

Promoting Promotion in the Development of Prevention Science

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The history of prevention science reflects a long-standing commitment to using scholarship to improve the quality of life of children, youth, and families. Research associated with applied developmental science involves a corresponding goal. However, different conceptions of youth are found prototypically in prevention research and in applied developmental science efforts aimed at promoting positive youth development. The former approach focuses on youth as having problems to be managed. The latter sees youth as resources to be developed and seeks to integrate individual and ecological assets in the service of positive youth development. As exemplified by the articles in this special issue, many programs that are labeled as prevention in orientation nevertheless involve actions or ideas consistent with the positive youth development promotion perspective. The integration of prevention and promotion approaches facilitates the design and delivery of policies and programs that may be effective in enhancing healthy youth development in directions that advance civil society.

Imagine that you were the owner of a business and that you were interviewing a prospective teenage employee about her job qualifications. Imagine also that she was the successful “product” of a set of effective prevention programs aimed at risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use and abuse, unsafe sex, and delinquency and violence. “Okay,” you might say to this job candidate, “I see that you don’t use drugs or alcohol, you don’t have a sexually transmitted disease, you’re not pregnant or a teen mom, and you are not involved in the juvenile justice system. But tell me, what can you do? What skills or abilities do you have that will contribute to my business?” These perhaps seemingly practical questions raise an important set of issues in regard to the current status and future development of prevention science.

Maggs and Schulenberg, the editors of the special issue, define prevention science as a field aimed at preventing, or at least moderating, human afflictions. They, and the contributors to the special issue, seek to integrate this field with developmental science, an area of scholarship directed to the description and explanation of the ontogenetic change trajectories that comprise human development (Lerner, 2002b). The goal of the interrelations sought by Maggs, Schulenberg, and the authors in

this issue is to understand how to deter youth from falling off the normative course of healthy development.

The fields of prevention science and of developmental science share a common interest in changes linked to positive development. The former field emphasizes actions that eliminate factors decreasing the probability of positive development, but, as stressed later, includes as well a long-standing commitment to identifying means to enhance healthy functioning and positive development. The latter field seeks to identify the features of and the factors accounting for positive development. As such, both areas of scholarship have interests consistent with the field of applied developmental science (ADS).

ADS and the Promotion of Positive Youth Development

ADS seeks to use theory and research about human development to integratively advance understanding of, and policies and programs for, positive, healthy development among diverse individuals and the people and institutions seeking to nurture them. Not only is ADS relevant conceptually to the interests of prevention science, but, as well, it challenges this field to move beyond its traditional focus on trying to prevent undesirable behavior from emerging and presses it also to attempt to enhance the strengths of individuals and families.

ADS is associated with a dynamic, developmental systems theory of human development (Lerner, 2002b) and stresses that this system may be engaged to iden-

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tify strengths of children and adolescents, and their families and communities, that may be marshaled to enable all young people to develop their potentials for positive contributions to self and society (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). Accordingly, the model emphasized by scholars in ADS emphasizes that it is certainly not humane, or economically or politically prudent, to wait for youth problems to fully emerge and to *then* seek means to ameliorate their severity or further growth. In addition, the model emphasizes that problem prevention, although remaining important, is not sufficient to address these problems. There are at least two reasons for this view.

First, as illustrated by the imaginary job interview situation previously noted, prevention is not provision (Pittman, 1996, 2000; Pittman & Zeldin, 1994). Preventing a problem from occurring does not, in turn, provide children and adolescents with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute productively to self, family, and community. This is because, second, problem-free is not fully prepared (Pittman, 1996, 2000). A child free of problems associated with substance use, violence, crime, unsafe sex, and so forth, is not necessarily a child who has the knowledge and skills to compete successfully in the global marketplace. Educators and employers will want to know that young people are not engaging in harmful behaviors; however, they also will want to know that young people are prepared to fully participate in school and career.

Accordingly, ADS stresses the promotion of positive development, not the prevention of negative outcomes. ADS emphasizes that young people possess assets to be developed, not problems to be managed (Roth, 2000; Roth et al., 1997; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). ADS rests on the vision that to enable children and adolescents to make positive contributions to self, family, and the economic and civic components of their communities—that is, to develop the “Five Cs” of positive youth development: competence, confidence, character, caring and compassion, and connection to the institutions of civil society (Lerner, 2002a; Lerner et al., 2000)—children and adolescents must be provided with the individual strengths and social supports they will need to be prepared.

For instance, Damon (1997) described how a “youth charter” may marshal the assets for positive youth development within a community. A youth charter is a set of rules, guidelines, and plans of actions that each community can adopt to provide for their youth a framework for development in a healthy manner. Youth themselves, as well as significant adults in their community (e.g., parents, teachers, clergy members, coaches, police officers, and government and business leaders), create partnerships to pursue a common ideal of positive moral development and intellectual achievement (Damon, 1997).

