YOUTH INCLUSION

Implementation Guide

Youth Inclusion Implementation Guide

Submitted by

The Military REACH Team
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Military REACH, a project of the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families, utilizes a multi-disciplinary approach integrating both research and outreach to support those who work with and on behalf of military families. Through our three-fold approach, we provide empirical research that identifies and addresses key issues impacting military families and the programs that serve them, offer outreach and professional development through online resources, and host a Live Learning Lab for program staff seeking constructive professional development feedback for their programs.

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How to Use This Implementation Guide

We all play a part in making sure the youth in our programs feel included and safe by ensuring that the physical environment, activities, and programs offered are welcoming to all youth.

This guide provides youth program managers and training specialists with strategies for implementing practices within their programs to promote a sense of safety, belonging, and purpose for all youth.

Each topic in this guide includes four elements:

Background provides program managers and trainers with important background on the topic. This information is linked to research on positive youth development and sets the stage for the reflection element called Stop and Think.

Strategies provides program managers with first steps, next steps, and actionable items to ensure their program is inclusive.

Strategies in Action presents examples of concrete practices and procedures for youth program managers to operationalize the strategies.

Stop and Think presents reflection questions to help program managers and trainers think about how the topic is implemented successfully in their program and where adjustments are necessary. Program managers may want to discuss these questions with their staff to get input.

What Is Positive Youth Development?

Positive youth development is an approach to youth programs that emphasizes the strengths of youth while considering their physical, mental, and social well-being. Program staff who practice a positive youth development approach believe that youth success requires not just the absence of problematic behavior but also the existence of healthy development.[1, 2, 3] Rather than intervening only when young people are at risk for engaging in problematic behaviors, program staff use a positive youth development approach to promote favorable behaviors and development by supporting the skills, interests, qualities, and abilities of all youth.[1, 4]

Program staff should also understand that youth live in a series of support systems. They are members of families, teams, clubs, and likely attend school. A youth program is most effective when it strengthens and collaborates with existing support systems.[3] Staff who practice positive youth development emphasize environmental rather than internal influences on development, working to alter systems that may promote positive and healthy youth development.[5]

High-quality youth programs support young people and enhance positive youth development by allowing youth to contribute to decisions that guide their lives, which empowers them to feel valued for who they are.[6] *It is important that this sense of empowerment and value extend to all youth within youth programs.* The purpose of this implementation guide is to help explain how to accomplish this goal.

Positive Youth Development and Youth Programs

There are eight features considered essential for a high-quality youth program:[7] (1) physical and psychological safety; (2) appropriate structure; (3) supportive relationships; (4) opportunities to belong; (5) positive social norms; (6) support for efficacy and mattering; (7) opportunities for skill building; and (8) integration of family, school, and community efforts. While all of these features contribute to the development of a youth program that is welcoming and safe for all youth, physical and psychological safety, opportunities to belong, and support for efficacy and mattering are the most critical and should be the focus when creating a welcoming and safe environment.[8]

Physical and Psychological Safety

Physical and psychological safety are present in environments that are free from violence, bullying, harassment, and other threats to a young person's physical or psychological well-being.[7] Structurally-safe and well-maintained facilities are important for physical safety, and many programs have clear rules around bullying. However, youth who believe they are different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture need environments that offer models for positive social interactions to ensure their physical and emotional safety.[9, 10, 11]

Opportunities to Belong

Belonging describes a young person's sense that they are accepted, included, and valued,[12] and a sense of belonging can come from interactions with other youth or adults.[13] This sense of belonging helps to build a sense of connection for the youth which is associated with positive outcomes like positive identity, improved self-esteem, and resilience.[14, 15, 16, 17]

Support for Efficacy and Mattering

Efficacy and mattering is the sense of purpose youth have when they believe their voices are being heard and that their contributions matter. Programs can support this sense of purpose by creating programs with experiences that contribute to this sense of purpose such as making decisions about activities and the environment and leading activities.[7, 18, 16] For youth who see themselves as different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture, this input is important. It builds a sense of belonging and safety.[19, 11, 20]

Throughout this implementation guide we will explore strategies and practices that reinforce these three key elements for program managers to use to ensure their programs are inclusive of all youth.

Foundational Aspects of Inclusive Environments

Background

There are several aspects of a positive youth development program that are foundational to an inclusive environment. **Rules, Systems, and Language** set the parameters for acceptable behavior, create paths to support the program objectives, and paint a picture of the program for youth to use to imagine whether they will fit in. **Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships** are important to help youth feel welcome and that they belong. **Youth Input, Decisions, and Leadership** promote youth further identifying with the program and building a sense of ownership. **Engaging in Community Collaboration** further diversifies the program possibilities to better meet the needs of the youth in the program. Let's explore each of these foundational aspects of inclusive environments.

Rules, Systems, and Language

Youth programs that are welcoming and safe must be built on a groundwork of rules, systems, and language aimed at protecting and empowering all young people. These practices and procedures reduce harassment, bullying, and discrimination while ensuring the safety of youth participants.[11]

Rules

Good youth programs are safe and welcoming for all youth and communicate this value to the participants and families involved in the program.[21] One way this is done is through the development of

clear and understandable rules that prohibit harassment, bullying, and discrimination and by training youth program staff to enforce and model those rules.[11, 8] Program managers and staff who work with youth should develop and periodically review rules with youth to ensure specific protection for youth who may feel excluded. These rules should be shared with the youth in the program and their families.[21, 6, 24] These rules should include a no-tolerance rule regarding hate speech, including homophobic remarks and language that demeans one population like "fag," "that's so gay," or "retard."[25, 26, 23]

Strategies

➔ Review the rules and assess whether or not the rules include protections from harassment, bullying, and discrimination.
➔ Review how the rules are created, reviewed, and shared with family and youth.
➔ Review how the rules are enforced.

Stop and Think

• Are all groups of youth specifically protected in the program's current rules?
• How could current rules be rewritten to protect and provide a safe space for more youth?
• Does staff training teach program staff what the rules are and how to consistently implement them?

Systems

In addition to having rules that specifically prohibit and protect against harassment, bullying, and discrimination, robust systems are necessary to enforce rules, support youth safety and belonging, and ensure youth have input into program structure and activities. Generally, systems are a uniform way to make sure the same steps are taken each time an action occurs. Systems build an expectation for how rules will be followed and set the boundaries for acceptable behaviors in a program.

