

Positive Youth Development in the Juvenile Legal System

Executive Summary

Background: Developmental neuroscience research has brought discussions of adolescent brain development to the forefront of juvenile system policy and practice. Advocates and system administrators are increasingly drawing on concepts related to positive youth development to promote wellbeing amongst youth in the juvenile legal system. Positive youth development offers important directions for the juvenile legal system to re-align research, policy, and practice initiatives away from the dominant risk and deficit lens, and towards youth success and positive developmental trajectories (Lerner et al., 2011). This brief summarizes research and scholarship surrounding positive youth development and discusses the [Positive Youth Justice Model](#) as a promising framework to apply positive youth development in the California juvenile legal system.

Search Strategy: We searched the phrase “positive youth development” OR “positive development” in combination with the keywords “juvenile,” “youth justice,” and “juvenile system” in the following databases: Google Scholar; Proquest Social Service Abstracts; National Criminal Justice Reference Service. We also searched these terms in the resource libraries of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

Results and Conclusion: The Positive Youth Justice model is one of the most widely cited models of positive youth development and seems to offer the most robust framework for applying positive youth development to the juvenile legal system in a comprehensive and intentional way. However, while positive youth development as a whole has been discussed widely in the field of youth justice, research surrounding this topic, including the Positive Youth Justice model, is limited. Only four studies of positive youth development in the juvenile legal system have been conducted to date, and there do not appear to be any studies of the Positive Youth Justice model. Additionally, there are several substantive critiques about the juvenile legal system’s inherent opposition to positive youth development. Overall, it seems that principles of positive youth development, such as those described in the Positive Youth Justice model, have some potential for usage by juvenile justice systems, but should be considered in light of the limitations of current evidence base and the context.

Overview of Literature on Positive Youth Development

Historically, scholarship and practice regarding youth in the juvenile legal system rely on a deficit model, wherein “problems” with the youth are identified, solutions focus on “fixing” such problems, and success is defined as the absence of risk for these problems. The concept of *positive youth development* (PYD) challenges this framing, and instead orients research and practice toward focusing on youth’s strengths and competencies rather than their deficits, with an emphasis on promoting healthy development and well-being. There are three primary ways in which the principles of PYD are typically applied (Hamilton, 1999). First, PYD may be applied as a theory to inform research and scholarship of youth development. Second, PYD may be applied as a theoretical framework to inform the design of youth programs so that they are oriented towards promoting positive development. Finally, PYD may refer to an example of a specific youth program.

Several different models have been conceptualized to guide PYD research and practice, each emphasizing various assets, competencies, and resources that are hypothesized to promote healthy development and social-emotional wellbeing (Shek et al., 2019). The four predominant PYD models are summarized briefly below.

Table 1: Overview of Positive Youth Development Models

Model	Core components	Development of Model
Benson’s 40 Developmental Assets (Benson, 2006)	40 internal (qualities of the individual) and external (qualities of the surrounding environment) processes that promote positive development.	Extensive synthesis of a wide range of youth development research studies.
Lerner’s 5 C’s of Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2005)	5 indicators of alignment between youth and their surrounding context: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring/compassion, and in the presence of all 5, a 6th emerges: contribution. Such alignment is hypothesized to promote positive development.	Longitudinal research of 4- H youth development programs.

Catalano's 15 Positive Youth Development Constructs (Catalano et al., 2004)	15 developmental constructs that are hypothesized to indicate positive development, such as resilience, social competence, or self-determination.	Extensive literature review of youth development research.
Social-Emotional Learning Model (Tolan et al., 2016)	A set of 5 key psychosocial skills that enable individuals to effectively navigate their lives. The skills include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.	Developed from theories on social information processing, social cognition, emotion processing, and emotional intelligence.

Each model has been utilized in research and practice to varying extents to understand and promote positive youth development. However, because of the current lack of empirical evidence for each model, it is not clear when to select which model to use, particularly in light of the Stepping Home continuum. It may be that the selection of a model to use is a matter of preference dependent upon an agency or jurisdiction's capacity or the task at hand, but this is not known. Nonetheless, many of the models share some degree of overlap in the general developmental features and processes that they emphasize, as described in Table 2.

