

YOUTH THRIVE™

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS FOR HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Maximizing the Potential for Healthy Development throughout Adolescence

The Center for the Study of Social Policy is embarking on a new multi-year Youth Thrive initiative to examine how foster youth can be supported in ways that advance healthy development and well-being and reduce the impact of negative life experiences. We are synthesizing research on positive youth development, resiliency, brain development and the impact of trauma to establish a unifying set of principles that will in turn translate into recommendations to guide policy makers and practitioners in their work with vulnerable youth.

Youth Thrive is firmly situated in the context of adolescent development. Adolescence is a phase of rapid change during which youth are shaping their sense of identity, adjusting to their growing bodies, developing peer relationships and social ties within the greater community, and mastering critical-thinking and problem-solving skills that will ready them for a meaningful and rewarding adulthood. Provided supportive guidance and experiences, youth can make the transition to adulthood successfully and as smoothly as possible.

Not surprisingly, vulnerable youth encounter more challenges to reaching a healthy and satisfying adulthood than their more advantaged counterparts. Exposure to violence and maltreatment, lack of consistent, nurturing relationships, involvement in public systems such as foster care or juvenile justice—all entail significant and potentially life-altering impacts on experiential outcomes and the positive transition to adulthood. During this time of self-discovery and identity formation, youth who confront such “adverse circumstances” and who cannot learn how to regulate emotions or form meaningful relationships are particularly susceptible to feelings of isolation as they navigate the pathways to adulthood. For example, recent studies of former foster youth demonstrate that a substantial proportion have serious problems adjusting to life as independent adults.¹ Issues range from lack of employment and educational achievement, involvement with the criminal justice system, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse. Of course, one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence—separation from family in order to create a sense of self—is compromised when a young person does not have a family to separate from, or has undergone so many placement moves to new caregivers that all he/she has known is separation and loss.

New research suggests that traumatic effects on brain development may play more of a role than previously understood in causing negative outcomes for youth. Established research on how to promote positive youth development and help youth grow into mature, successful adults, combined with insights from emerging research in neuroscience and brain development, provides an opportunity for fresh thinking on improved adult outcomes for at-risk youth. In addition, over the past decade, there has been a growing conviction in communities, child welfare and other child-serving fields as to the importance for practitioners addressing not only *risk factors* that jeopardize a child’s prospects for a secure life (for example, family violence) but also *protective factors* (for

¹ Mark Courtney et al., *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21*, Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago, Dec. 2007.

example, good pre-natal health) that round out the intervention picture. Much of the prior work on identifying protective factors has focused on the developmental needs of the youngest children (0-6 years of age), and parents have been supported in attending to these protective factors as a means for enhancing the healthy development of their children. New work is needed to focus on building protective factors for adolescents, especially the most vulnerable youth.

In light of burgeoning new knowledge, Youth Thrive has two goals. First, we seek to give child welfare agencies and their partners a way to translate the federal mandate for child well-being into actions that will secure the healthy development of youth in foster care. In pursuit of this goal we have examined the research knowledge-base to identify protective and promotive factors that build healthy development and well-being for youth as they move through adolescence into adulthood. We will share our synthesis of the research and the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors framework with the field, and use that to fashion policies, programs, and interventions that promote health and well-being. We anticipate creating tools for use among practitioners working with at-risk youth, including training curricula for parents, foster parents and relatives caring for youth; group homes and other facilities; and child welfare agencies. Our second goal is to disseminate this information to parents, caregivers, families, and communities so that they will better understand how they, in their respective roles, can prioritize healthy development for young people to grow into successful, productive and caring members of society.

We expect Youth Thrive to yield a greater alignment of knowledge, principles of support, and policy and practice in the field. Ultimately, we hope that the developmental needs of young people involved in the child welfare system will be better attended to, and that these youth will receive the supports and experiences necessary to ensure enhanced opportunities for productive and secure lives.