Building Strengths in Youth

A Logic Model for Positive Peer Culture

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Amidst growing calls to base practice in research, some organizations simply append evidence-based methods to existing programs. A logic model provides a more systematic approach to document program goals, interventions, and outcomes. This article presents a logic model for Positive Peer Culture (PPC), linked to research and practice literature. The youth development goals of PPC are grounded in the Circle of Courage principles of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. Positive Peer Culture is listed as a research-based practice by the California Evidence-Based Clearing House (CEBC, 2021) which offers this summary description: "PPC is a peer-helping model designed to improve social competence and cultivate strengths in youth. Care and concern for others is the defining element of PPC …. These norms not only extinguish antisocial conduct, but more importantly reinforce pro-social attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors."

Roots of Youth Empowerment

Early twentieth century reformers sought to replace punitive systems with democratic models of education and youth work (Kreisle, 2010). A prominent example was Homer Lane who founded two residential schools for delinquents as simulated democracies: *Ford Youth Republic* in Detroit and *Little Commonwealth* in England (Bazeley, 1928). Youth elected their leaders, passed laws, tried violators in youth courts, and punished rule-breakers. In 1928, Clara Liepmann published a law-school dissertation on *self-governance* programs for young offenders in Europe and the United States. She found that, after initial enthusiasm, most settings became punitive or chaotic. When charismatic leaders left, youth self-governance failed.

David Wills of England had been intrigued by self-governance but recognized that simply transferring power to youth was a recipe for excess. Working with the Society of Friends, Wills established therapeutic communities for young offenders in England and Scotland (1941, 1945). He replaced the notion of *self-governance* with *shared responsibility* as adults and youth worked together in mutual respect. Positive Peer Culture (PPC) operates with that philosophy of youth empowerment.

Positive Peer Culture has direct roots in two progressive traditions of youth work in the mid-twentieth century:

Reclaiming Youth. August Aichhorn of Austria pioneered schools and residential programs that replaced punishment with relationships as described in his 1935 book *Wayward Youth.* Aichhorn mentored Fritz Redl who came to the United States and founded the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp to train professionals in therapeutic group methods for troubled children (Redl & Wineman, 1957).

