World Leisure Journal
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwle20

Positive Youth Development Practices in Recreation Settings in the United States
Peter A. Witt\textsuperscript{a b} & John L. Crompton\textsuperscript{c}
\textsuperscript{a} Bradberry Recreation and Youth Development
\textsuperscript{b} Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences Texas A&M University, 2261 TAMU, College Station, TX, 77843-2261 Phone: 979-845-7325 E-mail:
\textsuperscript{c} Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences Texas A&M University, 2261 TAMU, College Station, TX, 77843-2261 E-mail:
Published online: 11 Mar 2011.

To cite this article: Peter A. Witt & John L. Crompton (2003) Positive Youth Development Practices in Recreation Settings in the United States, World Leisure Journal, 45:2, 4-11, DOI: 10.1080/04419057.2003.9674311
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/04419057.2003.9674311

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Positive Youth Development
Practices in Recreation Settings in
the United States

Peter A. Witt, John L. Crompton
Texas A&M University

Abstract

Recreation programs sponsored by park and recreation departments in the United State are mov-
ing beyond simply offering programs designed to reduce at-risk youth deficit behaviors to ap-
proaches that include the broader focus of positive youth development for all youth. Using the
Developmental Assets Model and the Protective Factors/Resiliency framework, language and prac-
tice are moving from a “fun and games” approach to one that includes supplying the supports and
opportunities necessary to enable youth to thrive. Building on ideas such as “Problem free is not
fully prepared” and “Fully prepared is not fully engaged,” programs have been paying more atten-
tion to services that do more than reduce violence, problem use of drugs and alcohol, and unpro-
tected sex among adolescents, to approaches emphasizing young people and families as partners
in shaping and delivering services; developing comprehensive service systems that encompass
home, school and non-school settings; along with serving the needs of all youth in the community,
not just those labeled at-risk. In this paper these approaches to services are described along with
case examples of how selected communities are applying these principles in their youth work efforts.

Keywords: Youth development, developmental assets, resiliency, empowerment

Increases in negative youth behaviors in the
United States in the 1980s led to calls to ‘do
something’ to stop or reduce youth’s abusing
alcohol and drugs; engaging in unprotected
sex; having children out of wedlock or before
teens were ready to be responsible parents;
and being involved in or the victim of gang vio-
lence. These concerns led to the redefinition
and refinement of programs sponsored by
city sponsored park and recreation programs
(PARDs) for ‘at-risk’ youth.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, PARD pro-
grams began to expand their focus to move be-
ond simply offering programs designed to re-
duce negative behaviors to embracing a more
broadly conceived youth development frame-
work that encompassed services for all youth,
not just those considered “at-risk.” Positive
Youth Development (PYD) as a philosophic framework and system of principles is increasingly the paradigm driving the development of programs and services in the United States.

The Rationale for a Broader Approach

Research findings suggest that deficit reduction approaches to lessening youth problems have generally 'produced weak, transient or no results' (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2001, p.1), because deficit reduction efforts alone are too limited. Thus, efforts must be made to create organizations and communities that enable youth to move along the pathways to adulthood by supplying the supports and opportunities necessary to develop services beyond those that only deal with issues of problem prevention. As Gambone et al. (2001) have noted:

At the center of this thinking [is] the idea that young people are assets in the making – their development dependent on a range of supports and opportunities coming from family, community and the other institutions that touch them. When supports and opportunities are plentiful, young people can and do thrive; when their environments are deficient or depleted, youth tend not to grow and progress. (Pp. 1-2)

Thus, an ecological approach to development is required for PYD to be successful.

The Search Institute’s Development Assets Model (http://www.search-institute.org) emerged from efforts to operationalize these goals. The Development Assets Model has provided a powerful tool for mobilizing communities to identify and build the internal and external supports necessary for youth to grow along the pathway to adulthood.

The changing understanding of the mission of youth services from a deficit to an assets approach is similar to the debate that emerged in the 1980s in the health field. Initially health was defined as the absence of illness. However, concerns arose that in order for a person to achieve quality of life, more than being free of illness was necessary. Efforts were made to find ways to enhance health through better diet, more exercise, better relationships with others, and expansion of interests and abilities. Creating a healthy lifestyle was added to reducing illness as the twin goals of medicine.

