



Positive Youth Development

ACTION

- Support legislation to expand opportunities for positive youth development for America's young people.

HISTORY

The United States has no national federal policy to promote positive youth development. Existing federal initiatives for young people either attempt to fix problem behavior, such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and delinquency, or are education-based. Too many children and youth grow up without adequate family and community support or the opportunity to build productive futures. Young people must have real-life options before they make harmful decisions. Without improved resources, young people with the fewest options are the ones most likely to resort to violence and display other problem behaviors.

In 2003, the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth convened to examine the federal government's efforts and programs to assist these young people. The task force looked at incorporating positive youth development practices that help disadvantaged youth, and improving the effectiveness of federal programs aimed at youth.

In December 2003, the Task Force released its final report to the President, which included many constructive recommendations to increase the effectiveness of evaluation and accountability of programs, strengthen education and training initiatives for disadvantaged youth, support increased youth involvement, and establish mentor opportunities for foster and migrant youth.¹

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also held the second annual National Youth Summit in 2003, bringing together hundreds of young people, many leading proponents of positive youth development, and others involved in program development and implementation to discuss best practices and strategies to promote positive youth development.

The task force report, together with the summit follow-up may provide support for legislation that will be introduced in 2004. That legislation will provide new resources to ensure youth have access to opportunities and experiences they need to become contributing members of society.

Legislation is being considered that will provide resources to support community-based efforts to provide young people ages 10–19 with access to five core youth development resources:

- ongoing relationships with a caring adult,
- safe places with structured activities,
- access to services that promote healthy lifestyles,
- opportunities to acquire marketable skills, and
- opportunities for community service and civic participation.

Among the many types of activities communities could fund under positive youth development legislation are:

- mentoring,
- character development,
- youth centers and clubs,
- camps and programs outside of school hours,
- risk-avoidance programs,
- academic and cultural enrichment,
- youth entrepreneurship,
- community service,
- civic participation activities,
- training or group counseling, and
- referrals to state certified counselors to provide services.

Legislation would provide resources to community-based collaboratives to establish or develop positive youth development initiatives. A strong evaluation component would be required to demonstrate effectiveness. The legislation would target youth who face greater challenges, such as those in out-of-home placements and those who live in rural areas or areas with high concentrations of poverty. The legislation would contain specific provisions for involving youth in planning, implementation, and evaluation decisions.

KEY FACTS

- Approximately 8 million children ages 5–14 spend time unsupervised on a regular basis.²
- Young people with nothing to do during out-of-school hours miss valuable chances for growth and development. The odds are high that youth with nothing positive to do and nowhere to go will find things to do and places to go that negatively influence their development and futures.³
- Students who reported spending no time in a school-sponsored afterschool activity were 57% more likely to have dropped out before reaching the 12th grade than were students who spent 1–4 hours in such activities.⁴
- The hours of 3:00 PM–6:00 PM on school days are the peak hours for teens to commit crimes, smoke, drink, use drugs, or engage in sexual activity.⁵
- Adolescents who spend time in communities that are rich in developmental opportunities for them experience less risk and show evidence of higher rates of positive development.⁶
- Participation in afterschool programs is associated with better school performance, finer work habits, better interpersonal skills, and less time spent in unhealthy behaviors.⁷
- The U.S. General Accounting Office estimates that, in 2002, the number of afterschool programs for school-age children met as little as 25% of the demand in some urban areas.⁸

SOURCES

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