

## Positive Youth Development Programs: Experience Based on the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong

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### *Abstract*

*A survey of the literature shows that there are worrying trends and phenomena related to the development of adolescents in Hong Kong. As such, primary prevention programs targeting specific adolescent developmental problems and positive youth development programs are called for. However, research findings show that there are very few systematic and multi-year positive youth development programs in Hong Kong. In response to this worrying picture, a positive youth development program entitled Project P.A.T.H.S. was initiated by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust to promote holistic development of junior secondary school students in Hong Kong, with the involvement of five universities in Hong Kong the program development, training and evaluation. Based on different evaluation strategies, existing research findings generally revealed that different stakeholders had positive perceptions of the program, workers, as well as benefits the program and the program was effective in promoting holistic positive youth development in Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.*

*Keywords: Youth Development, Chinese, Positive Psychology*

### **Introduction**

Research findings showed that there were worrying trends and phenomena related to the development of adolescents in Hong Kong (Shek, 2006). In the area of substance abuse, there was a growing trend of psychotropic substance abuse among young people in the past decade (Shek, 2007, 2010b). In the area of adolescent suicide, there was a growing trend of adolescent suicide in the past two decades. Researchers have also reported that adolescent problem gambling and Internet addiction are growing problems deserving the attention of youth workers and policy-makers (Derevensky, Shek & Merrick, 2010; Shek, Tang & Lo, 2008; Shek, Siu & Yu, 2010; Siu, Ma & Shek, 2010).

How can we reduce adolescent developmental problems? A review of the literature shows that two non-mutually exclusive approaches can be adopted. The first approach is the prevention approach which attempts to prevent adolescent developmental problems via well-conceived intervention programs. According to Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard and Arthur (2002), there are several attributes of the prevention science perspective. These include These include: 1) identification of risk and protective factors; 2) adoption of a developmental perspective; 3) assertion that problem behaviors share many common antecedents; and 4) assertion that risk and protective factors change youth outcomes.

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to recognize feelings in oneself and others (including empathy), skills to express feelings, skills to manage emotional reactions or impulses (delay of gratification and frustration tolerance), and emotional self-management strategies.

5. Promotion of Cognitive Competence: Developing the program participants' cognitive abilities, processes or outcomes, including academic performance, logical thinking, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making, planning and goal setting, and self-talk.

6. Promotion of Behavioral Competence: Cultivation of verbal communication (making requests and positive response to criticisms), non-verbal communication and taking action skills, and providing reinforcement for the effective behavior choices and action pattern.

7. Promotion of Moral Competence: Development of a sense of right and wrong and respect for rules and standards as well as social justice.

8. Cultivation of Self-Determination: Promoting the program participants' sense of autonomy, independent thinking, or self-advocacy.

9. Promotion of Spirituality: Helps the program participants to develop purpose and meaning in life, hope, or beliefs in a higher power.

10. Development of Self-Efficacy: Promoting the program participants' coping and mastery skills and changing their negative self-efficacy expectancies or self-defeating cognitions.

11. Development of Clear and Positive Identity: Promotion of healthy identity formation and achievement, including positive identification with one's social or ethnic identity.

12. Promotion of Beliefs in the Future: Helping program participants to develop future potential goals, choices or options.

13. Provides Recognition for Positive Behavior: Developing systems for rewarding, recognizing or reinforcing participants' positive behavior such as prosocial behavior or positive changes in behavior.

14. Providing Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement: Designing activities and events for program participants to make positive contribution to groups.

15. Fostering Prosocial Norms: Encouraging program participants to develop clear and explicit standards for prosocial engagement.

### **The Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong**

With reference to the intensification of adolescent developmental problems in Hong Kong, there are very few systematic and multi-year positive youth development programs in Hong Kong (Shek & Sun, 2009). For the existing youth enhancement programs, they commonly deal with isolated problems and issues in adolescent development (i.e., deficits-oriented programs) and they are relatively short-term in nature. To promote holistic development among adolescents in Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust initiated and launched a project entitled "P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme". The word "P.A.T.H.S." denotes Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes. The Trust invited academics of five universities in Hong Kong to form a Research Team with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University as the lead institution to develop a multi-year universal positive youth development program to promote holistic adolescent development in Hong Kong. Besides developing the program, the Research Team also provides training for teachers and social workers who implement the program, and carries out longitudinal evaluation of the project.

