Promoting positive youth development through technology

Youth spend substantial amounts of time in front of a screen – including computers, cell phones, and game consoles. Can technology help promote youth development?

Yes! Mariana Bers, a researcher at Tufts University, researches how digital experiences can promote positive youth development. Using the metaphor of landscape design, she shows that designers of digital programs should strive to provide:

- young children with a digital playground, not a virtual playpen. The "playground promotes, while the playpen hinders, a sense of mastery, creativity, self-confidence, and open exploration" (p. 23).
- elementary youth a multimedia park, not a virtual mall. Parks are places of creation while malls are venues of consumption.
- high school adolescents with a palace that supports purposeful explorations of identity, self-reflection, creativity, and community participation, not simple wireless hangouts.

To promote positive youth development, you should ensure digital activities offer these:

- *Content Creation* - Creation of personally meaningful projects so youth become producers, not just consumers.
- *Creativity* - Supportive of creative expression, sharing, and reflecting.
- *Choices of Conduct* - A bounded playground with freedom for youth to make choices, take risks, experience consequences, and reflect; experiment with moral and ethical issues and community norms.
- *Communication* - Communication through multimedia (text, voice, sound, video, etc.); development of language; promotion of connections between youth and adults.
- *Collaboration* - Common tasks that require that youth depend and respond to each other; experience includes technical and social supports from peers and adults; youth use technology to help others.
- *Community-Building* - Shared sense of community responsibility; mechanisms for contributions to the common good; experiencing democratic participation.