Youth Thrive™ Framework and Trauma Informed Care

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This multi-year initiative examines how foster youth can be supported in ways that advance healthy development and well-being and reduce the impact of negative life experiences.

Not surprisingly, vulnerable youth encounter more challenges to reaching a healthy and satisfying adulthood than their more advantaged counterparts. Exposure to violence and maltreatment, lack of consistent or nurturing relationships and involvement in public systems such as foster care or juvenile justice all entail significant and potentially life-altering impacts on the positive transition to adulthood.

New research suggests that traumatic effects on brain development may play more of a role than previously understood in causing negative outcomes for youth. Established research on how to promote positive youth development and help youth grow into mature, successful adults; combined with insights from emerging research in neuroscience and brain development, provide an opportunity for fresh thinking on improved adult outcomes for at-risk youth. Over the last decade, there has been a growing conviction in communities, child welfare and other child-serving fields as to the
importance for practitioners addressing not only risk factors that jeopardize a child’s prospects for a secure life (for example, family violence) but also protective factors (for example, good pre-natal health) that round out the intervention picture.

Two of Youth Thrives™ many goals:

1. To give child welfare agencies and their partners a way to translate the federal mandate for child well-being into actions that will secure the healthy development of youth in foster care. CSSP has examined the research knowledge-base to identify protective and promotive factors that build healthy development and well-being for youth as they move through adolescence into adulthood. The synthesis of the research and the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors Framework will be shared with the field, and hopefully used to fashion policies, programs and interventions that promote health and well-being. CSSP anticipates creating tools and trainings for practitioners working with at-risk youth, parents, foster parents and relatives caring for youth, group homes and other facilities and child welfare agencies.

2. To disseminate this information to parents, caregivers, families and communities so that they will better understand how they - in their respective roles - can prioritize healthy development for young people to grow into successful, productive and caring members of society.

CSSP believes Youth Thrive™ will help yield a greater alignment of knowledge, principles of support and policy and practice in the field. Ultimately, the hope is that the developmental needs of young people involved in the child welfare system will be better attended to, and that these youth will receive the supports and experiences necessary to ensure enhanced opportunities for productive and secure lives.
Having accurate knowledge of adolescent development is critically important because beliefs about youth influence perceptions and treatment of young people. For example, many parents believe all risk-taking is bad and will lead to undesirable, dangerous or deadly outcomes. Parents who hold this belief may discourage or try to prevent their youth from taking any risks. However, numerous studies distinguish between negative risk-taking (e.g., drinking and driving, having unprotected sex) and positive risk-taking (e.g., running for student council president, playing team sports). Behaviors that are considered to be positive risk-taking are risky because they involve the possibility of failure. Current research finds youth who challenge themselves by taking positive risks are more likely to avoid negative risks and to achieve healthy, favorable outcomes and thrive. Furthermore, positive risk-taking helps youth learn how to win and lose, supports identity development and boosts self-esteem and self-confidence. Thus, positive risk-taking should not only be allowed, it should be encouraged.

Thus, parents, adults who work with youth and young people themselves can benefit from increasing their knowledge and understanding about adolescent development. Gaining more knowledge about adolescent development is particularly important given the recent advances in the fields of neuroscience and developmental psychology. Scientists in these fields have provided much evidence about the complex neurobiological changes that take place during the teenage years and into the mid-20s, as well as the structural and functional differences between adolescent and adult brains. Understanding the nature of adolescent brain development is essential in promoting healthy outcomes in youth. Research has shown that the adolescent brain develops unevenly. Structures and functions that contribute to emotions—such as fear, anger and pleasure—develop in early adolescence, but abilities such as thinking ahead, balancing risks and rewards and controlling impulses are still evolving well into early adulthood. This developmental timing gap may explain why some youth choose to engage in sensation-seeking behaviors and to make decisions based on feelings rather than logic. In addition, some youth have developmental histories marked by poor relationships, environments that create toxic stress, involvement in institutions that are not aligned with their developmental needs or personal trauma. These circumstances and experiences negatively impact youths' innate developmental transitions and, therefore, impede the course of healthy development. But the adolescent brain is adaptable and shaped by experience. When youth have support and guidance from caring and encouraging adults, these experiences can help youth acquire the competencies needed for a healthy transition to adulthood.

