



# Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement

*Competing Priorities or Inseparable Goals?*

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**the forum**  
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT  
*moving ideas to impact*



**The Forum for Youth Investment** (the Forum) was created to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement by promoting a “big picture” approach to planning, research, advocacy and policy development among the broad range of organizations that help constituents and communities invest in children, youth and families. To do this, the Forum builds connections, increases capacity and tackles persistent challenges across the allied youth fields.

Relationships are at the core of the Forum’s work. The Forum builds connections by developing relationships with organizations and individuals throughout the allied youth fields, and by identifying, facilitating and brokering relationships among these contacts. The Forum builds capacity by offering tools, training, advice, presentations, papers, commentary and international perspectives. The Forum tackles challenges by offering fresh ways of looking at old issues, synthesizing information about current efforts

and creating neutral forums for diverse leaders to share experiences, develop joint strategies and align efforts.

Communities are where change really happens. The Forum believes that the information, tools and insights generated at the national level must be shaped by and useful to local communities and practitioners. The Forum also believes that all of these efforts are best undertaken by a range of organizations who are interested in increasing collective learning and action on “big picture” issues.

To help realize this commitment, in 2003 the Forum joined forces with Community IMPACT!, a national organization working with a small network of local nonprofits that involve young people in community change, to form Impact Strategies, Inc. Impact Strategies, Inc., is dedicated to moving ideas to impact in neighborhoods and across the nation. Also committed to bringing international lessons into U.S. conversations, the Forum is a member of the International Youth Foundation’s Global Partner Network.



Printed in the U.S.A. • Reprinted March 2005

ISBN 1-931902-15-1

**SUGGESTED CITATION:** Pittman, K., Irby, M., Tolman, J., Yohalem, N., & Ferber, T. (2003). *Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement: Competing Priorities or Inseparable Goals?*. Based upon Pittman, K. & Irby, M. (1996). *Preventing Problems or Promoting Development?* Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc. Available online at [www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org).

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## Part I

# THE PARADIGM SHIFTS

Concerns about youth problems continue to grow, fueled by incidents and trends as varied as school shootings and declining test scores. These concerns are valid. But while solving youth problems is critical, it is not enough. Too many conversations about young people focus only on their problems, not on helping them grow and develop. Even fewer programs and policies focus on engaging young people in their schools, organizations and communities. Three goals — solving young people’s problems, preparing them for adulthood and helping them get involved — are too often seen as competing priorities. It is time that they are recognized as inseparable goals.

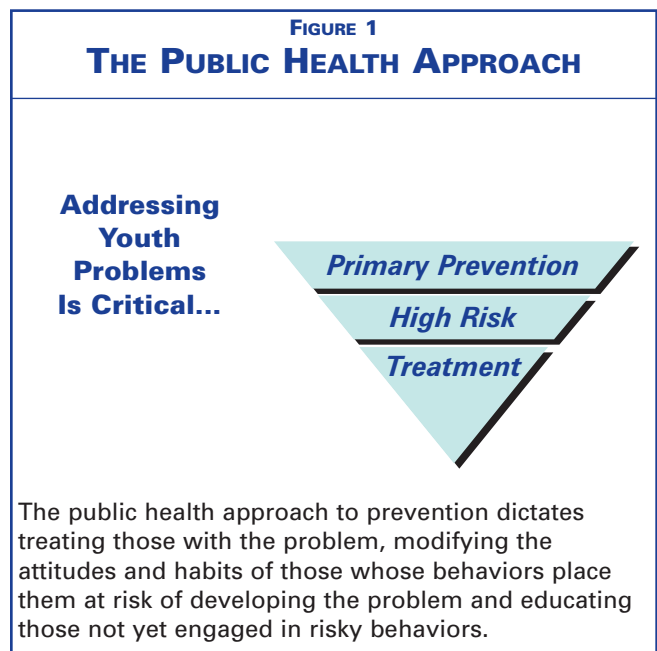
## Preventing Youth Problems: The Glass Half-Empty

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the public health model — with a focus on treatment, intervention and prevention — was brought to bear on the full range of youth problems. The idea of primary prevention — reaching young people earlier, before the problem occurs — helped move pregnancy and substance abuse prevention curricula and services into schools, often down into the middle and elementary grades.

