Systematic Review of Positive Youth Development on Adolescent Mental Health

Sneha Saha[1], Dr. Priyanka Shukla[2]

[1]Ph.D. Scholar (Psychology), [2]Assistant Professor,

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University, Lucknow

Abstract

Lately, adolescents of Gen Y are being treated as young adults before enteringthe full-fledged adulthood. Present-day adolescent life-coursewitness similar decision making & problem solving situations, relationship complexities, societal expectations and personal dilemmas that were unique and limited to adulthood in the past. Adolescent psychological health has seen similar transformations; mental problems like depression, suicidal ideation, violent behavior, risk behavior, substance abuse, addiction and many more are now prevalent among adolescents. Factors that work as a catalyst in the growing rate of adolescent problems are negligence of authorities (school and government policies), lack of parent involvement (busy schedules and inefficient time management), addictive usage of materialistic products (mobile phones & laptop) and increased hostility and competition among adolescents. With the current wave of positive psychology in action, practitioners and researchers have realized that positive youth development programs can be of ideal use to help adolescents cope psychologically. Positive youth development shifts focus from "adolescent as a problem-child" to "adolescent as a potential child". Positive Youth Development program realizes each adolescent has a potential to excel if given adequate guidance and support by responsible adults in a protective and nurturing environment. This is a theoretical paper purposefully prepared in focus to elaborate Positive Youth Development, and how Positive Youth Development can serve as a budding program to help adolescents with their psychological problems and promote mental health. Various youth development programs will be highlighted with their effects on adolescent mental health and adolescent trajectory.

Keywords: Positive Youth Development, Mental Health, Adolescents, Therapy, Programs, Interventions.

Introduction

Positive youth development has emerged as one of the most efficient training programs which can help the youths of today to introspect and excel. In the new scenario of youth survival, practitioners have shifted their core focus from the negativity in youth's psyche as a barrier to their development to the positivity that is inherent in youth for a satisfied and successful life. Practitioners and theorists all around the world are acknowledging the importance of programs like that of positive youth development that shares a holistic approach towards youth understanding and development. Within the crucial bracket of youth age group i.e. 14-25years, there lies a hostile age range which has seen a drastic change i.e. the adolescents 14-18years. Being adolescent has seen various changes in the past few years, adolescent authorities (teachers, parents and psychologists) have reported increased violence level, technology addiction, substance abuse, bullying and even depression in adolescents. However, the take on counter measures to help adolescents cope has shown efficient modification with the introduction of Positive youth development from theory to practice.

At present time, adolescents feel an extra pressure to excel, survive and perform. This pressure brings deleterious consequences for mental health of adolescents through the influence of increased stressors and factors such as high level of violence, reduced social support and dependence on technology. The mental health care settings in the schools are presently limited and lack expertise. Mental health problems at an early stage remain unrecognized and untreated among adolescents. The basic reason to this lack of diagnosis can be owned to the fact that parents and authorities believe "it is just a phase and they will grow out of it" or "it is how their child is". The mere misrecognition of the fact that "my child is not a mental patient" restricts the parents or teachers to recognize the actual problem and work towards coping with it; and since the authority figures don't realize the urgency of the matter adolescents are left perturbed to cope with their issues on their own. Adolescents conceal their problems and realize that they are alone in this war with themselves. In a multi-centre project initiated by ICMR with the general aim to systematically study the psychiatric disorders in children and adolescents found that the common disorders in age group 12-16 years were: psychosis, hysterical neurosis, and conduct disorders. Psychoses and conduct disorder cases were significantly more among males while hysterical neurosis cases were more common among female children. The other important observations from the project pertain to abnormal psychosocial situations in family and other social environment of children. The psychosocial factors were: familial over involvement, mental disturbance in other family members, discordant intrafamilial relationship, inadequate/inconsistent parental control, stress in school environment. It was found that abnormal psychosocial factors were more associated with conduct disorders, emotional disorders, psychalgia (headache, tension) and academic problems. Poor mental health can have import effect on the wider health and development of adolescents and is association with several health and social outcomes such as

higher alcohol, tobacco and illicit substances use, adolescent pregnancy, school drop-out and delinquent behaviours. There is growing consensus that healthy development during childhood and adolescence contributes to good mental health and can prevent mental health problems.

