

**FACT SHEET**  
**YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION: CORE COMPETENCIES**

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**Introduction**

Many youth violence prevention programs seek to identify "risk" factors that increase risk for violence and "protective" factors that moderate that risk. Indeed, there is a large literature on risk and protective factors related to youth violence (see Lipsey & Wilson, 1998 for a review). Efforts are therefore aimed at reducing specific risk factors and enhancing protective factors. In some cases, programs are directed towards entire populations believed to be "at risk" such as inner-city, low-income youth. In other cases, certain youth are identified for participation in a variety of programs based on the presence of selected risk factors, such as early aggressive behavior, low self-control, poor social problem-solving skills, or significant family problems. A number of federal agencies such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Centers for Disease Control have rallied around this public health perspective that emphasizes reduction of risk for youth violence.

A slightly different approach to violence prevention emphasizes the importance of positive youth development. Rather than focus on selected risk factors and how to reduce them, a youth development approach emphasizes strengthening the capacity of youth to become healthy and successful adolescents and adults through skill building and development of opportunities for engagement and support. Youth development programs are typically broad-based and include all youth rather than targeted to those deemed to be at-risk. Terms such as positive development, social competence, and asset-building are used. The overall goal of the youth development approach is to maximize positive outcomes.

**Core Competencies for Healthy Youth Development**

Despite the existence of a number of taxonomies of positive developmental outcomes (e.g., Sroufe & Rutter, 1984; W.T. Grant, 1992), most youth development and prevention efforts select certain competencies (e.g., problem-solving skills) or contextual supports (e.g., family functioning) that are not connected systematically. In many cases these are mixed together in long lists of "good things." For example, a large number of communities have embraced the 40 assets of healthy youth development promoted by the Search Institute (Benson, 1997). Many of these assets reflect ways to

build individual competencies (e.g., family support), rather than delineating what these competencies are and how they are linked to youth violence.

Rather than providing a listing of assets or protective factors that often do not differentiate clearly between individual outcomes (e.g., self control) and supports that facilitate those outcomes (e.g., effective parenting), a focus on **core competencies** provides a specific guide for youth development programming by emphasizing measurable outcomes. Development of core competencies begins at birth or before and extends through adolescence and beyond. A number of different programs and supports can facilitate the development of these competencies at different ages.

Guerra (in press) and Williams and Guerra (1996) have identified five core competencies that are important for healthy social and emotional development and that are important for youth violence prevention. In other words, youth who are skilled in these five areas should be less likely to engage in violence and other problem behaviors. These are described in the following table.

<b><i>Core competency</i></b>	<b><i>Related terms</i></b>	<b><i>Links to youth violence</i></b>
<b>Positive identity</b>	Positive self concept, hopefulness, future goals	Violence associated with negative identity
<b>Personal agency</b>	Self-efficacy, effective coping, attributional style	Violence associated with hostile attributional bias
<b>Self regulation</b>	Affective, behavioral, and cognitive self regulation	Violence associated with poor impulse control
<b>Social relationship skills</b>	Social problem solving skills, empathy, conflict resolution skills, capacity for intimacy	Violence associated with poor social problem solving skills and lack of empathy
<b>System of belief</b>	Attitudes, norms, values, moral engagement	Violence associated with aggressive norms and moral disengagement

A youth development approach to violence prevention that highlights core competencies emphasizes understanding and attending to the specific developmental needs of youth. It integrates a risk-focused approach by recasting many risk and protective factors in terms of these core competencies. However, developmental issues alone are not the only predictors of youth violence. It is also important to identify problem-specific factors that are not directly related to development. For example, easy access to firearms can increase the risk of violence, while community policing can decrease that risk. The impact on risk of these community factors is not directly related to the mastery of specific competencies; rather, it is through other mechanisms such as opportunities and deterrence. An integrated approach to violence prevention should build on youth development but also recognize other violence-specific risk factors and how they can be addressed.

### **Promising Strategies**

Healthy youth development begins early and can be fostered in many ways. A major emphasis is on the creation of supportive environments in families, schools, and communities. Most youth development efforts also emphasize integrated services within communities rather than disconnected and fragmented programs.

The development of the five core competencies begins at birth or before. Thus, programming to foster this development must begin early and continue throughout childhood and adolescence. This programming should involve specific instruction and opportunities to practice discrete skills as well as promotion of contextual supports for development. Clearly, some strategies are more appropriate for selected age groups. Examples of positive strategies to foster healthy development include:

#### Promoting a positive identity in children and youth

- Opportunities for engagement and involvement in school and community activities that are available to children regardless of academic achievement, income, or other prerequisites that exclude some children
- Parent and teacher training programs that emphasize positive reinforcement and acknowledgement of positive behaviors
- Opportunities to explore various skill and career options and to build on individual strengths and talents
- Youth employment training programs that prepare youth for meaningful and rewarding careers
- Mentoring programs that provide positive role models and encouragement

#### Developing a sense of personal agency

- Youth involvement in decision making and governance at school and in the community

- Attribution retraining programs that encourage youth to accurately attend to and interpret social cues and decrease hostile attributional biases
- Providing children and youth with safe and supportive environments that minimize exposure to stressors
- Training families and children in effective coping skills

#### Building self regulation skills

- Direct instruction (e.g., individual, classroom, small group) in self regulation skills such as anger management and cognitive self-control
- Parent training programs that emphasize de-escalation rather than escalation of aggressive behavior
- Opportunities for engagement in group activities that provide structure as well as short-term and longer-term reinforcements
- Availability of mental health counseling and services, including diagnoses of children with problems such as ADHD

#### Promoting social relationship skills

- Opportunities for safe and structured play (e.g., community playgrounds)
- After-school recreation and social development programs
- Direct instruction (e.g., individual, classroom, small group) in social relationship skills
- Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs
- Mentoring programs that provide positive role models and teach children how to engage others successfully
- Community service opportunities that get children and youth involved in the lives of others, including those most in need

#### Helping youth develop a prosocial system of belief

- School and community-wide campaigns to promote prosocial norms and discourage aggressive and antisocial norms
- Media campaigns that encourage prosocial and responsible behavior
- Rules and laws that set guidelines for acceptable and appropriate behavior
- Social development, moral reasoning, and character education programs that emphasize social responsibility

### **References**

Benson, P. (1997). Forty Assets for Youth. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

Guerra, N. G. (in press). Preventing violence by promoting wellness. Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies.

Lipsey, M., & Wilson, D. B. (1998). Effective interventions for serious juvenile offenders: A synthesis of research. In R. Loeber & D. Farrington (Eds.), Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders (pp. 313-345). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sroufe, L. A., & Rutter, M. (1984). The domain of developmental psychopathology. Child Development, 83, 1348-1357.

Williams, K. R., & Guerra, N. G. (1996). Supporting Youth by Strengthening Communities. Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Boulder, Colorado.

W.T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence (1992).

### **Related Publications on Youth Development**

Eccles, J. & Gootman, J. (Eds.), (2001). Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Shinkoff, J., & Phillips, D. (Eds.) (2000). From Neurons to Neighborhoods. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

### **Internet Resources**

Youth Learn: <http://www.youthlearn.org>

National Youth Development Information Center: <http://www.nydic.org>

Institute for Youth Development: <http://www.Youthdevelopment.org>

Positive Youth Development in the United States: <http://www.aspe.hhs.gov>

Reconnecting Youth and Community: <http://www.ncfy.com>