The model has merit, and it has brought legitimacy to much of the non-academic focused work in the youth

fields. But it is not sufficient on its own. When applied to more complex individual issues such as violence, unemployment, or early pregnancy, it limits strategies to those that aim to fix what is broken. When we talk about prevention, we are talking in terms of problems. No matter how early we commit to addressing them, there is something fundamentally limiting about having everything defined by a problem. In the final analysis we do not assess people in terms of problems (or lack thereof), but potential.

Case in point. Suppose we introduced an employer to a young person we worked with by saying, “Here’s



Johnny. He’s not a drug user. He’s not in a gang. He’s not a dropout. He’s not a teen father. Please hire him.” The employer would probably respond, “That’s great. But what does he know, what can he do?” If we cannot define — and do not give young people ample opportunities to define — the skills, values, attitudes, knowledge and commitments that we want with as much force as we can define those that we do not want, we will fail. *Prevention is an important but inadequate goal... problem-free is not fully prepared.*

## Developing Positive Youth Outcomes: The Glass Half-Full

In the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, policy makers and program planners began to take this statement and approach — problem-free is not fully prepared — to heart. They recognized the need to *broaden the outcomes* — to help young people learn and develop across a full range of developmental areas, taking into account cognitive, social, moral, civic, vocational, cultural and physical well-being. And, given that fixing problems was no longer seen as enough, they began to *broaden the strategies*. A range of services, supports and opportunities was recognized as the core of prevention and development strategies (Pittman & Wright, 1991).

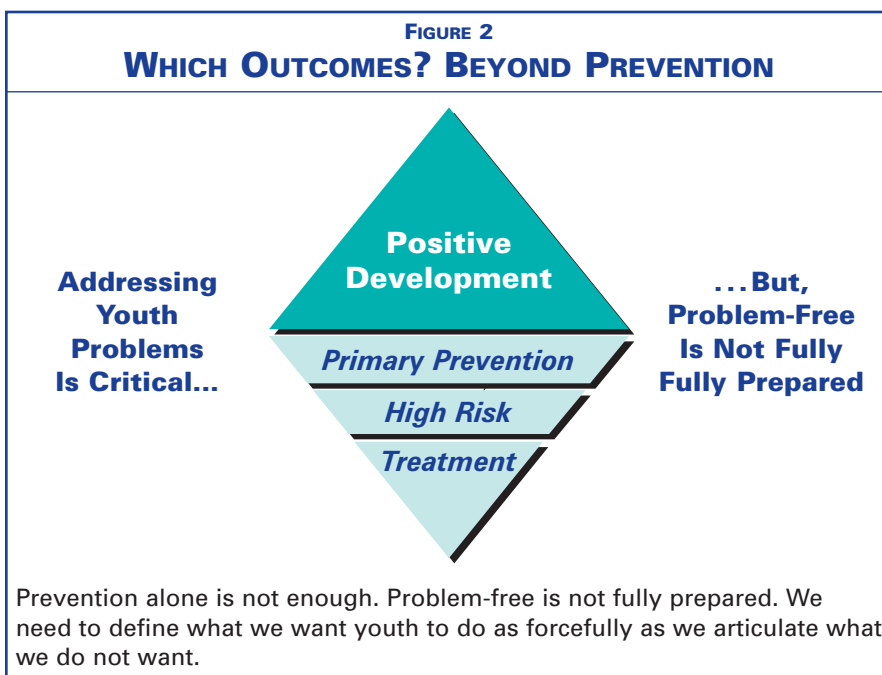
Asserting that problem-free is not fully prepared does not trivialize the importance of either problem prevention or academic preparation. The power of this first paradigm shift, to the extent that it is fully understood, is that it reaffirms the need to *help all youth achieve the goals that parents set for their children, and that young people set for themselves*. It reaffirms the need to invest fully in all youth. It urges us not to ignore the need to support those not in obvious trouble, while challenging us not to limit the expectations and range of supports offered to those who are.

