

# The Community Action Framework for Youth Development

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The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in “youth development” as both a policy and a community approach to helping children achieve healthy outcomes as young adults. When the historical approach of intervening with teenagers who exhibited “high risk” behaviors showed little appreciable success over time, early advocates of youth development convinced decision-makers that trying to change these outcomes in the late teen years was unsuccessful because they were the end result of a developmental process, rather than simple behavioral choices that could be redirected. As a result, funding began to flow not only to programs for “high risk” youth, but to prevention programs for younger “at risk” youth with the same goal of reducing the number of young adults exhibiting unhealthy, unproductive behaviors. But again, as young people were taught to “say no” to drugs, violence, crimes and unprotected sex, the number of young adults in the welfare, criminal justice, and other public systems was not declining significantly.

Although the prevention approach was a positive step that allowed more flexibility in the use of resources, these programs still did not constitute a “youth development” approach. They remained focused on negative behaviors rather than on the positive developmental milestones young people must achieve if they are to become healthy adults. Many of the early youth development frameworks evolved precisely to make this point. They sought to shift the focus away from directly reducing negative long-term outcomes for at-risk youth, to promoting healthy developmental outcomes for all youth that would subsequently lower the occurrence of negative long-term outcomes.

Despite the success of these frameworks in shifting the field’s focus to developmental outcomes as the goal in the shorter term, they have often left the longer-term outcomes implicit, or excluded them completely, which often raises questions: Should youth development programs be expected individually, or collectively, to change young people’s long-term life chances?

The Community Action for Youth Development Framework (see Figure 4.1) seeks to integrate basic knowledge about youth development and the community conditions that affect it with emerging hypotheses about what it will take to transform communities into places where all young people, and particularly those young



people currently least likely to succeed, can achieve their fullest potential. It reorganizes existing information from other youth development frameworks, research, and practical experience in terms that explicitly seek to translate developmental principles into a systematic approach to planning, implementing and evaluating activities and investments for youth.

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Figure 4.1) seeks to address five questions:

1. What are our basic long-term goals for youth? (Box A)
2. What are the critical developmental milestones or markers that tell us young people are on their way to getting there? (Box B)
3. What do young people need to achieve these developmental milestones? (Box C)
4. What must change in key community settings to provide enough of these supports and opportunities to all youth that need them? (Box D)
5. How do we create the conditions and capacity in communities to make these changes possible and probable? (Box E)

## Realistic Outcomes

According to the framework, the long-term goals of community-based youth development initiative (Box A) are to improve the long-term life chances of young people to:

- Be economically self-sufficient—all youth should expect as adults to be able to support themselves and their families and have some discretionary resources. They should have a decent job and the education, or access to enough education, to improve or change jobs.
- Be healthy and have good family and social relationships— young people should grow up to be physically and mentally healthy, be good caregivers for their children, and have positive and dependable family and friendship networks.
- Contribute to their community—community contributions can come in many forms, but we hope that our young people will aim to do more than simply be tax-payers and law-abiders.

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## Necessary Developmental Outcomes

Our review of the relevant literature suggests that the likelihood of these three goals being achieved increases dramatically if youth accomplish certain things as they move from childhood through adolescence (Box B). First, they must learn to be productive. Adolescents need to do well in school, establish outside interests, and acquire basic life skills. Second, they must learn to establish connections with adults in their families and community, with their peers in positive and supportive ways, and with something larger than themselves, be it religious or civic. Finally, they must learn to navigate—to chart and follow a safe course. Navigating takes multiple forms including interacting appropriately in their multiple worlds (their peer groups, families, schools, social groups and neighborhoods); transitioning from being taken care of to taking care of others; and managing the lures of unhealthy and dangerous behaviors.

Research and common sense tell us that if young people can achieve these outcomes, their prospects as adults improve dramatically—if they do not, success (as defined by our three long-term goals) will be difficult to achieve.

