

## Navigating the Transition between Childhood and Young Adulthood: Helping Adolescents Thrive

Adolescence is often viewed negatively – as a difficult time of transition that exposes youth to a range of risk factors. Indeed, research has demonstrated that children are at increased risk for drug and alcohol use, sexual risk behavior, and physical fights as they transition into adolescence (Brooks, Harris, Thrall, Woods, et al. 2002). However, while adolescents face increased risk factors, most do not succumb to them.

Given what we know about the power of expectations, framing adolescence as a time of opportunity instead of only as a time of risk can be useful. Because of this, experts in the field of child development and neuroscience have begun to advocate a more positive view of adolescence, with an increased focus on the opportunities present during this life stage. Examining positive developmental processes can provide new insights into how to support healthy growth among adolescents. Finding ways to foster the strengths present in adolescents, their families, and communities can also help us increase the number of youth who thrive.

### **Positive Youth Development**

Taking a positive youth development approach to understanding adolescence involves believing that all youth have assets, talents, and the ability to develop successfully and contribute to society (Damon, 2004). Positive youth development is present for adolescents when they have sufficient skills and knowledge, are actively engaged in their lives, and are surrounded by supportive contexts (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006).

Thriving—the focus of this paper—is one aspect of positive development. *Thriving* refers both to the lack of problem behaviors and psychopathology as well as the presence of positive development and well-being (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Thriving is a

dynamic process that unfolds across the lifespan (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Theokas et al., 2005). Thriving represents a developmental trajectory that indicates how well an adolescent is doing at any given point in time within multiple life contexts (e.g., academic, career, family, social, psychological, and health domains).

### **What is Thriving?**

Benson and Scales (2009) identified six characteristics of thriving which are linked with positive developmental outcomes among adolescents. The first, *spark identification and motivation*, involves having and pursuing interests and passions. This is an essential aspect of thriving because it provides youth with a driving energy, which leads to adaptive development over time. In one study, adolescents who identified “having a spark” (passion) had significantly higher scores on a range of positive developmental outcomes than those who did not identify a passion (Benson & Scales, 2009). *Positive emotionality*, a second characteristic of thriving, means having a positive attitude and optimistic outlook on life. Youth who engage positively with the world are not always happy, but they are generally able to approach new experiences with a positive attitude and bounce back quickly after a setback. The third, *hopeful purpose*, relates to an adolescent’s desire to make a difference in the world. Hopeful purpose also is associated with adolescents’ belief that they will be successful in the future. *Moral and prosocial orientation* reflects a young person’s belief that they have a responsibility to help others, including plans to participate in community service in the following year. This thriving characteristic relates to an adolescent’s connection with other people, as well as to a sense of right and wrong. *Openness to challenge and discovery* relates to an adolescent’s willingness to take on challenges and interest in discovering new things. Everyone must work hard to succeed in this world, and adolescents who are open to being challenged are more likely to do well.

Finally, *spiritual development* refers to the process by which adolescents “affirm the importance of a sacred or transcendent force and their faith or spirituality in shaping everyday thoughts and actions” (Benson & Scales, 2009, p. 97). Adolescence is an important time for spiritual development (King & Boyatzis, 2004). It does not necessarily involve following a specific religion, but instead refers to how adolescents’ values influence the way they operate in the world (Benson & Scales, 2009).

### **Learning from Thriving Among African American Youth**

It is important to help youth thrive, because thriving adolescents develop into well-adjusted adults who care about people in their communities and give back to society (Lerner et al., 2003). To help understand how thriving can be fostered among youth, I conducted a recent study investigating factors related to thriving for African American adolescents (Gooden & McMahon, 2013). A total of 152 youth, recruited in collaboration with 5 black churches, participated in the study. The vast majority (91%) of adolescent participants identified as African American. Results indicated that religiosity, religious support, and the value of communalism are significantly related to thriving among African American adolescents.

*Religiosity* is defined as involvement with a religious organization, engaging in religious practices, and belief in a higher power. It has been directly linked with thriving (Dowling et al., 2004). Religiosity works to promote positive adolescent development, protect against stressors (Furrow, King, & White, 2004; King & Furrow, 2008), and aid youth as they cope with both social and emotional aspects of their lives (Blaine & Crocker, 1995). Youth involved in churches gain access to a community of supportive, non-familial adults (King & Furrow, 2008), the chance to interact with positive role models (Smith, 2003), and the opportunity to develop life skills and leadership (Smith, 2003).

The benefits of religious involvement for youth point to the importance of facilitating participation in value-based organizations. If families are religious, their adolescents will likely benefit from being involved in religious / spiritual programs and activities. Even if families are not religious, it might be useful for them to seek out groups that help youth to develop positive values and beliefs about themselves and the world.

*Religious support* is also significantly related to thriving (Gooden & McMahon, 2013). Religious support involves experiencing support from God, church leaders, and church members. Because existing evidence suggests that when youth experience support from friends and family they are more likely to thrive (Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006), it is important to ensure that congregation members and leaders make active efforts to provide social support to youth. Additionally, teaching adolescents that God plays a supportive role in their lives may also help to support the development of thriving among religiously-involved youth.

*Communalism* is also significantly and directly related to thriving (Gooden & McMahon, 2013). Communalism reflects an understanding of people's interdependence and our responsibility for the well-being of others (Boykin, Jagers, Ellison and Albury 1997). Communalism is also related to moral reasoning (Woods & Jagers, 2003).

Although previous research supported the positive effects of communalism (Jagers, Sydnor, Mouttapa, & Flay 2007; Woods & Jagers, 2003), the study by Gooden and McMahon (2013) is the first to demonstrate a specific link between communalism and thriving for African American adolescents. Taken together, these results suggest that teaching adolescents to understand how people are interconnected, and fostering their sense of responsibility, helps them thrive. In addition, engaging youth in activities such as community service, which involve

helping others or the environment, or in team sports, in which youth are encouraged to rely on and support each other, can also help foster communalism.

## **Conclusion**

While it is easy to become overly focused on helping youth to avoid the risks present during adolescence, attending to the potential present in this stage of life and fostering positive development can be a more effective way to support youth. Thriving, an important aspect of positive youth development, relates to adolescents' current functioning as well as their developmental trajectory. Associated with life functioning across a variety of areas, thriving predicts a number of positive outcomes for adolescents.

Providing supportive, accepting, and understanding home environments helps youth to thrive. Additionally, research has demonstrated that involving youth in religious or value-based organizations, surrounding youth with positive contexts that provide social support, and helping youth to understand how they are connected to other people and take responsibility for themselves and others helps promote thriving among adolescents.

## **How to Help Your Youth Thrive [Text Box]**

- Help them to develop and pursue a passion
- Support them! Provide them with opportunities to receive support from family, friends, and non-familial adults
- Get them involved in value-based organizations
- Involve them in community service and other activities that foster their sense of collective responsibility

## **Biography**

Adia Gooden, Ph.D., is a Postdoctoral Clinical Scholar Fellow at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. Dr. Gooden received her B.A. in Psychology from Stanford University and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from DePaul University. Dr. Gooden has extensive experience working with young adults who are in college and graduate school and transitioning in and out of school. One of Dr. Gooden's primary foci for her fellowship is specializing in working with couples for premarital issues and counseling, couples conflict, and difficulties with marital satisfaction and intimacy issues. Dr. Gooden also has experience working with adolescents and their families. Dr. Gooden's dissertation research focused on the factors that facilitate thriving among African American youth. In therapy, Dr. Gooden works with adolescents and families to enhance their strengths, as well as supporting them in addressing concerns.

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