Core Competencies

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Overview
Well-adjusted youth have a repertoire of socioemotional skills that help them effectively navigate their social worlds. These skills, or competencies, can also prevent involvement in problem behaviors such as substance use, violence, delinquency, early school leaving, and high-risk sexual behavior. There have been a number of efforts to identify a set of “core competencies” or primary markers of healthy adolescent socio-emotional development. Delineating a common set of indicators has clear benefits for developing coordinated programs to promote positive youth development and prevent youth problems. Guerra and Bradshaw (2008) have recently proposed a core competency framework relevant to both healthy adjustment and prevention. This framework highlights the importance of five core competencies: (1) positive sense of self, (2) self-control, (3) decision-making skills, (4) a moral system of belief, and (5) prosocial connectedness (Guerra and Bradshaw 2008).

Competence and Adjustment
What set of core competencies best describe a well-adjusted youth? The term competence refers to qualities that foster effective adaptation in a given context. From a developmental perspective, competence has been framed as mastery of key developmental tasks required for effective adaptation within a particular life stage and social setting. These tasks typically reflect an array of skills, beliefs, and behaviors linked to the age-graded requirements of a given context. For example, when children enter school, they must learn to follow rules and obey adults. To date, there is no universal list of primary developmental tasks of adolescence, although some broad models have been influential in research and practice. In general, models of youth competence have been promoted by advocates of a positive youth development approach. From this perspective, successful adjustment is viewed not as the absence of problems but as the presence of positive attributes that allow youth to reach their full potential.

One of the most widely used approaches to delineating youth competencies is the developmental assets model promoted by the Search Institute (Benson 1997). According to this model, there are 40 key developmental assets related to healthy adjustment and socio-emotional competence. Some of these assets reflect internal qualities, such as positive values. Other assets reflect external assets linked to how youth are treated, such as having caring families and living in communities with high standards for youth behavior. In essence, developmental assets are much broader than competencies because they include contextual supports that promote competencies (such as caring...
families). It is also not clear whether all assets are of equal importance or whether there is a subset of assets of primary importance to healthy adjustment (Small and Memmo 2004).

A more focused approach by Lerner and colleagues identified five Cs that youth need to thrive: cognitive and behavioral competence, confidence, positive social connections, character, and caring, leading to a sixth C of contribution to society (Lerner and Benson 2003). The emphasis of the 5C approach again is on supports and strengths youth need to reach their full potential as productive members of society. Competence is listed as an essential attribute; yet, competence is not clearly defined in terms of specific skills, attitudes, or behaviors.

### Competence and Prevention of Youth Problems

Efforts to prevent youth problem behaviors have emphasized discrete risk factors that increase the likelihood of problem behaviors, protective factors that can buffer the effects of risk factors, and promotive factors that portend adjustment absent risk. In general, most programmatic efforts focus on decreasing risk and enhancing protection/promotion, with separate programs for each type of problem behavior. Further, the distinction between building assets and preventing problems has led to an arbitrary split between positive youth development efforts and risk prevention programs (Small and Memmo 2004). In practice, there are common factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of multiple problem behaviors and also predict healthy adjustment.

A focus on core competencies allows for the delineation of common factors that at high levels provide a marker for positive youth development and at low levels increase the likelihood of adolescent risk behavior. A core competency framework can facilitate theoretical and empirical linkages across these different research traditions and guide proactive efforts to promote adjustment and reduce risk (Guerra and Bradshaw 2008). Indeed, many evidence-based competence enhancement and prevention programs emphasize a discrete set of desired youth characteristics. The core competency framework describes key developmental competencies for adolescents that have been linked empirically to healthy adaptation and lower levels of risk behaviors.

### Five Core Competencies

Although there is not a commonly accepted set of benchmarks for adolescent adjustment, certain competencies have been at the forefront of developmental and prevention research. Based on a careful review of the literature, Guerra and Bradshaw (2008) proposed a core competency framework based on five core competencies linked empirically to adjustment and problem behaviors. These are: (1) positive sense of self, (2) self-control, (3) decision-making skills, (4) a moral system of belief, and (5) prosocial connectedness. Although these competencies are interconnected (for example, competent problem solving requires both self-control and good decision-making), each has received considerable attention in its own right. Each competency can also be subdivided further into smaller components. Youth who are adept in these five competencies are likely to be well-adjusted whereas youth with specific deficits in one or more areas are more likely to be at risk for problem behaviors.

