

**The Developmental Context for
Out-of-School Time Programming**

A Literature Review

**Prepared by Dan Restuccia of Community Matters, for
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT**

Learning in Communities / Providence

January 2004

TO: Learning in Communities / Providence Leaders
FROM: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and Community Matters
DATE: January 2004
RE: The Developmental Context for Out-of-School Time Programming

This memorandum outlines the developmental context in which out-of-school time programs operate. It describes the major developmental trends of children and youth from early elementary school years until late adolescence and the ways that out-of-school time programming can promote healthy development. The memo is divided into sections roughly covering elementary aged children, middle school youth, and older youth in high school and into their early employment years.

While the memo seeks to cover all domains of child development, the most emphasis will be placed on social and cognitive/intellectual development, the areas most directly connected to most OST programming. Text that is not italicized relates directly to child development, while italicized text discusses the implications of a particular stage of development on OST programming.

Developmental Context for Middle Childhood (Age 6-10)

According to developmental theorist, Erik Erikson, during middle childhood (roughly the elementary school years) children should develop “a sense of industry,” developing competence at a variety of tasks.¹ In these years, children’s self-esteem is linked to their perceived success at activities. Students also develop the ability to cooperate and develop relationships with adults outside of their family.²

Success in a wide range of experiences is critical to the healthy development of children and growth of their self-esteem. During the middle childhood years, students enter new social roles - - such as school and other organized activities -- where their social status is often defined by their level of competence at these activities. Children both develop the ability to reflect on their own successes and failures and begin to experience social comparison and competition. Failure to master the skills needed for success in academic, social, or other settings can lead to a sense of inferiority, with long term intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal consequences.

Children’s cognitive development in this period can be characterized largely by their ability to use increasingly complex logic and reasoning to solve problems. Students begin to understand the relationship between cause and effect.³ They enter Piaget’s “concrete operations” stage, developing “operations” -- the mental representation of dynamic processes.⁴ This allows children to think through multi-step problems.

¹ Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1968.

² Jacquelynne S. Eccles, *The Development of Children Ages 6 to 14*, *The Future of Children: When School Is Out*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Fall 1999, p. 30-44.

³ Massachusetts School Age Care Coalition, *Age and Stages*, Front of the Bus Productions, February 2003.

⁴ Robert S. Siegler, *Children’s Thinking*, 3rd ed., Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998, p. 40.

“With the right kinds of experiences, [children] develop a healthy sense of industry and confidence that they can master and control their worlds.”⁵ Out-of-school time programs can help provide those experiences. They can scaffold problem solving techniques for students helping them develop these critical tools. They can provide academic support in a less competitive and pressured setting than a typical school environment. They can expose children to a wide range of activities, helping them develop competencies in areas outside of schools’ primary focus. High-quality OST programming can support healthy development of children boosting their self-esteem, making them more willing to try to new things, and supporting their academic and social success.

During the middle childhood years, children broaden their social surroundings. They enter settings with increasingly complex peer dynamics. Children become responsible for managing their own peer relationships. During this time children become aware of the needs of others in their groups -- the sense of “we” and the notion of cooperation begin to form.

Out-of-school time settings offer a supportive environment where children can develop social skills under the supervision of caring adults. Research has shown that children involved in out-of-school time programming have better social skills and emotional adjustment than those who are not. This is particularly true for low-income and minority students.⁶ Children can receive help from program staff negotiating these new relationships and resolving any conflicts that may arise in a physically and emotionally safe environment.

Developmental Context for Early Adolescence (Age 11-14)

Youth undergo profound physical and psychological changes during early adolescence. They enter puberty and their bodies begin to change from those of children to adults. The importance of peer relationships increases and parental influence declines as young people seek to become more autonomous. These dramatic changes occur at a time when the middle school environments for most students do not adequately meet their developmental needs. OST programs often provide an environment that supports developmental transitions during this stage.

Adult Relationships

During adolescence, youth seek to become autonomous individuals. They demand and are granted increasing independence from parents and other authority figures in their lives. Typically, youth and families have fewer interactions and do fewer things together during this time period than was the case earlier.⁷

Out-of-school time programs are well situated to help young people navigate their changing relationships with adults during this transitional period. Though adolescents often appear to be

⁵ Ibid, p. 32.

⁶ Deborah Lowe Vandell and Lee Shumow, “After-school Childcare Programs,” *Future of Children* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 65; Nancy Marshall, Cynthia Garcia-Coll, et al., “After-School Time and Children’s Behavioral Adjustment,” *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (July 1997): 497-514; and Gregory S. Petit, John E. Bates, et al, “Patterns of After-School Care in Middle Childhood: Risk Factors and Developmental Outcomes,” *Merrill Palmer Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (July 1997): 515-538.

⁷ Eccles, 37-40.

distancing themselves from authority figures, they are still eager for strong adult connections and guidance. OST staff can serve as bridges, helping young people understand the new relationships that they now have with adults and peers. Adolescents are looking for adults who are willing to listen to them. The small student-staff ratio and loose structuring of most OST programs for this age group set up their staff to be important mentors to early adolescents.

