



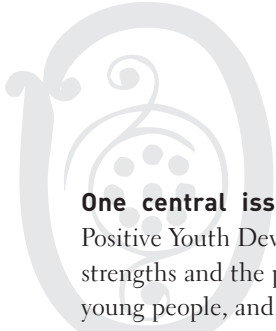
The Thriving Child
Growing our Communities

An Introduction to Sockeye's Forum on Youth Development

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Sockeye's mission is to promote conversation and critical thinking about topics of importance to people in the Pacific Northwest. Our purpose for partnering on this particular series is to deepen the dialogue about advances that are taking place in the field of child and youth development and to provide a glimpse into the efforts of many extraordinary individuals who help young people thrive.

While preparing for this two-part series, we have asked for, argued about, and addressed several topics pertinent to the positive development of children and youth. In these two issues, we address just a few of them.



One central issue is being raised by leaders in the Positive Youth Development (PYD) movement: What are the strengths and the possibilities that we seek to promote in young people, and how do we transform our families, our schools, our institutions, and our communities to enable all children to access and act on their strengths?

The PYD movement, along with its cousin movements (such as the study of self-efficacy by Albert Bandura; Positive Psychology, led by Martin Seligman; the Appreciative Inquiry approach of David Cooperrider; and the Organizational Learning theories of Peter Senge and others) has sought to shift the discussion from problems and deficits toward capacities, efficacy, and strengths (both individual and systemic).

The idea driving the PYD movement is that policies and programs that keep kids from problem behaviors, or help them merely survive, are inadequate. PYD founder Peter Benson makes the case for a more inspired view of children and youth, arguing that policies and programs need to find ways to help young people achieve optimal growth and levels of well-being.

The Helen Gordon Center at Portland State University, which is based on the municipal school system in Reggio Emilia, Italy as described by Will Parnell, operates according to principles that promote self-efficacy and that nurture the emerging strengths of their young learners.

A strengths-based approach also asserts a view of parents, teachers, mentors, coaches, and others as assets in a child's life, and seeks to engage them as respected participants in the positive development of youth. Linda Blaydon and Gretchen Dursch from Communities and Parents for Public Schools (CPPS) describe the advocacy work being done in Portland to create a school environment that identifies parents as key partners in the education of their children.

Another key topic is one that addresses promising advances in early-childhood education taking place in Oregon. The Children's Institute's research and work is achieving significant success in Oregon on behalf of programs such as Head Start. David Mandell, the organization's research director, explains the research supporting the efficacy of early interventions such as preschool for at-risk kids.

Much of the research informing the nationwide spread of pre-K and full-day kindergarten programs is based on the Perry Preschool Project, which turns out to share characteristics promoted by PYD and the approach used at Helen Gordon. A common theme for many of these highly successful programs is the positive social outcomes which follow their young partic-

ipants long after attending them and which appear to eclipse improvements in academic success.

However, theoretical advances also are being made to support concepts of behavioral and intellectual plasticity well beyond a child's early years. Jay Hutchins examines the Sherlock Holmes-like investigative work of James Flynn on the plasticity of "intelligence." The Flynn Effect gives policy and practitioner pundits a different set of lenses with which to view academic development and outcomes.

Flynn's observations challenge the traditional conclusions of behavioral geneticists about the immutability of IQ and have opened up another conversation about the connection between research and practice. Science seems to have become a bit of a false god in the field of child development. As work on Sockeye's forum has progressed, we have navigated the lackadaisical use of terms such as "research shows...", "evidence tells us...", and "experts have identified...", as well as the ubiquitous "evidence-based." The reality in the social sciences is that it is very, very difficult to avoid what Milbrey McLaughlin calls "faux science." Mixed in with a bit of hubris and some political urgency, it seems possible to stray far afield from what might actually be good for young people.

So it is that rigorous research, good intentions, critical thinking, and common sense are all needed to drive the field toward actionable and effective outcomes. We serve children, youth, and families best with our own lifelong commitment to learn, to continuously engage in that reflective, humble, and creative desire to know what's true.

