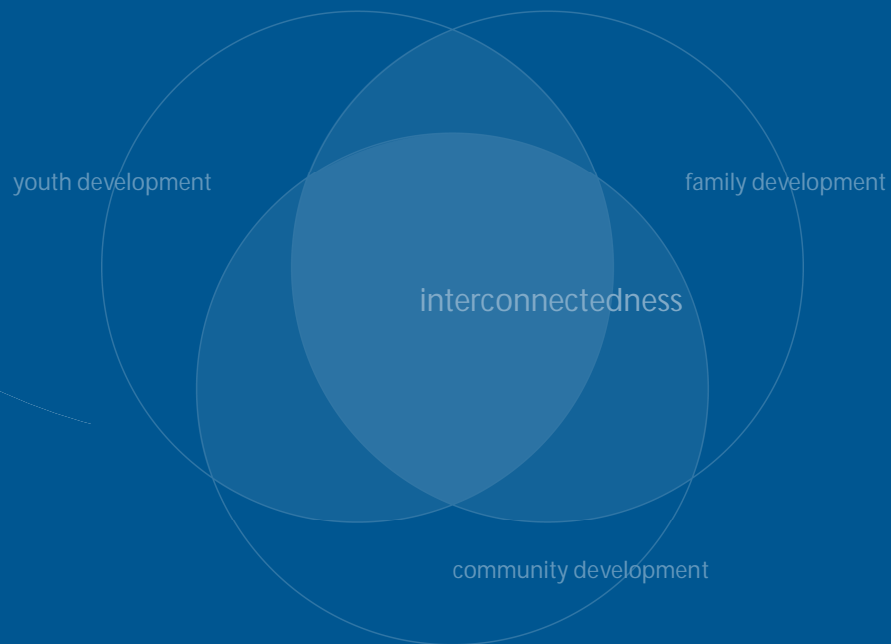


# Strengthening Families To Promote Youth Development

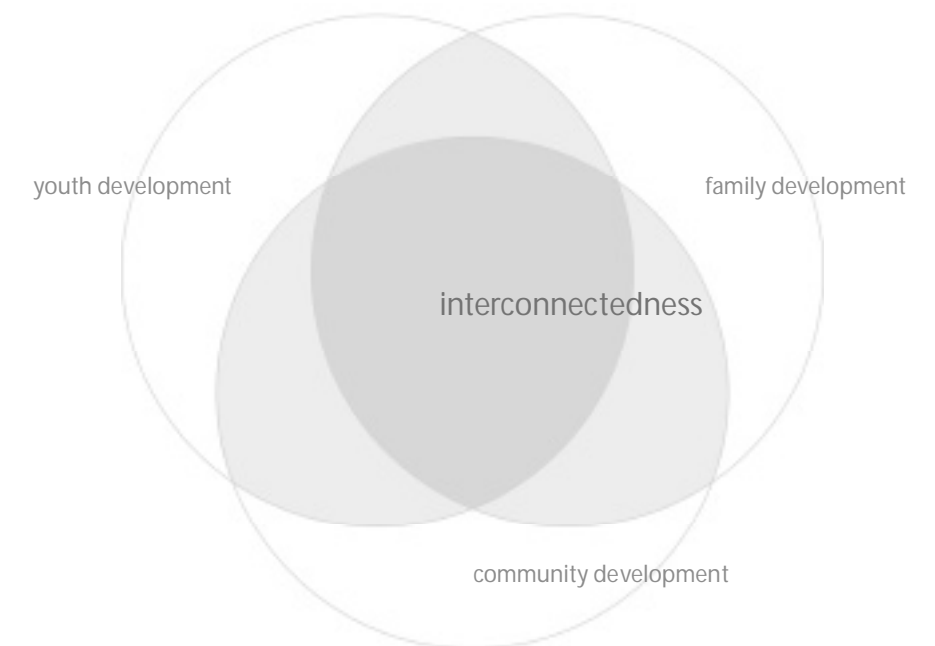
A Report of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's  
Roundtable Discussions  
December 2001



# Strengthening Families To Promote Youth Development

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

OMG is pleased to present this report on the Family Strengthening Youth Development Roundtables, sponsored by and held at the Annie E. Casey Foundation in December 2001. We are very grateful to those who provided assistance in one form or another, including Debra Delgado of the Casey Foundation, Geri Peak of CARTA, Margaret Spencer of the University of Pennsylvania, and the Roundtable participants who generously gave of their time and expertise (they are listed by name at the end of the report). We would also like to acknowledge the Annie E. Casey Foundation for hosting and sponsoring the events and supporting research in this important area.

DECEMBER 2002

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[www.omgcenter.org](http://www.omgcenter.org)

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ISBN 0-9727711-0-7

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## FOREWORD By Debra Delgado

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has been working to promote the well being of vulnerable children for over 50 years now.

Our approach has evolved from our earliest activities, which were primarily to sponsor a camp for disadvantaged children to later attempts to find stable placements for children in foster care. In the 1980s, the Foundation shifted its focus toward improving the effectiveness of institutions—from education to child welfare to juvenile justice. In the mid-90s the approach evolved even further to examine the intersection between child outcomes and community conditions. Lessons learned from all of these investments have helped shape our current approach that is based on the following premise: *Children and youth do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods.*

When it comes to working with families who have young children, this premise is easily understood and applied by parents, practitioners, policymakers and researchers. However, when we expand the age group to include adolescents, the premise takes on new complexities and various questions and issues surface. For example, does it make sense to focus on families when the stronger influences for teens seem to be their peers and the media? Or, how can we talk about the family context for teens that are in foster care or the juvenile justice system?

To begin to address these and other questions, the Foundation invited over 30 experts including practitioners, advocates, policymakers and researchers who work with and on behalf of vulnerable youth and families to participate in two Roundtable discussions. This report describes the key insights and recommendations derived through the dialogue, highlights areas in which there seemed to be consensus and also offers suggestions for next steps.

We are grateful to all of the Roundtable participants for their willingness to challenge and be challenged by their colleagues. The Roundtables were successful only because each and every one of the participants came ready to roll up their sleeves and work. Thank you each for your contributions.

We also want to acknowledge and thank the consultants who developed the background papers for the Roundtable. Lisa Berglund, Geri Peak and Barbara Sugland collaborated to produce the Family Strengthening Youth Development “white paper.” We also want to express appreciation for Margaret Beale Spencer and her colleagues at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania for their contribution, a paper examining the linkages between family development and youth development.