Strategies

Identify these systems:

➔ **Reporting System** where youth are comfortable reporting bullying, harassment, and discrimination. This system should include a way to log incidents, information about how staff respond to the report, and the plan for addressing the issue.[21, 11]
➔ **Staff Recruitment System** that helps program managers recruit staff who reflect the diversity of the youth and who are prepared to work with diverse youth and families.[6, 22]
➔ **Staff Training System** where youth program staff receive training on how to respond to bullying, harassment, and discriminatory behavior when it occurs.[24]
➔ **Communication System** for communication between program staff and parents and staff and youth[21] regarding all of the happenings in the program (both positive and negative news).

➔ **Creating, Updating, and Enforcing Rules** that incorporate youth input and are dynamic, addressing the current concerns and issues within the program.

Stop and Think

- Are these systems in place, in use, and used correctly?
- Does the recruitment system hire staff that reflect the youth in the program?
- Does the training system for staff teach them how to respond to bullying, harassment, and discrimination?
- Does the rule system include youth in creation and updating processes?
- How can systems be changed to be more robust or easier to use?
- What other systems might need to be considered, created, or modified to support an environment where everyone feels welcome?

Language

The language used by individuals within a youth program significantly contributes to whether youth feel welcome and safe in a program.[11, 22, 23] Creating program-wide language that reflects a welcoming and safe environment involves critical consideration of currently used language and how that language may be heard by different youth or groups of youth.[8] This requires youth program staff to be aware of what they are saying and how they are saying it as well as the way language is used in print and electronic materials.

Strategies

➔ Adjust language and terminology to reflect youth and parent preferences for name, pronoun, or adjective of choice.[21, 27, 28, 8]

➔ Reflect adjusted language and terminology on registration materials, field trip forms, marketing material, etc.

➔ Train program staff on the use of language and terminology to include what the terms are and why it is important to adopt them.

➔ Review the languages youth speak, read, and write and reflect this knowledge in printed materials and the program staff hired.

➔ Review how youth communicate and adjust to their preferences (i.e., email versus social media, etc.).[22]

Stop and Think

- What words or phrases are used in the youth program that could be changed to be more inclusive?

- How does the youth program gather information about youth's names and pronouns? How is this communicated to all staff?

- Are there certain places where misunderstandings occur between individuals or groups? For example, are there some youth who routinely don't understand instructions or follow certain rules? If so, what could be done to prevent this in the future?

- What words and phrases do youth use in the program that could demean another group? Why are they potentially hurtful?

Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

Supportive adult-youth relationships are an important component of youth programs and critical for those programs that want to create a welcoming and safe environment. Supportive adult-youth relationships help youth achieve better physical, mental, and family health.[33, 29, 30, 31, 32] When long-lasting, these relationships cushion youth against many of the negative influences and high-risk behaviors they navigate daily by reinforcing their sense of belonging, physical and psychological safety, and perception that they can make a contribution that matters.[34, 15, 35, 36] Youth programs are ideal settings for youth to establish relationships with adults other than their parents.

Often the visible indication of a supportive relationship is the response program staff have to youth, particularly when staff witness discrimination, harassment, or bullying. Program staff indicate their support through consistent responses to inappropriate language, behavior, and bullying.[38, 22]

Staff should keep an open mind during all interactions with youth, paying special attention to those who see themselves as different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture. Program staff should be willing to learn from youth and to be sensitive to their values and those of their families, working to bridge any differences or conflicts.[6]

Working with any population of youth offers opportunities for a wide variety of interactions and youth program staff need to know how to leverage all interactions, especially the negative ones, into positive outcomes.

Characteristics of Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships
Supportive adult-youth relationships are important because they help young people recover quickly from difficulties in their lives and lessen the negative effects of stressors they may encounter.

In order for an adult-youth relationship to be considered high-quality and supportive, certain characteristics should be considered.

Consider if the relationships are
- Trusting, caring, and genuine
- Safe and accepting
- Reciprocal or mutually beneficial
- Consistent and long-lasting
- Attuned and compatible
- Attentive and individualized
- Tailored to the youth's needs

Strategies

→ Train staff on how to create and maintain supportive adult-youth relationships.

→ Ensure staff understand the benefits of supportive adult-youth relationships on youths' development.

→ Establish and enforce clear boundaries for adult-youth relationships (i.e., invitations to parties, to connect via social media, etc.)

→ Create a group where youth program staff can seek out advice or assistance from each other when they are unsure of how to address certain situations or support certain youth.[27]

→ Train staff on how to respond to bullying; negative and rude language; verbal or physical aggression; youth viewing inappropriate material online; and youth with cognitive, social, physical, or emotional delays and immaturity or withdrawal.

→ Periodically discuss and answer questions about the populations represented within the youth program.

Strategies in Action – Establishing a Supportive Adult-Youth Relationship

It is not always clear how to establish a supportive adult-youth relationship. That is because each supportive adult-youth relationship forms and develops differently.[38] However, program staff can take intentional actions to grow positive, trusting relationships with youth through *relational strategies*.[39] These intentional investments of a youth professional's time and effort to develop a bond with a youth can promote positive development.[36]

Some examples of relational strategies include the following:

Minimize Relational Distance	Relational distance is the perceived distance between two people. Youth may feel disconnected from staff and other youth. Staff can minimize this distance by having a fun outward behavior and initiating conversations. Youth program staff will need to learn how to balance this strategy with the need to maintain adult authority.[36]
Active Inclusion	Active inclusion is intentionally inviting youth who are not involved to become part of the group.
Attention to Proximal Relationships	For the youth in the program, their proximal relationships are with their family members, other youth in school and the program, teachers, coaches, and the youth program staff. By asking about these relationships, staff provide practical and emotional support to youth, often helping the youth to understand other points of view, helping make connections with peers and family members, and ultimately helping to resolve conflicts.

