



YOUTH WHO THRIVE



A summary of critical factors and effective programs for 12-25 year olds, commissioned by the YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto.

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Foreword

The YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto are pleased to provide *Youth Who Thrive*, a resource created to support the development of youth programming. While there are hundreds of studies that address the question of how to help youth thrive, for the past decade there hasn't been a systematic review that summarizes the best available knowledge.

The Students Commission of Canada and the Social Program Evaluation Group at Queen's University conducted a literature review to synthesize the best available current research on youth development and developed this resource. The findings will be used to help the YMCA and United Way Toronto develop and improve existing programs for youth. Beyond our organizations, we wanted to share what we learned with others to support the development and delivery of programs that have greatest possible positive impacts for youth in the Greater Toronto Area and beyond.

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These pages summarize the strongest current research about what youth aged 12-25 need to thrive. Programmers who intentionally combine scientific evidence with specific knowledge of youth in their program are more likely to produce better results.



Apply the evidence to your program for good results

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Thriving defined

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[Youth Who Thrive \(full literature review\) \[PDF\]](#)





Many youth face multiple barriers and do not have access to supports, services and opportunities to thrive. Despite the large number of studies that address the question of how to promote positive youth development, there was no current overall summary of this research to form a basis for consistent evidence-based youth programs and services.

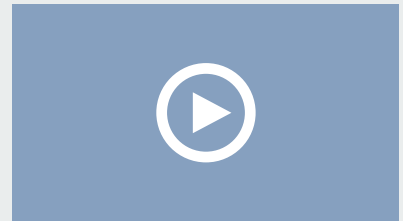
To address the gap, the YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto initiated a review of current research literature 2002 to 2013, *Youth Who Thrive*. This resource summarizes the full review, outlining the critical factors that support youth ages 12-25 to thrive during critical life transitions such as moving to high school or leaving care and promoting long-term health throughout their lives. The specific objectives were:

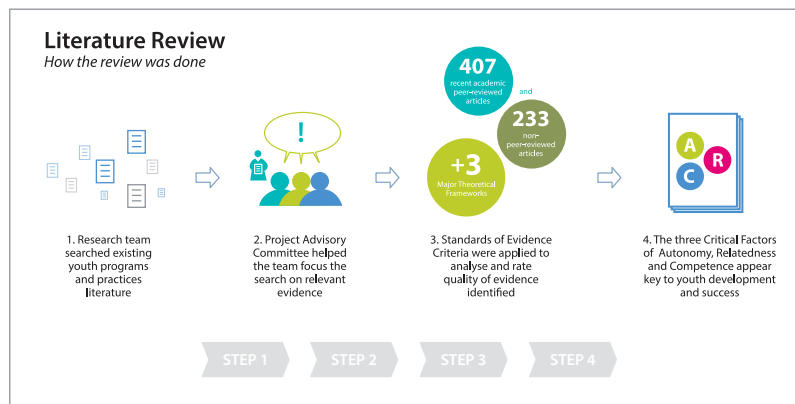
1. Review and synthesize young people's needs in relation to their development and critical transitions.
2. Identify key programming outcomes that address young people's development and transitions
3. Identify evidence-based interventions and program designs to achieve outcomes

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Introduction of Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds.
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Click to step through the methodology.

Literature review: How the work was done

The Project Advisory Committee helped the research team develop search words and criteria for evaluating the quality of the evidence. Only research studies that met the standards were included. The research team found and reviewed 407 peer-reviewed academic studies and 223 non-peer-reviewed studies from 2000-2013 that met the criteria. Standards of evidence were also applied to three major theoretical frameworks and 18 program Interventions.

Not all knowledge is included in the literature review; there are many organizations developing and delivering programs without the resources to conduct evaluations that meet academic publishing requirements or standards of evidence established for this review.

The findings of this review are limited largely to academic literature because of the partners' objective to build an evidence-based foundation for program development. The review discusses the limitations of the published literature and outlines the need for program research that focuses on specific populations. A shared future objective of the partners is that programmers and organizations will use this foundation to design program research that helps address the gaps that exist in the literature.

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[Standards of Evidence \[PDF\]](#)

[Methodology of Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)



Thriving defined

Thriving during adolescence is assisted by being physically healthy and developing the capacity to learn, the capacity to feel good about one's self, and the capacity to behave well socially and societally.

The academic categories for these capacities are often described as cognitive/learning, emotional/psychological, and behavioural/social. Many youth organizations translate these terms into easy to remember words like head, heart, feet or hands.

Although the strongest determinants of adolescent health worldwide are structural factors in society such as income inequality and access to education, effective youth programs can contribute to positive outcomes for youth, who in turn positively impact their communities.

Thriving can be seen through school success, leadership, helping others, maintenance of physical health, delay of gratification, valuing diversity, and overcoming adversity. These short- and medium-term outcomes are often used as indicators of health and thriving.

Thriving in adolescence generally leads to long-term health and well-being in adulthood. Young people who thrive during adolescence are more likely to feel psychologically and physically healthy, contribute to their communities, achieve success in education and employment, maintain strong relationships, and be satisfied with their lives as adults.

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[Head, Heart, Feet, Spirit sheet \[website\]](#)

[Thriving and theoretical framework of Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)





Youth Who Thrive updates and complements the evidence base from recent literature and these previous reports: *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, *Youth Impact Plan: An Evidence Review*, *Roots of Violence*, *Stepping Stones* and *Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework*.



Community Programs

Youth Impact Plan

Roots of Youth Violence

Stepping Stones, Stepping Up

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Community Programs

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, edited for the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine by Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Gootman (2002), is a thorough review of available research on community programs that promote positive outcomes for youth. This report presents a set of eight features of youth program settings that encourage positive youth development. The more settings youth experience that have these features, the more likely they are to gain strengths and assets that lead to well-being. *Youth Who Thrive* confirms that these eight features are well supported by current research evidence, and adds two more. However, there is still a lack of research that focuses on a wider range of youth populations over a longer period of time to understand which program elements contribute in which ways for particular youth.

For those who design and deliver programs, this review has an important message — it is the processes of interaction of the youth in the setting or program that is important. When adolescents walk in the door, it is not what they see that is important, it is how they become engaged. The features of the program set the stage for young people’s engagement.

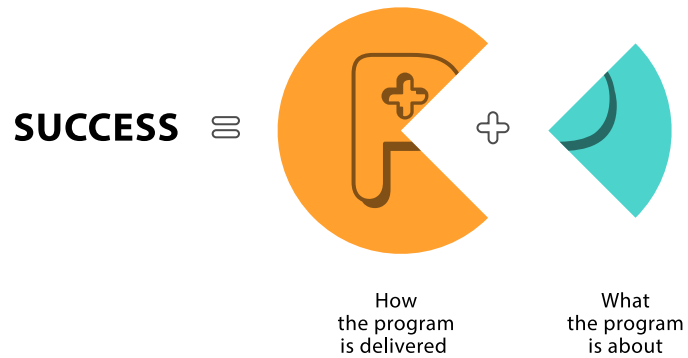
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[Community Programs to Promote Youth Development \[PDF\]](#)

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Youth Impact Plan: Evidence Review

United Way Toronto's *Youth Impact Plan: Evidence Review* identifies three strong contributors to youth well-being: engagement, educational attainment, and economic security.

Successful programs for youth are characterized by:

1. Strong relationships between youth and non-family adults;
2. Youth agency and engagement in decision-making and program design to influence their communities;
3. Skill building that is physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, and social; and
4. Clear, high expectations for youth.