**A Positive Sense of Self.** The centrality of the “self” to healthy adjustment has long been a focus of psychological inquiry. Although there is general agreement that a “healthy self” is important for behavior and adjustment, there is less clarity about what this means. Essential elements of a healthy self may also vary by age. Three aspects of self-development that seem to be particularly critical during adolescence are self-awareness, agency, and self-esteem. Stated otherwise, a positive sense of self during adolescence requires a cohesive and integrated concept of the self, a sense of agency or volition over self-generated acts, and positive self-evaluations.

One of the most universally acknowledged and widely studied aspects of adolescent development is the search for a coherent identity (Erikson 1968). Because self-descriptions are likely to vary across different roles with different demands, adolescents are confronted with conflicting self-stories that must be resolved. The resolution of this identity “crisis” has long been considered a primary developmental task of adolescence (Erikson 1968). In this vein, self-awareness for adolescents requires not only an accurate assessment of their physical, psychological, and behavioral attributes but also a more refined and integrated conceptualization of the self.

This integrated self-awareness helps the adolescent understand the present and sets the stage for the
future – providing clear direction and purpose. Thus, self-awareness during adolescence involves reconciling multiple conceptions of the self and aligning those concepts with future possible selves to achieve personal goals. Just as an integrated self-awareness can provide purpose for future efforts, a positive future orientation has been linked with lower levels of problem behaviors including violence and substance use.

A positive sense of self also hinges on a sense of volition over self-generated acts, or personal agency. From infancy, children derive pleasure from controlling events, such as moving parts of a toy or throwing a ball. Over time, an important component of self-development is the increasing realization that the self is an active, independent agent. This provides the foundation for a sense of self-efficacy, defined as individual's beliefs about their capacities to produce designated levels of performance that can influence relevant events in their lives. A positive and strong sense of self-efficacy promotes adjustment and well-being, including sustained effort and the ability to recover from failure; low self-efficacy may lead adolescents to boost self-confidence by developing beliefs in their abilities to control negative events, such as becoming a school bully.

A more controversial marker of adjustment during adolescence is self-esteem. Although this has proven to be a popular concept in practice, there has been a fair amount of scholarly debate about the meaning and importance of self-esteem for adjustment and prevention of youth problem behaviors. Self-esteem includes both global judgments of self-worth as well as domain-specific self-evaluations. In some sense, global self-esteem should reflect a broad self-assessment that provides a composite across these multiple domains. In general, high self-esteem has been associated with multiple markers of positive affect and life satisfaction and is an important indicator of healthy adjustment during adolescence. However, understanding the connections with adjustment and problem behaviors requires a more nuanced understanding of how self-esteem is defined, what is it based on, and how it is actualized.

Healthy adjustment may be contingent on the specific domains relevant to youth and opportunities for engagement and success in these domains. When youth are engaged in socially valued domains such as academic achievement, there are more opportunities to develop high self-esteem, which should be linked to adjustment in settings where education is valued. On the other hand, when youth have limited success experiences in domains such as school, poor performance may lead to low self-esteem and increase the likelihood that youth will drop out of school, suggesting a connection between low self-esteem and youth problem behaviors.

Self-control. From early childhood onward, children must increasingly regulate and manage their behavior in a controlled fashion and consistent with situational or normative demands. Self-control involves obeying disliked rules, resisting immediate rewards, and modulating responding in accordance with age-graded standards. Turn-taking is an example of self-control that is quite difficult for young children but becomes easier and more normative as children get older. A further distinction involves the difference between emotional regulation of feelings and behavioral regulation of actions.

By adolescence, youth are expected to have internalized standards for behavior, which requires more internal monitoring (or self-control) and less external regulation. However, recent advances in understanding adolescent brain development suggest that brain maturation linked to frontal lobe activation (implicated in self-control) continues to develop well into early adulthood. In addition to developmental advances in self-control, there are clear individual differences associated with temperament, neurobiology, and caregiving environments.

Why is self-control critical for both optimal adjustment and lower risk for problem behaviors? Clearly, goal-oriented behavior requires self-control and delay of gratification in order to pursue one’s goals. Studying for an exam is likely to have more long-term benefits than short-term appeal. A teenager who wants to get good grades must exert self-control and spend the requisite time studying rather than staying out late with friends. Both friendships and intimate relationships require learning how to regulate negative emotions in a constructive fashion. Some studies have suggested that self-control is a limited resource that can be depleted if called on too often.