Practice Mutual Respect	Many adults expect youth to value their experience and authority. Mutual respect requires staff to value youth's experience and authority as well.[39] To model this behavior, staff should be sincere, show gratitude, do what they say they will do, compliment achievements, offer to help, and respect different opinions and abilities. When developing programs and activities, staff should ask for youth input and ideas, listen to youth when they share ideas, and value youth and adult points of view equally. An effective way to model respect is by being polite. Using words like "please" and "thank you" begins to set the tone for this strategy.
Find Commonality	A strategy for building rapport or feelings of connection between two people is to find topics that are interesting to both parties.[36] These may be topics of discussion like music, food, or sports or shared experiences such as living in a particular community or having younger siblings. These links become the launch pad for the relationship and clear the way for future conversations and interactions.
Be Available	Program staff should be available to youth while ensuring clear and appropriate boundaries are in place.[39] Being available means, interactions with youth are part of the program staff's job, AND staff who work with youth make themselves appear to have time for interactions. It sounds simple, but it is not because this strategy involves both the adult's and the young person's points of view. The program staff may understand interacting with the youth is part of their job, but their body language, tone, and other duties may send signals to youth that they are too busy or unavailable. To be effective using this relational strategy, program staff should practice these techniques to indicate they are open to interactions with youth: • Adopt an open posture – keep your head up and shoulders square, and you will appear to be paying attention to whatever or whomever is in front of you. • Smile – genuine smiles make you seem more approachable and inviting. • Eliminate barriers – barriers can include crossed arms, counter tops, sunglasses, and distractions like phones. Get out from behind the counter and put away your device to seem more available to youth.
Recognize Individuals	Recognize youth for the things that make them individuals. Remembering birthdays and asking about a competition or other big event that happened since the last time you saw them are other ways to build rapport.[38]

Use Active Listening	Make an intentional effort to see things from the young person's perspective when youth want to discuss something, particularly if it is something that might upset them or make them feel uncomfortable.[39, 24, 38]
	If you use active listening techniques with a youth, you encourage them to open up. Ask questions that require more than a simple yes or no response. For example,
	How did that happen? *What did you do to help your friend?* *How would you respond to someone if they had this same experience?* *Why do you think this is the case?* *What does that mean?* *What are your options for solving the problem?* *What do you care most about in this situation?* *What are your concerns?*
	These kinds of questions can help clarify the topic for you and for the youth and help build rapport. However, be careful you are not firing questions at the youth. This kind of approach may make them feel interrogated or attacked. Make sure your verbal and nonverbal signs are neutral or supportive when asking such questions. This type of questioning is useful in uncovering details that may have initially been overlooked or thought irrelevant.
Recognize Social Identities	Social identities are a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership. These identities are carried with them throughout their life. People can belong to multiple groups at the same time and youth in the program likely belong to a family, school, and neighborhood group. Other groups they may belong to include subgroups in school such as band and sports teams or outside of school, in the community, such as churches or even gangs. Social identities might influence relationships and youth program staff should know to what other groups youth belong.[20]
Respect Confidentiality	Youth sometimes tell staff things in confidence, sharing personal problems, stories, successes, etc. that they do not want shared with other adults or youth. By respecting their wishes to keep what they have shared private, program staff become caring adults whom youth can trust. Youth and the staff who work with them should be clear about where the limits to this strategy lie, specifically if youth indicate they may hurt him- or herself or someone else.[24]
Build Trust	Building trust takes time. Program staff earn and build the trust of youth over time through consistent use of the other relationship strategies.[18, 38]
	Do staff try to see issues from the young person's point of view?

	o Then youth will trust program staff to be good listeners and advocates for fairness.
	• Are staff polite, sincere, and consistent in their language to youth in the program?
	o Then youth will trust future interactions with program staff will follow the same pattern.
	• Does the youth program staff keep conversations confidential?
	o Then the youth will trust the staff who work with them in the future.[37, 38]

Strategies in Action – Understanding Ages and Stages

Understanding the developmental levels of youth helps us understand why youth interact in many situations. Youth developmental levels are studied through four major areas of development: physical, social, emotional, and intellectual (cognitive). Just as physical growth patterns vary from youth to youth, developmental growth patterns can vary as well. For example, a youth may be physically 15 years old, but have the emotional development of a 13-year-old and social development of a 16-year-old. By understanding the continuum of growth, you will be better able to understand what may influence how a youth reacts.

Early Adolescence (9-11 year-olds). This age group focuses on comparisons and may find comparisons with the success of others difficult and detrimental to self-confidence. Youth in this age and stage judge ideas in absolutes (right or wrong) and do not tolerate much middle ground. Relational aggression or trying to hurt someone by damaging their social status or relationships (think rumor spreading) and emotional bullying are more common among girls in this age group. Access to electronics increases opportunities for bullying at this age and developmental level.[53]

Middle Adolescence (12-14 year-olds). With a wide range of sexual maturity and growth patterns between and within gender groups, physical differences can be the focus for this age group. This is when youth begin to grow into their adult bodies and when the ears, nose, hands, and feet may be larger or disproportionate to the rest of the body. During this age and stage, youth begin to look more to peers than to parents for recognition, acceptance, and trust. Youth may act a certain way to get a laugh or attention from their peers in this age group.[53]

Late Adolescence (15-18 year-olds). As youth grow and mature, the range of physical size and maturity shrinks. At this age and stage, youth physical growth is tapering. However, emotionally, intellectually, and socially, this age group is continuing to develop. Youth 15–18 years of age begin to test sexual attractiveness as well as

accepting and enjoying their own uniqueness. Youth still seek status and approval from peer groups and look for confidence of others in their decisions.[53]

Throughout adolescence, youth seek to define their identity and may comment on peers who do not fit in with their crowd to help themselves fit in. Bullying reaches its peak in early adolescence and then decreases in high school.[54] More 8- to 15-year-olds identify teasing and bullying as a big problem as compared to drugs, alcohol, sex, and racism.[55] Early adolescence is a time when significant differences can contribute to an environment of insecurity and bullying.

Youth may not fully think through the dangers and implications of their actions when they are with a group of peers. Although youth are developing the ability to understand individual differences, they may put aside these emerging cognitive skills and join with bullying friends rather than stand out by defending someone being singled out.[56]

Strategies in Action – Responding to Questions

In a supportive adult-youth relationship, youth may ask program staff questions about controversial or sensitive topics. There are strategies staff can take to prepare for this eventuality.

