Conceptual Framework for Positive Youth Development and Prevention

When all the research is coalesced, it forms a conceptual framework that posits that childhood is a critical time of rapid physical, social, and emotional development that puts children who are navigating the unprecedented shifts in social norms and structures at alarmingly high risk. The pressures of a rapidly changing society are destabilizing schools, families, and other institutions that formerly helped ensure the health and well-being of teenagers. Modern statistics bear this out: children are at epidemically higher risk of health and life-compromising behaviors than at any time in our history, with escalating behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, teen pregnancy, acts of violence, suicide, and a host of others.

Research indicates that two major outcomes are critical for the promotion of positive social behaviors and attachments and the reduction of health-compromising behaviors, such as drug use, violence, and misconduct:

1) To develop positive social behaviors in young adolescents, such as self-discipline, responsibility, good judgment, and the ability to get along with others, and

2) To develop positive commitments to their families, schools, peers, and communities, including a commitment to lead healthy, drug-free lives.

The original evidence-based model upon which the acclaimed Lions Quest programs were developed was derived from a synthesis of the information-rational model (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), social bonding theory (Hirschi, 1969), social learning theory (Akers, 1992; Bandura, 1977), the social development model (Hawkins et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1992; Hawkins & Weis, 1985; Weis & Hawkins, 1981; Elliot, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1982; Kim, 1981; Kandel 1982), and the self-derogation theory (Kaplan, Martin, & Robbins, 1982; Kaplan, 1980; Kaplan, Martin, & Johnson, 1986). Since then, the model has been expanded to include the scientific basis of social and emotional learning (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Wahlberg 2004; Goleman, 2002), strengths-based prevention (Hawkins, Catalano, & Arthur, 2002; Hansen, Giles, & Fearnow-Kenney, 2000), evidence-based character education (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003), service-learning (Meyer, Billig, & Hofschire 2004), and assets and the impact of thriving (Benson & Scales, 2006).

The framework describes how a nurturing external environment in which children learn critical life skills influences and supports the internal conditions that encourage their positive social behaviors and commitments, and reduces their risk for problem behaviors such as substance abuse and violence.

External Conditions Current prevention research on resiliency (Werner 1997, 2001), risk and protective factors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Arthur, 2002), and developmental assets and thriving (Benson, 1997, 2006), affirm a programmatic emphasis on teaching life skills and developing positive commitments. This research identifies emotional and social competencies and prosocial bonding as powerful protective factors that support children's overall healthy development and reduce their risk for harmful behaviors, such as substance abuse and violence. The importance of reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors is highlighted in the 2003 NIDA guide, *Preventing Drug Use among Children*, and is one of the best documented approaches to preventing substance abuse.

To use today's risk and protective factor terminology, Lions Quest programs to proactively strengthen key protective factors that support children's healthy development and mitigate those that put them at risk for problem behaviors. Program content and processes help to establish a school environment that offers:

