



## Youth Who Thrive Briefing Note

Research during the past ten years provides significant evidence about the importance of investing in well-designed youth programs. Adolescence and early adulthood (12-25 years) is a period of complex transitions involving intense biological, psychosocial and environmental changes. The literature review *Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective programs for 12-25 year olds*, released in April, 2014, demonstrates that

programs that focus on the critical factors and incorporate evidence-based program features help youth thrive in adolescence. These programs can be instrumental in promoting positive youth development, reducing the risks youth face, and subsequently improving health and well-being in adulthood.

### Critical factors: autonomy, relatedness and competence

Three major approaches used by many organizations and schools have the strongest evidence: 40 Developmental Assets™, the Five Cs, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Three critical factors for youth thriving are shared across these approaches: autonomy, relatedness and competence. Our reorganization of the approaches into these three factors provides a simple way to summarize your program framework, communicate how your program supports youth to thrive, and ground your program in current research evidence, no matter what your approach.

**Autonomy** is having input, voice or agency in determining one's own choices and acting upon personal interests, values and goals. A program environment that supports autonomy includes invitations and encouragement for adolescents to make decisions about what they want to do and how they want to go about various tasks, being assisted as needed.

**Relatedness** is a sense of belonging and connection with others. An example of an effective practice is providing inclusive programs that offer consistent adult-youth relationships for at least six months with frequent contact, involvement and closeness.

The YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto commissioned a literature review on youth development to make research accessible and useful to youth-serving programs within the GTA. The Students Commission of Canada and the Social Program Evaluation Group at Queen's University reviewed recent (2002 to 2014) academic and grey literature, synthesizing the developmental needs critical transitions, promising programs, and key outcomes for program focus.



**Competence** is having the skills to effectively achieve desired goals. Effective programs offer opportunities for skill-building and mastery of different types of competence over time, including emotional, social and cultural competences through opportunities to interact with youth with diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

Focussing on these three factors provides a common, simple, evidence-based framework for program design, improvement and measurement.

### Three areas for program focus: learning, feeling, behaving

To thrive in adolescence, youth need to experience positive outcomes holistically in the areas of learning, feeling, and behaving, as well as physical health. The ongoing achievement of autonomy, relatedness, and competence are each associated with these outcome areas.

***Learning/cognitive outcomes:*** Youth are more likely to have success in school, develop deeper thinking, explore new opportunities and jobs, and be committed to lifelong learning and work.

***Feeling or emotional/psychological outcomes:*** Youth are more likely to have strong self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction, and lower levels of depression and anxiety.

***Behaving or behavioural/social outcomes:*** Youth are less likely to get in trouble with the law, misbehave, or abuse substances. Youth are more likely to have good social skills, seek and accept social support and delay gratification.

Youth who thrive in adolescence are more likely to have long term health and well-being outcomes: they are more likely to be physically active and psychologically well, contribute positively to society, be committed to lifelong learning, find employment and feel satisfied with their lives.





## Ten key features of positive youth programs

Ten evidence-based features are important for positive developmental settings and promote autonomy, relatedness and competence. Reviewing and enhancing youth programs with these features in mind can help programs foster better outcomes.

<b>1. Supportive relationships:</b> Caring and close relationships with peers and adults.	<b>6. Appropriate structure:</b> Environments with clear boundaries, strength-based expectations of achievement, flexibility and adequate support .
<b>2. Opportunities to belong:</b> Opportunities for social inclusion and connection to their communities.	<b>7. Support for youth to be effective and feel like they matter:</b> Youth feel valued and have the capacity to make a difference.
<b>3. Positive social norms:</b> Positive values and socially accepted behaviours modeled by peers, adults and programs.	<b>8. Opportunities for skill building:</b> Opportunities to learn and master meaningful, new and increasingly challenging tasks.
<b>4. Integration of family, school, &amp; community efforts:</b> Coherence and collaboration across social settings in which youth are engaged.	<b>9. Diversity of experience:</b> A broad variety of participation opportunities with peers who have diverse experiences and perspectives.
<b>5. Physical and psychological safety:</b> Feelings of safety and comfort in a context , as well as physical safety	<b>10. Customizing for particular youth needs :</b> including youth involvement in planning and decision-making: Addressing unique needs of specific youth populations.



## Moving forward in the GTA

The demographics of the Greater Toronto Area are unique, and the research about its particular demographic mix is insufficient. The available evidence can only speak to us broadly. Yet, we know that programs are more effective if they are tailored to the specific demographics of youth attending the program. Involving youth in program planning and decision-making can directly contribute to customizing your program. Our informed attention to how our programs work and why, and our willingness to share it, will help advance our sector's contribution to assisting all youth in the GTA to thrive now and well into their futures. By doing so, we also help our city to thrive.