

Section II. Overview: Positive Youth Development with Refugees and Immigrants

A. *Defining Positive Youth Development*

The field of “Positive Youth Development” (PYD) has developed over the last several decades as a contrasting approach to youth programming focused on problems or deficits. Where some youth programming may have focused on behaviors for youth to avoid (such as gang involvement, early pregnancy, delinquency), PYD programming typically emphasizes strengths or assets to be encouraged and developed in young people. This approach does not ignore such problems, which can actually have quite tragic consequences for youth, their families, and communities; rather it approaches prevention and treatment of these problems through building on youth strengths. The effectiveness of this approach is supported by a growing body of research.

“To promote achievement among youth from various ethnic groups, programs that focus on youth strengths and potential rather than concentrating on preventing specific negative outcomes have been found to be more successful.”⁴

An issue brief released by Chapin Hall Center for Children describes the following three assumptions as common to the various PYD frameworks:

1. **Focusing on strengths and assets rather than deficits and problems.** For example, emphasizing the skills and competencies that will be needed in the transition to adulthood.
2. **Acquiring strengths and assets through positive relationships, especially with pro-social and caring adults.** For example, emphasizing relationships with trusted adults such as parents and family, teachers, neighbors, business owners, and mentors.
3. **Developing and acquiring youth assets in multiple contexts and environments.** For example, schools, workplaces, community organizations, social programs, and neighborhoods all offer opportunities to acquire developmental resources.⁵

B. *PYD as a Culturally Appropriate Approach*

A deficit-focused approach can alienate the very people a program or agency desires to reach. A recent SAMHSA-funded publication describes the “PEACE” program in Salt Lake City, Utah.⁶ This “violence prevention” program worked closely with parents from several refugee communities, who organized into “Work Groups” to plan and implement a curriculum in the public schools. The first recommendation by the refugee parents was to shift the focus from “violence prevention” to “success in school.” These parents felt that the focus on violence singled out their children as violence-prone, while the

⁴ Jennifer G. Roffman, Carola Suarez-Orozco, and Jean E. Rhodes (2003). “Facilitating Positive Development in Immigrant Youth: The Role of Mentors and Community Organizations,” in *Community Youth Development: Programs, Policies and Practices*. Francisco A. Villarruel, Daniel F. Perkins, Lynne M Borden, Joanne G. Keith (Eds). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. P. 112, endnote 3.

⁵ Jeffrey Butts, Susan Mayer, Gretchen Ruth (October 2005). “Issue Brief: Focusing Juvenile Justice on Positive Youth Development.” Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago: Author. P. 5. See page 14 of this Toolkit for this resource.

⁶ Ibid, Note 1, pp. 36-44. See page 16 of this Toolkit for this resource.

focus on school achievement was much more in line with their cultural values. Furthermore, they felt the curriculum should be for all youth, not just refugees. Once this decision was implemented, the parents embraced the program and continued to remain involved with the schools after the program ended, a successful outcome for the program.

C. Assets for Newcomer Youth

A positive youth development approach has particular relevance to work with refugee and immigrant youth, since they can potentially draw on the heritage of two cultures. This bicultural background can be an added strength for youth preparing for adulthood; however adolescents may need support and encouragement to see their mixed heritage positively since many teens wrestle with a desire to “fit in” with their peers. Unfortunately, too many programs may see only the barriers faced by refugee and immigrant youth, rather than the strengths on which they can build.

The West African Teen Outreach Program (WATOP) hosts a West African meal twice weekly, has sports teams organized by national heritage, has included African dance instruction, has employed West African staff (Liberian and Sierra Leonean), and provides educational enrichment.

An article on “Creating successful programs for immigrant youth” notes the following four assets of immigrant youth:

1. **Values** of the family’s culture of origin, such as the importance of extended family, the valuing of community needs over individual needs, and collective decision-making.
2. **Bilingualism** as an asset in an increasingly global world.
3. **Migration-related challenges** which can help youth mature and develop confidence and leadership skills.
4. **Balancing two cultures** which can help youth develop resiliency, flexibility, insight and exposure to multicultural communities.
5. **Strong religious heritage** which can provide moral support and guidance.⁷

D. Ideal Program Elements for Working with Refugee and Immigrant Youth

Research on general youth needs also has applicability to newcomer youth; however, certain programming elements are particularly relevant and can improve services and outreach to refugee and immigrant youth.