Approach the Topic. Program staff should take time to be familiar with the issues youth are facing. If the latest concern is teen suicide, then staff should understand how this issue is viewed in the community by youth, adults, school staff, etc. Understanding the issue will help the staff to be prepared to answer questions.

Words Matter. Youth, like adults, naturally notice the differences between people. They notice differences in the way people talk, look, act, etc. To deny it is to avoid the issues and possible tension these differences could create. Staff should be prepared to discuss uncomfortable topics with youth. Below are some basic strategies for entering these kinds of conversations:

> Only share the facts. Do not rely on what you believe to be true. Know it is true before you share information, or tell the youth you do not know and suggest that you find the answers together.[36]

> Clearly answer the questions youth have. Think before you speak, and do not omit main points because they are uncomfortable or awkward.

> Use language that is accurate, respectful, and age appropriate. Read the earlier section Understanding Ages and Stages for more information about what is age appropriate. A good rule of thumb is when youth stop asking questions, it is time to stop providing information because they need time to process the information you have shared.

> Showcase similarity and diversity to start conversations.

Build Empathy. Empathy is the ability to think about things from another person's point of view and the ability to recognize and respond to others' feelings appropriately. Youth will have varying skills in this area depending on their age and developmental level. Program staff can support the growth of empathy

by incorporating discussions about current events and asking youth how they think the people in the stories might feel. Some topics in the news might be too sensitive and staff may need to look for fictional characters from books, movies, or TV shows to find examples. Staff can also help youth reflect on situations in their own lives by asking questions like "How do you think she feels?" or "How would you like to be treated if you were in that situation?"

Set an Example. Youth mirror the examples they see around them at home, school, and in the youth programs they attend. Staff who work with youth need to be good examples for youth in how they should behave toward people from different backgrounds, races, ethnicity, abilities, orientation, etc. Since the program staff should reflect the youth in the program, how they interact with each other should reflect how the youth should interact. Staff should watch for and reward positive social behavior, even if it is a simple "good job," to let the youth know staff are proud of them.

Strategies in Action – Responding to Bullying

Bullying is any aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, emotional, or relational) that involves an imbalance of power, whether real or perceived,[55, 57] and should not be tolerated in youth programs.[26, 8] The program and the program staff need to be positioned to address this behavior.

Programs should be developed with clear rules and procedures that leave little uncertainty for how to respond to and address bullying behavior. The systems should require documentation of incidents, details on how they were addressed, and plans to prevent such incidents in the future.[21] Information about these rules and the procedures should be clearly communicated to parents and youth to ensure everyone understands what behavior is not acceptable.[21] As part of ongoing professional development training, youth program staff should learn how to respond to victims of bullying, specifically how to listen to the entire story and then how to respond with intention rather than singling out one bully-victim pair (this can sometimes set the victim up for more bullying).[21]

Program staff have a responsibility to act to promote the safety and well-being of all youth. A youth professional's responsibility is to follow these rules and procedures to maintain the safety and well-being of the youth in the program. To be proactive, staff should educate youth about the impact of bullying in one-on-one or large group settings[25, 21] and develop programs that include all youth, especially those who see themselves as different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture. This type of programming helps limit bullying potential by facilitating positive peer interactions through activities.[48, 36]

Strategies in Action – Responding to Put-Downs

The language used within a program is a foundational component of making an inclusive program that is safe and welcoming for all youth.[27, 8] Program staff not only need to be thoughtful regarding their own use of language but also need to recognize speech from youth that degrades any group of individuals,[26] including homophobic remarks (e.g., "that's so gay," "no homo"), racist remarks (e.g., racial slurs), sexist remarks (e.g., "sissy," "you throw like a girl"), or any other speech that demeans a group of youth (e.g.,

"retard"). In an inclusive youth program that is welcoming and safe for all youth, there are rules in place that explicitly prohibit such speech, and program staff consistently respond to it when it is heard.[25, 26]

Staff should approach youth who use degrading language with a set of approaches that begin with education, proceed to redirection, then limit the opportunities of the youth using the negative languages, and finally progress to a direct consequence. Through this strategy, youth program staff explain what the word or phrase used actually means and why that language might be hurtful toward someone else.[25] Staff should name the behavior and redirect the youth to positive and productive language. For example, tell the youth that the phrase they used is derogatory and considered name-calling and that it is unacceptable.[24, 25] Staff should explain how they are offended by the phrase[25] and encourage youth to find another way to communicate their thoughts.[25] Throughout the incident, the staff need to support the targeted youth. One intentional way to do this is to pull the youth aside publicly or privately and ask what he or she needs.[24]

Strategies in Action – Supporting LGBTQ Youth

For supportive adult-youth relationships to be effective in helping to facilitate an inclusive environment, the relationships need to be supportive of all youth. Many different sub-groups of youth exist, and all face unique challenges. One of these groups, LGBTQ youth, are particularly susceptible to discrimination. LGBTQ youth feel less safe in a variety of environments and are more likely to have been bullied or harassed than non-LGBTQ youth.[11, 37, 49, 26] These experiences make LGBTQ youth more vulnerable to a variety of negative behavioral, physical, and mental outcomes.[49] However, environments that are welcoming, safe for, and affirming of LGBTQ youth buffer against these potential negative outcomes.[49] With that in mind, it is important that youth programs work to actively include and protect LGBTQ youth.

Issues	Staff should be trained and aware of the issues affecting LGBTQ people in their community by reviewing local media and working with local advocacy groups. Program staff should also spend time thinking about how activity expectations may support, celebrate, ignore, or demean LGBTQ youth.[8]
Language	Staff who work with youth should be trained in the language used about and by persons who identify as LGBTQ. Staff should understand the impact this language has on LGBTQ youth in particular. Below are topics that should be covered: • **Pronouns** are parts of speech that substitute a noun in a sentence. For example, a person who is transitioning from male to female may ask to be referred to as "she" instead of "he" because the feminine pronoun coincides with that person's gender identity.[59]