Such a hunger for learning is evident in the research of Judith Harris, author of "No Two Alike" and the controversial bestseller "The Nurture Assumption," whose hypotheses on why human beings become who they are not only are controversial, but appear to be based on solid science relative to many studies informing current practices. Although there is disagreement about the implications of her evidence, it is clear that her kind of rigorous, out-of-the-box search for experimental data is needed to aid genuine advances in the field of childhood development.

Jay Hutchins describes Harris's ideas and documentation of the conclusions of 40 years of unpopular research by behavioral geneticists in a piece about "No Two Alike." Hutchins, in an afterword to the forum, highlights a few more areas in which hubris, political urgency, passion, and even good intentions have come together to, perhaps, confuse evidence about what is best for helping children become thriving adults.

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As our conversations continue into the fall, we intend to highlight further insights, interventions, programs, and people who show particular promise in their positive, systemic impact on children and families. We observe that a highly effective intervention on behalf of the positive development of children seems to actually intervene in governmental and other systems meant to support and empower our youth.

An excellent example is the Wraparound Oregon project that Portland Circuit Court Judge Nan Waller will discuss in the second part of Sockeye’s series on youth development. Waller argues for a shift in the way government services are designed to support our most needy citizens. So does the forward-thinking Youth Data Archive work coming out of the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University, led by McLaughlin.

We briefly introduce the YDA concept in this issue, in anticipation of learning more from McLaughlin, who will describe her work with youth and their communities in the fall issue of Sockeye.

We also will be facilitating a conversation between McLaughlin and Portland Mayor Tom Potter, who will share some of his unique reflections and vision for furthering the rights of children in the Pacific Northwest.

Doug Stamm, the executive director of Meyer Memorial Trust, is applying a multi-disciplinary, entrepreneurial approach to the particular opportunities facing the philanthropic community to positively impact the field of youth development. Stamm will share insights, as well as his conviction about the vital task facing our entire community to raise children who become civically engaged citizens of a democratic society.

The innovative work at Friends of the Children, a national mentoring organization founded in Portland, successfully translates youth development theory into a practice and program that is transforming the lives of disadvantaged young people, one child at a time. In speaking with Duncan Campbell and Orin Bolstad, we identify some of the critical components of what makes theirs a model organization for helping young people thrive.

A Process of Reflection

At every level of social impact, there is opportunity to engage in the skill of meta-cognition. It is telling that the approaches and programs that seem most promising in terms of positively impacting critical indicators of thriving all have this component in common. When a young person, a parent, teacher,

mentor, policy leader, researcher, philanthropist, community organizer, or a politician engages in the process of reflection, iterative learning, and informed action, they contribute to a process that appears to be good for both the child and society.

So we are enthusiastic about participating in the larger conversation about helping children, youth, and their communities thrive. Some outcomes we hope will take place through these and other such conversations include:

- A sharpening of our collective critical thinking around effective child and youth development practices. This includes challenging our paradigms about youth, families, schools, culture, race, intelligence, nature, nurture, science, community, and more.
- The recruitment of a greater number of teachers, parents, businesspeople, academics, and policymakers into the positive youth development movement. We believe this movement rightly charges and empowers us as citizens to take greater responsibility for giving all the children in our midst an opportunity to grow into happy, responsible, and contributing members of our society.
- Encouragement to those leaders and activists who, with heart and integrity, are putting good ideas into action to ensure that Portland is becoming a model thriving community. Wouldn’t it be cool if the Northwest was recognized nationally as *the* region that is good for kids?
- A resurgence of proactive creativity about the well-being of youth. We need to do more than exchange our best ideas with one another, share resources, and build bridges. We need actionable ideas that help children and youth thrive.
- Greater clarity and specificity about which positive outcomes that young people themselves, and the people who care about them, desire, and a passion to create the kinds of environments which support those positive outcomes.
- Humility, truth, and grace, extended to one another.

While rigor and scientific integrity are noble and good, we also know that when it comes to children, families, and youth, the territory is wild, beautiful, heartbreaking, and subtle, occasionally delivering us to dizzying heights of success and inspiration, but more often calling upon us to persevere and to keep a sense of humor, perspective, and love.

With deep gratitude we want to thank our authors, interviewees, and sponsors who have contributed their best ideas to the ongoing conversation about how to most effectively, and lovingly, help all children thrive. 