



# NCYOJ's School Responder Model Podcast Series

## EPISODE 1: POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



### INTRODUCTION

In this discussion part of the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice School Responder Model podcast series, NCYOJ's Darren Cosgrove and Catherine Kramer talk about the positive youth development framework and how this approach can be integrated into a School Responder Model. Moderated by Dr. Brandow, this is part one of a two-part conversation that explores strategies for enhancing opportunities for youth and for building collaborative relationships among youth and adults.

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#### | Crystal Brandow:

Hi, this is Crystal Brandow with the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice. Thank you so much for joining us on this podcast. Today we're talking about positive youth development with Darren Cosgrove and Catherine Kramer. Both Darren and Catherine are also with the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice and affiliated with the University of Albany School of Social Welfare. Darren's also affiliated with the Miami Ohio University and Catherine works on the National Institute of Justice, Comprehensive School Safety study, which we'll be talking about today in the context of the School Responder Model. Darren, Catherine, thanks so much for being on this podcast.

#### | Catherine Kramer:

Thanks for having us.

#### | Darren Cosgrove:

Thank you so much.

#### | Crystal Brandow:

So like I said, this discussion is going to center around positive youth development, and we are going to talk about this in the context of the School Responder Model. So before diving into some of the meat of the conversation, it makes sense to back up and talk about what is positive youth development. It may sound a little bit obvious, but what makes it special?

#### | Catherine Kramer:

Yeah, I think when people hear the term positive youth development for the first time, they think like, well, what can this be? That seems like a fairly obvious statement to make. We want youth to develop positively. I think what makes it unique though, is that a lot of us who are working in youth-serving professions or working in youth-serving organizations or agencies actually don't approach our work with young people that way. So Darren and I will talk about a few of the distinguishing features, but I'll kick us off with the first one.

#### | Catherine Kramer:

So positive youth development takes a strength-based rather than deficit-based view of young people. So it's really seeing young people as a collection rather than seeing young people as a collection of potential risk factors. The focus is really

on looking at their abilities, skills and interests that that young person might have. So that means that positive youth development is really about promoting resiliency and competency. So whether that might be social-emotional, behavioral, cognitive, or others in a young person, and it's about supporting that young person with discovering and cultivating their identity. The emphasis is really on self-determination and self-efficacy.

**I Darren Cosgrove:**

And I would also that secondly, unlike many of the other approaches to working with youth positive youth development is really about working with all youth rather than targeting some youth that may be considered at risk. Positive youth development is really about what all youth need to develop. It's really a paradigm shift that we among others argue can have a really democratizing effect on how we think about working with young people of all backgrounds. At the same time, we really want to recognize that not all young people are equally supported in their development of competencies and their self-identity. If it is something that's not happening for a young person in their home life or in their community, and it's also not happening in the institutions that may be intended to serve them, that can be a real problem. And the intentional application of positive youth development by professionals working with young people can really make a significant difference.

**I Darren Cosgrove:**

I think in short, positive youth development, we would say is a really intentional approach to working with young people that aims to draw upon individual and community strengths as a means to enhance youth opportunities in really constructive ways that promote positive outcomes, that promote leadership development and strong relationships. This is done to adherence, not to just like one specific evidence-based curriculum or service model, but through creative and collaborative relationships between young people and then the adults that are working with them.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

Thank you so much. Pointing out those distinguishing features really makes this framework come to life a little bit, right at the outset of this conversation. So thank you for that. So again, this is a podcast series focused on a School Responder Model. So from your experience and the expertise that you both have, what are some ways that you would say positive youth development shows up in the School Responder Model framework? What can this look like?

**I Catherine Kramer:**

Sure. So the School Responder Model is a framework that guides schools through the process of developing their own unique approaches to meeting the needs of youth who have behavioral health conditions. So the goal really is to connect young people with necessary services rather than to kind of respond with these punitive approaches, you know, zero tolerance policies or involving law enforcement, both of which we know can result in young people entering the juvenile justice system. So the School Responder Model is really involved, developing a formal kind of process and supportive structure that schools can use to respond to youth who might have a behavioral health issue. So that involves developing cross-system teams so that schools can come together with service providers, as well as law enforcement to kind of work on these models and implementing them together as well as involving youth and their families in this process.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

So though not specifically part of the School Responder Model, schools developing their model may want to consider incorporating PYD. So given that PYD is more of this broad framework for how to understand young people and how to relate to them and work with them, it would make sense in some ways for the School Responder Model to be part of a broader effort if the school is looking to align its mission to align kind of how it works with young people, with the principles and practices of the PYD framework.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

So this could take really many different forms in a school setting. So though the emphasis is on building relationships with students, investing in their growth and development inside and outside the classroom, as well as letting youth have voice and choice and structuring their learning and developing are all key components of what PYD can look like in a school. So because kind of PYD emphasizes the need to harmonize practices and approaches across all the institutions and organizations that a young person interacts with, we argue that it's really a great kind of approach to take to a School Responder Model that's really about bringing together partnerships with community-based organizations and with law enforcement. So we think that PYD can really serve as this overarching framework through which a school can implement their School Responder Model.

