Building Community & Sense of Belonging for Youth

Research Brief

Prepared at the Request of NYS Counties
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YOUTH CONNECTEDNESS

Connectedness is defined as a sense of being cared for, supported, belonging, and closeness with others that comes from protective and sustained relationships within families, schools, and communities.[1]

Adolescents who reported feeling connected were as much as 66% less likely to experience health risk behaviors related to sexual health, substance use, and violence and to have better mental health in adulthood than less connected peers.[2]

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to experience health risk behaviors

Greater Connectedness → Greater Well-Being
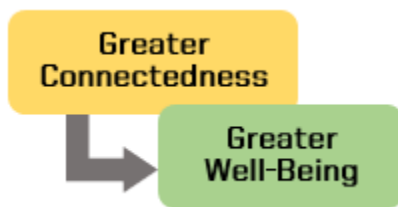
In a study of over 2,000 teens in Australia, results indicated that global connectedness (i.e., connectedness across the domains of family, school, peers, and neighborhood) was positively linked to well-being. The strength of this association decreased over time, highlighting the importance of continuous efforts to build connectedness. [3]

PROMISING APPROACHES

Youth Development Programs

Positive youth development (PYD) programs have the potential to support adolescents across a range of outcomes. The key characteristic that makes these programs effective seems to be the atmosphere they provide for youth.[4]

"The atmosphere – providing youth with a supportive and empowering environment – rather than the opportunities provided by program activities, differentiates successful youth programs."

In a 2017 systematic review of 24 studies involving over 23,000 youth, findings showed small benefits for academic achievement and psychological adjustment, but no significant link between participation and sexual risk behaviors or problem behaviors.[5] In other words, PYD seems to benefit youth, but more research is needed to be certain.

Additional considerations when choosing programs for your county:[6]

Ensure continuous collaboration with the variety of individuals and groups that make up the local community	Select programs that are interactive, hands-on, or perceived as fun by youth	Incorporate parental support or links to the community's culture into programs	Define clear staff roles and communicate throughout program delivery

Neighborhood Interventions

In a 2022 review of 28 community interventions for families, authors described program mechanisms associated with positive outcomes:

1	Parents getting to know each other during programs	5	Professionals give supportive response regarding questions or group discussions
2	Parents learning from mutual exchange of parenting experiences	6	Parents give input for the content of the interventions (i.e. co-production)
3	Parents attending frequent meetings (between 4 and 13 sessions of ≈ 2hrs)	7	Professionals collaborate with parents in close relationships and with flexibility
4	Local organizations and professionals implement program principles in a proactive and flexible manner	8	Community members may not have confidence in their skills; institutional support over time increases efficacy

EXAMPLE PROGRAMS

Below is a list of programs that have been rated by trusted evidence clearinghouses, which compile available effectiveness data for individual programs. These programs have all been rated as having a positive impact based on high-quality evidence according to the Results First Clearinghouse Database.[7]

1. **Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach:** a program for youth 13-18 with the overall goals of reducing substance use and dependence, increasing social stability, improving health, and improving life satisfaction. https://www.chestnut.org/ebtx/treatments-and-research/treatments/a-cra/

2. **Communities that Care**: a planning and implementation system that helps community stakeholders come together to address adolescent behavior problems such as violence, delinquency, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school. https://depts.washington.edu/sdrg/programs/center-for-communities-that-care/

3. **Cross-age Peer Mentoring:** a category of programs that connect an older youth with a younger child or adolescent. Examples of these programs: IGNITE, Link Crew, YESS

4. **Friends for Youth:** this program creates and sustains community-based, long-term, one-to-one relationships between trusted adult volunteer mentors and youth who lack a positive adult relationship. https://www.friendsforyouth.org/

5. **Strong African American Families: a** preventive intervention for African American teens living in rural communities and entering high school. https://cfr.uga.edu/saaf-programs/

FUNDING & SUPPORT

METHODS

Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as a review of research and findings from non-partisan think tanks, foundations, and organizations. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal statistical methods for summarizing results and exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

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