Guided Group Interaction. Known as GGI, this was a peer helping program at Highfields, a mansion in New Jersey donated by transatlantic aviator Charles Lindbergh for use as a children's home after the kidnapping and murder of his young son. Two publications on Highfields sparked widespread interest in using peer groups as agents of change with troubled youth (McCorkle, Elias, & Bixby, 1958; Weeks, 1958).
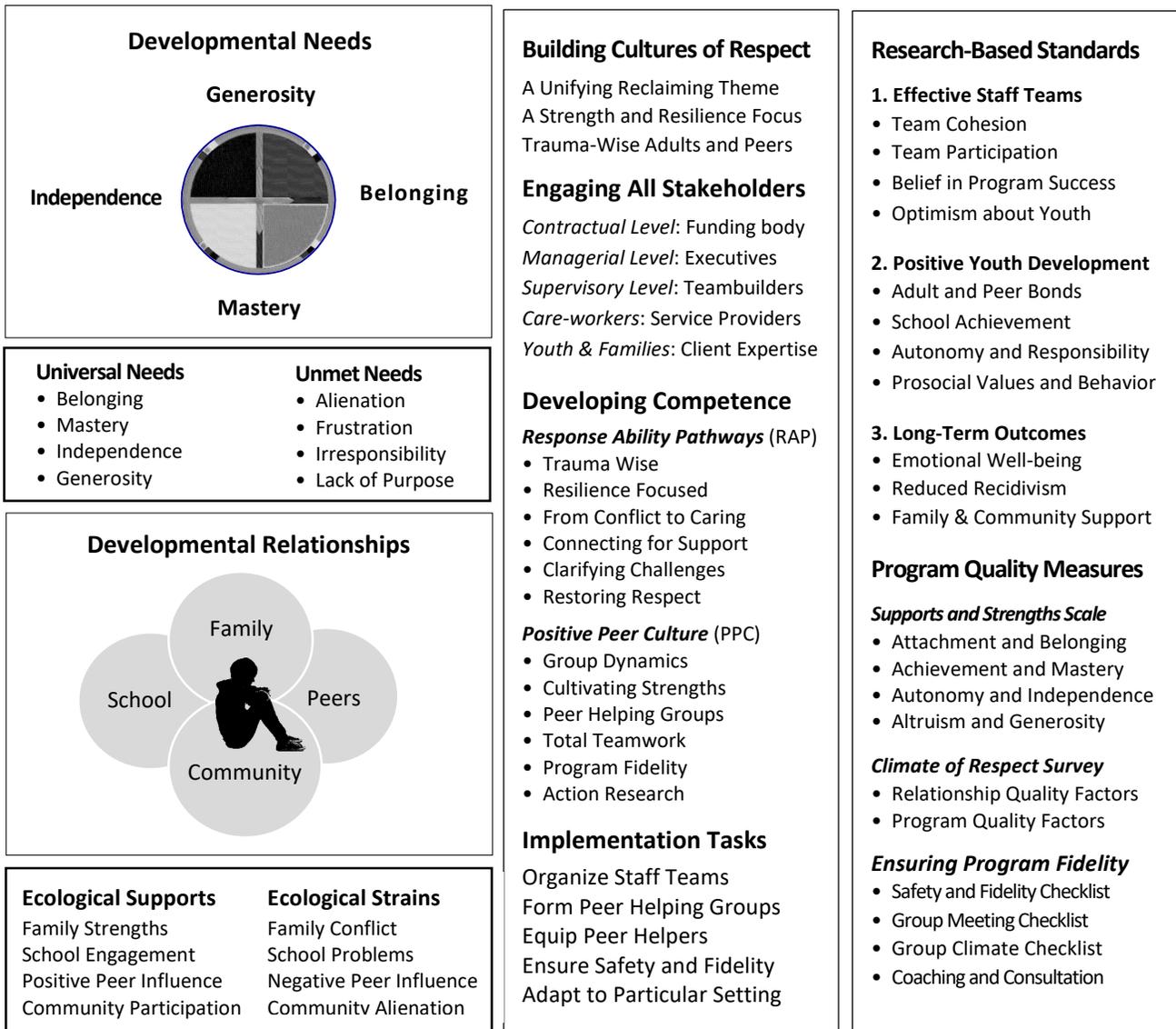
Harry Vorrath was trained at Highfields and established Positive Peer Culture (PPC) in various group settings for delinquent youth. Larry Brendtro was on the faculty of the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp and brought reclaiming youth methods to Starr Commonwealth in Albion, Michigan. Vorrath was invited to move to Starr where he and Brendtro co-authored the first edition of *Positive Peer Culture* in 1974.

Starr Commonwealth became a laboratory for research on strength-based approaches with publications on resilience and peer-helping (Brendtro & Ness, 1983; Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1996; Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985; Wasmund & Tate, 1996). Starr hosted the 1990 International Association of Workers for Troubled Children conference in New York City, introducing the book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* which described the Circle of Courage model (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). The Circle of Courage draws from Indigenous values for raising children in cultures of respect that meet universal needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. This traditional wisdom is validated by a consilience of research on neuroscience, resilience, and youth development (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015).

Many peer group programs fail because they are not grounded in a strong evidence base about the essential components of effective interventions (Gottfredson, 1987). The following discussion describes the research foundations behind the PPC Logic Model as displayed below.

Positive Peer Culture Logic Model

Identifying Goals for Growth ➡ Implementing PPC ➡ Tracking Outcomes

Developmental Needs

Generosity

Independence   Belonging

Mastery

Universal Needs
- Belonging
- Mastery
- Independence
- Generosity

Unmet Needs
- Alienation
- Frustration
- Irresponsibility
- Lack of Purpose

Developmental Relationships

Family

School   Peers

Community

Ecological Supports
Family Strengths
School Engagement
Positive Peer Influence
Community Participation

Ecological Strains
Family Conflict
School Problems
Negative Peer Influence
Community Alienation

Building Cultures of Respect

A Unifying Reclaiming Theme
A Strength and Resilience Focus
Trauma-Wise Adults and Peers

Engaging All Stakeholders

Contractual Level: Funding body
Managerial Level: Executives
Supervisory Level: Teambuilders
Care-workers: Service Providers
Youth & Families: Client Expertise

