



EMPOWERING GOAL SETTING



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Empowering Goal Setting: A Basis for Improving Social Well-being in Youth

Joshua Farella, Assistant 4-H Agent, Coconino County

Meghan Penrod, Assistant 4-H Agent, Navajo County

Empowered goal setting is the foundation by which 4-H can support youth in defining and achieving a sense of personal purpose. In this article we review some important reasoning behind empowering goal setting and suggest some useful models for framing interactions with 4-H youth.

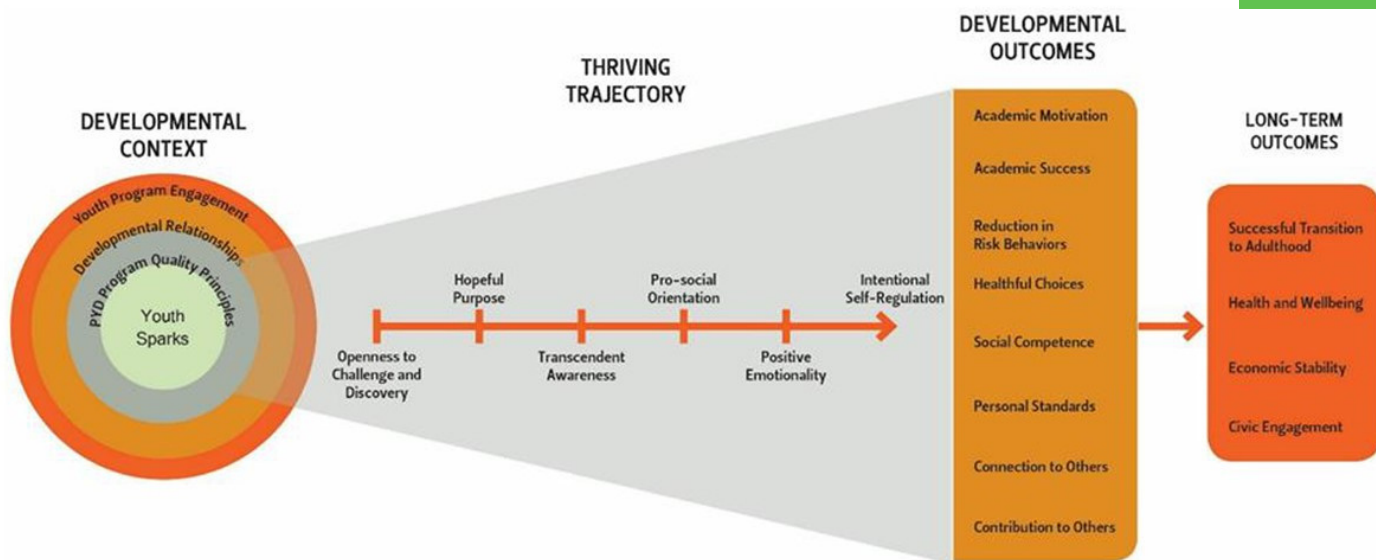
Introduction

Empowering goal setting is a fundamental part of supporting desired short and long-term outcomes in positive youth development (PYD). Setting, progressing, and completing tasks has a profound influence over social well-being in young people. Largely, this well-being revolves around a sense of purpose, i.e. the active and tangible creation of personal meaning and achievement. Given the impact that these skill sets ultimately have on a young person's life, we recognize careful attention must be placed on fostering and growing these skill sets within programs and youth. Further, we must identify and replicate successful structures to maximize positive impacts in young lives.

For the purposes of this article, we are going to discuss goal setting and achievement in terms of the SOC Model, i.e. goal Selection, Optimization, and Compensation. Each of these elements plays a fundamental part in supporting empowered goal setting skills in youth. In 4-H, 'selection' refers to a youth's opportunity to pursue different goals, i.e. projects and activities, and to focus their curiosity on a theme of their choosing. 'Optimization' here is the youth's ability to gather and align resources to succeed in a task, for example an elder 4-her's knowledge and a Project Leader's expertise or material supplies. 'Compensation' is a youth's feeling of achievement and success occurring throughout process of selection and optimization. This is felt not only in the final moment of project completion, but in every moment of participation macro or micro. For volunteers, these essential elements provide a useful framework for adapting content to provide quality engagement for nearly any young person.

