

# ILLUMINATING THE PROCESS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF THRIVING ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Mary E. Arnold, Oregon State University  
Ryan J. Gagnon, Clemson University

## 4-H As a Developmental Context for Youth

Adaptive developmental regulations theory<sup>1</sup> predicts that youth develop through positive, mutual interactions with their contexts. 4-H programs provide a rich context for youth development by focusing on three key aspects:

### Designing and Implementing High Quality Programs

The elements that make up a high-quality youth development program have been consistently considered by researchers since the positive youth development field gained momentum in the 1990s. The result is an ever-increasing awareness that programs must be “done” well if they are to be effective. Researchers<sup>2</sup> have identified eight program elements that ensure quality: (1) Physical and psychological safety, (2) appropriate structure, (3) supportive relationships, (4) opportunities to belong, (5) positive social norms, (6) support for efficacy and mattering, (7) opportunities for skill building, and (8) integration of family, school and community. Further research has illustrated additional ingredients that make up a high-quality youth development program, including the facilitation of youth sparks<sup>3</sup> and the presence of developmental relationships.<sup>4</sup>



### Facilitating Youth Sparks

Youth sparks are an essential ingredient of youth development.<sup>5</sup> A spark is a “passion for a self-identified interest or skill, or a capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in an adolescent’s life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction” Having a spark gives a young person a sense of direction and encourages goal setting.

### Fostering Developmental Relationships

Developmental relationships are mutually secure attachments and interactions between youth and adults that increase in complexity and gradually shift power to youth over time.<sup>6</sup> Developmental relationships support youth through the expression of care, expansion of possibilities, provision of support, challenging growth, and sharing of power.<sup>7</sup>



## Definition of Youth Thriving<sup>8</sup>

**Openness to Challenge and Discovery.** The young person has the desire and ability to explore and try new things and challenges *and possesses a growth mindset that supports effort in learning over innate ability.*

**Hopeful Purpose.** The young person has a sense of purpose and sees one’s self as on the way to a happy and successful future.

**Transcendent Awareness.** The young person affirms the importance of a sacred or transcendent force and the role of faith or spirituality in shaping everyday thoughts and actions.

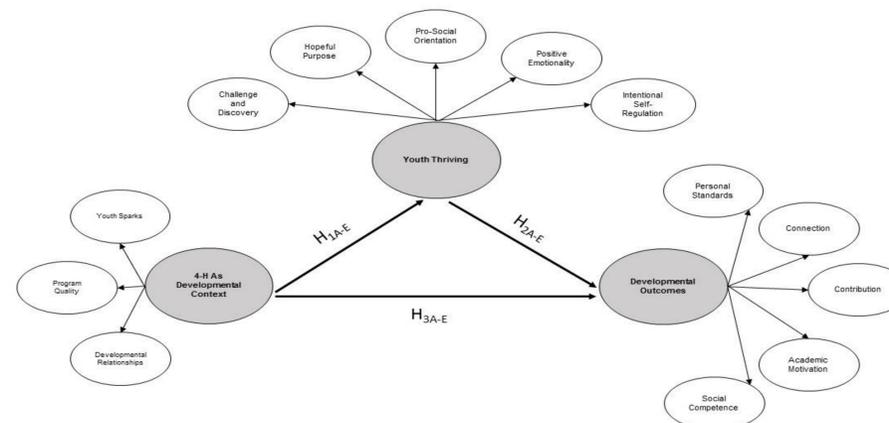
**Pro-Social Orientation.** The young person sees helping others as a personal responsibility, and lives up to the values of respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring.