Interestingly, advocacy for adoption of the principles of positive youth development is not totally new. Since the late 1800s, interest in moving youth work beyond a fun and games approach to one that more fully encompasses youth development and social group work principles has wax and waned based on society’s concerns about negative youth behaviors or the desire to accomplish specific developmental goals. For example, the roots of social group work are in the efforts of Jane Adams at Hull House (Adaams, 1969), and the many reformers active in the settlement house movement. Immigration and migration, urbanization and industrialization spawned the playground movement (which eventually became the park and recreation movement), and a number of youth serving organizations that are still in operation today, e.g., Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Girl Scouts, YMCA andYWCA youth programs, and Boys Clubs (now Boys and Girls Clubs) (Kett, 1977).

Unfortunately, since that period, interest in youth issues has fluctuated as a function of the level of negative youth behaviors and the degree of public concern with such behaviors. What is new about the current positive youth development movement is its attempt to anchor youth services in a developmental rather than a deficit reduction framework. While efforts to reduce negative behaviors must be undertaken, the positive youth development paradigm seeks to increase the competency of all youth to meet the challenges of growing up.

Defining Positive Youth Development

While a number of PYD definitions have been proposed, the following appears to be useful for understanding the goals and content of PYD efforts:

YD is a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive YD addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models that focus solely on youth prob-
lems. (National Youth Development Information Center website, 2001).

The PYD paradigm recognizes that ‘Problem free is not fully prepared’ (Pittman, 2001). Thus, while we must work to reduce negative behaviors, efforts also need to be made to enable youth to develop the social, health (emotional and physical), vocational and civic competencies needed to be fully prepared (Pittman, 2001, p. 24). PYD moves us from simply undertaking short-term, quick fix solutions aimed at diminishing negative behaviors to long-term attention to development. While programs and communities must define the PYD approach to fit local circumstances, fundamental principles that should guide PYD practices include:

(i) “viewing young people and families as partners, rather than as clients, and involving them in designing and delivering programs and services;” (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws/im/im9708.htm; February 5, 2003);

(ii) developing a coherent system of supports, opportunities and services that encompass home, school, and non-school settings; and

(iii) devoting attention to the developmental needs of all youth in the community (all youth are ‘at-risk’). YD strategies, therefore, focus on giving young people the chance to exercise leadership, build skills, and become involved in their communities.

The PYD approach also acknowledges that helping young people requires strengthening families and communities (http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/fysb/FYSBprog.htm).

A 2002 report by the National Academy of Sciences identified 11 basic program elements that characterize programs that can contribute to asset building in youth (Figure 1). These elements are relevant to programs in all settings. The more of these elements that characterize programs, the more likely it is that the program can contribute to developing the supports, opportunities and services that promote PYD (National Academy of Sciences, p. 8).

What is most gratifying are the increasing number of programs that are built around the programmatic elements outlined in the National Academy of Sciences report and are driven by the philosophic principles listed above. In the park and recreation field in the United States, embracing a PYD paradigm is leading departments to:

- base programs on a strong philosophic underpinning such as the Developmental Assets Model;
- work in concert with youth on all aspects of program planning and design;
- increase collaborations with families, schools and other youth serving agencies; and
- increase service efforts beyond facility-based programs through instituting street worker/roving leader outreach programs.

In the following sections, examples of how elements of the park and recreation service delivery system are responding to these youth development imperatives are described.

### Developing a Rationale for Services

Several frameworks are being widely used to operationalize the PYD vision. They help delin-
Positive Youth Development Practices in Recreation Settings in the United States

create both the role of agencies in the overall PYD framework and the components that make up quality programs. The Developmental Assets Model and the Protective Factors/Resiliency Model (Jessor, 1992) are two of the more widely adopted models. The Developmental Assets model provides a framework for identifying and building the internal and external supports necessary for youth to grow positively into adulthood, while the protective factors/resiliency framework defines the elements necessary to enable youth to overcome risk factors in their lives.1

Aurora Library and Recreation Services Department (Colorado) has adopted the Developmental Assets Model for conceptualizing delivery of its youth services. Surveys are undertaken to determine which assets to promote through current programs and the additional programs that need to be developed to deliver other desired assets. Staff have developed three strategies for enhancing asset development. First, the intentionality of programming and training efforts was increased to enhance asset building. Second, working with smaller groups, and terminating or amending drop-in programs in favor of more structured activities increased the intensity of programs. Third, improvements in communication about assets to staff and parents were made in an effort to increase the number of adults who were consciously building assets.

In Austin, the Park and Recreation Department uses the Protective Factors Model to design and evaluate teen programs as part of the city’s Social Fabric Initiative. For example, the objectives of the Neighborhood Teen Program include: (a) provide opportunities for youth to gain help with difficult personal and family issues; (b) increase participants’ abilities to make positive choices about issues such as avoiding drug and alcohol usage, gang membership, and pregnancy; and (c) teach youth positive means for resolving conflicts.