Developing Competence

Response Ability Pathways (RAP)
- Trauma Wise
- Resilience Focused
- From Conflict to Caring
- Connecting for Support
- Clarifying Challenges
- Restoring Respect

Positive Peer Culture (PPC)
- Group Dynamics
- Cultivating Strengths
- Peer Helping Groups
- Total Teamwork
- Program Fidelity
- Action Research

Implementation Tasks

Organize Staff Teams
Form Peer Helping Groups
Equip Peer Helpers
Ensure Safety and Fidelity
Adapt to Particular Setting

Research-Based Standards

1. Effective Staff Teams
- Team Cohesion
- Team Participation
- Belief in Program Success
- Optimism about Youth

2. Positive Youth Development
- Adult and Peer Bonds
- School Achievement
- Autonomy and Responsibility
- Prosocial Values and Behavior

3. Long-Term Outcomes
- Emotional Well-being
- Reduced Recidivism
- Family & Community Support

Program Quality Measures

Supports and Strengths Scale
- Attachment and Belonging
- Achievement and Mastery
- Autonomy and Independence
- Altruism and Generosity

Climate of Respect Survey
- Relationship Quality Factors
- Program Quality Factors

Ensuring Program Fidelity
- Safety and Fidelity Checklist
- Group Meeting Checklist
- Group Climate Checklist
- Coaching and Consultation

Identifying Goals for Growth

Developmental Needs

Abraham Maslow (1959) described most problem behavior as the result of unmet needs; effective prevention and treatment is designed to address these needs. This is a key principle in the science of resilience and positive youth development (Werner, 2012; Masten, 2014).

Decades of research document four brain-based developmental needs—namely Attachment, Achievement, Autonomy, and Altruism (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015). Major theories of childhood socialization use various synonyms to describe these biosocial needs (Jackson, 2014). In Circle of Courage terms, these are needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2019). When needs are met, children learn, grow, and thrive.

When needs are unmet, a host of problems ensue (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015). Disruption of belonging is marked by mistrust and conflict. Without mastery, children experience academic or social difficulty. Deprived of independence, youth cannot develop self-control and self-confidence. And, without generosity, humans become self-centered and lack respect for self and others.

Developmental Relationships

Junlei Li and Megan Julian (2012) reviewed research showing that *developmental relationships* are the *active ingredient* in all successful interventions with children and youth at risk. They cite Bronfenbrenner's (1979) four-part definition that matches Circle of Courage needs as shown in parentheses below:

- A close emotional bond　　　　(Belonging)
- Increasingly complex tasks　　　(Mastery)
- Shifting power to the learner　　(Independence)
- Reciprocity of relationships　　　(Generosity)

While thousands of factors may have some impact on outcomes, unless developmental needs are met, interventions lack impact. Bronfenbrenner (1986) defines the world of childhood as including family, school, peers, and community. In a healthy environment, these relationships provide *supports* to meet developmental needs. But alienation in the ecology creates *strains* and needs go unmet.

Implementing PPC

Building Cultures of Respect

Meeting needs of children is the central concern in Indigenous *cultures of respect*, but such shared values are neglected in a world where self-serving individualism erodes the spirit of community (Bolin, 2010). Israeli researchers describe "reclaiming" programs as meeting the needs of both the young person and society; this requires a unifying theme where all participants share mutual values of respect (Wolins & Wozner, 1982, p. 155). Positive Peer Culture builds strength in all young persons, particularly those experiencing problems. Rejecting a deficit mindset, interventions are both *trauma-informed* and *resilience-focused* (Bath, 2015; Soma & Allen, 2020). Young persons who have experienced trauma are in a world of pain and show "pain-based behavior" (Anglin, 2014). Further, much trauma among youth results from mistreatment by peers, e.g. bullying, harassment, and rejection. A unique element in PPC is that young people are trained in the same

"trauma-wise" strategies as adults. Instead of fueling further trauma, youth learn to respond to needs rather than react to problem behavior (Brendtro, 2020; Brendtro & Kreisle, 2021).

