationships with adults, peers and younger children
  - relationships changing and enduring as developmentally appropriate
- System characteristics
  - community-wide partnerships

# Youth Development Models

- Benson & Pittman (2001) – 5 Cs: *competence, confidence, character, connections, and contributions*
- Connell, Gambone, & Smith (2001) – Learning to be **productive**; learning to **connect**; learning to **navigate**
- CUBI Model (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2000) – **C**ompetency; **U**sefulness; **B**elonging; **I**nvolvement
- Search Institute (Scales & Leffert, 1999) – 40 Developmental Assets

# Traditional Juvenile Justice: Not Congruent with PYD

- Tendency to focus on the individual level
- Physical isolation from home/school/ community
- Psychological isolation via labeling
- Placing with other negatively labeled peers
- Doing “to”, not “with” young people
- “Record” restricts future opportunities

# Adolescent Brain Development and Social Development: Congruent with PYD Principles

- Strength-based
- Importance of relationships with caring adults
- Empowerment-focused
- Supports and opportunities to learn healthy behaviors
- Connections to community

# PYD and JJ: Contrasting Paradigms

## Youth Development

- Strengths
- Assets
- Empowerment
- Inclusion
- Development

## Juvenile Justice

- Deficits/Deviance
- Diagnoses
- Treatment/Punishment
- Exclusion
- Symptom Amelioration

# Positive Youth Justice Framework

(Butts, Bazemore, & Meroe, 2010, p. 31)

PRACTICE DOMAINS	Domain-Specific Example	CORE ASSETS	
		<i>Learning/Doing</i>	<i>Attaching/Belonging</i>
<b>Work</b>	Job readiness	Resume writing workshop	Job-seeker support group
<b>Education</b>	Computer skills	1-on-1 skill building in HTML, etc.	Youth-to youth tutoring program
<b>Relationships</b>	Communication skills	Training in conflict management	Youth-adult mentor program
<b>Community</b>	Youth-led civic improvement campaign	Prepare and present formal testimony	Launch new advocacy program
<b>Health</b>	Physical fitness	Weight training	Team sports
<b>Creativity</b>	Self-expression	Mural art program	Group performance, music or theater

# Strength-Based (SB) Practice to Promote PYD

- ▶ Every individual, group, family and community has strengths
- ▶ Practitioners best serve clients by collaborating with them
- ▶ Every environment is full of resources
- ▶ Assessment process seeks to discover strengths
- ▶ Engage clients in collaborative planning

# What Would a Strength-Based, PYD-Focused System Look Like?

- Emphasis on diversion; limited use of secure pre-trial detention
- Mental health screening
- Individualized assessment of risks, needs, AND strengths
- Collaborative case planning based on assessments
- Individualized intervention plans with goals based on core assets and practice domains
- Family engagement
- Community-based; limited use of residential placements
- Informal options for technical violations of probation

# Individualized Assessment of Risks, Needs, and Strengths

- ▶ YLS/CMI is a good tool for assessing criminogenic risks (Hoge & Andrews, 1996)
- ▶ Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scales (BERS; Epstein & Sharma, 1998)
- ▶ CANS is a good tool for assessing needs (Lyons et al., 1999)
- ▶ Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) – a strengths assessment developed specifically for juvenile justice (Mackin et al., 2005)
- ▶ Oregon's integrated assessment (OJCP; NPC Research, 2010)

# Collaborative Case Planning & Individualized Interventions

- Involve the youth and family as partners
- Use team approaches, e.g., similar to wraparound
- Involve mentors if possible
- Fit the plan to the youth and family rather than fitting the youth to existing programs
- Use identified youth strengths and interests as “hooks” to prosocial engagement, e.g.,
  - Community service in an area of youth strengths/interests
  - Assign family fun as “homework”
  - Creative skills development with peers
- Review the plan periodically and modify as necessary

# Contrasting Interventions (1)

## Traditional

- Probation supervision to ensure compliance
- Individual and family counseling, group therapy
- Job counseling, community service as punishment

## PYD-Oriented

- Case management to ensure youth access to range of social resources
- Peer counseling, leadership development, family living skills
- Work experience, community service as job preparation, career exploration

# Contrasting Interventions (2)

## Traditional

- Outdoor challenge programs
- Mentoring, Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- Remedial education

## PYD-Oriented

- Conservation and community development projects, engaging with community groups
- Youth/adult mentors; intergenerational projects with elderly
- Cross-age tutoring (juvenile offenders teach younger children), educational action teams, decision-making skills training

# Changing the Culture: Facilitating Factors

- ▶ Hospitable, collaborative community culture
- ▶ Vision, supported by a plausible “theory of change,” with a credible “Champion” of the vision
- ▶ Effective communication & collaboration among key agencies and stakeholders
- ▶ Commitment from the top
- ▶ Training/retraining/intentional hiring
- ▶ Early adopters’ success
- ▶ Integration of SB/PYD into the “machine” of the bureaucracy (e.g., paperwork)
- ▶ Consistent reinforcement through supervision
- ▶ Abundance of and links to community resources

# Changing the Culture: Challenges

- Resistance from “old-line” staff
- Additional demands on staff in terms of time and creativity
- Making meaningful links between SB assessment and individualized plans
- Staying the course
- Obtaining buy-in from other stakeholders: judges, prosecutors, police, service providers, etc.
- Some families are initially resistant – want system to “fix” their child

# Bottom Line

View youth who come into contact with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system as **children** first

Develop policies and practice protocols collaboratively

Pursue PYD goals in addition to recidivism reduction

Enhance the educational level and competencies of staff who work directly with youth

Tailor interventions collaboratively and individually – be creative

Don't give up and just blame the youth when plans don't work – adjust the plan