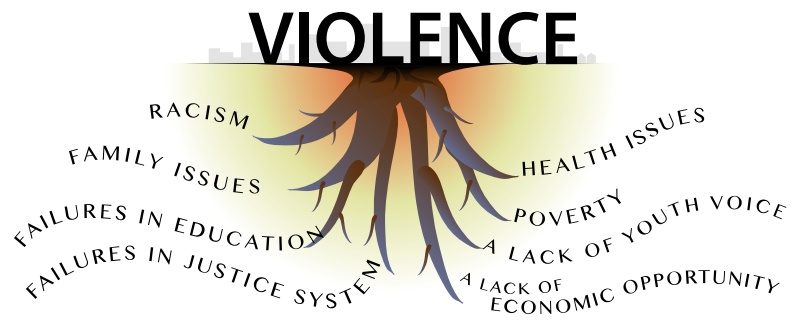
This report concludes that the success of youth programs depend more on how the program is conducted than its content. The findings in this report are limited by the lack of rigorous program evaluation. The report is therefore only able to conclude that the success of youth programs depends largely on how the program is conducted but is not able to draw any conclusions about how content influences program success.

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Roots of Youth Violence

The *Roots of Youth Violence* report outlines the societal conditions that are root causes of violence involving youth. This report identifies key barriers to thriving including poverty, racism, inaccessible and inadequate community design, failures of the education and justice systems, health issues, family issues, a lack of youth voice, and a lack of economic opportunity.

The *Roots of Youth Violence* report recommends that youth engagement is a key part of the strategy to improve the social context, with a focus on skill-building, a sense of belonging with at least one adult who provides nurturing and support, and youth voice in matters that affect them. These recommendations are directly reflected in *Youth Who Thrive*.

Based on existing research, this report wasn't able to answer questions about how youth programs can help to change the social conditions that are at the roots of violence. This is an area that, as a sector, we'll have to continue to explore if we're going to support youth in all the ways they need.

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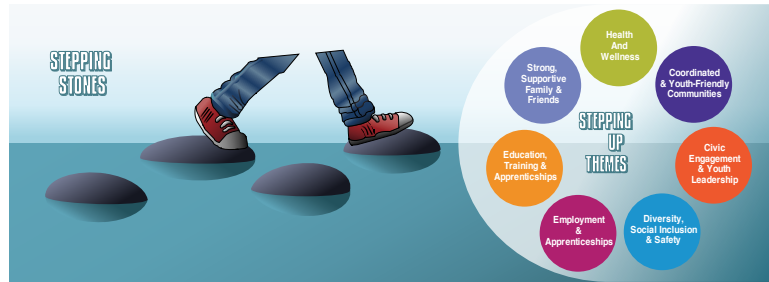
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[Roots of Youth Violence \[PDF\]](#)

[Introduction of Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)

Roots of Peace Video (available by clicking on video to right) was created by John Campbell of The Students Commission from a series of video contests entries by youth addressing the causes of gun and gang violence.





Stepping Stones, Stepping Up

In 2012, the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services released *Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development*. This resource builds upon a series of 13 research papers examining aspects of youth development from 12-25 years. However, most of these resource papers are limited to a developmental psychology approach. Developmental maps describe key developmental events for youth from early to late adolescence and into early adulthood. These maps include tips for practitioners for supporting youth in each stage.

Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth to Succeed released by the Ministry of Child and Youth Services in 2013 identifies 20 evidence-based outcomes and indicators across seven themes that are important to enhancing young people's well-being. These indicators are limited to existing data collected in Ontario.

The seven outcome themes are:

1. Health and wellness;
2. Strong, supportive friends and families;
3. Education, training, and apprenticeships;
4. Employment and entrepreneurship;
5. Diversity, social inclusion, and safety;
6. Civic engagement and youth leadership; and
7. Coordinated and youth-friendly communities.

(See Resource link below.)

The *Stepping Up* framework also has seven guiding principles:

1. A positive asset-based view of youth;
2. Targeted support for those who need it;
3. Collaboration and partnership;
4. Meaningful youth engagement and leadership;
5. Diversity;
6. Evidence-informed choices; and
7. Transparency.

(See Resource link below.)

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Resources

[Stepping Stones](#) [download PDF]

[Stepping Up framework](#) [PDF 4.7mb]

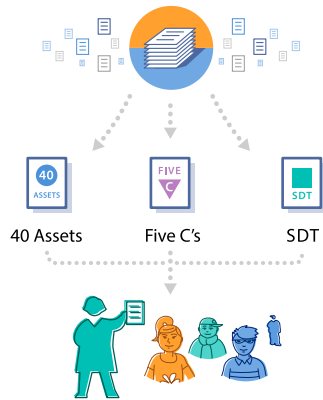
[Introduction of Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds](#) [PDF]

[Map of connections between Stepping Up framework and Critical Factors](#) [flash]

[Map of connections between Stepping Up framework and Critical Factors](#) [PDF]



Three major approaches useful for designing youth programming have strong evidence: 40 Developmental Assets™, the Five Cs, and Self-Determination Theory.



40 Developmental Assets™

Five Cs

Self-Determination Theory

The Five Cs emerged from youth development practice, the 40 Developmental Assets™ from a research institute, and SDT from psychological theories about motivation. Despite their varied origins they all confirm the same three factors.

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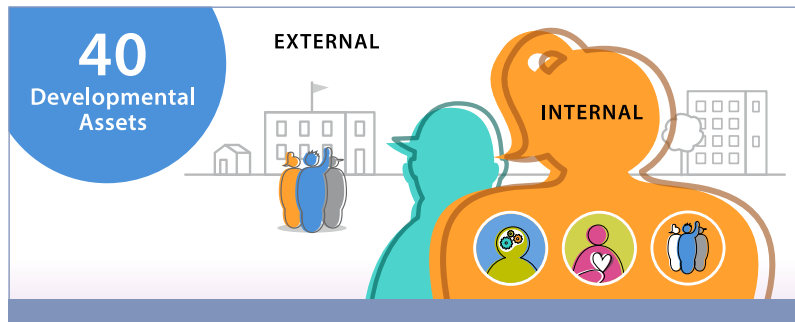
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Common critical factors across program frameworks [PDF]





The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets™

Developmental Assets™ from The Search Institute provides a list of 40 factors that help youth thrive. The theory is that the more of these positive factors young people have, the more likely they are to become healthy, successful, and happy. The list includes internal personal assets such as self-esteem, honesty, and planning skills. External assets include supportive family, caring school, and involvement in positive youth programs.

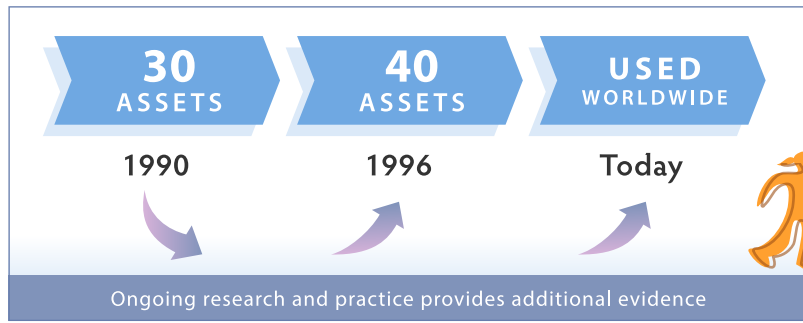
Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental Assets™ is comprehensive, with a theory that has been researched in several studies, providing evidence that the developmental assets contribute to thriving. • It is strengths-based, focused on enhancing community and individual youth. • Assets are shown to contribute to more positive health behaviours and less negative risk behaviours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The type of research studies conducted cannot demonstrate conclusively that the developmental assets caused the positive results for youth. • There is a lack of independent research. Much of the research has been conducted and published by The Search Institute, not in independently reviewed academic journals.