Positive youth development interventions, born from positive psychology research, can aid youth practitioners in achieving desired positive outcomes including increased optimism, strong social connections and healthy self-confidence. Positive youth development is an ideal platform for the application of positive psychology. Adolescent coaching provides adolescents with an opportunity to maximize their potential and improve their overall wellbeing through vision, action and accountability. Positive youth development addresses the ways in which adolescents can integrate positive psychology research and interventions into private and group coaching sessions, in order to affect lasting positive change on adolescents' self-esteem, friendships, and future orientation. The establishment of a sound positive environment around youths is a key to their effective functioning and survival. Positive environment is dependent on positive relationships and strengths established at school, family or social environment through interactions with parents, teachers, peers and society. The development of a positive ethos within youths is the foundation for better opportunities to understand themselves as youths and engage in activities that would lead physical, psychological and social upliftment of the youth– 'Positive Youth Development' will enable youths to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

Inherent Challenges and Changes in Adolescence

1. Rapid physical, biological, and cognitive development (Christine & Viner, 2005; Kuhn, 2005).

2. High prevalence of mental health problems; frequently corresponds with onset of pathology (Ravens-Sieber et al., 2008; Sawyer et al., 2000).

3. High rates of risk taking behaviour (Kelley et al., 2004). Issues identified as highly concerning to adolescents include body image, family conflict, and stress (Mission Australia, 2010).

 4. Pressure to succeed in secondary school, make career choices, and to set up pathways and opportunities for the future.

Recent researches in light of positive psychology points out that lack of direction towards positive youth development can be a major reason behind these youth problems. For most youths at the age of 11 they are small children and as soon as they reach 13 (being a teenager) they are expected to behave like a mature adult. This expectancy leads to confusion regarding themselves among youths, they are confused about they are responsible for themselves or they still need guidance of adults. Lack of smooth transition and righteous passage guided by adult supervision leads to youth problems. Positive psychology researchers emphasize on the

new way of thinking-positive youth development- where youths are producers of their own well being and growth. Adults in this new perspective do not focus on preventing the problem rather they support the positive potentials within young people which helps youth establish a positive connection with them.

Positive Youth Development

Human development was once thought to end at adolescence with adulthood a plateau and old age a decline in development (Berk 2001). However, it is now accepted that development takes place throughout the lifespan, right up until the day of death. Development across these stages can be seen as continuous, where individuals build on and develop skills and abilities that were there from an early age. Or it can be seen as discontinuous, where the developing individual moves through stages, each of which has unique features, with their experiences at younger stages quite different in nature from those at later stages (Berk 2001).

Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. Young people need safe, structured places to learn and links to basic services that, if absent, can prevent them from learning and functioning within our society.

Positive Experiences + Positive Relationships + Positive Environments = Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is based on the belief that, given guidance and support from caring adults, all youth can grow up healthy and happy, making positive contributions to their families, schools, and communities. The term "positive youth development" often generates several different responses. Most commonly people hear "youth development" and think of child and adolescent development, meaning biological, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Or they think of youth services, all the programming and services communities provide to young people to address their needs and foster their growth. Or they might think of a distinct approach or philosophy of interacting and working with young people, one that informs programming and promotes adolescent development. We understand positive youth development as an approach or philosophy that guides communities in the way they organize services, supports, and opportunities so that all young people can develop to their full potential.

Introduction to Positive Youth Development Interventions

The following are essential features of effective learning environments and settings that facilitate positive youth development for young people inside and outside of school. These features of positive developmental settings

and characteristics of successful positive youth development staff can be used for training staff, designing programs, and developing standards and assessment tools:

– Physical and Psychological Safety – Safe and health-promoting facilities; practice that increases safe peer group interaction and decreases unsafe or confrontational peer interactions.

