

Research in Brief:

Are Positive Youth Development Interventions Effective?

Problem behaviours, such as substance misuse and violence, increase during adolescence. Moreover, adolescents who engage in one problem behaviour are more likely to engage in others. These trends are concerning because problem behaviours can perpetuate into adulthood and lead to adverse physical, psychological and occupational consequences.

Positive youth development interventions are thought to be essential to the prevention of problem adolescent behaviour by supporting young people in acquiring a sense of competence, self-efficacy, belonging and empowerment. This may promote positive behaviour and reduce the likelihood of risky behaviour.

A recent systematic review examined the current literature to evaluate the effectiveness of positive youth development interventions in promoting positive outcomes and reducing problem behaviours.

What is a systematic review?

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the best available research on a specific question. This is done by bringing together the results of several studies. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined.

What is a meta-analysis?

A meta-analysis is a statistical analysis that summarizes the quantitative results of several studies. The purpose of a meta-analysis is to develop a single conclusion that has stronger statistical evidence than any single study.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers searched for relevant articles through online databases, websites, registers, reference lists of previous reviews and fellow researchers.

Then, they screened the titles and abstracts of the studies for their suitability based on the following criteria: participants age 10-19 years old, positive youth development interventions addressed at least one youth development goal outlined by Catalano et al. (2002) (e.g. bonding, resilience, self-determination), interventions were delivered outside school hours, and the study employed randomized controlled trials with a control group for comparison.

Why does this matter?

- ⇒ Problem behaviour increases in frequency during adolescence
- ⇒ Young people who engage in one risky behaviour are more likely to engage in others
- ⇒ Problem behaviours can continue into adulthood and lead to negative consequences such as poor physical, mental and sexual health, substance abuse and addiction, poor educational and occupational achievements, and premature mortality
- ⇒ Positive youth development interventions are a promising preventative technique for reducing risky behaviour

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Communities of practice in the KNSWB include: **Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, PREVNet, School Mental Health ASSIST, and the Social Planning Network of Ontario**

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All relevant papers were retrieved in full and assessed against the inclusion criteria. Following this, the researchers extracted the data from the studies and conducted meta-analyses to determine the effects of positive youth interventions on the following outcomes:

- Positive social behaviours: ability of a person to get along with others (e.g. social competence)
- Problem behaviour: inability to adequately control behaviour in social situations (e.g. conduct problems)
- Emotional distress: internalised mental health issues (e.g. depression)
- Self-perceptions: thoughts about and perceptions of self (e.g. self-control)
- Academic achievement: students' success in meeting short or long goals in education (e.g. grades)
- Academic adjustment (e.g. school attendance)
- Sexual health outcome sexual risk behaviours and pregnancy rates (e.g. sexual initiation)

The researchers also examined how the following factors might influence the effect of positive youth development interventions:

- Setting: community, school, mixed
- Duration: <1 year, ≥ 1 year
- Type of intervention: academic/skills training, community projects, mentoring, recreation, mixed
- Youth risk level: low/mixed, high
- Age: elementary (5), middle (6-8), high school (9-12)
- Publication status: published, unpublished

What did they learn?

Positive youth development interventions moderately improved adolescent's self-perception, emotional distress and academic achievement. However, positive youth development interventions did not improve positive social behaviour, problem behaviour, academic adjustment or sexual health outcomes.

These results provide partial support for positive youth development interventions because they demonstrate that enhancing adolescent's assets allows them to succeed academically, view themselves more positively, and manage emotional difficulties.

Positive youth development interventions were effective regardless of setting, duration, age, type of intervention or publication status. Only youth risk level influenced the effect of positive youth development interventions. Young people deemed low-risk were more likely to benefit from positive youth development interventions than high-risk youth.

Adolescence is a developmentally sensitive period that presents a window of opportunity in which to intervene and influence the trajectory of the individual's behaviour. Accordingly, teachers and families should consider implementing positive youth development interventions for their potential to reduce risky behaviour and encourage adolescents to thrive.

This brief summary was prepared from: Ciocanel, O., Power, K., Eriksen, A., & Gillings, K. (2017). Effectiveness of positive youth development interventions: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *J Youth Adolescence*, 46, 483-504. doi:10.1007/s10964-016-0555-6.

Reference mentioned in the RIB: Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *Prevention and Treatment*, 5(1), 15. doi:10.1037/1522-3736.5.1.515a

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