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Wonderful. And I mentioned earlier that Catherine works on the NIJ Comprehensive School Safety Initiative or the School Safety study. And so she's familiar not only with the School Responder Model, as we just heard and also has this expertise and PYD, so it's great to have you here talking about this. And Catherine, you've been working on the School Responder Model work for how many years now?

**I Catherine Kramer:**

Oh, a while. I started on the project in 2017, so right when the project was getting going.

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Wonderful. So that just adds to this conversation and will continue to, in how PYD, although not an inherent core component of this model is a perfect element and framework to fold into the schools that are doing this work. So thank you for that. And something that I'll add is this all sounds very important obviously, as it is indeed. And the tone from both you Catherine and Darren is maybe that you don't believe this is happening to a large extent with young people in schools now or young people in community now. Is that accurate and why do you think that is if so?

**I Darren Cosgrove:**

Yeah, I would say it's certainly, positive youth development is something that it's happening and is being done really, really well in a lot of places. But yeah, I think there's definitely room for more application. And I think, Catherine and I talk about how there are innocent and perhaps not so innocent reasons why positive youth development is not as prevalent at least as we think it should be in practice with young people. Maybe I'll start talking about the innocent reasons why it is not as prevalent. And we'll leave Catherine with the talking about the not so innocent reasons.

**I Darren Cosgrove:**

So I guess as far as some of the reasons why we don't see positive youth development used as much as maybe other paradigms or approaches to working with young people is actually out of care and concern for young people. We as adults tend to be very concerned about all of the potential risks that come with adolescence. Brain science has certainly told us a lot about the developmental period of adolescence and the fact that it actually continues longer than we had previously thought. The brain actually matures into an adult brain around the age of 25. We know that young people are predisposed given the structure of their brains to be taking more risks. And that the ability to fully process things like long-term consequences of actions may not be fully developed.

**I Darren Cosgrove:**

And it's not surprising that as a response to that many adults take a very cautious approach to working with young people. However, it is definitely possible to view things another way. The risk-taking of youth in some ways is a gift. It allows young people to explore the world in ways that are absolutely appropriate and developmentally necessary. The question really becomes about not trying to avoid risks, but supporting young people in the process of taking healthy risks, because that's exactly how they're going to learn about themselves and how they're going to learn about the world around them.

**I Darren Cosgrove:**

So providing opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom to take on self-directed, independent projects or skill acquisition can allow for such risk-taking. That could mean trying out for a school play or entering an art exhibit, playing a new sport or instrument. There's lots of ways that we can encourage this very natural process of risk-taking, and really start to think about risk as this developmental piece of adolescence that doesn't necessarily need to be avoided altogether. We just need to be able to support young people in taking healthy, appropriate, and developmentally meaningful risks.

**I Darren Cosgrove:**

Catherine, do you want to talk about maybe some of the... You know, we recognize that a lot of the absence of positive youth development is fears around wrestling and wanting to keep young people safe. We kind of framed that as the innocent reasons why. Do you want to talk about maybe some of the reasons that might not be so innocent?

**I Catherine Kramer:**

Sure. So Darren leaves me with the not so innocent reasons. Thank you, Darren. So yeah, I think as Darren pointed out, while care and concern on the part of adults for young people is certainly warranted and in common for all of the different reasons that Darren spoke about. It's also pretty common for adults to have a fairly pathologizing view of youth. So many times adults were not even aware of kind of the negative ways in which we view youth and understand youth. So Darren and I, we actually have run several workshops about positive youth development for youth-serving professionals. So these were folks like social workers, actually some educators who came together and we showed them a collection of images of young people that came out of popular culture. So magazines, advertisements, billboards, things like that. And so we showed them these images and it was pretty surprising when you looked at the collection as a whole.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

