

FAMILIES IN SOCIETY

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CONTENTS

Featured Topic:
AT-RISK YOUTH

New
CE Courses

Webinars and
Teleconferences

Networking and
Conferences

Call for
FIS Reviewers

Applying a Positive Youth Development Approach With At-Risk Youth

Interest has grown in the positive youth development (PYD) approach and its application to youth in a variety of settings. When using the PYD approach, workers focus on youth assets rather than deficits, collaborate with youth in planning the youth's future, build youth competencies rather than doing tasks for the youth, adopt a holistic perspective of healthy personal growth, and engage in long-range planning rather than short-term solutions.

There are a number of problem-oriented youth behaviors that can be approached from a PYD perspective, among them: substance abuse, engaging in unsafe sex, remaining in abusive relationships, compulsively overeating or gambling, and acting out aggressively. We recommend that workers (a) routinely assess for and respond without moral judgment to these behaviors, even if the youth has not identified them as problems; (b) help youth understand the criteria that they could use to decide whether they need to change, and the urgency of the need for change; (c) raise awareness of the possible effects on the transition from adolescence to adulthood; (d) explain the role of risk factors as a hidden

dimension affecting progress toward independence; (e) explore times when the youth was symptom-free regarding this behavior and identify coping methods the youth used to achieve this; and (f) help youth identify their stage of readiness for change. The following techniques may be helpful:

Normalize: Point out that initial involvement is often motivated by an innocent need. For example, abusive relationships may be motivated by the need to be loved; anorexia or bulimia may be motivated by the need to have control over something in one's life or the need to change one's appearance; and lack of caution around sexual behavior may be motivated by the need to feel free of constraints.

Emphasize the effect on independence: Help youth consider ways the behavior may interfere with stability in housing, work, and relationships (although the behavior is likely to also have temporary benefits that the youth needs to consider and discuss).

Identify and minimize risk factors: Are there steps that can be taken now to avoid or minimize at least the current risk factors?

Identify and understand symptom-free periods: What methods were helpful—asking for help, avoiding peers engaged in the behavior, and/or staying on medications? Could those constructive coping methods be used again if the youth decided to make a change? Did the youth make other gains during those periods (e.g., family relationships, school, work, housing)? Reinforce the idea that the youth is able to take some kind of positive action, even if he or she still struggles with the problem behavior.

Help youth identify their readiness for change: Place responsibility on the youth to decide whether he or she wants to make changes, and if so, what kind of change and with what kind of help. Assist youth who are not ready to change in seeing this reality, rather than engaging in pseudo-change that enlists community and organizational resources without using them.

(Excerpted from "Using a Positive Youth Development Approach in Addressing Problem-Oriented Youth Behavior", by Maryann Amodeo & Mary Elizabeth Collins. Families in Society © 2007)



To read the full article and other articles by Amodeo, log in to: www.familiesinsociety.org.

Featured Topic: At-Risk Youth

Further Reading

Independence or Interdependence: Rethinking the Transition From “Ward of the Court” to Adulthood (2003)

Adolescent Self-Care: Reviewing the Risks (2001)

Refining the Evaluation of Treatment Foster Care (2002)

Minimizing the Need for Physical Restraint and Seclusion in Residential Youth Care Through Skill-Based Treatment Programming (2003)

Foster Children at Risk for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (1996)

Girls Fighting Trouble: Re-Storying Young Lives (2002)

The Power of Group Work With Kids: A Practitioner’s Reflection on Strengths-Based Practice (2001)

Children Who Have Witnessed Community Homicide: Incorporating Risk and Resilience in Clinical Work (2000)

Caring Relationships as a Protective Factor for At-Risk Youth: An Ethnographic Study (2003)



Policy Focus

The Prevention of Mental Disorders in Children and Adolescents: Future Research and Public Policy Recommendations (2003)

The following literature review examines the research on the prevention of mental illness in children and adolescents; relevant theories also are surveyed. The results point to directions for future research and present public policy. A risk-reduction model in preventative research, whereby risk factors are identified and matched to empirically tested interventions, is most promising. If risk factors can be decreased or in some way altered while protective factors are enhanced, the likelihood of at-risk children eventually developing a mental disorder would decrease.

