

ENCOURAGING SELF-DETERMINATION AND GOAL SETTING AMONG YOUTH

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**Strategies for encouraging
youth self-determination in
positive youth development
programming include
the following:**

- [Explain the rationale
behind rules, assignments,
and activities.](#)
- [Involve youth in decisions about
program implementation.](#)
- [Employ youth-driven
programming to the
extent possible.](#)
- [Encourage setting goals.](#)
- [Promote decision-making and
refusal skills.](#)
- [Promote positive relationships
with adult role models.](#)
- [Provide skill-building
opportunities.](#)
- [Promote mindfulness.](#)
- [Celebrate achievements.](#)



Self-determination is having the attitude and ability to choose and set goals, make life decisions, and work to reach goals. Self-Determination Theory is a framework that focuses on human motivation and personality development. Youth-serving providers can use self-determination principles in their programs to protect youth against risk behaviors, promote mental health, and help youth gain skills and values needed to become healthy adults. The theory states that people have natural needs for **autonomy, competence, and relatedness**. Meeting these needs is vital for well-being and mental health (Deci & Ryan 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci 2000).

Key Components of Self-Determination Theory

Autonomy: Feeling in control of one's own actions and choices. When individuals experience autonomy, they are more likely to be internally motivated and engaged in activities.

Competence: The need to feel effective and capable. Skill development activities boost motivation and well-being by enhancing competence.

Relatedness: The need to connect with others and form meaningful relationships. Fulfilling the need for relatedness involves feeling connected, understood, and supported by others.

THE ROLE OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN FOSTERING HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

Self-determination theory suggests that people are most motivated by engaging in activities for their inherent satisfaction. Internally motivated youth find fulfillment in constructive activities and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. In addition, youth who see themselves as autonomous are more likely to resist peer pressure. When environments support autonomy, youth are encouraged to make their own informed choices. This reduces the likelihood that they will engage in risky behaviors as a way to challenge perceived control. For example, self-determination is an important factor in preventing adolescent substance use (Crabtree et al., 2020; Moore & Hardy, 2020). Research has shown that youth who are internally motivated use less alcohol and are less

likely to be persuaded by social influence than those who are externally motivated (Chawla et al., 2009; Knee & Neighbors, 2002; Neighbors et al., 2003, 2006; Rockafellow & Saules, 2006). Conceptual models have identified self-determination as a protective factor for both sexual risk avoidance and sexual risk cessation (Inanc et al., 2020). The evidence reviewed for the models showed that sexual refusal skills protected youth and increased the likelihood of choosing abstinence. For female youth in particular, having a strong sense of self-determination (believing that they have control over what happens to them, rather than that their lives depend on outside forces like fate or luck) protected them against ever having sex and from becoming pregnant as teenagers. Other studies have shown that adolescents whose parents/caregivers supported their autonomy were less likely to initiate sexual intercourse (Turner et al., 1993). They were also less likely to engage in sexual risk behaviors (Riley & McDermott, 2018).



THE ROLE OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH



Self-determination theory suggests that meeting people's basic psychological needs improves their well-being (Deci & Ryan). Alternatively, a lack of self-determination can lead to feelings of helplessness and depression (Deci et al., 1991) or stress and anxiety (Moore et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Adolescence is a critical period for the development of autonomy, identity, and well-being. It is therefore vital to understand how self-determination affects mental health during this stage. Studies have shown that adolescents who believe they have greater autonomy and control over their lives tend to have better psychological well-being, including higher self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Luyckx et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, adolescents who feel their autonomy is undermined may have worse mental health outcomes (Van Petegem et al., 2015).

Additionally, resilience studies show that future-oriented thinking builds adaptive coping strategies and reduces risky behavior. Future orientation involves setting goals, planning for the future, and seeing oneself in positive future scenarios. It helps people navigate challenges by providing purpose, direction, and motivation. Resilience researchers stress the importance of fostering future orientation in children and adolescents to protect against risk behaviors and negative outcomes (Maston, 2001).

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS CAN PROMOTE SELF-DETERMINATION AND FUTURE ORIENTATION AMONG YOUTH



Researchers have studied how supportive environments like families, schools, and communities can foster adolescents' self-determination and promote positive mental health (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). For example, when parents encourage independent decision-making and respect adolescents' choices, their children's mental health outcomes tend to be better (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Likewise, when teachers help students feel independent and capable in class, students are more satisfied and academically successful (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING YOUTH SELF-DETERMINATION IN POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

Consider using the following strategies in your programming. It is important to note that while you support youth to make decisions, you must also give youth accurate and timely information to guide their decision-making.

Using a [Positive Youth Development](#) approach in your programming is essential. It promotes agency, decision-making, competence, confidence, and hopeful expectations about the future. It also links youth to positive adult role models.