Knowledge of other aspects of adolescent development is needed as well, including: signs indicating a youth may have a trauma history and needs special help; cultural factors that influence the perceptions of youth; and factors that promote or inhibit healthy youth outcomes. Furthermore, as youth prepare for the transition to adulthood, research studies demonstrate they need guidance about and experiences that enable them to:

- Adjust to and accept their changing body
- Make decisions about sexual behavior
- Engage in healthy behaviors such as exercising within one’s physical means
- Engage in positive risk-taking and avoid negative risk-taking
- Build and sustain healthy relationships with peers and adults
- Develop abstract thinking and improved problem solving skills
- Forge a personally satisfying identity, including what and who one would like to become
- Gain independence from parents and other adults while maintaining strong connections with them
- Engage in socially responsible behavior such as volunteerism and community service
- Identify productive interests, develop realistic goals and seek to excel
- Develop mature values and behavioral controls used to assess acceptable and unacceptable behaviors
- Understand one’s personal developmental history and needs
- Learn to manage stress, including learning from failure
- Deepen cultural knowledge
- Explore spirituality
- Learn essential life skills such as financial management and conflict resolution

Adolescence is a unique developmental period. It is essential to understand the science of adolescent development and to apply this knowledge when developing programs and policies that are designed to help youth acquire the competencies that set them on a path toward healthy outcomes in adulthood.
In their search for identity, purpose and direction, youth need to feel connected to someone or something in order to thrive. Youth need people, inside and outside of their family, who care about them; who can be non-judgmental listeners; who they can turn to for well-informed guidance and advice; who they can call on for help in solving problems; who encourage them and promote high expectations; and who set developmentally appropriate limits, rules and monitoring.

Youth also need to be constructively engaged in social institutions—like schools, religious communities and recreational facilities—that are safe, stable and equitable. Social institutions provide support for youths’ intellectual, social, emotional, moral and physical development, and provide opportunities to participate in organized activities like academic enrichment, sports, social clubs, support groups, volunteering and the labor force. Social institutions also offer opportunities for youth to “give back” to their community.

Social connections—people and institutions—help youth increase their knowledge and develop their skills, have a sense of belonging and find meaning in their lives. Thus, the availability and quality of social connections are important considerations in the lives of all youth because they are anchoring forces that provide:

- **emotional support** (e.g., affirming good problem-solving skills or being empathic)
- **informational support** (e.g., providing guidance about changes from puberty, applying to college or entering the workforce)
- **instrumental support** (e.g., providing transportation or financial assistance)
- **spiritual support** (e.g., providing affirmation, hope and encouragement)

When youth have a sense of connectedness to peers and adults they feel loved, wanted and valued; they have people who care about them as individuals now and who care what happens to them in the future; they feel secure and confident that they can share the joy, pain and uncertainties that come with being an adolescent; and they tend to seek timely assistance and resources from people they have learned to count on when faced with challenges.

Close peer relationships are extremely important for healthy development during adolescence. The adolescent peer group provides a context for youth to achieve two essential, related tasks: develop and express independence and develop their own identity differentiated from their family. Identity includes a youth’s self-concept (i.e., beliefs about oneself), self-esteem (i.e., positive or negative feelings about oneself) and a sense of who one is (including gender, race, culture and socioeconomic status). A sense of independence includes:

- **emotional autonomy** - relinquishing primary dependence on parents and forging a more mature relationship with parents or other trusted adults

Conversely, research shows a lack of close peer relationships is associated with a range of poor outcomes in adolescence and adulthood such as delinquency, poor academic performance, poor social skills and mental health problems. Also, in contrast to the commonly held belief that parents’ influence is overshadowed by the adolescent peer group, numerous research studies affirm the meaningful role that parents and other caring adults continue to play in the lives of young people; find that youth who feel close and attached to at least one caring adult are psychologically healthier than peers who feel detached; and demonstrate that being connected to a trusted adult serves as a buffer against many types of health risks including depression, early sexual activity, violence and alcohol and marijuana use.

Studies have also found that in order for youth to have a sense of connectedness to a social institution, they must perceive the social institution as safe and believe that at least one adult associated with the institution is fair, cares about them both as a member of a group (e.g., student/team player/band member/congregant) and as an individual, and wants them to succeed. Researchers found similar buffering effects from being connected to a social institution as being connected to other people. For example, the presence of and participation in an active, school-sanctioned support group was found to be correlated with lower rates of depression and suicide attempts in LGBT youth. Conversely, when young people feel isolated, socially excluded or disconnected from social institutions, they may experience a range of negative reactions from lack of self-confidence to increased likelihood of suicidal thoughts.

