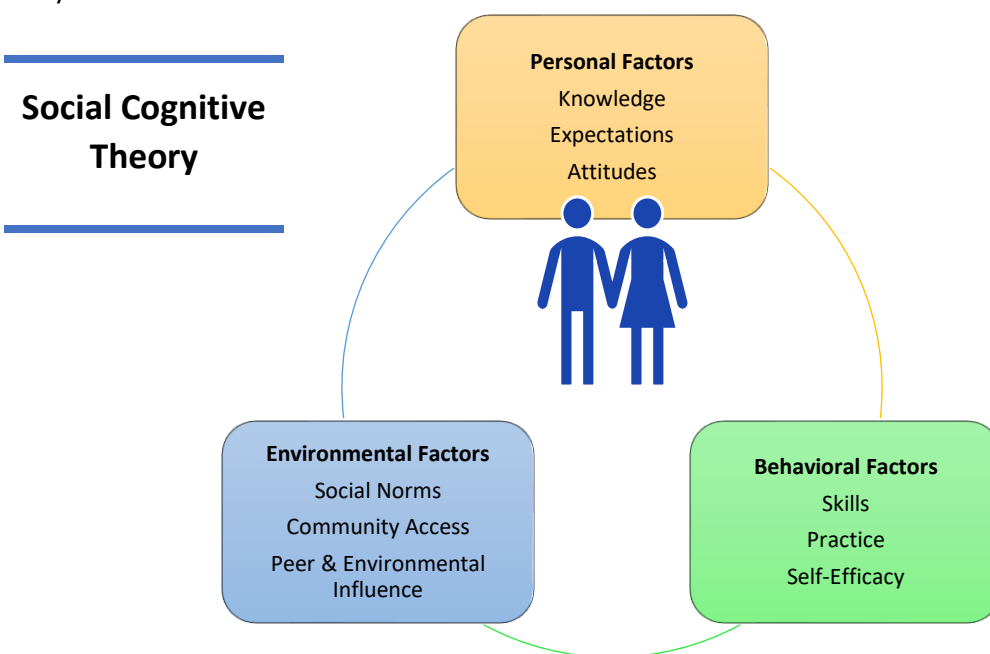# What Are We Doing About It?

Given all the challenges and risks that our youth face today, simply heightening awareness and identifying the problems are not adequate responses. For example, numerous anti-trafficking campaigns tend to employ scare tactics that present all children as being trafficked,[1] which can be both counter-productive and misleading as to the true mechanism behind this growing issue. Most of these anti-trafficking campaigns fail to address the social realities that affect youth such as poverty, homelessness, and involvement in the child welfare system.[2] The Project ROOTS toolkit takes these prevalent issues and corresponding research into account when creating a set of interactive activities that aim to prevent youth from being drawn into these risky behaviors.

The Project ROOTS is based on Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which suggests that the social (environmental), personal (cognitive), and behavioral domains interact and impact one another. Individuals stand as agents of change, as well as byproducts of their respective environments and self-efficacy (the confidence one has in the ability to perform a behavior) is one of the key constructs of this theory.[3]

Social Cognitive Theory

Personal Factors
Knowledge
Expectations
Attitudes

Environmental Factors
Social Norms
Community Access
Peer & Environmental Influence

Behavioral Factors
Skills
Practice
Self-Efficacy

Positive Youth Development (PYD)
"Positive youth development is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive…[it] promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths."[4]

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[1] Smith, Erica Med, and Jasmine Oglesby LSW. "HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ADOLESCENTS Understanding the Issues as a Service Provider." Webinar.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Kelder SH, Heolscher D, Perry CL. How individuals, environments, and health behaviors interact: Social Cognitive Theory. In: *Health Behavior: Theory, Research, and Practice.* Jossey-Bass; 2015:249-298. doi:10.1533/B978-1-84569-641-2.50009-X.

[4] Positive Youth Development. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development

Project ROOTS stands in unison with PYD by enlisting the facilitator as a protective factor for youth. Their role is to serve as a consistent, supportive mentor for the individual. Forging this bond, in turn, helps elicit resiliency amongst youth, which is defined as a positive, adaptive response in the face of significant adversity.[5] This toolkit employs PYD by initiating discussions that aim to provoke over-arching themes of empathy, empowerment, and equality within youth.