- **Explain the rationale behind rules, assignments, and activities.** Stating the reasons for your rules encourages youth to develop an internal motivation to follow the rules and participate fully in your program's activities.
- **Involve youth in decisions about program implementation.** Youth can give input about your program's goals and activities, including input on group agreements or ground rules. Give them options for teaching methods and assessments to cater to different learning styles.
- **Employ youth-driven programming to the extent possible.** Let them choose and plan discussion topics or projects. This will ensure that the content is relevant, engaging, and meets youth needs and concerns. Involve older youth or past participants as [peer mentors](#) or youth advisors. Doing these things creates a sense of ownership, attachment, and belonging.
- **Encourage goal setting.** First, help youth [discover their interests and passions](#). Then, help them set realistic short- and long-term goals that match their interests. Encourage them to start with small goals. They can build on their successes before setting complex goals. You can also teach them how to break down larger goals into manageable steps. Link youth with agencies and resources such as mentors, educational opportunities, internships, volunteer programs, and community service learning projects. This can help them achieve their goals.
- **Promote decision-making and refusal skills.** Start discussions and create activities that promote critical thinking. Give youth opportunities to question and analyze information. Help them learn how to weigh the pros and cons of specific behaviors and predict the consequences of their actions. Create activities to show how choices about sex, substance use, and other behaviors can impact educational and career goals. Use role play activities to practice decision-making and refusal skills.



- **Promote positive relationships with adult role models.** Bonds with supportive adults and peers can protect youth. They provide a sense of belonging and reduce the lure of risk-taking for social approval. Create a supportive and trusting environment for open communication between youth and staff. Ensure that staff are trained in active listening. Consider including mentorship in your programming. Explore the [mentoring resources at youth.gov](#) or the MENTOR [resource library](#) to learn more about mentoring programs.
- **Provide skill-building opportunities.** Provide programming to build practical life skills to foster a sense of competence and autonomy. Incorporate [Adulthood Preparation Subjects](#) such as healthy life skills, education and career success, and financial literacy into your program. Build on youth participants' strengths as you develop their skills. Encourage them to advocate for themselves when it comes to their needs and educational goals.
- **Promote mindfulness.** Mindfulness improves youths' awareness and understanding of their thoughts and emotions. It promotes well-being and helps youth reflect on values and goals. This reflection informs autonomous motivation and decision-making (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness also helps youth focus attention and manage responses to frustration and challenges. Consider adding a short, regular mindfulness activity to your classroom routine. This could be a guided breathing exercise, a short meditation session, or mindful movement like yoga or stretching. There are many apps and resources available for this purpose, including this [free app from Smiling Mind](#).
- **Celebrate achievements.** Acknowledge and celebrate both small and large accomplishments to boost youths' self-efficacy. Verbally recognize effort and achievements in class and give students an opportunity to recognize each other. Write notes or emails to acknowledge students' actions you appreciate. Showcase students' work publicly by publishing their essays in a newsletter and invite parents and caregivers to learn about completed class projects. Plan class celebrations to collectively recognize students' achievements.



RESOURCES

Resources on *The Exchange*

[Adulthood Preparation Subjects Resource Guide](#) – Resource Guide

[Building On the Strengths of Young People: A Relationship-Focused, Trauma-Sensitive Approach](#) – Webinar

[Building on Strengths: The Role of Positive Youth Development in Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programming](#) – Infographic

[Empowering Youth to Make Healthy Decisions](#) – Webinar

[Finding My Passion](#) – Plug and Play Activity from *We Think Twice*™

[Incorporating and Prioritizing Youth Mental Health in Sexual And Reproductive Health Programming](#) – Tip sheet

[Planning My Next Steps](#) – Plug and Play Activity from *We Think Twice*™

[Positive Youth Development Approach](#) – Webinar

[Trauma-Informed Care: Resilience](#) – Podcast episode

[Weathering The Storm: How Supportive Adults Can Promote Youth Mental Health and Wellness](#) – Infographic

Additional Resources

[Assessing Self-Determination Skills](#) ↗ – University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign College of Education and College of Applied Health Sciences, Illinois Center for Transition and Work

[Center for Self-Determination Theory](#) ↗ – Non-profit organization created to advance Self-Determination Theory by disseminating the philosophy, research, and practices of Self-Determination Theory

[Goal Setting](#) – Resources for youth from *We Think Twice*™

[Leadership and Mentorship](#) – Resources for youth from *We Think Twice*™

[Key Principles of Positive Youth Development](#) – Youth.gov

[Promoting Positive Youth Development](#) ↗ – Youth Power

[Smart Choices](#) – Resources for youth from *We Think Twice*™

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