

# Establishing Positive Youth Development Approaches in Group Home Settings: Training Implementation and Evaluation

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Published online: 2 February 2008  
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**Abstract** This article reports on a training program for group home supervisors that was designed to utilize positive youth development principles in work with youth transitioning from care to independent living. Over a period of 5 months, eight one-day training sessions took place across one state in the U.S. (Massachusetts) with a total of 186 group care staff in attendance. The evaluation consisted of three components: observation of participant feedback during training, training day post-test, and follow-up with participants 2–3 months after training. Implications of the data, particularly barriers to implementation of training programs, are discussed.

**Keywords** Training evaluation · Group home supervisor training · Positive youth development · Independent living

## Introduction

This article reports on a training program, conducted in one state (Massachusetts) in the U.S. The project was funded by the federal government (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau) and was designed to help workers who assist foster care youth with the process of transitioning from care to independent living. Despite the importance of group care staff, little attention is paid to their training needs, training programs, and training evaluation. Recognizing the limited attention to group home staff, a major component of this training program was targeted toward group home supervisors, with the intent that they might then facilitate similar training within their own group home settings. The training program was, therefore, designed with the assumptions that community-based group home staff members are fundamental to the preparation of youth for later

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independence, that principles of youth development should guide the work with youth in the community, and that, in general, group home staff do not receive adequate training for this important work. After a brief discussion of background on youth development approaches in child care work and a description of the training project, we discuss the evaluation methodology and findings of the project.

## Literature Review

Central to the positive youth development approach is the idea that a deficit orientation to youth work with a primary focus on problem behavior (e.g., substance abuse, school failure) does not constitute best practice. Positive youth development is grounded in the belief that *all* youth need to be provided with opportunities and supports throughout adolescence and has the aim that *all* youth become confident and competent adults (Batavick 1997); positive youth development emphasizes “comprehensive views of youth as assets, as individuals with resources and capabilities that deserve full support and development” (Costello et al. 2001, p. 195).

Theories of adolescent development inform youth development as a philosophy and framework for practice. Positive youth development emphasizes the tasks of adolescence as critical in framing work with youth. Pittman et al. (2001) have collapsed a complex list of desired behavioral and psychological outcomes of adolescence into what they have termed the 5Cs: competence, confidence, character, connections and contributions. The focus on these broad developmental tasks of adolescence helps youth professionals shift from otherwise narrowly defined areas of intervention that mainly aim at reducing negative behaviors. Catalano and colleagues (2002) note that positive youth development advocates have placed emphasis on the development of youth in order to promote positive outcomes in various areas (e.g., physical, social, cognitive, moral and civic). Positive youth development scholars argue that in addition to gaining competence in the various developmental areas, youth need to be engaged by having access to full participation in the community, the workplace and the broader society (Pittman et al. 2001). A core challenge for the youth development approach has been its application to youth exhibiting challenging problem behaviors; however, recent work has identified practice principles for using a youth development approach when addressing youth substance-abusing behaviors (Amodeo and Collins 2007).

Positive youth development represents a paradigm shift across fields that interact with youth and, therefore, development and training activities are necessary to strengthen youth development practice (Huebner et al. 2003; Robertson 1997; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003). Robertson (1997) sees a parallel between an organization’s focus on youth development and the organization’s attention to staff development. Yet, limited attention has been given to the systematic development and training of youth workers (Huebner et al. 2003). Huebner et al. (2003) state that two things are needed to improve staff development in youth organizations: (1) a framework that incorporates the fundamental understanding and articulation of the content of youth development work, and (2) attention to methodology for delivering staff

development programs. The latter is seen as particularly important in the delivery of youth development training because it needs to be conscious of the framework of practice with youth it is imparting and how this can be modeled in the training of workers.