So the participants really, as they look through the images, it became quite clear that youth are often portrayed as self-absorbed, selfish, lazy, superficial, overly emotional, simple, or uncomplicated, and just lacking any good decision-making abilities. And so what we saw anecdotally, we also know is true in research. So there was a survey in 2014 of adults ages 18 to 87. And we found that there, they survey found that there tended to be more positive use of adults and older adults than of adolescents and young adults. So in the survey, adolescents and young adults were more commonly perceived as lacking morality or being kind of overly self-absorbed or narcissistic compared to other age groups. So it's really not uncommon for adults to view youth as a group to be just obnoxious, troublemakers, lazy, and to really minimize their concerns as unimportant and the kind of the result of hormonal changes and things like that.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

So of course, as professionals, so social workers, teachers, mental health professionals, school resource officers, and others, we also have our own terminology that we use to describe young people. So if we talk about young people in school, we might refer to them as high school dropouts if they exit high school. We talk about at-risk youth, we talk about juvenile delinquents or offenders, and we even use terms like vulnerable youth or substance addicted youth. So as professionals, I'm sure these are terms we have all used that we know that we were socialized kind of in our professional training. So many of us who work with youth or encounter, we encounter these terms fairly regularly, but when we stop and really think about it, we realize how that objectifies young people and really takes this very narrow view of them as just this kind of collection of risk factors.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

So actually what Darren and I have learned that there is in fact, a term for this. It's called adultism. It was first coined in 1985, and it refers to the ways in which adults treat children and adolescents in ways that allow them to gain unfair power over them. So from an adult's perspective, youth are incompetent, irresponsible and not emotionally stable and rational enough to be trusted. And therefore from an adult's perspective, the views and opinions of adults are valued much more than those of young people. So of course it, while it is the responsibility of adults to protect and provide for young people as Darren was talking about, as well as to guide and nurture them. But at times this kind of adult-child hierarchy can become rigid and over-prescribed. So this can contribute to this belief that adults are superior in skills and abilities and virtues and such beliefs about youth and adults have implicitly and explicitly informed service providers' understandings of what youth need and how such needs should and can be met.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

It's interesting the mention of the terminology specifically. So again, in a School Responder Model context, we've worked with schools who have changed their code of conduct, for example, to remove language that would, excuse me, would refer to youth as something like offenders. They removed language that related in school youth behaviors to things aligned with the vernacular you might hear in the criminal system as a way to humanize the students in the school and get away from almost predicting their involvement with the juvenile justice system by using that language. So that's interesting, and whether or not the schools that have done that are familiar with the term adultism. It would be interesting to find out.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

So that might not be something that everyone knows, even if they're doing some of these things that you're describing. So how would you share the ways in which you learned about positive youth development? Again, people may be doing this and not know that they're doing it. They may not have explicitly learned about positive youth development. Darren, do you want to share first how you learned about this?

**| Darren Cosgrove:**

Yeah, sure. So like the origin story. So I actually, I experienced positive youth development before I even understood what it was. So as a teenager, I was really lucky to have some opportunities that certainly have continued to inform and guide my life today as an adult and in my working career. So as a young person, as a teenager, I ended up joining a sexuality and health-focused peer education program. And as a group, we would write and present these like theater-based educational skits, and interactive workshops that focused on sexuality and dating and adolescent health. And we would create these presentations and then offer them out in the community. We would do health outreach to other young folks, to parents, to adults, and to those who are working, service providers working in similar fields.

**| Darren Cosgrove:**

And to prepare the presentations, our group would meet once a week. It was facilitated by an adult advisor and by a junior advisor who was closer in our age, who was more closely positioned as a peer. And during the meetings, we'd learn about different sexuality or health-related topics. We discuss our own related experiences. So if we were talking about like dating violence, we might be discussing what we're seeing within our school or among our peers. So we really have the chance to bring our lived experience and perspective into the group. And then from drawing on either our own lived experience or those of our peers, we would create these skits and these workshops but then also during the meeting. So that was sort of like product that we were doing, which I think ties really into this positive youth development framework.

**| Darren Cosgrove:**

But also during the meetings themselves, we had this chance to form really close relationships with one another. There was definitely like a sense of belonging, of rapport and of trust among the peers in the group, as well as among the adult service providers who were working with us. And we would use that relationship there, that closeness to really have this mission-driven projects, projects that we would be working on whether, again, that's related to doing a skit or an outreach initiative in the community or doing a needs assessment. It really provided us the opportunity to learn about topics that were really important to us, to be actively involved in our learning, to develop really important skills related to like community assessment, leadership, public speaking, things like that.

