



CONNECTING THE DOTS: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS AND THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF 4-H

By

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“A pilot has hundreds of instruments but, in times of crisis, is trained to focus on a few critical indicators of a plane’s condition. A physician has available thousands of tests to diagnose disease but begins with any patient by taking the ‘vital signs.’ In like manner, the Circle of Courage [Essential Elements of 4-H] marks the critical indicators, the vital signs for positive youth development. However complex our curriculum or counseling systems, we must never lose sights of the basics: All children need opportunities to experience *Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity* [emphasis added].” – Brendtro et al. 2005

With a plethora of youth development research and theories to scour and assess, deciding how to best support Positive Youth Development (PYD) can be daunting. However, a review of numerous frameworks proposed and validated by researchers and practitioners highlights that many seamlessly converge within the same basic foci: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. This particular terminology was coined by Brendtro et al. in 1990 and combined within a framework called the Circle of Courage. Roughly a decade later, the Circle of Courage was adopted by 4-H Youth Development, and internally rebranded as the Essential Elements of 4-H (Kress 2003). By aligning program focus with the Essential Elements framework, 4-H Youth Development professionals are employing PYD indicators supported by a century of respected research and practice.

In order to more clearly understand how existing indicators of PYD align with the Essential Elements, a detailed table (see Figure 1) was developed, which demonstrates the connections between over a dozen youth development frameworks and illuminates their alignment with the Essential Elements. Further information about the frameworks highlighted in Figure 1 is detailed below in chronological order of each framework’s introduction to the field of youth development.

The Four Hs

The 4 Hs of the 4-H Youth Development program were coined early in the 20th century by pioneering program leaders striving to define core program values.

Records maintained by Iowa State University Extension (2017) and the Iowa 4-H Foundation (2017) give credit to O.H. Benson and Josephine “Jessie” Field Shambaugh, both school superintendents and Iowa 4-H program leaders, for selecting “head,” “heart,” and “hands,” in 1907, and O.B. Martin, a South Carolina 4-H program leader, for suggesting the fourth H, “health,” in 1911. In addition to core program values, the Hs also represent four branches of life skill development: thinking, managing (head), relating, caring (heart), giving, working (hands), and being, living (health; Hendricks 1998 National 4-H Council 2017).

Self-Esteem & Self-Worth Research

Long before the Circle of Courage, Stanley Coopersmith, a renowned pioneer in the field of self-esteem research, concluded that one’s self-esteem is based on his/her feelings of significance (acceptance, attention, affection), competence (mastery, success, self-efficiency), power (self-control, earned respect, influence), and virtue (worthiness, value to one’s cultural and community; Coopersmith 1967). In 1983, Susan Harter, a developmental psychologist, built upon Coopersmith’s four antecedents of self-esteem, adding control (power and control, as one dimension) and restricting virtue to moral virtue alone (Gonzalez-Mena 2009; Harter 1983). Alfie Kohn, a well-known voice in progressive education and self-worth research, also postulates the existence of four basic youth needs: collaboration, content, voice, and virtue (Kohn 1993; Jones 2011).

The Circle of Courage

The Circle of Courage was developed by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bockern, who first showcased the model in *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (1990). Their combined backgrounds in psychology, children’s behavior disorders, Native American studies, theology, and education lead to a simple, yet profound, PYD framework that integrates traditional Native American child caring wisdom with positive psychology and resilience research.

The Circle of Courage shifts our attention regarding the problems of youth from a deficit focus to one that promotes youths' strengths and developmental needs. The framework identifies "four universal needs of all children: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. When these needs are met, children grow and thrive. But when these needs are frustrated, multiple problems follow" (Brendtro et al. 2005; see Figures 1 and 2 for element descriptions).

The Developmental Assets

The Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework (2007) is based on developmental systems theory and suggests thriving in youth occurs when "active, engaged, and competent" youth are paired with "receptive, supportive, and nurturing ecologies" (Benson 2007).

