YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Applying a Positive Approach

Contents

Introduction

The South Australian Government made a commitment through *youth***connect: South Australia's Youth Strategy 2010-2014, to develop best practice guidelines to support South Australian organisations to deliver youth development programs based on a positive approach.**

The *Youth Development: Applying a Positive Approach* handbook has been written in response to this commitment.

The years from 12 to 24 are a critical stage for young people; they build on the experiences of childhood and generate the foundations for adulthood. During this period, each young person has a number of key tasks to undertake. How well each of these is mastered affects the degree of success each of them will experience in their adult life.

While these key tasks are common to all young people, there is tremendous diversity in young people's individual characteristics and backgrounds, such as gender, culture, being a recent migrant or refugee, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, rural or urban location, disability, religious affiliation and family structure. The interaction of these characteristics has a significant effect on the development process, life experience and outcomes and, therefore need to be carefully considered in a youth development approach.[1]

This handbook outlines a number of program values and characteristics that reflect a positive approach to youth development. It also provides examples of putting a positive approach into practice.

Many organisations already deliver high quality youth programs; this handbook reflects these practices and acknowledges their work.

Adopting a positive approach to youth development will support young South Australians to reach their full potential.

Note - This document is based on literature related to positive youth development. This approach is an emergent area of research with some variation. Therefore this document does not include all elements of a positive approach but provides an operational foundation.

A list of resources, literature reviews and research that informed the development of this handbook can be found in the Bibliography.

A Positive Approach to Youth Development

Positive youth development is focused on what is needed for young people to develop the skills and attitudes they need now and in the future.

In order to thrive young people require a range of personal attributes (competencies, knowledge, experiences, behaviours and beliefs) that support them to make positive choices. Evidence indicates that a young person's personal attributes both protect them from risky behaviours and promote positive attitudes and actions. They are a stronger predictor of whether a young person will engage in negative risk-taking behaviour than either their social or demographic profile.

Positive youth development seeks to support young people to develop the attributes they need by focusing on the promotion of positive experiences and qualities. It is an approach that builds on participants' strengths rather than focusing on perceived problems or issues.

Studies of young peoples' engagement in youth development programs suggest a strong relationship between their involvement in such programs and reduced involvement in risky behaviours and activities and the development of knowledge, skills and competence in a diverse range of life skill areas.

However the quality and the context of a program matters. The values and

characteristics described in this handbook support the design and delivery of programs that contribute to positive youth development.

Three fundamental values should underpin all positive youth development programs. They are:

- youth-centred
- strengths-based
- inclusion for all.

In addition there are eight characteristics of effective youth programs. These characteristics are:

- participation and empowerment
- safe environment
- positive relationships
- personal development
- skill development
- age and development phase appropriate
- delivery in a diversity contexts
- sufficient duration and frequency.

Many of the values and characteristics are inter-related and complementary; organisations may be able to address them directly or indirectly when designing their programs. For example, a program that is youth-centred and engages the participants in program decision making will promote supportive relations between adult facilitators and young people.

Youth-centred
Fundamental value

Young people are placed at the centre of all program decisions.

Positive youth development programs ensure that young people are central in all aspects of the program. The 'youth centred' value is broader than ensuring a young person's active participation; it goes to the organisation's core practices around working with, and for, young people.

For a program to be 'youth centred' all activity needs to engage with young people, including governance discussions, program planning, implementation, evaluation, relationships and communication.

Youth-centred development programs provide participants with opportunities to take responsibility and embrace lead roles in setting program goals and challenges.

Adult facilitators provide a supportive environment including gauging the appropriate level of responsibility of participants when setting these goals and challenges.

Programs provide opportunities for young people to contribute to making a real difference in their lives and/or the community and for their contributions to be recognised and valued.

Positive youth development includes giving young people access to experiences that build leadership, boost self-confidence and awareness and connect young people to caring adults.

Putting it into practice

- Adult facilitators actively create opportunities for young people to participate in decision making; young people inform the development, design, implementation and evaluation of all youth programs.

- Young people are supported to fully engage in a program. Additional support is provided when required to achieve this, for example, peer mentoring by experienced participants; provision of additional information and resources to support young people to build their knowledge base and be more informed.

- Adult facilitators actively seek input and contributions from participants in an environment free from judgment or fear of retribution, for example, regular group meetings or planned opportunities for participants to provide formal and informal feedback.

- Young people are treated as equals.

- Young people are valued and respected and are seen as active, contributing members of society now and in the future.

- Young people are supported and encouraged to learn new things and engage in new experiences in safe and supportive environments.

Strengths-based
Fundamental value

Programs focus on developing the personal attributes of the participants and build on their individual strengths.