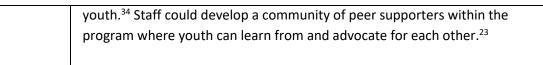|	
	• **Gender identity** is the way an individual identifies with regard to gender; it is not necessarily connected to the sex the individual was assigned at birth.[24]
	• **Gender non-conforming or transgender** describes when a youth's gender identity does not align with their biological gender or when youth express their gender in a way that is not traditional.[24]
	• **Transition** refers to when transgender people take steps so that their outward identity matches their gender identity (e.g., dressing in different clothes, choosing a more masculine or feminine name, asking to be referred to by different pronouns).[42]
	• **Queer** is an umbrella term used to describe someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or a host of other identities distinct from strictly heterosexual.[24]
	• **Questioning** refers to youth who are uncertain about their sexuality or gender identity.[24]
	• **Gender identity and sexual orientation** are different things; there is not necessarily a connection between biological sex, gender identity, and sexual attraction.[8]
Rules and Procedures	Being clear about the definitions, rules, and procedures regarding bullying, harassment, and discrimination will help program staff to protect all youth, including the LGBTQ youth in the program.[11, 8] Program rules and procedures should
	• Explicitly oppose discrimination based on sexuality or gender identity[8]
	• Prohibit the use of anti-LGBTQ language and actions[28]
	• Ensure the use of names and pronouns youth prefer[23]
	• Convey the intentional aim to provide a safe place for LGBTQ youth where they can feel comfortable to be themselves[42]
	• Limit or prohibit dividing youth by gender[23]
	There are ways to create programs that directly support LGBTQ youth. Consider offering peer-support groups for LGBTQ youth[28] where LGBTQ youth can be educated about how to become resilient to society's expectations[42] or forming formal mentoring programs specifically for LGBTQ

> youth.[34] Staff could develop a community of peer supporters within the program where youth can learn from and advocate for each other.[23]

Youth program staff need to be open to LGBTQ youth and responsive to their concerns. The first step to this end is not to make assumptions about youth (i.e., do not assume you know someone's sexual orientation or gender identity).[24] Furthermore, visibly support LGBTQ youth by responding to anti-LGBTQ behavior every time it occurs. This leads to a greater sense of trust between program staff and LGBTQ youth.[24, 38]

There is a possibility that youth will reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity to program staff. This is called "coming out." The youth professional may be the first or only person an LGBTQ youth comes out to, so it is essential to support the youth in a sensitive, responsive, and constructive way.[24] In coming out to staff, youth are taking a risk and sharing a piece of themselves, and this action should be met with respect and acceptance.

> When a youth comes out to a youth professional, the staff ***should*** offer support without making assumptions that the youth needs or wants help. Staff should listen and recognize the courage it took for the youth to come out. Above all, tell the youth they are accepted for who they are and that staff will respect the confidentiality of the disclosure.[24]

> When a youth comes out to a youth professional, the staff ***should not*** doubt the identity the youth is claiming or tell the youth to be secretive. Above all, the youth professional should respect the confidentiality of the statement and not disclose the information to other individuals, including the youth's parents, other youth, or other staff in the program.[24]

Strategies in Action – Suicide

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults (ages 10-24) in the United States. There are an average of 5,240 suicide attempts by youth in grades 7-12 each day.[67]
One of the responsibilities of being in a trusting adult-youth relationship is that sometimes during regular conversations youth might disclose having past or current thoughts of suicide. If this happens, program staff should consult with their manager to develop a safety plan while the youth is at the youth program. A safety plan includes emergency contacts (e.g., police, trusted family members), positive activities to redirect suicidal thoughts while at the youth program or at home (e.g., write in a journal, play with a pet, listen to uplifting music), and a list of positive upcoming events (e.g., graduation, birthday, family vacation).[58]

Sometimes youth do not verbally talk about their suicidal thoughts, but there are signs staff can watch and listen for that might indicate youth are struggling with thoughts of suicide. Program staff should also be aware that some youth might start to contemplate suicide more after a peer has committed suicide. Youth who do this may attempt suicide as a "copycat," and staff should consider the time immediately after a young person's suicide as high risk for youth who may be more susceptible to suicidal thinking. It

is important to know that these warning signs do not automatically mean youth are suicidal but usually indicate that staff (or youth program managers) may want to talk with them about any major difficulties or stress in their lives. These indicators may also be a sign to refer youth and their families to licensed professionals for a full suicide risk assessment.[58]

Warning Signs

- Drastic changes in mood, emotional state, or interactions with others
- Discussions about wanting to hurt themselves, disappear, or that life isn't worth living
- Writings, conversations, artwork, or other forms of expression that focus on death and dying (unless there has been a recent death in their social network or of a popular figure in society)
- Risky behaviors that suggest they do not care about their well-being such as extreme substance abuse (taking an excessive amount of medication at one time)
- Avoidance of and isolation from family, friends, teachers, youth program staff, and other members of their social network
- Selling or donating a majority of their personal belongings because they say they "won't be here" to use them
- Conversations related to being a burden to others, feeling trapped, hopeless, or helpless
- Unable to list a reason to live, someone who cares about them, or something to look forward to
- Discussions of past suicide attempts that include regret at having survived and interest in trying again[58]

Program staff should be prepared to take several steps if they identify any of these warning signs in a youth.

First. Be prepared to talk with the youth, and ask them if they are thinking about harming themselves. Talking about suicide does not make it more likely that a youth will commit suicide.

Second. Listen carefully and do not judge what the youth has to say. It is not the program staff's job to counsel the youth. Youth program staff should not attempt to play the role of a therapist. Their job is to get the youth connected to the people who can help them. Staff should not simply direct youth to the staff but rather take them to the people who have this training.

Third. Refer youth to help. The youth program should have a plan in place in the case a youth indicates they are considering suicide. That plan should include a list of local suicide prevention resources with instructions on how to refer someone to those services. One nation-wide resource is the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has a mission to provide immediate help to individuals in crisis. It is the only national suicide prevention and intervention telephone resource funded by the Federal Government.

Fourth. Remember, suicidal ideation (thoughts about suicide) is not privileged information and should be disclosed to parents, caregivers, other staff, and other helping professionals.

Stop and Think

- How would youth describe the adult-youth relationships in the program?
- How are youth given access to connecting with program staff? How are boundaries maintained?
- What can a youth program manager do to facilitate discussions between staff who work with youth to help them support each other in response to youth questions?
- How do staff respond to bullying? Is their response consistent?
- Who tends to be bullied within the program? How can staff include bullied youth and facilitate positive peer interactions?
- How have staff responded to put-downs in the past?
- What makes it difficult to respond to put-downs? How can youth program staff overcome those factors?