- **Engage refugee/immigrant community leaders, families, and youth in the program:** Involving the community in your program in a meaningful way is important for a number of reasons. Working in partnership with community leaders and parents can increase the likelihood that the program will address concerns felt to be important by families, in a culturally appropriate manner, and communicates that their opinions are valued. This, in turn, makes it more

⁷ See: Maud Easter and Dina Refki, “[Creating Successful Programs for Immigrant Youth](#),” *ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence: Practice Matters* (December 2004): 1-2

likely that parents will support their children attending the program. It can also help to bridge the “acculturation gap” for youth by affirming the importance of their cultural heritage and providing a model for integrating cultural values and practices.

Methods for engagement might include a participatory community assessment, a “community advisory committee”, involving parents in activities, and keeping local organizations and families informed regarding youth accomplishments. Examples of youth leadership development strategies from the resources in this Toolkit include “community youth mapping”, a process through which youth identify the resources in their community, activities that focus on identifying and developing future career goals, and youth-led action projects that address community needs.

- **Recruit bicultural and/or bilingual staff:** Employing youth service workers who look and sound like the youth to be served can encourage participation, while helping youth and their parents feel comfortable with a particular youth program. It can also be critical for effective communication with both youth and their families. Translating outreach materials into other languages is helpful but not usually sufficient by itself. Multicultural staff are useful not only for language ability but also as a bridge between cultures and a support for youth with a bicultural identity.

An Asian immigrant parent whose child participates in Brownies stated that, “[O]rganizations have only done part of the job in translating brochures, with no translators or bilingual troop leaders...”⁸

- **Support family relationships:** Many youth programs in the U.S. target children as individuals, rather than focusing on children as part of a larger family unit. Such approaches can be off-putting to newcomer families, who may view programs treating adolescents as independent decision-makers as divisive, rather than supportive, of family unity. Refugee and immigrant

“Effective parent programs strengthen parental support and guidance by involving parents, youth and program staff in communication about cultural expectations.”⁹

families from cultures which value *interdependence* over *independence*, and where parents are the primary decision-makers, will likely want to be involved in programs for their youth. In addition, refugee parents may feel that there are already many forces in this new environment which come between them and their children, leading them to prefer programs and activities which involve the whole family, rather than just youth.

- **Provide socialization, safety and security:** Many newcomer youth struggle with feeling lonely in a strange environment. Typical adolescent desires to “fit in” make these feelings more acute for teens. Immigrant youth need a place that feels safe for them as minorities, and a place where they do not feel “different” from everyone else. Programming for monoculture groups

⁸ Carolyn Y. Johnson. “Found in Translation: YMCAs, Scouts, After-School Groups Adapt to Influx of Asian Families.” (June 30, 2005, Third Edition) *Boston Globe*, p. GS1.

⁹ Ibid, Note 7, p. 3.

(such as Hmong youth) or multicultural groups (such as for mixed refugee populations) can accomplish this.

A Chinese teenager in Massachusetts said that her after-school program at the Episcopal Quincy Chinese Center helped her overcome the loneliness she initially felt in the U.S. With other newcomer youth at the Center, "I can do my homework and play with my friends."¹⁰

- **Support academic and educational achievement:** For many immigrant families, education is viewed as the key to success in their adoptive homeland. Refugee families may value education highly because of limited access to schooling due to war, flight, discrimination, expense, or civil unrest. Youth programming which helps newcomer students to succeed in school is likely to be popular with refugee families.

The youth program of Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Ministries (IRIM) in Chicago, Illinois, combines education and activities for newly arrived refugee children. As described by the program director:

"When I don't understand things in class, they help us...I don't have a big sister or big brother to help me, so they help me."¹¹

8-year-old IRIM Program Participant

*The goal is to provide academic assistance to newly arrived children so they can catch up... A lot of children from African countries have no formal education. When they come here, they're placed in a grade [according to] their age. So they're put in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade at school, and it's the first time in their lives they've been in school.*¹²

- **Include adults as role models and mentors:** Adult role modeling is an important element of positive youth development programming. Some researchers suggest that mentoring is especially important for refugee and immigrant youth, since adult mentors can serve as role models and examples of successful integration of two cultures. For example:

*For immigrant youth, mentors and nonparental adults in community agencies may prove to be invaluable for optimal development... They can be a source of explicit information about the rules of engagement in the new society. They may also serve as a valuable source of emotional support, acting as attachment figures in a new context where youth are often socially isolated. The guidance provided by volunteer mentors or adult staff members at community youth organizations represents an important resource to foster the healthy development of immigrant children.*¹³

¹⁰ Ibid, Note 12.