Finally, special thanks to the OMG staff, Manuel Gutiérrez and Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, who skillfully organized and facilitated the Roundtables and, with Margaret Berkey, produced this report.

Overview of

# Family Strengthening Youth Development Roundtables

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## THE CONTEXT FOR THE ROUNDTABLES

Over the past three years, the Casey Foundation has funded a series of studies and meetings of experts to begin to articulate the basis for Family Strengthening Youth Development, an approach that attempts to document and highlight the role, influences, and contributions of the family on positive youth development. Concurrently, the Foundation has been paying special attention to the needs of vulnerable youth in transition, recognizing the commonality of issues facing youth in foster care, youth who come to the attention of the juvenile justice system, school dropouts, young welfare recipients, and youth whose parents are incarcerated. This report, a synthesis of two recent Roundtable discussions among practitioners, researchers and policy makers, is intended to further articulate a family-based perspective for promoting youth development.

### Casey’s New Focus on Families

The Roundtable discussions on Family Strengthening Youth Development occurred in the context of the Casey Foundation’s recent redirection of its work to focus on families. As outlined by senior program associate Debra Delgado at the outset of the discussions, the Foundation’s longstanding interest in promoting the well-being of children and youth has expanded to recognize the reality that young people are inextricably tied to families as well as their communities. Casey’s new overarching initiative, labeled *Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development*, is based on a deceptively simple premise: “Children do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods.” For the past three and a half years, the Foundation has been making investments in several areas to develop an integrated framework that intertwines lessons from the fields of family support, economic development, systems reform, and community building.

During this time, the Foundation has also been working to articulate a youth development agenda within the broader context of strengthening families. This agenda is being pursued through three distinct avenues, the first of which is knowledge development. To this end, the Foundation has convened leading experts from influential organizations in the field of youth

development to develop an operational framework to highlight the benefits that youth, families, and communities can attain through engaging and mobilizing parents to create youth-supporting environments. Those involved in the effort include the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research in the Academy for Education and Development, the Center for Applied Research and Technical Assistance, the Urban Strategies Council, the National Governors’ Association, the Youth Development Institute in the Fund for the City of New York, the International Youth Foundation (now named the Forum for Youth Investment), Public/Private Ventures, the Search Institute, the University of Washington, and independent researchers. This approach has been labeled *Family Strengthening Youth Development* (FSYD). A white paper, considered a “consensus” document, was produced by the Center for Applied Research and Technical Assistance, Inc. (CARTA) for the Casey Foundation.<sup>1</sup> This document examines the range of strategies for engaging families in existing youth development programs and articulates the FSYD approach.

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### Summary of Roundtable discussion points:

- The FSYD framework recognizes the importance of grounding work with youth within the context of family and community.
- The family plays a critical role in youth development; various community resources are needed to support the family in this role.
- There is a continuum of roles that families play in youth development programs, ranging from minimal to deep integration in program activities.
- There is an important distinction between beginning with the *family* or with the *program* as the context for youth development that holds implications for program design and implementation.
- Different programmatic dimensions are required at different stages in a young person’s development; the nature and degree of family involvement in programs also needs to be age-appropriate because family functions evolve as young people grow and develop.
- The needs of vulnerable families and youth in transition pose additional challenges that underscore the importance of having a holistic program framework integrating youth, family and community development.

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<sup>1</sup> “Exploring the Family’s Role in Youth Development Programs,” CARTA, undated.

“ FAMILY STRENGTHENING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT DESCRIBES A PRACTICE–BASED EVOLUTION OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES WHERE THE INVOLVEMENT OF FAMILIES IS WOVEN INTO THE MISSION AND PRACTICE OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES.”

GERI PEAK “Family Strengthening Youth Development: A Position Paper,” CARTA, Inc.

According to this document, a review of practice, research, and policy on the role of family in youth development identified a number of programs that have attempted to incorporate the family into youth development activities. These programs share a number of common features, which are listed in the box below.

The second front on which the Foundation is working is that of putting theory into practice. Within the *Making Connections* initiative, the centerpiece of the Foundation’s *Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development* strategy, the process of developing, piloting, and testing tools to help practitioners integrate family strengthening and youth development work has begun. This process is important not only in and of itself, but also because it confirms the Foundation’s recognition that this agenda cannot be advanced in isolation. Rather, it is necessary to draw upon the wisdom and insight of those whose voices are already influential in the field. Two examples of FSYP applications in *Making Connections* cities are the following: a partnership with Providence, RI schools to integrate school–based youth development and family strengthening activities, and a collaboration with YouthNet in Hartford, CT to

**Common features of youth development programs involving a family component:**

- Intentional, comprehensive, and inclusive efforts to involve the family
- A family–systems perspective, which considers family influence even when parents are not physically present
- A strong belief that family competence influences youth competence
- Different forms of outreach to meet family needs
- Involvement of family is core to the strategy

develop a youth business incubator that incorporates family and community concerns.

And thirdly, the Foundation is also working to promote this agenda among an array of other grantmakers, including not simply those with an existing emphasis on youth, but also those whose focus is on long–term community change. This effort stems from the fundamental belief that family–strengthening youth development is a way of helping to create community change.

**R&D work on family–strengthening youth development (FSYP)**

As mentioned above, an early outcome of the Foundation’s initial work was the articulation and documentation of the FSYP approach. In a subsequent paper, CARTA described FSYP as both an *approach* for implementing positive youth development program activities and a *set* of such activities, designed to directly support the families of a program’s youth participants. FSYP began as practice–based innovations, and as the paper contends, it is both evolutionary in its extension of youth development principles to families, and revolutionary in bringing together families and program staff in a united effort to nurture young people.

Another influence on the Foundation’s thinking was a report produced by the Youth Development Institute (YDI). This report emphasizes the burgeoning issue of integrating youth programs (including caring staff and mentoring relationships) with existing family resources. In particular, the report focuses on the interplay between the goals that parents have for adolescents, the goals youth programs have for their participants, and the perceptions that organizations and parents have of each other.