In child welfare, training has often been used as one way to deal with the complexities of the job and a vehicle for implementing change (Gregoire et al. 1998). In addition, training and development activities may improve staff retention (Curry et al. 2005). To be considered effective, training must not solely rely on participant change within the training setting, but the utilization of learned knowledge, attitude and skill within the work setting (e.g. Curry et al. 1994; Gregoire et al. 1998). Mitchell et al. (1989) noted that evaluation of training is usually done during or immediately after the training, yet later follow-up is needed to assess whether practice has been influenced by the training. Consequently, they utilized follow-up phone interviews with participants two months after training to assess the degree to which they had followed through on action plans articulated at the training. Although only 21 of 54 participants completed an action plan at the training, at follow up 78% of identified action items had been partially completed. A similar follow-up methodology is used in the current study.

## Project Description

Through a 3-year federally funded training grant, a collaboration between a school of social work and the public child welfare agency was developed to create and implement training of child welfare workers who assist youth transitioning out of substitute care and toward independent living. Over a period of 5 months, eight one-day training sessions took place across Massachusetts with a total of 186 participants (an average of 23 per training), who were primarily group home supervisors and managers. Additionally, staff members of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS) Adolescent Outreach Program were present at the training. These workers (a total of 28) had already undergone a similar but more extensive training (4 days) conducted by the same team as the currently described training. Several of these outreach staff attended the 1 day training of group home staff in their regions to help facilitate linkages between DSS and group home staff working with DSS clients.

The training sessions recognized the unique setting, circumstances, and issues of group home care and valued the fundamental role that group home staff play in preparing youth to meet the challenges of adulthood in their transition from care. The primary topics covered were: (1) positive youth development, (2) utilizing relational and task models in youth work, (3) use of a transition planning framework, and (4) building staff and program capacity. *Positive youth development* was described by presenting definitions, key concepts, and comparisons to more traditional deficit-based models of practice. The following definition of positive youth development was provided in the training: “A process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially,

morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models which focus solely on youth problems” (National Collaboration for Youth Members 1998).

*Relational and task models* were identified as two distinct but potentially complementary models for working with youth. The relational model emphasizes the forming of relationship between worker and youth as primary, prior to a focus on transition outcomes, by recognizing that interpersonal relationships enhance growth and change in people. The task model derives practice principles from cognitive-behavioral theory and emphasizes tasks to be accomplished and agreed upon outcomes as a focus of the work. A *transitional planning framework*, developed for this project, was presented and discussed. The framework identified four stages of transition planning work: Decide (setting goals), Obtain (taking initial action to meet goals), Maintain (utilizing support to solidify progress), and Grow (addressing the next steps in developing goals). Finally, *building staff and program capacity* was adapted from the youth development framework of the Community Network for Youth Development (2007) and focused primarily on participants’ identification of, sharing, and discussion about their agency practices that emphasize elements of a youth development approach in five areas: safety, relationship building, youth participation, community involvement, and skill building. An overview of the topics, content, and methods of delivery, are outlined in Table 1. The full curriculum can be obtained from the first author.

At the end of the day, participants were provided with a modified version of the curriculum and time was devoted for questions and ideas about implementing the training in their programs. It was the intent that participants would return to their settings and work to integrate the training and the concepts within their group home.

## Evaluation Method

The evaluation of the training consisted of three components. First, a project team member (Hill) observed all training sessions and recorded comments, questions, feedback and discussion that took place during the training. These notes were later reviewed (Collins) and content analysis was used to identify conceptual categories of participant reaction to the training. Second, satisfaction and perceived gains were measured at the end of the training session using an evaluation form consisting of nine Likert-scale questions and three qualitative, open-ended questions. Third, the impact of the training on group home practice was assessed via a follow-up mail and phone survey conducted approximately 2–3 months following the training. A questionnaire comprised of qualitative, open-ended questions was used. The questions assessed participants’ self-report regarding the degree of knowledge, attitude, and skill change since the training, the extent to which participants had applied new knowledge and skills in their work, and the ways they had shared new concepts and ideas or trained staff themselves using the materials from the training.

