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Appropriate Structure

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Appropriate Structure

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Introduction

Appropriate program structure is a critical feature of youth development settings, acting as a catalyst, providing the scaffolding needed to promote effective skill building, a sense of belonging, establishment of positive social norms, opportunities for youth voice, positive relationship development, and creation of safe and comfortable surroundings. A program with appropriate structure in place can be identified by its continuity and predictability, clear boundaries, and consistent rules and expectations. Conversely, youth programs lacking appropriate structure may be described as chaotic, disorganized, over-controlled or autocratic (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Appropriate structure, as it relates to programs that promote positive youth development, includes three primary components: 1) a well-trained and engaged staff, 2) appropriate activities, and 3) clear and consistent boundaries and guidelines. Each of these components is essential to provide the necessary structure for an intentional and consistent positive youth development program. Having a well-trained and engaged staff is paramount in building the relationship between adult staff and youth participants. Appropriate activities engage young people in learning new skills, promoting personal growth and keeping youth interested in the program. Clear and consistent boundaries provide participants with predictability and clear expectations (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Research Overview

Well-Trained and Engaged Staff

Positive relationship development is often cited as the most crucial factor in the success of youth development programs. Successful relationship development requires a commitment of time, and consistency. Positive relationships between adults and youth participants developed in conjunction with appropriate, intentional and structured activities can increase the likelihood that youth will successfully navigate potential roadblocks as they grow and mature. In many instances, youth workers often find themselves lacking the necessary knowledge, support, and resources to meet the complex needs of young people whom they work with on a daily basis (Yohalem, 2003). Providing and encouraging opportunities to develop skills and gain knowledge is an important key in engaging and retaining staff in youth programs (Bouffard & Little, 2004).

Appropriate Activities

Offering appropriate activities is an important way to recruit and engage youth participation in afterschool and youth development programs. Structured program activities can create opportunities to develop stronger relationships between youth and staff. Many well-designed programs and activities are able to promote learning and skill development while providing opportunities for staff and volunteers to support youth. However, overly structured programs may hinder the development of the adult and youth relationship if too much focus is placed on accomplishing the required activities rather than getting to know the youth.

Young people experience cognitive, social/emotional and interpersonal changes in addition to physical changes during adolescence. Spano (2004) categorizes these changes during adolescence into five broad categories: 1) moving toward independence, 2) future interests and cognitive development, 3) sexuality, 4) physical changes, and 5) ethics and self-direction. Appropriate and intentional activities must be planned for a variety of ages to support development within the five categories.

Duration and intensity of participation are two key elements of providing appropriate and structured activities. Adolescents who participate in organized activities over a two year period (versus one year) are more likely to achieve certain successes in adulthood, including greater likelihood of postsecondary education attendance and completion (Gardner, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Research further suggests that participation in activities described as highly structured can be linked to lower rates of antisocial behavior (Gerstenblith et al., 2005). These two findings suggest a need to design programs that strike a balance between structure and autonomy, providing young people increasing opportunities for age-appropriate decision making.

Clear and Consistent Boundaries and Guidelines

Development of clear and consistent boundaries and guidelines is ideally considered a process between adults, youth and amongst peers to define expectations and establish norms. It is the interaction between youth and adults that offer the opportunity to create meaningful experiences that are supported by clear behavioral guidelines. Programs that deliver high-quality behavior management systems: 1) are very specific about what behavior is expected for different activities and/or procedures, 2) are consistently applied by staff members, 3) post rules and consequences for youth to see, 4) include an immediate response to misbehavior, 5) include positive and negative consequences for appropriate and inappropriate behavior, respectively, and 6) develop program rules in collaboration with participants – to increase youth buy-in (Gerstenblith et al., 2005).

It is important that programs employ caring and respectful adults who have the ability to work with youth to develop and maintain these boundaries and guidelines. If adults and staff are unreasonably critical, controlling, cynical, and judgmental or prejudiced, more harm than good can result (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005). Youth serving organizations should follow judicious hiring practices to make certain qualified individuals are hired.

When youth speak about programs as being like a "home" and staff members like "family," these remarks most likely suggest the presence of a highly qualified and caring staff member or mentor. Hirsch's (2005) research of an after-school program found that three-fourth's of the youth reported that the club served as a second home, a testament to the quality of relationship that the youth had with the staff.

Practical Application

Appropriate structure is best visualized as a three-legged stool. All three components-- well-trained and engaged staff, clear and consistent boundaries and guidelines, and appropriate activities-- must be present in order to have a balanced and effective structure. When developing the structure of a youth development program, focusing only on one component, such as clear and consistent boundaries, while leaving out others (e.g. the need for well-trained staff and/or appropriate activities) can create an unbalanced youth program. Balance and success are created when all three components are programmed together.

Consider the following tips when developing appropriate structure in each of the three areas:

Well-trained and Engaged Staff

Professional development may be offered in a variety of settings, and may be formal or casual, highly structured or flexible, conducted prior to the job application process or throughout the career (Bouffard & Little, 2004). Below is a list of professional developmental suggestions that can be incorporated within organizations and those which may be accessed elsewhere to increase the knowledge and skills for staff and volunteers:

Organization-Based Professional Development

- √ Offer pre-service training and new-staff orientation

- √ Partner with other community organizations to offer in-service training to current staff

- √ Develop a staff mentoring program; pair more experienced staff with new hires

- √ Create informal resources, such as newsletters, online discussion boards, and 'brown bag' lunches for staff members to share ideas and expertise

- √ Implement an ongoing performance review and coaching process

Additional Sources of Professional Development

- √ Higher education, including certificate and degree programs

- √ Training seminars and resource centers provided by community and statewide organizations

- √ Local and national credentialing systems and programs

- √ Local and national conferences

- √ Distance-learning programs offered online, through audio, video and correspondence coursework

Visit http://reachmilitaryfamilies.arizona.edu to search a directory of higher education and community training opportunities

Appropriate Activities

√ Work with staff to be sure all involved understand ages and stages of child and youth Development

√ Develop program activities to match the desired program outcomes

√ Check in with youth to ensure that activities are developmentally and culturally appropriate, and that they are engaging and appealing

Clear and Consistent Boundaries and Guidelines

√ Engage youth in development of program boundaries, rules, and consequences

√ Ensure that developed guidelines are enforced fairly and consistently for all youth

√ Respond to positive behaviors as well as negative behaviors

√ Develop the boundaries in context with the environment (e.g. location, culture, developmental stages of youth, current trends in youth development)

Summary

Safe, structured and enjoyable contexts provide youth with more than encouragement to 'just say no' to risky experiences. They provide something to which youth can say 'yes' (Kahne et al., 2001). In order for positive youth development outcomes to occur, youth must experience predictable and stable environments. Hiring qualified staff members who enjoy working with young people and can ensure a healthy atmosphere through consistent monitoring and clear communication will encourage regular youth participation and better outcomes for young people. Staff members must also provide age-appropriate opportunities for youth to become decision-makers and participants in establishing the norms and structure of programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

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