



## Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Physical Activity

"Be active, healthy, and happy!" So communicates the message on the cover of the recently published *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*.<sup>64</sup> Specific guidelines for children and adolescents are driven by continuing evidence that less than 50% of youth are engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity levels sufficient enough to result in healthy outcomes.<sup>63, 75</sup> Thus, recommendations for youth 6 to 17 years old suggest 60 or more minutes of physical activity daily including aerobic, muscle-strengthening, and bone-strengthening activities—a dosage that has shown positive health outcomes such as lower risk of cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, bone disease, and overweight/obesity.<sup>61, 64</sup>

Physiological health is the most commonly mentioned benefit of regular physical activity.<sup>61, 64</sup> Less frequently mentioned but highly desirable benefits of a physically active lifestyle are mastery of motor and sport-specific skills that contribute to competence in lifelong physical activities, attaining social and psychological life skills (e.g., interpersonal skills, resistance skills), and improving developmental outcomes such as confidence, self-regulation, character, motivation, and perseverance.<sup>67, 72</sup> We refer to all these outcomes as *positive youth development*—physical, social, and psychological assets, qualities, and characteristics that are potentially acquired through physical activity participation. Positive youth development goals are salient for many reasons, such as enhancing youths' desire to continue physical activity for self-determined reasons like enjoying experiences, identifying as a physically active person, and seeking health and fitness benefits. Participating out of internally driven reasons and attaining positive health and social, psychological, and physical assets translate to continued interest in and value toward a lifetime of physical activity. In this monograph, we define a positive youth development perspective, delineate goals and contexts of effective youth development programs, review the research evidence for physical activity as a context for youth development, and make recommendations for how a variety of stakeholders such as parents, educators, and healthcare providers can optimize positive youth development through physical activity.

### Physical Activity Contexts

Physical activity is an umbrella construct that consists of multiple dimensions or forms.<sup>64</sup> A range of structured and unstructured activities within school and out-of-school contexts define where children and youth play, are active, and expend energy. These contexts include organized sport, school physical education, recreational activities, motor skill development programs, dance, recess, and active transport such as walking and biking. All types are developmentally appropriate and enjoyable for motivating youth to sustain a physically active lifestyle and nurturing social, psychological, and physical outcomes.<sup>61, 73</sup> Multiple settings are recognized in the Physical Activity Guidelines: "It is important to encourage young people to participate in physical activities that are appropriate for their age, that are enjoyable, and that offer variety."<sup>64, p. 16</sup> Thus, in our review we are inclusive of the range of developmentally appropriate contexts for maximizing positive youth development through physical activity.

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### A Positive Youth Development Perspective

Positive youth development is a relatively recent framework (1990s) that highlights children and adolescents as resources for fostering competencies rather than as problems to be managed.<sup>3, 14, 42, 56</sup> Positive youth development fosters to development of personal skills or assets, including cognitive, social, emotional, and intellectual qualities necessary for youth to become successfully functioning members of society. As developmental sport and exercise psychologists, we naturally add physical assets (e.g., motor and sport-specific skills, health-related fitness) to the list of social and psychological assets emphasized by developmental psychologists. Positive youth development occurs when young people experience opportunities to develop competencies through interactions with important others in family, peer, school, and community settings.

Effective youth development programs emphasize three main components: (a) personal or life skills development; (b) positive adult, peer, and community relationships, and (c) a psychological climate focused on learning, mastery, and autonomy support.<sup>3, 7, 18, 40, 43, 57</sup> Life skills refer to acquisition of competencies (e.g., interpersonal, self-management, goal setting) in one domain (e.g., physical activity) that generalize or transfer to school, family, community, and job settings. Life skills development is connected to positive physical, social, and psychological outcomes, such as physical health (e.g., motor skills, physical fitness), character (e.g., respect, integrity), social and emotional qualities (e.g., responsibility, empathy), and behavioral characteristics (e.g., initiative, perseverance). Coaches, teachers, and parents are responsible for ensuring that youth glean positive developmental outcomes from physical activity participation. This means that best practices involve teaching broad-based competencies deliberately, systematically, and seamlessly.

### Personal Development Goals

Several models exist for conceptualizing positive youth development goals. Benson's<sup>3</sup> *Developmental Assets*<sup>®</sup> refer to positive experiences, relationships, opportunities, and personal qualities that young people require for healthy development. This framework emphasizes 20 external assets (e.g., family support, other adult relationships, positive peer influence) and 20 internal assets (e.g., achievement motivation, integrity, responsibility, cultural competence, self-esteem) that contribute to promoting positive behaviors and attitudes (e.g., leadership, valuing diversity) and protecting youth from high-risk behaviors (e.g., violence, substance abuse).