Other work that the Foundation has drawn upon includes research conducted on its behalf by the Search Institute. Beki Saito, a consultant to the project and a participant on one of the Roundtables, noted that the research findings overwhelmingly focused on the issue of relationships. Surveys conducted with adults and youth community residents in low–income communities demonstrated not only a common vision for what made a desirable neighborhood, but a clear preference for connection–making through personal relationships.

Informal “family champions” might be tied to an institution such as the Salvation Army, a school or a hospital, or might be unaffiliated with any organization. Regardless of their professional status, figures such as these were among the leading community strengths identified by residents. Saito described these community connectors as “a tremendous resource for families.”

One other item the Foundation drew upon was Lisa Berglund’s research and work as a technical assistance provider for *Making Connections*. Berglund outlined components of positive youth development (such as fostering self–determination and belief in the future), and suggested that the role of family–strengthening youth development was to promote those same qualities in all of the social environments around youth. She also described FSYP strategies and principles.

Delgado acknowledged that there is tension among a number of youth development practitioners who report that they are already overburdened with having to respond to the needs and concerns of young people, making it difficult for them to envision expanding their work to include families. The Foundation’s knowledge development work aims to articulate the importance of the connection between family development and youth development and to develop tools that will facilitate making that paradigm shift at the practice level.

**DESCRIPTION OF ROUNDTABLES**

Two Roundtable discussions were held at the Baltimore offices of the Annie E. Casey Foundation in December 2001. Both discussions followed a similar format, in which participants attended an informal dinner the night before a more formal all–day session. The discussions followed a structured but flexible agenda (see textbox). Manuel Gutiérrez of the OMG Center and Debra Delgado of the Casey Foundation moderated the sessions. The purpose of the Roundtables was not to seek consensus on a particular strategy but rather to deepen understanding of the FSYP framework, to explore further convergences between family and youth development, and to offer recommendations to the Foundation for its ongoing work in strengthening families to promote youth development.

There were 13 participants for the first Roundtable session and 21 for the second. Participants were individuals with significant expertise as researchers, practitioners, policy makers, or program developers in the youth, family, and/or community development arenas. By design, the Roundtables were set up to stimulate discussion across fields as well as across professional roles. (See the end of the report for a list of Roundtable participants.)

In preparation for the Roundtables, each participant was provided with background material in the form of two papers. The first was a 15–page document produced by the Center for Applied Research and Technical Assistance (CARTA), referenced above. The second was a more lengthy theoretical paper commissioned by the OMG Center and produced by Margaret Spencer and colleagues at the Graduate School of Education of the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup>

Both Roundtable sessions were recorded and complete transcripts were prepared. This report summarizes and integrates themes from both sessions. While each session provided distinct conversations, there was substantial thematic overlap across the sessions. To better facilitate understanding of these themes and issues, the authors of this report have chosen to integrate the findings from both Roundtable sessions and present them in unified form.

**The Roundtables convened researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to examine the following questions:**

- What is the role of the family in youth development? And in youth development programs?
- What are the theoretical underpinnings for linking youth development and family development?
- What are the multi–systemic issues related to vulnerable youth in transition and how do these issues inform the conceptual framework linking youth development and family development?

<sup>2</sup> The CARTA paper, “Family Strengthening Youth Development: A Position Paper,” can be obtained from the Center at 410-625-6250; the Spencer paper, “Multi-Systemic Perspectives on Family and Youth Development,” can be obtained from OMG by contacting Margaret Berkey at 215-732-2200.

# Role of Family in Youth Development

A major organizing theme of both Roundtable discussions was the examination of the role of the family in youth development. The discussions are organized here under three distinct subheadings: family functions; dynamics of age; and involvement of families in youth development programs.

## FAMILY FUNCTIONS

There was substantial agreement on the contribution of the family to youth development in two broad realms. First, there is a large body of research literature supporting the family's contribution to the child's growth and psychological well-being. Recent research—such as the Adolescent Health Study—also emphasizes

“IF WE ARE REALLY GOING TO BE FAMILY FOCUSED, WE HAVE TO MAKE AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND THE FAMILY. THIS IS ONE OF THE STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS WE SHOULD MAKE.” HEATHER WEISS

the importance of parents and other adult relatives to youth. Efforts to strengthen families with a goal of youth development would need to enhance parents' capacities to nurture and support their children. This can be done either by changing the environment, by teaching parents directly, or by combining both strategies. Second, participants noted the importance of families in helping kids negotiate their relationships with other social institutions. This becomes an important function in adolescence, as kids at this age begin to have experiences without their parents at their side—with schools, with employers, with community-based organizations. Moreover, this function becomes increasingly more important as kids get older. Steinberg<sup>3</sup> characterized this function as “family management” rather than parenting. The graphic at left is a representation of how the parenting function changes as youths progress into later adolescence.

All families need information, skills, supports, and resources to rear their children. At the same time, Pittman noted, families also need to help their young people get the information, develop the skills, identify the supports, and connect to the resources that *they* need to get where they are going. Youth development programs attempt to address those youth needs, although, as this report will note later, there is a great deal of variability in the extent to which they engage families in their work.

When considering social class as a possible determinant regarding ability to perform the needed family functions, Furstenberg noted that in his longitudinal study of Philadelphia families there were no differences between low-income and middle-class families when looking at the internal management function. That is, both groups manifested comparable effectiveness, warmth, and internal control. However, when examining the second major realm of family functioning—management of the external world—

there were striking differences in what has become known as “cultural capital,” or “social capital.” The resources that parents possess and the connections that they can bring to bear are very important for helping youth learn how to manage their external world. Not surprisingly, the study also found that there is a greater availability of programs and institutional resources for youth in middle-class neighborhoods.

Saito noted that, in a Search Institute study of families in impoverished neighborhoods, the internal function of the low-income family as far as values, expectations, hopes, and desires is very similar to that of middle-class families. In terms of relationships to the external world, however, low-income families are more distrustful of external institutions. The fundamental difference seems to be that low-income families' connections to institutions are often based on problems and/or mistrust. Thomases reiterated that there are family functions that are critical regardless of race, culture, and class and that families need to be supported to do these. When parents have difficulty exercising those functions, there may be other adults that move into those roles. This is a situation where youth organizations—acting as mediating organizations—sometimes get into trouble with people who believe in family support because the organization is perceived as “trying to be a substitute parent.” Nevertheless, she added, collective parenting is a powerful concept.