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[Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets \[website\]](#)

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The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets™

The Search Institute released the Developmental Assets framework in 1990. This original framework included 30 assets. In 1996, the framework was expanded to 40 assets. Since then it has become frequently cited and widely used across the world. The Developmental Assets™ framework has been integrated into many youth programs, professional development for practitioners, youth assessments, and studies.

External Assets	Internal Assets
<p>Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family support • Positive family communication • Other adult relationships • Caring neighbourhood • Caring school climate • Parent involvement in schooling 	<p>Commitment to Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement motivation • School engagement • Homework • Bonding to school • Reading for pleasure
<p>Empowerment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community values youth • Youth as resources • Service to others • Safety 	<p>Positive Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring • Equality and social justice • Integrity • Honesty • Responsibility • Restraint
<p>Boundaries and Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family boundaries • School boundaries • Neighbourhood boundaries • Adult role models • Positive peer influence • High expectations 	<p>Social Competencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and decision making • Interpersonal competence • Cultural competence • Resistance skills • Peaceful conflict resolution
<p>Constructive Use of Time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative activities • Youth programs • Religious community • Time at home 	<p>Positive Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal power • Self-esteem • Sense of purpose • Positive view of personal future

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FIVE Cs

FIVE CORE PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

- COMPETENCE
- CONFIDENCE
- CONNECTION
- CHARACTER
- CARING/COMPASSION

Youth who build all five Cs are more likely to thrive

The Five Cs framework

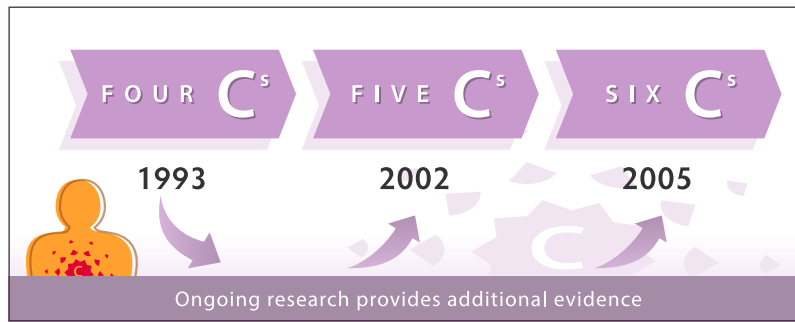
The evidence for the 5 Cs framework was first provided in 2002 by the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. The 4 Hs were Head, Heart, Hands and Health and the study continues today.

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive youth development (PYD) had emerged as a new approach that focused on the strengths of youth and how to support their development. The 5 Cs framework through the 4-H study was the first to provide evidence and ways of measuring PYD. • The Five Cs are related to higher levels of positive outcomes and decreased negative outcomes over time. • The 5 Cs framework is concise and clear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some research has challenged whether the Five Cs represent what's working in all positive youth development programs, particularly sports, where positive values that benefit the group are crucial. • Also in sporting programs, the relationship between the youth and his or her environment is more dynamic or changing than originally thought in the Five Cs approach. • The Five Cs may not always be distinct.

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- [Development frameworks in Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)



Research expands the research

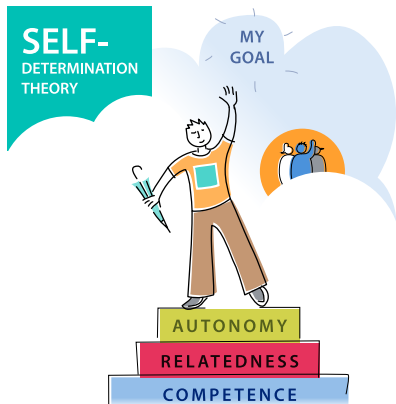
In 1993, 4 Cs were proposed by Rick Little, that is, competence, confidence, connection, and character. Based on a review of research evidence, a fifth C, caring (or compassion) was added. The sixth C began to be added in 2005 in the research literature.

Core Principle	Description
Competence	Positive view of one’s actions in specific areas, including social competence (interpersonal skills), cognitive competence (cognitive abilities), academic competence (school grades, attendance, and test scores), and vocational competence (work habits and career choice explorations).
Confidence	An internal sense of positive self-efficacy and self-worth at an overall level rather than in specific areas; one’s global self-regard.
Connection	Positive bonds with people and institutions reflected in bi-directional exchanges between youth and peers, family, school, and community.
Character	Respect for societal and cultural rules, standards for correct behaviours, integrity, and a sense of right and wrong (morality).
Caring/ Compassion	A sense of sympathy and empathy for others.
Contribution	When the five Cs are present, youth contribute positively to self, family, community, and society. These contributions have a behavioural component (actions) and an ideological component (belief that contributions are a necessary part of one’s civic duty).

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Self-Determination Theory

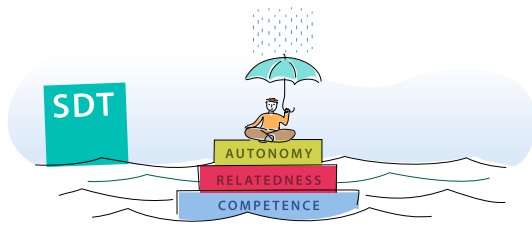
According to Self-Determination Theory, an individual's ability to reach their goals is dependent on how much they can fulfill three basic psychological needs: 1) autonomy, 2) relatedness, and 3) competence. In other words, youth can better reach their goals when they make their own decisions to reach for a goal (autonomy), when they connect and interact meaningfully with others (relatedness), and when they have skills to put their ideas into action (competence).

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research in a variety of environments has confirmed autonomy, relatedness, and competence for motivating one's self.• Self-determined motivation is related to well-being. Environmental support fosters self-determination.• The approach focuses on developing young people's strengths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not enough studies examine all three needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) at the same time.• There is no conclusive evidence about whether or not there are more than three needs.

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SDT: An umbrella theory

Self-Determination Theory comes from a history of scientific interest about human needs during the 1960s. This theory is a broad umbrella theory that includes sub-theories about basic needs and motivation. The first practical evidence for Self-Determination Theory was provided by Edward Deci in 1971. Through his collaboration with Richard Ryan, Self-Determination Theory's three basic needs were identified.

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Youth programs can assist youth to thrive by experiencing positive results, or outcomes, in three areas: learning, feeling, and behaving.



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Feeling

Behaving

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[Head, Heart, Feet and Spirit worksheet to reflect on learning, feeling and behaving outcomes that lead to youth thriving \[website\]](#)

[Youth Who Thrive \(full literature review\) \[PDF\]](#)

[Outcomes page \[PDF\]](#)





LEARNING OUTCOMES

Some ways learning is demonstrated

- Increased job exploration
- Higher motivation for learning
- Higher school achievement
- More effective learning strategies

Learning outcomes involve a young person's development of abilities, processes, and skills. They are shaped by previous knowledge and experiences and interactions with others. Learning is a continuous and contextual process; outcomes can result through formal learning opportunities such as school, through informal everyday experiences such as play, or through non-formal opportunities such as youth programs. The learning process matters; when young people are meaningfully involved in their own learning, they have stronger learning outcomes. Having meaningful learning experiences is important for adolescents to thrive.

Learning outcomes that appear in research studies are often related to mental abilities in formal education settings because these are easier to measure. However, there is a multitude of different learning outcomes from other contexts that, while harder to measure, have a deep impact on young people's lives. There is more work to be done to identify the broad range of learning outcomes from youth programs.

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**FEELING
OUTCOMES**

Some ways youth reveal their emotional (internal) state

- Higher self-esteem
- Greater sense of energy
- More hopeful
- Less depression

Feeling outcomes involve a young person's experience of emotions and development of a sense of self. Young people's emotional states are continuously changing and are influenced by their temperament, previous experiences, interactions with others, and context. When young people have support and encouragement and can follow their own choices, they feel better. Having a range of feelings (including positive feelings and a positive sense of self) is important for adolescents to thrive.

