

Family Strengthening/Youth Development

INTRODUCTION TO AN EMERGING FIELD



THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE/FUND FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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Overview

Strong family support is essential for young people as they mature and become adults. Family strengthening/youth development is an emerging field with a knowledge base and practices to help those who work with youth strengthen relationships between youth and families. In recent decades, there has been greater recognition that adolescents are the central actors in their own development. The emphasis on the role of young people has resulted, at times, in failure to address the critical role of families in adolescent development. Families are the keystones in the foundation of social supports that also include neighborhoods and schools. Caring relationships and consistent emotional bonds between families and adolescents are significant protective factors for youth.

While adolescence is marked in part by the need for greater autonomy than in earlier years, most young people still rely on their families. For those who work with youth, it is important to understand both the need for balancing tensions and the sometimes contradictory tendencies in relationships between young people and their families.

A body of literature is beginning to define the field of family strengthening/youth development. Theoretical underpinnings have been established for years, however, in the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, Frank Furstenberg, Theodora Ooms, and others. Many practitioners recognize the importance of the family/youth integration advocated by this field and seek to build communities that bring together young people and adults, adolescents and family members. This has occurred despite the lack of targeted funding as well as policies that discourage integration.

In order to support better integration of family strengthening and youth development in policy and practice, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has funded field research and documentation of practices. This research has been helpful to those working with youth in the following ways:

- It describes the role that youth development organizations play in strengthening relationships between youth and their families.
- It identifies what youth organizations need to know and be able to do in order to enhance their ability to support youth and their families.
- It identifies the type of external supports and opportunities that families need and that youth organizations can provide to support the development of youth.
- It details specific practices and policies that reflect the emerging field of Family Strengthening/Youth Development.

This bulletin briefly summarizes the research findings. More extensive treatment can be found in two monographs prepared by the Youth Development Institute: *Youth Development and Family Strengthening: A Study of Emerging Connections* and *Family Strengthening/Youth Development: A Handbook*. See *Resources* at the end of this bulletin.

Family Strengthening/Youth Development:

What Is It?

Family strengthening/youth development is an approach to providing activities, programs, and services that strengthen relationships within families in ways that bolster adolescent development. This approach seeks to accomplish the following:

- Increase the knowledge and skills of youth organizations, schools, and other organizations in supporting strong connections between family members and adolescents.
- Improve the quality of relationships and deepen understanding and communication among family members.
- Increase and sustain the capacity of youth, family members, and other adults to engage in shared activities that are rewarding and enjoyable.
- Provide families with skills, resources, and services that increase their ability to support their children.

A wide range of activities, including many that are common in both community- and school-based programs, can be adapted to include family strengthening practices. Some examples include the following:

- Service activities in which youth and adults work side by side to make community improvements.
- Academic support activities that engage families.
- Culminating activities, such as graduations and exhibitions, where young people showcase their talents and abilities, and parents have a role in planning and supporting the activities.
- Team sports that involve youth and adults as players, coaches, and referees.
- Arts and cultural activities that engage both family members and young people.
- Regularly scheduled orientations for parents of youth who register for programs, to inform them about the agency's programs for youth and other family members.

Why Is Family Strengthening/Youth Development Important?

Family strengthening/youth development provides guidance to policymakers and practitioners about ways to increase the likelihood that young people will become successful adults. Public and private funders and youth organizations can build neighborhood infrastructures that enhance the development of young people by bringing together community programs, schools, peers, neighbors, and, especially, family members. Connecting and focusing these efforts so that they are collective, cumulative, and consistent strengthens the resources available for young people.

Pressures on families have increased in recent decades. Economic stress, the need for parents to work, and loss of funding that bolsters community institutions and families have reduced supports for young people. Families themselves have changed markedly, with many youth cared for by grandparents, siblings, gay and lesbian couples, or other nontraditional caretakers. As a result, the mutual reinforcement and integration of services and opportunities have become critical to rebuild a strong web of support and assure healthy development.

