

**SUMMER 2007 SPOTLIGHT:****Helping Refugee Youth Find the Right Path**

*Researchers have started...identifying the “protective factors” and “social assets” that reduce a young person’s chances of getting caught up in crime. We are learning that youth with positive and supportive relationships are less likely to engage in crime, violence, and substance abuse.*

*We are also finding that being rewarded for learning and for trying out new skills helps to keep young people attached to conventional social institutions, such as family, school, and work. And, we are discovering that, just like anyone else, young people value their communities when their communities value them. In other words, youth are less likely to get involved in crime when they participate in community affairs, and when they have a voice in public dialogue. All of these lessons are now known as “positive youth development” or the “youth development approach” [5]*

The adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” may be so old-fashioned it’s modern. In the field of youth services, a positive youth development approach, as described above, signals a renewed emphasis on prevention by ensuring that youth have the supports and relationships they need before problem behaviors emerge. Refugee and immigrant youth—facing the challenges of acculturation on top of the trials and transformations of adolescence—may be well-served by a positive youth development approach which can draw on the protective factors and social assets of both their native and new cultures in order to keep them on the path to success in the U.S.

**Positive Youth Development Described**

Positive youth development (PYD) has emerged as one of the most effective strategies for preventing youth problem behaviors. As noted in BRYCS’ [Positive Youth Development Toolkit](#), the field of PYD has developed over the last several decades as a contrasting approach to earlier youth programming which focused on problems or deficits. Where some youth programming may have focused on behaviors for youth to avoid (such as gang involvement), PYD programming typically emphasizes strengths or assets to be encouraged and developed in young people. This approach does not ignore such problems; rather it approaches prevention and treatment of these problems through building on youth strengths.

Many of the programs that use a positive youth development framework operate during after school or out-of-school time hours. Extracurricular activities, including after school programming, can be a significant influence in a child’s positive development, providing regular participation schedules, direction by an adult leader, emphasis on skill development, and involvement that requires sustained attention, opportunities for meaningful participation and clear feedback. [7] Effective after school programming is neither an extension of the school day nor child care. Rather, at its best it provides positive youth development through a low staff-to-student ratio and individual instruction, combined with a focus on prevention of risky behaviors.

After school programming first entered public discussion with the term “latchkey kids,” as an increasing number of children came home to empty houses after school while parents worked. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 69 percent of all married-couple families with school-age children have both parents working outside the home, with this number even higher for single-parent families. [12] This common situation is especially significant in light of research showing that much of the risky behavior in which youth engage—such as sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, and juvenile crime—occurs during the after school hours of 3-6 p.m. [7]

## Positive Youth Activities as Prevention

Numerous programs provide art and sports activities for youth. These activities cross cultures and are often used in programs with a positive youth development focus. Yet, many program managers find it difficult to quantify the effectiveness of such programs, or to determine what part of their programming has the most positive impact on youth. Following is a summary of some of the available research on art and sports activities.

- **Art**

The [Youth ARTS Development Project](#)—a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), national arts organizations, and local arts programs for at-risk youth in three cities across the United States—conducted a controlled program evaluation revealing that at-risk youth given opportunities in the arts showed:

- Decreased frequency of delinquent behavior and court referrals
- Improved attitudes toward school
- Increased ability to communicate effectively
- Improved ability to work on tasks from start to finish.

In addition, an interdisciplinary research team from Americans for the Arts conducted a [decade long study](#) of community youth organizations providing arts programming in low-income neighborhoods. [3] They found that, compared to youth nationally, young people in community arts-based programs were:

- Four times as likely to have won school-wide academic achievement
- Three times more likely to have won an award for school attendance
- More likely to project that they will continue their education after high school
- Eight times more likely to receive a community service award.

There can be additional benefits for refugee and immigrant youth engaged in the arts, such as using art to bridge cultural, racial, and ethnic barriers [13] and providing an opportunity to practice English. Furthermore, it has been noted that the arts can strengthen the “inner resources” of youth, such as self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of identity, which are particularly applicable to foreign-born youth who may be coping with traumatic backgrounds, acculturation, and integration into a new society. [2]

Limited research exists on the impact of arts-based programs on American-born at-risk youth [4] and even less on foreign-born youth. However, there are numerous “Promising Practices” with refugee youth, such as the [Studio2000 program in Louisville, Kentucky](#), where youth work with established local artists, gain practical skills, and earn income while creating art. In addition, several promising practices are documented in [The Art of Community: Creativity at the Crossroads of Immigrant Cultures and Social Services](#). Formal program evaluation can help to fill this research gap by documenting outcomes, indicating areas of success or needed improvement, and facilitating program replication. For more information on how to evaluate an arts program, see the [Youth ARTS Toolkit](#), which includes a chapter on evaluation.

