

# What Do You Mean by “Youth Development”?

The California Center accepts the following definition of youth development:  
*“...the ongoing growth process in which youth are engaged in attempting to (1) meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful...and (2) to build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives.”<sup>1</sup>*

This understanding of youth has become the foundation for a shift in public policies – a shift away from problem-centered approaches toward “youth development” approaches.

## Problem-Centered Approaches

For many years, policymakers have tried to solve youths’ problems in isolation – with separate programs for teen pregnancy, violence prevention, substance abuse, etc. (This approach is also called “*categorical*” or “*deficit-based*.”) While some programs with this orientation have proven successful, the approach fails to account for the fact that many problems are interrelated. Money is often wasted because services overlap or complementary programs fail to coordinate with one another. In addition, the problem-centered approach reinforces negative stereotypes of youth by unfairly casting young people as problems to deal with—as opposed to valuable resources to develop.

## Youth Development Approaches

By contrast, true youth development focuses on young people’s positive aspects and sets high (rather than low) expectations for them. Proponents of youth development look for meaningful ways to engage youth in the development of a specific array of skills, knowledge and attitudes – which they call “*competencies*.” Proponents also mobilize entire communities to provide the “*assets*” youth need to be successful. They seek to develop young people into well-rounded individuals with the “*resiliency*” to succeed, even under challenging circumstances. Some of the “*assets*” that enable youth to thrive include: belief by adults that youth are resources to develop not problems to solve; connection to community; supportive families; relationships with caring adults; personal safety; access to positive youth programs; and ability for planning and decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

For more information on youth development, visit the Search Institute at [www.searchinsitute.org](http://www.searchinsitute.org).

<sup>1</sup> Karen Pittman, 1993. *Forum for Youth Investment*.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased and culled down from the full 40-asset list compiled by the Search Institute, *Healthy Communities, Health Youth Tool Kit*.