**Table 1** Description of training

Topic	Content	Method
Positive youth development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview</li> <li>• Historical perspective</li> <li>• Understanding the paradigm shift from a traditional child welfare approach to positive youth development</li> <li>• Key characteristics and definitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecture</li> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Brainstorming</li> <li>• Case study exercise discussion in small and large groups</li> </ul>
Relational and task models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of the models/explanation and features of each model</li> <li>• Interaction and interrelation of the two models</li> <li>• Influence of different variables such as gender, culture, nature of relationship with youth regarding which model is used</li> <li>• Influence of programmatic and systemic constraints on use of these models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trainer presented case examples</li> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Handouts</li> </ul>
Transition planning framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review/explanation of 4 stages of the framework: Decide, Obtain, Maintain and Grow</li> <li>• Flexibility and applicability of framework to all youth in multiple domains</li> <li>• “Education” domain used as a model</li> <li>• Typical experiences and feelings of youth in each stage</li> <li>• Worker skills needed to assist and support youth in each stage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Brainstorming</li> <li>• Exercise involving audience feedback and participation</li> <li>• Comments recorded on large sheets by trainer</li> </ul>
Building staff and program capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanation of how positive youth development can be infused in programs</li> <li>• Best practices regarding implementation of positive youth development into: program safety, relationship building, youth participation, skill building, and community involvement</li> <li>• Plans for implementing training within group homes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise involving participants writing suggestions of best practices on newsprint</li> <li>• Facilitated discussion of best practices</li> <li>• Closing exercise—“letter to myself” detailing plans for implementing training</li> </ul>

## Findings: Observations of the Training Process

Throughout the eight training sessions, five key themes emerged from participants’ comments and reactions: utility of a framework and language with which to conceptualize youth work, the identification of comparative challenges of a traditional child welfare approach and a youth development approach, empowering

effects of a strengths-based approach, the identification and sharing of best practices, and identification of challenges of overcoming staff resistance to change.

### Framework and Language with which to Conceptualize Youth Work

Most participants stated they knew something about positive youth development and that the concept was familiar to them. They appreciated the presentation of a clear framework with a language to bring back to their coworkers. Similarly, the transition planning framework portion of the training appeared to resonate with participants. They found the practical steps and stages to be a relevant way in which to organize their work with youth as they moved through jobs, college applications, and other goals. Participants spoke of how the earlier stages of Decide and Obtain were the easiest to achieve and that programs did these best. Another commonly expressed view was that these stages coincided with the “aging out” of youth in the system, that is, that group homes focus almost exclusively on Decide and Obtain. Participants stated that once a youth was at the Obtain stage, and had found a job, for example, staff had to then turn their attention to other youth in their program. Participants spoke of how youth often faced transition to other programs or to independent living at the Maintain and Grow stages, and staff therefore lose contact with youth. Some participants raised the point that this transition planning framework may be difficult for youth with cognitive limitations and that a “scaling down” of stages would be needed.

### Identification of Comparative Challenges of a Traditional Deficit-Focused Approach and a Positive Youth Development Approach

Participants recognized the extent to which traditional child welfare practice has historically been deficit-oriented, and that systemic barriers to youth development practice included time limits of programs, lack of resources, frequent or inappropriate placements, and high caseloads. A case study exercise was used, in which small groups read a case study of a fictional adolescent, and considered two different ways of handling her situation, one from a youth development approach and the other from a traditional child welfare perspective. This exercise generated much discussion, and of all the exercises, this seemed to get to the heart of their work and the tension that exists between a positive youth development approach and the current limitations in the child welfare system. Many people agreed that the youth development approach was the more desirable, but it was regarded as the “ideal”, and difficult to put into place due to policies and liability issues that many programs face. The traditional approach in the case study was viewed as the “standard” approach taken in group homes, in which all relevant collaterals are called in to meet, and as the easiest and safest route to take.