Feeling outcomes that appear in research studies are subjective, because these feelings are internally felt. While they may be difficult to attribute to particular programs, they still play a key role in a young person's experience of a program.

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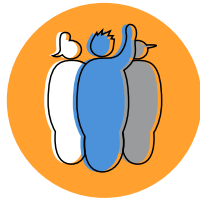
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**BEHAVING
OUTCOMES**

Some ways youth behave externally

- More physical activity
- Less problem behaviour
- More active coping
- More social interaction
- Increased leadership
- Increased valuing of diversity

Behaving outcomes involve a young person's actions and external responses. These outcomes can be individual actions or social interactions with others. Behaving outcomes are influenced by a young person's temperament, experiences, abilities, interactions with others, and context. When young people have support and choice and can make decisions in their lives, they are more likely to have better behaving outcomes. Having healthy behaviours and social interactions is important for adolescents to thrive.

Behaving outcomes that appear in research studies are often related to problem behaviours, because these behaviours are easier to observe and tend to be better documented. However, there are many positive behaving outcomes related to youth programs that are just as important to young people's lives.

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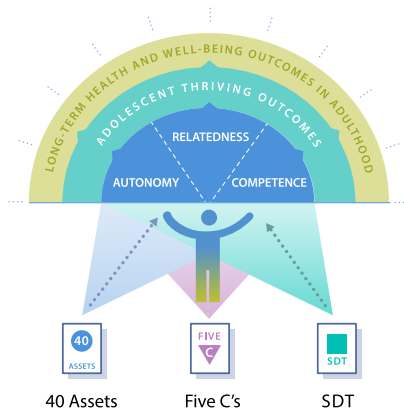
Three critical factors are shared across the approaches with strong evidence: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.



- Associated with adolescent thriving outcomes that lead to long-term health and well-being.

- Critical for navigating transitions through young people's lives.

- A simplified model to track and tune-up existing programs.



- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Competence
- Research gaps

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- [Autonomy, Relatedness and Competence in Three Developmental Frameworks Table \(Cross-Framework Synthesis\) \[PDF\]](#)





What is autonomy?

Young people having input, voice, or agency in determining their own choices and acting upon personal interests, values, and goals.



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Autonomy Outcomes



Learning

Cognitive / learning outcomes

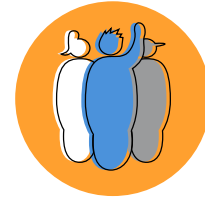
- When environments support autonomy, youth show improved school/activity performance and grades, greater motivation for learning, and deeper thinking and reasoning.
- When youth feel they have more autonomy in the classroom, they are more likely to participate in school activities, reducing the drop in student engagement that tends to occur with age.
- Support for autonomy from teachers and parents is critical for school achievement and competence, job exploration, and career commitment.



Feeling

Psychological / emotional outcomes

- Youth are more likely to establish life-goals and experience well-being if their parents/guardians behave in ways that support autonomy.
- Youth who feel hopeful and are more emotionally competent are more likely to have positive emotions and life satisfaction.
- Young people are more likely to have high levels of self-esteem and vitality (i.e., sense of energy) if they have opportunities to make decisions and commitments of their own volition or will.



Behaving

Behavioural / social outcomes

- Higher volition, or will, is related with reduced misbehaviour and alcohol use from early to late adolescence.
- Increased autonomy can be beneficial for some young people, but too much can be detrimental for others. For example, youth who have more autonomy and are living in situations that are risky or dangerous report higher delinquency.
- Youth are more likely to actively search for and accept social support if they receive autonomy support from their family.

Programmers who know their youth well, and know what the available research is saying, are able to use this combined knowledge to provide experiences of autonomy in positive, safe environments so that youth develop the skills to use autonomy more effectively in their riskier environments.

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What is relatedness?

Young people having a sense of belonging and connection with others.

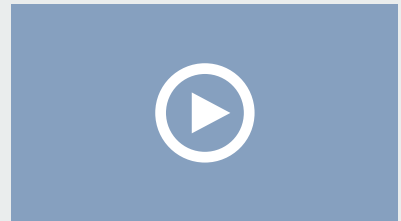


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Relatedness Outcomes



Learning

Cognitive / learning outcomes

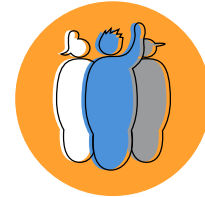
- Young people are more likely to be motivated to learn, do well in school, and participate in school activities when they have supportive teacher-student relationships and experience belonging in school.
- Positive peer relatedness can support career exploration and commitment.



Feeling

Psychological / emotional outcomes

- Youth are less likely to feel depressed if they have a sense of family connection and school belonging.
- Peer and teacher-related belongingness are associated with hope, improved psychological adjustment, and well-being.



Behaving

Behavioural / social outcomes

- Parent quality and adult bonds are associated with lower rates of delinquency.
- Teacher-student relationships are associated with lower rates of school misconduct and disciplinary problems.
- Learning positive social norms (such as appropriate ways to relate to others) from family and peers is linked to reduced antisocial behaviour. This relationship is so strong that it neutralizes any negative influences coming from neighbourhood or school contexts.
- Youth-adult mentorships with deep connections (i.e., long-term, close, frequent, and involved) are effective at supporting social skill-building.

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What is competence?

Young people having skills to effectively achieve desired goals.



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Competence Outcomes



Learning

Cognitive / learning outcomes

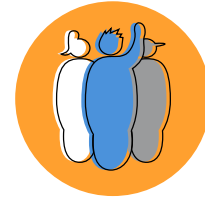
- When young people are hopeful about their competence, they are more likely to perform better in school.
- Self-perceived competence is associated with academic achievement and performance.
- Young people who are more socially competent are more likely to do well in school and continue to higher learning.



Feeling

Psychological / emotional outcomes

- Youth with higher cognitive and behavioural competence are less distressed, have greater psychological well-being, and report decreased substance use.
- Youth who feel hopeful and are more emotionally competent are more likely to have positive emotions and life satisfaction.
- Young people with higher social and physical competence have higher self-esteem.
- Emotional competence is associated with greater adaptability and coping, and reduced depressive thoughts, anxiety, and mental disorders.



Behaving

Behavioural / social outcomes

- Young people who have higher social competence tend to have lower rates of antisocial behaviour, delinquency, and drug use.
- Higher cognitive and behavioural/social competence is associated with waiting to be sexually active and increased use of contraceptives.
- Physical competence is associated with sport participation.
- Youth who are more culturally competent tend to value diversity, have better physical health, delay gratification, and take leadership.

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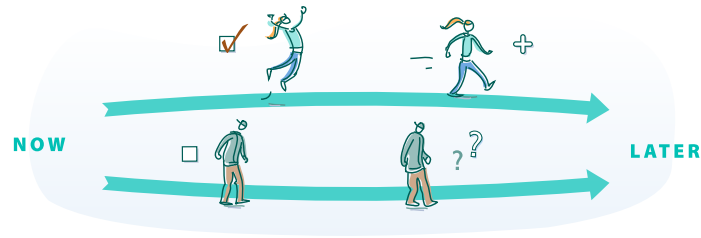
[Summary table of outcomes associated with competence \[PDF\]](#)

[Competence chapter in Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)





+++ OUTCOMES



Research gaps

Although the research evidence is strong on the developmental needs of youth, there are questions that still need to be studied and answered. The most important to improve programming are:

1. There is strong evidence that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are critical factors of youth development that lead to positive outcomes. However, we do not know if these are the only critical factors.
2. Evidence-based programs and practices may not be effective across all activities or for all youth. There is not enough research to conclude which programs or practices work best for specific youth in different contexts in the GTA. It is important for these practices to be adapted with those youth in mind.
3. Effective youth programs can lead to positive outcomes for youth and communities. However, it is less clear how these outcomes are related to health and well-being over the long-term.