- **Sports**

Most Americans do not question the value of sports in the lives of youth. The notion that sports develop character dates back to the early 1900's [7] and is deeply entrenched in our culture. In addition, since the 1990's, sports and recreation programs have become popular tools for crime prevention. [8] Some noted benefits of sports and recreation for youth (beyond improved physical health) are summarized in [\*Sport, Physical Activity, and Antisocial Behavior in Youth\*](#). These benefits include:

- Decrease in juvenile crime, recidivism rates, and antisocial behavior
- Improvement in academic performance
- Improvement in conflict resolution and leadership skills
- Improvement in overall psychological well-being, including self-esteem and self-confidence
- Lower levels of substance abuse
- Improvement in task performance, goal-setting, and problem-solving.

Several international reports specifically examine the role of sports activities in the lives of refugee and immigrant youth. The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants reviewed the literature pertaining to immigrants, refugees and sports ([\*OCASI Research on Inclusive Recreation Model for Immigrant and Refugee Youth\*](#)). The authors cited studies indicating seven benefits for youth who participate in sports:

- Identification with peer group
- Cognitive development
- Social development
- Physical development/personal health
- Emotional development
- Moral development and community connectedness
- Economic health

A report from the United Kingdom examines [\*The Roles of Sport and Education in the Social Inclusion of Asylum Seekers and Refugees\*](#). The authors reported "ample material to illustrate the use of sport for such purposes," [1] although they admit the evidence is "largely in terms of stakeholder perceptions of the projects in operation rather than quantitative evaluations of policy outputs" [1] In the context of a larger discussion on social inclusion, the report looks at social integration. The authors include descriptions of sports programs that promote tolerance and improve relationships between members of similar ethnic groups, different ethnic groups, and new refugee populations and their receiving communities. Additionally, an Australian report, titled [\*Multicultural Sport: Sustaining a Level Playing Field\*](#), details that country's efforts to involve resettled refugee youth in sports programs.

At a minimum, sports activities provide a diversion for at-risk youth or, as one author put it, sports can "...help make the pro-social choice easier than the anti-social choice." [6] . A soccer program for African youth, run by [\*Roza Promotions, Inc.\*](#), was created to offer such pro-social opportunities for refugee youth in Staten Island, NY. In addition to an after-school tutoring program, Roza Promotions, Inc. organizes soccer teams for multiple age groups. While program outcomes have not been formally evaluated, staff report anecdotally that the programming has contributed to the number of West African youth graduating from high school and attending college. Through the program, Roza Promotions, Inc. has successfully collaborated with the New York City police department in addressing youth crime in the area.

The impact of sports programs on youth is difficult to evaluate, since there are many different types of sports and recreation programs, and the effects of sports programs on antisocial behavior are largely indirect, targeting the underlying risk factors and not the antisocial behavior itself. [11] Furthermore, many community-based sports programs have barely enough funding to exist, let alone to adequately evaluate themselves. Yet solid research and evaluation may be critical to the survival and funding of youth sports programs by demonstrating effective outcomes and methods. An example of sport related program evaluation is available in the article [\*Measuring the Impact of Crime Reduction Interventions Involving Sports Activities for Young People\*](#).

## Positive Youth Development in a Gang Prevention Model

Positive youth development programming typically focuses on activities or behaviors to model, rather than those to avoid, emphasizing youth strengths over youth problems. However, some programs targeting specific problem behaviors have incorporated principles of a positive youth development approach. As an example, we highlight below a gang prevention model.

### Striving Together to Achieve a Rewarding Tomorrow

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University offers the CASASTART (Striving Together to Achieve a Rewarding Tomorrow) model: a community-based, school-centered program designed to keep high-risk youth free of substance abuse and crime. Many federal agencies, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, have identified CASASTART as a model program. CASASTART is based on a positive youth development framework and uses intensive case management to provide services to counteract the various factors that make youth vulnerable to substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. Collaborative relationships are developed between the service agencies, schools, law enforcement, and the families involved with the youth.

CASASTART has been rigorously evaluated, and results indicate that CASASTART children are:

- Less likely to commit violent offenses
- Less likely to use or sell drugs
- Less likely to be negatively influenced by peers or to associate with delinquent peers
- More likely to be promoted to the next grade in school.