**TABLE 1  
DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS ATTAINED  
THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** (adapted from 73)

<p><b>Physical Assets</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Motor skill competencies and movement literacy</li> <li>Sport-specific competencies</li> <li>Physically active lifestyles</li> <li>Knowledge about physical activities, sports, and games</li> <li>Physical fitness</li> <li>Physiological capacities</li> <li>Physical health</li> </ul>
<p><b>Psychological Assets</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-determined motivation toward physical activity</li> <li>Positive values toward physical activity</li> <li>Feelings of self-determination, autonomy, and choice</li> <li>Positive identity, body image, and self-esteem</li> <li>Perceived physical competence and self-efficacy</li> <li>Positive affect and stress relief</li> <li>Moral identity, empathy, and social perspective-taking</li> <li>Cognitive functioning and intellectual health</li> <li>Hope and optimism about the future</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Assets</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support from significant adults and peers</li> <li>Feelings of social acceptance</li> <li>Close friendship and friendship quality</li> <li>Leadership, teamwork, and cooperation</li> <li>Respect, responsibility, courtesy, and integrity</li> <li>Sense of civic engagement and contribution to community</li> <li>Resistance to peer pressure to engage in risky behaviors</li> </ul>

Lerner’s Five Cs are another way of representing positive youth development objectives.<sup>42, 43</sup> The Five Cs are: *Character*, conveying respect for societal and cultural norms; *Caring*, embracing a sense of empathy and sympathy; *Competence*, signifying social, academic, cognitive, and vocational skills; *Confidence*, possessing strong self-efficacy and global self-regard; and *Connection*, engaging in positive exchanges between peers, family, school, and community. A sixth C, *Contribution* (giving to family, community, and society as a whole), is a result of demonstrating all Five Cs.

Larson’s notion of *developmental or growth experiences* is another way of viewing positive youth development.<sup>17, 29, 40, 41</sup> Growth experiences are defined as those that teach or expand youth in some way, such as new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of interacting with others. Adolescents in school-based and community youth programs (e.g., sports, 4-H, arts) consistently describe positive developmental experiences in domains of *personal development* (initiative, problem solving, emotional self-regulation) and *interpersonal development* (diverse peer relationships, prosocial norms, group process skills, and adult networks and social capital).

Table 1 displays a broad spectrum of assets that are possible from embracing an intentional physical activity program. This list is in line with our definition of positive youth development that includes social, psychological, and physical assets,<sup>73</sup> which all contribute to healthy youth development and successful transition to adulthood. Although the mainstream literature recognizes physical activity as a context for promoting *social and emotional* competencies, little attention is paid to beneficial *physical competencies* that contribute to psychosocial development and commitment to physical activity. Fundamental motor skills are prerequisites to mastering sport-specific skills needed for lifelong physical activities (e.g., running, swimming, skiing).<sup>8, 61</sup> Strong et al. prioritize motor skill and movement activities for preschool and early school-age youth, and recommend physical activities that emphasize health, fitness, and behavioral outcomes for youth ages 10 to 18 once the foundation for movement literacy is laid in the early years. As Clark articulates, “If we want a nation of physically active citizens, then we need to help them acquire the motor skills that will allow them to participate in a wide range of physical activities.”<sup>78, p. 43</sup>

## Positive Social Relationships and Caring, Supportive Climates

Features of effective youth development programs include *social and contextual factors* that contribute to fostering life skills and developmental outcomes.<sup>7, 18, 45, 56</sup> Roth and Brooks-Gunn<sup>56</sup> propose three characteristics of youth development programs—goals, atmosphere, and activities. Lerner et al.<sup>42</sup> refer to the “Big 3” of effective youth development programs: (a) sustained, positive adult-youth relations, (b) skill building activities, and (c) youth participation and leadership. Others highlight social and contextual features for facilitating and achieving program goals and personal competencies.<sup>18, 45</sup> These views highlight the importance of *positive social relationships, skill-building activities, and caring, supportive climates* as common components in promoting youth development.

These contextual conditions are consistent with evidence-based research of sources, outcomes, and mechanisms of influencing youth development in physical activity settings.<sup>37, 59, 66, 67</sup> Youth are most likely to experience positive developmental outcomes within a mastery motivational climate that accentuates learning, mastery, and improvement as indices of success, and when interactions with coaches and parents are characterized by positive and informational feedback, appropriate role modeling, and autonomy-supportive styles. In addition, positive relationships with teammates and friends in physical activities are associated with favorable self-perceptions, emotions, self-determined motivation, and moral development.<sup>58</sup> Table 2 displays key contextual features that characterize effective youth development programs, which provide a strong basis for determining strategies to enhance healthy youth development through physical activity participation.