While most participants agreed that the youth development approach was the more desirable, the consensus was that it was more time-consuming and ran the risk of becoming too “experimental”—asking a youth to take an active part in his or her

treatment plan and in the decision-making process could create the expectation that all youth in the program would ask for the same treatment, and with youth of wide ranging cognitive, behavioral and emotional backgrounds and abilities, this could pose a challenge. Participants stated that because “putting out fires” was the nature of group home work, a youth-focused approach in this scenario is challenging.

### Empowering Effect of a Strengths-Based Approach in a Deficit-Oriented Field

Due to the particularly stressful nature of adolescent group care work, the trainings were experienced as a welcome break to discuss issues and challenges with colleagues outside of their own group care setting. Participants reported feeling “refreshed”, “energized”, and “positive”. Participants discussed how from the outset, their work is oriented around a youth’s identified “problems”: they enter the system due to these problems, and the focus of the relationship and the programs is oriented around managing and reducing these problems rather than on promoting a youths’ strengths, assets and potential. This philosophy is reflected and reinforced in the paperwork, treatment plans, and “point systems” in many group homes.

### Identification and Sharing of Best Practices

Participants enjoyed the interactive nature of an exercise in which they were asked to reflect on how their programs provide the key supports and opportunities of: safety, relationship building, youth participation, community involvement and skill building. During this process, participants discussed the respective “best practices” of their agencies. In the discussion period that followed the exercise, participants talked about how it helped them to realize how much they were already doing in terms of these supports and opportunities. Of all these, “safety” was identified as fairly easy to provide due to agencies’ need to focus on liability concerns. Participants also spoke of relationship building as a strength and focus in group homes, but mentioned some of the obstacles to both achieving and maintaining relationships with all youth due to the frequent transitioning of clients in and out of programs, the subsequent loss of contact between staff and clients, and the histories of trauma and loss that characterize many youth in group home settings. Overall, many participants, particularly those who worked in acute and locked settings, agreed that providing opportunities for community involvement and youth participation posed the greatest challenge.

### Identification of Challenges of Overcoming Staff Resistance to Change

A frequently expressed sentiment was that while participants strongly agreed with the concepts that were presented, there was some uncertainty as to whether program staff would be as receptive. Many participants spoke of the notion of “change being hard for people”, particularly asking staff to make a shift in their approach and

attitude in their work. As one participant put it, “whether staff will do what we tell them is another matter”. Along these same lines, other participants expressed the view that staff resistance to a new ideological framework stems from the fact that the traditional way of doing work requires less effort and creativity, and a youth development approach demands more effort, time, and “thinking outside the box”—things staff may be reluctant to embrace while doing work that is essentially crisis driven.

### Findings: Training Day Post-test

The training post-test measure was completed by 154 participants and consisted of 9 items which participants rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree and 4 = strongly disagree). Additionally, three open-ended questions were included (what aspects of this training session did you like the most? what aspects of this training session did you like the least? any more comments about this training session?). Data from these three questions were grouped into two categories: positive comments and negative comments.

In Table 2 we present data for three quantitative items for each site related to participant knowledge, learning, and satisfaction. The other items on the measure provide feedback on the trainer and training materials and (although positive) are not reported here. The Knowledge item states “after this session I feel more knowledgeable about the topic presented than I did before”. The Competence item states “after this session I feel more competent to practice the skills presented than I did before”. The Satisfaction item states “Overall, the training met my expectations”.