Portland requires that all funded programs that are part of its Time For Kids Initiative be designed to contribute to one or more of the 10 Developmental Assets they deemed to be most important to Portland’s youth. The focus of most of the programs is on developing three assets: (a) academic achievement; (b) developing work and/or life skills; and (c) community involvement/community service.

The Developmental Assets and Protective Factors/Resiliency models are important for moving park and recreation programs beyond a “gym and swim” (fun and games) mentality, programs designed mainly to keep youth off the streets. While gym and swim programs and settings provide youth a place to go and things to do, full youth development is not a result of these efforts. Thus, the broader focus is moving toward building productive youth behaviors, rather than merely keeping them occupied. Agencies that cling to the “fun and games” orientation will fail to realize the funding potential that exists in their communities for the support of recreation services. They will also fail to position themselves as relevant to community efforts to develop a comprehensive system of PYD services. Agencies must move beyond a casual approach to programming to one that involves “intentionality,” what do we want to have happen and how are we going to make it happen? (McLaughlin, 2000).

If created intentionally and strategically, more supports for more youth in more neighborhoods constitute more pathways to success – pathways are diverse, wide and accessible enough for all youth to see, try and ultimately select from. These pathways offer the basic things young people need: people to talk to, places to go, and opportunities to explore. [These pathways] build the attitudes, skills, values and knowledge that young people need in a full range of areas from cognitive and vocational to personal and civic. (Pittman et al., 2000, p. 49)

Involving Youth

A prerequisite to youth programs delivering the instrumental outcomes that communities seek is that programs are sufficiently interesting and engaging that young people will participate. In developing programs, a gradual shift from centralized top-down decision-making by recreation professionals, to decentralized, youth-centered decision-making is occurring.

---

1 The examples cited in this paper are taken from Witt and Crompton (2002).
Too often youth feel that adults plan for them, rather than with them. Youth empowerment enables youth to take ownership and responsibility for their involvements. Empowerment includes involvement in both identification of problems and issues that programs should address, and the design and implementation of the programs themselves.

In a number of communities, youth summits have been held. The typical charge to these forums is to solicit broad community input to (i) identify youth needs in the community; (ii) recommend actions to meet these needs; and (iii) coordinate and mobilize community resources so the recommendations can be expedited. These vehicles have been effective in transitioning communities from the problem identification stage, to creating and organizing mechanisms to enable PYD. Over time, summits and task forces have increasingly seen youth involvement as integral to their success. Three examples follow.

In Kettering, Ohio, the Healthy Youth Task Force, established jointly by the City Council and Kettering School Board, furthered its agenda by convening three youth summits comprised of community and student leaders. Youth were integrally involved in identifying youth needs and formulating responses to address them. The summit process resulted in creation of a student youth council, STAND (Students Taking A New Direction). STAND members complete a “Pledge to Help” form and their mission is to provide services to the community, and positive social activities for youth. The summit process also led to hiring a Youth Development Coordinator, with STAND members playing a key role in the interviewing and hiring process.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee led to creation of a set of recommendations and actions to implement needed programs and services, together with a Charter of Teen Principles. A Chattanooga/Hamilton County (Tennessee) Youth Council – sponsored by the Chattanooga Parks, Recreation, Arts and Culture Department – played a central role in the evolution of Project Choices, which provides teens with constructive alternatives to hanging-out at a large local mall. The project was developed after teens who were unaccompanied by adults were banned from the city’s major shopping mall on Friday and Saturday nights.

In Phoenix, Arizona, as a follow-up to a youth summit, 25 teen councils were developed at recreation centers throughout the city. They meet weekly or bimonthly to plan recreation activities, trips, special events, and social community service programs with guidance from the professional recreation staff. Each council elects a member who attends the monthly meeting of the citywide Teen Parks and Recreation Board. The Board is responsible for development and implementation of an annual teen conference and citywide special events. A member of the citywide Board represents youth on the city’s Parks and Recreation Advisory Board.

In Richmond, British Columbia, the Youth Involved Process (YIP) was created to increase youth involvement. The YIP recognized that the process of planning, facilitating, implementing and evaluating was more important than merely participating in a program. Implementation of the YIP was designed to enhance the development of specific internal and external Developmental Assets. The shift from a direct delivery to a facilitative role was challenging for staff since it required a change in philosophy, work plans, job expectations and desired outcomes. Training was undertaken to help staff adopt to a process vs. activity-based model, and efforts were made to create the kind of working conditions that would encourage staff to work with the program over a period of time, thus enabling the development of long term relationships leading to increases in trust and respect between the staff and the teens.

