Family Policy for Positive Youth Development
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Guiding questions
- What policies can help engage youth in the policy making process?
- What policies can reinforce the family's role in supporting youth transitions from school to work and address youth employment challenges?
- What family policies might help countries improve youth outcomes?

Outline
- Positive Youth Development
- Settings for Positive Youth Development
- Family as the Primary Setting
- Community for Positive Youth Development
- Family Policy and Policy Making Process
- Recommendations - Policies Supporting Families and PYD

Positive Youth Development

In the late last century attention about youth was centered around teenage pregnancy, drug use and abuse, and violence, despite that the majority of youth were doing well. Positive youth development had grown as a response to the overly emphasis on youth problems in the United States. Researchers and practitioners made intentional efforts to understand what individual characteristics, family environments, and community settings are associated with positive developmental outcomes. The assumption is that we empower youth with life skills and strengthen their families and communities, and as a result they can succeed and thrive when they enter adulthood. Positive youth development is a proactive approach that recognizes youth as able and talented, as well as partners in all the efforts to ensure their healthy trajectories, e.g., policy making and programming to help youth grow.

> "Youth development occurs in environments that provide constructive, affirmative, and encouraging relationships that are sustained over time with adults and peers, while concurrently providing an array of opportunities that enable youth to build their competences and become engaged as partners in their own development, as well as the development of their communities" (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003).

Research has shown support for several positive youth development models. The Life Skills Model identifies specific skills and characteristics that programs help youth to master and use in life (Hendricks, 1996). The Assets Model identifies internal and external characteristics of children and youth that set them on the path to overcome adversities and succeed (Search Institute, 2007). The Circle of Courage Model has been enlightened by the core values of Native American childrearing practice. This model identifies *Belonging, Mastery, Generosity and Independence* as the four core characteristics. Youth who have these characteristics have caring adults in their lives, live in safe and inclusive communities that provide opportunities to learn, to engage, and to lead. They also have opportunities to participate in decision making that influences their lives, and opportunities to serve others and their own communities (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Heck, & Subramanian, 2009). Through vigorous evaluation research Lerner and other researchers (Lerner, Dowling, Anderson, 2003; Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) named the similar characteristics into five categories: Competence, Confidence, Connections, Character, and Caring/Compassion (the Five Cs Model). Contribution has later been added, as the Sixth C to the model (Lerner, 2004).

Overall youth need life skills, healthy youth-adult relationships and support, and opportunities in order to develop and transition successfully into adulthood. Specifically outcomes and experiences of positive youth development are

- Physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills
- Intentional learning experiences
- Effective communication
- Cultural literacy skills
- Leadership
- Social and cultural capital (Foundation of Youth Development, Great Plain IDEA, 2015)

The development of these skills occurs in both formal and non-formal education settings including family, school, after-school project or program, community, and social media. The settings provide opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills, exposure youth to intentional learning experiences, provide opportunities to learn and practice effective communication, foster cultural literacy and grow social and cultural capital.

Settings for Positive Youth Development

Environments in which children and youth grow shape who they become and what path they follow into their adulthood and later life. Youth development takes place in many settings, i.e., families, in school, in communities, at parks, and on the streets and social media. Two settings are particularly discussed below for policy implications.

The family is the immediate environment or microsystem that both influences and is influenced greatly by youth. DeFrain and his colleagues' studies of families around the world show that children, youth and individuals fare well in families that are marked by six major strengths: appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, spiritual wellbeing, enjoyable time together, and ability to manage stress and cope with crisis (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). For positive developmental outcomes, youth need to feel

safe at home, in the neighborhood, and in other settings. They have supportive relationships with parents and other adults. Parents and caregivers have consistent and predictable expectations, and provide opportunities for youth to engage in and practice decision making while keep monitoring their behavior. Parents also set clear boundaries and have positive communications in the age-appropriate manner. It is worth noting that Parents' autonomy support and granting predicted higher self-esteem, as well as better academic and emotional and functioning of youth in general, for example, in the U.S. and Chinese samples (Bush, 2000; Cheung, Wang, & Qu, 2016). However research also shows their association varies from culture to culture. Cultural values may moderate the relationship between parenting behavior and children's appraisal of such behavior, which, in turn, predicted their developmental outcomes (Soenens, Vansteenkiste & Van Petegem, 2015). Chinese children tend to view parental control as an expression of love and care instead of intrusion (Xia, et. al., 2015). Therefore policy making must take culture into consideration and policy initiatives must be culturally sensitive.