Several Roundtable participants also commented on the importance of culture when examining family functions and roles. According to Perez, immigrant Latino families manifest very strong family-centered values. Since families are frequently divided at the time of migration, family reunification remains a strong motivating force for many years and families work hard to preserve ties with relatives who remain in their country of origin. Bruner also noted the important role that the extended family plays in African-American families, which is different than what is seen in the dominant western European culture. Participants reinforced the need for practitioners to be sensitive to these cultural nuances in designing programs and delivering services.

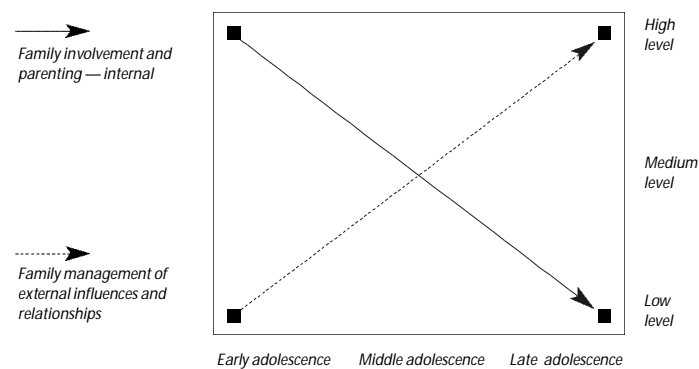
## DYNAMICS OF AGE

There was general agreement that, developmentally, there are great differences in the life course of youth, going from early adolescence to early adulthood. Consequently, the roles of the family and the roles of institutions differ across the youth's developmental stages. Roundtable participants stressed the importance of articulating the dynamic interplay of developmental needs, family functions, and needed institutional supports for each developmental stage.

“THE ROLES THAT FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES PLAY IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES ACTUALLY DON'T DIMINISH WITH AGE — THEY INCREASE. AND THE INFORMATION, SKILLS, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORTS THAT FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES NEED TO SUCCESSFULLY HELP YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE IT THROUGH THIS TRANSITION ALSO DON'T DIMINISH — THEY INCREASE.” KAREN PITTMAN

Pittman remarked that, from a developmental perspective, we need to better understand how the roles that families play in youth development shift, from being the primary resource, to broker and advocate, to monitor, and how those roles need to be supported. In addition, according to Weiss, the process of autonomy during adolescence involves important negotiations within the family, as the youth moves into adulthood and independent functioning. Dennis noted how the age of true independence, both financial and psychological, seems to be continuously delayed in today's society. This, however, increases the level of complexity in the family dynamics. Thomases also noted that the developmental process is not just a task of separation and autonomy; instead, it is an ongoing task of renegotiating relationships. Furthermore, the linkages change dramatically as we go up the age spectrum of youth. According to Furstenberg, during the transition to adulthood stage, parents have less to offer their kids besides support and a home, when the

Figure 1  
Family Role in Relation to Age of Youth



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3. Participants are identified here by their last names; for full names and affiliations, please refer to the end of the report.

kids are beginning to relate to other institutions such as the workplace or college.

Because of these considerations, participants urged the Foundation to come up with programmatic strategies that would be responsive to different adolescent developmental stages as well as to the corresponding family function needs.

### INVOLVEMENT OF FAMILIES IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Roundtable participants also examined the issue of family involvement in youth development programs. There was general agreement that there is a spectrum of youth development programs and that there is a continuum of family involvement within these programs. At one end of the spectrum, youth development programs define their purpose as providing supports that are not available to youth because families are unable to provide them. In this context, there is little consideration to family involvement, as the youth becomes the sole focus of the interventions. At the other end of the spectrum, there are programs that strive to integrate family support and youth development strategies. In these instances, families play active roles in program design as well as in program participation.

Sugland noted that, in the context of Family Strengthening Youth Development, there should be a range of family roles—partners, facilitators, contributors, supporters, advocates, and participants. With the family-oriented programs, there is an understanding that you can't even consider trying to work with a child or an adolescent in a family without considering the family in the cultural context and in the community. Pittman also emphasized that there is

a variety of roles that families can play in youth development programs. Some programs see families as barriers and some see families as resources, but programs need to consider a range of relationships to have with families and possess the capacity to meet the family where they are in that space. Also, she added, it is important to recognize that one of the things that is most powerful and needed in youth development is for families to better connect to other families. Youth development programs need to figure out how they can facilitate that learning.

Some participants urged caution in trying to expand the reach of youth development programs. Several noted the inherent challenges of involving parents in youth activities. Kipke noted that, in her experiences as a program evaluator in Los Angeles, it was very difficult to engage parents as they often worked two or three jobs and were overstretched. Weiss also observed that there seems to be unwillingness on the part of a lot of organizations that serve children and youth to deal with families. Their perspective appears to be that if you open the door to families, there will be tension between meeting the needs of families and meeting the needs of youth.

The importance of stand-alone youth programs was also emphasized. It was noted by several participants that research in many communities places youth activities above community priorities, as there are kids hanging out with nothing to do and getting involved with gangs and drugs. In the context of documented youth needs, Halpern remarked that, in a modest way, just having good after-school programs for kids is helpful to families.

Other participants also noted how public systems and categorical funding drive program development, which present huge challenges for bringing families into programs. As an example of a major policy shift affecting family involvement in youth development, Thomases described how the Beacons initiative in New York City recently eliminated work with adults and families, elements that had been core to the original conception of the model. As a result, Beacon service providers are likely to feel pressure to target programs and interventions to youth only. While affected by this new policy, Perez and Sister Mary Paul (directors of Beacon programs) reiterated their agencies'

“ WE KNOW A LOT ABOUT RESILIENCY FACTORS. WHAT WE DON'T KNOW IS THE EXTENT ONE NEEDS TO ADD SOME FAMILIAL COMPONENTS TO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN ORDER TO MAKE THEM MORE EFFECTIVE, OR EFFECTIVE FOR DIFFERENT POPULATIONS... IT WILL BE IMPORTANT TO BUILD EVALUATION AND LOOK AT EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE.” LARRY STEINBERG

commitment to working with families as they seek to support their children and youth.

