

IDENTIFYING HIGH QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

Information for Youth Development Professionals Overview

*Lauxman, Waits, Stuart, Tessman, Borden, Strickland, Norquest & Stone
The University of Arizona*

Overview

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide youth professionals with information to consider when conducting youth programs. The eight features of positive youth developmental settings are introduced. These features present key components of quality youth programs. Youth professionals are also introduced to an assessment tool for evaluating the quality of these elements in youth programs

Staffing is Critical to Quality Youth Programs

A key component of quality youth programs is staffing. Research indicates the importance of positive staff-child relationships for positive youth outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Tolman, Pittman, Yolalem, Thomases & Trammel, 2002). Investing in staff development provides positive impact through a chain of events. Professional development activities affect the practices that youth workers use in their programs, and these practices in turn benefit youth participants. Youth Development Professionals trained in the eight features of positive youth developmental settings outlined by The National Research Council (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) are adequately prepared to improve the quality of youth development programming. Each of these features is described in more detail below.

Physical and Psychological Safety - Staff create an atmosphere of physical and emotional safety

The key components of a physical and psychologically safe youth program include an environment that is safe, inviting, and free from both physical and emotional harm. This includes protection against bullying and other forms of intimidation or violence (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Staff should provide a program with clearly defined written policies and procedures, including strategies for risk reduction and emergency response. A safe environment also includes staff trained in child abuse prevention, policies,

and procedures to comply with licensing regulations and laws, such as fingerprinting, reference checks of staff, and procedures for reporting.

Appropriate Structure - Staff develop and provide a consistent system

Appropriate Structure - Staff develop and provide a consistent system Two distinct but related features affect the impact of program quality: the structure of the program and the institutional features. According to Vandell and Reisner (2004), an appropriate structure includes staff education, child-staff ratio, and financial resources. Youth need time in structured activities, consistent monitoring, clear rules, expectations, and disciplinary guidelines. A key to quality youth programs for middle and high school youth is age-appropriate program planning and implementation. Successful youth programs include both physical and psychological boundaries, including guidelines, rules and limits that are clear and consistently enforced.

Supportive Relationships – Staff care and provide connections with youth

A critical aspect of youth programs includes the training and support of staff in developing appropriate, sustained, quality relationships with youth. Staff trained in youth development are able to interact positively and effectively

8 Features of Positive Youth Developmental Settings

- Physical and Psychological Safety
- Appropriate Structure
- Supportive Relationships
- Opportunities to Belong
- Positive Social Norms
- Support for Efficacy and Mattering
- Opportunities for Skill Building
- Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

with youth. Research indicates that having at least one positive and caring relationship with an adult can buffer children against risk factors in their lives and can predict positive outcomes in later life (e.g., Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002; Werner & Smith, 1982). Staff provide a vital opportunity for youth to develop connections with a caring, competent adult, whether the program focuses on academics, leadership skills, or other outcomes (Seligson & Stahl, 2003).

Opportunities to Belong - Staff develop opportunities to instill a sense of belonging

Understanding the key factors associated with youth engagement in learning are critical. A recent study suggests four components youths need in order to engage in learning: a sense of oneself as a competent learner; parents who are involved with their child's education; an emotional attachment to caring adults; and exposure to positive peer influences (Miller, 2003).

Youth who participate in program decisions take more ownership in its success and are more likely to remain engaged (Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003). Behavioral researchers have identified three factors that influence decision-making:

- Motivations—the conditions of being involved and the stimulus or influence for becoming involved,
- Intentions—a clear mind, attention, or will concentrating on something or some end or purpose for being involved, and
- Environment—information is provided to young people about youth development program opportunities, scheduling meets the need of youth, and the program is accessible (e.g., readily available transportation, affordable, safe location) (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005)

Professional development teaches staff how to encourage youth participation and develop their decision-making and leadership skills. This is essential as staff members play a critical role in providing opportunities for youth to develop a sense of belonging. The program should provide opportunities for youth to be actively involved. For example, youth should be encouraged to join many groups and activities and to be involved in positive peer interaction. Social engagement and integrated activities provide youth with the opportunity to make decisions and develop a sense of acceptance. The program should also provide experiences for youth to develop appreciation and support for social-cultural identity and acceptance of diversity (Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2002). Youth programs promote positive development while seeking to prevent problem behaviors (Roth, 2004). Youth who feel a sense of belonging tend to be more responsible, feel more confident, and have a better attitude about school (Gootman & Eccles, 2002)