– Appropriate Structure – Limit setting, clear and consistent rules and expectations, firm enough control, continuity and predictability, clear boundaries, and age-appropriate monitoring. Supportive Relationships – Warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, responsiveness.

– Opportunities to Belong – Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement and integration; opportunities for socio-cultural identity formation; support for cultural and bicultural competence.

– Positive Social Norms – Rules of behavior, expectations, injunctions, ways of doing things, values and morals, obligations for service.

– Support for Efficacy and Mattering – Youth-based, empowerment practices that support autonomy, making a real difference in one's community, and being taken seriously. Practice that includes enabling, responsibility granting, meaningful challenge. Practices that focus on improvement rather than on relative current.

– Opportunities for Skill Building – Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn cultural literacy, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; opportunities to develop social and cultural capital.

– Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts – Concordance, coordination, and synergy among family, school and community

Youth development gained a much greater following in the 1980s, though, when it became clear that prevention programs targeting specific "risky" behaviors were either not achieving significant positive results or were not doing enough to help youth become healthy, productive members of society. As Karen Pittman, a noted youth researcher, famously observed: "Problem free is not fully prepared." She advocated for a massive conceptual shift "from thinking that youth problems are merely the principal barrier to youth development to thinking that youth development serves as the most effective strategy for the prevention of youth problems."

In a systematic review Catalano et al (2004) looked at which interventions achieve best results in boosting the positive development of children and young people and preventing problematic behaviour. This review found 77 well-researched interventions which answer to the criteria they listed for positive youth development

programmes. Significant impact of interventions has been found in among others interpersonal skills, quality of relationships with adults and peers, problem solving and cognitive competences, personal effectiveness and educational achievement. Some interventions also showed impact on decrease of problematic behaviour, such as the use of drugs and alcohol, smoking, aggressive behaviour and other problematic behaviour in school.

Effects of Positive Youth Development Interventions:

- Adolescents move from fixing problems to building on strengths.
- Instead of reacting to problem behavior, adolescents are pro-active, building positive outcomes.
- Instead of targeting troubled youth, practitioners engage all youth.
- Practitioners and authorities move from looking at youth as recipients of services to youth as resources and active participants. Traditionally theorists focused on programs and interventions, now they focus on relationships.

Models of Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs:

PYD starts from a holistic view on development and growing up and pays attention to all aspects of development (physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral development). An optimal development of young people takes place in an environment that boosts the development of competences and offers young people opportunities to use and generalise these skills (Catalano et al, 2004; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002; Durlak, 2007).

Programmes focused on positive youth development all aim to promote one or more of the following factors (National Research Council, 2013) :

- Children's physical and mental safety
- Opportunities for involvement
- Positive social standards
- Skills development
- Cooperation and matching of interventions and activities in various domains

(a.) **The 5Cs Model of Positive Youth Development (Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000))**

In his book, Liberty, youth development expert Richard Lerner theorizes that young people will thrive if they develop certain behaviors, dubbed the "five Cs," over the course of childhood and early adolescence: competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring/compassion. According to Lerner, a youth with the five thriving behaviors is on the path to attaining a sixth C: contribution – to self, family, community, and civil society. It is the sixth C that leads to positive adulthood. "Committed— behaviorally, morally, and spiritually—

to a better world beyond themselves," he writes, "they will act to sustain for future generations a society marked by social justice, equity, and democracy and a world wherein all young people may thrive."

Five C's	Extension of Five C's
Competence	Enhancing participants' social, academic, cognitive, and vocational competencies.
Connection	Building and strengthening adolescents' relationships with other people and institutions, such as school.
Confidence	Improving adolescents' self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, identity, and belief in the future.
Character	Increasing self-control, decreasing engagement in health-compromising (problem) behaviors, developing respect for cultural or societal rules and standards, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and spirituality.
Compassion/Caring	Improving youths' empathy and identification with others.