The [Youth Gang Prevention Services Program](#) of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization in Portland, Oregon, follows the CASASTART model. The YGPS program provides foreign-born youth of Portland with intensive case management, family education, coaching, academic support, and after-school and summer activities in healthy and supportive environments. In addition, the youth are provided with pre-employment and job readiness assistance and connections to caring adults. A key element of the program is the collaborative relationships that have developed between IRCO and other local organizations and agencies, including juvenile justice and law enforcement entities. Indeed, no matter which type of model is used, a key element of successful prevention initiatives is multi-agency coordination and integration between police, juvenile justice, schools, out-of-school time programs, non-profits, and others, which the YGPS Program has achieved. Some studies suggest positive results from this type of collaboration, indicating that youth problem behaviors can be controlled, if not reduced. [8]

## Conclusion

As noted in the opening quote, positive youth development capitalizes on the assets of young people by helping them develop supportive relationships; learn new skills; maintain attachments to family, school and work; and feel valued and heard by their communities. The programs mentioned here are just a few of the ways that agencies are using these methods to help refugee and newcomer youth find the right path in a new country. BRYCS welcomes other examples of positive youth development approaches to working with refugee and immigrant youth; please contact us at: [info@brycs.org](mailto:info@brycs.org)

## Tools and Tactics for Preventing Problem Behaviors Among Newcomer Youth

### TIPS FOR PROGRAM MANAGERS

1. **Programs should be culturally sensitive.** Since the research is so clear concerning the benefits of biculturalism for immigrants, programs that teach new skills while celebrating and sharing the different cultures of participants are most effective. An excellent method for making a program more culturally appropriate is to involve the community and program participants from the beginning of the planning phase all the way through the final evaluation.
2. **Programs should be developmentally appropriate.** Programs need to be targeted to the child's physical, cognitive, and psychosocial level of development, and timed so that the family is open to the intervention. When working with refugees and immigrants, be mindful that child development may be viewed differently in other cultures, while childhood responsibilities and discipline practices may vary as well.
3. **Programs should be comprehensive.** They should address risk and protective factors at as many ecological levels as possible, including the child's family, peer group, school, community, and larger society.
4. **Programs should be family-focused.** One of the most consistent findings in the literature is the relationship between family conflict (specifically parent-child) and risk for maladjustment and problem behaviors. This is especially important for families from cultures where less emphasis is placed on individual needs and the group is more highly valued.
5. **Programs should be long-term and enduring.** Programs that build recognition, trust and engage families long enough to make a real difference in functioning – rather than provide a temporary fix – are most effective in the long term.
6. **Programs should be of sufficient dosage or intensity.** Particularly for those families in crisis and with more complex needs, programs should provide sufficient services to make a difference in the long term.
7. **Programs should have an early start.** This is especially preferable when a family has multiple problems. Early intervention can serve as a primary prevention measure and can prevent more serious problems later on.
8. **Programs should have high rates of recruitment and retention.** Not only are these factors a goal, they are also a test of the cultural appropriateness and relevance of a program.
9. **Programs should have a trainer/program coordinator of high personal efficacy.** This characteristic is closely related to a program's success. The coordinator should be experienced and caring, demonstrate warmth and empathy, share the program's philosophy, and be able to readily relate to clients.

Source: Summarized from *Understanding, Preventing, and Treating Problem Behaviors Among Refugee and Immigrant Youth* [adapted to immigrant and refugee youth by Lyn Morland (9, pp. 45-47) from Karol Kumpfer's work on *Principles of Effective Family Strengthening Programs* (10, pp. 41-46)]

## GENERAL WEB RESOURCES

- [Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Violence Prevention Center](#)
- [Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence](#)
- [Chapin Hall Center for Children](#)
- [Family and Youth Services Bureau](#)
- [Helping America's Youth](#)
- [National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development](#)
- [National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth](#)
- [National Council on Crime and Delinquency](#)
- [National Crime Prevention Council – Outreach to New Americans](#)
- [National Criminal Justice Reference Service](#)
- [National Youth Gang Center](#)
- [National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center](#)
- [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#)
- [Search Institute](#)

*In addition to the aforementioned, see the [list of highlighted resources](#), which provides the most up-to-date and useful resources on this topic available for free download. BRYCS' Spotlights and other publications are written for practitioners. All of the information and recommendations above are based on the references below. In places where there is not a specific reference listed and you would like to know the source, please [contact us](#) and we would be happy to provide that information.*

## REFERENCES

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