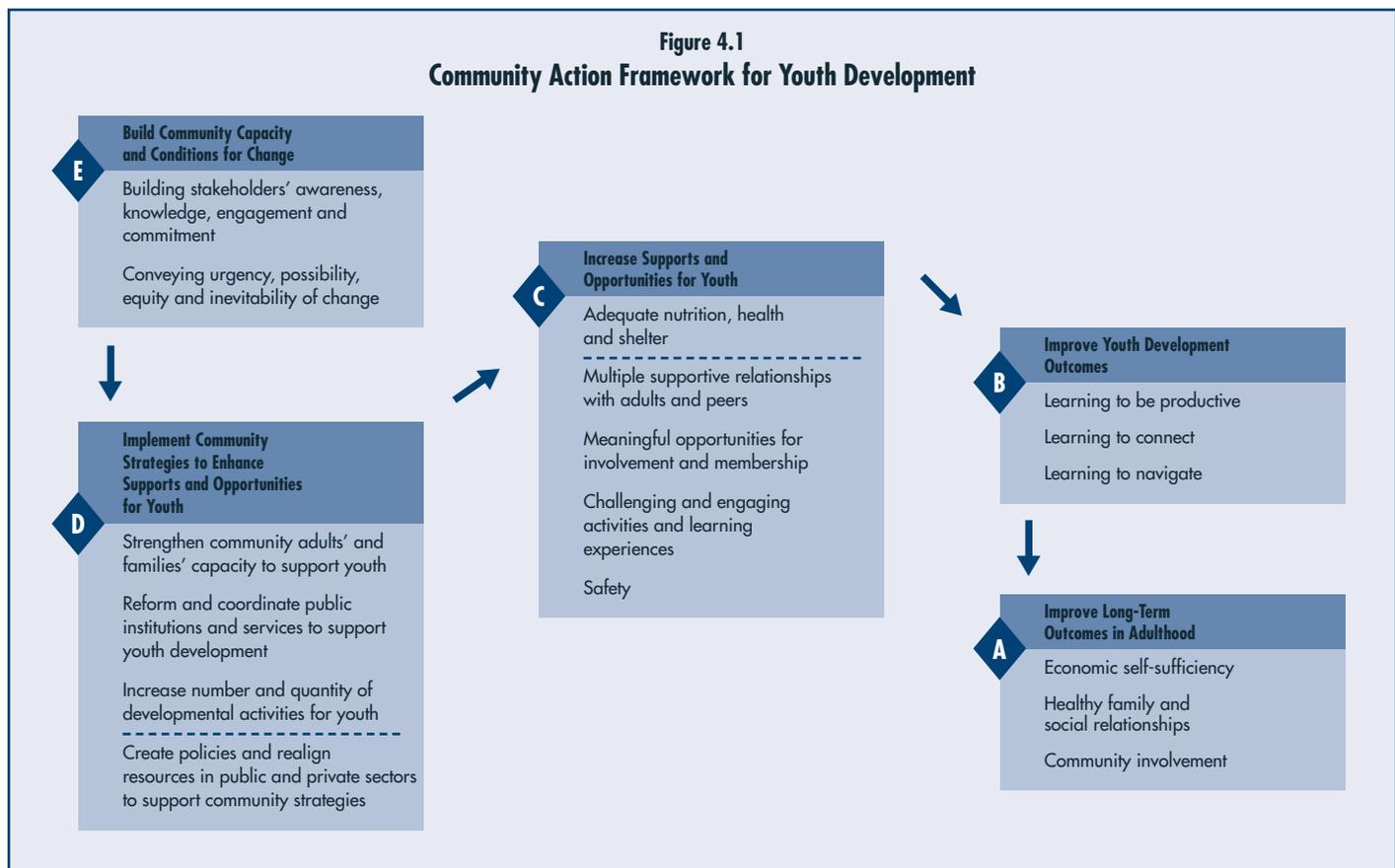
Our framework recognizes that we need to plan for and monitor interim steps toward the long-term outcomes we seek for youth. We want to prioritize outcomes shown to predict success in adulthood, focusing on behavioral accomplishments (rather than internal traits and abilities) that are feasible for all youth, and sufficient to give them a strong foundation for a successful adulthood.

Some of the ways we measure developmental progress for younger children meet these criteria. For example, we look at their ability to play cooperatively with other children and to deal with minor peer conflict without adult intervention as indicators of their readiness to move on to more complex social roles. We need to do the same for older youth.

Measured this way, learning to be productive, connect, and navigate lend themselves to observable, understandable, and defensible thresholds that all youth can and should achieve. For example, setting the goal that all youth in this community will finish school and know enough to get a decent job or go to college sets a clear threshold. Trying to make sure that all youth will have high enough self-esteem does not. Similarly, finding out whether youth treat diverse peers and adults respectfully, manage to avoid serious involvement with drugs and alcohol, and do not overreact to minor rejections by their peers seems clearer and more compelling than whether they are good enough problem solvers.

## What Supports and Opportunities Must Communities Provide for Youth?

The framework asserts that, for youth to learn to be productive, connected, and able to navigate, they have to experience a set of supports and opportunities that are the critical building blocks of development across all of the settings in which they spend their time (Box C). Research points to a short list of five key requirements associated with the capacities we expect young people to have in order to achieve our goals for them.



