WHAT IS YOUTH DEVELOPMENT?

Youth development, or positive youth development, serves as the unifying principle for YDEKC's diverse coalition of organizations, but what exactly do we mean when we talk about youth development? And how is youth development related to social, emotional, and academic learning? Finally, why do we believe that a youth development approach is critical to the well-being of young people in King County?

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT DEFINED

The federal [Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs](#) defines positive youth development as:

…an intentional, prosocial 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 young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.[i]

YDEKC does not distinguish between positive youth development and youth development. Nor do we believe that a youth development approach is or should be confined to out-of-school-time programs. We believe that youth development principles should guide the ways that adults work with youth across settings, and should serve as the basis for community investments in a whole child, whole day system of support for children, youth, and families.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT BOTH EXTENDS AND UPENDS THE LOGIC OF PREVENTION

Youth development emerged in the 1990s in response to a growing awareness that the prevention of specific problem behaviors in young people was not sufficient to prepare them for success in adulthood. Rather, healthy development in childhood and adolescence depends upon the extent to which young people's environments maximize their developing strengths and competencies. Youth development flips the traditional logic of prevention by regarding the active and intentional promotion of positive, holistic development as an effective means of minimizing problem behaviors and not the reverse. In general, youth development as an approach is guided by the following fundamental principles:

- Young people are assets to be developed, not problems to be solved
- The relationship between young people and their environment is reciprocal and dynamic
- Young people need to experience connection to family, school, and community
- Young people have both the need and the ability to contribute positively and meaningfully to society
- Young people need culturally and developmentally appropriate services, opportunities, and supports to transition successfully to adulthood

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES SUPPORT HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

There is no single program model or curriculum that makes a program "youth development." Rather there are certain features and practices that programs using a youth development approach share. These programs support the healthy development of young people by:

- Ensuring **physical and psychological safety**
- Emphasizing **positive and supportive relationships** with caring adults
- Promoting **belonging and positive identity development** for all young people regardless of race, culture, gender, ability, or socioeconomic status

- Providing **opportunities for skill building** through activities that engage youth and offer appropriate levels of challenge
- Enabling and encouraging youth agency through **voice, choice, and leadership** opportunities

In Washington, high-quality youth development programs are largely guided by the Washington State Quality Standards for Afterschool and Youth Development Programs developed by School's Out Washington, and assessed using the Youth (or School-Age) Program Quality Assessment developed by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. Taken together, these provide youth development practitioners with a common language and framework for designing and evaluating youth programs. It is also important to note that youth development work often occurs outside the context of group-based youth programs; in mentoring, service learning, and job skills programs; in cultural organizations and faith-based institutions; in health and wellness programs; and in schools and other community settings.

Youth development and social and emotional learning are natural allies

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which people develop skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions.[ii] Youth development, with its focus on the whole child, has long been a key strategy for supporting social and emotional learning. Not only can youth development programs serve as a venue for implementing SEL-related curriculum; the interactive skill-building opportunities that youth development programs traditionally provide can reinforce the development of social and emotional competencies in young people. We believe that the individual outcomes generally associated with youth development – competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution[iii] – are analogous to those of SEL, and that these frameworks should be regarded as complementary to one another.

A youth development approach can and should guide investments in community well-being

We believe that a youth development approach should serve as the basis for all services, opportunities, and supports for young people and their families in King County. Youth development offers an alternative to reactive, punitive approaches to problem behaviors in children and youth. All young people, but particularly those furthest from opportunity, stand to benefit from expanded access to the safe, supportive, interactive, and engaging contexts that support healthy development. A youth development approach offers several distinct advantages:

- It can interrupt the **school to prison pipeline** by offering positive alternatives to exclusionary discipline
- By honoring youth voice, choice, and leadership, it can deepen **community involvement** in solution seeking
- Through its focus on relationships, it can **build connections** between young people and the institutions with which they interact
- Proactive investment in **prevention and promotion** can minimize the need for reactive investments later

Many children and youth in our region experience poverty, racism, homelessness, interpersonal violence, and other forms of trauma. Unfortunately, these experiences put children and youth at higher risk for poor outcomes in school, work, and life. As a community, we need to work to eliminate these risk factors; at the same time, we need to ensure that our young people have ample opportunity to build resiliency so that they can reach their full potential. We believe that youth development offers a promising approach that can be applied across a range of contexts that support young people.

[i] Youth.gov (n.d.). Positive youth development. Retrieved from https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development
[ii] Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (n.d.). What is SEL? Retrieved from https://casel.org/what-is-sel/
[iii] Lerner, R. M. (2004). Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among America's youth. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.