

Essential Elements of Positive Youth Environments **pippahpack**

Positive Youth Environments are Accepting

Positive Youth Environments are Accepting. Environments promote acceptance, not just tolerance, of diversity, which includes race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, body type, and gender. Policies and practices are geared toward eradicating discrimination and achieving social justice and equity. Communities have positive images of youths and do not promote negative stereotypes.

- Every hour someone commits a hate crime. Every day at least eight black people, three white people, three gay men or lesbians, three Jews, and one Latino become hate crime victims (*Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999*). There are approximately 676 active hate groups in the United States (*Southern Poverty Law Center, 2001*). Most hate crimes nationwide are committed by youths under the age of 22 (*Southern Poverty Law Center, 2001*). **The United States is becoming more racially/ethnically diverse. Adolescents represent the most diverse segment of the population** (*Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999*). **Racial and ethnic diversity enriches society in immeasurable ways.**
- Bullying and harassment are significant problems affecting youths, creating fear and anxiety, and are deterrents to learning. Girls are more likely to experience sexual harassment in school. **Comprehensive school-based anti-bullying programs and policies can be effective in reducing bullying incidents** (*Eslea & Smith, 1998*).

Students today report having a greater awareness of school policies and materials related to sexual harassment than students surveyed in previous years (*American Association of University Women, 2001*).

- Experiencing racism is related to poorer physical and mental health. A study of African Americans found perceived discrimination to be associated with hypertension, psychological distress, self-reported illness, and lower well-being (*U.S. Public Health Service, 2001*). **Strong family and community relationships serve as protective factors for youths of color** (*Johnson, Roberts, & Worrell, 1999*).
- Failure to understand the cultural background of adolescents and their families can lead to misdiagnosis, lack of cooperation, poor use of health services, and general alienation of adolescents from the health care system (*Davis & Voegtle, 1994*). **Cultural competence serves to increase the quality of services, and increase communication between service**

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providers and clients, thereby producing better outcomes (NASW, 2001).

- Parents and families who place high emphasis on personal attractiveness can affect body dissatisfaction and result in eating disorders (*National Women's Health Information Center, 2001*). External images, biases and stereotypes perpetuated through the media and other social mediums can affect adolescents' self image.

Greater diversity and realistic portrayals and media images of

various body types and images challenge accepted norms and can affect self-concept and social acceptance of diversity.

- Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youths may fear negative responses and compromised confidentiality from medical providers regarding their sexual orientation which, in turn, influences the fact that they are less likely to seek needed medical services (*Clayton, Brindis, Hamor, Raiden-Wright, & Fong, 2000*).

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Community Checklist

- Integrated, demographically diverse communities
- Service providers who represent the diversity of the community served
- Resources and services that are equitably distributed and tailored to meet the unique needs of youths and their families
- Cultural competence training and continuing education provided for service providers working with youths and their families
- Organized opportunities for youths and their families to participate in cultural exchanges such as community celebrations and activities in schools, agencies, and community centers
- Active school and community campaigns aimed at acceptance of diversity and promotion of anti-hate attitudes
- Media ads and social messages that promote good health, not specific images of beauty
- Visible images in school and community settings that show the diversity of youths, highlighting positive behaviors
- Existence and equitable funding of extracurricular and sports programs for girls
- Comprehensive school and community programming and policies that address bullying, sexual harassment, and discrimination
- Monitoring systems for targeted solicitation of youths by hate groups
- Youth programs that provide venues for young people to share their experiences, address concerns, and solve problems

Tips on Things You Can Do

- Integrate the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* into your practice.
- Ensure that your office/service setting is reflective of your clients with diverse youth-oriented and culturally specific service information, magazines, posters, and so forth.
- Actively engage in activities that will increase your awareness of youth culture, including popular music, television and radio programming, and magazines and other print media.
- Tailor health and service information to be culturally specific.
- Disseminate information and resources to professional colleagues.
- Introduce to your school or service setting curricula or training information related to diversity.
- Establish a policy task force to work with decision makers in developing policies and standards for schools/service settings that address disparities and discrimination.
- Support advocacy campaigns and organizations that focus on body image acceptance and self-esteem building with youths.
- Work with youth groups such as drama clubs to develop innovative ways to address issues of diversity and acceptance.