**1. Adequate nutrition, health and shelter:** This first developmental need stands alone as a necessary precondition for youth to benefit from the others. While every setting or organization may not be relevant to, or capable of, providing for these needs, they must be addressed if we expect young people to grow.

**2. Multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers:** Perhaps the most consistent and robust finding on human development is that experiencing support from the people in one's environment, from infancy on, has broad impacts on later functioning. Relationships with both adults and peers are the source of the emotional support, guidance, and instrumental help that are critical to young people's capacity to feel connected to others, navigate day-to-day life, and engage in productive activities.

**3. Challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences:** Adolescents need to experience a sense of growth and progress in developing skills and abilities. Whether in school, sports, arts, or a job, young people are engaged by—and benefit from—activities in which they experience an increasing sense of competence and productivity.

**4. Meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership:** As young people move into adolescence, they need ample opportunity to try on the adult roles for which they are preparing. They need to make age-appropriate decisions for themselves and others: deciding what activities to participate in; choosing responsible alternatives; and taking part in setting classroom, team, and organization policies. They also need to have others depend on them through formal and informal roles. In order to develop a sense of connectedness and productivity, and to begin making decisions from a perspective that is less egocentric, young people also need to participate in groups of interconnected members, such as their families, clubs, teams, churches, and other organizations that afford opportunities for youth to take on responsibilities. They also need to experience themselves as individuals who have something of value to contribute. When healthy opportunities to belong are not found in their environments, young people will create less healthy versions, such as cliques and gangs.

**5. Physical and emotional safety:** Finally, young people need to experience physical and emotional safety in their daily lives. With these supports, young people are able to confidently explore their full range of options for becoming productive and connected; and, when they experience challenges to navigate, they can focus their full attention on meeting these challenges.

These five supports and opportunities are the lens through which a community should first examine its ecology to identify the resources available in the lives of its young people. They are also the standards of practice to which individual organizations and programs working with youth should commit themselves, and against which they should document their accomplishments.

### **What Strategies Can Communities Pursue?**

We suggest three strategies that communities can implement to increase supports and opportunities for youth across the major settings in which they spend time: family and neighborhood, schools and other public institutions, and gap period settings (before and after school, on weekends, holidays, and summer). A fourth community strategy calls for policy and resource realignments to support the first three strategies. Applying a youth development approach to a wide range of settings is essential if we are to achieve meaningful change in a broad and diverse population of youth at the community level.

What must a community do to deliver the goods?

### **1. Strengthen the capacities of community adults (parents, families, primary caregivers, neighbors, and employers).**

We cannot “program” or “service” young people into healthy development. Providing specific programs and high-quality youth services are key strategies for optimizing youth development outcomes; but without caregivers, neighbors, and employers of young people providing the supports and opportunities at home, in their neighborhoods, and where they work, our impact on the lives of a community's youth will be minimal.

Any honest community effort to increase supports and opportunities in the everyday lives of adolescents will, and should, inevitably bump against the sensitive question of how to deal with families and family issues. The case for including families in youth development approaches is clear: the family is the single most critical source of support, encouragement, moral development, love and sustenance for a young person. In recent years, there has been increasing recognition that parents need support as they work to raise their children. Most supportive interventions and policies have, to date, focused on the parents of young children. However, parents of adolescents are in as much need of support as are the parents of young children, especially in disadvantaged communities where networks and resources for children from 10 to 18 are particularly thin.

Optimizing adult support of youth will also have to involve neighbors as well as employers of youth. Communities will need to understand and then build on youth's often casual but sometimes crucial contacts with neighbors and on their early work experiences to increase the supports and opportunities available to them.

### **2. Reform and integrate the large institutions and systems that affect young people.**

Reforming and coordinating public institutions have proved formidable challenges, which the field has usually sidestepped. The most glaring example is public education. However, some major educational reform efforts are using the supports and opportunities included in this framework—or conditions closely related to them—as guideposts to rethink and redo how schools work.

Beyond schools, juvenile justice as a system, and as it is practiced in communities, bears directly on the lives of many young people— young people whose development is most seriously devoid of support and opportunities, and who are least likely to gain access to traditional, youth-serving organizations that currently define our field of practice. Other public institutions and policies touch youth through separated funding streams that originate at federal and state levels (welfare, housing, drug and alcohol treatment) and end up in many communities being unorganized, unstrategic, and underfunded. Seldom do these institutions build from a coherent recognition of what needs to be done to support youth. They respond most of all to the dictates of funders and must constantly order their work and priorities to keep their funding, even when inadequate.