The concept of developmental assets was first mentioned in 1990 by Peter Benson, a psychologist, who served as the president of the Search Institute from 1985 to 2011. Along with the Circle of Courage, the Development Assets Framework was one of the first models to focus on building strengths within youth rather than focusing on problems. The framework includes 40 assets categorized into internal (e.g., honesty, a sense of purpose, a commitment to learning) and external factors (e.g., family support, positive adult role models, family/school boundaries) which promote PYD. Both internal and external assets are critical, suggesting both the youth and their environment are important for positive development. Benson (2007) proposed that the greater the number of assets a youth has, the more likely they are to experience positive outcomes in multiple contexts.

Resilience Research

Resilience research describes youth needs as protective factors, or conditions that promote healthy development despite the presence of adversity. Bonnie Benard (1991), a prominent theorist in the field of prevention education, has identified four protective factors for youth: social competence (attachment), problem-solving skills (achievement), autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (altruism). Brendtro et al. (2005) also believe resilience research indicates four basic protective factors. Although the terminology is slightly different, the themes are consistent: attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism. Resilience research is in agreement with the Circle of Courage and Developmental Assets Framework in its intentional rejection of the "pathology" model of youth development, a problem-focused approach that dominated youth development research in the 20th century.

The Cs Model

The Cs model of youth development is intended to define the developmental characteristics needed for youth to thrive and be successful, contributing members of society. Introduced in the early 1990s by Rick Little, founder of the International Youth Foundation, as the Four Cs of connection (positive bonds with other individuals and organizations), competence (domain-specific, positive view of self-actions), character (respect, morality, integrity), and confidence (global positive self-worth; Little 1993; Pittman et al. 2000; definitions from Bowers et al. 2010). Lerner (1995) expanded the Cs model into the Five Cs by adding caring (capacity for sympathy and empathy). Currently, some researchers argue that contribution (to self, family, community, and civil society; definition from Zarrett and Lerner 2008) should be included as a sixth C, while others feel contribution is the result of the first five Cs, not an element of its own (Arnold 2013).

The Targeting Life Skills Model

The Targeting Life Skills model was developed in the mid-1990s by Patricia Hendricks, a former Extension Youth Development Specialist at Iowa State University Extension, to aid 4-H staff with program planning and evaluation (Hendricks 1998). Grounded in youth development and resilience research, the model identifies 35 specific skills that young people develop through 4-H (e.g., leadership, goal setting, positive values, critical thinking). The targeted life skills are displayed on a wheel and are organized according to their alignment within the four Hs (i.e., head, heart, hands, and health). Hendricks defines 'life skills' as abilities that help an individual to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life.

The Critical Elements of 4-H

Nearly 95 years after the program first began, 4-H began the lengthy process of conducting its first national impact study which led to the identification of Eight Critical Elements. Forty-five youth development professionals from 23 states met in 1997 to discuss and design the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project (Peterson et al. 2001). After an extensive literature review, the Eight Critical Elements, a collection of program characteristics that result in positive outcomes, were developed; elements included:





Connecting the Dots: Youth Development Frameworks and the Power of the Essential Elements

Essential Elements of 4-H (Circle of Courage, Positive Psychology)	Eight Critical Elements ³	Antecedents of Self Esteem, Self-Worth Research	Resilience Research	Developmental Assets ⁸
BELONGING Opportunity to establish trusting connections. ¹ Youth need to know they are cared about, and feel a sense of connection to others. ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Positive relationship with caring adult ✓ Safe environment ✓ Inclusive environment 	Significance acceptance, attention, affection ^{4,5} ; collaboration ⁶ ; "I am appreciated" ²	Attachment Motivation to affiliate and form social bonds ² ; social competence ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Support ✓ Interpersonal competence ✓ Boundaries & expectations ✓ Safety ✓ Community values youth
MASTERY Opportunity to solve problems and meet goals. ¹ Youth need to feel they are capable, and experience success at meeting challenges aligned with their own interests. ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Engagement in learning ✓ Opportunity for mastery 	Competence mastery, success, self efficacy ^{4,5} ; content ⁶ ; "I can solve problems" ²	Achievement Motivation to work hard & attain excellence ² ; problem-solving skills ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Commitment to learning
INDEPENDENCE Opportunity to build self-control and responsibility. ¹ Youth need to know that they are able to influence people and events through decision-making and action. ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future ✓ Opportunity for self-determination 	Power & Control self-control, earned respect, influence ^{4,5} ; voice ⁶ ; "I set my life pathways" ²	Autonomy⁷ Motivation to manage self and exert influence ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Self-esteem ✓ Positive identity ✓ Youth as resources ✓ Sense of purpose ✓ Planning & decision making
GENEROSITY Opportunity to show respect and concern. ¹ Youth need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose. ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Opportunity to value and practice service for others 	Moral Virtue worthiness (valuable to one's community) ^{4,5} ; virtue ^{4,6} ; "My life has purpose" ²	Altruism Motivation to help and be of service to others ² ; sense of purpose and future ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Caring ✓ Equality & social justice ✓ Positive values