Benson (1997) and his colleagues at Search Institute (e.g., Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000) identified attributes that comprise developmental assets needed by youth for their positive development. External assets include support (from family members, peers, teachers, and neighborhood institutions), empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and opportunities for the constructive use of time. Internal assets include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.

The more developmental assets possessed by an adolescent, the greater the likelihood of positive, healthy development. For example, the more assets present among youth, the lower the likelihood of alcohol use, depression, suicide risk, and violence (Leffert et al., 1998). The greater the number of developmental assets possessed by youth, the more likely they are to possess attributes of thriving—school success, leadership, valuing diversity, physical health, helping others, delay of gratification, and overcoming adversity (Scales et al., 2000).

Integrating Promotion and Prevention

Prior historical eras have seen policymakers and professional practitioners serving youth emphasize interventions that focused on either an ameliorative (problem reduction) approach or, as discussed in this special issue, a preventive (problem avoidance) approach to the challenges of youth. Both of these approaches often involve a deficit view of young people, one that sees youth as (almost inevitably) having weaknesses that need to be diminished or avoided—that is, as possessing problems to be managed.

In turn, I have noted that ADS, in stressing that youth are resources to be developed (Roth, 2000; Roth et al., 1997, 1998), emphasizes that preventing disease or behavioral problems does not constitute the provision of health or the actualization of positive development. Preventing the actualization of youth risk behaviors, and the diminution of the quality of life such behaviors entail for society when large proportions of cohorts of youth engage in them, is not the same as taking actions to promote positive youth development. Indeed, purely prevention-oriented programs or policies, especially when predicated on a deficit view of youth, do not prepare young people to contribute to civil society—that is, to enact behaviors that will enhance self, family, and community in the service of social justice, equity, and democracy (Lerner et al., 2000).

However, many programs that are labeled as prevention in orientation nevertheless involve actions or ideas consistent with the positive youth development promotion perspective (Roth, 2000; Roth et al., 1997, 1998). In many ways, the articles in this special issue

reflect such an integration. For instance, Vitaro, Brendgen, and Tremblay (this issue) report that, whereas there was no direct effect of a delinquency prevention program on the growth of delinquency, positive program effects (a decrease in disruptiveness) were mediated by the presence of what Benson (1997; Benson et al., 1998) specified as key ecological assets for positive youth development: parental supervision and social relationships with positively behaving peers. In fact, Vitaro et al. recommended that if one wants to develop a successful program with delinquent youth, one must avoid labeling them as problem children and capitalize on the positive influence of positive peers. These ideas reflect an emphasis on viewing youth as resources (Roth, 2000) and on applying interpersonal assets for healthy development (Benson, 1997).

Similarly, in the face of the iatrogenic effects found in relation to their prevention program with high-risk youth, Poulin, Dishion, and Burraston (this issue) call for the application of what are developmental assets, ones again involving healthy and supporting interpersonal relationships. Stressing that the key principle involved in such interventions is the use of caregiving adults, Poulin et al. conclude that effective actions involve the enactment of caregiver guidance, support, and structure.

Moreover, one may view the programs described by Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, and Abbott (this issue), and by Schulenberg and Maggs (this issue), as much instances of the application or inculcation of developmental assets as they are purely efforts at prevention. The Hawkins et al. program appears to involve several of the types of internal and external assets identified by Search Institute (e.g., support, commitment to learning, and social competencies), and the intervention described by Schulenberg and Maggs appears to make great use of assets linked to social competencies.

In sum, then, and as illustrated by the articles in this special issue, the goals of efforts aimed at prevention and those directed to the promotion of positive youth development need not be, and often are not, discontinuous—especially when embedded in effective community-based programs (Jensen, Hoagwood, & Trickett, 1999; Lerner, 2002b; Roth et al., 1997, 1998). The key to successful integration may be a commitment to viewing *all* young people—no matter their background—as possessing individual strengths and ecological assets and to capitalizing on these resources to enhance their life chances.

Conclusions

Prevention science and prevention scientists have a great deal to offer to colleagues interested in the appli-

cation of developmental science in the service of promoting positive youth development. As exemplified by the articles in this special issue, prevention scholars taking a developmental orientation to their work offer theoretically nuanced and empirically rich depictions of the person–context dynamics of developmental trajectories across life. In addition, they provide a set of methodologically sophisticated procedures for describing and testing explanations of developmental change. Most important, the articles in this special issue illustrate that, when developmentally-oriented prevention science is coupled with ideas and actions linked to the ADS emphasis on the promotion of positive youth development, the lives of young people may be altered for the better.

Prevention and promotion approaches that are integrated in this manner offer, then, a vision for the design and delivery of policies and programs that may be effective in enhancing the probability that youth develop in individually healthy and interpersonally positive directions, and that they act to keep society moving forward effectively into the future. If the developmental system is attuned to promoting the assets of communities and individuals in an integrated manner, healthy and successful people will emerge from the periods of childhood and adolescence willing and able to sustain and advance social justice, democracy, and thus civil society.

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