Table 2: A Comparison of Dimensions Emphasized in Positive Youth Development Models (adapted from Shek et al., 2019, p. 137)

Dimensions	Different approaches or versions of PYD				
	40 developmental assets	5Cs/6Cs models	15 PYD constructs	SEL	Character/spirituality
Theoretical orientation	Ecological perspective (lifespan developmental perspective); strength perspective	Ecological perspective (community emphasized)	Ecological perspective (prevention science: risk and protective factors)	Social information-processing	Humanistic, existential and strength perspectives
Emphasis on the role of community in youth development	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not much	Not much
Spirituality	Yes	Not much	Yes	No	Yes
Character/morality	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Thriving continuum	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Being versus Doing	Both	Both	Both	Doing > Being	Being > Doing
Origin	Western	Western	Western	Western	Western

Abbreviations: PYD, positive youth development; SEL, social-emotional learning.

Principles of PYD in the Juvenile Legal System

While there is a lack of research assessing the efficacy of these different PYD models, one model that is widely cited as the most robust and comprehensive application of

PYD to the juvenile legal system to date comes from Dr. Jeffrey Butts and colleagues' Positive Youth Justice framework (Butts et al., 2010). Outlining a "mindset" rather than a concrete model, the framework is more easily adaptable to a wide set of jurisdictions as it allows for a wider range of programming and interventions to be used rather than specific programs. The framework adapts the focus on strengths and competencies from the larger body of work on PYD to address the unique challenges and circumstances of young people involved in the juvenile legal system. Positive Youth Justice emphasizes the need to shift the underlying assumptions about youth in the juvenile legal system, from perceiving them as victims or villains, to instead viewing them as resources (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Changing the Frame of Youth Involved in the Juvenile System (adapted from Butts et al., 2010, p. 12)

Changing the Frame			
ASSUMPTIONS	PRIMARY LENS		
	Youth as Victim	Youth as Villain	Youth as Resource
Origins of Most Delinquent Behavior	Symptom of underlying disturbance	Anti-social impulses, lack of restraint due to permissiveness and the absence of punishment	Normative response to adolescent needs for status, belonging, power & excitement, lack of empathy
How Delinquent Youth Compare with Other Adolescents	Fundamentally different in psychological and emotional makeup	Fundamentally different motivations and impulses toward deviant behavior	Largely similar to other adolescents but with fewer social assets
Delinquent Youth Capacity for Behavior Change	Incapable of conventional behavior without therapeutic interventions	Incapable of conventional behavior without strict discipline and the threat of punishment	Inherently capable of conventional behavior with sufficient access to supports and pro-social opportunities
Principal Intervention Strategy	Individual or family-based therapeutic treatment	Deterrence and retributive punishment	Skill development, attachment and engagement
Role of Treatment	Primary	Secondary	Secondary
Risks of Treatment	Could fail to address underlying cause(s)	Could delay or impede deterrence	Could introduce stigma or harm—i.e., iatrogenic effects

Core assets and practice domains in positive youth justice

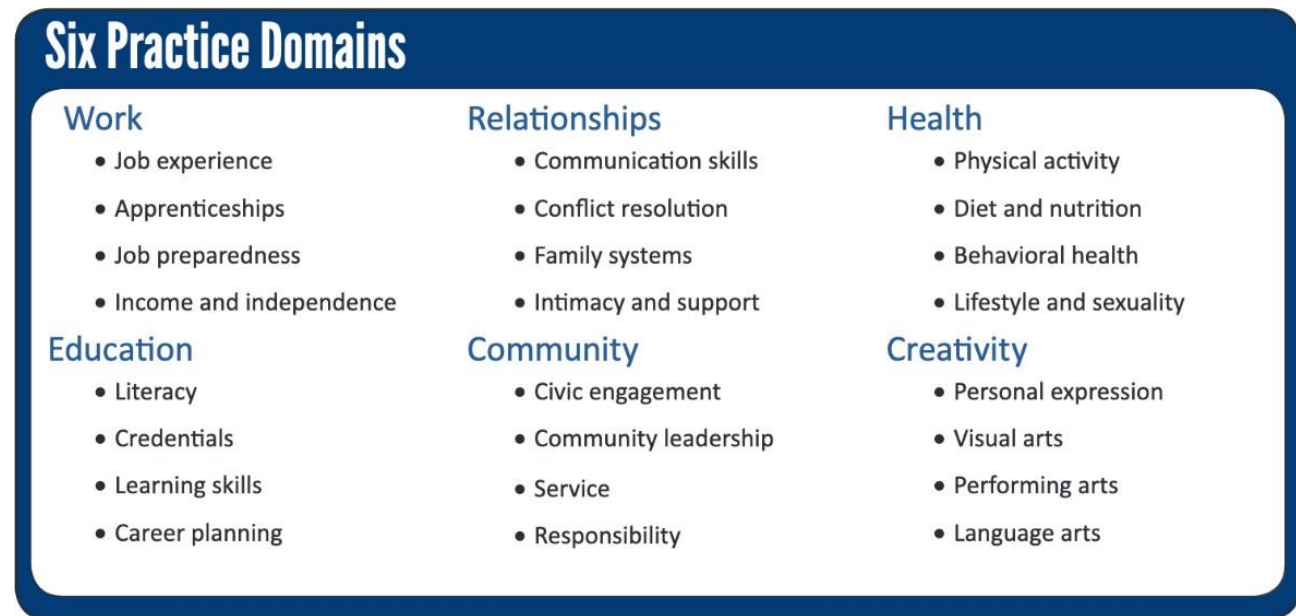
Butts and colleagues (2010) further elaborate that Positive Youth Justice should focus on promoting two core assets: 1) learning/doing, and 2) attaching/belonging.