Youth Input, Direction, and Leadership

Programs and activities should provide youth with opportunities to affirm their sense of self, identify with others that are similar and different to themselves, and take action. Program staff should not decide how to best reflect the young people's interests; rather, they need to get youth input. Youth who feel they are contributing to the development of the programs and activities will feel ownership of the programs and a sense of purpose, and programs that reflect the diversity of the youth will be more successful.[40, 18, 15] Organizations that allow youth to participate in program design and development not only build strong, positive adult-youth relationships but also an environment where youth feel welcome and safe.[39, 33]

Strategies for getting youth input can be formal (i.e., youth advisory boards, focus groups, etc.) or informal (i.e. in-person). Program staff should consider how groups of youth interact with these strategies, especially youth who may not feel included or safe in the program.[23, 39] The point of getting youth input is to learn about the interests of the youth who participate in the program and then develop activities that align with those interests.[43, 16]

This does not mean consulting youth regarding decisions that have already been made or with only token options.[39] The influence youth have on decisions in the program needs to be real and meaningful in order for it to contribute to a positive, welcoming, and safe environment.[18] In cases when it is not possible to involve youth in decision-making, it is helpful to explain why they were not included and how the decision was reached.[39] Each youth program should include a structure for youth input that fits within the overall arrangement of the program.

Note, youth input should not only focus on programs and activities but also be part of the process of developing systems and rules that govern the youth program space (see section on Rules, Systems, and Language).[39]

To further support youth input, direction, and leadership, youth program staff need to understand the concerns of the youth in the program.[23] To do this, staff should educate themselves and other program staff about the issues faced by youth. In particular, they should increase their understanding of youth who may see themselves as different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture. This understanding allows staff to see the humanity of people from different groups[46, 24] and contributes to the youth professional's capacity for creating programs for all youth.

Strategies

- → Identify the formal and informal ways youth have input into activities and the program.
- → Identify why youth do not use these formal and informal avenues for input.
- → Adjust these avenues to improve youth input.
- → Identify how youth let program staff know their preference for activities and programs.
- → Observe how program staff react to input when they believe it is unreasonable or unattainable.
- → Observe the impact on youth when staff react poorly to input.
- → Identify how youth exhibit leadership in the program.
- → Consider whether that leadership is meaningful.
- → Provide youth program staff with information about the characteristics of the youth who participate in the program.[22]
- → Connect staff with individuals outside the youth program who offer additional information or perspectives about the concerns youth encounter.[24, 25]

Strategies in Action

Youth program staff may not understand how to create a system where youth have input, give direction to the program, and serve in leadership roles. The basics of this system are the same as those for any good relationship.

Respect – Show respect for the each participant's experiences, opinions, and abilities. Listen and ask inspiring questions.

Communication – Communication involves a giver and a receiver. Practice respect in your communication. Be clear and concise, then listen to the youth.

Support – Adults have connections to which youth may not have access. They may know how to use funding in the center, know systems youth are not a part of, and can support youth in the activities they want to do. Youth input does not mean the adult checks

out. The adult role is to facilitate and, more importantly, to ensure youth are working in a safe environment.

These principles in action look like this:

Provide Context and Background	Providing background information about important issues to youth at the appropriate level facilitates understanding and involvement. When a person has a basic understanding of topics like the value of a diverse environment, the importance of building up people who have less privilege, or the foundation of religious equality, they are better able to participate in decision-making in a meaningful way. Without this baseline information, it may appear that youth do not support something when truly the youth have not been given full information about the value of that concept or topic.
Build a Foundation of Trust	Trust is critical to a youth professional's credibility and effectiveness when working with youth. Without it, youth will not share their ideas, opinions, or preferences. See the earlier section on relational strategies for building trust. Keep in mind that keeping your word is a great way to build trust. Program staff should spend some time setting and clarifying the ground rules for group dynamics and developing a language of respect and inclusion to open and maintain channels of communication between youth as well as between youth and staff.
Establish an Environment to Share	Early in the process, staff will want to get feedback from youth and facilitate decisions among youth about the options they brainstorm. Depending on what the youth are trying to accomplish and the age of the youth, staff might offer a survey, conduct a short circle discussion to decide, or conduct a vote with feet (a process where youth move from one part of a room to another to signify their choice). The youth professional's role in this component is to facilitate getting the feedback as well as to allow enough time for youth to give their input in a respectful manner.
Practice Active Listening Skills	Active listening skills are a tool for building trust and rapport by demonstrating concern or interest. Program staff can use these skills to help youth answer the question, "What do you want to do?" • **Open Ended Questions**. "What activities did you really like last year?" or "You didn't attend the last couple of activities. What was it about the activities you didn't like?" are questions that require more than a simple yes or no and encourage youth to share more details. • **Withhold Judgement**. Give youth time to finish their thoughts, articulate their ideas, and provide details.

	• **Paraphrase**. Reflect statements back to youth. This technique shows you are listening and allows them to clarify.

Stop and Think

- What are some youth concerns that staff have heard but not addressed?
- How have youth been educated about the topics and integrated into the decision-making process?
- How do youth voice their interests, concerns, and ideas within the youth program?
- Where can youth contribute more to decision-making in the youth program?
- How do program staff explain decisions to youth?
- How do youth provide leadership in the program? How can that leadership be expanded or enhanced?
- What types of adult-youth collaborations currently exist in the program? How could there be more of these opportunities?
- How do older youth interact with younger youth in the program?

Understanding Bias and Values

Everyone has had biases or been prejudiced at some time in their lives. Implicit or unconscious bias and prejudices are part of the unconscious decision making part of the brain.[50] Staff need to understand themselves to overcome any unconscious biases that work against an open and welcoming youth program.

Bias and prejudice are terms used to describe a set of beliefs that influence and sometimes misinform decisions and interactions with others.

Bias is a preference for or against a person, idea, or thing.

Prejudice is judging or forming an opinion before having all of the relevant facts.

Reflection can help an individual become aware of their unconscious biases and prejudices by spending time thinking about specific actions, thoughts, and statements. Reflection gives a person understanding, and with understanding, they gain knowledge. Knowledge is what program staff use to inform the way they interact with youth. For example, if a person walks barefoot in grass and is stung by a bee, the next time they walk barefoot through grass, they will watch for bees to avoid being stung. Understanding

that bees sting happened after the person was stung. The knowledge (understanding that bees sting) changed their behavior (watching for bees) to avoid being stung. This is the goal of reflection.