¹¹ William Hageman, "Summer games; For refugee kids at day camp, cultural differences just mean more ways to play. And the end of summer just means an excuse to dance." (September 4, 2005, Chicago Final Edition). *Chicago Tribune*, p.3.

¹² Ibid, quoting Melineh Kano.

¹³ Ibid, Note 4, pp. 91-92.

- **Advocate for and with refugee students:** It takes time for newcomer parents to understand the educational system in the U.S. and to develop the confidence to speak up for their child. Programming for newcomer youth can help fill this initial gap by serving as an advocate for refugee and immigrant students.

“A lot of parents come to this country and don't know how to support their kids. They don't know how to go to school and advocate for their kids. The kids are left to sink or swim.”¹⁴

One social service provider noted that some children may be erroneously placed in special education classes, if a school is not aware of what a refugee child has been through, including traumatic experiences or disrupted education.¹⁵ Another provider observes that newcomer parents cannot always advocate themselves for their children, which can lead to dropping out of school if not addressed.

Youth programs can help to advocate for children within available systems, while also empowering parents and youth to advocate for themselves.

E. Programming Challenges and Critical Issues

In addition to the rewards of working with refugee and immigrant youth come certain challenges in serving newcomer populations. These challenges are not necessarily unique to serving youth or newcomers but they may be more pronounced with these populations. Many of the challenges mentioned here will also be true for work with newcomers of any age.

- **Transportation:** Finding ways to get refugee and immigrant youth to programs can often be an impediment to participation. Some newcomer families do not have their own transportation and rely on public transit. In some families, the parents may work late hours and therefore are unable to shuttle children to and from after-school or evening activities. Single parents may also struggle with transportation due to other household and childcare responsibilities.

Programs should consider ways to aid families with transportation, such as public transit vouchers, agency coordinated transportation, and/or a centralized location that is easy for youth to access (such as in a school or community center).

- **Bilingual / bicultural staff and materials:** Language and cultural barriers can hinder participation by newcomer families. Translating outreach materials is one aspect of this; involving bilingual and bicultural staff and volunteers is equally critical in bridging cultural differences and developing a sense of trust with newcomer youth and families.

¹⁴ Sandy Dang, as quoted in: Mary Beth Sheridan. “After-School Programs Go Multicultural; Community Groups Reach Out To Kids From Around the Globe.” (April 24, 2005, Final Edition) *The Washington Post*, p.C4.

¹⁵ Ibid, Note 11.

Retention: Retaining bilingual/bicultural employees can also be a challenge, as newcomers seek employment that is welcoming and provides an opportunity for advancement. Listed below are several recommendations for training and retaining bicultural workers.

- If English is not the worker's first language, provide opportunities for language acquisition and more time for, or assistance with, paperwork.
- Provide good supervisory support.
- Value bicultural staff equally with other staff; recognize the contribution they can make to the team (i.e., do not limit them to language interpretation).
- Be flexible with work schedules so that bicultural staff can pursue training or continuing education to qualify for higher level positions; offer assistance in finding financial aid resources.
- When possible, have more than one bicultural staff member on the team for support.¹⁶

Hmong Women's Circle celebrates Hmong heritage and traditions by building personal leadership skills and empowering Hmong young women to be healthy, educated, and engaged in their communities.

- **Effective outreach methods:** Agencies that are developing new youth programming, or are new to serving refugee youth, may experience initial difficulties in recruiting youth participants. Listed below are some outreach suggestions.
 - Interact directly with the community you hope to reach by participating in community activities or meeting with community leaders.
 - Establish linkages with ethnic community-based organizations, refugee resettlement programs and English as a second language (ESL) programs.¹⁷
 - Establish linkages with ethnically based and non-ethnically based houses of worship. Use presentations, fliers in bulletins, and relationships with religious and spiritual leaders.
 - Use language-specific media, such as radio, television and newspapers targeting particular language or cultural groups. Develop public service announcements for mainstream radio or television, particularly for recruiting adult mentors or volunteers.
 - Encourage bicultural staff to recruit within their own community.
 - Develop brochures and translate materials into the language of your target group.
 - Use resource fairs to disseminate information in refugee communities.
 - Recruit through local schools.¹⁸

¹⁶ This section on "Retention" modified from the BRYCS publication, "Developing Refugee Foster Families: A Worthwhile Investment" (2004), p. A-3.

