

Toward a Common Vision

Naming and Framing

the Developmental Imperative

by Joel Tolman and Karen Pittman

To meet the developmental needs of all young people,
we need a clearer picture of their lives and the
opportunities and challenges that shape their experience.

During the last decade, national attention to the out-of-school hours has increased dramatically. With new urgency, leaders at all levels of decision making are calling for safe spaces in the hours between 3 and 6 P.M., extended opportunities for academic learning, additional services for young people considered at risk, and improved supports for families with working parents. These calls have contributed to a significant shift in public will, policy, philanthropy, and research. It is time to strengthen the foundation for all of this activity—to build a vision that will help us keep our eyes on the prize as we each do our part to support young people.

How Clear Is Our Picture of What Youth Need?

Most adults would know something was wrong if they spent a day in an early childhood center and saw the children doing only one activity (e.g., playing with alphabet blocks) and did not see them also eating a healthy snack, playing outside, involved in a creative activity, and interacting with each other.

But as children get older, the picture of the kind of environment and the range of opportunities they need to fully develop get fuzzier. Would most adults know to be appalled if they walked into a poorly run school or youth center? Would they know if a community was

not youth friendly? Can they name the things they expect a 15-year-old (or a 10-year-old or an 18-year-old) to know and be able to do as well as they can name the things they do *not* want a young person to do?

Despite concerted, long-term work on the part of youth advocates, public understanding of what young people need and can do—and public commitment to support young people’s development—remain incomplete.

There are many reasons why public understanding and commitment weaken as young people get older. Supporting young people gets more complicated with age, as they move across more and more diverse settings. Keeping track of who provides what and developing consistent standards of quality across diverse settings are huge challenges. In the face of such complexity, policymakers and citizens are likely to gravitate to simple answers—even if they only provide a piece of what young people need.

At the same time, most adults get anxious as young people enter adolescence, spurred by widespread perceptions that youth is a time of crisis, instability, and risky behavior. Media messages and political posturing only reinforce negative public perceptions—thus fueling investments aimed at solving problems rather than supporting positive development.

Whatever the constellation of reasons, the bottom line is the same: we need a clearer picture of what youth need and can do. More work is needed to paint a picture of youths’ multiple developmental needs and explain how these needs interconnect.



Photo: Sonja Brevik

The Vision: More Opportunities for Learning and Development

To provide the supports young people need during the out-of-school hours, we first need a shared sense of what we are talking about. Over the last two decades, youth advocates have made solid progress in advancing three critical concepts that have now gained widespread acceptance. These three concepts help define what we mean by “the developmental imperative”:

- **Young people need and deserve supports throughout their waking hours.**

In early childhood the charge is clear. Infants and young children need constant care and attention. Leaving them alone for several hours is seen as negligence. As young people

grow, they reach an age when they should have time by themselves. Still, out of sight does not mean out of mind. Parents work hard to ensure that their children have safe places to go and supportive people to be with. Advocates have successfully made the case that parental wisdom should be reinforced—development does not end when young people step outside their houses, nor does it end with the closing school bell. The number of waking hours increases as young people grow; the percentage of those hours that are unstructured and unsupervised increases exponentially.

Investing in early childhood is necessary but not sufficient—there is no way to “inoculate” children so they will be immune to later developmental challenges and tasks.

■ **Young people need and deserve early and sustained investments throughout the first two decades of life.**

While research suggests that some ages witness particularly crucial stages of development, all ages are critical. Investing in early childhood is necessary but not sufficient—there is no way to “inoculate” children so they will be immune to later developmental challenges and tasks. Development is ongoing, and does not stop because program funds run out or because a certain age is reached.

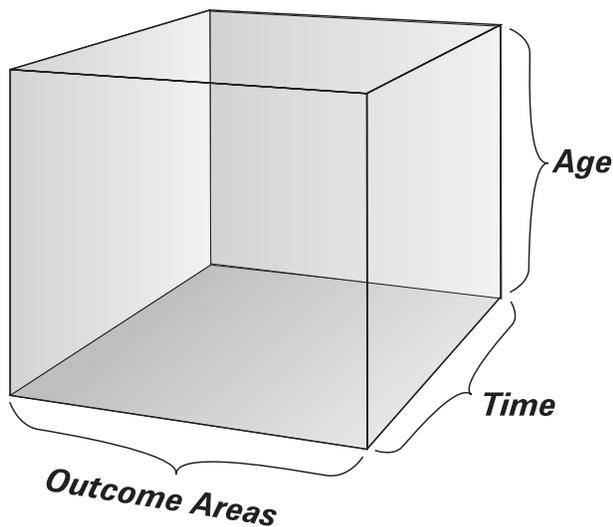
■ **Young people need and deserve investments that help them achieve a broad range of outcomes.**

For young people, academic success is critical, but it is not enough. While they may not use these terms, young people and their families realize that becoming fully prepared for adulthood also requires vocational, physical, emotional, social, and civic development. Ideas like confidence, competence, character, connection, and opportunities to contribute may hit closer to home for some young people (Pittman et al., 2001).

It is the basic logic of these statements that makes them powerful. From the time that young people are small until they are fully grown, they wake up every morning looking for things to do, people to talk to, and places to be and explore. The more communities and governments help families provide these people, places, and possibilities—not only in the preschool years but throughout childhood and the transitional years—the better the child and youth outcomes.



The Developmental Imperative: How Do We Help Youth Fill the Space?