Youth need to practice decision making and be granted age-appropriate autonomy so that they can exercise and gain confidence and skills, and make responsible choices. Lack of knowledge of human development, parents often fail to recognize youth developmental needs for identity formation and for participation in decision making. As a result youth and their parents experience conflicts and anger, which, if not dealt and resolved in age appropriate manner, can not only lead to emotional and relational problems during adolescence, but also affect youth transition into healthy adulthood. Education about human development and family life course seems to be warranted for parents and everyone. Parent education is most required and provided to parents who commit child maltreatment and abuse, and parents whose children show problems. It is offered when negative behavior occurs, and therefore it is associated with deficits. Education about human development and the family should be a proactive approach to empower parents and youth, as well as strengthen families. Human and family development education should be adopted as policy initiatives to enhance the wellbeing of youth and families, and to improve public health.

Communities for positive youth development possess several characteristics. First and foremost, the communities provide opportunities for youth to belong, feel connected, and to form their own socio-cultural identity; the communities provide support, culturally competent practice, and social inclusion. As such, policies for social inclusion promote positive youth development.

Eccles and Gootman (2003) identified a number of community features for positive youth development. Similar to the family setting, youth feel safe physically and psychologically, and have positive peer interactions. The communities take measures to minimize negative peer interactions such as bullying, abuse and violence. The adult people (teachers, youth professionals and others) in the community are role models and mentors. They interact with youth in the age-appropriate manner and set clear boundaries while they provide emotional support. The communities see youth as partners, resources and contributors, and provide opportunities for them to lead and contribute. The communities take actions to develop and implement strategies to enhance youth developmental outcomes so that they can learn to be productive, to develop healthy relationship, and be able to navigate (Cornell & Gambone, 2002).

Today youth are active on <u>social media</u>, another setting that affects their lives. Although social media is used by people of all ages, it is especially popular among youth. More than two-thirds of youth used social media to interact with others and maintain their relationship (Pew Research, 2015). This social setting is relatively new. The Pew Research report also showed that social media influenced young people both positively and negatively. This new social platform can provide opportunities for youth to learn and to connect. However it has risks. We need to understand youth behavior and interactions on social media, what the benefits and risks are for young people, and how this setting interacts with other settings, and how it can be regulated and monitored to ensure its safety. Research on youth development needs to keep up with the rapid development of social media technology.

Family Policy and Policy Making Process

Zimmerman (1992) broadens the definition of family policy, referring it not only as "all the individual policies that affect families, directly or indirectly", but also as "a perspective for understanding and thinking about policy in relation to families…" This interpretation is insightful in that it shows family policy and family policy making is greatly influenced by the way that family service providers and communities, scholars, decision makers, and the society as a whole think about how legislatures should do to advance the well-being of families. More importantly it indicates that the family policy making is a dynamic process in which individuals, families and communities have an essential role and a responsibility to influence family policy.

Historically family policy making has followed two processes as described by Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1998): "1. Policy X was adopted pragmatically to solve new policy problems pressing upon leaders; 2. Policy X was promulgated in order to keep alive its ideological vision of its proponents…" (p. 3). For example, the communist ideological convictions dominated the Chinese policy making from 1949 to 1976. After Mao's era ended in 1976, China began the socioeconomic reform by adopting a market economy and "open door policy". Family policies have been mainly the responses to the problems during its social transition and transformation. Another example is abstinence-only education supported by the U.S. federal government funding in early 21st century. The policy measure was not based on evidence. Research shows that abstinence-only education did not reduce teenage pregnancy and birth rates. Having examined sex education laws and national data, researchers had concluded that abstinence-only education was associated with high rates of teenage pregnancy, and thus was not an effective public policy in prevention (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Clearly policy solutions need to be developed and supported by research.

Formulating policies for youth's wellbeing and successful transition to adulthood requires changes in the frame of conceptualization and decision making process. Specifically youth is not viewed as a problem that needs solutions, but as assets, resources and contributors. In addition policy-making process should shift from a top-down approach to a democratic and interactive process where youth and families are engaged and their voices are heard.

Policy Recommendations

1. Policies for social inclusion to promote equality in access to quality education, housing employment, and safe and clean environment for all.
2. Policy initiatives for family life development: Funding for campaign of family life education about human and family development including PYD and parenting skills. Parents model their parents and are most frustrated by not knowing what to do when rapid social, economic, and cultural changes require new parenting knowledge and skills.
3. Policies to increase opportunities for youth: They need job opportunities and opportunities for diverse paths to achieve success and reach their full potentials. They need to be able to form their cultural identity. Adolescents who experience conflict with parents feel rejected by parents and their families. Adolescents who are marginalized, bullied and alienated do not feel they belong to their schools and communities.
4. Policies to support communities and programs see youth as partners and collaborators rather than problems; and engage youth in community development.
5. Policies to support integration and coordination of the efforts of families, schools and communities
6. Policy initiatives for youth professional training
7. Policy initiatives to support independent policy research in order to develop research supported and effective policies
8. Policy initiatives to support policy research about the impact of social media on youth development.

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