A Gender-Transformative Approach

Project ROOTS encourages youth to think about and challenge the gender norms that currently define society. Moreover, its approach moves away from one categorized as gender-sensitive to gender-transformative. A gender-sensitive approach ushers discussions of the specific needs of males and females due to the prevailing social construction of masculinity and femininity, yet it falls short in transforming these gender norms, especially when they are harmful. A gender-transformative approach, which underlines this toolkit, discusses norms and the social construction of gender, making an effort to question and change such norms that are harmful or may result in gender-based violence.[6] Not only do we wish for participants to become aware of the harmful gender norms, but we subsequently intend to transform these standards in lieu of our discussions, activities, and leadership exemplified by the facilitator.

The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework

"Social and emotional learning involves implementing practices and policies that help children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can enhance personal development, establish satisfying interpersonal relationships, and lead to effective and ethical work and productivity…SEL contributes to competence in the following five domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making."[7] Amidst the variety of issues that this toolkit aims to address, SEL contributes to the social and emotional aptitude of our youth. Engaging these fundamental skills translate into successes in other areas of daily life. High school and emotional competency decreases dropout rates, school and classroom behavior issues, drug use, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, and criminal behavior…sustaining a focus on social and emotional growth through adolescence is vital for improving achievement and outcomes beyond school.[8]

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[5] National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience. *13*. 2015: 9.

[6] Barker, G., Ricardo, C., & Nascimento, M. (2017). *Engaging men and boys in changing gender-based inequity in health: Evidence from programme interventions* (Publication). Retrieved http://www.who.int/gender/documents/Engaging_men_boys.pdf

[7] Durlak, J., Domitrovich, C., Weissberg, R., & Gullotta, T. (2015). *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*. Guilford Publications. Retrieved from https://www.guilford.com/excerpts/durlak.pdf.

[8] *Ibid.*

School Connectedness

According to the California Department of Education, the 2016-2017 statewide report indicated that the number of suspensions and expulsions within public school systems have been steadily decreasing.[9] Despite this positive sign, the data provided by these reports should prompt us to continue to encourage our youth to meet their academic goals and interests. In the scope of suspension rates by ethnicity, the three largest groups shown were African American (9.8%), American Indian or Alaska Native (7.4%), and Pacific Islander (5.0%). However, and with regards to the total number of expulsions, the three largest groups identified were Hispanic or Latino (3,326), White (1,046), and African American (798).[10] By engaging academics and teachers, youth can formulate their long-term goals and interests into a career that provides meaning and value.

One important factor that can support school attendance and improved goal setting is the

Source: Social and Emotional Learning [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.carsoncityschools.com/departments/educational_services/bully_free_zone/social_and_emotional_learning

connections students create amongst other youth give them another means to develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally. "School connectedness can play an important role in adolescent's health trajectory. School connectedness has come to be defined as the extent to which one feels accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school."[11] School connectedness assumes an important role in protecting against risky behavior such as violence, sexual activity and depression. It is recommended that interventions to promote school belonging and develop positive coping styles among boys may hold substantive benefit for reducing adolescent boy's involvement in risky behaviors.[12] This capacity to become included in a group of like-minded people is fundamental to the growth and maturation of youth over time. Such relationships are healthy in virtue of youth's shared experiences and grant them the opportunity to explore and foster their social interactions and emotions.

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[9] "State Schools Chief Tom Torlakson Announces Fifth Year in a Row of Declining Student Suspensions and Expulsions." School Profile: Oxford Academy (CA Dept of Education). https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr17/yr17rel80.asp.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Basterfield, Candice, Reardon, Candice, Govender, Kaymarlin, and Litt, D. "Relationship between Constructions of Masculinity, Health Risk Behaviors and Mental Health among Adolescent High School Boys in Durban, South Africa." *International Journal of Men's Health* 13, no. 2 (2014): 101-120.

[12] *Ibid.*