In general, the positive qualitative comments emphasized the strengths of the trainer (enthusiasm, motivation, experience), the varied style of training delivery (large group, small group, lecture, individual exercises, etc.), interactive exercises, opportunity to share with colleagues, and the closing exercise that provides a reminder of the training in a month. A particularly favorable comment stated “Great training, great lunch, great location, CEUs, enthusiastic trainer – what’s not to like?” The less positive comments were about the length (“could be done in a half

**Table 2** Group home supervisor training post-test

Site	N	Knowledge	Competence	Satisfaction
A	27	1.70	1.96	1.67
B	25	1.32	1.48	1.16
C	19	1.42	1.53	1.42
D	24	1.83	2.04	1.88
E	19	1.68	1.89	1.47
F	23	1.52	1.69	1.39
G	17	1.53	1.65	1.59

*Note:* Data are missing for the final training session

day”) or need for more time for discussion, need for more examples of application of material, and idiosyncratic comments (e.g., not liking group activities).

### Findings: Follow-up on Training Impact

The follow-up survey was comprised primarily of qualitative, open-ended questions. As indicators of potential impact on practice, the survey asked respondents if, since the training, they: (1) discussed concepts from the training with coworkers and staff; (2) referred to the curriculum or handouts; (3) did additional reading from the bibliography provided; (4) integrated positive youth development concepts into the program; (5) implemented a similar training in their group home. The data from 71 respondents completing the follow-up survey identified: 58 had discussed concepts from the training with coworkers and staff, 35 had referred to the curriculum or handouts since the training, 2 reported doing additional reading from the bibliography since the training, 33 had integrated youth development concepts into the program, and 4 had implemented a similar training in their group home setting.

Additionally, qualitative information was collected from respondents. Respondents were asked: *Can you describe any ways in which your participation in the training had an impact on your work?* Some key themes included:

- Helped reinforce the work programs were already doing—an affirmation of focus and goals of programs.
- Importance of working from strengths perspective; focus on positives and strengths carried over into paperwork/handbooks, rules, treatment plans, language used in planning meetings, avoiding labels such as “manipulative”, “unmotivated”, etc.
- Helped not only see youth in more “positive” light, but helped staff feel more positive about their work. “Changed paradigm from dysfunction to positive interaction”. New framework instead of “punitive and negative approach”.
- Participants found great benefit from hearing other participants’ ideas, views, obstacles in their programs, and things that work, especially ideas about ways to empower youth, involve them and give them more control (e.g., in treatment planning, activities).
- Helped people reflect on difficulty of transitioning at young age, how to improve on and better help youth with transition issues.
- Provided tools to work with youth transition to Independent Living.

Respondents were also asked to give examples of *how they had integrated youth development concepts into their programs*. Some of their responses included:

- Focus on strengths and positives when working with youth.
- Provide youth with more choices vis-à-vis activities, groups, etc.
- Involving youth more in decision making, rules/policies of program, listen to their recommendations, ask for their input/feedback in house meetings.
- Changes in language used, for example, in manuals, treatment plans. Use more positive, strengths based language/framework.

- More proactive in helping youth work toward goals, using concrete steps.
- Some used “letter to myself” idea and applied it to youth—to help them think of their stated goals and how to achieve them.
- More proactive about getting involved with youths’ employers, and accessing employment resources, help youth obtain/think about jobs that are more career oriented.

Respondents were asked what they felt were the *key barriers to implementing a similar training in their group home setting*. Responses included:

- Time; difficulty scheduling time when all or most staff can attend
- Staff resistance to change; low staff morale/burnout
- Financial issues of having to pay staff to come in when not on the schedule
- So many mandatory trainings already required of staff to attend, hard to get them to attend more trainings
- Nature of the work is such that staff are overwhelmed and concerned with daily grind, crises, hard to focus on and shift to “preventive”, longer term stuff
- Big caseloads, high turnover of staff make it difficult for staff to attend.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the observations of participants’ reactions and the quantitative post-test data it appears that the response to the training was positive. As the data suggest, the training that was delivered fit well with programs’ intent to integrate concepts of youth development into group home programming. Programs did not need to be convinced of the approach; however, most programs had lacked the overarching framework and language that were provided in this training. The training could provide the framework and related tools that could help facilitate work the programs were already doing or planning to do. Thus it appeared the training met an important need. Additionally, the training was well received because the messages themselves were positive and the delivery of the training was collegial and respectful of the good work that programs were already attempting to do. As discussed by Robertson (1997) there are parallels between focusing on positive youth development and positive staff development. In the same way that youth can benefit from being treated as equals and focusing on positive development, staff can benefit from the same emphasis.