- Clear rules and positive expectations for appropriate behavior, including no use of Illegal drugs and the norm of non-use among young adolescents.
- Opportunities to develop the emotional and social competencies that support positive behaviors and commitments.
- Positive interaction between adults and young adolescents that creates bonding between the home, school, community, and positive peers.
- Predictable and consistent reinforcement for positive behaviors.
- Reciprocal interaction between adults and peers for the establishment of mutual respect.
- Safe environments that promote opportunities for maximum learning.
- Reinforcement and support for positive norms and a healthy, drug-free lifestyle. (Adapted from NIDA, 2003)
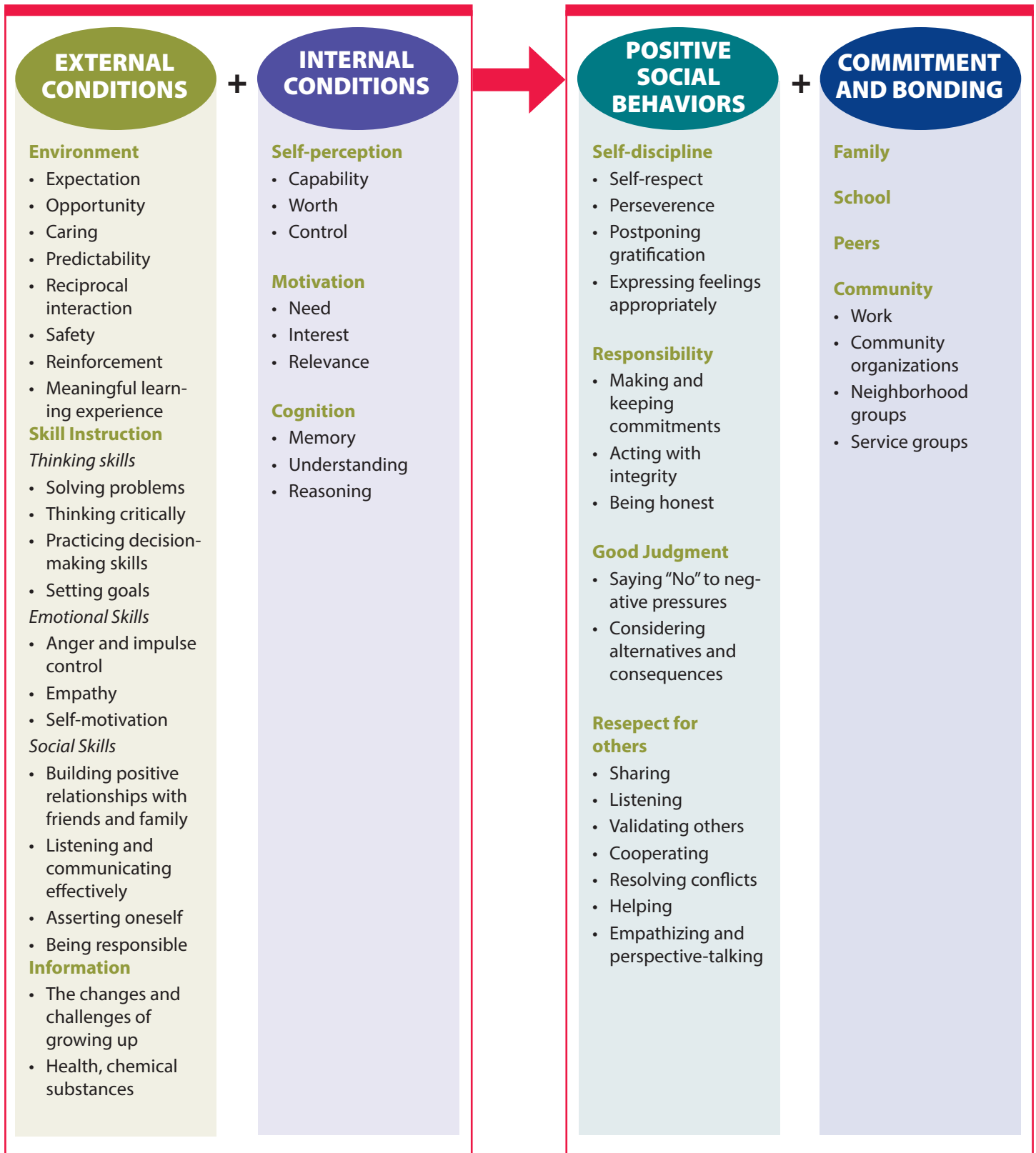
Through the classroom curriculum, children have multiple opportunities to learn, practice, and apply thinking skills, such as solving problems, making decisions, and setting goals, as well as emotional/ social skills, such as friendship making, communication, and assertiveness/refusal skills. Evaluation studies indicate that prevention efforts that include social and emotional skill development lead to greater academic achievement and less anti-social behavior, such as drug use, violence and bullying, early sexual activity, and suicide. (Blum et al., 2002; Welsh et al. 2001; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Wahlberg, 2004).