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[Youth Who Thrive \(full literature review\) \[PDF\]](#)





The research identifies 10 important features of effective youth programs and their settings. Four features support relatedness, four support autonomy and competence, and two support all three critical factors (autonomy, relatedness, and competence).



Key Features of Effective Youth Programs



[Relatedness Program Features](#)

[Autonomy and Competence Program Features](#)

[Program Features for all Three Factors](#)

[Summary Table](#)

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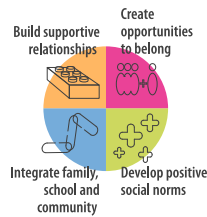
Resources

[Interventions chapter in Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)





Programs that build relatedness:



1. Build supportive relationships

Relationships with adult mentors are more effective when they are long-lasting and close. When youth have at least one caring adult in their lives, they demonstrate fewer risk-associated behaviours, greater academic achievement, and higher self-esteem. Youth-adult partnerships characterized by collaboration and power-sharing are related to increased sense of group belonging.

Build supportive relationships putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)



2. Create opportunities to belong

It is important that all young people feel that they belong regardless of their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abilities, and socio-economic background. This feature includes providing young people with opportunities for social inclusion, engagement, and integration. Building cultural identity, promoting cultural pride, and recognizing the impacts of racism can be important for young people to have a sense of belonging and navigate transitions throughout adolescence and early adulthood.

Create opportunities to belong putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)



3. Develop positive social norms

Youth benefit from regular access to positive values through peer role models, adult mentors, and group-developed rules or guidelines. Positive social norms provide a foundation for relatedness and self-determination (autonomy). When designing programs, developers need to intentionally create environments with positive values that build competence to respond to social justice and ethical issues, such as empathy. Comprehensive programs are more successful in fostering moral development than programs that solely focus on one aspect of young people’s lives. Programs with high staff/participant ratios and programs that meet often are best positioned to serve youth participants.

Develop positive social norms putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)



4. Integrate family, school, and community efforts

The key to this feature is collaboration across the social settings in which youth are engaged: school, extra-curricular activities, peer groups, family, neighbourhoods, and community organizations. Social environments that work together to create meaningful experiences and decrease risk behaviour, support positive youth development. Young people benefit when their efforts and values in one context have connections to another. Pooling resources and coordinating priorities across social circles can foster programming that focuses on the needs of a particular neighbourhood.

Integrate family, school and community efforts putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)

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[Build supportive relationships checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Create opportunities to belong checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Develop positive social norms checklist \[PDF\]](#)

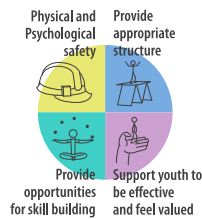
[Integrate family, school and community efforts checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Interventions chapter in Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)





Programs that foster the development of autonomy and competence:



5. Ensure physical and psychological safety

For youth to get the most out of their participation, it is essential that they feel safe at all times. Intentionally building social and emotional competencies may contribute to creating this sense of safety. For example, youth can collaborate to develop and decide upon shared group guidelines. Actively reflecting and inquiring about their own behaviour improves personal development, psychological well-being, and interactions with others. When youth feel safe, they will be more likely to learn and participate freely.

Ensure physical and psychological safety putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)



6. Provide appropriate structure

Appropriate structure includes creating an environment that has clear boundaries, expectations, and adult support/supervision as required. This feature involves providing a consistent environment to ensure participants not only feel safe within the environment, but also comfortable returning to it.

Programs with unstructured time combined with a lack of skill-building opportunities and low adult involvement tend to lack positive social relations and lead to negative outcomes. However, it is important to consider the role of the specific youth involved, the social context, and unstructured time, to understand its potential advantages and disadvantages. When designing programs, ensure supports, such as adult involvement and established positive social norms, are in place for “unstructured” components.

Create opportunities to belong putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)



7. Support youth to be effective and feel valued

The goal of youth programming should extend beyond attendance. Participation must include active engagement to result in positive developmental benefits. Young people need to feel that they matter, that their ideas matter, and that they have the capacity to make a difference. It is important for youth to see the results of their decision-making. The academic literature uses the words efficacy and mattering for these concepts.

Support youth to be effective and to feel valued putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)



8. Provide opportunities for skill building

Young people benefit from opportunities to learn and practice new and meaningful skills. Tasks that do not fit a young person’s interests or are not challenging enough, are not meaningful. Mastering increasingly challenging tasks builds confidence and competence and leads to positive development. Programs that empower youth and foster meaningful skill-building usually include multiple sessions per week, individualized feedback, and appropriately challenging tasks.

Provide opportunities for skill building putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)

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[Ensure physical and psychological safety checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Provide appropriate structure checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Support youth to be effective and to feel like they matter checklist \[PDF\]](#)

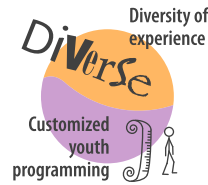
[Provide opportunities for skill building checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Interventions chapter in Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)





Programs that foster the development of autonomy, relatedness, and competence:



9. Ensure diversity of experience



Programs that best support youth development include breadth and depth of programming. Breadth (variety of participation) is more significant in some cases than frequency. Participation in multiple programs protects youth from the shortcomings of any individual program, providing more opportunities to increase autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Further, intentionally involving a diversity of perspectives and experiences within a program is a promising practice. When youth experience a new challenge or context that is different from their norm, they become more prepared for the transition to adulthood.

Ensure diversity of experience putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)

10. Customize youth programming



Youth programming should be as broad as possible (macro), while addressing the unique needs of its population (micro). This balance is achieved by coordinating and collaborating with all program partners, including youth. Programs can effectively meet the unique needs of specific youth by engaging them in program planning and decision-making. Youth input into program and organizational decision-making increases autonomy, relatedness and competence. Youth input is also a unique contributor to successful development and positive outcomes.

Customize youth programming putting it into practice [checklist \[PDF\]](#)

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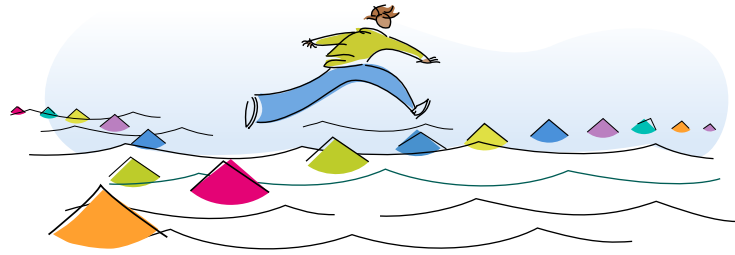
Resources

[Ensure diversity of experience checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Customize youth programming checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[Interventions chapter in Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective practices for 12-25 year olds \[PDF\]](#)





Summary Table for Program Features

Critical Factor	Program Feature	Practice Checklist
Relatedness	1. Supportive relationships	Practice checklist [PDF]
	2. Opportunities to belong	Practice checklist [PDF]
	3. Positive social norms	Practice checklist [PDF]
	4. Integration of family, school, and community efforts	Practice checklist [PDF]
Autonomy, Competence	5. Physical and psychological safety	Practice checklist [PDF]
	6. Appropriate structure	Practice checklist [PDF]
	7. Support for youth to be effective and feel valued	Practice checklist [PDF]
	8. Opportunities for skill building	Practice checklist [PDF]
Autonomy, Relatedness, Competence	9. Diversity of experience	Practice checklist [PDF]
	10. Customized youth programming	Practice checklist [PDF]

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[1. Build supportive relationships checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[2. Create opportunities to belong checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[3. Develop positive social norms checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[4. Integrate family, school and community efforts checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[5. Ensure physical and psychological safety checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[6. Provide appropriate structure checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[7. Support youth to be effective and to feel like they matter checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[8. Provide opportunities for skill building checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[9. Ensure diversity of experience checklist \[PDF\]](#)

[10. Customize youth programming checklist \[PDF\]](#)





The research identifies effective practices associated with the development of each of the critical factors.