Despite the positive response and highly engaged participants should this training program be considered a success? Almost 50% (33 of 71) reported integrating youth development concepts into their programs. As with many training evaluations, this evaluation did not set a target level in terms of outcomes measures (e.g., “x” programs will implement concepts within 3 months) and therefore summative conclusions cannot be based on a predetermined standard. Nonetheless, we offer some comments regarding the extent to which programs had begun to implement youth development programming. Some typical explanations as to why more implementation had not occurred may be due to the relatively short follow-up period (i.e., perhaps 2–3 months did not give supervisors enough time to plan and

implement); or the group home may have been in a particular crisis mode (i.e., more immediate problems such as securing funding, filling staff vacancies, or client challenges delayed supervisors' plans for implementation).

Other explanations suggest challenges of implementing change efforts. The training program may have underestimated the skills needed by supervisors to implement change in their settings. More extensive support to develop the skills and gain confidence in the ability to implement change is likely needed. An improvement to the training program would be to offer more follow-up via a consultation model. For instance, programs that might be soon ready to implement a training in their own setting might attend a facilitated meeting in which supervisors have outlined specifics of a training program and seek consultation on the delivery of the training, including the opportunity to practice training delivery in a supportive setting. Several of the programs expressed an interest in attending such a meeting, however, project resources precluded the ability to offer this meeting. Project staff, however, remained available for phone consultation following the conclusion of the project.

Another barrier may relate to the nature of contracting process by which group homes operate. As contracted agencies there are limitations in their freedom to change programming and, similarly, they are required to carry out a number of specific services. Perhaps some of the efforts to institutionalize programming within a youth development model were perceived as too divergent from current practice within the parameters of the contract with the state agency. For example, specific case progress forms may be required that lack sufficient opportunity for youth input, but group home staff may be required to use such forms in the short term.

There are numerous methodological issues that arise in conducting training evaluations and few training projects attempt to conduct more than a pre/post test of knowledge or attitude. Our attempt to follow-up after the training was a methodological enhancement of most training evaluations. A clear problem in conducting follow-up was the extensive turnover in staff, one reason why our response rate was less than desirable. Extensive turnover of staff is an important reality in group home care. It is likely that many of those supervisors who left their positions remained in the field of child welfare/group home care and thus, the training may have an impact on the next setting in which they are employed. More extensive evaluation which attempts to track training participants to their next place of employment would help to answer this question. Other reasons for the low response rate may be the busy lives of group care staff and, perhaps related, a lack of enthusiasm for participation in evaluation. Many group home supervisors face numerous job-related demands, including responding to crises. They may also lack experience in conducting evaluation-related tasks or perceive participation as time-consuming, lacking in import, or somehow threatening.

Group home staff members are a particularly important audience for independent living training utilizing a positive youth development philosophy. Unlike public child welfare staff, group home workers spend much more time with youth and, therefore, have a better opportunity to influence youth. In planning the training there were discussions with DSS and group home providers about the appropriate audience for the training. In particular, there was fruitful discussion as to whether

the focus should be extensively, partly, or not at all on the more structured residential treatment centers versus community-based group homes. The argument for including the staff of the residential treatment centers was that youth in these facilities also transition from care, they have the least amount of preparation, and they may face the most abrupt transition from a highly structured setting to independent living. On the other hand, some thought that the principles of positive youth development are more appropriate for community-based settings and that having too many people from different types of settings would be a challenge to conducting the training. In the end, the decision was to focus primarily on group homes but to include some supervisors of residential treatment settings. A next phase of a project such as this might focus specifically on the application of youth development principles in more structured settings.

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