As part of this discussion, Hill articulated an important distinction between the *family* as a context for youth development and the *program* as a context for youth development. In the former, you start out with the family, reflect on the fact that family is the most important thing to young people, and then develop a range of supports and an environment that supports that notion of family. In the continuum of entry points for Family Strengthening Youth Development, one needs to recognize that there are organizations that are going to start with the family as the context and that youth development and all the other pieces come out of that lens. Then you will also have youth development programs that are still primarily focused on engaging the young person, but will attempt to engage family, can figure out how family can be a resource, and can do things that support and get families comfortable.

There was general agreement that, presently, there is not a strong practice base for Family Strengthening Youth Development. As a practical step, it will be important to look at what practitioners are doing and to provide opportunities to enhance their skills in order to make it possible to integrate various perspectives, like considering the role of the family in youth development. Steinberg recommended investing in evaluation in order to have empirical evidence when examining the effects of programs with different orientations. Weiss also recommended setting appropriate expectations about what is the minimum set of resources necessary to meet objectives. And, it will be important to focus on the family, not on the program. If the focus is on the family, then you need to support families' efforts to nurture, rear the young person, and provide necessary community resources.

“ THE THING THAT IS IMPORTANT IS NOT TO THINK ABOUT FAMILY STRENGTHENING AS SOMETHING THAT IS A NEW CONCEPT, BUT TO THINK OF IT AS AN INHERENT PART OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT WHICH NEVER WANTED TO SEPARATE YOUTH FROM FAMILY OR COMMUNITY.” JOHN KIXMILLER

# Linkages

## YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT: CONCEPTUAL LINKAGES

In preparation for the Roundtable discussions, the OMG Center commissioned a paper on the conceptual linkages between youth development and family development that was distributed in advance to Roundtable participants. In this paper, Spencer and her associates discuss large conceptual models for providing an overarching framework that define linkages between society, family, and youth development.

Spencer et al. use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a starting point for looking at different levels of environmental influence in terms of dynamic, interactive systems of person-environment relationships. Built as a hierarchical model (seen below in Figure 2), Bronfenbrenner discusses four different levels of environmental influences on a person: micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, and macro-system.

Spencer et al. then expand Bronfenbrenner's model by introducing a framework that specifically focuses on developmental processes while still taking into account multi-systemic levels of environmental context. The Spencer framework provides insight on the factors that determine how youth view and comprehend family, peer, and societal expectations, as well as their prospects for competence and success. The components of this framework are detailed in the textbox at right. Following a discussion on the continuous, cyclical interaction of these factors, Spencer et al. provide several illustrations of their applied model for various levels of environmental context, examining influences on the family as well as family functions and processes that impact on youth development.

The Spencer paper elicited further discussions on the conceptual linkages between youth development and family development. Weiss noted how the Spencer framework advances our understanding of the multiple systems impacting on youth development; however, given the complexity of cross-system levels of analysis and scarcity of resources, she emphasized the need to make strategic interventions. For her, a priority intervention would consist of ensuring that professionals that come into contact with a child have a solid understanding of the family. A good example of this, she noted, can be found in innovative teacher training for parent and family involvement.

J. Williams remarked that it would be very helpful to track, side by side, the principles and conceptual frameworks for youth, family, and community development. Johnson also noted the importance of looking at the literature in order to identify where family development and youth development outcomes intersect. Being able to learn from vulnerable families whose children are "making it" would provide invaluable information on those linkages, she added. Brown emphasized the need to look more closely at peer influences, as this factor seemed underdeveloped in the Spencer model. Steinberg commented on the importance of the middle level in the ecological model, as this involves a family's ability to navigate various systems and the neighborhood environment on behalf of their young people. He also pointed out the importance of being able to describe the situation of families with special needs in this framework.

### Identity Development Framework

The following components describe identity development through the life course:

- **risk vs. protective factors** — contributors that may predispose individuals to adverse outcomes or that provide protection;
- **stress** — actual experiences that challenge one's psychosocial identity and well-being as well as available supports;
- **reactive coping strategies** — coping mechanisms for resolving stress, which could lead to adaptive or maladaptive solutions;
- **emergent identities** — how individuals view themselves within and between their various contextual experiences; and
- **life stage outcomes** — productive, such as positive relationships and high self-esteem, or adverse, such as incarceration and self-destructive behavior.

—Spencer et al., 2001

As part of this discussion, Sugland offered that the life cycle of families would be another critical factor to consider in any framework, as this would provide further insight into the family's needs, capabilities, and skills. Pittman agreed but also cautioned that the developmental stages of families are not necessarily based on how old their kids are and argued for looking at this factor from a conceptual level.

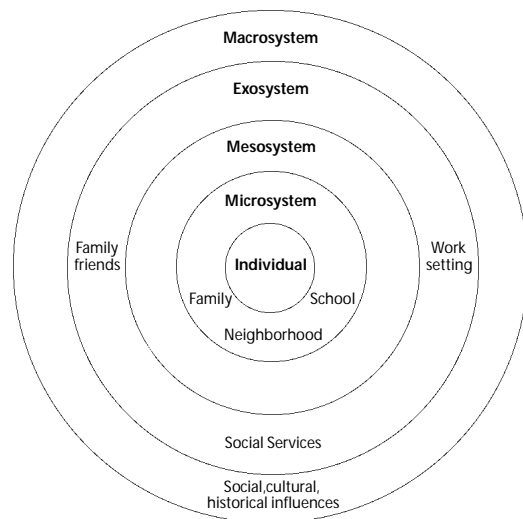
Several participants commented on the need to invest in evaluation in order to test hypotheses and refine conceptual formulations linking youth development and family development. Hahn strongly suggested that any conceptual formulation should be grounded by a compelling argument that would clearly spell out why parents and guardians should be involved in the futures of their young people. Lacking that compelling argument, he added, would lead to excessive theorizing and definitional work, but would not advance the youth development field.

For Furstenberg, that compelling argument can be built by an increasing body of research that says that in order to promote successful youth development, youth need to be in contexts that have certain characteristics, that are good quality, and that the role of parents is to place the kids in the right kinds of situations. He added that the critical issue for parents in poor communities is not acquiring knowledge, but having access to resources. Steinberg, however, argued that, when talking about adolescence, there is either a lack of parenting information for parents or it is not well delivered to parents who are seeking that information. For him, then, interventions should span a middle ground between direct support for building parenting skills and adding resources to the community.