Effective practices:
Autonomy

Effective practices:
Relatedness

Effective practices:
Competence

Summary table
of effective practices

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Youth Who Thrive (full literature review) [PDF]





Effective practices to increase autonomy in youth

- Acknowledge youth perspectives
- Be responsive to young people's interests
- Encourage initiative
- Invite youth to consider, share, and develop personal goals that are relevant to their life planning
- Provide a rationale for rules
- Offer meaningful choices, including options for youth to leave a program if they are no longer motivated to be involved
- Provide opportunities for planning and decision making within programs
- Ensure decision-making opportunities are meaningful, but not too stressful
- Offer more structure and guidance to young people who are already dealing with a high level of responsibilities
- Ensure deliberate use of unstructured time in positive social contexts

To improve young people's experiences of autonomy without adding stress to their lives, ask more questions. For example, in addition to encouraging young people to share their ideas, and take the lead on planning and decision-making, ask questions about whether they would like additional support and how they would like to be involved.

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[Next: Effective Practices: Relatedness](#)

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[Youth Who Thrive \(full literature review\) \[PDF\]](#)





Effective practices to increase relatedness in youth

- Provide emotionally supportive relationships particularly during the transition from elementary to secondary education
- Provide opportunities for youth to build attachment, intimacy, and shared interests with their peers
- Foster a sense of belonging in programs and broader organizational contexts
- Support parents to build strong attachment bonds with their children
- Provide opportunities for positive socialization with family and peers
- Sustain adult-youth relationships for at least 6 months, with frequent contact, involvement, and closeness
- Provide helpful, supportive, encouraging, dependable, and consistent mentor/advocate relationships with youth exiting care
- Provide opportunities to recognize the impacts of racism, to explore youth’s cultural community and identity
- Build youth-adult partnerships characterized by power-sharing
- Coordinate community efforts to increase connections across young people’s families, schools, and community programs

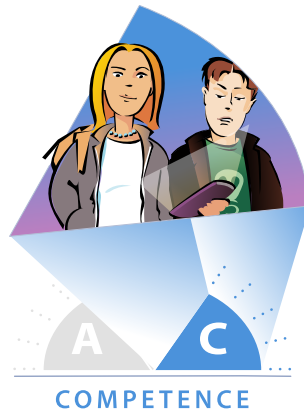
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[Next: Effective Practices: Competence](#)

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[Youth Who Thrive \(full literature review\) \[PDF\]](#)





Effective practices to increase competence in youth

- Offer opportunities for skill-building and mastery of different types of competence over time
- Integrate communication, listening, and cooperation skill-building
- Provide opportunities to interact with youth with diverse perspectives and backgrounds
- Integrate emotional skill-building so that youth can understand, identify and regulate emotions, and use positive emotions to foster well-being
- Encourage youth to problem solve
- Offer opportunities to reflect on and acknowledge individual and group achievements to improve young people's perceived competence
- Ensure appropriate challenge
- Offer opportunities to explore options and make plans for the future
- Provide opportunities for new experiences
- Ensure breadth and depth of programs

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[Next: Summary of Effective Practices](#)

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[Youth Who Thrive \(full literature review\) \[PDF\]](#)





Summary of effective practices based on strong research evidence

Effective practices to increase young people's autonomy

- Acknowledge youth perspectives
- Be responsive to young people's interests
- Encourage initiative
- Invite youth to consider, share and develop personal goals that are relevant to their life planning
- Provide a rationale for rules
- Offer meaningful choices, including options for youth to leave a program if they are no longer motivated to be involved
- Provide opportunities for planning and decision making within programs
- Ensure decision-making opportunities are meaningful, but not too stressful
- Offer more structure and guidance to young people who are already dealing with a high level of responsibilities
- Ensure deliberate use of unstructured time in positive social contexts

Effective practices to increase young people's relatedness

- Provide emotionally supportive relationships particularly during the transition from elementary to secondary education
- Provide opportunities for youth to build attachment, intimacy, and shared interests with their peers
- Foster a sense of belonging in programs and broader organizational contexts
- Support parents to build strong attachment bonds with their children
- Provide opportunities for positive socialization with family and peers
- Sustain adult-youth relationships for at least 6 months, with frequent contact, involvement, and closeness
- Provide helpful, supportive, encouraging, dependable, and consistent mentor/advocate relationships with youth exiting care
- Provide opportunities to recognize the impacts of racism, to explore youth's cultural community and identity
- Build youth-adult partnerships characterized by power-sharing
- Coordinate community efforts to increase connections across young people's families, schools and community programs

Effective practices to increase young people's competence

- Offer opportunities for skill-building and mastery of different types of competence over time
- Integrate communication, listening and cooperation skill-building
- Provide opportunities to interact with youth with diverse perspectives and backgrounds
- Integrate emotional skill-building so that youth can understand, identify and regulate emotions, and use positive emotions to foster well-being
- Encourage youth to problem solve
- Offer opportunities to reflect on and acknowledge individual and group achievements to improve young people's perceived competence
- Ensure appropriate challenge
- Offer opportunities to explore options and make plans for the future
- Provide opportunities for new experiences
- Ensure breadth and depth of programs

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Autonomy, relatedness and competence are affected by demographic factors.



Gender

Socioeconomic status

Ethnicity



These and other demographic factors are important to take into account in programs, but current research does not tell us how to tailor programs with these in mind. There is even less research published about the specific demographic characteristics of the complex youth population in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The following examples are not specific to youth in the GTA, but may provide hints and suggestions to tailor youth programs to a specific group of youth.

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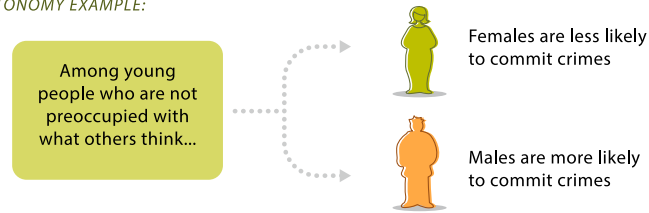
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There are gender-specific outcomes for all three critical factors.

AUTONOMY EXAMPLE:



Gender

Gender may play a role in the influence of relationships. For example, young people who have strong bonds with a parent or adult in their lives are less likely to commit a crime. However, these strong bonds are more influential on the behaviours of young women than young men.

There are some gender-specific outcomes related to social competence. For example, partner sexual communication is associated with increases in the use of contraceptives by young women, but not by young men.

How can our program create space for youth to self-determine their gender expression, their ethnic and cultural identity and their sexual orientation?

How can our program be inclusive of all genders, all ethnicities, all sexual orientations and all abilities?

How can our program encourage youth to feel hopeful about their competence even when they try new and challenging things as they get older?

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Socioeconomic status affects young people's experience of autonomy.