Peer Relationships

Early adolescence is the period when youth put the most stock in their relationships with other peers. Many adolescents prioritize peer acceptance over academic success. Similarly, self-esteem is increasingly predicated on physical appearance and peer acceptance. This makes them susceptible to negative peer pressure that can lead to risky activities including drug use and sexual activity. Adolescents often desire help from adults to develop positive peer relationships and resolve conflicts that arise with peers.

OST programs create a safe environment where students can develop positive peer relationships. Many programs create a “community of achievers” where students are exposed to a peer group that is positively engaged in academics and other positive activities. By joining this group and receiving the peer acceptance that they crave, adolescents avoid the negative situations that can arise in unsupervised environments. Additionally, program staff help youth develop the conflict resolution skills needed to maintain positive peer relationships.

Cognitive/Intellectual Development

During early adolescence, youth continue to develop their ability to understand abstract concepts and follow increasingly complex logic. They move into the “formal operations stage,” Piaget’s final stage of development. They develop the ability to logically work through problems and see the full range of possibilities in a given situation. For many, this leads to questioning the organization of the world, asking deep questions about truth, justice and morality.⁸

It is important for early adolescents to experience mastery in a variety of endeavors. This gives them the confidence they need to continue to try new things as they mature. As early adolescents become more focused on how others perceive them, it is important for them to feel like the work they are doing is connected to the larger world.⁹

Out-of-school programming, unburdened by the mandates placed on schools, is positioned to help students explore and achieve mastery in a wide range of activities. Schools tend to focus most heavily on linguistic and logical-mathematic intelligences. In OST programs, students can achieve mastery relating to intelligences that are not emphasized during the school day, or in activities that are outside the standard curriculum. Many students who struggle in schools thrive in high quality OST programs where they choose from a variety of activities, which may capitalize on intelligences not generally valued during the school day.

⁸ Siegel, p. 42-44.

⁹ Massachusetts School Age Coalition.

The community focus of most OST programs easily allows students to connect the things they do in the program to the outside world. Project-based learning and service learning are two techniques commonly employed in the out-of-school hours to help students ask critical questions about their community and understand their connection to it.

The Risk and Opportunity of Adolescence: The Youth Development Approach

As students enter late adolescence in their high school years, changes in their development begin to abate. Their physical changes are slowing. Their relationships to their peers and adults begin to stabilize. In their final stage of cognitive development, they are able to understand the logical constructions and abstract ideas needed to participate in the adult world.

Late adolescence is a time of risk and opportunity. Because they have completed the bulk of the developmental changes they will undergo in their path towards adulthood, they are increasingly able to function in the adult world. At the same time, much of this world is foreign to them, and presents a risk if this transition is not handled appropriately. The youth development approach is widely recognized to support adolescent development, decreasing the risks and capitalizing on the opportunities.

The section that follows outlines the youth development approach, and offers an explanation of its ability to decrease the risks young people face during adolescence.

The Positive Youth Development Approach¹⁰

Positive youth development is a set of strategies which any program or program model can adopt to help guide youth on a successful transition to adulthood. It is an approach that provides youth with the broadest possible support, enabling them to attain desirable long-term outcomes, including economic self-sufficiency and engagement in healthy family and community relationships. Youth development programs offer youth the following broad experiences, which research has shown are the most important contributors to healthy development:¹¹

- **Promote a Sense of Physical and Emotional Safety.** Youth at a program must feel as though the adults there will protect them from any physical harm. They also must feel they are valued and accepted by the group.
- **Encourage Relationship Building.** Young people need many supportive relationships to help them navigate their adolescence. They need guidance from adults as well as emotional and practical support from their peers
- **Foster Meaningful Youth Participation.** Simple participation is not enough to promote positive youth development: youth must have an active role in shaping the program. They must have the opportunity to practice and develop leadership skills by planning projects, initiatives, and activities.

¹⁰ The section that follows is adapted from: Dan Restuccia, *Positive Youth Development: A Literature Review*, Providence, RI & Boston, MA: Community Matters and Rhode Island Kids Count, August 2003. See this document for a complete discussion of the youth development approach.

¹¹ Sam Piha, *Youth Development Guide*, San Francisco, CA: Community Network for Youth Development, 2001, page 24. http://www.gse.uci.edu/afterschool/ca/Documents/cnyd/YD_Guide/YD_Guide.pdf and Restuccia, p. 4-7.