Runaway Youth System Dynamics: A Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Runaway and Homeless Youth Policy (CE Course # 100747) (2004)

The author develops a dynamic model, applying it to runaway and homeless youth behavior and shelter usage. Together, the model and supporting evidence imply that simple linear thinking may guide policy expansion to the detriment of homeless youth. Shelters provide incentives for other service systems to neglect difficult cases, which raises serious questions about the efficacy of the shelter system. This new framework provides common ground upon which practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and research communities can consider the impact and effectiveness of policy and service.

Strengths-Based Case Management: Implementation With High-Risk Youth (2007)

There is an increasing need to identify effective methods of intervention for youths at risk for negative life outcomes. Strengths-based case management (SBCM), effective for both adults with chronic mental illness and adults with substance abuse problems, can also be a successful treatment for at-risk youths such as adolescent runaways.

Practice Focus

Peer Victimization: The Case for Social Work Intervention (CE Course #100656)(2003)

Children involved in peer victimization or bullying are at greater risk of having adjustment problems that may persist into adulthood. A comprehensive framework is needed to address the factors influencing bullying and the interactions among them. Social workers are uniquely situated to help children, youth, and their families affected by bullying and to address peer victimization at all levels of intervention.

Cognitive Problem Solving and Aggressive Behavior Among Children (1996)

Looking at the way aggressive children think about social opportunities and solve social problems, this article distills implications for refining family preservation services with antisocial, aggressive children and their families. Special emphasis is focused on the role that cognitive problem solving plays in the social development of delinquent youth.

Injection Drug Use Among Youths: Scope of the Problem and Recommendations (CE Course # 101028) (2007)

Although social workers possess increasingly greater knowledge and skills in dealing with tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use among adolescents and young adults, they often have limited knowledge of injection drugs such as heroin and cocaine. Implications for practice are discussed, including early intervention, involvement of family and social networks, street outreach strategies, and the need for services along a continuum of care.

Social Work Practice With Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescents (2004)

Identity development, including disclosure and the emergence of sexuality are discussed, along with family and school issues. Particular emphasis is given to a number of risk factors that GLBT youth encounter: emotional distress, isolation, internalized homophobia/transphobia, depression, substance abuse, suicide, violence/victimization, family conflict, school performance, and sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

Essentials for Social Work With Adolescents

I feel that it is my duty to advise you that although we live in the era of evidence-based models, there are no perfect solutions. By all means get to know what works and learn all you can about best practices. Use the scientifically sanctioned and well-marketed models of practice and their manuals and curricula to guide you, but never to drive you. Think curriculum-guided, not curriculum-driven. Never factor out who you are, who the young person sitting before you is, and what the situational surround says about the moment in time. Learn from the models and learn from yourself and learn from the inside out as well as the outside in so that you can be free to innovate, improvise, and be co-creators with the teenagers with whom you work. Don't forget that we must never treat kids as objects to be fixed. They demand to be taken as whole people. It is our duty to do so.

Some additional essentials in working with adolescents:

Remember that context counts: Tuning in to how things are framed, who does the framing, and what the framing means is an important assessment tool for social workers working with teenagers. It is as important as making a sound DSM diagnosis or doing an inventory of kids' strengths and assets. The more clearly we see the frame—understand the context—the more likely we are to uncover the so-called truths that are imposed on us.

Check your ego outside the door: To work with teenagers, you need to be light and fluid and flexible and grounded all at once in order to effectively adjust to adolescents'

changing tides of equilibrium and disequilibrium and the shifting sands of conflict, playfulness, calm, constructive activity, fighting, tension regulation, attending to task, and affectionate feelings.

Form partnerships with parents and significant people in teens' lives: You don't always have to know everything and be the central helping person. And, if you don't have to know everything, you can ask questions and afford to be uncertain and ignorant, so long as you're willing to trust others and have faith in what they might have to offer. Not having to control everything allows you to share power. That is what true empowerment is all about.

Help teenagers to make waves: Maintaining a dual focus by tuning in not only to the near things of individual need but also to the far things of social change, or what I like to call the importance of helping teenagers to make waves. Our young people need to see the potential of changing not only themselves but also their surroundings, so that they may become active participants in community affairs, so that they might make a difference, might change the world one day where we have failed to. It is essential that we help teenagers to make these waves.