Engaging all Stakeholders
Effective interventions with youth at risk focus on meeting the needs of those being served (Beker & Feuerstein, 1991; Van Bockern, 2018). Yet many prevailing approaches seek to manage disruptive behavior rather than build restorative relationships (Gharabaghi, 2019). Suppressing symptoms of pain-based behavior by administering consequences or psychoactive chemicals is a path to failure (Brendtro, 2019; Foltz, 2012). Positive Peer Culture builds a framework of shared values in *the best interests of the child* (Anglin, 2002. The focus on needs of the young person pervades all levels of the organization: funders, managers, supervisors, care-workers, young people, and families. Implementing PPC begins by developing congruence among these stakeholders who embrace shared values and principles (Clarke, 2011).

Funders. Those who control funding need a general understanding of the program if they are to align policy and resources to needs. Policy leaders may be aware that some group programs degrade into "peer deviancy training. Positive Peer Culture is specifically designed to counter such negative peer influence (Osgood & Bridell, 2006). PPC is a paradigm shift from authoritarian to restorative methods that challenges the reward and punishment mindset. Yet one can explain that PPC is not permissive since adults in authority hold youth accountable, expecting responsibility instead of obedience. Emotional and behavior problems are seen as pain-based behaviors and punishment only delivers more pain. The focus on Circle of Courage needs is readily understood by all stakeholders since Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity are universal values.

Managers. Executives need in-depth knowledge including the evidence-base behind the program to provide the leadership and resources for programs to succeed. They also set the tone for relationships that permeate the organization. There should be congruence between management style and treatment orientation (Babcock & Sorensen, 1979). While authoritarian leadership may fit a behavior modification program, a participative leadership style model is best matched to this youth empowerment model (Garner, 2002). Staff who work in authoritarian structures are ill-prepared to empower youth. Thus, the mission of a peer helping program is best matched to servant leadership (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018; Tate, 2003). Servant leaders are committed to meeting the needs of all in their realm of influence. An organizational culture meeting the needs of staff cascades down to impact interactions with youth.

Supervisors. Effective supervisors have a thorough understanding of various staff roles essential for building and sustaining quality programs. As the bridge between management and those delivering services, they provide *in situ* staff development and guidance which requires both theoretical and practical expertise on the treatment model. Since effective staff teams are essential to positive peer groups, supervisors implement a model of Total Teamwork which invests shared responsibility in all who work with each self-contained group of students (Garner, 2002; Seger & Koehler, 2011). Supervisors adjust their leadership style to the developing maturity of staff, providing more initial supervision with new staff and delegating greater responsibility with growing competence. Research shows a strong causal link between the effectiveness of staff teams and developing positive youth cultures (Gold & Osgood, 1992).

Care-workers. All who serve youth receive universal training with strategies for meeting growth goals:
Connecting in Crisis: Methods of Positive Relational Support replace coercive discipline.
Natural Problem Solving: Challenging life events become opportunities for learning and growth.
Shared Responsibility: Youth become partners with adults and peers in building positive futures.
Peer Helping Strategies: Youth show concern for peers which then extends to family and community.

Teamwork Principles: Staff participate in interdisciplinary teams sharing responsibility for a peer group.
Supporting Families: Staff view parents as partners, and youth strengthen bonds with their families.
From Trauma to Resilience: Staff and students provide a safe environment with supportive relationships.

Youth and Families. For millennia, children were reared in *cultures of respect* (Bolin, 2006). As cultural psychologist Barbara Rogoff (2014) observes, most cultural knowledge is not acquired by formal instruction. Rather, children learn primarily through natural relationships as they observe more competent adults and peers, and then "pitch in" and participate in the community. In a similar manner, staff in Positive Peer Culture are authoritative elders who model values and practices in a culture of respect. Youth develop and strengthen these same capacities. They seek support from trusted persons in time of crisis. They participate in problem-solving and learn how their behavior affects self and others. They take responsibility for their actions and make good decisions. And in regular peer group meetings, they help one another and extend this caring behavior to their relationships in family and community.

Developing Competence
All who deal directly with youth and families need specific training to put these principles into practice. Two certification courses are available to those who work directly with youth or supervise staff. These involve interactive, experiential learning with a manual, course guidebook, engaging visuals, and videos. Principles in this training are reinforced through supervision, team meetings, peer support, and ongoing consultation. These courses equip staff (and youth) with the skills to develop a caring climate and Positive Peer Culture.