A strengths-based approach is a respectful and meaningful starting point in supporting positive outcomes for young people.

Anjh positive approach focuses on building the personal attributes of the participants. It promotes development of skills, behaviours and beliefs that contribute to thriving in young people. It does not focus on addressing perceived problem-behaviour.

By drawing upon individuals' personal attributes, adult facilitators and young people can work together on mutually agreed goals. This can empower young people to take a lead role in their own development.

Putting it into practice

- Program design intentionally develops one or more personal attributes within the participants, building on their strengths and interests.

- Young people are encouraged to identify and build their own personal strengths and attributes with the support of adult facilitators.

- Adult facilitators encourage young people to see challenges as capacity building opportunities and support them to tackle these challenges in a respectful, supportive and non-judgemental manner.

Inclusion for All
Fundamental value

Programs develop the personal attributes that all young people need to thrive.

'Inclusion for all' focuses on what all young people need from themselves and others to thrive, have positive wellbeing and reach their full potential.

It recognises that all young people, regardless of their background or circumstances, may need support to acquire a range of skills, abilities, behaviours and beliefs to thrive. It complements the strengths-based approach and personal development focus of program design.

This value does not detract from recognising that program design can be targeted to address the needs or issues of a specific group of young people.

Putting it into practice

- Program activities promote and build personal attributes that are required by all young people to successfully thrive. Life skills, including personal and social skills are a significant part of program activities and are fostered in participants.

- A diversity of young people with different life experiences, backgrounds and cultures are supported to participate. This will broaden and deepen the experiences of the participants and provide a foundation for learning and respect through exposure to a variety of experiences, attitudes and beliefs.

- Programs involving young people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds acknowledge and respect their cultural values, beliefs, tradition and customs. Adult facilitators are sensitive to their own cultural framework and the impact this has on their youth development practice.

- Targeted programs, designed for specific cohorts of young people, are still founded on a strengths-based, personal development, approach. Targeted programs promote the attributes required by all young people to thrive in addition to building skills to address assessed issues or needs. For example:

    – a program targeted at young people in or exiting the juvenile justice system would develop a broad range of attributes with the

additional aim of building their capacity to address the factors that contributed to their offending.

- a program designed for young Aboriginal people would develop a broad range of attributes with an additional focus on cultural values and supporting cultural identity.

Participation and Empowerment

Characteristic

Young people are involved in program design and are active participants in decision making processes.

Program evaluation and review are undertaken using youth participation practices.

Programs developed in partnership with young people are more likely to be effective at engaging them and therefore have greater impact. Involving young people as partners in making decisions that affect them increases the likelihood that the decisions will be accepted and adopted.

Participatory evaluation empowers young people by providing opportunities for them to highlight issues of importance to them.

Empowerment is an important outcome of youth participation. Empowerment promotes increased self-esteem and self-worth within young people.

Putting it into practice

- Young people are recognised as equal partners in the program.

- Young peoples' opinions are heard and respected and inform decision making.

- Young people are provided with opportunities for leadership and teamwork.

- With appropriate support and guidance, young people are given control of processes and decisions. For example, young people actively influence program decisions such as when, where and how program activities will take place; they chair meetings, discussions and forums; and inform budget decisions and expenditure.

- Adult facilitators plan how young people will be involved in decision making rather than just adding youth representatives to an adult planning group.

- Strategies are developed in partnership with young people to support their engagement in decision making processes.

- Barriers to young people's participation are examined and addressed prior to program commencement including but not limited to location, timing, duration and cost. For example activities for young people are accessible by public transport and do not conflict with young peoples' work or study commitments.

- Activities are designed to be interactive, engaging and fun while providing skill development opportunities, for example teamwork or leadership skills. Adult facilitators allow adequate time to talk with young people about their experience of the activity and any reflections.

- Where possible and appropriate, activities and experiences should apply or relate to real life situations.

- Adult facilitators allow time for young people to create their own experiences, for example, they do not try and resolve problems for participants' rather they are supportive and interested but allow the participants to develop their own solutions.

- Young people are involved in all aspects and stages of program evaluation.

Safe Environment

Characteristic

All programs and activities occur in safe physical and psychological environments.

Physical and psychological safety are prerequisites to a positive approach to youth development.

Young people learn better and participate more fully when they feel physically and emotionally safe. A safe environment encourages honesty, trust and respect amongst and between adult facilitators and young people.

Putting it into practice

- Organisations have an appropriate child safety policy that meets relevant child protection legislation requirements.

- Organisations have an appropriate anti-bullying policy in place.