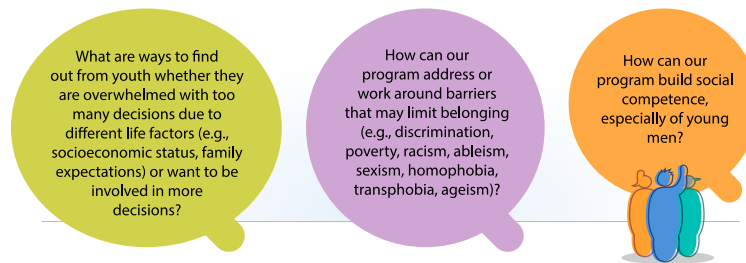
AUTONOMY EXAMPLE:



Socioeconomic status

More guidance and structure may be beneficial for youth living in poverty.

Young men living in inner-city, lower-middle class neighborhoods are more likely to get farther in school if they have high levels of social competence. They are also more likely to end their relationships with peers who commit crimes and are less likely to commit crimes themselves.



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Connection to ethnicity affects young people's experience of belonging.

RELATEDNESS EXAMPLE:



Ethnicity

Family cultural norms about decision-making affect young people's experience of autonomy. Too little or too much autonomy may be detrimental to mental health. Belonging and supportive relationships are important for all youth, but may be more important for ethnic minority youth. Different competences may be more important in some cultures than in others. Cultural competence that includes valuing diversity is related to thriving for all youth, but may be especially important for white youth.



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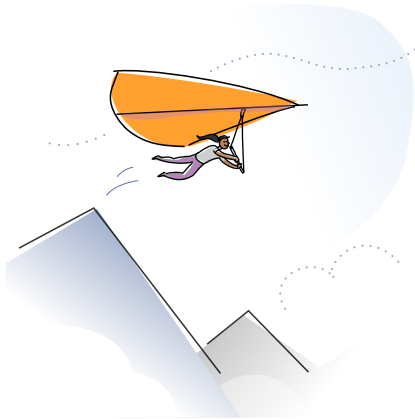
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Autonomy, relatedness and competence can support transitions during early adolescence, mid-adolescence, late adolescence/early adulthood, as well as transitions such as moving to independent living, exiting child welfare, and parenting.



Age-Related Transitions

Overview

Early adolescence

Mid-adolescence

Late adolescence/early adulthood

Lifestyle Transitions

Independent living

Exiting Child Welfare

Parenting

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Autonomy, relatedness, and competence in adolescence

As youth go through adolescence, autonomy increases. Joint decision-making tends to peak in middle adolescence, and individual decision-making rises sharply between 15-17 years and becomes more prominent in late adolescence. Timing for increased autonomy is critical. For example, increased decision-making during mid-adolescence can lead to less depression in late adolescence.

Youth in early adolescence are highly dependent on parental relationships. Peer and romantic relationships gain importance as youth get older. However, there is limited evidence about how these relationships change through adolescence and into adulthood.

Competence generally increases with age, but perceived competence can decrease as young people tackle new or challenging tasks, or become less confident in their abilities.

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Autonomy, relatedness, and competence support transitions in early adolescence.

Support for autonomy can improve self-esteem and encourage physical activity at this time. Puberty can be a time when youth experience shifts in their self-esteem and anxiety about participating in programs.

Relatedness, particularly with positive peers, is crucial during the transition to high school. Youth need to feel like they belong and have peers to rely on as they enter a new environment.

Social competence in early adolescence has lasting impacts as youth transition to secondary school and into adulthood.

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Example: Improving relatedness in early adolescence.



Young people typically experience a decrease in relatedness with adult caregivers and teachers during the transition from elementary to secondary education.

To avoid this gap in relatedness, it is important to provide youth with opportunities to develop long-term relationships with adults other than parents and teachers.

Peer and romantic relationships become more important during early adolescence. Opportunities to build relationships with peers with positive behaviours and social skills are helpful during this transition. Feeling a sense of belonging with a group of peers also contributes to healthy romantic relationships.

Environments that are inclusive help to build young people's sense of belonging during this transition. Opportunities for youth to connect to their own ethnic identity are important for inclusion and belonging, especially for ethnic minority youth.

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Autonomy, relatedness, and competence support transitions during mid-adolescence.

During mid-adolescence, young people who have greater autonomy in making choices about what they want to do, and where, are more likely to have greater self-esteem and social support.

Close peer relationships based on a mutual give-and-take during mid-adolescence can buffer anxiety and provide support, allowing young people to explore future options, such as career choices.

Young people who feel hopeful and encouraged about their competence are more likely to enjoy and master new skills during the transition into post-secondary education.

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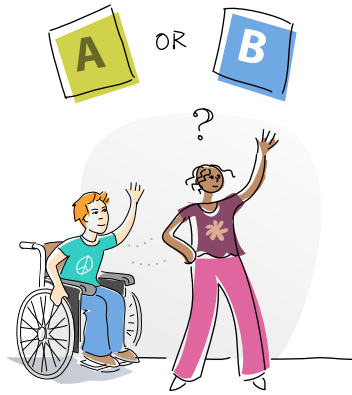
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Example: Improving relatedness in mid-adolescence.



Providing opportunities for young people to make decisions about what they want to do and how they want to go about various tasks helps them develop self-driven goals. During the transition out of high school, self-driven goals lead to greater well-being and help young people make plans for their lives.

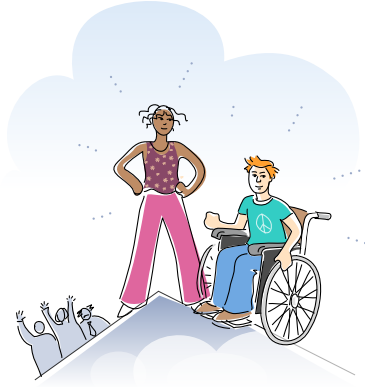
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Autonomy, relatedness, and competence support transitions during late adolescence/early adulthood.

During late adolescence, young adults who are encouraged and supported in their autonomy are more likely to feel like they have the energy to take on increasing independence.

Mentoring/Relationships continue to be important.

Academic competence, social competence with peers, appropriate conduct, and coping ability are associated with successful transitions into adulthood.

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Example: Improving competence in late adolescence/early adulthood.



During the transition from education to workplace, young adults have increasing responsibilities and new tasks. Offering opportunities for young adults to explore options and build planning skills during this transition can be very useful. The ability to choose and effectively pursue goals that reflect one's interests is critical, particularly for individuals who had low competence and/or adverse life conditions as adolescents.

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Young people thrive when they decide where to live.



Support for autonomy during adolescence leads to increasingly independent living during the transition to adulthood.

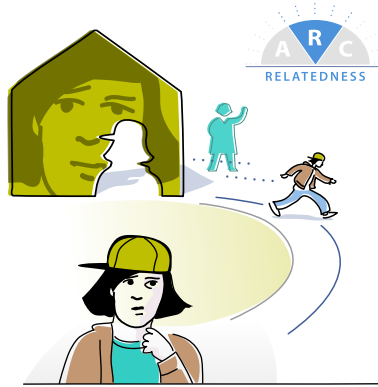
Young people with increased autonomy and independence during mid-adolescence (around 14-16 years) are more likely to be living independently by age 25. When young people decide where to live based on their needs and values, they are more likely to experience well-being.

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Relatedness benefits youth in care.

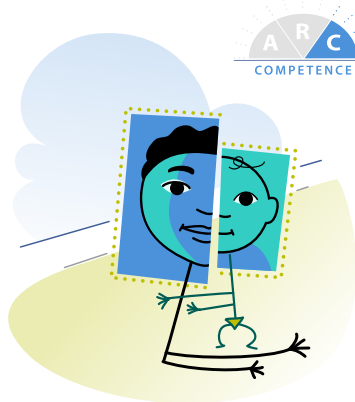
Young people in care, whether in foster care or group homes, often experience difficulties during their transition to independence because of the sudden absence of caregiver support. Relatedness with supportive, dependable, and consistent adults and mentors is a critical factor to support young people transitioning out of care.