The first asset, **learning and doing**, emphasizes the importance of opportunities to learn and practice new skills, competencies, and responsibilities that will support their transition to adulthood, as well as strengthen their confidence and sense of self-efficacy. Positive Youth Justice systems promote this asset by connecting young people to pathways and opportunities for this kind of learning and doing.

The second asset, **attaching/belonging**, focuses on the importance of social connections and relationships for healthy development, and emphasizes opportunities for young people to strengthen pro-social ties and develop a sense of belonging to that community. Positive Youth Justice systems promote this asset by facilitating spaces and connections for young people to strengthen their attachments and positive ties.

Butts and colleagues outline six specific practice domains for juvenile legal systems to prioritize. They assert that these six domains—work, education, relationships, community, health, and creativity—offer promising directions for juvenile legal systems to promote the core competencies of learning/doing and attachment/belonging. These competencies are elaborated in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2: Six Practice Domains for Positive Youth Justice (adapted from Butts et al., 2010, p. 19)



Ultimately, Butts and colleagues advocate that administrators and practitioners in the juvenile legal system apply these domains and assets to inform how they approach their work overall. This may involve practices such as adopting specific programs aligned with the domains and measuring success in implementing these domains and assets.

Though Butts and colleagues' Positive Youth Justice framework seems to offer the most robust conceptual model for applying principles of PYD to many jurisdictions in the juvenile legal system, other scholars have also raised additional relevant considerations. Specifically, Lerner and colleagues (2011) have extended their 5 C's model to examine how juvenile legal systems can better adapt the environment, resources, and opportunities for young people to the competencies outlined in the 5 C's model. This model contains significant overlap with the learning/doing and attachment/belonging assets outlined in Positive Youth Justice and may offer additional helpful directions for juvenile legal systems to think about PYD. In the relevant literature, there is also some discussion of the Youth in Custody Practice Model (YICPM), which is described as a comprehensive approach to implementing PYD principles in juvenile legal systems. However, while YICPM appears to have been implemented in 10 local systems (Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2022), we were unable to find specific details about the model itself, or indications that any research or evaluation has been conducted on this model.

Empirical Studies of PYD in the Juvenile Legal System

At present, a search for PYD research in the juvenile legal system (see discussion of search terms in the executive summary) yields limited empirical research, with only four studies identified. These studies largely use a case study approach to describe the efforts of local systems to implement programs or to transition facility culture and management to align with PYD principles. These studies offer some promising indications for promoting PYD in juvenile legal settings. However, to date there are no experimental, quasi-experimental, or rigorous qualitative or observational studies to offer more compelling evidence on the impact of comprehensive PYD initiatives in juvenile legal systems. Moreover, while the Positive Youth Justice framework appears to be the most robust and comprehensive approach to PYD cited in the current literature, there does not appear to be any specific empirical research testing the application of it specifically.

These 4 case studies are described below.