Expanding on this discussion, Blyth noted that one of the theoretical linkages that we do not understand well is how families contribute to both the creation of enriching environments as well as the management of the interface with those environments for their kids. In poor neighborhoods, families do not have the financial resources to support enrichment opportunities and ready access to those opportunities are lacking for youth. In this context, parents would need to advocate for the creation of those opportunities, facilitate access to those opportunities, and ensure the retention of those opportunities. Various strategies, then, including parenting education might contribute to the elimination of existing barriers in those neighborhoods. Making a linkage to the family support movement, Bruner noted the importance of family resource centers in creating points of congregation for families where they can share experiences and create social networks. He also pointed out the special challenge of kids with parents in prison (about one million and a half, nationwide) and the importance of providing necessary supports and opportunities for those parents upon re-entry into society.

“WHILE WE CAN ENHANCE PARENTS’ KNOWLEDGE A LITTLE BIT, THE BIG ISSUE IS TO ENHANCE THE RESOURCES TO IMPROVE THE SETTINGS THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO YOUTH—WHETHER IT IS THE SCHOOL, AFTER SCHOOL, OR OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL. YOUNG PEOPLE NEED MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONS... THE WAY TO HELP FAMILIES IS BY STRENGTHENING THE INSTITUTIONS.” FRANK FURSTENBERG

Figure 2  
Bronfenbrenner's  
Ecological Systems Theory



Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989, 1993), as cited in "Multi-Systemic Perspectives on Family and Youth Development," Margaret Beale Spencer, et al., 2001

### YOUTH-FAMILY-COMMUNITY LINKAGES

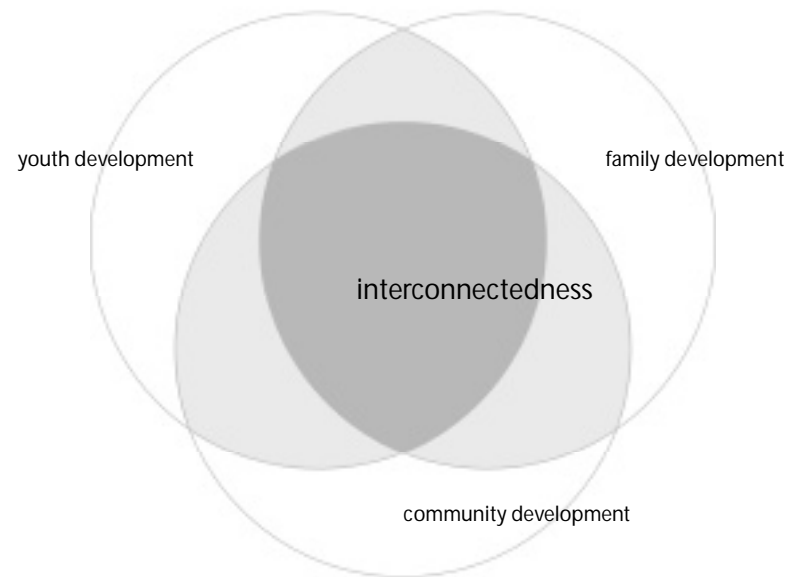
Many participants in both Roundtable sessions emphasized the need to develop a holistic framework that allows practitioners to work with youth, family, and community at the same time. If the approach is not holistic, there is the danger of taking a segment and ignoring the contributions, contexts, and intersections with other spheres. The notion of “nesting” youth, family, and community contexts was a prominent feature of this discussion. While these three contexts are often unconnected by practitioners, the graphic below assumes a high degree of interconnectedness among the three spheres.

Sister Mary Paul noted that the family and youth linkage cannot happen except in a community context. Kixmiller reinforced the notion that youth development practitioners need to include youth in community and family from the beginning. According to him, it is very important not to isolate adolescents in a peer group

without a community context that also includes adult interaction. Several participants noted the importance of learning from those who are doing it well. Thomases referred to a present study of the Youth Development Institute in New York City, which is examining the intersection of youth development and family development in programs such as the Center for Family Life, Alianza Dominicana, and Rheedlen, considered leaders in the field. Remarking on the importance of developing sound outcomes for a holistic framework, J. Williams added that practitioners run into difficulty when they try to envision a program that is going to produce youth outcomes, family outcomes, and community outcomes.

In looking for examples of the blending of youth development and family development, several participants noted the importance of working with schools and opening school buildings for family strengthening and youth development activities, mirroring the original intent of Beacon Schools in New York City. As Sister Mary Paul noted, school buildings are often the best resources found in many communities and these buildings ought to be owned by the communities.

Figure 3  
Interconnectedness of Youth, Family and Community Contexts



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## Vulnerable Families/Youth In Transition

For several years the Annie E. Casey Foundation has been investing in public system reform initiatives, including the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, Family to Family, Urban Children's Mental Health Initiative, and the Plain Talk Initiative. Realizing there were a number of larger questions that program staff were seeing across initiatives, the Foundation decided to step back and invest in a knowledge development agenda to help revise and guide their overall strategy in family strengthening youth development. One of these crosscutting research questions attempts to learn what happens to those young people being served in the “deep end” public systems as they get older and leave the system. Finding out how, or if, the transitioning process helps kids move into a healthy adulthood has become a central component of the Foundation's knowledge development efforts.

In working toward this goal, the Foundation has expanded its grantmaking in the last three years to include programs that support vulnerable families/youth in transition. This is a fairly new grantmaking area in general within the children, youth and family field. Investments in improving transitions for vulnerable young adults focus on the five groups detailed below.

The knowledge development strategy in each area has been to discover what is working from the ground up, to look at best practices as well as best examples of policy and system reform, and then explore the lessons of what happens when young people transition out of these systems.

### FRAMING THE ISSUES

Talmira Hill, formerly of AECF and now an independent consultant, has been working in this area for several years, researching ways that systems have an impact on these youth and their families and looking at the intersection between youth development and family development, and identifying strategies to provide supports to these families.

In introducing the issue of vulnerable young adults in transition, Hill discussed how family strengthening youth development has been especially challenging in a couple of ways. For example, if the young person has been removed from his birth family by child welfare services, then there may be multiple family contexts for both the practitioner and the youth to deal with. These could include more than one foster family, an adoptive family, relatives who are caring for the youth, or a combination of these family contexts. Finding ways to acknowledge all of these layers and support the needs of that young person can be difficult. A second type of challenging situation arises in the case of young offenders, where the perception is frequently that the family itself may form an environment that is contributing to their kids' trouble with the law.