(Excerpted from "Assuming a Stance of Uncertainty: Essentials for Social Work With Adolescents", by Andrew Malekoff. Families in Society © 2005)



Further Reading

Reciprocal Relationships Between Antisocial Behavior and Parenting: Implications for Delinquency Intervention (1999)

The Home Environment and Delinquency: A Study of African American Adolescents (1999)

High-Risk Children and Adolescents: Family and Community Environments (1993)

School-Based Family Support: Evidence From an Exploratory Field Study (2003)

Early Intervention Strategies with Borderline Clients (1996)

Treatment of Adolescents: A Comparison of Individual and Family Therapy (1989)

Cognitive Appraisal in Three Forms of Adolescent Maladjustment (1987)

Addressing Risk Behaviors, Service Needs, and Mental Health Issues in Programs for Young Fathers (2005)

Assessing Adolescent Parents and Their Infants: Individualized Family Service Planning (1991)



How do you use FAMILIES IN SOCIETY?

Staff Training and Professional Learning

"Because the articles on ethics were so comprehensive, they were perfect to utilize in our training sessions for over 200 social workers."

Caroline Carman, MSW, LISW

South Carolina Dept. of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC)

"The strengths-based assessment articles proved invaluable during training sessions for our mental health staff."

Dr. Angela Shields

Dept. of Mental Health

Los Angeles County, CA



"Your articles are a great resource for both presenters and attendees in our workshop 'Legal and Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work.'"

Tricia McCarthy

National Assoc. of Social Workers (NASW) Michigan Chapter



Program Development and Evaluation

"After reading the article on best practices for siblings and out-of-home placement, I was impressed and astounded on how real the information was and have made recommendations for all of my adoption supervisors to study it. The assessment tool found in the article has been an integral resource in our decision-making process for placing siblings together."

Mary Mitchell, LSW, MS.Ed

Cuyahoga County Dept. of Children and Family Services

"The article on foster parent decision-making has been very helpful in providing information and statistics on the effectiveness of recruitment and retention of foster parents."

Melissa Cole

Foster Family-Based Treatment Association

"The article on Diné (Navajo) natural helping and resilience is an excellent resource for our early childhood care and development initiative."

Jaime Apolonio

First Nations Partnership Programs

"FIS provides some of the best material available to include in our resource books for the United States Air Force (USAF) in its efforts to improve the handling of sexual assault cases on Air Force installations around the world."

Lynn Hecht Schafran, Esq.

National Judicial Education Program (NJEP), Legal Momentum

How do you use FIS? Send us your examples and ideas!

Agency Resources

Webinars and Teleconferences

Families in Society and its publisher, the Alliance for Children and Families, present the 'Hot Topic' Webinar and teleconference series. Interactive presentations with nationally-recognized experts focus on topics relating to practice, education, and policy within social services.

Learn more about the significant trends and techniques found in the pages of *Families in Society*. You and your staff can take advantage of one-on-one discussions with Webinar presenters who share their research and theory develop-



ments, guidelines for clinical services, implications for practice, and recommendations on the delivery and management of those services. Previous Webinars include ethics and risk-management, unplanned termination by adolescents in mental health services, women and substance abuse, and resiliency theory in practice.

Many Webinars offer additional registration options for earning online continuing education credit. Webinar presentations are also available on CD-ROM to add to your agency's educational library and staff development resources.

For more information, contact FIS staff: info@familiesinsociety.org.

Upcoming Conferences

Families in Society will be recognized at the meeting of the International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO) for the joint IFCO/*FIS* special issue "Family Foster Care: Voices From Around the World." This special collection of articles, edited by IFCO advocate Rosemarie Carbino, highlights family foster care programs from various countries and includes new articles by child welfare administrators and practitioners, foster parent associations, educators, and researchers.

Learn more about this collection, visit:

www.familiesinsociety.org/new/specialissue/fostercare/index.htm.

Call for Reviewers

Families in Society is currently adding individuals to our consulting editors forum who serve as reviewers of submitted manuscripts. If you would like to review manuscripts on behalf of Families in Society, please visit www.familiesinsociety.org/reviewing.asp.