- All program participants, activities and behaviours respect and actively promote diversity in culture, religion and sexual-orientation. This can be promoted via a code of conduct for both adult facilitators and young people.

- Program activities are conducted in premises that are physically safe and secure, where emergency procedures are clearly displayed and young people have a safe place to store their belongings.

- Programs are delivered in an environment that is relaxed, comfortable and welcoming, with age and culturally appropriate furnishings and resources.

- Programs are delivered in culturally sensitive and inclusive environments, including displaying information in a culturally appropriate manner.

- Young people are involved in developing processes for dealing with conflict that clearly outline how conflict will be resolved and how disrespectful behaviour (bullying, harassment, name calling) will be handled.

- Adult facilitators consider the implications of the age of participants in a program. For example, the

definition of 'youth' is 12 to 25, which could see young people aged *under* 18 being in programs or shared spaces with those *over* the age of 18 (i.e. young adults). This may present child safe environment issues that will require management.

- Adult facilitators consider the cultural appropriateness of program activities.

- Adult facilitators consider the gender appropriateness of program activities Alternatives may need to be developed to support young men and young women to participate in activities.

- Adult facilitators use positive language to create and reinforce positive relationships and environments.

- Organisations have appropriate insurance coverage and the program's participants and activities are included in such coverage.

- Organisations undertake a comprehensive risk assessment during program design to identify any risks. Appropriate controls are developed to address any key risks identified prior to the commencement of program activities.

Positive Relationships

Characteristic

Programs promote positive relationships and mutual respect between all program participants, for example between adult facilitators and young people, within the participant group, and between adult facilitators and other staff and volunteers.

Positive relationships bring safety, stability and encouragement to a young person's life. Positive relationships are critical for their development. Young people need to learn to build meaningful relationships with both peers and adults (such as parents, teachers and other significant adults in their lives).

Positive adult/youth relationships are developed when adult facilitators follow the lead of young people, cultivate a culture of youth participation and balance the stretching of participants with appropriate support, assistance and mutual respect.

The role of an adult facilitator is to demonstrate the attributes and qualities of a positive role model and relate to a young person in a way that supports their development.

Putting it into practice

- Adult facilitators have appropriate skills and competencies, for example, the ability to:

  - understand and apply youth development principles
  - communicate and develop positive relationships with young people and their families
  - adapt, facilitate and evaluate age and developmental phase appropriate activities with and for young people
  - respect and honour cultural and human diversity
  - involve and empower young people
  - identify potential risk factors and take measures to reduce those risks
  - care for, involve and work with families and communities
  - work as part of a team and show professionalism
  - demonstrate the attributes and qualities of a positive role model
  - interact with, and relate to, young people in ways that builds their personal attributes.

- Adult facilitators and young people display mutual respect, recognising each other's views are equally valued, without the adults' views being held in higher regard as 'experts'.

- Adult facilitators support and promote peer group learning, where participants share and learn from each other in a safe environment free from judgment and harassment.

Personal Development

Characteristic

Programs promote and foster the development of a range of personal attributes in the participants.

Personal attributes are the set of competencies, knowledge, experiences, behaviours and beliefs that support young people to thrive. A program does not have to address a wide range of attributes as evidence indicates that strength in one attribute will offset weakness in another. However, it also shows that a young person with more attributes will have greater resilience than a person with fewer.

Programs aiming to build young people's attributes may focus on fostering:

- behavioural, emotional, social, cognitive and moral competence
- self-efficacy
- resilience
- self-determination
- positive identity
- cultural identity
- a belief in the future
- pro-social attitudes.

Putting it into practice

- Adult facilitators work with young people to identify which attributes the program will focus on and design activities that promote and foster these attributes.

- Programs do not need to address all attributes but should clearly articulate which attribute/s related to a program's objectives will be developed and how program activities will support this.

Note: The list of attributes provided are drawn from an analysis of programs that achieved positive change in young people. It is not exclusive and the attributes to be developed in a program should reflect the views and needs of the participants.

Skill Development

Characteristic

Programs provide a range of activities that promote sequential skill development and opportunities for young people to use and refine skills.

Programs include activities that teach skills and provide opportunities for participants to practice skills and to reflect on their success and learning.

Putting it into practice

- Adult facilitators provide opportunities for young people to identify skills and/or learning needs and incorporate these into program design.

- Young people are involved in developing program activities and are responsible for their own participation. Activities should be fun, interesting, meaningful and reflect the needs and wishes of young people rather than replicating adult learning environments.

- Program activities are developmental building blocks, with each activity or experience building on the last.

- Program design reflects skill development occurring over time. The focus is on quality, sequential skill development sustained over time, rather than providing many opportunities to learn a range of skills but no opportunities to practice and refine them.

