

“Everyone’s Responsibility” Preparing Youth for Life

Parenting is more challenging today. Youth are exposed to more choices at even younger ages. This trend requires adults to evaluate their own values and attitudes about what messages are being sent to young people regarding: drug and alcohol use, smoking, sexual activity, school failure, delinquency and other risky behaviors.



However, in focusing on such “at-risk” behaviors, we skew the discussion about youth development, and the potential for youth’s productivity and growth is minimized.

It’s about kids.

A child is much like a seed that needs rich soil, sunshine and moisture to germinate and get off to a healthy start. Consistent, nurturing care cannot be left to chance. Just as a gardener tends the plants at each stage of growth, so also, children have critical needs at each stage of their development. Basically “preparing youth for life” is an attitude or way to think about young people that focuses on their capabilities, strengths, and developmental needs without ignoring their weaknesses and problems.

“Preparing youth for life” is a family and community process with many unexpected variables. A child’s world today is much different than it was when today’s adults were children. Family members need to have realistic expectations and be able to reach out to a support network when “weeds” or negative risk behaviors pop up and threaten positive youth development.

We know that America’s future workforce is being “grown” today as we prepare our youth. But when we talk about youth development, we are not just focused on preparing youth for a job. The future success of North Dakota is dependent on how well we prepare young people for productive adulthood, and it is everyone’s responsibility.

As we look at preparing youth for life, we begin with the end goal of a productive adulthood in mind. We can define “productive” as youth who learn:

Respect for self - Youth who are caring, compassionate, responsible citizens with a sense of self-identity not easily influenced by negative control. Youth who make choices for a healthy lifestyle.

Respect for work - Youth who are productive, enthusiastic life-long learners of knowledge and skills. Youth who have a purpose and a plan for a future.

Respect for others - Youth who have positive values, social competence, problem-solving skills and a genuine empathy for others as they nurture relationships.

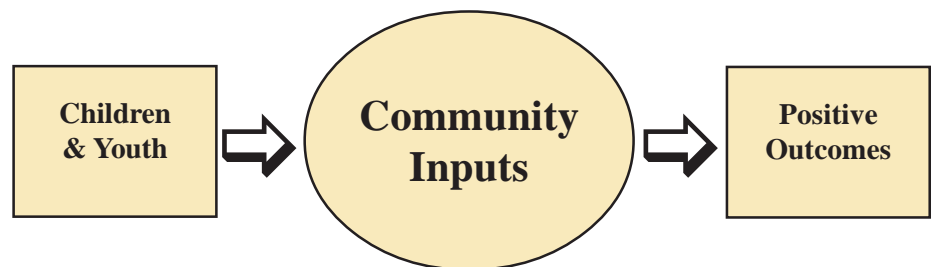
Respect for leadership - Youth who contribute to the life and revitalization of their communities.

“Family, peers, schools, community groups, religious organizations and places of employment are critical to determining a youth’s development.”

- Center for Youth Development and Policy Research

“People are looking at strong communities as a key to positive youth development.”

-Search Institute



Community-Based Youth Development

How can you help prepare North Dakota youth for life?

- What types of experiences did you have that allowed you to succeed? What could you do to provide youth with similar positive experiences?
- What would happen if you invested a few hours each week to encourage, guide, and mentor just one young person who is struggling to develop the skills and confidence to feel good about him/herself?
- How can youth in your community participate and contribute in some way that is meaningful to them (think about their skills and interests)? It does not have to be part of an organized group - it can be individual to individual.
- How can youth be recognized for their service to the community?
- It's much more productive to involve youth from the get-go, so why wait until youth demand attention for a problem?

Additional Resources

- Annie E. Casey Foundation
www.aecf.org/kidscount/
- Center for Youth Development and Policy Research
www.aed.org/aedgroups/socialchange/cydprinfo.html
- National Youth Development Information Center
www.nydic.org/nydic/devdef.html#youth
- Search Institute
www.search-institute.org/research/ECDAF.html
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families
www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/fysb/youthinfo/blueprint.htm

Communities need to value young people as resources and involve them in creating positive goals and outcomes, rather than only seeking to stop young people from engaging in risky behaviors. Aspects of positive youth development include:

A Youth-Centered Approach:

- Meets basic needs that are critical to survival such as food, shelter, clothing, exercise, and good nutrition.
- Helps youth understand the consequences of risky behavior.
- Builds on individual strengths by utilizing youth's talents, skills, and interests.
- Develops social skills and meaningful relationships through the interaction, negotiation, planning and decision-making process with peers and adults.
- Educates parents and adults about how children grow, develop, and behave so they can have realistic expectations.
- Cultivates a sense of identity, responsibility, self-discipline, respect for self and others, discernment in choices, and coping skills.

“Children do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive communities.”

-Annie E. Casey Foundation

A Knowledge-Centered Approach:

- Appreciates and encourages creative expression.
- Motivates interest in life-long learning and life skills by recognizing that learning is central to their involvement, whether in clubs, sports, arts, or community service.
- Develops reasoning and problem-solving skills.
- Engages youth as active partners and leaders in community decisions and provides them an opportunity to interact with peers and adults.
- Guides understanding of career options and the logical steps to reaching goals that are consistent with abilities and interests.
- Creates appreciation for the purpose and value of work, family, leisure, and fun.

A Care-Centered Approach:

- Nurtures a sense of belonging and empathy.
- Develops trusting relationships in a family-like (safe, structured and supportive) environment.
- Respects diversity and works toward the common good of all people.
- Monitors who youth are with and where they are at.
- Provides discipline, guidance, and a safety-net in times of need.
- Keeps youth accountable for ethical choices.
- Contributes to the broader good of family, community, and society-at-large by establishing ongoing relationships with caring adults.