¹Kress, 2003; ²Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 2005, p 132; ³Peterson et al, 2001; ⁴Coppersmith, 1967; ⁵Harter, 1987; ⁶Kohn, 1993; ⁷Benard, 1991; ⁸Search Institute, 1997; ⁹Hendricks, 1996; ¹⁰Gambone & Connell, 2004; ¹¹Li and Julian, 2012; ¹²National 4-H Council, 2016; ¹³Lerner et al., 2005

Figure 1. Youth development frameworks aligned within the Essential Elements of 4-H. The original table has been modified to fit on two pages. We recommend you view the table in its entirety by placing the pages side-by-side.

Connecting the Dots: Youth Development Frameworks and the Power of the Essential Elements

Targeting Life Skills ⁹	Community Action Framework ¹⁰	Features of Developmental Relationships ¹¹	4 Hs ¹²	Six Cs of PYD ¹³
BELONGING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Nurturing relationships ✓ Social skills ✓ Communication ✓ Cooperation ✓ Personal safety ✓ Conflict resolution ✓ Accepting differences ✓ Teamwork 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Learning to connect ✓ Multiple supportive relationships with adults & peers ✓ Safety ✓ Policies & public institutions support youth development 	Attachment Positive & appropriate connections between youth and adults (e.g., teacher & student, coach & player)	HEART relating, caring 	CONNECTION
MASTERY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Learning to learn ✓ Decision making ✓ Critical thinking ✓ Problem solving ✓ Wise use of resources ✓ Keeping records ✓ Marketable skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Challenging & engaging activities & learning experiences 	Progressive Complexity Youth are engaged in progressively more complex experiences as the activity progresses	HEAD managing, thinking 	COMPETENCE
INDEPENDENCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Self-esteem ✓ Resiliency ✓ Goal Setting ✓ Self-motivation ✓ Leadership ✓ Planning/Organizing ✓ Managing feelings ✓ Self-discipline ✓ Self-responsibility ✓ Stress management ✓ Healthy lifestyle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Learning to be productive ✓ Learning to navigate ✓ Meaningful opportunity for involvement and membership 	Balance of Power Power shifts from adults to youth as activity progresses to develop youths' independence	HEALTH being, living 	CONFIDENCE
GENEROSITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Empathy ✓ Concern for others ✓ Service Learning ✓ Character ✓ Community Service ✓ Responsible citizenship ✓ Contributions to group effort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Community awareness & involvement 	Reciprocity Youth and adults feel an equal committed to one another's well-being & success; both experience mutual respect & positive dependence	HANDS giving, working 	CONTRIBUTION
				CHARACTER
				COMPASSION

¹Kress, 2003; ²Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 2005, p 132; ³Peterson et al, 2001; ⁴Coppersmith, 1967; ⁵Harter, 1987; ⁶Kohn, 1993; ⁷Benard, 1991; ⁸Search Institute, 1997; ⁹Hendricks, 1996; ¹⁰Gambone & Connell, 2004; ¹¹Li and Julian, 2012; ¹²National 4-H Council, 2016; ¹³Lerner et al., 2005

Figure 1. Youth development frameworks aligned within the Essential Elements of 4-H. The original table has been modified to fit on two pages. We recommend you view the table in its entirety by placing the pages side-by-side.

a positive relationship with a caring adult, a safe physical and emotional environment, an inclusive environment, engagement in learning, the opportunity for mastery, the opportunity for self-determination, the opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future, and the opportunity to value and practice service for others. Over the next few years, the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project conducted a multi-state survey of over 2,400 youth and 400 adults, which validated the elements as critical to successful PYD (Peterson et al. 2001).