**TABLE 2  
CONTEXTUAL FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE YOUTH  
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**<sup>18, 45</sup>

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Definition and Examples</b>
Physical and psychological safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides secure and health-promoting facilities and practices</li> <li>allows for safe and appropriate peer interactions</li> </ul>
Appropriate structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides clear, appropriate, and consistent rules and expectations</li> <li>provides adult supervision, guidance, and age-appropriate monitoring</li> </ul>
Supportive relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>offer opportunities to form adult and peer relationships that are warm, close, caring, and respectful</li> <li>guidance and support from adults is available, appropriate, and predictable</li> </ul>
Opportunities to belong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>emphasize inclusion of all members, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, and ability</li> <li>maintain a social environment that appreciates individual differences</li> </ul>
Positive social norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>maintain expectations for socially appropriate behavior</li> <li>encourage desirable values and morals</li> </ul>
Support for efficacy and mattering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>allows for and supports autonomy</li> <li>values individual expression and opinions</li> <li>focuses on individual improvement, not absolute performance</li> </ul>
Opportunities for skill building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>offer opportunities to learn and improve physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills</li> <li>prepare individuals for competent and healthy functioning in the future</li> </ul>
Integration of family, school, and community efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides opportunities for experiences that integrate transactions among family, school, and community</li> </ul>

## Physical Activity as a Context for Positive Youth Development

Scholars from multiple disciplines (kinesiology, recreation, education, psychology) identify school and community-based physical activities as viable contexts for facilitating and achieving positive youth development goals.<sup>15, 21, 35, 46, 67, 72</sup> This makes sense given that physical activity programs seek to cultivate specific competencies among youth while simultaneously applying strategies that aid in reducing negative thoughts and actions that detract from healthy development. Structured physical activity settings (e.g., school physical education, community youth sport) also consist of important others (coaches, teachers, community leaders) who organize activities that are designed to optimize positive youth development.

Longstanding research demonstrates that physical activity is a viable context for promoting positive youth development.<sup>66, 67, 72</sup> The knowledge base documents psychosocial and behavioral benefits of participation, including self-esteem, social relationships, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, leadership, and character development. Thus, as Gould and Carson<sup>27</sup> observe, the developmental benefits of physical activity participation and the social-contextual conditions fostering such benefits have been topics of study long before the phrase *positive youth development* was ever coined.

In the last decade, physical activities have become a central focus of interest because studies show that the greatest percentage of youth participate in sports, recreation, and leisure activities as compared to school, service, arts, and faith-based activities.<sup>23, 29</sup> Several studies based in school settings demonstrate positive effects of sport and physical activity participation on academic achievement, development of peer networks, and identity formation.<sup>2, 17, 55</sup> Physical activity interventions in school and out-of-school settings have also shown improved cognitive functioning, favorable self-perceptions, lower depression, better social skills, and improved fitness among at-risk youth.<sup>3, 13, 16, 49</sup>

Structured physical activities in after-school settings are associated with higher initiative, emotional regulation, and teamwork experiences,<sup>20, 29, 41</sup> lower dropout rates,<sup>44</sup> and fewer antisocial behaviors.<sup>51</sup> Other studies have shown that participation in sports is related to higher grade point average and meaningful adult, peer, and community relationships; but participants also report incidences of alcohol abuse, stress, negative coach and peer interactions, and parental pressure.<sup>20, 29, 41</sup> Thus a positive youth development approach to physical activity is appealing with its explicit focus on identifying personal development goals, determining contextual sources of influence, and promoting healthy outcomes.

### A Framework for Positive Youth Development through Physical Activity

Petitpas et al.<sup>50</sup> synthesized the literature on definitions, goals, and conditions of positive youth development to customize essential components for maximizing positive social and psychological assets and outcomes through sport participation (see Table 3). These same principles can be applied to broad-based physical activity offerings.

When conditions for context, external assets, and internal assets are satisfied, healthy youth development is maximized in terms of academic, social, psychological, and physical outcomes (e.g., better school performance, interpersonal skills, emotion management, cardiovascular endurance). This custom framework for physical activity programs offers an appealing platform for conceiving how participation in developmentally appropriate contexts can make an impact on life skills development and physical, social, and psychological outcomes.

Petitpas et al.'s<sup>50</sup> framework offers a useful way to organize and describe physical activity research, evaluation, and programs based on a positive youth development approach. Several educators discuss why and how physical activity (especially school-based and community sport) is a viable context for teaching life skills.<sup>15, 21, 27, 67</sup> These papers align with a focus on personal development goals and social environmental factors affecting healthy outcomes. For example, Bruening et al.<sup>5</sup> conducted a comprehensive physical activity program for pre-adolescent girls of color. The intervention included physical

**TABLE 3**  
**FRAMEWORK FOR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY<sup>50</sup>**

Context	External Assets	Internal Assets
Youth are involved in an intrinsically motivating activity within a psychologically and physically safe environment	Youth are exposed to and learn from caring and compassionate adult mentors as well as surround themselves with a positive peer group and community	Youth are actively learning skills that are important for successfully coping with life situations

activity and life skills sessions over 12 weeks, using female college-athlete mentors as role models of healthy living and resisting risky behaviors, and focusing on social, psychological, and physical health outcomes. Program involvement improved girls' self-esteem, accountability and responsibility, connections to community and a sense of belonging, knowledge and acquisition of health and life skills, and application of skills to their everyday lives.