Although self-control is essential for healthy adjustment, it has been studied primarily in relation to problem behaviors, with research supporting a consistent relation between low self-control and problem
behaviors such as aggression and delinquency. For example, according to Gottfredson’s *self-control theory of delinquency* (Gottfredson 2007), low levels of self-control are the most robust predictors of criminal behavior. Higher levels of behavioral control have also been linked to reductions in problem behaviors such as delinquency, substance use, and high-risk sexual behavior. Indeed, many prevention programs designed to impact a range of problem behaviors emphasize helping youth learn self-control strategies to better regulate their feelings and behavior.

**Decision-Making Skills.** Many of the choices youth make as they transition from childhood to adulthood have a marked impact on their current and future well-being. In tandem with developmental advances in abstract reasoning and changes in brain architecture, the capacity to make effective decisions increases during adolescence. Teenagers are capable of imagining future outcomes in the present, coordinating multiple and independent pieces of information, and understanding the likelihood of various consequences, although they also appear to have some difficulty learning from negative consequences. The ability to make effective decisions across multiple situations is an important marker of healthy adjustment and can impact future well-being.

What are the characteristics of good decision-making that reflect competence in this domain? The answer is not straightforward, in part, because different models of decision-making have been used to study relations with different types of behavior. Similar to research on self-control, much of the decision-making research with adolescents has emphasized problems in decision-making, or immaturity of judgment, as related to specific negative behaviors. For example, studies of adolescent risk behaviors (including substance use) have emphasized characteristics of decision-making linked to risk, including accuracy of risk perceptions, perceived vulnerability, and consideration of consequences. In general, adolescents are more likely than adults to overestimate risk and are just as likely to feel vulnerable. The most notable difference is that adolescents, particularly those who are high-risk takers, focus more on perceived benefits than perceived harm when making decisions.

There have also been numerous studies of decision-making derived from social-information processing (SIP) models of competence and behavior (Crick and Dodge 1994). These models emphasize sequential processing of information related to social situations, including searching for relevant cues, interpreting these cues, setting goals, generating alternative solutions, considering consequences, making a decision, and reflecting on its impact. They also incorporate underlying rule structures or scripts stored in memory that serve to guide decision-making.

From a developmental perspective, competence in sequential processing is believed to improve over time. According to SIP models, good decision-making involves attention to relevant cues in a non-biased manner, setting prosocial goals, linking actions with these goals, considering multiple response options, thinking about both positive and negative consequences, knowing when to engage in beneficial behaviors and refrain from harmful ones, and taking action and reflecting on one’s actions to evaluate one’s decision. More responsible decisions during adolescence have been linked with more sophisticated and well-integrated decision-making skills. Still, most studies utilizing this model have emphasized deficits in processing as related to problem behaviors. For example, a robust finding is that more aggressive children and youth tend to attribute hostile intent to others under ambiguous circumstances (labeled hostile bias).

**Moral System of Belief.** This core competency reflects a system of values and beliefs (as opposed to a discrete skill such as self-control or decision-making). A well-adjusted youth must be a productive and engaged member of society, which requires internalizing a set of beliefs about how people should treat each other. Moral beliefs include judgments about moral issues involving harm, fairness, integrity, and responsibility. Although there has been much debate throughout history about the nature of moral thought and action, in simple terms, a moral system of belief emphasizes the common good and the welfare of others and engages psychological processes such as empathy and perspective-taking. Competency in this domain is reflected in the adolescent’s ability to consider the effects of his or her actions on others, and make decisions that balance personal needs with the welfare of others.

For some youth, a moral system of belief becomes part of their emerging personal identity, labeled *moral*
identity (Damon 2004). Youth who endorse a moral course of action and believe it is part of who they are (i.e., their identity) are more likely to act accordingly. Indeed, an emphasis on the development of a moral system of belief and a moral identity is reflected in many programs designed to enhance positive youth development, including the Search Institute’s asset-building model as well as character education and life skills programs. To the extent that problem behaviors cause harm to others, youth with a well-developed moral system of belief and moral identity should be less likely to engage in these behaviors. Building a moral system of belief and related moral identity should also be an important component of prevention programs.

Prosocial Connectedness. The concept of connectedness has been extremely popular in the positive youth development field. These programs often set as goals developmental outcomes such as investment, engagement, attachment, bonding, sense of belonging, and mattering. These terms have been applied to a variety of settings including peers, families, schools, communities, and social institutions. The end goal is a psychological state of “belonging” that empowers youth because they feel trusted and acknowledged. Presumably, when youth feel connected to a social context, they are also more likely to act in a respectful and careful fashion. Of course, an important caveat is that this connectedness reflects attachment to prosocial groups rather than antisocial groups. Bonding to antisocial groups such as gangs does not enhance positive youth outcomes. Hence, the term prosocial connectedness is used to denote attachment and involvement with prosocial and supportive social groups.