## Encouraging Full Engagement: The Glass Runneth Over

Another sea change, as dramatic as the shift from prevention to development, is currently under way. The 1990s witnessed a growing commitment to youth engagement — both as a tenet of the youth development approach and as a reaffirmation of what young people can do. It is time to move from problem-free is not fully prepared to a new catch phrase: fully prepared is not fully engaged.

Research on development increasingly emphasizes the importance of participation — choice and voice — for adolescents (Pittman & Wright, 1991; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). Mounting evidence suggests that young people who take active roles in organizations and communities have fewer problems, are better skilled and tend to be lifelong citizens (Irby, Pittman & Ferber, 2001). Development is triggered by engagement — young people learn best when they are engaged with their heads and their hearts, and where they have real choice in the situations in which they are involved.

Data on program enrollment cast an equally long shadow and add practical urgency to developmental



research. Young people vote with their feet and older youth simply do not show up for programs that do not challenge them and provide opportunities to engage:

*...Many youth programs nonetheless are not responding as fully as they might to the needs and wants of young adolescents and are thus failing to attract young people after the age of twelve or thirteen — even to such potentially attractive offerings as sports. In particular, youth programs are failing to reach out to young people in low-income environments; to solicit their views, listen to them and act on their suggestions . . . [to] address the needs for earned income and initial paid employment experience. In general programs do not adequately acknowledge the role of gangs in addressing young adolescents' needs (for safety, status, meaningful roles, a sense of belonging, a sense of competence) and they do not actively compete with gangs for youth membership.*

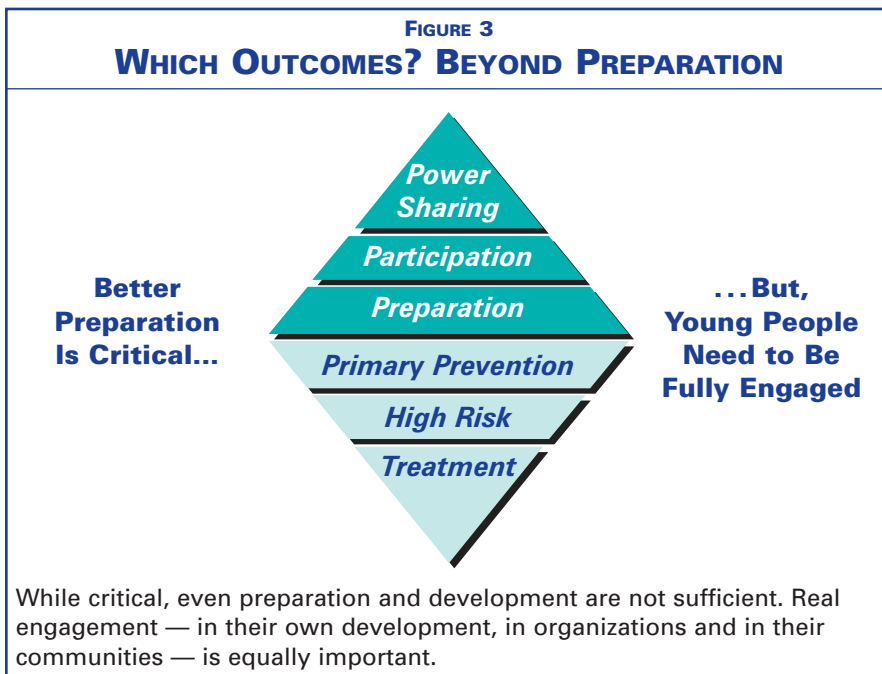
— *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Non-School Hours*,  
Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992

These developmental and practical realities are forcing a change in the way that youth organizations do business. At a minimum, youth development organizations have begun to operate on the principle that young people be given more meaningful choices and roles in the activities in which they are involved, shifting from receiving knowledge to creating knowledge

(passive to active learning strategies) and from being service recipients to being program planners and deliverers. Taken at its broadest, the commitment to youth participation translates into an organizational commitment to involve young people in all aspects of decision making — from programming to fund development to personnel to governance.