Response Ability Pathways (RAP): Restoring Bonds of Respect
RAP provides essential skills for all who work with youth in family, school, and community (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005; 2023). Young people need supportive persons who respond to their needs, not react to their problems. RAP builds *response abilities* for adult and peer mentors who then guide youth on *pathways to responsibility*.
  • RAP puts the Circle of Courage into practice to meet growth needs of all young persons.
  • RAP taps research evidence on resilience, brain science, and positive youth development.
  • RAP builds responsibility and engages youth in a curriculum of caring (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
RAP uses natural helping skills to *connect* with persons in need, *clarify* problems, and *restore* respect. As adults master and apply these skills, they model the helping relationships youth will have with one another. The resilient brain uses challenges as learning opportunities in a process called *CLEAR Problem Solving*:
   Challenge: What difficulties are you facing? ("I am failing in school.")
   Logic: What do you say to yourself about this? ("I must be stupid.")
   Emotion: What feelings are you having? ("I got angry at the teacher.")
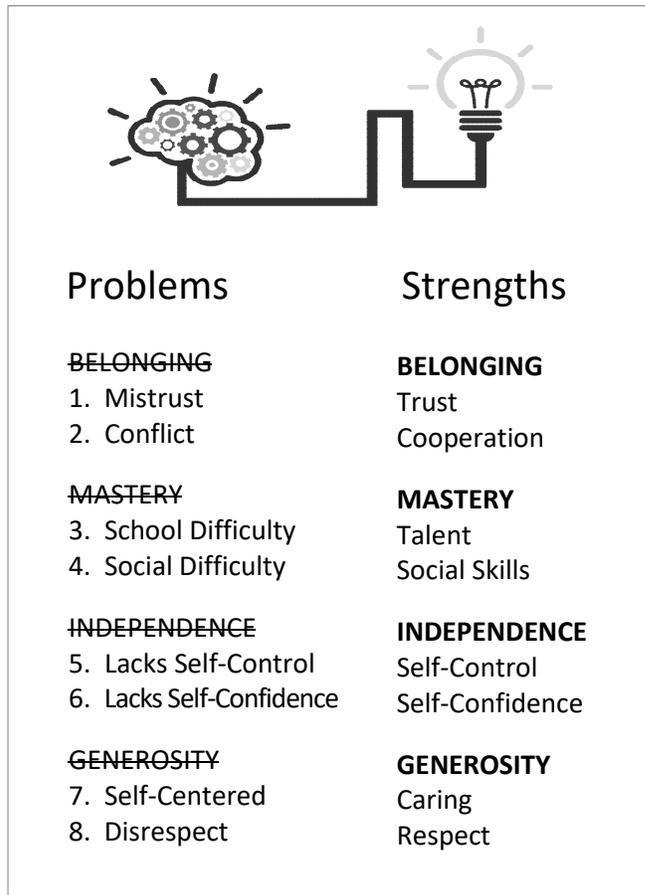   **A**ction: How did you deal with this problem? ("I swore at the teacher.")
   Response: What was the result? ("I got kicked out of class.")
By reflecting on these experiences, young people learn how their behavior affects self and others and develop new coping strategies. Skills developed in RAP apply to all work with youth and form the foundation of peer-helping groups in PPC programs. For research on the implementation of RAP interventions in different settings, see: Espiner & Guild, 2010; Forthun & McCombie, 2007; Shields et al., 2008; Shields et al., 2012.

Positive Peer Culture (PPC): Building Strengths in Youth
The PPC model draws on decades of research and practice in building positive climates in settings serving challenging children and youth (Brendtro & Ness, 1983; Brendtro & Kreisle, 2021; Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985). PPC reverses negative peer influence by engaging youth in prosocial peer-helping groups (Osgood & Bridell, 2006). Youth learn to build trust, solve problems, and develop talents, and these helping skills are extended to

other relationships in the young person's life and through service-learning activities. Positive Peer Culture is designed to create living and learning environments that meet Circle of Courage developmental needs. As seen here, a specific vocabulary of common problems turns problem-solving into building strength and resilience:

Problems

BELONGING
1. Mistrust
2. Conflict

MASTERY
3. School Difficulty
4. Social Difficulty

INDEPENDENCE
5. Lacks Self-Control
6. Lacks Self-Confidence

GENEROSITY
7. Self-Centered
8. Disrespect

Strengths

BELONGING
Trust
Cooperation

MASTERY
Talent
Social Skills

INDEPENDENCE
Self-Control
Self-Confidence

GENEROSITY
Caring
Respect

Implementation Tasks

The failure of evidence-based interventions often results from inadequate attention to implementation of the program model (Elliott et al., 2020). These are key tasks in organizing effective peer-helping programs.