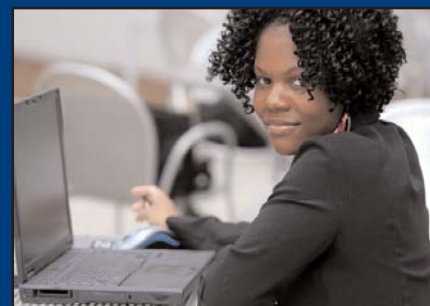
NOTE: We are in need of referees with specific expertise in issues relating to social work interventions with individuals and families identified as the working poor. In particular, we are looking for those in practice and policy with a background in agency settings and/or clinical services. Please e-mail FIS staff at info@familiesinsociety.org for more information.

CE4Alliance

At a time when budgets are tight and dwindling, you may find your options for staff training and development becoming more limited. The Alliance for Children and Families recognizes this dilemma and continually works to provide quality and cost-effective resources.

As part of that effort, the Alliance's continuing education program, **CE4Alliance**, can help you and your staff keep up-to-date, learn from the innovators, and earn credits. Use this CE program with the *Families in Society* research and practice archive (www.familiesinsociety.org) and your agency will have powerful tools to compliment staff development and quality improvement (QI) efforts. The flexibility and affordability are additional advantages to a program that provides competent, consistent, and interdisciplinary learning.

Don't miss out on new program features, added courses, and surveys, add your agency's staff training or QI coordinator to our mailing list. To sign up, send an email to info@familiesinsociety.org.



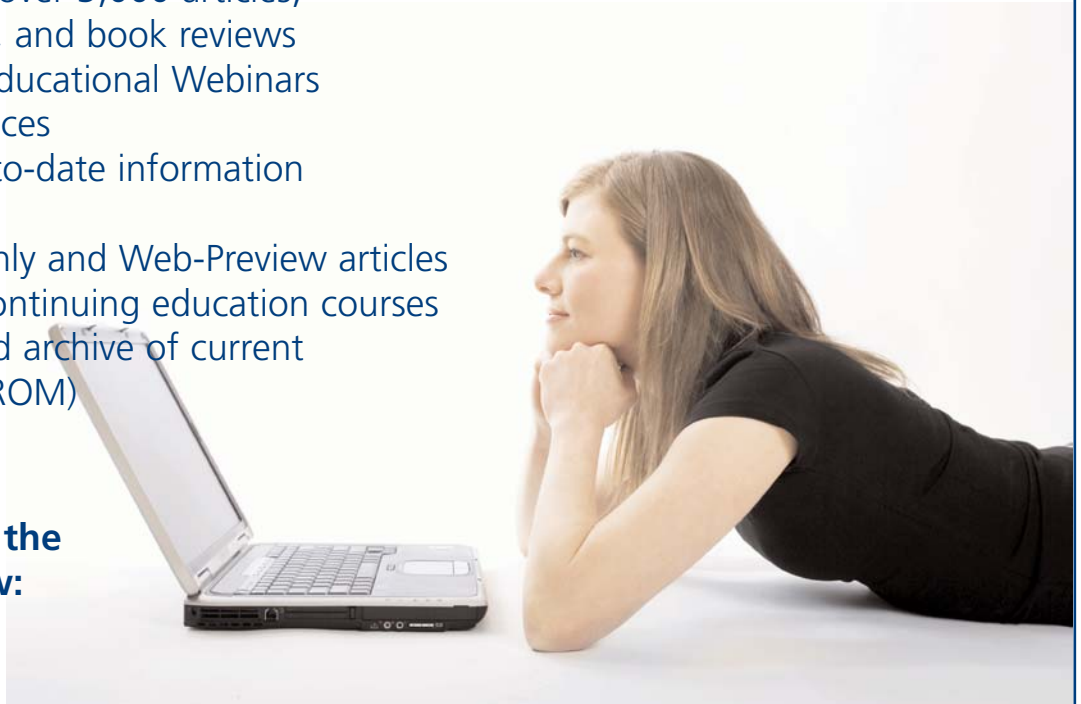
For more information on agency resources, visit www.alliance1.org.

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