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Relational competence important for parenting.

Relational competence, the ability to connect with others, is associated with improved contributions of young fathers during the transition to parenthood. Relational competence includes skills such as the ability to understand others' emotions, to appreciate others, to express positive feelings for others, and to partner effectively.

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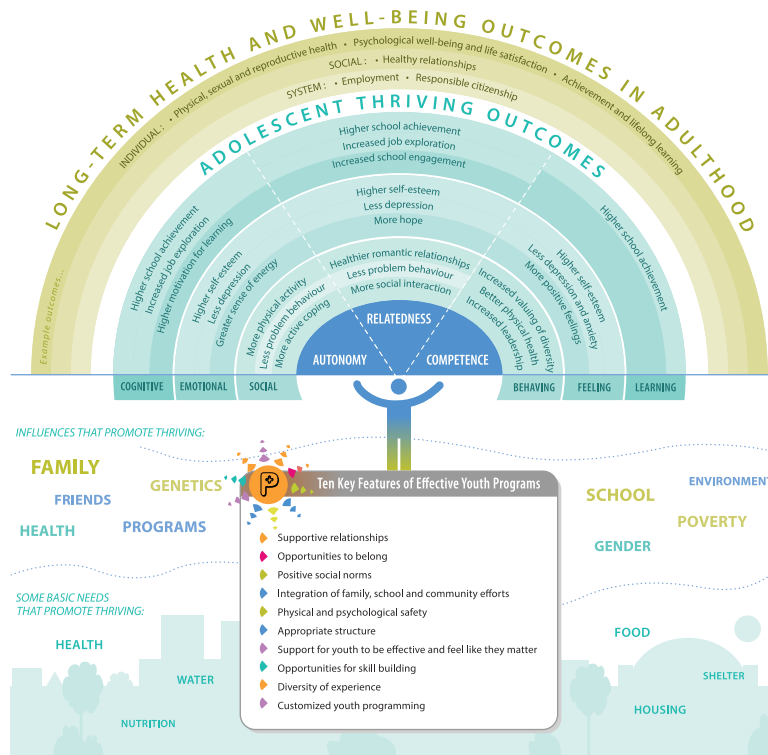
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Youth Who Thrive



* Outcomes listed are examples from studies that passed the standards of evidence test for the literature review. There may be other outcomes that contribute to thriving in adolescence.

[Click to reveal different aspects of the graphic.](#)



[Or click to view the Youth Who Thrive video.](#)

[Or click to download accessible PDF of graphic](#)

All key messages

Section	Key Message
Youth Who Thrive	A summary of critical factors and effective programs for 12-25 year olds, commissioned by the YMCA of Greater Toronto in partnership with United Way Toronto.
Acknowledgements	This resource was created for the YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way of Toronto by the Students Commission of Canada and the Social Program Evaluation Group at Queen's University. Thanks to all those partners and contributors who advised and participated in its development.
Purpose and Background	These pages summarize the strongest current research about what youth aged 12-25 need to thrive. Programmers who intentionally combine scientific evidence with specific knowledge of youth in their program are more likely to produce better results.
Setting the Context	<i>Youth Who Thrive</i> updates and complements the evidence base from recent literature and these previous reports: <i>Community Programs to Promote Youth Development</i> , <i>Youth Impact Plan: An Evidence Review</i> , <i>Roots of Violence</i> , <i>Stepping Stones</i> and <i>Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework</i> .
Developmental Frameworks	Three major approaches useful for designing youth programming have strong evidence: 40 Developmental Assets™, the Five Cs, and Self-Determination Theory.
Outcomes	Youth programs can assist youth to thrive by experiencing positive results, or outcomes, in three areas: learning, feeling, and behaving.
Critical Factors	Three critical factors are shared across the approaches with strong evidence: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.
Effective Programs	The research identifies 10 important features of effective youth programs and their settings. Four features support relatedness, four support autonomy and competence, and two support all three critical factors (autonomy, relatedness, and competence).
Effective Practices	The research identifies effective practices associated with the development of each of the critical factors.

Demographic Factors

Autonomy, relatedness and competence are affected by demographic factors.

Transitions

Autonomy, relatedness and competence can support transitions during early adolescence, mid-adolescence, late adolescence/early adulthood, as well as transitions such as moving to independent living, exiting child welfare, and parenting.

These key messages summarize the strongest evidence from current research about what youth aged 12-25 need to thrive. Understanding the critical factors, key program features, effective practices, and additional influences such as transitions and demographics, will assist when developing and delivering programs with diverse youth in the Greater Toronto Area and beyond.

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[Download Youth Who Thrive diagram PDF](#)





Tools overview

These tools are designed to support you to communicate knowledge from this website with others and to integrate this knowledge into youth programs.



Program development tool

Program designers can use this tool to develop their program model and to work with others in workshops to design programs, or program improvements. There are work sheets to help integrate key outcomes, effective program features and practices into your program. > [Program development tool](#)



Powerpoint presentation

This powerpoint can support you to present the *Youth Who Thrive* framework to youth program designers and deliverers. > [Powerpoint presentation](#)



Workshop guide

This workshop guide can support you to engage program designers/deliverers to connect knowledge from the literature review with their knowledge of programs and youth. > [Workshop guide \[PDF\]](#)



Pamphlet

This pamphlet can be shared with parents and guardians to communicate how programs may support their youth to thrive. > [Pamphlet \[PDF\]](#)



Poster

This poster provides an at-a-glance image of the overall framework to support youth thriving. It can provide a visual summary for everyone in your building. > [Poster \[PDF\]](#)



Briefing note

This short briefing note highlights the key messages of the literature review and how this knowledge can support youth in the GTA to thrive. > [Briefing note \[PDF\]](#)



Framework video

This is a video version of the Youth Who Thrive framework, explaining each element and how each relates to the other, contributing to thriving in adolescence and long-term health and well-being. It can be used in training sessions, workshops and presentations. > [Framework video \[Youtube\]](#)

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[Youth Who Thrive \(full literature review\) \[PDF\]](#)



This resource was created for the [YMCA of Greater Toronto](#) and [United Way of Toronto](#) by the [Students Commission of Canada](#) and the [Social Program Evaluation Group at Queen's University](#). Thanks to all those partners and contributors who advised and participated in its development.



Partners & Contributors

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The YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto decided to conduct a literature review to synthesize the best available current research on youth development. This synthesis is designed to make the review more easily accessible and useful to youth-serving programs and services within the GTA. We partnered with the Students Commission of Canada and the Social Program Evaluation Group at Queen’s University in 2013 to review and synthesize recent (2000-2013) academic and non-peer-reviewed literature on the developmental needs and critical transitions for youth, key outcomes for programs to focus on, and promising interventions.

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Thanks to the Advisory Committee for their invaluable expertise, support and feedback at key stages of the literature review and resource development:

Uzo Anucha, ACT for Youth/York University
Mike Brooks, Ministry of Children and Youth Services
Sarah Butson, YATI, Ontario Lung Association
Sarah Earl, YMCA of Greater Toronto
O'neil Edwards, Pathways to Education/
Ryerson University
Marketa Evans, United Way Toronto
Michael Hall, YMCA of Greater Toronto

Joanna Henderson, CAMH
Michael Johnny, York University
Michelynn LaFlèche, United Way Toronto
Jabari Lindsay, City of Toronto
Moira MacDougall, YMCA of Greater Toronto
Malik Musleh, UNITY Charity
Vicki Poulos, YATI, Ontario Lung Association
Carrie Tanasichuk, YMCA of Greater Toronto

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We would also like to thank the following contributors for their generous insights, which have informed the knowledge mobilization strategy, and for their willingness to share their stories, which have been included in this resource:

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