



Executive Summary

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The Rationale for Recreation Services for Youth: An Evidenced Based Approach

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Executive Summary

Youth development is:

...the ongoing growth process in which all youth are engaged in attempting to (1) meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded, and (2) to build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives. *Source:* <http://oyd.aec.org/whatis.html>, Pittman, 1993, p. 8.

Thus, youth are valuable resources to invest in and not problems to be solved. Adolescents want to develop their capacities, but they need opportunities and appropriate adult involvement and guidance to do so.

This monograph was written to assist park and recreation professionals and elected officials to better understand the important role of park and recreation services, facilities, and programs in the process of youth development.¹

Park and recreation departments are ideally situated to supply the supports, opportunities, programs, and services to facilitate adolescents' development into healthy and fully functioning adults. However, adolescents do not need adults to do things "to" or "for" them, rather adolescents need to be involved in the learning and growing process—they need to have opportunities to "develop themselves," and they need adults to serve as enablers in this process.

The youth development approach is opposite of a problems-based approach, which holds that there is something wrong with the individual and that park and recreation departments need to provide the skills and knowledge to correct deficiencies. Recreation services provided by park and recreation departments need to both help reduce problem behaviors, as well as increase pro-social attitudes and skills. Critical to an understanding of youth development is the phrase "problem free is not fully prepared," which recognizes that it is possible to be problem free but not grow to be a fully functioning adult. Efforts need to be made to create family structures, communities, and organizations that enable youth to move along pathways to adulthood by supplying the appropriate supports, opportunities, programs, and services.

Although park and recreation departments are significant players in providing services that promote youth development, the case for the importance of the departments has not always been fully made. The services provided by park and recreation departments are more than fun and games, or gym and swim programs. These programs—which are typically organized, structured, and adult-supervised or led—provide excellent opportunities for adolescents to develop and grow to become fully functioning adults. Participation in these activities is associated with autonomy and identity development, positive social relationships, and learning conflict resolution, academic success, mental health, and civic engagement.

Nine outcomes are particularly important results of participation in out-of-school time (OST) programs. These outcomes occur for participants, families, and the wider community and include:

1. contributing to reducing juvenile delinquency
2. contributing to increasing positive and reducing negative behaviors
3. exposing youth to less violence

¹ "Youth" refers to individuals between the ages of 12 and 19. This is also the period known as adolescence; thus, "youth," "adolescent," and "teen/teenager" will be used interchangeably. There is considerable debate at the moment about how long adolescence actually lasts. Some have argued that with youth being more dependent on their parents for longer periods of time and staying in school longer, that adolescence at least extends until one graduates from college. For the purposes of this monograph, we have used the more traditional approach of tying adolescence to the teenage years.

4. improving children's educational performance and thus impact the quality of the future work force and the national economy
5. helping decrease health care costs related to childhood obesity
6. increasing the economic contributions of young people to society when they become adults
7. helping youth develop self-confidence, optimism, and initiative
8. increasing civic responsibility and participation
9. helping reduce parental stress and thus impact healthcare costs and lost job productivity.

Thus, park and recreation departments have the potential to do more than keep children off the streets in a safe environment.

The departments can play an important role in achieving each of the nine outcomes by incorporating eight standards that define high-quality youth programs. These standards have been identified by the National Academy of Sciences (Eccles and Gootman, 2002) and address:

1. physical and psychological safety
2. structure that is developmentally appropriate
3. supportive relationships
4. opportunities to belong
5. positive social norms
6. support for efficacy and mattering
7. opportunities for skill building
8. integration of family, schools, and community efforts.

Achieving these standards is also critical to recruiting and retaining program participants. Many of the reasons youth join and drop out of programs are related to the perceived presence or absence of these program characteristics. Due to their growing autonomy, adolescents have considerable say regarding whether they choose to join or leave a program. The negative experiences reported by program participants are indicative of how adult leaders fail to be effective in implementing youth development practices.

Park and recreation departments can and should be important players in creating an overall youth development service system. Planned, purposive programs need to be carefully crafted and efforts need to be implemented to help young people develop the knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and behaviors necessary to successfully transition to adulthood. The work done by park and recreation departments is critical in helping youth reach their full potential.

Historically, park and recreation departments have included youth development as part of their missions, although the term "youth development" is relatively new. These historical roots will be discussed in Chapter 1, *We've Always Known the Importance of Recreation*, to provide a context for understanding the evolution of not only services to youth, but also to the youth development movement. Chapter 2, *Contemporary Youth Development*, discusses basic principles of the contemporary youth development movement while Chapter 3, *Outcome Frameworks to Guide Youth Development*, outlines frameworks for understanding key elements that should be included to guide successful youth development programs.

In Chapter 4, *The Scientific Evidence Relating to the Impact of Recreation on Youth Development*, we identify nine major outcomes associated with youth participation in youth development programs. These outcomes are most attainable when programs follow the key principles of programming identified in Chapter 3. Finally, Chapter 5, *Creating Community and Statewide Partnerships*, discusses the importance of creating community and statewide partnerships to foster powerful approaches to youth development programming.

Reference

Eccles, J., and Gootman, J.A. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington: National Academy Press.

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BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

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Dr. Peter A. Witt has been active in the youth development field for more than 40 years. He is currently a Professor and holder of the Bradberry Recreation and Youth Development Chair at Texas A&M University in the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Sciences. He is also co-chair of the Youth Development Initiative www.ydi.tamu.edu. Dr. Witt has written extensively about youth development issues and received a number of grants to support his work. For the past 10 years, he has served as the external evaluator for Fort Worth After School, and has also conducted evaluation studies for municipal park and recreation departments and

other youth-serving agencies. He has also given presentations to numerous professional and academic audiences. Dr. Witt has won a number of awards for his commitment to teaching, research, and public service. He was the 2010 recipient of the Bush Faculty Excellence Award in Public Service and has also received the Robert W. Crawford Youth Prize from the National Recreation Foundation and the Roosevelt Research Award from the National Recreation and Park Association. He is a fellow and former president of both the American Academy of Park and Recreation Administration and Academy of Leisure Sciences.

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

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Dr. Linda L. Caldwell is a Professor of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management and Human Development and Family Studies at The Pennsylvania State University. She is also the Director of the College of Health and Human Development Global Leadership Initiative. Her research primarily focuses on interventions that develop youth competencies, promote healthy lifestyles, and reduce risky behavior in and through leisure. She is the co-developer of two interventions: TimeWise: Taking Charge of Leisure Time and HealthWise South Africa: Life Skills for Young Adults. Her primary funding comes from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Heart,

Lung, and Blood Institute. Dr. Caldwell is currently secretary of the Children and Youth Commission of the World Leisure Association, president of the Academy of Leisure Sciences, and an elected member of the American Academy of Park and Recreation Administration. In 2007, she was the recipient of the National Recreation and Park Association Franklin D. and Theodore Roosevelt Excellence in Recreation and Park Research Award and the Society for Prevention Research International Collaborative Prevention Science Award. She received the College of Health and Human Development Leadership in Outreach Award in 2009.