¹⁷ These can be located by contacting the office of your [State Refugee Coordinator](#). To find yours, go to:

¹⁸ Ibid, Note 16, p. A-2.

- **Target Population:** Another consideration in developing youth programming is deciding which age group to target. Certainly, factors to consider include a particular agency's strengths, expertise and resources with respect to the needs of certain developmental ages. Consideration should also be given to the specific needs of youth in your community and to existing service gaps.

In the Young Women's Equity Project (YWEP), refugee/immigrant African and Slavic young women are given academic, and individualized support (includes career planning and portfolio development) over a long term (2 to 3 year) period with the goal of enrolling the women in college, vocational training or to secure science and math career employment.¹⁹

Beyond agency and community considerations, some researchers have identified "transition times" as critical periods in children's lives when they may experience both vulnerability and promise.²⁰ The most common transition periods are when graduating or advancing to a new school: from elementary school to junior high school; from junior high school to high school; and at high school graduation. In addition to other factors, program developers might examine what positive youth development opportunities exist for newcomer youth at these critical periods of change.

One of the most significant times for youth is the transition to adulthood. For more information, as well as extensive resources on this topic, see BRYCS' April/May 2006 Spotlight, *Blessed with a difficult task: Refugee youth and the transition to adulthood*.

Refugee youth and their families have typically overcome great obstacles and hardship by the time they arrive in the U.S., however, we do them a great disservice by only focusing on these challenges. Refugees, as well as immigrants, arrive with strengths, talents and promise awaiting an opportunity to flourish. The resources in this Toolkit can help service providers increase the opportunities available for newcomer youth so that all have the chance to thrive.



¹⁹ See page 51 of this Toolkit for more information on this program.

²⁰ See: Catherine R. Cooper, Jill Denner, and Edward M. Lopez. "Cultural Brokers: Helping Latino Children on Pathways Toward Success" in *Future of Children* issue on "When School is Out", Vol. 9 (2) (Fall 1999).

F. Additional BRYCS resources available in the archives at www.brycs.org:

Juvenile justice and at-risk youth

- Refugee Youth and the Juvenile Justice System [Spotlight October 2004](#)
- Resources addressing [at-risk youth, youth support and intervention within the community, crime prevention, and juvenile justice](#) for service providers working in the youth services field and refugee resettlement.

Mentoring

- Mentoring Refugee Youth [Spotlight January 2005](#)
- New Directions in Mentoring Refugee Youth [Brief June 2010](#)
- Resources that focus on [mentoring programs](#) for refugee youth.

Refugee youth and the schools

- Serving Children With Little or No Previous Formal Schooling [Spotlight March 2005](#)
- Promising Practices in After-School Programming for Refugee Youth and Children [Spotlight July 2005](#)
- Resources for [school administrators, educators, and parents on education-related issues](#)
- Refugee Students and the No Child Left Behind Act - [Spotlight February 2006](#)
- Resources and training available from the Illinois state [School Aged Refugee and Immigrant Services \(RCSIG\)](#) for educators and parents.

Separated children

- Separated Children: Challenges and Opportunities [Spotlight September 2004](#)
- Resources relevant to [separated children](#): children who enter resettlement accompanied by a sibling, a member of the extended family, or family friend, instead of parents.
- [Serving Foreign-Born Foster Children: A Resource for Meeting the Special Needs of Refugee Youth and Children](#)

The resources in the following “Toolboxes” provide background on Positive Youth Development and practical “how to” materials for a step-by-step approach to developing effective programs for refugee youth.

For more assistance, BRYCS offers the following services:

- Web site and Clearinghouse at www.brycs.org with regular updates & over 1500 resources in a searchable database
- Individual consultations by email and telephone
- Cross-service and targeted on-site trainings
- Conference presentations