

## Integrating Positive Youth Development into PREP Programming

### Purpose of this brief

The Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) was authorized by Congress in 2010 and is one of the largest federally funded programs designed to address adolescent pregnancy. PREP grantees have flexibility in designing and implementing programs provided they adhere to certain requirements specified in the legislation, including educating youth on at least three of six adulthood preparation subjects (APSs)\*:

- Adolescent development
- Educational and career success
- Financial literacy
- Healthy life skills
- Parent-child communication
- Healthy relationships

Another requirement for PREP grantees is that they implement a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach in their programs. This approach offers a framework for designing and implementing effective programs for the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among youth, particularly in the context of the APS requirements. This brief provides PREP grantees with an overview of the key concepts and evidence base for PYD. It examines the value of a PYD approach in relation to the APSs and provides guidance on how to incorporate PYD into existing programming to improve program outcomes.

\*U.S. Congress, Social Security Act, Section 513. Available at [https://www.ssa.gov/OP\\_Home/ssact/title05/0513.htm](https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title05/0513.htm).

Over the past several decades, programs serving youth have increasingly recognized the value of Positive Youth Development (PYD) practices in enhancing program engagement and effectiveness (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2002). PYD is an intentional approach that supports and builds on the competencies, skills, and strengths of youth to enable them to grow and flourish throughout life (Hinson et al. 2016). The Administration for Children and Families has embraced PYD as a useful framework for Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) grantees to use in designing and implementing programming related to the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among youth. PREP grantees are required to implement a PYD approach in their programs, particularly in delivering adulthood preparation subjects content (see callout box). By incorporating PYD practices across APSs, grantees can enhance program recruitment, retention, and youth engagement and improve pregnancy and STI prevention and other youth risk prevention outcomes for participating youth.

### Key takeaways

- **Intentionally incorporate PYD practices into program design and implementation.** Grantees should employ this comprehensive approach throughout the lifespan of PREP programming, from the initial planning and design phases through delivery and implementation.
- **Invest long-term in high-quality, trained staff who demonstrate a commitment to PYD practices.** Program staff are the key mechanism by which PYD practices are consistently applied. By conducting careful staff recruitment, providing relevant training, and working to retain high-performing staff, programs taking a PYD approach can ensure continuous high-quality implementation.
- **Explore ways to grow and support the evidence base for PYD.** Existing research on PYD as an approach for improving youth programming is promising, but continued examination remains critical. PREP grantees can contribute to the growing knowledge base by leveraging relevant PREP performance measure data and incorporating a PYD lens into research and evaluation efforts.

## What is Positive Youth Development?

PYD is defined as:

*... an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families. PYD emphasizes that this engagement is productive and constructive; and it recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths. PYD promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing support to build on youth's leadership strengths (National Clearinghouse on Family & Youth 2007).*

Importantly, PYD is an **approach** to youth programming; it is not a specific curriculum or program model. There is no defined, specific, or manualized way to integrate PYD into youth-serving programs. However, researchers and practitioners have identified key practices used by programs that have successfully implemented a PYD approach (see callout box) (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2002). Together, these practices form a supportive framework that can be applied across any program component, context, and population.

It is likely that PREP programs have experienced the ways that positive, supportive programming can enhance youth engagement and outcomes. Program staff may not call it PYD, but—through experience or intuition—many staff working with youth come to appreciate the value of strengths-based programming across a variety of settings and populations. This movement towards a more positive orientation represents a dramatic change over the years in programming for youth. Some decades ago, interventions that offered only information were thought to be sufficient, though they were not typically found to reduce risky behaviors (Blum 2003; Durlak 2013). Likewise, information combined with services and negative-fear based programming demonstrated rather limited effectiveness and in some cases was found to be harmful (Kirby 2007; Hinson et al. 2016; Andrews and Knaan 2011).