Some studies assessed youth development outcomes following a sport-based life skills program.<sup>6, 48, 51</sup> Adolescents improved from pre- to post-test on social responsibility and goal setting,<sup>6</sup> while 10-12 year-old participants experiencing a life skills program compared favorably to controls on goal setting, problem solving, and positive thinking.<sup>48</sup> Other studies used interviews and field observations to discern developmental experiences among youth in school-based and community sports.<sup>20, 36</sup> These studies reinforce that positive development is not an automatic consequence of participation—adolescents reported many positive experiences (e.g., initiative, leadership, meaningful relationships with coaches and teammates), but also cited some negative experiences such as parental pressure, poor relationships with coaches, and a stressful competitive environment. Thus positive youth development is maximized under intentional conditions of positive relationships and a caring, supportive climate.

### Coaches and Teachers as Sources of Positive Youth Development

In physical activity contexts, coaches and teachers comprise special adults who make a difference in the quality of youths' experiences and personal skill development.<sup>1, 37, 59</sup> Studies consistently show that coaches and teachers who provide greater frequency of *behavior-contingent praise and informational feedback*, coupled with low punitive responses, are associated with participants who report higher self-esteem, perceived competence, enjoyment, and self-determined motivation, and continued physical activity participation.

Coaches and teachers who engage in *autonomy-supportive* behaviors (e.g., allow participants choices, share decision-making, receptive to input) facilitate positive psychosocial and behavioral outcomes.<sup>19, 53, 60</sup> Greater coach/teacher autonomy support is associated with greater perceived competence, feelings of self-determination, and sense of relatedness in young participants. Satisfaction of these psychological needs, in turn, predicts intrinsic motivation, physical activity behaviors, and psychological well-being. Coaches and teachers who emphasize a *mastery climate*, in which successful participation is defined, recognized, and evaluated in self-referenced terms (learning, mastery, improvement), is associated with feelings of competence, enjoyment, social acceptance, and autonomy; greater intrinsic motivation, improved motor skills, and more frequent physical activity.<sup>19, 52, 62</sup>

Intervention studies have shown that teacher behaviors and strategies in school physical education contribute to improved character development among youth.<sup>25, 26, 54</sup> In implementing the *Fair Play for Kids* curriculum with 4th through 6th grade students, teachers in the experimental group effectively used pedagogical methods such as modeling and reinforcing altruistic behaviors and facilitating discussion to enhance student learning of moral concepts in weekly lessons over the school year.<sup>25, 26</sup> Students in the experimental group showed improvement in moral judgment, reasoning, and intention and prosocial behavior from pre- to post-intervention and were significantly higher than the control group at post-intervention on all indices.

Studies that view coaches' behaviors and interpersonal styles within a positive youth development framework show support for improved personal development among participants. Gould et al.<sup>28</sup> interviewed successful high school coaches about how they teach life skills to athletes, while Harwood<sup>30</sup> outlined an intervention for educating coaches on how to enhance commitment, communication, concentration, control, and confidence in young athletes. Coatsworth and Conroy found that autonomy-supportive coaching (seeking athlete input and praising autonomous behavior) and a climate characterized by support and encouragement were related to greater self-esteem, development of initiative, and identity reflection in 7-18 year-old recreational swimmers.<sup>9, 10, 11, 12</sup>

Two recent studies explored mechanisms whereby coaches promote positive youth development through physical activity. Bhalla<sup>4</sup> assessed African American and Caucasian adolescent girls' perceptions of whether and how their coaches taught them life skills through basketball. Interview responses revealed common themes for how coaches influence life skills learning: (a) provide specific strategies (e.g., set team goals), (b) provide general advice (e.g., stay calm), (c) provide social support (e.g., encourage persevering through hard times), and (d) model desirable behaviors (e.g., how to appropriately deal with referees). Gano-Overway et al.<sup>24</sup> surveyed 9- to 16-year-old low-income youth attending a summer program emphasizing physical activity and health education. Participants' perceptions of a caring climate predicted beliefs about ability to regulate positive and negative emotions, which in turn predicted self-efficacy to empathize with others. Empathic ability beliefs were positively related to prosocial behaviors such as helping and being nice to others.

## Parents as Sources of Positive Youth Development

Considerable research shows that parental beliefs and behaviors are intimately related to their children's physical activity beliefs and behaviors.<sup>22, 38</sup> Fredricks and Eccles<sup>22</sup> specify three mechanisms by which parents influence children's development: (a) as providers of experience (e.g., signing up, transporting, providing support), (b) as interpreters of experience (e.g., conveying beliefs about child's ability and value of physical activity), and (c) as role models (e.g., demonstrating positive physical activity attitudes and behaviors). Children whose parents are more supportive and encouraging report greater perceived physical competence, enjoyment, and self-determined motivation to continue involvement. Parents who hold stronger beliefs about their child's competence in physical activities have children who express more favorable perceptions of ability and positive values toward physical activity. Parents who exemplify physical activity role models by expressing favorable emotions and regularly participating are associated with children who hold positive attitudes toward and engage in more frequent physical activity.