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Connell and Gambone 1998) was developed by James P. Connell, co-founder of the non-profit Institute for Research and Reform in Education, and Michelle Alberti Gambone, sociologist and founder of non-profit Youth Development

Strategies Inc. Their combined background and leadership in the youth, school, community, and policy sectors influenced their development of a comprehensive framework combining the fundamentals of youth development with community conditions. The Community Action Framework highlights the interconnectedness between community supports and opportunities for youth with long-term outcomes for youth (Gambone and Connell 2004). It includes individual-level youth outcomes (e.g., learning to be productive) as well as the environmental factors needed to reach such outcomes (e.g., multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers). The framework is organized into five sequential components; the third component, ‘increase supports and opportunities for youth,’ most closely aligns with other PYD frameworks. This component includes multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers, meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership, challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences, and safety.

The Essential Elements of 4-H

In 2003, Cathann Kress, National 4-H Program Director from 2002–2008, reviewed 4-H program evaluation data and found PYD was most effectively facilitated when 4-H intentionally included the four Circle of Courage elements in its programming. Kress then consolidated the previously identified Eight Critical Elements within the Circle of Courage, keeping the vocabulary and meaning of the Brendtro et al. (1990) model constant (Figure 2), but internally rebranding the framework as the Essential Elements of 4-H. The Essential Elements (belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity) are considered necessary within all 4-H Youth Development programs and projects.

Developmental Relationships

Quality relationships between youth and adults have long been recognized as critical for effective youth development programming. In 2012, Junlei Li, a professor of psychology, along with graduate student Megan Julian, presented four features that make up high-quality developmental relationships. Li and Julian pulled from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) definition of interactions, considering the four features highlighted by Bronfenbrenner to be the ‘active ingredients’ in promoting positive development in any youth setting. Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist who is best known for developing Ecological Systems Theory, defined the optimal conditions for developmental relationships:

“Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favor of the developing person.” – Bronfenbrenner 1979

Essential Elements of 4-H (Circle of Courage, Positive Psychology)

BELONGING: Opportunity to establish trusting connections.¹ Youth need to know they are cared about, and feel a sense of connection to others.²

INDEPENDENCE: Opportunity to build self-control and responsibility.¹ Youth need to know that they are able to influence people and events through decision-making and action.²

MASTERY: Opportunity to solve problems and meet goals.¹ Youth need to feel they are capable, and experience success at meeting challenges aligned with their own interests.²

GENEROSITY: Opportunity to show respect and concern.¹ Youth need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose.²

¹Kress, 2003; ²Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 2005, p 132

Figure 2. Essential Elements of 4-H definitions.

From this, Li and Julian (2012) specify the four features of developmental relationships as attachment (positive and appropriate connections), progressive complexity, balance of power, and reciprocity (commitment to one another's well-being, positive dependence). They suggest that developmental relationships apply to not only two people, as mentioned by Bronfenbrenner, but also to groups.

Conclusion

Indicators of Positive Youth Development (PYD) have been conceptualized in a variety of ways, often making it difficult for youth development professionals to determine which framework best fits their program's needs. Figure 1 highlights that the PYD indicators of various well-known youth development frameworks are not only similar in theme but align neatly within the four Essential Elements of 4-H (i.e., Circle of Courage). This alignment indicates that the Essential Elements (belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity) are supported by an impressive history of respected research and practice. 4-H Youth Development professionals can confidently utilize the Essential Elements framework to guide program development, implementation, and evaluation.

Note

The concept for Figure 1 grew from a similar figure designed by the authors and collaborators for a previous publication (Weybright et al. 2016).

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