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The Research Base for Positive Prevention Programs
The Five Opportunity Areas

The City of Little Rock's Positive Prevention Programs are place-based. They are operated by community-based organizations and located in Little Rock's neighborhoods with greatest obstacles to successful development—high crime, poor academic outcomes, limited economic opportunities. Positive Prevention Programs provide a set of opportunities that both best practice frameworks and empirical studies have supported as important for youth to develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills required to make good choices, resist negative pressures, and lead productive lives. This set includes:

- Opportunities for caring, consistent relationships with responsible adults in their families and in the broader community;
- Opportunities for positive social and recreational activities with peers and family;
- Opportunities to make positive contributions to their family, neighborhood, and community and to feel valued for their contribution;
- Opportunities to learn and test new skills through participation in a wide range of social, cultural, educational, service, and employability activities; and
- Opportunities to assist in the design and implementation of programs and services in which they participate.

The rationale for insuring these opportunities are a part of the experiences of participants at the City's Positive Prevention Programs is both theory-based and evidence-based. In her 1991 testimony before the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, Karen Pittman, then Vice President of the Academy for Educational Development and Director of its Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, stated:

"For years, Americans have accepted the notion that—with the exception of education—services for youth, particularly publicly funded services, exist to address youth problems. We have assumed that positive youth development occurs naturally in the absence of youth problems. Such thinking has created an assortment of youth services focused on "fixing" adolescents engaged in risky behaviors or preventing older youth from "getting into trouble." Preventing high risk behaviors, however, is not the same as preparation for the future. Indeed, an adolescent who attends school, obeys laws, and avoids drugs, is not necessarily equipped to meet the difficult demands of adulthood. Problem-free does not mean fully prepared." (Pittman, 1991).

Pittman continued in her testimony to list the basic needs that must be met to prepare young people fully for adulthood: 1) Safety and structure 2) Belonging and membership
3) Self-worth and an ability to contribute 4) Independence and control over one's life 5) Closeness and several good relationships 6) Competence and mastery and 7) Self-awareness. Pittman further asserted that, given appropriate design, community-based youth serving organizations could be central to adequately meeting these needs of youth.

Karen Pittman's voice was not alone in promoting positive youth development in the early 1990's. The Carnegie Foundation's Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours* (1992). This important research initiative helped, along with Pittman's efforts, to shape youth work for the past three decades. In *A Matter of Time*, the Carnegie Council defined positive youth development "as the process through which adolescents actively seek, and are assisted, to meet their basic needs and build their individual assets or competencies (pg. 38)." The Council further defines these assets or attributes as 1) Social competence 2) Problem-solving skills 3) Autonomy (sense of self-identity and an ability to act independently and to exert control over his or her environment and 4) Sense of purpose and of a future (pg. 36). Finally, the Carnegie Council asserted that community-based youth programs promote development of these attributes in the nonschool hours when they provide 1) Opportunities to socialize with peers and adults 2) Opportunities to develop skills that are relevant now and in the future 3) Opportunities to contribute to the community 4) Opportunities to belong to a valued group and 5) Opportunities to feel competent.

These foundational frameworks inspired additional theoretical and empirical studies regarding the positive youth development approach to youth work. In 2002, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies completed a two-year project evaluating and integrating the research and findings related to youth development program design and implementation. The resulting compendium, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, compiles evidence that young people develop fully in settings that include: 1) Physical and psychological safety and security 2) Structure that is developmentally appropriate with increasing opportunities to make decisions and take on leadership roles 3) Emotional and moral support 4) Opportunities for adolescents to experience supportive adult relationships 5) Opportunities to learn how to form close, durable human relationships with peers that support and reinforce healthy behaviors 6) Opportunities to feel a sense of belonging and being valued 7) Opportunities for skill building and mastery 8) Opportunities to develop a sense of personal efficacy 8) Opportunities to make a contribution to one's community 8) Strong links between families, schools, and broader community resources.

Finally, two widely recognized initiatives combine a youth development framework and empirical research supporting the framework. The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets and America's Promise Alliance Five Promises both provide substantial evidence that settings promoting specific resources and opportunities are related to successful development. The 40 Developmental Assets include positive adult relationships, community valuing youth and service to others, safety, positive peer relationships, involvement in programs and creative activities, achievement motivation, caring for others, chances for planning and decision-making, and sense of personal power. In surveys of 200,000 youth in 6th through 12th grade completed in 318 U.S communities, young people that had only 25% or fewer of the assets in their lives were 8 to 39 times more likely to experience the negative outcomes of problem alcohol use, violence, illicit drug use and sexual activity than were those youth with 75% or more of the assets in their lives. Also, those youth with 75% or more of the assets, when

compared to youth with 25% or fewer of the assets, were about 2 to 6 times more likely to experience the positive outcomes of exhibiting leadership, maintaining good health, valuing diversity and succeeding in school (Search Institute, 2002).

The Five Promises promoted by America's Promise Alliance are "key resources that correlate with success in both youth and adulthood" (America's Promise Alliance, 2006). These resources are 1) A caring adult 2) Safe places and a constructive use of time 3) A healthy start and healthy development 4) Effective education for marketable skills and lifelong learning and 5) Opportunities to make a difference through helping others. Research completed by Child Trends for America's Promise Alliance demonstrated the effects of these resources and opportunities. Specifically, Teens with four or more of the promises are twice as likely to get mostly A's in school as are those with only one or fewer of the promises. Youth with four or five of the promises are 40% more likely to volunteer in their communities than are youth with only one or none of the promises. Teens with four or five of the promise opportunities are twice as likely to refrain from using violence as are those with only one or none of the promises. The presence of four or more of the promises reduces health disparities between African American and Hispanic youth and white youth. The presence of four or more of the promises also reduces the disparity of school performance between African American and Hispanic youth and white youth.

Across more than three decades and a variety of research initiatives completed by nationally recognized and highly regarded entities, a common set of opportunities were deemed crucial for healthy and successful development of young people. Early in the process of understanding the importance of these developmental resources, the City of Little Rock adopted the core set of opportunities for inclusion in its Positive Prevention Programs. Review of the continually developing research base demonstrates the wisdom of this adoption and supports maintaining inclusion of these opportunities in the future.

References

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