In an innovative study exploring how parents socialize their children through physical activities, Kremer-Sadlik and Kim<sup>39</sup> videotaped family interactions during children's formal sports participation (e.g., youth soccer), informal sports participation (e.g., backyard pick-up games), and passive participation (e.g., watching sports on television). Analysis of parent-child interactions during these activities revealed that successful parents actively socialize children about moral values and desirable interpersonal qualities by questioning children's responses, modeling prosocial behaviors, and explicitly teaching about socially acceptable actions. The authors conclude, "Leadership, teamwork, loyalty, competitiveness, confidence, ingenuity and other values gained through sports activities also apply to life; they are seen as requisites for raising children into successful, healthy adults."<sup>p. 50</sup> Parents play an important role in cultivating values and teaching competencies to their children in physical activity contexts.

## Physical Activity-Based Youth Development Programs

Many youth programs publish mission statements and identify goals reflective of a positive youth development approach. As Petitpas et al.<sup>50</sup> contend, however, evaluation research is needed to determine whether programs are effective in achieving their goals. We feature two physical activity-based programs that target personal development goals, emphasize positive social relationships and a caring, supportive climate, and demonstrate data-based evidence of effectiveness. These include

*The First Tee* ([www.thefirsttee.org](http://www.thefirsttee.org)) and the *Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility* model ([www.tpsr-alliance.org](http://www.tpsr-alliance.org)).

*The First Tee* uses golf as a *context* whereby life skills are taught and developmental outcomes are promoted. Over 250 national and international chapters exist serving diverse populations in urban and rural settings. The program relies upon coaches, peer mentors, and community volunteers as *external assets*, with structured training to educate coaches on how to maximize youth development. Coaches are trained to apply four building blocks: (a) *activity-based* (integrating golf and life skills into one seamless and enjoyable activity), (b) *mastery-driven* (defining success as individualized learning and improving, as in the concept of *Personal Par*), (c) *empower youth* (opportunities for autonomous decision-making and relationship building), and (d) *continuous learning* (using a positive approach to give feedback about performance attempts). These building blocks are enacted along with a deliberate life skills curriculum designed to teach *internal assets*—interpersonal, self-management, goal setting, and resistance skills. Positive youth development is the result of the synergy among context, external assets, and internal assets, and represented by *The First Tee Nine Core Values*—honesty, integrity, respect, responsibility, courtesy, sportsmanship, confidence, judgment, and perseverance.

Weiss and her colleagues conducted a 4-year longitudinal study providing evidence-based research that *The First Tee* is effective in achieving its goals of positive youth development.<sup>67-71</sup> In Year 1, they interviewed a diverse sample of youth ages 11-17 about what life skills were learned, how they were taught, and if they were transferred to other domains. Over 90% provided convincing evidence of successfully transferring skills learned in the golf context to school, family, and peer domains, such as showing respect, managing negative emotions, and helping others. This evidence was corroborated through interviews with parents and coaches. In Year 2, analysis of interview responses revealed that 90% provided evidence of retaining knowledge and transfer of life skills learned in *The First Tee*. Domains in which life skills were used (e.g., school, family, friends) and specific strategies (e.g., *STAR*, *Goal Ladder*) were consistently named. Survey responses showed that participants in *The First Tee* compared favorably to youth in other out-of-school-time activities (e.g., sports, band, youth

In Years 3 and 4, interviews revealed that the large majority of youth successfully retained ability to transfer life skills, and domains and strategies for using life skills were consistent over time. Survey methods revealed that most life skills (transfer and activity-specific) and core values increased or remained stable over time (e.g., meeting and greeting, managing emotions, confidence). Collectively, data over four years provide longitudinal evidence that *The First Tee* is effective in teaching life skills and promoting social and psychological qualities. Synergy among the caring climate, deliberate life skills curriculum, and effective program delivery by trained coaches are key processes whereby positive youth development is realized.

Hellison's<sup>32</sup> *Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility* model is a physical activity-based youth development approach designed to promote prosocial values, social skills, and resiliency among underserved youth. The model has been applied in a broad variety of physical activity settings (school physical education, after-school programs) with children and adolescents from diverse backgrounds. Consistent with a positive youth development approach, the program consists of trained teachers who provide a caring climate and engage in autonomy-supportive behaviors that encourage program acceptance by youth, balance empowering students with teaching explicit values, and optimize conditions in which youth can thrive.