There are two tiers of programs (Tier 1 and Tier 2 Programs) in this project. The

The second component of the project is training program. It is argued that well-designed training for the potential program implementers can minimize the chances of committing a type III error—correctly concluding that the prevention program is ineffective for the wrong reason. There are times when program results display no preventive effects and researchers naturally attribute such to the inadequacies of the program curriculum when in fact, the lack of implementers' training could have contributed to its ineffectiveness. Despite the importance of training in adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs, the significance of training prevention professionals tends to be overlooked. Shek and Wai (11) reviewed the training programs for adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs. The authors' conclusion is that the documentation for training programs in positive youth development programs was weak and that the existing training programs had limitations.

Against such a background, training is strongly emphasized in the P.A.T.H.S. Project. For each of the Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 programs, both teachers and social workers involved receive 20 hours of training before implementing the program in their schools. Generally speaking, there are three days of training at each grade. In Day 1, the conceptual foundation, program philosophy, curriculum issues and evaluation methods are introduced. In Day 2 and Day 3, the training program covers the teaching units in the curriculum as well as the ways by which the program can be successfully implemented (e.g., program implementers have adequate debriefing skills and adopt reflective practice). In the training program, the potential program implementers are encouraged to reflect on their motivation to teach the program and identification with the program philosophy. They are also empowered to carry out the experiential learning activities which are quite foreign to Chinese teachers. The principles underlying the design of the training programs can be seen in Shek and Wai (2008).

The final component of the project is program monitoring. Actually, one unique characteristic of the Project P.A.T.H.S. is systematic evaluation of the program. Utilizing the principle of triangulation, various evaluation strategies have been used to evaluate the Tier 1 Program as follows (Shek, Sun & Siu, 2008; Sun, Shek & Tang, 2009):

1. Objective Outcome Evaluation: A randomized group trial with 24 experimental schools and 24 control schools initially has been carried out.
2. Subjective Outcome Evaluation (Tier 1 Program): Both students and program implementers are invited to complete subjective outcome evaluation forms (Form A and Form B, respectively) after completion of the program (e.g., Siu & Shek, 2010).
3. Process Evaluation: Systematic observations are carried out in randomly selected schools to understand the program implementation details.
4. Interim Evaluation: To understand the process of implementation, interim evaluation is conducted by randomly selecting roughly half of the participating schools in the Experimental and Full Implementation Phases (e.g., Shek, Sun & Siu, 2008).
5. Qualitative Evaluation (Focus Groups Based on Students): Focus groups involving students based on schools randomly selected from the participating schools are carried out.
6. Qualitative Evaluation (Focus Groups Based on Program Implementers): Focus groups involving instructors based on schools randomly selected from the participating schools are carried out (Shek, Siu & Lam, 2006).
7. Qualitative Evaluation (In-depth Interviews with Program Implementers): Prolonged in-depth interviews with teachers are carried out.

(e.g. Panel on Child Fatality Review; Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse), and a program that can be used for anti-drug education in schools (Resource Kit for Teachers on Anti-Drug Education). Third, the project has impact internationally. The project has been adapted and implemented in Shanghai and Macau. In addition, more than 100 international refereed publications have been generated from the project. The list of publications can be seen in the web site of the project (<http://www.paths.hk>).

In view of the growing adolescent developmental problems, it is important for policy-makers and youth workers to re-think about how to deal with such problems. Although the prevention approach has been widely adopted in the field, it can be argued that it may over-focus on youth problems and different adolescent problem may call for different prevention programs. Alternatively, it is argued that the use of positive youth development approach can help to promote the psychosocial competencies of young people which would reduce their likelihood to engage in adolescent problem behavior. The Project P.A.T.H.S. is an excellent example showing the utility of such an approach. As there are very few validated positive youth development programs in different Chinese contexts, it is suggested that more effort should be made to develop such programs in future.

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### 摘要

「共創成長路」— 青少年正面成長課程在香港推行的經驗

在近年，多項本地調查顯示，香港青少年的發展有多個令人擔憂的現象及趨勢。社會有需要發展基層健康方案，以針對年青

人的發展問題及培育正面發展。可是，香港多年來都未有開發有系統及持續的青少年正面成長課程。針對這令人擔憂的現象，香港賽馬會慈善信託基金贊助及推動了一個名為「共創成長路」的青少年正面成長課程，以促進香港初中學生的全面發展。「共創成長路」計劃的課程由本地五所大學所設計、並進行導師培訓及成效評估。通過使用不同的評估策略，成效研究結果顯示，不同的利益相關者普遍對計劃、導師、及效益有正面的評價，認為「共創成長路」的課程能有效地促進香港青少年的正面發展。

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