The axes of the cube and their scales are flexible. Age is one way of breaking down population; the axis could capture dimensions such as risk status, gender, and race/ethnicity. An axis could track the range of inputs youth need (e.g., America's Promise's caring adults, safe places, healthy start, marketable skills, opportunities to serve). If the time of day is not useful, an axis could be dedicated to contexts of development such as families, community, schools, neighborhoods. The cube's content is also flexible and can be filled with information on research, policies, public opinion, practice, or philanthropy. It can be filled from the perspective of one youth, a program, a community, city, county, state, or country. Or it might be filled with the funding priorities of a foundation, all the youth organizations in a city, the range of activities an organization offers, or the scope of messages for a public service campaign.

The Cube: A Simple Way to Frame the Challenge

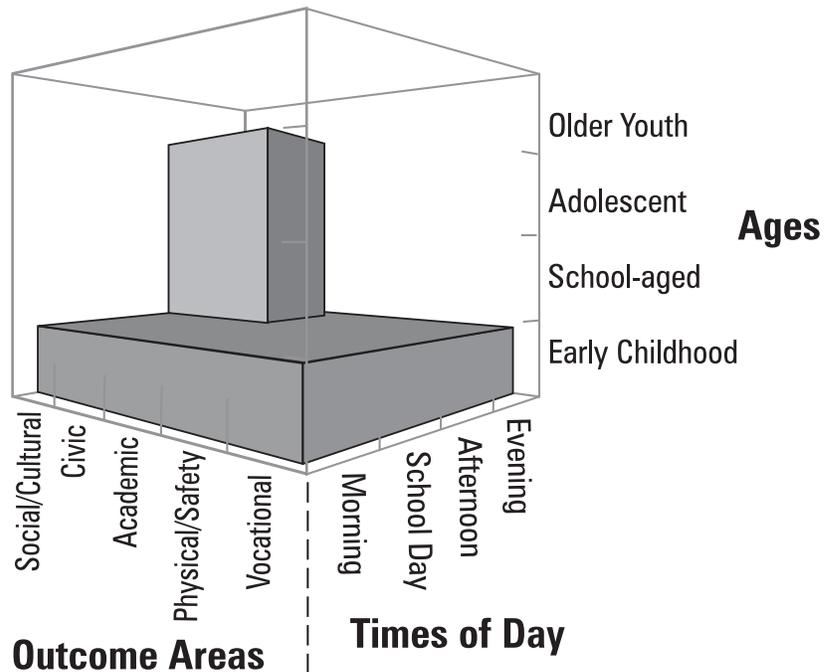
For a long time, youth development advocates have been talking about the need for intentional supports more of the time, across more outcomes, across more of the developmental periods. These basic premises reflect a commonsense understanding of what young people need and can do. The challenge is to build a sense of moral urgency behind these basic statements.

A key to this is simplicity. A year ago, the Forum for Youth Investment took these three ideas—times, ages, outcomes—and made them the axes of a cube. Creating a cube defines a space to be filled—a space for which all who touch the lives of young people, either directly or indirectly, share responsibility.

With the cube in hand, we can begin to tell interesting stories about the ways we support young people. Take early childhood, for instance. Young children need a range of opportunities and services throughout their waking hours that address a variety of developmental needs. While public funding for early childhood supports is far from sufficient and the network of public, private, and family providers remains incomplete, there is a broad public understanding that young children need a range of supports.

As children move out of their early years, schools become the dominant institution in their lives. But schools tend to focus on only a subset of the outcome areas (academic), hours of the day (primarily 8 A.M. to 3 P.M.) and ages (5–18). This narrow role of schools presents two challenges:

What Fills the Space? Early Childhood and Schools



1. There is a need to consider how schools, especially secondary schools, can aid in youth development more broadly—how, for instance, schools can intentionally aid young people’s social, emotional, and civic development.
2. However, we must recognize that schools cannot do everything in their limited hours. What is the gel that surrounds schools? How do we think about the space surrounding the school day as a whole?

Schools occupy, at best, one-quarter of the annual waking hours of the country’s elementary and secondary students. This does not account for those young people who are not in school, not employed, and in need of additional education, training, and support. In cities where as many as half of the 16- to 18-year-olds

are not in school, out-of-school time is nearly all the time.

Unfortunately, the current national discussion on “out-of-school time” focuses primarily on the goal of creating more “after-school programs.” Many funding streams and programs focus on the hours directly after the school day, the students in elementary and (increasingly) middle school, and outcomes directly related to academic competence and physical safety. During other hours, funding and programming are less robust. Young people have few options during their mornings, evenings, weekends, and summers.

Opportunities and supports phase out as young people leave early adolescence. Perhaps most importantly, the services, opportunities, and supports that are available lack coherence, connection, and continuity. Even in neighbor-

hoods and cities where much is going on outside of school hours, little is done to link programming into a continuous, intentional web of support. A lack of options is compounded by consistent fragmentation.

The focus on grades K–6, from 3 to 6 P.M., is understandable and vital—elementary school students need safe places to go and stimulating things to do in the hours after school ends and before their parent(s) get home. It cannot be

detached, however, from conversations about the three broader imperatives illustrated by the cube:

- Young people need and deserve supports throughout their waking hours;
- Young people need and deserve investments throughout the first two decades of life;
- Young people need and deserve investments that help them achieve a broad range of outcomes. ☘



Photo: Don Breneman

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A B O U T

the Authors

Joel Tolman coordinates The Forum for Youth Investment's projects related to youth action, high school reform, and effective learning environments. He is a founding board member of Global Youth Connect, an international youth-led organization that encourages youth activism for human rights. Joel is a graduate student in the School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University.

Karen Pittman is executive director of The Forum for Youth Investment, a U.S. initiative of the International Youth Foundation. The Forum supports organizations that invest in young people by promoting a "big picture" approach to planning, research, advocacy, and policy development. Karen formerly worked for the Clinton administration, the Children's Defense Fund, and the Urban Institute, and is recognized as an innovative thinker and policy advocate for youth and youth-related issues.