

Research Update: The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development

Theresa M. Ferrari, Ph.D.

Ohio Buckeye Clover Graham
February 2005

Description

A team of researchers headed by Richard Lerner at Tufts University is undertaking this longitudinal study. The overall goal of the study is to understand the processes that are involved in the emergence of positive youth development. The first wave of data collection was conducted in 2002 through 2003 with 5th graders. The sample consists of 1,700 youth from all regions of the U.S and 1,117 of their parents. The initial analyses of these data are presented in this article. Much of the article is devoted to describing the measures, as they will be used in subsequent waves of the study.

A point of clarification on the name of the study: It is not solely about 4-H members. The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development is funded by the National 4-H Council. Participation in youth organizations, including 4-H, is one of the variables in the study. This article does not report data specific to 4-H members, but rather to the relationship of participation, regardless of the organization, to youth development outcomes.

The theoretical framework used in the study is that of developmental systems theory. In essence, this theoretical perspective examines the processes by which youth interact with their environment to produce developmental outcomes. When the environment supports healthy development, the individual purportedly develops the *Five Cs*: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. These five combine to represent the larger concept of positive youth development. When a young person possesses these attributes, it is hypothesized that a sixth C, *contribution*, emerges. It is believed that community-based youth programs provide such support for the healthy development of young people.

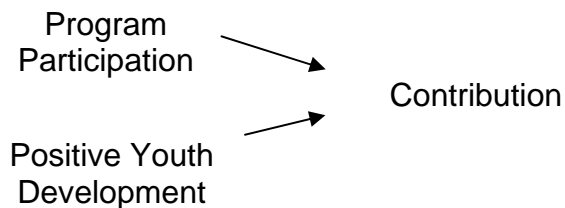
Contribution is defined as embodying both thought and behavioral components. That is, youth believe that it is important to give back to the others and they take actions that support this belief, such as being a leader in a group, helping friends and neighbors, and volunteering in the community. Another term for this concept is *civic engagement*. Thus, contribution is believed to be the outcome or end result of processes of positive development.

The central question examined in the study is whether participation in youth programs contributes to the relationship between positive youth development and contribution. The frequency of participation (i.e., how many times participated in a month) was used as the participation measure.

Findings

Girls had higher scores than boys on caring, character, competence, connection, and positive youth development. Girls also had significantly higher contribution scores than males. At this age, youth reported a very low incidence of engagement in risk behaviors.

Both overall positive youth development and the level of program participation were significantly related to contribution. In other words, those who had higher scores on the Five C measures had a higher level of contribution, as did those who had more frequent program participation. However, the relationship between positive youth development and program participation was not significant. This suggests that at least for this age group, positive youth development and program participation are each independently related to contribution (as shown in the diagram below) rather than positive youth development being moderated by program participation. At this point in time, those who participate to a greater extent in youth programs are not experiencing higher levels of positive youth development.



What does this study tell us? Implications for Practice

The positive relationship between positive youth development and contribution are in line with what we'd expect. Thus, it is important for youth programs to continue providing opportunities to develop the Five Cs of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring, as well as contribution. When interpreting these results, it is important to keep two things in mind: (a) the results represent only one point in time and (b) the participants in the study were in 5th grade. The lack of a significant relationship between participation and positive youth development doesn't mean that the amount of participation in youth development programs is unimportant. It is likely that the effects of such participation are cumulative. Because it can be expected that risk behaviors increase with age, the effect of participation as a protective factor may not "kick in" until later when opportunities to engage in risky behaviors become more prevalent. Other research indicates that it is not simply the frequency of participation (as measured in this study), but the duration of participation that matters. Future waves of this study should provide important insights as the participants are surveyed throughout their adolescent years.

Reference

Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., Phelps, E., Gestsdottir, S., Naudeau, S., Jelicic, H., Alberts, A., Ma, L., Smith, L. M., Bobek, D. L., Richman-Raphael, D., Simpson, I., Christiansen, E. D., & von Eye, A. (2005). Positive youth development, participation in community youth development programs, and community contributions of fifth grade adolescents: Findings from the first wave of the 4-H study of positive youth development. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 17-71.