(b.) SOS Structure

Youth development programs build their services and activities around the SOS structure, ideally using a broad range of community partnerships to implement this multi-faceted model and create the rich environment that youth need to be successful. Organizations using a youth development approach therefore provide services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) that enhance the young person's environment and increase his or her ability to reach these outcomes.

SOS	Extension of SOS
Services	*Services* are the critical interventions needed to enhance the essential well-being of the young person —the traditional services that are generally provided by public welfare, health, school, and recreational programs.
Opportunities	*Opportunities* offer youth meaningful and real ways to influence the world around them, nurture their interests and talents, practice and enhance their skills and competencies, and increase their connectedness to community.
Supports	*Supports* are the ongoing positive relationships that young people have with adults, peers, and organizations that provide the safety, structure, motivation, nurturing, and guidance to allow youth to explore, learn, grow, and contribute.

(c.) 40 Developmental Assets (Search Institute)

Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets that enable young people to succeed in life. These findings provide a useful set of measurable building blocks that unify the social development model and the concept of key competencies. These 40 developmental assets are grouped into two major types. External assets

include positive experiences that young people receive from people and institutions in their lives. Internal assets focus on nurturing the internal qualities of young people to guide choices and create a sense of self, purpose, and focus (e.g. commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity). This research indicates that the more assets youth have, the less likely they are to engage in risk-taking behaviors and the more likely they are to engage in pro-social behaviors.

External Assets	Internal Assets
Support 1. Family Support, 2. Positive Family Communication, 3. Other Adult Relationship, 4. Caring Neighborhood, 5. Caring School Climate, 6. Parent Involvement in Schooling	**Commitment to Learning** 21. Achievement Motivation, 22. School Engagement, 23. Homework, 24. Bonding to School, 25. Reading for Pleasure
Empowerment 7. Community Values Youth, 8. Youth as Resources, 9. Service to Others. 10. Safety	**Positive Values** 26. Caring, 27. Equality & Social Justice, 28. Integrity, 29. Honesty, 30. Responsibility, 31. Restraint
Boundaries & Expectations 11. Family Boundaries, 12. School Boundaries, 13. Neighborhood Boundaries, 14. Adult Role Models, 15. Positive Peer Influence, 16. High Expectations	**Social Competence** 32. Planning & Decision Making, 33. Interpersonal Competence, 34. Cultural Competence, 35. Resistance Skills, 36. Peaceful Conflict Resolution
Constructive Use of Time 17. Creative Activities, 18. Youth Programs, 19. Religious Community, 20. Time at Home	**Positive Identity** 37. Personal Power, 38. Self-Esteem, 39. Sense of Purpose, 40. Positive View of Personal Future

(d.) Five Promises

The Five Promises are a framework put forth by America's Promise outlining five resources that all children need in their lives to be successful. Based on highly regarded research from the *National Promises Study*, *The Voices Study*, and *Investing in our Young People*, when children have at least four of the five promises consistently in their lives, their chances of success are greatly increased and the risks of failure are greatly mitigated.

Five Promises	Extension of Five Promises
1. Caring Adults:	Ongoing relationships with caring adults— parents, mentors, tutors or coaches— offer youth support, care and guidance.

2. Safe Places	Safe places with structured activities provide a space for youth to learn and grow.
3. A Healthy Start And Future	Adequate nutrition, exercise, and health care pave the way for healthy bodies, healthy minds, and smart habits for adulthood.
4. Effective Education	Marketable skills through effective education help youth navigate the transition from school to work successfully.
5. Opportunities To Help Others	Opportunities to give back to the community through service enhance self-esteem, boost confidence and heighten a sense of responsibility to the community.