Positive youth development goals are defined as five levels of responsibility:<sup>31</sup> (a) respect for the rights and feelings of others (self-control, including others, resolving conflicts in a democratic way), (b) effort (self-motivation, trying new tasks, on-task persistence), (c) self-direction (working independently, goal setting progression, courage to resist peer pressure), (d) helping others and leadership (caring and compassion, sensitivity and responsiveness, inner strength), and (e) outside the gym (trying these ideas outside physical activity program, being a role model). Respecting others lays the foundation for developing social responsibility, because controlling one's negative emotions, resolving conflicts peacefully, and including everyone in

activities are required for recognizing the rights of all participants. Activities, teacher behaviors, and implementation strategies are designed to optimize students' achievement of self- and social responsibility goals.<sup>31, 33</sup> These methods and activities are designed to integrate physical activity and life skills within the same lesson, facilitate transfer of life skills learned in physical activity to other domains, shift responsibility from the teacher to students, and build relationships with students founded on respect for individuality. Specific teacher strategies include awareness talks, direct instruction, individual decision-making, group evaluation meetings, and reflection time.

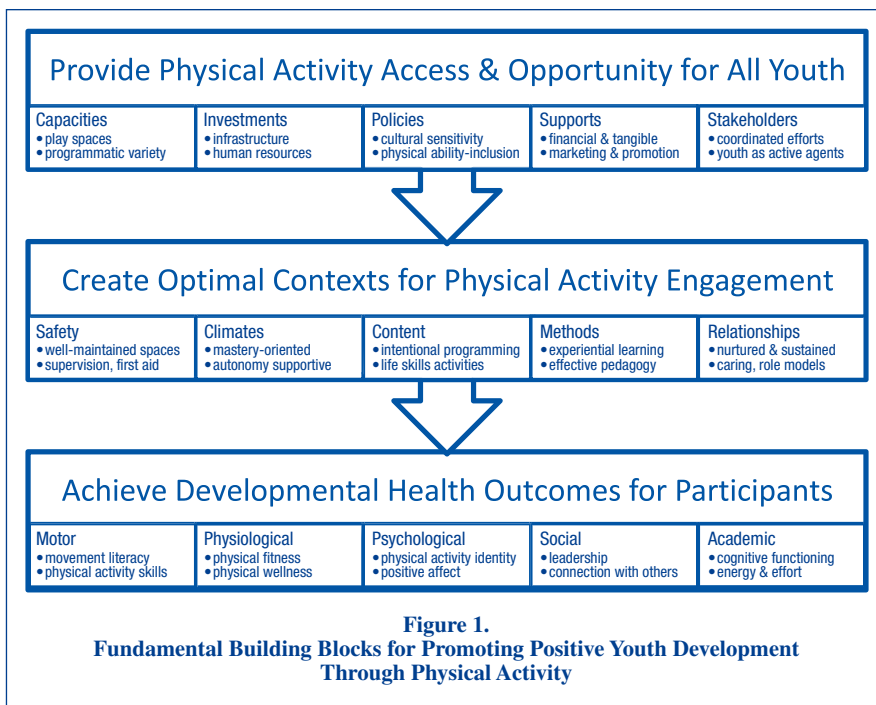
Evaluation studies show that programs based on the responsibility model are effective in achieving positive youth development goals.<sup>33, 34, 65, 74</sup> For example, Walsh<sup>65</sup> implemented an after-school physical activity program for at-risk adolescents that focused on creating a vision for their future selves and careers. Session activities, goals, and teaching methods stemmed from responsibility model principles, and researchers assessed program impact with a variety of methods including weekly journals, field observations, and formal interviews. Findings revealed that program participants developed skills for coaching younger students as well as skills for envisioning an individualized career and job.

### Promoting Positive Youth Development through Physical Activity

Promoting the many healthy aspects of youth development through physical activity requires putting knowledge into practice and assessing the outcomes. "Best practices" refers to the "gold standard" for evidence-based activities, strategies, and methods that successfully achieve the targeted, replicable, and sustainable outcomes of positive youth development through physical activity. In our review we provided sources of evidence supporting these best practices. We included scholarly literature and evaluation reports of exemplar programs as sources of evidence for components, approaches, and practices that have been proven to develop the many positive physical, psychological, and social assets and outcomes attainable through physical activity experiences for youth.

Derived from evidence in the sources reviewed, we present a figure that illustrates a fundamental building blocks approach for promoting positive youth development through physical activity (see Figure 1). At the forefront is the moral imperative to provide physical activity access and opportunity for all youth. Without focused consideration of equitable access and opportunity, many youth are excluded from physical activity, or fail to be explicitly encouraged and included. We define underserved youth in physical activity contexts as those not presently meeting minimum activity standards for achieving optimum health benefits. Poor urban and rural girls, boys with disabilities, obese and overweight children, immigrant youth, and older adolescents are among the most underserved, and are ones for which we must prioritize fixing "opportunity gaps"<sup>74</sup> in physical activity. Examples of individual building blocks underlying opportunity and access are capacities, investments, policies, supports, and stakeholders, with some brief examples of each provided in the figure bullets. For example, community capacity for physical activity should be enhanced by building "mechanisms to stimulate local planning, development, implementation, sustainability, and accountability," and investments made in "incentives for community collaborations to assess, map, plan, and support sustainable opportunities for their young people."<sup>74, p. 39</sup> Communities need policies, tangible supports, and coordinated stakeholder efforts to build these mechanisms and investments.