• *Organizing staff teams* so all dealing with youth participate in the teamwork process. Teams develop plans for progress of youth, monitor group climate, evaluate their own team functioning, and plan activities.

• *Forming peer-helping groups* by training adult facilitators to conduct formal group sessions where young people identify problems, provide support to persons in need, and build strengths by giving and receiving help.

• *Equipping peer helpers* to identify problems and thinking errors and participate in building a respectful group culture that meets needs of all for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.

• *Identifying safety and fidelity issues* so staff and supervisors can prevent problems or take quick corrective action if the group process becomes problematic.

• *Adapting to the particular setting* through ongoing consultation enables group leaders, clinicians, educators, and direct care staff to address unique challenges in implementing PPC in their specific organization.

Tracking Outcomes

Research Based Standards

There is a wide body of evidence and practice expertise on standards for successful peer helping (Brendtro & Caslor, 2019; Steinebach et al., 2018). Here are three key areas where research informs quality programs. These standards were first established through research on 45 PPC groups in the Michigan Peer Influence Project (Gold & Osgood, 1992):

1. Effective Staff Teams

The strongest predictor of positive youth cultures is a positive staff team. Research shows that four factors indicate effective teamwork and high staff morale:

• *Team cohesion* is a strong bond among staff in contrast to factions and cliques fueling interpersonal conflict. Disagreements about task can be healthy but open or subterranean conflict is not.

• *Team participation* is based on an egalitarian culture where all staff have a voice, regardless of their position. The measure of this factor is full participation rather than dominance by a few.

• *Belief in program success* requires understanding and embracing the values and principles of this model. Many adults will have to learn to shift from authoritarian to authoritative roles in work with youth.

• *Optimism about youth* or its opposite become self-fulfilling prophecies. Staff who have negative or judgmental attitudes will need corrective support from supervisors or staff teams.

2. Positive Youth Development

The most extensive study on peer group programs with youth at risk was conducted by University of Michigan researchers Martin Gold and Wayne Osgood (Gold & Osgood, 1992; Osgood & Briddell, 2006). This longitudinal study gathered extensive data from youth and staff from 45 self-contained PPC groups. Researchers identified key elements leading to positive outcomes in the program and after return to the community. Subsequent research has reinforced the importance of these youth development variables (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015; Gibbs, 2019; Steinebach et al., 2018).

• *Adult and peer attachments* have positive impacts during the program and in the community.
• *School achievement* has strong effects on life outcomes, despite other problems facing youth.
• *Fostering autonomy* while demanding responsibility creates positive climates and relationships.
• *Prosocial values* reduce the lure of delinquent and self-defeating behavior.

3. Long-Term Outcomes

There is strong evidence for the positive short-term impact of quality Positive Peer Culture programs (Giacobbe & Traynelis-Yurek, 1992; James, 2011; Laursen, 2010; Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985). However, the challenge is to maintain these gains over the long term. Effective interventions match treatment to individual needs to promote emotional well-being, reduce recidivism, and strengthen family and community supports (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015; Brogan et al., 2015).

• *Emotional Well-being*. Research shows that outcomes from PPC are more favorable for youth who show qualities described as *buoyant* (resilient and prosocial) in contrast to personality measures of *besetment* (anxious and depressed). Many beset youth have experienced relational trauma and maltreatment and thus have difficulty trusting others (Gold & Osgood, 1992; Ryan, 2006). Close emotional bonds with caring adults and peers reduce besetment and strengthen emotional well-being. Positive Peer Culture does not limit trauma treatment to the therapy hour but applies trauma and resilience principles to natural relationships in "The Other 23 Hours" (Bath & Seita, 2018). Creating long-term emotional well-being requires staff to be both *trauma-informed* and *resilience-focused* (Soma & Allen, 2020).