Because biases, prejudices, and values form over time, it often takes time to change or remove them.

Strategies

→ Explain the importance of understanding our implicit or unconscious biases.
→ Train staff on productive reflection techniques.
→ Identify time for reflection (i.e., during staff prep time).
→ Provide examples of how understanding biases can positively affect the youth program.
→ Create opportunities for program staff to interact, work with, and know the objects of their biases or prejudices to begin to break down stereotypes and create new experiences on which to base their beliefs that influence future decisions and interactions.[46]

Strategies in Action – Reflection

There are two important parts to productive reflection: observation and examination.

Observation, or taking the time to consider, assess, look at, or review a statement or thought, allows a person to pay attention to what is important. Since an individual is reflecting on their unconscious biases and prejudices, they should think about what it is about other people that makes them uncomfortable and why they feel the way they do.

Examination, or clearing one's mind, allows a person to set aside distractions and consider the topic, person, or attribute with fresh eyes. An individual should ask himself or herself: is this bias or prejudice fair or relevant? How did I get this bias? Why is it so powerful? Why is it so important to me?

This exercise may feel uncomfortable. This discomfort is likely because the person truly does not know anything about the object other than what their bias tells them and, for the first time, they are ignoring the bias, causing them to feel that they are being untrue to themselves, giving up part of their distinctiveness, or betraying their cultural identity. Through reflection, youth program staff can begin to understand their unconscious biases and prejudices and begin to let them go by putting less of an emphasis on them.[51]

Engaging in Community Collaboration

Youth programs do not exist in isolation but are only one part of the world in which youth live, learn, and grow. Youth are constantly balancing between their individual environments of family, school, youth programs, etc.,[41] and in order to thrive, they need to feel safe and welcome across all settings. Youth programs are uniquely placed to assist families and communities in creating a network of inclusive environments that ensure a continuity of safety for youth.[42]

Through community collaboration, program staff could help youth who may not feel empowered in developing relationships with role models with similar backgrounds[34] or support youth in developing and providing education to the greater community about issues they face as individuals.[8]

Program managers can also play a role by researching and providing information to program staff concerning resources available outside of the youth program, particularly for youth who may not feel empowered.[24, 8]

Parents, guardians, stakeholders and other adults who understand and support youth programs help to create a community where inclusion is valued and all youth are welcome, safe, cared for, and respected.[26] This understanding builds a sense of continuity for youth, who will then be better able to trust the safety of the environments around them.[52]

▰ Strategies

- ➔ Identify the systems already in place to connect youth with people and organizations in the community.
- ➔ Take steps to strength the program's relationship with other community organizations (i.e., schools, church youth groups, local 4-H clubs, Boy Scout, Girl Scout troupes, etc.)
- ➔ Talk with youth about who they admire and why.
- ➔ Develop a program to connect youth with a mentor.
- ➔ Ask youth to explain the issues that are important to them.
- ➔ Identify ways the program can support youth's interest in those issues within the community.

▰ Strategies in Action – Print and Electronic Communication

An inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment is beneficial for all youth. Explaining this to the other caring adults and stakeholders in each young person's life is critical to creating a positive, effective collaboration. To support this understanding, the program should clearly communicate the program values through print and electronic communication.

> **Print Communication.** Bulletin boards, forms, signs on desks, artwork in halls, and announcements on screens for future programs are examples of written communication that broadcast the program's values to parents, youth, and staff, and each is an opportunity to reinforce and support how the program is viewed. The language on all printed materials should be reviewed to ensure it is consistent and reflects the values of the program and all youth. The content of public communication should be reviewed

periodically, checked for consistency, and updated. Involving youth and parents and guardians in this review is a good idea.

Electronic Communication. Social media and emails from the program are similar to print communication but less formal. A youth program manager should be able to control the messages sent on behalf of the entire program. Still, clear rules and systems for electronic communication between staff and parents and between staff and youth should be established. Youth program staff training should cover the rules for electronic communication and reinforce the youth professional's responsibilities in supporting the values of the program.

Strategies in Action – Difficult Communication

Not all questions are answered through print or electronic communication. Youth program staff should be prepared to respond to concerned, angry, upset, or confused adults. These adults may be parents or guardians, concerned community members, or even organizational leaders. Prepared program staff will be advocates for all youth in the program. Prepare staff by coaching them in the following techniques:

Check the Attitude. When approached by an upset parent, guardian, or other adult, staff should model how they want the other adult to act. This technique is called mirroring. Mirroring happens when a person subconsciously imitates the gestures, attitudes, and speech of another. Defensive language and behavior will only further agitate an upset parent. Instead, stay calm, show compassion, and try to take the upset parent's perspective. Staff should understand that parents have their son or daughter's best interests in mind. To help staff with this technique, they should imagine how they would like to be treated if they were upset. Staff should remember the parent or guardian is not necessarily upset with them, but rather something else in the program, and that this interaction is not personal.

Listen and Agree. Youth program staff need to make the time to listen to these parents and to send signals that they are receiving the feedback from the parent. If youth are present, move the discussion to a more private location. Allow the upset adult to tell you everything they need to say. Try not to interrupt them as this appears to be a defensive act. Indicate you are listening by maintaining eye contact and providing non-verbal signals such as nodding, taking notes, etc. Listening to the parent's concerns is a sign of respect and may help to diffuse any tension, allowing for calmer discussions and conversations.

Staff can and should agree that there is an issue to resolve. Agreeing there is an issue does not indicate the parent or guardian is right, only that there is an issue and that it should be resolved.

Sort the Issue. One of the best techniques a youth professional can learn is how to sort the issue. If the problem is about the facility, rules, and systems, or other areas out of

the youth professional's control, they should immediately refer the upset parent or guardian to the program manager.

However, if the issue is about an activity plan, group rules, or some other part of the program under the direct control of the program staff, they should provide a simple and clear explanation about why it is the way that it is and how it supports program values regarding making the environment a welcoming place for all youth. Youth program staff should make this explanation without being defensive. If the parent or guardian is not satisfied, refer them to the program manager.

