

Positive Youth Development in Redwood City:

Executive Summary

Ilana M. Horwitz

Introduction

This study informs two Redwood City 2020 environmental initiatives: the Community Youth Development Initiative (CYDI) and the Drug and Alcohol Abuse Prevention Partnership (Prevention Partnership). The premise of these initiatives is that “primary prevention for young people involves simultaneously reducing psychological and physical health problems and enhancing social competence and health.”¹ A positive youth development approach emphasizes the need for youth to build core assets across the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional domains as opposed to simply “fixing” their deficits. This study explores positive youth development in Redwood City by providing data on three issues: (1) how Redwood City youth and adults perceive youth development settings, (2) attitudes and behaviors of Redwood City youth toward healthy lifestyle choices, and (3) ways in which CYDI and Prevention Partnership organizations support positive youth development in the community.

The study is informed by data from multiple surveys as well as interviews and focus groups conducted with youth and adults in Redwood City between 2010 and 2012. Although these data provide an array of perspectives, we were limited in our ability to draw conclusions because the data were collected in different ways, asked different questions, and had varying sample sizes and response rates.

Findings

Eight features of a young person’s environment are likely to promote positive development:² 1) physical and psychological safety, 2) supportive relationships, 3) opportunities to belong, 4) opportunities for skill building, 5) support for efficacy and mattering, 6) positive social norms, 7) appropriate structures, and 8) integration of family, school and community efforts.³ As part of this study, we looked at how youth experience these features in their in-school and out-of-school environments.

Youth Sense of Physical & Psychological Safety: Most youth (80% of elementary after-school students, 70% of middle school after-school students, and 93% of Sequoia High School students) reported overall physical safety. However, many students were concerned about specific issues, such as gang violence (33% of Sequoia High School students) or getting beat up (34% of elementary after-school students and 22% of middle school after-school students).

Youth Sense of Supportive Relationships: Most elementary after-school students (76%) felt that peers and adult leaders cared about them. Fewer middle school

¹ Weissberg, R.P., Kumpfer, K.L., & Seligman, M.E.P. (2003). Prevention that works for children and youth: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 58 (6/7) 425-432.

² Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

³ This report includes data that inform the first five features.

students (49%) reported feeling this way in after-school programs. This is consistent with research indicating that as students enter adolescence, they want more freedom from adults⁴ and are less satisfied with school.⁵

Youth Sense of Opportunities to Belong: Most elementary after-school students (83%) felt they were in respectful environments where students did not make fun of each other and did not say mean things. Fewer middle school students (64%) reported feeling this way in after-school programs.

Youth Sense of Opportunities for Skill Building: Many students (73%) reported opportunities to stretch and deepen their thinking in school and fewer (62% of elementary after-school students and 39% of middle school after-school students) reported those same opportunities in after-school settings. This is expected because the school environment is primarily focused on academic learning.

Youth Sense of Support for Efficacy and Matterings: Many youth (84% of elementary after-school students and 69% of middle school after-school students) reported having voice and choice in their activities; youth leaders engaged in youth-adult partnerships felt efficacious in their efforts to make a difference in their community. Youth and adults noted that for youth-adult partnerships to be successful, adults needed to be accessible and genuinely interested in connecting with youth, and youth needed to feel respected by adults. Successful youth-adult partnerships were characterized by trusting relationships, shared leadership, mutual recognition of each others' experiences and skills, and a focus on legitimate community issues.

Youth Behaviors and Attitudes Toward Healthy Choices: Sequoia High School students identified drug and alcohol prevention/education (53%), suicide and depression (45%), bullying and homophobia (40%), and sexual and reproductive health (including teen pregnancy) (38%) as key issues in their school.

Partners' Efforts to Support Positive Youth Development: Most CYDI and Prevention Partnership partners aimed to connect youth with adults by providing opportunities to collaborate on projects, engaging adults as mentors, and facilitating youth-adult dialogue. Half of partners reported training adults on how to partner with youth, and one-third trained youth on how to partner with adults. Adult partners reported challenges to engaging youth as leaders in their programs, including a lack of necessary staff skills to engage youth in meaningful ways, difficulty recruiting youth who have enough free time and leadership skills, and a lack of appropriate opportunities to engage youth as partners.

Considerations for Practice and Further Research

Successful youth development requires partnerships within and among all contexts where youth spend time, including home, school, and community. One consideration for partners is how they can effectively engage parents and families in their youth development initiatives.

Effective youth-adult partnerships help Redwood City youth develop fundamental skills and experience a sense of self-worth, efficacy, and connectedness. Partners could consider how to scale their youth-adult partnership-focused work to reach more youth and adults in the community, reach more youth who have the appropriate time and leadership skills, evaluate the reach and effectiveness of their youth leadership training, and how they might better train youth and adults to work together and provide them with more meaningful opportunities to do so.

Examining perspectives of families, additional youth and adult providers, and analyzing more data on features of positive youth development settings, would provide a more comprehensive picture of positive youth development in Redwood City.

⁴ Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American psychologist*, 48(2), 90.

⁵ Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.