As youth programs across disciplines have embraced a more holistic orientation, a growing body of research indicates that programs taking this approach can have a wide range of impacts on youth. Programs incorporating PYD practices have been found to have favorable effects on behaviors and outcomes such as substance use, violence, mental health, and academic performance, as well as on reproductive health outcomes such as reductions in adolescent pregnancy and STIs and increased use of contraceptives (Bonell et al. 2016; Taussig et al. 2019; Durlak et al. 2011; Gavin et al. 2010). Programs taking a PYD approach may also reduce adolescent pregnancy even when the program content focuses on topics outside of sexual activity, such as education or employment (Kirby and Coyle 1997). This research supports global recognition that

### Key Positive Youth Development practices

- Provide physical and psychological safety. Ensure safe facilities are free from violence and abuse and encourage health-promoting practices, such as mental health services that increase safe peer interactions and decrease confrontational interactions.
- Provide appropriate structure. Include clear and consistent rules and expectations, and age-appropriate monitoring, given that younger adolescents may need additional guidance compared to older youth
- Encourage supportive relationships. Foster caring relationships, social support, positive communication, and supportive guidance.
- Offer opportunities to belong. Create opportunities for meaningful inclusion of all youth, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or disabilities; provide opportunities for positive identity formation; and support cultural and bicultural competence among staff.
- Reinforce positive social norms. Support behaviors and values that promote respect, including clearly communicating expectations.
- Encourage self-efficacy and active participation. Support youth autonomy, offer opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles, and encourage youth to achieve meaningful change in their community.
- Provide opportunities for skill building. Provide opportunities for physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social development that prepare adolescents to make positive decisions about their health, as well as about their future educational and career opportunities.
- Integrate families, schools, and communities. Coordinate and collaborate with family, school, and community partners.

programming related to the prevention of pregnancy and STIs that promotes positive protective factors—including those supported by PYD—can be more effective than those that focus solely on reducing risk (Bearinger et al. 2007). As the field progresses, investment in large-scale rigorous evaluations such as randomized controlled trials could offer even deeper insight into PYD’s reach and impact.

## How can PYD support prep programming?

Existing evidence-based curricula can provide youth with the skills and knowledge needed to avoid adolescent pregnancy and be better prepared for adulthood. However, a comprehensive PYD approach can further engage youth and foster the motivation and sense of self-efficacy necessary for youth to adopt and employ those skills. By intentionally integrating PYD practices into PREP program components, grantees can facilitate healthy adolescent development and enhance program outcomes. PREP grantees may already implement some or all

of the key practices above, as they are well-aligned with PREP program goals. For example, PREP programs seek to promote successful healthy transitions to adulthood and provide age-appropriate programming that is inclusive and culturally appropriate.

To support grantees in incorporating PYD practices into programming, the Administration for Children and Families sponsored the development of a unified framework that combines common elements from six distinct conceptual models developed for each APS (Clary et al. 2021). This framework describes a PYD approach that is relevant to the APSs and demonstrates how it can help to improve the outcomes targeted by PREP programs. Input from PREP grantees gathered as part of the larger effort to develop the unified framework and the APS-specific conceptual models offers insight into the ways that grantees are applying PYD practices as they integrate APSs in their PREP programs. Descriptions of how a PYD approach can support each APS are provided in the table below, along with examples from grantees.