It may seem that increasing the number of people who could provide constructive social support to youth would be the “cure” for social isolation and feelings of disconnectedness. Providing opportunities for youth to create sustainable, positive social connections is necessary but alone is not sufficient. Youth can feel lonely and isolated even when surrounded by others if relationships lack emotional depth and genuine acceptance. What is essential is that these opportunities must support a sense of connectedness between the youth and at least one other that be. New relationships should engender emotional, informational, instrumental or spiritual support so that meaningful discourse and healthy development may occur in a context of mutual trust and respect.
Adolescence is a period marked by significant neurological, physical, emotional, social and cognitive developmental transitions. Youths’ preparation for and success at navigating these transitions is influenced by their earlier developmental histories, experiences and perceptions as well as the nature and impact of their current relationships, contexts and circumstances. Youth need nurturing adult support, positive peer relationships and wholesome experiences to help them navigate these transitions, to develop cognitive and social-emotional competence and to thrive in life.

Cognitive competence and social-emotional competence are essential developmental tasks in adolescence because they lay the foundation for forming an independent identity and having a productive, responsible and satisfying adulthood. The interrelated components of cognitive and social-emotional competence include:

- **Executive functioning:**
  - cognitive flexibility - seeing alternate solutions to problems and being able to shift perspective
  - future orientation - thinking about the potential consequences of one's behavior and choices
  - cognitive self-regulation - exercising control over thinking
  - emotional self-regulation - exercising control over feelings
  - behavioral self-regulation - staying on task even in the face of distractions
  - planning - having a goal and using reasoning to develop a strategy
  - working memory - following instructions sequentially and holding information in mind while engaging in another activity

- **Self-awareness** - a growing understanding about one's developmental history and needs
- **Self-concept** - a stable positive identity
- **Self-esteem** - overall good feelings about oneself
- **Self-efficacy** - realistic beliefs about one's capabilities
- **Self-compassion** - being kind to oneself when confronted with personal failings and suffering
- **Self-improvement and mastery** - committing to and preparing to achieve productive goals
- **Personal agency** - taking responsibility for one's self and one's decisions and having confidence to overcome obstacles
- **Character strengths** (e.g., persistence, hard work, gratitude, respect, integrity)
- **Positive emotions** (e.g., joy, love, hope, optimism, trust, faith, compassion)

The primary role of adolescents is that of a student. Thus, in addition to the family, the school is a primary context for cultivating youths' cognitive and social-emotional competencies, for understanding how these competencies impact academic outcomes and for working with youth who have cognitive and social-emotional difficulties. Ideally, within nurturing and responsive family, school and community contexts, youth are afforded opportunities to tap into their interests; explore and come to grips with their personal, gender and cultural identity; seek more independence and responsibility; think more about values and morals; try new experiences; and strive to reach their full potential.

However, when youth have a history of early trauma or are in families, communities or schools that are unstable, dangerous or persistently under-resourced, they may not have these opportunities and may be at greater risk for poor school performance; impaired or negative social relations; anger, acting-out and aggressive behaviors; and mental health problems.

It should be noted that experiencing challenges and adversity does not necessarily predict poor outcomes for youth. There is increasing evidence that having experiences that promote cognitive and social-emotional competencies helps to reduce the likelihood of youth developing problems and increase the likelihood of good outcomes despite threats to healthy development.
All youth need help sometimes—help with homework, with figuring out the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, with considering their next steps after high school. But when youth are faced with very trying circumstances such as foster care, homelessness, substance abuse or trauma, they need access to concrete support and services that address their needs and help to minimize the stress caused by very difficult challenges and adversity. Assisting youth to identify, find and receive concrete support in times of need helps to ensure they receive the basic necessities everyone deserves in order to grow and thrive (e.g., healthy food, a safe and protective environment), as well as specialized academic, psychoeducational, health, mental health, social, legal or employment services.

When youth are faced with overwhelmingly stressful conditions they need to seek help, but for some youth asking for help is not an easy thing to do. It may be embarrassing because the services needed have a stigma associated with them such as special education programs, domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters or mental health clinics. Other youth may believe they do not have the right to ask for help, or that asking for help is a childish act, will put others in control of their lives or will cause more problems. Thus, youth-serving programs must clearly communicate that seeking help is not a shameful or immature act, nor does it mean completely relinquishing control. On the contrary, Asking for help is a form of self-advocacy; that is, speaking-up and taking responsibility for oneself and one’s needs. Self-advocacy is a key characteristic of becoming an adult. Seeking help, then, is a step toward improving one’s circumstances and learning to better manage stress and function well—even when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma. When youth ask for help and receive guidance about navigating the complex web of medical, mental health and social service systems, these are steps toward building resilience.