Internal Conditions By creating a nurturing environment that creates a norm of positive behaviors and commitments, evidence-based prevention programs seek to affect the internal conditions that support children's positive self-perception, motivation, and cognitive development, therefore reducing various risk factors, such as peer rejection, association with negative peers, antisocial and aggressive behavior, and prodrug attitudes and early drug use.

Positive Social Behaviors Lions Quest emphasizes nine major domains of positive social behaviors, all of which have been identified by prevention experts as mediating variables in substance abuse prevention programs:

- Building self-discipline, responsibility, and self-confidence
- Communicating effectively and cooperating with others
- Managing attitudes and emotions, including stress and anger management
- Strengthening positive relationships with family and friends
- Learning/ developing skills in solving problems and making healthy decisions
- Resisting negative peer pressure and drug use and seeking healthy, positive alternatives
- Thinking critically
- Setting goals for health and well-being
- Providing service and assistance to others

Conceptual Model for Program Development

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS + INTERNAL CONDITIONS → POSITIVE SOCIAL BEHAVIORS + COMMITMENT AND BONDING

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS

Environment
- Expectation
- Opportunity
- Caring
- Predictability
- Reciprocal interaction
- Safety
- Reinforcement
- Meaningful learning experience

Skill Instruction

Thinking skills
- Solving problems
- Thinking critically
- Practicing decision-making skills
- Setting goals

Emotional Skills
- Anger and impulse control
- Empathy
- Self-motivation

Social Skills
- Building positive relationships with friends and family
- Listening and communicating effectively
- Asserting oneself
- Being responsible

Information
- The changes and challenges of growing up
- Health, chemical substances

INTERNAL CONDITIONS

Self-perception
- Capability
- Worth
- Control

Motivation
- Need
- Interest
- Relevance

Cognition
- Memory
- Understanding
- Reasoning

POSITIVE SOCIAL BEHAVIORS

Self-discipline
- Self-respect
- Perseverence
- Postponing gratification
- Expressing feelings appropriately

Responsibility
- Making and keeping commitments
- Acting with integrity
- Being honest

Good Judgment
- Saying "No" to negative pressures
- Considering alternatives and consequences

Resepect for others
- Sharing
- Listening
- Validating others
- Cooperating
- Resolving conflicts
- Helping
- Empathizing and perspective-talking

COMMITMENT AND BONDING

Family

School

Peers

Community
- Work
- Community organizations
- Neighborhood groups
- Service groups

Developing these critical life skills requires that children have numerous opportunities to learn, practice, and apply these skills in real-life situations, including role-playing, class discussions with peers, and service to others. To provide modeling, consistency and reinforcement, caring adults at school, home, and in the community need to work together. In environments that support the development and integration of thinking, emotional and social skills and positive social behaviors can become a part of children's standard behavioral repertoire and deter the involvement in health-compromising behaviors (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Wahlberg 2004; Goleman, 2002).

Positive Commitment and Bonding Positive social behaviors and bonding reinforce one another. As young adolescents develop effective thinking, emotional, and social skills and engage in positive behaviors, they strengthen their bonds with their family, school, peers, and the community. Hawkins, Catalano, & Arthur (2002) have determined that young people are considerably more at risk for negative behavior if they do not form attachments with those around them. Programs such as Lions-Quest help to strengthen and reinforce young adolescents' positive attachments through:

- Lesson activities that teach the skills and concepts that support self-control, communication, cooperation, and caring relationships;
- Opportunities to contribute and help others through service-learning activities;
- Positive family interactions and involvement in all aspects of the program;
- School climate improvement;
- Positive peer interactions both in and out of the classroom;
- Involvement of the community, such as local service organizations like Lions Clubs, the PTA, and individual parents, youth workers, clergy, and others who have an interest in the well-being of young people.