**Table 1. How PYD can support APS programming and examples from PREP grantees**

Adulthood preparation subject	How can PYD practices support this APS?
<p><b>Adolescent development</b></p>	<p>Programming to promote healthy adolescent development aims to build strengths and respond effectively to challenges in the domains of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional well-being. PYD practices, such as ensuring <b>physical and psychological safety</b>, providing <b>opportunities for skill building</b>, and encouraging <b>positive social norms</b> can help to enhance adolescent development.</p> <p>Examples of how grantees used a PYD approach when implementing this APS include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirming that the meeting space is physically safe and free of hazards</li> <li>• Creating an emotionally safe and inclusive space where youth can explore their identities, beliefs, and values</li> <li>• Connecting the program curriculum to adolescents’ identities through culturally relevant adaptations</li> <li>• Empowering youth to provide organizational and community leadership (for example, facilitating youth involvement in meaningful community service opportunities)</li> <li>• Making youth aware of the different aspects of their development (cognitive, physical, emotional, spiritual, and social)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Educational and career success</b></p>	<p>By encouraging <b>self-efficacy and active participation</b> and providing <b>opportunities for skill building</b>, PREP grantees can promote the development of hard and soft skills necessary to set youth on the path to academic and career success. <b>Supportive relationships</b> with program staff, family, and other youth can engage participants and help students develop the confidence and drive to establish and work toward meaningful goals.</p> <p>Examples of how grantees used a PYD approach when implementing this APS include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing community partnerships to allow youth to gain experience through trainings or internships</li> <li>• Including activities to guide youth in exploring their goals and the ways in which an education can help in reaching those goals, rather than simply lecturing youth on the value of education</li> <li>• Considering diverse educational pathways, including college, technical careers, and trade schools</li> </ul>

Adulthood preparation subject	How can PYD practices support this APS?
<b>Financial literacy</b>	<p>Opportunities that promote adolescent’s sense of personal <b>self-efficacy and active participation</b> can engage youth and build confidence and understanding among participants about the implications of their earnings, spending, and saving on their current and future financial well-being. Including <b>family members</b> (such as parents), <b>community partners</b>, and financial institutions in financial literacy programming can make these lessons more meaningful and relevant.</p> <p>Examples of how grantees used a PYD approach when implementing this APS include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centering discussions around youth’s personal goals and exploring how financial capabilities can help them achieve their aspirations</li> <li>• Providing opportunities that emphasize the value of starting to budget for smaller, short-term purchases, and later moving to more long-term budgeting, such as planning for college or buying a car</li> <li>• Ensuring that financial literacy content is age appropriate and culturally relevant (for example, teaching youth about financial management websites and apps)</li> </ul>
<b>Healthy life skills</b>	<p>By encouraging <b>self-efficacy and active participation</b>, providing <b>opportunities for skill building</b>, offering <b>opportunities to belong</b>, and providing <b>appropriate structure</b>, grantees can help youth to develop a positive self-concept and sense of self-efficacy, set realistic goals, and identify pathways for achieving them.</p> <p>Examples of how grantees used a PYD approach when implementing this APS include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporating content focused on soft skills, such as self-efficacy and social-emotional learning</li> <li>• Providing positive, constructive feedback to youth</li> <li>• Addressing bullying and interpersonal problems through trauma-informed and restorative practices (for example, allowing peers to reflect on their behaviors and find positive solutions rather than having an authority figure assign a consequence)</li> </ul>
<b>Healthy relationships</b>	<p>Fostering <b>supportive relationships</b> and encouraging <b>h</b> are key to promoting healthy relationships based on trust, honesty, listening, and respect. Including <b>families, schools, and community partners</b> can also help to strengthen and reinforce critical relationships and connections.</p> <p>Examples of how grantees used a PYD approach when implementing this APS include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring that program staff and facilitators use language that is respectful of individuals and cultures</li> <li>• Recognizing and respecting groups sometimes treated as marginal in programming, such as pregnant teens</li> <li>• Discussing examples of healthy and unhealthy relationships with youth</li> <li>• Emphasizing the importance of developing a sense of identity and helping youth define what they value for themselves in relationships</li> </ul>
<b>Parent-child communication</b>	<p>Involving <b>families</b>—including parents and other caregivers—in programming can create important opportunities to initiate effective parent-child communication and encourage <b>supportive relationships</b>. Creating welcoming spaces that provide <b>appropriate structure</b> and ensure <b>psychological safety</b> invites open and active dialogue.</p> <p>Examples of how grantees used a PYD approach when implementing this APS include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helping youth develop skills to initiate a conversation with a parent or other trusted adult</li> <li>• Inviting parents/caregivers to share their values and expectations with youth through engaging homework assignments</li> <li>• Encouraging parents to draw on their unique influence as caregivers to help their adolescents build strengths, knowledge, and skills</li> </ul>