Positive Social Norms- Staff reinforce positive social behaviors

Positive youth development programs provide an opportunity for youth to experience positive social norms. Social norms refer to acceptable habits, norms, and expectations of behavior. Research on community programs indicates that social norms are critical for positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Social norms shape youths' perceptions of appropriate behavior either positively or negatively, depending on the social norms that emerge in groups. Quality programs provide youth with different life situations, viewpoints, and cultures to help them understand the importance of positive youth interaction, pro-social values, and behaviors across settings. Cultures and subcultures are an important source of social norms (Larson, Eccles & Gootman, 2004), and it is critical to consider how culture influences social norms. Staff members must be aware that social norms emerge through sustained interaction of a group (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, & Miller., 1998, cited by Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Community programs that have high expectations for involvement support pro-social norms by teaching youth responsibility to uphold certain rules of behavior, to be accountable to the program and its expectations, and to agree to live up to a set of morals, standards, and values (Larson, et al., 2004).

Support for Efficacy and Meaning - Staff develop an environment where youth matter and make a difference

When youth are involved in programs relevant to their interests and provide opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them, youth feel that they are making a difference in their world. Staff members can develop strategies to create an environment where youth matter and make a difference. Gambone and colleagues (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002) posit that two factors are essential for achieving positive youth development outcomes:

- Relationships are emotionally supportive, with adults showing interest in youths' time and activities and providing practical support, for example, helping with schoolwork or personal problems;
- Activities are challenging, interesting, and relate to everyday life, and youth participate in decision-making in developmentally-appropriate ways, relating to things they care about.

Opportunities for Skill Building - Staff engage youth in learning opportunities

Staff members can provide opportunities for youth to acquire cognitive, physical, psychological, social, and cultural skills. Staff members can design programs to include exposure to intentional learning experiences,

communication skills, cultural diversity, life skills and good habits, organizational and time management skills, opportunities to develop social skills, and preparation for employment. Youth learn how to learn as they practice new skills, develop talents, and enhance their abilities.

Research suggests that developing positive relationships and problem solving skills contribute to improved social and emotional competencies (Goleman, 1995). Social and emotional competencies refer to the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish and maintain positive relationships with others (Ragozzino, Resink, Utne-O'Brien, & Weissberg, 2003). In addition, studies have found that increases in social and emotional competences translate to improvements in academic behavior and attitudes (Goleman, 1995; Ragozzino et al., 2003; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Miller, 2003).

Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts- Staff create linkages between youths' lives

Integration of family, school, and community is critical to the success of out-of-school-time programs. According to Miller (2003), staff members can provide meaningful communication and synergy among the different settings of adolescents' lives and among the adults who oversee these settings. Successful youth development programs form youth-adult partnerships and involve youth and parents in programming. Optimal conditions for development exist when there is cohesion and a flow of information between family, school, and community. Collaboration of family, school, and community is necessary for the sustainability of programs (Roth, 2000). Staff members in training can also help plan enriching activities, connect with participants' families, and communicate with community stakeholders, all of which are elements of high quality programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Tolman et al, 2002). Young people stay involved in out-of-school programs and achieve academically when they connect with peers, family, school, and community.

Internet Resources

4-H Afterschool: The 4-H Afterschool website has information regarding its mission, programs, a pdf document describing the organization, an online afterschool journal, resources (guide to starting 4-H clubs in afterschool organizations, staff training information, and a sampler of 4-H learning activities), grant opportunities, curricula, news, and mentors. There is also a section called Afterschool Partners, which lists and describes the eight partners of 4-H Afterschool. <http://www.4hafterschool.org/>

Boys and Girls Clubs of America: The Boys and Girls Clubs of America website provides information on its mission, programs, their partners, and updates. They also provide a pdf document of their 2004 Year in Review, a list of board members, and how to start a Boys and Girls Club. There

is also a kid's center with links regarding youth members' achievements and its National Youth Day. <http://www.bgca.org/>

CYFER Network: The Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network is a comprehensive website that includes sections in Early Childhood, School Age, Teens, Parent/Family, and Community. Each section has practical and useful information to guide parents, including lists of sites and resources that are available. <http://www.cyfernet.org/>

One World Youth Project: One World Youth Project is a unique global sister-school initiative for middle and high school students, linking groups throughout the world together in learning partnerships. The One World Youth Project website is linked to a news page listing the current and recent stories of youth projects around the world. Many of the stories are reports written by the youth involved in the project. The site also includes many links on joining the project, satellite groups, forums, and project sites. <http://www.oneworldyouthproject.org/news.html>

The Forum for Youth Investment: The Forum for Youth Investment website provides information and resources regarding important issues, such as youth development, youth policy, out of school time, youth action, and education. It also provides information regarding its history, mission, and staff in addition to its publications, current projects, contact information, and e-newsletters. <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/>