• *Reduced Recidivism.* Two comparative studies in residential programs showed less recidivism among participants in PPC than control groups. A randomized study in the Ohio youth corrections system showed significantly reduced recidivism a year following PPC (Leeman, Gibbs, & Fuller, 1993). A study in Manitoba youth corrections compared youth in PPC with matched controls in non-PPC justice settings; significant differences favoring the PPC group were shown during the second year after leaving the program (Brendtro & Caslor, 2019). Thus, in both studies, effects were not immediately apparent but had a delayed impact. Long-term outcomes may be most influenced by what happens in the lives of youth as they gain increasing independence. This has led to greater efforts to provide transition services to reduce recidivism.

• *Family and Community Support*. Researchers at Elk Hill Farms in Virginia found recidivism of PPC graduates was significantly reduced by offering follow-up services for a year after release (Giacobbe et al., 1993). Studies at Starr Commonwealth in Michigan also showed follow-up services had significant impact on reducing recidivism (Ryan, Davis, & Yang, 2001). Starr researchers also tracked all contacts between students and family during placement in PPC (Ryan & Yang, 2005). Quality family interactions significantly predicted better outcomes. These families had direct involvement in the treatment process with in-home counseling, campus visits initiated by family members, and home visits initiated by a family service staff. The more families participated in the treatment process the more likely youth would experience positive outcomes.

Program Quality Measures

Evaluating program outcomes is a continuous process and most organizations access available data related to school achievement and behavioral adjustment. In addition, specific instruments have been developed to measure important dimensions related to developmental goals and quality of Positive Peer Culture programs as described below:

The Circle of Courage Supports and Strengths Scale measures growth in students. It is completed by youth to assess the dimensions of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity (Brendtro, Levin et al., 2021). Items cover both inner strengths (e.g., self-control) and external supports in the ecology (e.g., positive peers, family bonds). This scale can be computer-administered and scored to establish a baseline and track changes over time. Alternatively, items can be used for discussion and qualitative assessment.

The Environmental Survey (aka *Cultures of Respect Survey*) measures eight factors marking positive climates in group youth work settings (Yang et al., 2000). The 49 survey items were standardized on 2131 students and 712 staff from 31 PPC programs. Both students and staff complete this instrument. Results are computer-scored and can be compared with national norms for both staff and students (Starr Commonwealth, 2021). This instrument is used as a pre-implementation measure and periodically thereafter to track program quality.

Relationship Quality Factors
- *Staff/Student Relationships*. Do staff have the students' best interest at heart?
- *Staff/Student Communication*. Do staff communicate authentically with students?
- *Staff Involvement*. Are staff genuinely invested and interested in student activities?
- *Valuing Families*. Do staff members respect and involve students' families?

Program Quality Factors
- *Staff Effectiveness.* Are staff competent in their roles preparing youth for positive outcomes?
- *Treatment Effectiveness*. Are students becoming more effective problem solvers?
- *Intimidation*. Does bullying or peer intimidation impede developing a positive environment?
- *Counterculture*. Do adversarial relationships impede developing a positive environment?

Ensuring Program Fidelity is informed by research of staff and youth in 10 PPC programs (Brendtro & Ness, 1983) and other quality assurance standards for peer group treatment (Brendtro & Kreisle, 2022).
- *Safety and Fidelity Checklist* identifies common errors in implementation and program alteration.
- *Group Meeting Checklist* evaluates the process and quality of PPC meetings.
- *Group Climate Checklist* rates strengths of PPC principles in the natural life space.
- *Coaching and Consultation* maintain program quality over time and prevent program drift.

Conclusion

A persistent challenge in serving youth at risk is negative peer influence. Young people weakly bonded to adults may form a counterculture that sabotages education and treatment goals. Positive Peer Culture is designed to reverse this process by engaging youth in prosocial helping roles. The goals of PPC target developmental needs and provide a supportive relational ecology. Implementing PPC involves training of all stakeholders with strategies to develop bonds of respect and positive peer climates. Program outcomes are tracked using research-based standards and ongoing measures of program fidelity.

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