## Integrating PYD into PREP: staffing

Integrating PYD practices into PREP programming requires recruiting and retaining experienced staff who are committed to fostering positive adolescent development. Evidence from evaluations suggests that program staff are crucial in facilitating youths' buy-in to the program and ensuring youth's satisfaction with program activities (Kisker and Murphy 2016; Moore et al. 2018). Programs can incorporate the following practices in recruiting, training, and supporting staff for programs implementing a PYD approach:

**Staff recruitment.** When recruiting program staff, it is important to consider the specific skills and experience needed to successfully carry out the program (Langbert 2018). Programs requiring technical knowledge around financial literacy or the prevention of pregnancy and STIs, for example, may require facilitators with relevant work experience and technical skills. Similarly, programs serving at-risk youth or youth of a particular culture, gender, or race/ethnicity should take into account the facilitator's background and relevant work experiences serving the program population. For example, staff from one program that implemented Wise Guys, a male-focused, adolescent pregnancy prevention program offered by some PREP grantees, noted that program implementation appeared to improve when the facilitators and participants' gender, race, and experiences matched (Andrews and Knaan 2011). Program staff reported that having at least one Black male facilitator seemed to enhance the youth's receptiveness to the curriculum and increase engagement from the young men. As questions and concerns arose, the male facilitator was able to pull from lived experience to answer questions related to masculinity, values, and fatherhood. In addition, facilitators had extensive education and work experience that contributed to their rapport with the youth and ability to effectively deliver programming, including degrees in education, psychology, and expertise in education related to the prevention of pregnancy and STIs among youth. Recruiting staff who are qualified, youth-focused, and similar to program participants are important factors to consider when designing recruitment strategies and hiring program staff (Taussig et al. 2019).

**Staff training.** Once hired, staff skills and characteristics can be strengthened through short- and long-term training (Taussig et al. 2019). In addition to training staff on knowledge and skills taught in PREP programs, such as financial literacy and contraceptive use, a PYD approach should include training on developing social skills among staff to support the implementation of key PYD practices. The focus of these trainings can include learning to set high but realistic expectations, cultivating physical and emotional safety and empathy, and facilitating family engagement and/or open dialogue among youth (Keller 2007). Early and ongoing trainings can help PREP grantees

ensure that messages are retained, new staff are introduced to the PYD approach, and that staff members share a continued commitment to these practices.

Overall, staff in programs that take a PYD approach should be well trained in (Scott et al. 2017):

- **Group facilitation and curriculum content.** Staff should have the knowledge and ability to share materials in ways youth understand and find relevant.
- **Interacting with youth in a respectful manner.** Staff should recognize the importance of being youth-focused rather than adult-centered and interact with youth in a way that demonstrates respect for diversity in race, ethnicity, and other backgrounds.
- **Delivering engaging material.** Staff should facilitate engaging interactive activities, such as discussions and role plays.
- **Establishing appropriate boundaries.** Staff should learn to manage situations when youth ask them about personal or private information in a way that makes youth comfortable while also maintaining professional boundaries.

**Staff retention.** Staff turnover is a commonly reported concern for youth-serving programs, often due to the high emotional demands of the job, which can lead to burnout, stress, and fatigue (Mor Barak et al. 2001). High staff turnover can pose serious challenges to the quality and stability of program services and can reduce overall program effectiveness (Zlotnik et al. 2005). Cultivating a positive workplace environment, where staff feel a sense of satisfaction from the work and a commitment to the program and population served, is crucial for retaining staff on the job (Mor Barak et al. 2001). To do this, PREP programs can work to create clear channels for staff to seek help with stress or workload, provide professional development opportunities, build social support networks among coworkers, and provide opportunities for staff to directly engage in the program planning (Mor Barak et al. 2001). Taking steps to promote a positive work culture for both youth and staff can produce lasting improvements in program quality and youth outcomes.