**Positive Emotionality.** The young person is positive and optimistic. *In addition, the young person is able to regulate his or her emotions in a positive manner.*

**Intentional Self-Regulation.** The young person employs an effective balance of goal setting and pursuing strategies, including persevering, and making adjustments when goals are not attained. *In addition, the young person is able to make self-regulatory decisions that lead to better short-term and long-term success.*

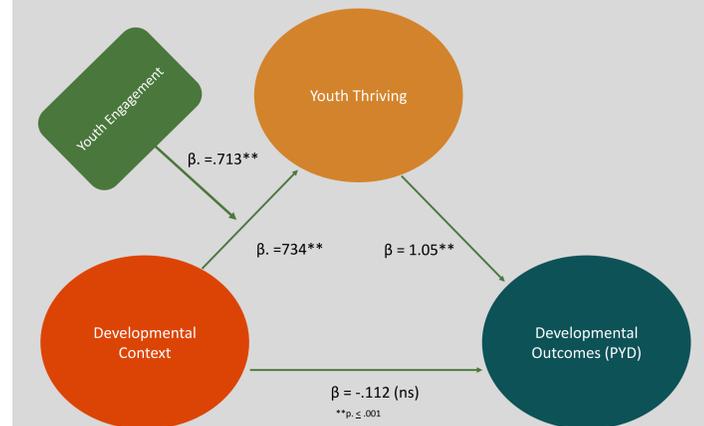
## Study Hypotheses

Three hypotheses guided this investigation:  $H_{1A-E}$ , *developmental context will have a significant positive effect on youth thriving*, and  $H_{2A-E}$ , *youth thriving will have a significant positive effect on youth developmental outcomes*. In accounting for the potential mediational influence of youth thriving, our 3<sup>rd</sup> hypotheses ( $H_{3A-E}$ ) predicts a non-significant direct relationship between program context and developmental outcomes, thus confirming the mediational role of the developmental process of thriving in the achievement of youth program outcomes.



## Results<sup>9</sup>

This research examined the relationship between the developmental context of 4-H youth development programs and resultant developmental outcomes, and explored whether the developmental process of thriving mediates this relationship. Developmental context is proposed to consist of three elements: (1) youth sparks, (2) program quality, and (3) developmental relationships. Combined, these elements describe the 4-H youth development program context more precisely than in previous studies, allowing for a clearer understanding of effective program settings. Likewise, the process of youth thriving provides insight into the mechanism through which youth development occurs.



Sufficient model fit, convergent, and discriminant validity of the 4-H Thriving scale was determined utilizing a multi-phase confirmatory factor analysis. As hypothesized, structural equation modeling revealed a full mediational effect of youth thriving on developmental outcomes. In addition, level of youth engagement was determined to moderate the relationship between developmental context and youth thriving. The results of this study guide youth development practitioners to focus on the quality of the developmental context of youth programs, and the ways in which programs can promote youth thriving.

## References

- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., von Eye, A., Bowers, E. P., & Lewin-Bizan, S. (2011). Individual and contextual bases of thriving in adolescence: A view of the issues. *Journal of Adolescence*, 34, 1107-1114.
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington DC: National Academy Press.
- Benson, P. L. & Scales, P. C. (2009). The definition and preliminary measurement of thriving in adolescence. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(1), 95-104.
- Pekel, K., Roehlkpartain, E. C., Svetersen, A. K., Scales, P. C., Sullivan, T. K., & Sethi, J. (2018). Finding the fluoride: examining how and why developmental relationships are the active ingredient in interventions that work. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 88(5), 493-502.
- Benson, P. L., & Scales, P. C. (2011). Thriving and sparks. In R. J. R Leveque (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Adolescence* (pp. 2963-2976). New York: Springer.
- Li, J., & Julian, M. M. (2012). Developmental relationships as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of “what works” across intervention settings. *American journal of orthopsychiatry*, 82(2), 157.
- Search Institute (2014). *The developmental relationships framework*. Minneapolis, MN: Author.
- Search Institute (2014). *The Search Institute model of thriving orientation: Overview of its evolution through recent funding from the Thrive Foundation for Youth*. Unpublished paper. Minneapolis, MN: Author.
- Arnold, M. E., & Gagnon, R. J. (in press). Illuminating the process of youth development: The mediating effects of thriving on youth development program outcomes. *Journal of Human Science and Extension*.



Oregon State University