Expanding the Service Model

PYD is multi-faceted, and requires a multi-dimensional response to be successful. Thus, recreation professionals have been required to adopt different modes of operation, and acquire a new knowledge base and skills. The former Director of the Phoenix Parks, Recreation, and Library Department observed:

“My staff say they are becoming counselors and social workers. That’s fine, I believe we should be. We have always done this, but there is much more emphasis on it now...
than there has been in a couple of decades. My philosophy is that if a young man comes in on drugs or a young woman comes in who is pregnant, we have to help. Young women come to my female staff and say ‘I’m pregnant, will you come home with me and help me talk to my mom.’ They are scared, so of course we help. We respond as best we can to whatever they need. I would not have a problem with my Department being called a Department of Community Services. Our job is to make young people whole in any way we can, and offering wholesome recreation activities is only one aspect of that. It’s a way of reaching them and gives us an opportunity to help them straighten out other parts of their lives.” (Witt & Crompton, 2002, p. 114)

Increasingly PARD programs include after-school tutoring, community service, job training, leadership development, health education, and the development of social skills. Often, existing staff are not equipped to direct such programs. Park and recreation programs, along with other youth service providers “have been criticized for providing safe and enjoyable opportunities but not meeting participants’ developmental needs. Often, connections to academic content are weak, skill development is not systematic, youth capacities are not fully engaged, and long-term relationships between adults and youth frequently do not develop” (Kahne et. al., 2001)

Hence, PARDs are recognizing the need to be an integral part of a larger PYD initiative, viewing their role as being part of a system that holistically serves youth, rather than being parachically concerned only with their recreational needs. According to the Director of Parks and Recreation in Columbus, Indiana:

“There was a long established, pervasive sentiment among leadership of all sectors in Columbus, Indiana, that they should view the community as ‘one big circle with no boxes.’ We do not view ourselves as existing in independent silos! We believe there is nothing we cannot do in our community for youth with the resources we have, but it means each organization has to get past the notion of protecting its turf. People have to learn to do that, and in some cases they are reluctant.” (Witt & Crompton, 2002, p. 81)

PARDs also seek to supply services on a residual basis, filling niches not available from other youth program suppliers. PARD personnel invariably have extensive networks that can be mobilized to meet youth needs, so they are able to be effective facilitators in bringing PYD agencies together to develop a community-wide service plan. Perhaps the most frequently cited aphorism in PYD is the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Recreation service providers must be perceived as part of the village. The Director of Portland (Oregon) Parks and Recreation observed that: “This is the chance for us to demonstrate the full value of who we are and what we can do...society needs help with its youth, and we have a piece of the solution. While retaining our uniqueness and autonomy, we in the field of recreation, who share the same values and goals, can accomplish more by working together than we can on our own.” Several other examples of agencies adopting this approach follow.

- The holistic philosophy which undergirds the extensive array of programs coordinated by the At-Risk Youth Division in Phoenix involves the Division in collaborations with such agencies as the City’s Youth and Education Office, Human Services Department, Prosecutor’s Office, Police Department, Maricopa County Juvenile Court, Vocational Services, Phoenix Mercury/Phoenix Suns, Arizona Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons...and dozens of other entities.

- In Columbus, Indiana, the Park and Recreation Department pooled resources for both capital funding of a $5.9 million center for youth and its subsequent operation. Collaborators included the Foundation for Youth, Boys and Girls Club, United Way, business leaders, and philanthropic organizations.

- In Virginia Beach (Virginia), in addition to the Parks and Recreation Department, the Youth Opportunities Team includes the Public School System, Community Services Board, Juvenile Court Services, Public Health, the Volunteer Council, the Department of Agriculture, Housing and Neighborhood Preservation, Police, Public Libraries, and Social Services.
Portland’s Time for Kids Initiative involved collaboration with 17 different partners, all of whom had specific programmatic roles in the Initiative.

Moving Beyond the Walls: Roving Leaders

Roving Leader programs recognize that not all youth are automatically attracted to available programs, yet many programs operate under the philosophy that to be served youth must come to a particular site. Thus, a number of cities have developed outreach or “roving leader” programs. The premise driving these programs is that youth workers who “roam” a neighborhood in which they are based will be able to find and connect with disaffected youth. Often, workers live in the areas where they work, which gives them credibility with, and a better understanding of neighborhood youth.