## Considerations for PREP grantees

This brief has described how PYD—a holistic, positive approach to youth programming—can improve program engagement, implementation, and outcomes for PREP grantees. For many grantees, this sort of prosocial approach is already very familiar, as the PYD practices highlighted here have their roots in the knowledge and experience of youth-serving practitioners. Implementing a PYD approach to programming is not only good practice, but also a requirement for PREP grantees. Below, we offer several considerations for grantees looking to fully benefit from this approach:

- **Intentionally incorporate PYD practices into program design and implementation.** Grantees might recognize some or all of the PYD practices as something currently implemented in PREP programming, yet it is important to remember that, taken together, the practices represent a comprehensive approach. Grantees should seek to employ this full approach throughout PREP programming, from the initial design through implementation. Standardized tools tailored to programs could be developed to support grantees in assessing the extent to which practices have been integrated into programming. For example, protocols that assess how programs are delivered—that is, whether they are didactic and information-based or youth-centered and relationship-based—would help managers understand the extent to which programs are implementing PYD practices. Notably, as grantees seek to implement these practices, it is important to understand that even a strong PYD approach does not assure that issues of racial, gender, or socioeconomic equity will be addressed (Redd et al. 2020). It is critical that grantees intentionally reach and engage youth from all backgrounds. In doing so, use of PYD principles can enhance and complement a focus on equity.
- **Invest long-term in high-quality, trained staff who demonstrate a commitment to PYD practices.** Planning for intentional integration of PYD practices is important, yet program staff are the key mechanism by which PYD practices are consistently implemented. Grantees should follow the guidance above to ensure careful recruitment, relevant training, and ongoing retention of high-quality staff. This will go a long way in ensuring that programs taking a PYD approach are implemented with quality.
- **Explore ways to grow and support the evidence base for PYD.** While research on programs incorporating PYD practices has yielded promising findings, there have been few large-scale studies to date. Continued examination of PYD as an overall approach for improving youth programming is needed. Rigorous investigations such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are critical, though they can be difficult to design and implement due to the wide range of variables associated with PYD and the lack of standard language and indicators across fields (Clary et al. 2021). However, examining PYD is not solely the responsibility of researchers. PREP grantees who feel that they are successfully implementing a PYD approach may share their experiences, help to refine PYD practices for population subgroups and APSs, and support evaluation efforts. Use of clear and consistent language and outcome measures can help to move the field toward developing a shared understanding of the approach. This can begin by incorporating a PYD lens into programs' research and evaluation efforts. For instance, as a first step, programs can leverage data from the PREP performance measures participant exit survey to examine connections between areas such as program engagement (for example, did youth feel interested in program sessions

and classes?) and perceptions of respect (for example, did youth feel respected as a person? Were youth picked on, teased, or bullied in this program?) with desired outcomes. At another level, grantees can work with evaluation partners to incorporate relevant measures of implementation and outcomes into long-term evaluation efforts, which can help to inform the utility of PYD practices across the APSs.

## Conclusions and next steps

In summary, there is growing evidence from research and practice that a PYD approach can enhance adolescent programming related to the prevention of pregnancy and STIs and improve outcomes. As an approach that has been tested and implemented in varied settings and contexts, PYD practices can be applied to deliver all six APSs addressed in PREP programs. It is critical that PREP programs be intentional about incorporating PYD practices into program design and implementation. In doing so, grantees may find that many of their existing practices already align with a PYD framework. By integrating these practices throughout their programs, PREP grantees can facilitate healthy adolescent development and improve program outcomes.

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Submitted to:

Tia Brown, Project Officer

Christine Zakhour, Project Officer

Caryn Blitz

Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

Administration for Children and Families

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Submitted by:

Heather Zaveri, Project Director

Mathematica Policy Research

1100 1st Street, NE, 12th Floor

Washington, DC 20002-4221

Telephone: (202) 484-9220

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