Given the recent advances in the fields of neuroscience and developmental psychology, service providers must be aware of and take into account the neurological, biological, social, emotional and psychological transitions that take place during the adolescent developmental period. In addition, service providers must be able to sensitively andcompetently address some of the “hard topics” associated with this developmental period such as gender identity and becoming sexually active.

Furthermore, when youth receive help, it should be provided in a manner that does not increase stress. Support and services should be coordinated, respectful, caring and strengths-based. Strengths-based practice with youth is grounded in the beliefs that:

- It is essential to forge a trusting relationship between youth and service providers so that youth feel physically and emotionally safe
- Regardless of the number or level of adverse conditions youth are experiencing, they have assets within and around them, their family or their community that can be called upon to help mitigate the impact of stressful conditions and to create needed change
- Youth have unrealized resources and competencies that must be identified, mobilized and appreciated
- Youth must be active participants in the change process and not passive recipients of services

In addition to addressing each youth’s individual difficulties, strengths-based practitioners must understand—and work to change—the structural inequalities and conditions that contribute to the young person’s difficulties

Youth who experience a strengths-based approach when they seek help feel valued because they are acknowledged as knowledgeable and competent. They develop a sense of independence, self-confidence and self-efficacy because they have opportunities to build their skills, experience success and strive to reach their full potential. Thus, access to concrete support in times of need must be accompanied by a quality of service coordination and delivery that is designed to preserve youths’ dignity; provide opportunities for skill development; and promote healthy development, resilience and the ability to advocate for and receive needed services and resources.
Adolescence can be a very happy and exciting developmental period. But it can also have its share of stress. The stress that youth experience, like the stress that individuals experience at any stage of development, is caused by the pressures (stressors) that are placed on them and can come from many sources:

- **Typical events and life changes** (e.g., taking a drivers exam or physical changes)
- **Unexpected events** (e.g., parents divorcing or being in a car accident)
- **Individual factors** (e.g., substance abuse or the youth’s trauma history)
- **Interpersonal factors** (e.g., bullying at school, relationship problems or feelings of loneliness and isolation)
- **Community, societal or environmental conditions** (e.g., school violence, racism, homophobia or being placed in foster care)

Numerous researchers have concluded that how youth respond to stressors is much more important than the stressor itself in determining their outcomes. Youth are more likely to achieve healthy, favorable outcomes and to thrive if they are resilient. **Resilience** is the process of managing stress and functioning well even when faced with adversity and trauma.

Some stressors youth face can be easily managed so that problems get resolved; for example, working with a tutor when additional help is needed to understand schoolwork. But some stressors cannot be easily resolved. Youth cannot “fix” their parents’ broken relationship, erase the abuse they suffered or be able to move out of a crime-plagued neighborhood. Rather, youth are resilient when they are able to call forth their inner strength to positively meet challenges, manage adversities, heal the effects of trauma and thrive if they are resilient. **Resilience is the process of managing stress and functioning well even when faced with adversity and trauma.**

Furthermore, demonstrating resilience helps youth to internalize the belief that their lives are important and meaningful. Thus, they can envision and conscientiously work with purpose and optimism toward future possibilities for themselves.

Brain research shows that some experience in managing stress, including learning from failure, is important for healthy youth development and well-being. Youth who have never had to address challenges or have never experienced failure are not fully prepared for adulthood. But sometimes the pressures youth face are so overwhelming that their ability to manage stress is severely compromised. This is the case with youth who grow up in environments that create toxic stress; that is, youth who experience strong, frequent and prolonged adversity without the buffering protection of nurturing adult support. Toxic stress can disrupt brain development, and adolescence is the developmental period in which the long-term effects of earlier experiences of toxic stress become most evident—such as patterns of disconnected relationships, difficulty interpreting others’ emotions and problems controlling one’s thoughts and actions.

There is increasing evidence, however, that the effects of **toxic stress** can be mitigated by experiences that help to build youths’ resilience. Experiences that:

- foster a consistent relationship with at least one safe, caring, reliable and competent adult who promotes high expectations and encourages self-improvement
- provide opportunities for productive decision-making and constructive engagement in their family, community, school and other social institutions
- encourage adolescent voice, choice and personal responsibility
- promote the development of self-regulation, self-reflection, self-confidence, self-compassion and character

Research studies show that in addition to helping youth who experienced toxic stress to manage responses to their histories of adversity, these experiences help to build all youths’ resilience so that they are on a developmental trajectory toward healthy, positive outcomes.
### Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence Characteristics Worksheet

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Increasing Willingness to Seek Support

Examine your beliefs and attitudes about adolescents

Our attitudes toward young people can invite youth participation or drive it away. Are youth seen as active partners in their services or as passive recipients of our services? Young people are incredibly skilled at reading adults and can quickly figure out if they are welcomed and respected or merely tolerated and expected to fail.