Today it is not at all difficult to point to youth-serving organizations, even institutions and systems, that have young people making decisions about their own activities and contributing to the larger organization as volunteers, paid staff, committee members and board members. But efforts to engage youth within youth-serving organizations are not always accompanied by efforts to engage them in their communities. Nor are they always offered with an eye toward meaningful public results. Young people are participants, but are not consistently real problem solvers (Irby, et al., 2001).

There is no doubt that a shift is occurring. Increasingly, youth participation is discussed as a vehicle for strengthening young people, their organizations and their communities (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Where the shift from a focus on active participation to public participation falls short, however, is at the point of arguing that young people's participation in addressing community problems is not only possible and useful, but fruitful — that it pays off against adult standards of success.

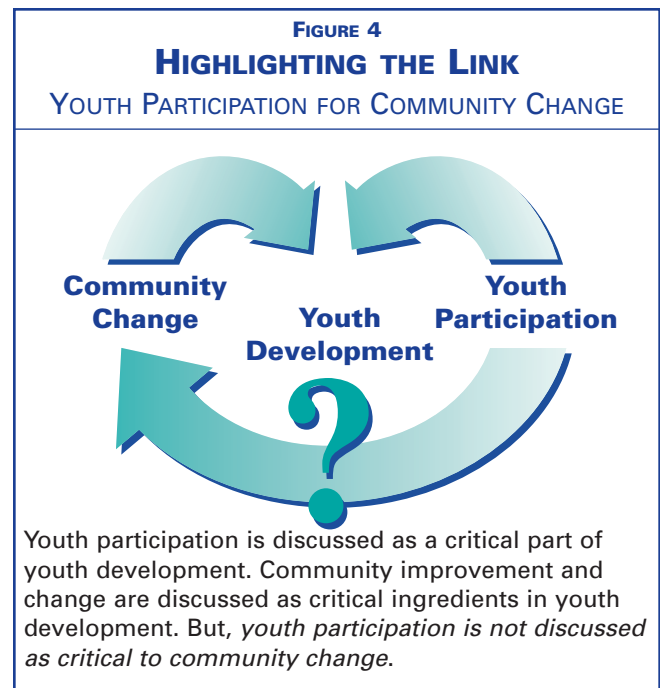


Efforts to promote and support youth action in community problem solving all share an assumption that the work done will be meaningful to the participants and meaningful to a larger group of beneficiaries. But this assumption is not translated into success indicators. The outcomes defined most clearly and measured most carefully are those that pertain to young people themselves: increases in skills and knowledge, changes in attitudes, increases in short term and/or long term involvement in organizations and the community, changes in adult perceptions of youth. Benefits to the organization and to the community are suggested

and often achieved (Zeldin et al., 2000), but these are neither the primary rationale for youth involvement, nor the primary evidence of success offered.<sup>1</sup>

This additional criterion of participation for meaningful change is the main distinction made by a growing number of newly created youth organizations that have a dual commitment to youth development and broader change. But for the most part, youth-focused organizations have not been held accountable to the type of strong, external goals many change-focused organizations use to mark success: Did power shift? Were new resources acquired? Was social justice served? Was lasting change achieved? Were lasting action groups formed? New partnerships forged? More volunteers recruited? Or, more simply, did change occur that was meaningful to a broad group of young people or adults?

<sup>1</sup> The New York State Youth Council, for example, identifies the three categories of benefits. The benefits to youth, however, stand out as the strongest and most measurable. The organizational benefits listed mirror the roles young people can play in organizations and in their communities.



In order to complete and connect the shifts in thinking that have begun over the past decade, we need to take a more careful look at what it takes to prepare and engage young people, and shed some light on the meaning of these important goals.