The National Collaboration for Youth: The National Collaboration for Youth is part of the National Human Services Assembly. This website provides information regarding its numerous member organizations, a pdf document regarding youth worker competencies, and descriptions of the Ageing Caucus coalition and the Family Strengthening Task Force. http://www.nasassembly.org/nasassembly/issue_coalitions.htm#1

YMCA: The YMCA website provides information on how to locate a local YMCA, information regarding the YMCA movement, an online store, how to become employed, and how to get involved (becoming a member/volunteer/donor). It also provides information regarding YMCA summer camps and how to start a new YMCA as well as links to YMCA International. <http://www.ymca.net/index.jsp>

Youth Service America: The Youth Service America website provides information regarding its programs and services, awards and grants, memberships, news and events, partners and sponsors, how to donate, contact information, and a description of their organization. It also has a section about National Youth Service Day (NYSD) with links regarding tools, awards and grants, post project results, project ideas, and their partners and sponsors. <http://www.ysa.org/nysd/>

References

- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bodilly, S. J., Beckett, M. K. (2005). *Making out-of-school time matter: Evidence for an action agenda*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG242/index.html>
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* Washington DC: National Academy Press.
- Gambone, M., Klem, A., Connell, J. (2002). *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*. Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc., and Institute for Research and Reform in Education.
- Goleman, D. P. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ for Character, Health and Lifelong Achievement*. New York: Bantam Books..
- Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development. (2003). *Building Community: A tool kit for youth and adults in charting assets and creating change*. Chevy Chase, MD.
- Larson, R., Eccles, J., & Gootman, A. (2004). Features of positive developmental settings. *The Prevention Researcher*, 11.
- Miller, B. M. (2003). *Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Afterschool programs and educational success. Critical Hours: Executive summary*. Quincy, MA
- Pittman, K., Irby, M., Tolman, J., Yohalem, N., & Ferber, T. (2002). *Preventing problems, promoting development, encouraging encouragement: Competing priorities or inseparable goals?* Takoma Park, MD: The Forum for Youth Investment.
- Ragozzino, K., Resnik, H., Utne-O'Brien, M., & Weissbert, R.P. (2003). *Promoting Academic Achievement through social and Emotional Learning*. Bethesda, MD: Educational Horizons.
- Rosenthal, R., & Vandell, D. L. (1996). Quality of school-age child care programs: Regulatable features, observed experiences, child perspectives, and parent perspectives. *Child Development*, 67, 2434-2445.
- Roth, J. L. (2004). Youth development programs. *The Prevention Researcher*, 11.
- Roth, J., (2000, April). What we know and what we need to know about youth development programs. Paper presented at Evaluation and Youth Programs Symposium at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescents, Chicago.
- Roth, J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). What do adolescents need for healthy development? Implications for youth policy. *Social Policy Report*, 14, 3-19.
- Ryan, A. M., & Patrick, H. (2001). The classroom social environment and changes in adolescents' motivation and engagement during middle school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 437-460.
- Seligson, M., & Stahl, P. (2003). *Bringing yourself to work: A guide to successful staff development in after-school programs*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shweder, R. A., Goodnow, J. J., Hatano, G., LeVine, R. A., Markus, H., & Miller, P. (1998). *The cultural psychology of development: One mind, many mentalities*. In W. Damon (Ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (Fifth edition), Vol. 1. (pp. 865-937). New York: Wiley & Sons.
- Tolman, J., Pittman, K., Yohalem, N., Thomases, J., & Trammel, M. (2002). *Moving an out-of-school agenda: Lessons across cities*. Takoma Park, MD: Forum for Youth Investment.
- Vandell, D.L., & Reisner, E.R. (2004). Investigating quality: The study of promising after-school programs. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 10, 28-29.
- Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1982). *Vulnerable but invincible: A study of resilient children*. New York: McGraw-Hill.



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCES
TUCSON, ARIZONA 85721

LISA LAUXMAN

Extension Acting Assistant Director

JUANITA O'CAMPO WAITS

Extension Area Agent

MARTA ELVA STUART

Associate Extension Agent

DARCY TESSMAN

Associate Extension Agent

LYNNE BORDEN

Extension Specialist, Associate Professor

BRENT STRICKLAND

Associate Extension Agent

JAN NORQUEST

Area Associate Extension Agent

MARGARET STONE

Research Associate

This information has been reviewed by university faculty.
cals.arizona.edu/pubs/family/az1403d.pdf

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, James A. Christenson, Director, Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, The University of Arizona.

The University of Arizona is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution. The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or sexual orientation in its programs and activities.