Once youth choose to engage in physical activity opportunities, it is essential to create optimal contexts for physical activity engagement to maximize positive youth development outcomes, as illustrated in the central blocks of our figure. Attention to evidence-based elements of



**Figure 1.**  
**Fundamental Building Blocks for Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Physical Activity**

safety, climate, content, methods, and relationships are among key components of optimal contexts. Examples of specific elements to illustrate the nature of these building blocks are provided in the figure. Our target behavior for effective contexts is for youth to participate in a variety of health-enhancing physical activity through engagement, learning, and performance involving a substantial physical effort component. Youth will differ in participation interests and intensities across a continuum or range of possible physical activity options. Ideally all will engage within a spectrum illustrating an optimal, healthful balance in the frequency, intensity, time or duration, and type of participation, as these are characteristics of health-enhancing physical activity contexts for youth and are compatible with positive youth development tenets.

When access and opportunity bring youth to engage in optimal physical activity contexts, evidence shows achievement of a multitude of developmental health outcomes for participants, as reviewed in earlier sections of our monograph and as illustrated in the final building blocks in our model. Motor, physiological, psychological, social, and academic benefits are supported by the literature, and represent what we believe are the desired outcomes of positive youth development through physical activity. Positive youth development through physical activity is unique in its capacity to achieve physical health outcomes, in addition to more commonly targeted psychological and social outcomes evident in many youth development programs.

From these figurative building blocks stem "best practices" or specific action strategies that stakeholders can use to promote positive youth development through physical activity. Recommendations from research-based evidence, recognized institutes, national entities, and governing bodies help guide the tactics to be used in promoting positive youth development through physical activity. Table 4 presents evidence-based strategies to be used by various stakeholders, such as physical activity leaders, family members, healthcare providers, youth peers, youth participants, physical activity administrators, and community leaders.

### Conclusion

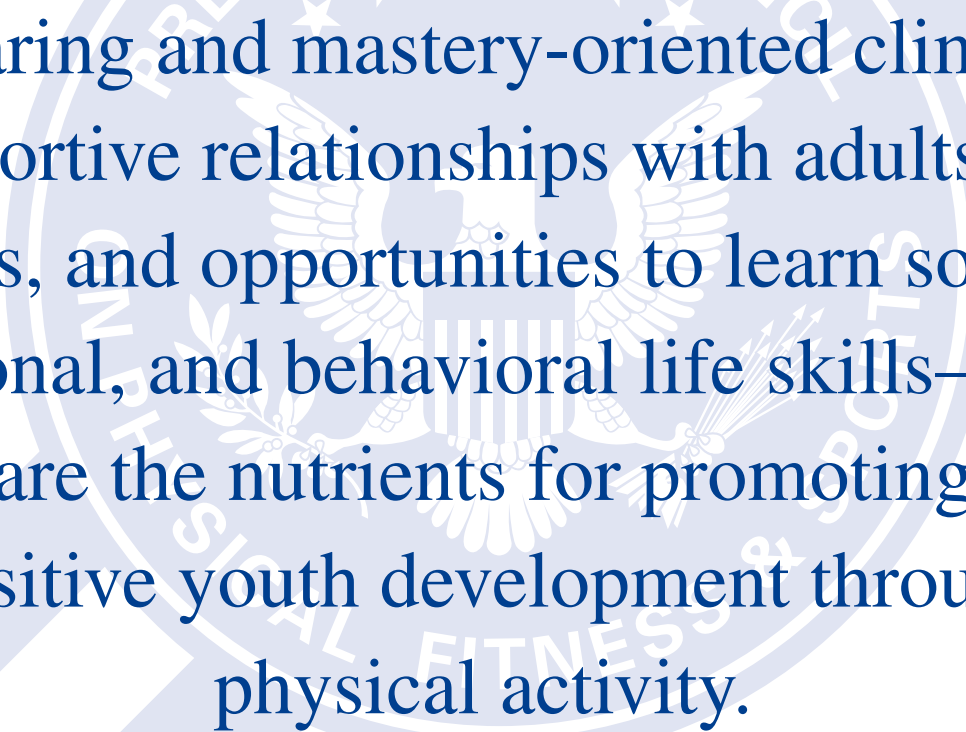
"Be active, healthy, and happy!" As we come full circle from our opening message taken from the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans,<sup>64</sup> it is clear that regular physical activity leads to important physical, social, psychological, and academic competencies and healthy outcomes among children and adolescents. A positive youth

development approach specifies the essential goals, contexts, and activities that optimize achievement of these competencies and healthy outcomes. A caring and mastery-oriented climate, supportive

relationships with adults and peers, and opportunities to learn social, emotional, and behavioral life skills—these are the nutrients for promoting positive youth development through physical activity.