Work from a strengths based perspective

Regardless of what issues the young person is facing, they have assets within them, their family, their culture, and community that can be accessed to support them during times of high stress. All young people have unrealized resources and competencies that need to be recognized and appreciated. Reminding youth of their progress and praising successes can help boost confidence and prevent them from becoming overwhelmed.

Understand the issues of those you serve

Adolescents are faced with a variety of difficult topics that can be uncomfortable to address. While young people may feel more comfortable seeking information from peers, they realize adults may have the information they really need. We must find ways to let young people know we are willing and able to provide information regarding hard topics like mental health, sexual orientation, gender identity, community violence, or substance use. If we, as providers, can’t competently and sensitively assist with these concerns, young people will certainly feel less confident in our ability to help with the other issues they face.

Safety first

Until youth experience a sense of safety, it is difficult to accept and take in any of the help we have to offer. Taking time to examine not only the physical safety of your programs and services, but to truly consider the emotional safety needs of each youth will build trusting relationships. Keep in mind that we can’t assume our services are safe simply because we think they are. Engaging young people in defining what safety means for them can provide a sense of personal control in a situation that may feel uncontrollable. It is important to help set boundaries they are comfortable with and use these as a framework for working together. Remember young people are likely to push against these boundaries to test how safe we truly are. It may mean that the young person starts and stops with us a few times. We need to respect this need and make sure the young person always knows the door is open when they are ready and able to start again.
Engage youth as helpers

Capitalizing on the fact that adolescents are more comfortable with those their own age and think about using peers to distribute information about supports that are available. It’s helpful for youth to have access to others their own age who are experiencing similar situations and hearing what has and hasn’t worked for them. Seeing someone their age representing your program may lessen the stigma that adolescents may have regarding seeking help.

Be flexible and available

It’s hard enough to ask for help and when we make our services so difficult to access, young people will be less willing to seek assistance. At a minimum, we should find ways to meet young people where they are most comfortable, in their neighborhood or school for example, and provide access to supportive resources outside of traditional office hours. One way we can provide that support is to show we are willing to utilize technology as a means to stay in contact. Demonstrating we are familiar and comfortable with this important part of young people’s life can help engage youth in a manner they understand. Young people are less interested in traditional methods of service delivery like sitting and talking about issues in your office and are drawn to less traditional methods of services delivery. Providing more activity-oriented opportunities, like sports and exercise, service-learning, and other hands-on activities can actually help young people recognize the benefit of services, which in turn increases the likelihood they will return if support is needed again.

Provide a different experience

Begin with getting to know the youth, not their problem. Let them know what they can expect from you and your program, instead of handing them a handbook filled with program rules and expectations they need to meet in order to access services. Make sure youth understand your role, how you can help, and the limits of confidentiality. Many young people accessing services have had a great deal of experience with adults, programs, and services offering help. Unless our approach looks different, their experience will tell them we are just another adult in a long line of “helpers” that don’t really help.
Characteristics of Resilient Youth...

Have close supportive connections with trusted family, friends, teachers, and other adults in the community

Generally view self in a positive light and can recognize they possess strengths and abilities

Are aware of their emotional responses to situations and can modulate their arousal and manage impulses

Possess strong communication skills; they know how to express themselves and listen to others

Have confidence in their ability to solve problems they encounter

Have the ability to tolerate and manage stress

They understand they do not have all the answers and feel confident in their ability to locate resources and ask for help and assistance

See themselves as resilient and not as a victim

Practice good self-care habits and have a number of healthy coping skills to use in a variety of situations

Experience themselves as a resource for others and can contribute to their family, friends, school, or community

Can separate themselves from their adversity and have a positive outlook for their future despite circumstances

Adapted from *This Emotional Life*, co-production of the NOVA/WGBH Science Unit and Vulcan Productions, Inc. 2009.
Self-Reflection and Planning

Identify specific ways you are using Youth Thrive™ concepts in your current practice.

What opportunities do you see for expanding your use of the Youth Thrive™ concepts?

What is one action you can take when you get back to your work?