Definitions of youth development typically characterize it as a process or approach in which young people become competent or develop competencies necessary to be successful and meet challenges. (Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 1996; National Collaboration for Youth, 2003; Pittman, 1991; Youth Development Institute, n.d.; Youth Development Block Grant, 1995).

According to NCWD/Youth, “youth development is a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent”.

The Search Institute’s definition differs slightly in its focus on assets, defined as factors – both internal and external – that promote positive development; however, its explanation of youth development covers similar developmental needs and challenges as other definitions (Search Institute, 1996)