- Skill development activities include realistic but high expectations, where young people are encouraged and supported to extend themselves to achieve outcomes.

- Skill development activities can include both individual and team goals and allow time to reflect on successes, failures, growth and learning.

- Skill development activities are age, gender, culture and developmentally appropriate and allow for diversity in learning styles.

- Programs provide young people with opportunities to be challenged by learning through doing, combining theoretical knowledge with practical application. For example:

  - team building skill activities have a theoretical component: participants discuss team roles, how teams work effectively and team 'norms'. This knowledge is then put into practice by organising young people into groups to undertake an agreed task, asking them to allocate roles, develop their own team norms and work together to achieve the task.

  - if incorporating a community service component in a program, this is based on a service learning approach - a method that combines instruction and skill development with a related activity. The community service activity should be performed across several months and support the participants to develop and use skills and develop positive relationships.

Age and Developmental Phase Appropriate

Characteristic

Program activities and their structure and supervision are appropriate to the age and development phase of participants.

'Youth' is defined as the period between the ages of 12 and 25. It covers a period when young people experience rapid physical, psychological, and social changes and growth. Program activities need to consider and address the diversity of needs associated with age and development milestones during this time.

Program structure and supervision supports age-appropriate levels of autonomy, reflecting the increasing social maturity and expertise of adolescents as they progress to adulthood. Both too little and too much structure and adult supervision is related to poorer outcomes for participants.

Putting it into practice

- Organisations are aware of and consider the skills, expertise and experience of adult facilitators in relation to their ability to meet the needs of the age and developmental stage of program participants.

- When setting individual and team goals, adult facilitators ensure they are age and developmental phase appropriate to make success achievable. Opportunities to assess setbacks and learn from activities are provided. Adult facilitators work with young people to identify and make changes to enable successful outcomes if required.

- Adult facilitators develop strategies that address the age range of participants, for example, they consider how a 12 year old participant might experience an activity versus a 21 year old. Some activities might require participants to be managed or grouped differently to reflect their age or developmental phase, or for different activities to be set for different age groups.

- Adult facilitators are mindful that age does not necessarily indicate an individual's developmental ability.

Delivery in a Diversity of Contexts

Characteristic

Programs operate in as many contexts as possible.

'Contexts' refers to where a program activity takes place and the opportunities this provides for young people to engage with people and communities. For example, in a school, the community, within family, with peers or in a workplace/professional environment.

A broader range of contexts will provide young people with opportunities to interact with a breadth of diversity of people, communities and social groups. Operating in a number of contexts is important as it increases young people's access to the range of support, experience and opportunities they require to develop.

Evidence suggests that programs that operate in one or two contexts positively affect young people's knowledge and attitudes with some impact on behaviours - whereas programs that operate in three contexts positively affects their knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs.

Putting it into practice

- Program activities are delivered in at least two contexts. For example, a school-based program also operates in another context, such as the community or family setting.

- Adult facilitators work with young people to determine which contexts are most suitable to support the program's objectives and the attributes to be developed and discuss the merits of these selections. This will help young people set goals and identify the benefits gained through the experiences.

Sufficient Duration and Frequency

Characteristic

Program length and frequency support the positive youth developmental approach.

Evidence suggests that the length of programs have an impact on the outcomes for young people. These are maximised when they participate in a program that lasts one year or longer, with less significant but still positive outcomes for programs that last between six months and one year. However, programs of shorter duration will not adequately meet a range of important characteristics of the positive approach including sequential skill development and promoting positive adult/young person relationships.

Regular, planned opportunities to engage in programs provide young people with stability, time to reflect and form opinions, and the ability to plan and prioritise activities in their lives. Frequent, regular activities will support meaningful relationships to develop and for participants to acquire and use learnt skills. However, activity frequency should consider other issues such as program fatigue.

Putting it into practice

- A program occurs over a twelve month period. Where this is not possible, a minimum of six months is suggested.

- Adult facilitators plan program activities with young people for the entire program period and include ongoing elements such as relationship building and sequential skill development.

- Adult facilitators work with young people to determine the appropriate duration and frequency for each program activity and what mechanisms are required to support the participation of young people.

- Planned program activities occur regularly, for example once per fortnight. If activities occur more frequently, consideration must be given to how program fatigue will be avoided. Weekly activity will require a higher level of planning to ensure activities are fun, engaging and beneficial for participants as a lack of sufficient planning can result in young people tiring of the program and disengaging.

- A schedule of program activities is developed with young people, providing young people with stability and structure and therefore promoting participation and engagement.

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Notes