**TABLE 4**  
**BEST PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** (adapted from 73)

<b>Physical Activity Stakeholders</b>	<b>Action Strategies for Promoting Positive Youth Development in Physical Activity Contexts</b>
<p><i>Physical Activity Leaders</i>            ...such as coaches, physical education teachers, fitness instructors, and mentors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• seek education and attain professional competencies in physical activity and positive youth development</li> <li>• follow evidence-based leadership and physical training practices</li> <li>• create mastery-oriented climates, with support and encouragement for efforts, improvements, and successes</li> <li>• seek input, allow youth choices, and engage in shared decision-making</li> <li>• care about youth and develop warm, sustained relationships with them</li> <li>• use behavior-contingent praise and give quality informational feedback</li> <li>• structure organized and enjoyable physical activity sessions</li> <li>• present optimal challenges and build physical confidence</li> <li>• teach life skills (e.g., interpersonal, self-management, goal setting, and resistance)</li> <li>• build multiple facets of physical fitness and health, including cardiorespiratory, cardiovascular, muscular, bone, and body composition</li> </ul>
<p><i>Family Members</i>            ...such as mothers, fathers, guardians, grandparents, siblings, and relatives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provide tangible experience and support for child’s physical activity</li> <li>• reduce barriers to physical activity for child</li> <li>• value and enjoy physical activity for child</li> <li>• role model positive physical activity attitudes and behaviors within the family</li> <li>• convey supportive belief in child’s abilities, competence, and efforts</li> <li>• emphasize intrinsic motives for physical activity</li> <li>• integrate family with school and community efforts</li> <li>• discuss prosocial values related to physical activity participation</li> <li>• encourage perseverance, problem solving, and resiliency in the face of new activities, challenges, and barriers</li> </ul>
<p><i>Healthcare Providers</i>            ...such as physicians, nurses, athletic trainers, physical therapists, and mental health professionals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• educate youth about health benefits of physical activity</li> <li>• promote physical activity for physical and mental health and wellness</li> <li>• teach safe participation and training practices</li> <li>• encourage use of safety gear and injury prevention strategies</li> <li>• work with physical activity sites and providers to ensure adequate first aid supplies and training for staff and youth</li> <li>• empower youth to make good health choices</li> <li>• discuss mental health and physical energy benefits of an active lifestyle</li> </ul>
<p><i>Youth Peers</i>            ...such as friends, teammates, opponents, classmates, and new acquaintances</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support and encourage each other in physical activity</li> <li>• invite and motivate each other in and through physical activity</li> <li>• develop diverse physical activity-based friendships</li> <li>• recognize and acknowledge physical activity accomplishments of other youth</li> <li>• teach physical activity skills to each other</li> <li>• use respect, care and inclusion with all youth</li> <li>• work with a variety of partners, small groups, teams, buddies with younger youth</li> </ul>
<p><i>Youth Participants</i>            ...such as diverse youth of all abilities, cultures, genders, socioeconomic levels, and geographic locations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• value and understand the benefits of physical activity</li> <li>• seek out physical activity opportunities</li> <li>• accept responsibility for making good physical activity choices</li> <li>• use leisure time for physical activity</li> <li>• cross train, engage in a variety of physical activities, develop physical talents</li> <li>• help other family members and friends be more physically active</li> <li>• assume physical activity leadership responsibility for younger age youth and peers</li> </ul>
<p><i>Physical Activity Administrators</i>            ...such as athletic directors, sport managers, park and recreation administrators</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• establish variety in offering structured to unstructured and diverse, innovative physical activity choices</li> <li>• listen to youth voices in program offerings and design</li> <li>• adopt an ecological approach to program development, employing intentional programming and experiential learning</li> <li>• invest in physical activity leader training and hire trained leaders</li> <li>• provide gender-, culture-, and ability-diverse physical activity leadership</li> <li>• generate physical, psychological, and social safety</li> <li>• establish clear behavioral expectations for leaders and youth</li> </ul>
<p><i>Community Leaders</i>            ...such as elected officials, government, nonprofits, youth-serving organizations, P-12 schools, colleges and universities, law enforcement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• invest in physical activity-supportive community design and facility infrastructure</li> <li>• implement active transport plans</li> <li>• advocate for policies to support physical activity</li> <li>• develop public-private partnerships and collaborations</li> <li>• establish and maintain environmental safety</li> <li>• create sustainability and accountability for activity options</li> <li>• fix opportunity gaps to ensure participation of under-active youth</li> <li>• market and promote opportunities to diverse micro-cultures</li> </ul>



A caring and mastery-oriented climate, supportive relationships with adults and peers, and opportunities to learn social, emotional, and behavioral life skills—these are the nutrients for promoting positive youth development through physical activity.

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