Yet another challenge that was discussed by Hill involves school-to-career work force development.

In an initiative being funded in Baltimore, youths referred from the child welfare system or juvenile justice and other public systems work part-time while continuing their education. The goals of the program are to achieve workforce development objectives while at the same time have them be enriching academically. One of the difficulties here has been balancing the needs of the families with those of the youths. For example, a problem that youths needed help with from the community facilitators has been handling their paychecks when

#### Casey investments in improving transitions for vulnerable young adults focus on:

- Out-of-school youths and youth workforce development, academic attainment, pathways to post-secondary education, youth investment, economic opportunity for young people;
- Young adults leaving the foster care system;
- Young offenders transitioning out of the justice system: policies, practices, and the system or formats that address the economic opportunities available to young offenders;
- Young welfare recipients transitioning from welfare to work; and
- Children, youth and families of incarcerated parents, and finding ways to support them.

“ WE HAVE WORKED WITH ‘DEEP-END’ KIDS WHO ARE IN THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM, CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM, JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND SPECIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR 30 YEARS, WHEN THOSE KIDS WERE BEING REMOVED FROM INSTITUTIONS AND HOSPITALS AND BROUGHT BACK INTO COMMUNITIES. WE LEARNED QUICKLY THAT THOSE CHILDREN AND YOUTH DID NOT BELONG TO US AND DID NOT BELONG TO THE STATE, BUT BELONGED TO THE FAMILIES. AND IT’S NOT SO MUCH THAT WE NEEDED TO LOOK AT PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES, BUT WE NEEDED TO PUT FAMILIES IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT, IN CONTROL OF THEIR OWN SITUATIONS.” KARL DENNIS

their income may be needed for the family as well as themselves. A number of community facilitators have expressed a need for more direction and support in understanding how best to engage and work within the family context, particularly when the family is very vulnerable or fragile.

Hill cited other issues, such as cultural perceptions and understanding the relationship between the challenges faced by a vulnerable adult and what resources are available. One question the initiative is struggling with involves figuring out whether these issues all come together in the context of the family, or the program and services that are offered, and to what extent the community might be connected.

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## VULNERABLE YOUTH AND PUBLIC SYSTEMS

Several participants discussed the importance of getting clear about the distinction between *vulnerable youth* and *vulnerable youth in transition*. Sugland expressed her view that it would be problematic “to wait until someone is coming out of the juvenile justice system to then figure out how we can provide family support. We don’t want to wait until they are old enough to be out of foster care to figure out how to provide support.” She noted that vulnerable youth still need some kind of family support contact. This elicited some discussion about the distinction between the two types of vulnerable youth. Hill talked about how “the distinction between the moment of transition and any time leading up to that is not really important except for the fact that

if you’re trying to look at a strategic policy intervention, the transition point for foster care or for juvenile justice or any of these becomes an interesting strategic point to begin to raise all the questions about whether or not the system or any other community partner has been building the supports in a developmentally appropriate way for the transition to be successful.” She reminded participants that the State is no longer responsible for providing services to youth after the age of 18, or in some cases 21, whether those youth are prepared or not; the distinction between vulnerable youth and youth in transition therefore becomes a matter of being strategic about policy issues and system reform to better support these youth whose cases are closed by the State.

Following up on the needs of transitioning foster care youth, Owens commented that in her work with the newly begun Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the focus of the program is to support the development of effective policies and practices to help adolescents, ages 14 to 23, in foster care make successful transitions into adulthood. Outcomes they are hoping to have a positive impact on are health and mental health, housing, education, employment, and personal and community engagement. Youth engagement is intended to be the “cornerstone” of the initiative, which will focus on five sites—Atlanta, Kansas City, St. Louis, Nashville and Los Angeles, chosen because of its large percentage of youth in foster care.

Other participants talked about how vulnerable youth in transition should include additional populations. Steinberg discussed how youth with serious mental illness and those with chronic physical illnesses or disabilities could be especially vulnerable as they become

young adults because the health care system can be so difficult to navigate. Peak added that runaway homeless youth, immigrant youth, and sexual minority youth also have pressing needs as they transition out of public systems. Other participants pointed out that vulnerable youth who are also parents need special supports.

Sugland also remarked upon the need for an additional layer of supports for youth who are moving in and out of systems, since there may be policy and other political issues that affect their ability to make the necessary transitions. Sometimes the funds are there, she noted, but ironically are not available to many kids because of age or other legal restrictions. This prompted a discussion about the need for clear strategies that could involve system reform as well as creating transitional supports to vulnerable youth. It was acknowledged by several participants that there are instances where family situations are dysfunctional and unsupportive of youth. Steinberg noted that there is a small subset of families out there, usually in the Juvenile Justice population, where it would probably be to the kids’ benefit to weaken ties to the family. However, Dennis remarked that, regardless of parental problem behaviors, we should consider them as valuable resources to their children because the children will go back to their parents if they can do so.

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## THE VALUE OF FAMILY AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Blyth shared insights and some parallels from other research that could be of much use in the knowledge development for youth in transition. He referred to three important considerations. One is that youth who are vulnerable or low functioning in some fashion are the ones who most tend to regress or have initial problems when they face a transition. It’s not only that they’re vulnerable but also that “they are differentially vulnerable to the effects of transitions.” Secondly, it is possible to achieve a better result if one is able to better match the levels of supports that are provided before and after the kid is being transitioned out of a system. In a way, he added, it may be best to decrease supports a bit before the transition and increase them above

current levels afterwards, to even out the gap. Thirdly, it would be desirable to provide supports that will not be disrupted by the transition. This would involve, for instance, engaging kids in programs that are not cut off when they hit the transition point, where they will have friendships and relationships that will continue past the transition, providing some stability and strength. Another type of continuity that he recommends involves bringing parents or other people back into their lives, who can be something of a constant for youths as they transition out of systems.