Study	Sample	Methods	Findings
(Barton & Butts, 2008)	<p>Six juvenile justice programs from five states (AK, FL, MI, NY, OR).</p> <p>Programs had publicly stated an intention to use some aspect of PYD. Settings included secure residential, detention, probation, and community-based placements.</p>	<p>Site visits, interviews with staff and administrators, review of administrative documents, and observation of program activities</p>	<p>Results describe the efforts to implement PYD principles in each of these programs.</p> <p>The authors discuss trends across sites in factors related to the efficacy of pursuing PYD in juvenile settings. Examples of facilitating factors include leadership commitment, intentional hiring, ongoing staff training, and interagency collaboration. Examples of challenges included staff resistance, obtaining buy-in from other stakeholders, and demands on staff.</p>
(Barton & Mackin, 2012)	<p>One of the secure facilities assessed in Barton & Butts 2008 (in Alaska)</p>	<p>Surveys of institutional climate, recidivism rates (defined as adjudication for a new offense or violation of probation conditions within 1 year of release), and review of case files over the 3 years since implementing the initiative</p>	<p>Sustained reductions in critical incidents and improvements to institutional climate</p> <p>No differences in recidivism rates compared to other facilities under same division that did not implement PYD</p> <p>Case files showed some improvement in incorporation of PYD principles</p>

(Scheuermann et al., 2019)	Evaluation of PBIS (positive behavioral interventions and supports) model in secure juvenile facility in NV	Fidelity assessment Analysis of data on incidents, disciplinary actions, and facility climate	PBIS can be implemented with fidelity in secure juvenile facilities PBIS had positive impacts on youth behavior, disciplinary actions, and staff perceptions of facility climate
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The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Model (PBIS) is another widely used positive youth development model in the juvenile legal system. Compared to the Positive Youth Justice model, PBIS offers three concrete tiers of positive practices and systems for agencies and organizations to integrate the systems, data, and practices that affect their clients, while simultaneously promoting a positive climate. While it has mainly been used in the education sector, juvenile legal systems across the country, including Texas, Georgia, and Arizona, have adopted the model in their jurisdictions (Scheuermann et al., 2019). In the evaluation describe in the table above, Scheuermann and colleagues studied the feasibility and sustainability of PBIS in the juvenile legal system, particularly within secured facilities.

While the authors found that PBIS is feasible in secure settings and cautiously argue for its effectiveness in terms of impacting youth behavior and facility climates, it must be noted that there appears to be no other empirical evidence to support this. Additionally, PBIS is very costly to administer. There are also critiques of the model, such as its top- down structure that lets administrators choose the behavioral practices and cultural practices to promote in their schools and facilities, without much input from other key voices such as youth (Wilson, 2015). While the Positive Youth Justice Model and PBIS may be compatible, there is no research explicitly testing this.

Challenges and critiques of applying PYD principles

While there is some support for applying components of PYD to the context of the juvenile legal system, there are also important challenges and critiques of this approach that should be noted. One of the main critiques surrounding PYD is its inherent contradiction to the juvenile legal system. The state of being in custody itself is contrary to PYD as a whole (Cox, 2019). Therefore, it is contradictory to lay this positive, humanizing framework onto our current juvenile legal systems that are inherently punitive and dehumanizing, despite efforts to improve them and make them more “healing” and “developmentally appropriate.” The pursuit of PYD would require a much greater transformation of the juvenile legal system rather than applying these

frameworks to current our systems. Some other limitations of PYD raised by scholars (Butts et al., 2010; Cavanagh, 2022; Cox, 2019) include:

- Scholarship on PYD often overlooks larger systemic injustices and barriers that young people in the juvenile legal system face (e.g., stigma in job applications, housing costs, racism, and neighborhood violence) and frames the problem around supporting individual youth, rather than making broader structural changes.
- Some juvenile institutions and practices in the juvenile legal system, such as secure custody, are inherently misaligned with best practices in PYD, since they remove youth from critical social contexts, relationships, and developmental opportunities, and are often traumatic.
- Whether consciously or not, some practitioners, policymakers, and researchers still do not view some youth involved in the system as young people who are capable of change and rehabilitation.
- In the predominant funding model for juvenile legal systems, which is focused on financing concrete services and programs delivered by professionals, it is not clear how many essential components of positive development outlined in Positive Youth Justice (e.g., collective caregiving, neighborhood opportunities and environments, and informal community support networks) would be supported.
- Some Positive Youth Justice innovations (discussed above) are emerging and there is early evidence in support, but many unanswered questions remain about how translate these ideas into practice.

Resources and tools for PYD in the juvenile legal system

Several resources and toolkits have been developed for jurisdictions interested in implementing PYD programs or initiatives. Some of these resources are *not* evidence-based, and thus should be considered a starting point to consider different ideas and possibilities, with an understanding that some have not been evaluated with research.

- [Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators Toolkit: Positive Youth Development \(April 2017\)](#)
- [Youth In Custody Practice Model](#)
- [PBIS in Juvenile Justice](#)
- [OJJDP Positive Youth Development Literature Review \(2014\)](#)

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