**| Darren Cosgrove:**

And as I mentioned, this group it had a tremendous impact on me. It had a really profound impact on many of my peers. All in all, the group existed for about 25 years. And I think one thing that speaks to the sort of power and impact of that group is that members from each generation or cohort of members are regularly in contact with one another. Even after all of these years, many of us are still in touch and many of us have gone on to pursue careers in health and human services. For me, looking back on my time as a group member and then I also had the opportunity to be a advisor of the group when I aged out, I realized that the group really provided me and others like me, the opportunity to grow and to explore who we were within an environment that really prioritized our personal perspectives, valued our experiences.

**| Darren Cosgrove:**

The way the group was facilitated was really democratic. The advisors always sought to have decisions about the group or about what our priorities, goals or initiatives might be. All of those decisions were made collectively by the advisors and by the group members. And as a result, we the members came to really understand our ideas, as young people understand our ideas as really valuable contribution. We recognized that we were capable of leadership and community change. And for me, that's had a really tremendous psychological and emotional impact that has continued to shape and influence my sense of self. Certainly as I was navigating adolescents, but even now as I'm in well into my career and adulthood, I still draw upon those experiences and skills.

**| Catherine Kramer:**

Yeah. I would say that my experiences are very similar to Darren in a lot of ways. That I learned about PYD by actually experiencing it myself as a young person. So when I was in high school, I was active in a service learning program that actually provided multiple programs for youth to work out in the community. So in fact, many of these programs were co-led and organized by the youth themselves. I actually, I came in as a freshman and by the time I was a junior in high school, I was the leader of two of the programs. One organized a group of young people who were then paired with older adults who are out in the community. So we would make phone calls. And I started off as a caller myself. I called a woman every

day after school. Her name was Marguerite. I would tell her about my day, the things I did in school, what I was looking forward to. She would tell me about her day, share about kind of her life in general.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

And so the program was really designed to afford these relationships across generations while also providing older adults with an important touch point. And that impact actually could be very real as we were set up for a process that if we could not get in touch with our older adult partner, that we had a way of kind of contacting to do a wellness check and make sure that that person was in fact okay. So it really did serve this very important kind of function in the lives of the older adults who participated. And so I participate in that. I also was involved in a group of young people who would go to do weekly visits to a home for adults with developmental disabilities. And we'd be there for an hour every week. We would do crafts, activities of any kind, really, we would dance to music. And it really, the whole program was really a testament to how young people can really rise to the challenge when they're given responsibility.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

And so the program had a number of really positive impacts on me and as well as the broader community, but the investments made in me as a young person, as Darren said, I think I still feel the implications of that today. It made me feel important. It made me feel like I mattered, I had something valuable to contribute to someone else. The connections that I had, there were two adult leaders who ran the program. And the connection that I had with those two adult leaders was hands down without a doubt, the most important adult relationships that I had in high school when I was a teenager. And I think a lot of people can relate to this, but in high school, as we're kind of going through adolescents, we have a tremendous amount of self-doubt, being very uncertain about ourselves. And I will say that those two leaders of that program, they really lent their belief in me in a time when I really needed it.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

And I will say that I was also fortunate. I had a very supportive mother and she did a lot of advocating for me to have opportunities. And I was an okay student in math and science, I managed to get through. It was not my favorite, but I managed to get through and get through rather quickly. And because that opened up time in my schedule, I was actually able to pursue my own program and apply for a grant which got funded. And I remember this so vividly, like I remember going and talking to the program that I designed was to try and increase literacy among early, like early childhood literacy with toddlers and very young children.

**I Catherine Kramer:**

And I remember going in and talking to service providers about my program and trying to kind of build some partnerships and collaborations. And I just remember what it felt like to sit across from an executive director of this organization who was just, was like, how old are you? I can't believe you're doing this. And that feeling that I had, like how good that made me feel about myself and what I was able to accomplish is still something that is with me today. It's still a moment that I can go back and remember, like it was yesterday. So it really, these moments, we forget how much they truly impact people as they grow up. And I'll say that experience I had really impacted my trajectory and where I am today and the work that I'm doing.

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Thanks so much for sharing those experiences. That's wonderful to hear you two time travel and go back and share about how you learned in PYD principles, essentially with also before being familiar with the framework from a younger age. So thank you for that.

## CONCLUSION

Thank you for tuning into this discussion on positive youth development. We hope you'll listen to part two of this conversation where Darren and Catherine discussed the core principles of PYD and talk more about integrating this framework into a School Responder Model.