Prosocial connectedness requires skills and opportunities. One of the challenges for youth growing up in more disadvantaged communities is that there are often limited opportunities for involvement in prosocial groups; resource poor communities often struggle to provide meaningful and positive opportunities for youth engagement. Further, engagement in prosocial groups often requires skills or talents. Youth who perform better in school are more likely to be engaged, youth who are talented in music can join the orchestra or band, and so on. In recent years, online communities have provided opportunities for social connections, although it is difficult to gauge the extent to which these online opportunities emphasize prosocial connectedness.

Several recent empirical reviews of youth adjustment have highlighted the importance of youth connectedness across multiple social domains as a primary determinant of adjustment (Commission on Children at Risk 2003). Low levels of prosocial connectedness also have been implicated in risk-taking and problem behaviors. For example, adolescents who report higher levels of connectedness with parents have been found to report lower levels of unprotected sexual intercourse and make safer sex decisions overall. Youth who report positive connections to school are less likely to engage in bullying behavior and to drop out during adolescence, although connectedness to school tends to decrease over time, with high school students reporting the lowest levels.

Conclusion

Empirical research suggests that these five core competencies, taken together, play an important role in both youth adjustment and the prevention of problem behaviors. High levels of the core competencies provide a marker for positive youth development whereas low levels of one or more competencies increase the likelihood of adolescent risk behavior. Some competencies have more bearing on certain risk behaviors; for example, moral system of belief is most likely to impact youth violence and actions that cause harm to others. Programs and policies designed to bolster these five core competencies should increase the well-being of all youth and prevent the emergence of problem behaviors during adolescence.

References

Corporal Punishment in Schools

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Educational systems long have been dealing with debates surrounding the appropriate types of discipline that can or should be used by teachers and administrators in public schools. Among the most controversial has been the use of corporal punishment, which refers to the intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behavior (Levesque 2002). Although some may think that the practice has been banned, it remains considerably popular. Twenty states in the United States explicitly permit corporal punishment in schools, and those states make considerable use of it. The latest, yearly statistics reveal that 223,190 students were corporally punished in public schools, usually with wooden paddles (Center for Effective Discipline 2010). Given that private schools have considerably more power to control their students, the number of students likely is much higher. The high number has considerable import given that the effects of corporal punishment can be quite severe; this form of punishment has led to injuries prompting approximately 10,000–20,000 students to seek medical treatment each year (Society for Adolescent Medicine 2003). That nearly a quarter of a million children are subjected to this form of punishment every year, in the United States alone, certainly helps support the contention that it is a practice worth considering when thinking about adolescent development and adolescents’ rights.

This form of disciplining remains popular and controversial for many reasons. The practice remains popular, despite controversy, because there continues to be an inability to recognize the wide variety of punishments that are deemed corporal punishment.

As a result, some argue that using corporal punishment to correct poor behavior is effective in that fear and pain can promote better conduct. Others argue that corporal punishment violates individuals’ sense of human dignity, causes emotional and psychological problems, and has an overall negative effect on the learning environment itself. These debates may well continue because they may be referring to different types of punishments. There may be some forms of punishment that come to mind, most likely spanking, hitting, and slapping. However, corporal punishment also has been known to include punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, choking, painful body postures, use of electric shock, use of excessive exercise drills, or prevention of urine or stool elimination (Society for Adolescent Medicine 2003). The practice also remains popular because it is legal and supported by clear Supreme Court jurisprudence. A look at existing legal mandates reveals that protections against the use of corporal punishment actually are quite minimal. That minimalist approach to legal protections against corporal punishment laws has been highly influenced by the Supreme Court’s case that directly has addressed it: Ingraham v. Wright (1977). Examining that case is instructive in that it has helped to support and frame debates surrounding the use of corporal punishment in schools.

In Ingraham, two students brought claims against school officials of a Florida school district. The students claimed that they had received paddlings that had deprived them of their constitutional rights under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. The Court granted a review to address whether it would accept their claims that the punishment was cruel and unusual (the Eighth Amendment claim) and whether the Due Process Clause gives students a right to notice and a hearing before the infliction of corporal punishment (the Fourteenth Amendment claim). In a split five-to-four decision, the Court denied both claims.

The Court began by noting the accepted facts that the punishment had been quite severe. One of the students had been subjected to more than 20 licks with a paddle while being held over a table in the principal’s office. The paddling was so severe that he