The following programs are based in research and have been evaluated for effectiveness:

Beacons (School-Community partnership)

The Beacons are school-based centers for disadvantaged young people, ages 4-19, which stresses youth development rather than youth deficit. Young people are viewed as central players in their own lives. Managed by community, nonprofit organizations in 41 New York City neighborhoods, the Beacons draw more than 30,000 New Yorkers (including parents, teachers, and other adult community members) each year. Activities vary across sites but include recreational, educational, health and community services. By engaging youth in various activities and a continuity of supports, the Beacons allow them to develop caring relationships. The centers set high expectations and clear standards and provide opportunities to engage in high quality activities and make a contribution. Youth also sit on Community Advisory Councils, which plan and assist in the implementation of Beacon activities. The NYC Department of Youth Services founded the Beacons in 1991.

Big Brothers, Big Sisters

Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America (BBBS) is a 93-year-old program using autonomously funded local affiliates to support one-on-one mentoring matches between volunteer adults and young people. Outside evaluation by the Public/Private Ventures demonstrated that participants in this program were 46% less likely to initiate alcohol use and minority Little Brothers and Sisters were 70% less likely to initiate drug use. Little Brothers and Sisters were also 27% less likely to hit someone. The following are key components that assist with the development and maintenance of BBBS quality matches:

1) Stringent guidelines for screening volunteers by professional program staff to eliminate applicants who pose a safety risk, are unlikely to keep a commitment, or are unlikely to form positive relationships with a young person;

2) An orientation for volunteers to learn program requirements and rules, with some sites providing more extensive training on sexual abuse, developmental stages of youth, communication and limit-setting skills, tips on relationship-building and other issues;

3) A matching process which takes into account adult volunteers, youth and parental preferences, geographical proximity of adult volunteer and youth, gender, race, and religion (most matches are made within gender, and staff try to make same-race matches); and

4) Supervision to support effective matches, including required monthly telephone contact by agency case managers with the adult volunteer and the youth and/or parent.

Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI)

Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI) has designed a comprehensive program that bolsters every environment in which inner-city children learn, live and grow into adults. Self Enhancement, Inc.'s Youth Program provides structured, goal oriented personal development and violence prevention services to over 1,500 2nd through 12th grade inner-city Portland children and youth each year. Program services: *School Day Program* – case management and advocacy for SEI participants within their schools and within the community, tracking scholastic achievement and behavior. *After School and Weekend* – supervised, task focused education, recreation and performing arts activities that provide safety and options typically unavailable to inner-city children and youth. *Summer Program* -- all day expansion of school year program. Self Enhancement, Inc. was recognized in 1993 by the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention as a national model of youth violence prevention.

Youth as Resources

Youth as Resources (YAR) is an initiative of the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), a private, nonprofit organization whose principal mission is to empower people to prevent crime and build safer and more caring communities. YAR was started in 1987 in three Indiana communities with initial funding from the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment. The success of this program led NCPC and the Indiana Department of Corrections to introduce YAR as a special initiative in five Indiana juvenile correction facilities. YAR encourages youth engagement in communities by providing small grants to youth-designed and youth-implemented projects that address social problems and contribute to positive community change. Young people work as partners with adults in all levels of the program, including governing boards responsible for awarding

the grants and developing program policies. To support YAR's expansion, the Center for Youth as Resources (CYAR) was created in 1995 as a separately incorporated area of the NCPC. Youth participants ranged from 11 to 25 years of age.

Discussion

The present paper was purposely prepared to elucidate the theoretical roots to positive youth development intervention and its therapeutic effects on adolescent mental health. Upon extensive literature review on the subject, it was found that positive youth development finds its extraction from positive psychology. As recognition of positive energy among youth and adolescents, positive psychology practitioners theorized positive youth development where a positive environment, support and guidance are provided for young minds to thrive. However it was also found that positive youth development practice is limited to western world practice and has not been keenly researched on Indian grounds. It is of utter importance that equal recognition of therapeutic effects of positive youth development on youths should be recognized. This recognition would ideally lead the young minds of India towards a positive development as well. In continuation to this researchers of this paper are attempting to establish a positive youth development intervention based on the amalgamation of ground works in Indian psychology and western perspective.

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