Four elements of Roving Leader programs have been identified which differentiate them from other service vehicles (Austin, 1957). First, services are based on problems in young people’s lives as opposed to a specific program activity. Therefore, services are available to youth who have the greatest need rather than those who have paid a fee or become members of a particular group. Second, programs are heavily dependent on the relationship between youth and staff. Third, contact occurs in the community, not in an institutional setting. This is important since most institutions have formal standards that guide youth leaders in client selection and service, which may eliminate some youth from participating. Finally, the services provided by roving leaders are not initially requested by youth. The leader is required to reach out and take steps to alleviate any fear, suspicion or hostility that might exist. All of these outreach principles stress the importance of the personal relationship between staff and youth.

Austin and San Antonio Parks and Recreation Departments have extensive roving leader programs. Staff makes contact with youth not currently affiliated with city or nonprofit youth services and attempt to draw youth into constructive activities that would otherwise be on the streets and potentially involved in high-risk behaviors. To be successful, staff must be sensitive to local community circumstances as well as savvy and street-smart.

The Power of Adults: Opportunities for Youth to Experience Supportive Adult Relationships

In all PYD settings, the key to successful programs is the primacy of adults in supporting youth efforts to navigate the pathways to adulthood, while still enabling youth to have real voice and power in planning, organizing, and leading programs and activities. Adults are the key to helping create a developmentally rich program structure, boundaries for appropriate behavior, and clear opportunities for youth to have voice with regard to program structure and mechanics.

The need for adults to provide support is consistent with evidence that “resilient children, the ones who thrive despite obstacles, typically have caring adults present and active in their lives” (Walker, 1998, p. 14). Caring adults can be program staff, volunteers from the community, and/or parents. In all cases, adults are most effective if they “work in partnership with young people, who see themselves as supportive friends and advocates in contrast to adults motivated to save, reform, or rescue young people from their circumstances” (Walker & White, 1998, p. 15). The key is to ensure that youth efforts are “scaffolded” by adults (Pittman, Irby & Farber, 2000). Youth, like an emerging building, need support during “construction – development.” Eventually, when ready to stand on their own, the scaffolding can first be lessened and eventually withdrawn. Too often in the past, PARD programs have been based on the primacy of the activity over the process of participants interacting with meaningful adults. To realize the full power of adults in the lives of youth, quality adult leaders must be hired, trained, rewarded and retained. However, these objectives may not always be easy to accomplish. Too often youth serving agencies hire individuals who are too young and have too many issues themselves to be strong resources in the lives of youth. In addition, too often leaders are hired who only plan to be around for a short period of time, thus undermining the value of creating long-term, in-depth relationships between youth and meaningful adults. In many cases, a system is not in place to develop leaders on a pre-service and ongoing basis who understand the principles of
PYD and how to translate these principles into practice. Finally, salaries are often not high enough to attract and retain quality staff. In too many cases, we entrust our youth to low paid individuals who turn over too fast too quickly.

Final Thoughts

Unfortunately, in a number of cases PARDs have adopted the PYD language, but have in reality made few changes in their service priorities and approaches. To fully play a role, PARDs need to:

(1) fully understand and adopt positive youth development principles;
(2) fully use the power of these principles to make real changes in their programmatic approaches;
(3) meaningfully collaborate with other youth serving agencies to identify needs and provide more consistent positive youth development programs;
(4) develop a dynamic positive youth development system that works within the context of the overall community; and
(5) develop a better understanding of the characteristics of activities that make the successful transition to adulthood more likely.

Other critical elements of PYD practices include ensuring that the opportunities, services and supports offered are available for a critical mass of those young people who want or need them. Services must be of a scale and a level of saturation to achieve the threshold necessary to make a difference. In addition, it is critical that the opportunities created are sustained from year to year. Development is ongoing and takes time to accomplish. One shot, short-term programs can generate participants, but not necessarily meaningful development. Ensuring that more young people in more neighborhoods have more and better supports and opportunities more of the time should be our goal (Pittman, Irby & Farber, 2000).

Changing the way we think about design and delivery of youth serving programs can go a long way to achieving development beyond problem prevention. While the tone and structure of PYD is subtle and multi-layered, its tenets and practices can be achieved. To do less is to waste our opportunity to be an active participant in the positive development of our youth.

REFERENCES


PETER A. WITT

Bradberry Recreation and Youth Development Chair
Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University
2261 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-2261
979-845-7325
E-mail: pwitt@tamu.edu

JOHN L. CROMPTON
Distinguished Professor
Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University
2261 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-2261
E-mail: jcromp@tamu.edu