### **3. Increase the number and quality of developmental activities available for youth.**

Here is where our traditional definition of the youth development field (as activities which happen during the “gap” period) fits into this unifying framework. Stronger and more widespread supports for youth outside their homes, schools, social service, and work experiences are essential to optimize youth development outcomes. Key to this strategy will be a full assessment of the supports and opportunities available in gap periods to all youth and particularly to youth who are hard to reach. Also key will be the capacity of the organizations currently providing these activities to absorb expanded responsibilities for youth different from those currently served.

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### 4. Realign policies and resources in the public and private sectors to support the implementation of the strategies described above.

Without policy supports from the municipal, state, and federal governments, the youth development field will remain marginalized in its efforts to affect youth development outcomes. Our framework broadens the field's purview to incorporate family supports, neighborhood revitalization, and institutional reform as well as expanded youth development programming and activities. Common sense, if not scientific research, makes it clear that public policies will have to be realigned if this expanded set of strategies is to have any chance of being implemented. Policy should support thoughtful, innovative, and rigorous proposals by community shareholders for providing supports and opportunities to youth in all settings in which they grow up. These proposals can include recommendations for policy realignments at the state and federal levels to support the proposed community strategies.

Results-free resource allocations of the past haunt current efforts to marshal resources for new initiatives. Therefore, policy makers will need evidence early on that existing resources are being realigned to begin implementing these three sets of community strategies.

It seems clear that implementing all four strategies—and doing each better—is crucial. The price for our communities and our country will be high if we continue to promise meaningful change in the life chances of young people—particularly for those living in economically disadvantaged areas—and fail to tackle this full range of strategies. First, if we continue to tinker around the edges of these young people's lives, community-level outcomes for youth will not meaningfully improve. This failure will only deepen the cynicism of investors in youth development, including among the participants themselves, and make future investments more difficult to obtain. Second, the final fall-out of this “big goals, little intervention” approach will be further entrenchment of “blame the victim” scenarios in some professional, community, and policy quarters.

The framework provides even the smallest, most targeted program with the same expectation experienced by its larger, more heavily funded brethren—the supports and opportunities they all seek to provide their youth. These ideas can be a useful lens through which all practitioners can critically view and then improve their own practices. At the same time, the framework encourages small and focused players in our field to look outside their immediate purview and find ways to connect their work to other community settings and shareholders that touch their youth's lives.

### Bringing the Community Together

By definition, realignment of political, economic and human resources toward new and better youth development practices means some old practices and policies will have to go. For adults living and working with youth, for public institutions and for community-based organizations that serve adolescents and their families, making these choices and living with their personal and political consequences will not be an easy task. Therefore, these choices and their associated risks cannot be delegated or assigned to any single community stakeholder group.

Communities will need mobilization efforts to create conditions that encourage all shareholders to work together. In this framework (Box E), we have identified four conditions that mobilization efforts should seek to achieve to launch and sustain implementation of the community strategies. First, there must be a sense of urgency

among all shareholders, a feeling that something you care about is very wrong and must be made right. Second, shareholders must believe that these changes are achievable. Success stories have to be told and believed, and credible evidence of the efficacy of these strategies must be made available in compelling ways. Third, people asked to risk their comfort with the status quo have to see others doing the same; they have to sense equity in the pain and gain of change. Finally, before individual and institutional shareholders put themselves on the line, they will have to believe that business as usual can, in fact, be changed.

Creating these conditions is a tall order, but we believe that activities focused on building stakeholders' awareness, knowledge, engagement, and commitment to the story this framework tells can work. For example, shareholders who see the gap between where youth are and where they need to be can create a sense of urgency. Stakeholders who interact with youth and adults in other communities like theirs, where their concerted efforts are closing this gap, gain a sense of possibility that this can also happen in their community. Achieving a sense of equity requires shareholders across existing power relationships to engage in honest discussions about what they can do individually and collectively to implement these community strategies, the risks involved in doing so and the supports that will be needed from each other to pull it off. Finally, change of this kind only becomes inevitable when key stakeholders—those who control political and financial resources in the community and those who have immediate and persistent impact on the lives of youth—jointly agree that the risk/reward ratio makes business as usual the more painful option.

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### Suggested Reading

Gambone, M.A., Klem, A.M., & Connell, J.P. (2002). *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*. Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc. and Institute for Research and Reform in Education. Available on the Youth Development Strategies, Inc. Web site ([www.ydsi.org](http://www.ydsi.org)).