



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

National Institute  
of Food  
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4-H National  
Headquarters

## THE SCIENCE OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnish the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. (Federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, 2014)

### Positive Youth Development Roots

Positive youth development has its beginnings in the field of prevention. In the past, prevention efforts usually focused on one problem before they surfaced in youth, such as teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and criminal acts by youth.

Over time, practitioners, policymakers, funders, and researchers determined that promoting positive asset building and considering young people as resources were important strategies. As a result, the youth development field began to examine the role of resiliency—the protective factors in a young person's environment—and how these factors could influence one's ability to overcome challenges. Those factors included, but were not limited to: family support, caring adults, positive peer groups, strong sense of self and self-esteem, and involvement in school and community activities.

Researchers began to report that young people who have a diverse set of protective factors could, in fact, experience more positive outcomes. Youth programs are strengthened when they involve youth as equal partners,

providing benefits both for the program and for the involved youth.

### Positive Youth Development Today

Connecting youth to positive experiences and environments is a purposeful process. All youth have the room for positive growth and development. Youth must be valued to bring their skills to the table. Adults and youth work in partnership. Youth can attend, participate, or lead through positive youth development activities.

This systems approach to positive youth development uses the ecological model of influencers and strength-based supporters to involve and engage every part of the community—schools, homes, community members, and others. Young people are valued through this process. Positive youth development is an investment that the community makes in young people.

Risk can be used as a strategy to help youth develop positive outcomes. In today's fast paced world, it may be more important than ever to prepare youth to cope with and adapt to the unexpected.

Positive risk taking teaches youth how to apply learning from various points of view and decision making to the challenges they face. Instead of avoiding difficult situations, positive risk taking can be a tool in addressing the always changing future.



*Great relationships between youth and adults is one of the elements needed for positive youth development.*

### 4-H: The Program Model for Positive Youth Development

The 4-H Youth Development Program is the youth outreach program from the land-grant institutions' cooperative extension services, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. 4-H serves as a model program for the practice of positive youth development by creating positive learning experiences; positive relationships for and between youth and adults; positive, safe environment; and opportunities for positive risk taking.