Theoretical Framework

Positive Youth Development is based on the belief that, "given guidance and support from caring adults, all youth can grow up healthy and happy, making positive contributions to their families, schools, and communities," (HHS.gov, accessed March 2020)." Programs that use the PYD approach intentionally focus on "developing cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral and moral bonding competencies; self-efficacy; pro-social behavior; a belief in the future; a clear and positive identity; and self-determination," (HHS.gov). Arizona 4-H seeks to make youth thrive by providing a, "high-quality developmental context," and enabling youth to achieve these key developmental outcomes (Arnold, 2018; Figure 1).



Empowered goal setting forms an essential tenet of success within these models of thought. It is a reliable mechanism to improve success and achievement in youth members. This in turn creates purpose, function and meaning – existential requirements for any form of positive fulfillment.

Empowering Goal Setting in 4-H

Utilizing models, such as Selection, Optimization, and Compensation, provides a consistent framework for understanding and empowering goal setting. Youth need to fulfill their curiosity, which requires adaptive content. They also need to feel progress, which necessitates a structured program emphasizing achievement through process. Through purposeful goal setting we can support youth in creating meaning through achievement, and ultimately, finding purpose through their actions. Many experts stress the importance of this occurring in adolescence to ensure a young person can “fulfill individual goals and have the agency and competencies to influence the world around them,” (Nagaoka et al. 2014, p. 30). Timing for hands-on, experiential learning is critical and needs to be relatable to the youth. Volunteers can structure engagement by working to build and strengthen personal qualities that enable youth to effectively reach goals, (Park, 2004). In addition, young members need to experience and progress in contexts of teamwork, and engage in problem-solving, positive communication, and critical thinking. Further, these experiences must be delivered in a context that encourages the young person to drive goal setting and achievement, as opposed to learning trajectories defined by others (Olenik, 2017). An important part of this responsibility falls on 4-H volunteers – setting initial goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, and relevant. However, our highest goal must be to participate only as a supportive and caring adult within the youth’s fulfillment of personal goals and pursuits.

Arizona 4-H structures programming to provide youth with choice, progress, and success. For example, youth can learn and succeed at the club, county, state, and national level with many programs. This hierarchy provides an overarching framework for progress and the recognition of achievement, i.e. optimization and compensation. Yet, any volunteer knows that these are essentially incomplete without a caring adult providing guidance, support, and a personal sense of success at each step of the way. Arizona 4-H and volunteers must mirror their educational strategy, but at different scales. While the organization must provide a general pathway to hitting a target at the National Shooting Sports Competition, the volunteer must provide a series of goals and achievement for a young archer to hit the target for the first time. While 4-H can provide levels of achievement that take years of work and competition to pursue, the volunteer must sustain and foster a young person's curiosity and passion through minutes, and hours; supporting youth to set goals for the next hour, or week. These are two necessary parts of our organization, and each element cannot fully succeed without the other.

It is essential that volunteers provide an environment of opportunity. Such a context must have relevance to a young person; content and moments of progress that excite and motivate. Yet, volunteers can also benefit by working through their own SOC process, i.e. creating and managing programs in a way that sustains personal passion and need for achievement. Managing self-positively is an essential part of the "focused excellence" concept, (Parrot and Hauser, in progress). Intentional focused excellence allows for selecting a theme of program development that can be a joyful compensation for volunteers, i.e. create tangible successes that are personally motivational and empowering. In this way, the quality of programming is immeasurably improved. A collaborative dialogue can be created, where youth, volunteers, and staff have concurrent goals of achievement. Programming can be more fulfilling and instill a sense of success for all involved.

Recommendations

Empowering goal setting is an essential mechanism for creating purpose in young lives. It is the process by which we can support youth in creating their own meaning and motivations, and enable the pursuit of interests, curiosities, and passions. There is value in conceptual models, such as SOC, in producing frameworks for characterizing, reflecting and improving upon our approach to this process. Such models are a consistent basis for an intentional, reflective, and informed dialogue that assures our delivered content provides pathways towards purpose and meaning in young lives. Further, these frameworks can profoundly improve the personal and institutional success achieved by volunteers.

Our attitudes and perceptions are important, and our own relationship with goals and personal success directly impact those around us, thus managing self-positively is an essential element of quality youth development. By endeavoring to make our work meaningful for each youth, we support young people in building a foundation of essential life skills. Youth are enabled to experience positive self-concept, healthy relationships, and motivated to act meaningfully in their club, community, country, and world.

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Cooperative Extension

AUTHORS

Joshua Farella

Assistant Agent, 4-H Youth Development

CONTACT

Joshua Farella

farella1@email.arizona.edu

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