- ***Provide Opportunities for Community Involvement.*** *Young people are often looking for a sense of purpose. Creating opportunities for young people to become involved in the community and for community members to interact with youth is a powerful way to foster this sense of purpose.*
- ***Engage Youth in Learning Experiences that Build Skills.*** *Much of the attention that after-school programs have received in the last few years can be directly attributed to their ability to engage students as learners and to help them build skills needed to succeed in the current academic climate and the 21st century economy.*

Risks

Without the developmental supports to successfully transition from childhood to adulthood, many young people engage in risky behaviors detrimental to their health. During adolescence, many youth abuse alcohol and other drugs, become sexually active, or drop out of school. Thirteen to fifteen year-olds are at particular risk to begin drinking, and the incidence of binge drinking increases as youth progress through high school.¹² The rate of youth involvement in delinquency cases triples between age 12 and age 14, and increases steadily and dramatically through the adolescent years.¹³ Over half of teenagers are sexually active before graduating from high school. Half of all women in the nation become pregnant prior to age 20: four-fifths of these pregnancies are unintended.¹⁴ Engagement in these risky activities dramatically decreases the likelihood that an adolescent will achieve the goals of young adulthood such as achieving economic self-sufficiency, maintaining healthy family and social relationships, and contributing to the community.¹⁵

The youth development approach empowers youth to avoid the perils of adolescence, and develop the tools they need to excel in adult society. Through several of its publications, the Forum for Youth Investment has adopted the slogan “problem-free is not fully prepared” to emphasize the importance of this idea. The youth development approach is designed to ensure that youth are not only able to avoid the negative behaviors described above, but also fully prepared to enter adult society.

Opportunities

In late adolescence, it is critical for youth to develop the tools they need for success as adults. A well-designed youth-development program prepares students across a wide variety of developmental domains. Cognitively, it allows youth to solve problems actively and to develop their critical thinking skills. It creates a positive social network for youth to learn to work with others and avoid negative peer pressure. Youth development programs can also help students

¹² National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, *Alcohol Alert*, No. 37, Bethesda, MD: NIAAA, July 1997. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa37.htm>

¹³ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Court Statistics 1998*, NCJ 193696, 2003, <http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/193696/chap2.html#c>

¹⁴ National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *General Facts and Stats*, Washington, DC: NCPTP, December 2003. <http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/genlfact.asp>.

¹⁵ Sam Piha, *Youth Development Guide*, San Francisco, CA: Community Network for Youth Development, 2001, page 24. http://www.gse.uci.edu/afterschool/ca/Documents/cnyd/YD_Guide/YD_Guide.pdf.

understand the physical changes that occur in their body, and encourage them to defer early sexual activity and to practice safe sex once they are sexually active.

Youth development programs also offer activity in areas outside the traditional realm of child development. They can offer vocational development, helping youth prepare to enter the workforce as productive and active members. They introduce youth to role models in their community, expose them to a variety of career options, and help them to develop the personal responsibility expected by employers.¹⁶

Youth development programs also promote civic engagement, helping youth understand the importance of healthy community and their place in it. Many programs have strong service components and encourage awareness of current events and political activity.¹⁷

By working to meet all of the developmental needs of adolescents, the youth development approach can ensure that young people are prepared to enter adult society as fully productive members. In some areas, such as cognitive development, youth development programs build on the work done by schools. In others, such as vocational and civic development, they operate outside the scope of most schools. In each venue, they offer critical supports to ensure that today's youth become tomorrow's successful adults.

¹⁶ Karen Pittman, Merita Irby, Joel Tolman, Nicole Yohalem, and Thaddeus Ferber, *Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement: Competing Priorities or Inseparable Goals?* Takoma Park, MD: Forum for Youth Investment, September 2001, p. 10.

¹⁷ Ibid.

References

- Eccles, Jacquelynne S. *The Development of Children Ages 6 to 14*. The Future of Children: When School Is Out. Vol. 9, No. 2, Fall 1999. p. 30-44.
- Erikson, Erik. *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1968.
- Marshall, Nancy, Cynthia Garcia-Coll, et al. "After-School Time and Children's Behavioral Adjustment." *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (July 1997): 497-514.
- Massachusetts School Age Care Coalition. *Age and Stages*. Front of the Bus Productions, February 2003.
- National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *General Facts and Stats*, Washington, DC: NCPTP, December 2003. <http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/genfact.asp>
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, *Alcohol Alert, No. 37*, Bethesda, MD: NIAAA, July 1997. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa37.htm>
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Court Statistics 1998*, NCJ 193696, 2003. <http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/193696/chap2.html#c>.
- Petit, Gregory S., John E. Bates, et al. "Patterns of After-School Care in Middle Childhood: Risk Factors and Developmental Outcomes." *Merrill Palmer Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (July 1997), 515-538.
- Piha, Sam. *Youth Development Guide*. San Francisco, CA: Community Network for Youth Development, 2001.
http://www.gse.uci.edu/afterschool/ca/Documents/cnyd/YD_Guide/YD_Guide.pdf.
- Pittman, Karen, Merita Irby, Joel Tolman, Nicole Yohalem, and Thaddeus Ferber. *Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement: Competing Priorities or Inseparable Goals?* Takoma Park, MD: Forum for Youth Investment, September 2001.
- Restuccia, Dan. *Positive Youth Development*. Providence, RI & Boston, MA: Rhode Island Kids Count and Community Matters, August 8, 2003.
- Siegler, Robert S. *Children's Thinking*, 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998.
- Vandell, Deborah Lowe and Lee Shumow. "After-school Childcare Programs." *Future of Children* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1999).