A view held by Lewis is that neighbors can be a critical piece of these types of support. He feels, however, that they have less of an impact today than when he grew up in an urban neighborhood, and believes that finding ways to engage neighbors in the lives of youths could help them feel they had more of an extended family around them. Others responded in various ways to this notion of increasing supportive relationships, providing anecdotal examples as well as research findings highlighting the benefits of supportive adult relationships. Bruner referred to natural networks of support that we recognize are important to people in terms of making their lives meaningful, as well as connecting up economically, socially, and otherwise. For a variety of reasons, these networks don’t generally exist in poor, tough neighborhoods. However, strategies can be devised to get people together in neighborhoods and catalyze this activity. He added, though, that this approach is not enough to tackle these very difficult issues, and will require additional community supports if residents are going to be able to assist in any meaningful way.

## REFRAMING THE WORK WITH PUBLIC SYSTEMS

Fair cautioned against trying to find new ways to describe what we already know. As someone working with a new mayoral administration in Philadelphia, he noted the inherent challenges in developing an integrated vision of children and youth programs. As a public system administrator, he indicated that it would not be helpful to force systems into “some new fad or to force us in a new direction,” as this could lead to confusion and further fragmentation of services. Furthermore, he also emphasized that programs designed to assist those in the field with integrating family development services and youth development services would only be useful if they are grounded in existing efforts.

On the same subject, Kleinbard felt that by identifying and naming what is happening within the youth in transition area, those working in the field gain a sense of greater control over the issues, and perhaps an enhanced ability to resolve them. He cautioned, however, “that’s not to say there’s not a need to address some of the other issues of building knowledge about impact and adjusting the policy. But you don’t need a whole new program here.”

As an overall comment on the Foundation’s overarching strategy, Furstenberg stated his agreement that a holistic or comprehensive approach involving multiple systems would work best. Also important, he added, would be the need for a long enough period to allow an approach that follows youth over time. Both of these conditions will be necessary to build stability in families and provide enough opportunity for youths to begin healthy adult lives.

“WE KEEP REFERRING TO THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT WORLD AS A FIELD AND I JUST DON’T THINK IT’S A FIELD YET—AS MUCH AS I’D LIKE IT TO BE. IT’S NOT LIKE THERE ARE DIRECTORS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN EVERY STATE OR EVERY CITY... I THINK IT’S GOING TO BE REALLY IMPORTANT IN TERMS OF A POLICY STRATEGY, ABOUT WHERE YOU CONNECT AND HOW YOU CONNECT WHEN YOU WANT TO DO SYSTEMS CHANGE IN A COMMUNITY.” RICHARD MURPHY

## Language

At different times in the Roundtable discussions participants grappled with Casey Foundation language, seeking a clearer understanding of key terms. For instance, there was concern with the use of “family strengthening,” as there was the connotation that families are weak and may need “fixing.” Furstenberg suggested that instead of “family strengthening,” the emphasis should be on “family partnerships” or “family alliances” between community, institutions, and families since the Casey’s strategy is not fundamentally about changing families, but about changing communities. Bruner also noted that there are many strong families in poor, tough neighborhoods, but there is a lack of opportunities in those neighborhoods. Peak clarified that the family strengthening youth development term came from CARTA’s work, relating family development and youth development in a community context and stressed that “strengthening” is not about fixing families.

Delgado noted that the emerging understanding of the linkages between family development and youth development may be best expressed by the term “family strengthening to promote youth development,” with an emphasis on the “to.” Pittman, however, cautioned against making complex titles out of efforts to integrate various perspectives, as this could lead to confusion among practitioners. She added that what was important was to create a movement that would help practitioners progress toward a common goal.

## Moving Forward

The two Roundtables sponsored by the Casey Foundation provided a rare opportunity for a diverse group of community, family, and youth experts to discuss the basis, benefits, and challenges in the articulation of a family-based perspective for promoting youth development. The Family Strengthening Youth Development (FSYD) framework represents an evolution of positive youth development approaches that recognizes the importance of grounding work with youth within the context of family and community. Although the Roundtable discussions did not seek to achieve consensus on the FSYD framework, there was overwhelming support among participants for its basic premises: the family plays a critical role in youth development and various community resources are needed to assist the family as it endeavors to provide supports and opportunities for its young people.

While there was enthusiasm for the integrative perspective offered by the FSYD framework, the Roundtable discussions elicited different viewpoints and experiences on the subject of how to design and implement specific strategies. The range and breadth of discussion in the Roundtables attests to the challenges inherent in FSYD program approaches. Although acknowledging a continuum of roles that families can play in youth development programs—ranging from no role at all to the integration of parents and youth in program activities—there was agreement that very few existing programs provide the latter integrated framework. An important distinction was made between starting out with the *family* or with the *program* as the context for youth development. If the family is the starting point, then the program represents a youth development resource for the family. And, from that perspective, it would follow that closer ties must be built between programs serving youth and their families. This perspective certainly carries many implementation challenges, as it has not been the prevailing framework for youth development programs.

Roundtable participants expressed general agreement with the notion that different programmatic dimensions are required at different stages in a young person’s development. Since family functions shift in response to the young person’s developmental stage, the nature and degree of family involvement in youth programs

will need to be appropriate for the particular developmental stage. The challenges of applying the FSYD framework to a subgroup of vulnerable families and youth in transition also received considerable attention during the Roundtable discussions. The circumstances of these families and the needs of youth in transition underscored the importance of developing a holistic framework that integrates youth, family, and community development.

As the Casey Foundation moves forward in the further articulation and implementation of the FSYD framework, Roundtable participants offered the following recommendations.

**At the conceptual level:**

- Continue to *elaborate on the premise of the FSYD framework*—young people grow in families and communities.
- Continue to *define the linkages and interfaces* between youth development, family development, and community development.
- Articulate a *compelling case statement for the benefits of FSYD* that will generate a catalytic agenda for the field.

**At the knowledge development level:**

- Continue to *facilitate conversations across fields, disciplines, and professional backgrounds* in order to stimulate integrative strategies.
- Identify and document the *efforts of agencies that are already implementing an integrative framework*, linking youth, family, and community development.
- Fund *evaluation research* to provide solid empirical basis for FSYD outcomes.
- Link to *existing research studies and research networks* addressing issues directly relevant to the FSYD agenda.

**At the practitioner level:**

- Develop *tools to enhance understanding and facilitate implementation* of the FSYD framework.
- Provide *opportunities for training* that focus on the FSYD framework.
- Provide *opportunities for peer-to-peer learning*, relying on expertise developed by existing agencies that already provide an integrative framework for addressing youth development issues within the context of family and community.

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*Design:* Gallini Hemmann, Inc.  
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