The work of Urie Bronfenbrenner forms much of the basis for using a family strengthening approach to youth development. He describes the process of development as the product of an interaction between the individual and his or her environment.¹ An understanding of this ecosystem has encouraged greater attention to the social systems in which youth develop.

Other contributions to the field have emphasized the relationships between families and their communities and the ways that these connections can strengthen families' capacities to help themselves. Theodora Ooms describes the importance of what she calls "family capital," which includes "the resources and capacities families use inside the family and those it exercises in its social relations with others."² She argues that comprehensive strategies must connect interventions in the family to the community, and vice versa.

Frank Furstenberg uses the term "collective parenting" for the social networks and community resources that contribute to effective parenting. He writes that families are stronger and youth receive more support when community institutions and families share common values and expectations of youth. In neighborhoods that he defines as "dangerous," families need to create broader networks of support in order to be successful in the role of parent. In this context, youth organizations are an important resource for families.³

The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescence of the National Academy of Sciences, which looked at both risk and protective factors as they relate to adolescent health, analyzed the role of the family in youth development. This study found that "family connectedness," defined as caring support and a consistent emotional bond, is a significant protective factor for youth.⁴

Taken together, these and other studies point to the importance of integrating the support of diverse actors, including young people themselves.

Examples of Family Strengthening/Youth Development

A family strengthening/youth development approach can be applied in many different activities. By attending to both youth and family perspectives, youth workers can continue to offer young people opportunities to experience both autonomy and independence from their families, as well as schedule activities that engage their families. Below are some examples of how agencies that work with youth have adapted their practice to reflect family strengthening/youth development.

Sports and Recreation

The Center for Family Life (CFL), in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, conducts a range of sports activities in an elementary school yard and gym. In the afternoon and evening, local residents of all ages come to play sports and socialize. CFL's staff structures the program to include family strengthening in a number of ways. The range of activities available is diverse—everything from basketball to dance class to a lending library—to make it more likely that each family member will find something to engage him or her. Games are brief, so people of all ages and skill levels

¹ Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1979.

² Ooms, Theodora. 1996.

³ Furstenberg, Frank F. 1993.

⁴ Resnick, Michael D. et al. 1997.

get a chance to play or watch, and this increases interactions among them. And both youth and adults coach and referee soccer, the most popular activity, providing opportunities for them to see and relate to one another in different roles than they might have at home.

A Beacon Carnival

The Beacon program run by Good Shepherd Services in Public School 27, in Red Hook, Brooklyn, works with more than 200 elementary and middle school students. Its annual carnival is planned by the 11- to 14-year-olds, for whom it is an opportunity to develop leadership and organizational skills. On the day of the carnival itself, the youth work closely in teams with parent volunteers, running the individual games and handing out prizes. The carnival is family strengthening because it gives adults a chance to contribute to the community and see younger people in leadership roles and provides youth with the opportunity to work and make decisions together with adults, including their own parents.

College Counseling

Planning for going to college is a major undertaking for young people and their families. The Options Program at Forest Hills Community House in Queens, New York, works closely with youth and their families to develop effective, achievable college plans, and give parents the information and tools they need to help their teens through the process. Throughout, the Options staff supports the roles that families must play. One tool is a detailed month-by-month calendar of exactly *what* to do *when* in the college applications process. When conflicts within families arise, around who is responsible for paying for school, or whether or not a teen can go far from home for college, for example, Options' staff helps the family work through and resolve it.

The Framework

Through field research and conversations with practitioners, young people, and family members, common principles of family strengthening/youth development practice have been identified:

- *They promote emotional connectedness* by providing opportunities for young people and their families to have common experiences such as celebrations and structured activities devoted to stronger communication, and to talk with and express their feelings to one another. Youth and community agencies offer a neutral, or safe, space where young people and their family members can come together and relate to one another.
- *They share goals and promote high expectations.* Effective youth workers seek to expand the number of young people, parents, and other adults committed to building a strong and positive community. Parents who get to know youth workers often find that together they can reinforce important messages to youth by encouraging young people to work hard in school, participate in social activities, and become involved in their communities.
- *They help mediate between youth and families.* Tensions and even conflicts with parents and others in guardian roles are common during adolescence. Staff in family strengthening/youth development programs are trained and experienced at helping families work through these disagreements and build common understanding.
- *They provide valuable adult role models outside the family.* Learning to relate to and communicate with adults other than their parents is an important developmental step forward for youth. Knowing other adults helps teens learn skills needed to better relate to and understand the adults in their own lives. This can also expose young people to diverse races and backgrounds, thus enriching their appreciation of differences. Parents also benefit from seeing other adults interact with their teens.
- *They bridge generations.* Often, young people and parents feel that they live in separate cultures that reflect their different countries of origin, lifestyles, musical tastes, and peers. These may well promote different value systems and expectations of behavior. Youth workers can create understanding and meaningful connections that bridge the gaps between young people and their parents and between youth and adult cultures, and offer opportunities for positive interactions between generations. For young people who may be isolated in one neighborhood, youth workers can provide a gateway to a wider community and other cultures.
- *They promote parental efficacy.* Youth programs focused on family strengthening offer parents opportunities to develop and expand their own skills through workshops and classes and as volunteers and community leaders. Their competencies as parents also grow when they learn more about their own children's interests, goals, and development. Parent efficacy is also increased by connecting them to resources such as health or job training programs.

Organizational Support for Family Strengthening/Youth Development

Agencies wanting to incorporate the family strengthening approach into their work with youth need to put several elements in place in order to do it effectively. These include the following:

- A safe and welcoming physical space.
- A focus on building community among youth and between groups of young people and adults, both family members and other adults.
- Recognition and acknowledgement of non-traditional families in which teens' primary caretakers may not be their biological parents.
- A welcoming atmosphere for family members, including multilingual staff members who communicate readily and provide information about programs and services.
- Staff skilled in working with both youth and families.
- Parent councils and youth councils, or similar bodies, that provide opportunities for family members and young people to help shape activities from the early planning stages through completion and planning for follow-up.
- Regular communications with parents regarding programs and activities through newsletters, flyers, and telephone calls.
- A commitment to collect and use information about multiple contacts with families as a means for agency self-assessment.

Challenges

Agencies frequently encounter obstacles to instituting family strengthening/youth development practices. Some examples are the difficulties of identifying and hiring staff with the appropriate skills and commitment as well finding time and resources to train them in working with both teens and family members. Funding for youth programs may be inflexible in that it doesn't allow or give credit for work with family members.

Public agencies continue to structure funding streams categorically, rarely looking at where they might intersect and reinforce each other in the interest of providing more effective services. Often, community organizations that seek to integrate work with families into youth development must do it in spite of regulations and funding streams.

Supportive Public Policies: An Example from New York City

Policymakers in some places are attempting to overcome these barriers. New York City provides one example, in its program bringing foster care preventive services into Beacons, which are school-based community centers with programs and services to children and adults. Under this program, the city uses Beacon youth development funding to draw down state child welfare funding for preventive services.

The strategy brings additional resources into the Beacons and provides an opportunity for agencies to transform the way they approach work with families in crisis. Typically, preventive services are provided at a non-profit agency's offices—a family comes in for the express purpose of meeting with a caseworker. But in this case, preventive work with families is done in a community setting that offers constructive activities and social opportunities and where there aren't stigmatizing associations to the place itself.

Staff members in the Beacon make referrals for families attending the Beacon to help them obtain a wide range of services and to provide counseling when it's needed. And families having difficulties can continue to participate in the Beacon, instead of dropping out and losing their connections to positive activities and a strong community at a time when these might help them out of their crisis.

The challenges faced in creating the Beacon preventive services program and sustaining it over time can potentially arise in any situation where a single program blends funding streams from different agencies and levels of government. Shifting priorities in child welfare and youth development, and reductions in funding to community organizations, have all affected the program's implementation and operations. It has continued, however. Community organizations have communicated its importance to those making budget decisions, and leaders in government agencies have understood its value.

Resources

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