Defending Youth. Sometimes an angry or concerned parent will disagree with a rule or system and use that disagreement as a pretense to attack a youth in the program. In this case, simply sorting the issue as being a topic out of the control of the youth professional will undermine the trust and respect they need to maintain positive adult-youth relationships. Instead, the staff should first explain the rules, system, or other topic to the parent as well as why it is important and how it benefits all youth in the program. After this, the youth program staff should refer the parent to the program manager for further clarification.

Protecting the Youth's Confidentiality. Youth program staff should be trained to know the difference between privileged communication and information that they are required to report (e.g., intent to harm self or others). There are two outcomes for youth program staff in understanding this distinction. First, it is a critical component of developing trusting adult-youth relationships and maintaining safe environments for all youth. If staff disclose privileged communication, youth will no longer trust the adult to keep these confidences and will disengage from activities.[24] Second, understanding the line between privileged information and information that youth program staff are required to report helps staff to form responses to parents or other stakeholders who may have concerns about program values. Being able to articulate how the adult-youth relationship supports positive youth development will help most parents understand why staff cannot reveal private discussions with their son or daughter.

Youth program managers should support clear understanding of the line between privileged communication and mandated reporting by training staff to understand what they can and cannot share with parents and by clearly articulating the rule in both print and electronic media.

Time Out. No one should have to take verbal abuse whether that is in the form of inappropriate, hateful, or angry language from a parent. If a parent or guardian refuses to discuss an issue civilly, youth program staff should refuse to discuss further until the parent has calmed down. A short cool-down period where the staff leaves the parent for a short time, or a longer period where the staff schedules a meeting for another day or time can be effective ways of giving parents space to gain control.

- What resources or role models are available in the community outside of the youth program for youth who may need them?

- What systems are in place to connect youth with other people and organizations in the community?

- How would you describe the relationship with the local school(s)?
  Strong? Somewhere in-between? Weak?
  What makes it strong or weak?

- What questions do you think parents, guardians, or other community stakeholders have about making the youth program more welcoming and safe (i.e., clarifying rules and systems, involving youth in program planning and decision-making, etc.) and how that will affect programming and their youth?

- How can staff involve parents and guardians in the program and help answer questions or concerns they may have about program strategies around inclusion?

- How are parents involved in the program? How could they be more involved?

- How are the program values communicated to parents, guardians, and other community stakeholders?

- How do parents, guardians, and other community stakeholders provide feedback and ask questions about the program? How could systems be created to ensure more feedback is being gathered and addressed?

Intentional Program Structure

Background

A program and environment where youth feel welcome and safe is intentionally structured to support positive peer relationships, foster cooperation between youth, involve youth on multiple levels, and create and expand opportunities for youth leadership. Let's explore each of these components of intentional program structure.

Supporting Peer Relationships

Positive peer interactions act as a buffer between negative experiences and undesired youth outcomes.[26] Facilitating positive experiences among youth is a critical element of creating a high-quality youth program that is safe and welcoming for all youth.[33] When youth are able to learn from one another, they develop a deeper understanding of others, which is a step toward preventing prejudiced behaviors.[19] The results of positive peer relationships can also change how youth respond to bullying.

Youth look to one another to decide how to respond to bullying, and in an environment where supportive peer relationships are the norm, youth feel empowered to stand up to bullies more often.[26] Also, when youth intervene, they can stop the bullying the majority of the time.[44]

Strategies

To facilitate positive peer relationships,

➔ Periodically teach problem and conflict resolution skills to youth through activities like role-playing and skits

➔ Model effective social skills such as positive reinforcement, listening to others, and waiting to speak

➔ Create opportunities for youth to share stories of their experiences with one another to support a sense of belonging, personal responsibility, and empowerment[40, 29]

➔ Provide opportunities for youth to try out new skills and offer constructive, respectful feedback to one another[39]

To support youth program staff,

➔ Train them to lead youth in activities that teach them how to take direct positive action against bullying[26]

➔ Train them on correction and redirection strategies for inappropriate behaviors

➔ Train them to have clear expectations for youth behavior

Fostering Cooperation

Collaborative activities that involve high levels of cooperation support positive youth relationships in a youth program. Collaborative activities do not emphasize competition or isolate youth.[29] Collaborative activities support youth working together toward a common goal, enhance youth involvement,[45] and promote relationships between youth from different backgrounds and circumstances.[46] These collaborative activities also increase the potential for youth to practice interpersonal skills and form friendships with one another, which increases youth's sense of belonging.[19] Through collaborative activities, youth come to view each other more realistically rather than simply through stereotypes.[19]

As a short, stand-alone activity to help bring a group of youth together, or as an integrated component of a larger program, collaborative activities support interactions between youth.

Strategies

Program staff may already be familiar with collaborative activities if they have ever led a team building exercise with a group of youth. This type of activity may be used as an icebreaker or as a way to get a group of youth to begin working together. To be successful, the group of youth must listen, respond, and plan together. Strategies for successfully using collaborative activities include the following:

➔ Develop a variety of ways for youth to work together to meet common goals.[19, 33, 20] For example, if the program centers on engineering, have the group build bridges out of newspaper or drinking straws. If the youth are interested in gardening, have the youth work together to build raised beds.

➔ Ensure activities have a positive focus and do not involve judgment or winners and losers.[19] Competitive activities put youth in a situation where they compare themselves with others and lead away from collaboration.

➔ Ensure activities give equal status to all youth, regardless of the groups to which they belong.[19]

Multiple Levels of Youth Participation

Flexibility regarding the type of activities presented to youth and the ways they can be involved in those activities is important for high-quality, inclusive youth programs that provide a safe and welcoming space for all youth.[20] Developing activities that allow youth to participate in multiple ways and at multiple levels provides appropriate structure for a wide range of youth.[8] This type of structure promotes increased participation and a sense of ownership for youth, which leads to a greater sense of belonging and confidence in youth that their preferences are understood and have an impact.[45, 8] Youth participation and sense of ownership is strongly associated with program quality and can be used to measure the quality of the experience of youth in the program.[47] In addition, youth participation and sense of ownership is associated with greater positive impacts of youth programs.[33] A program that offers this flexibility to its youth participants offers multiple activity options at the same time.

▬ Strategies ▬

The development of youth participation on multiple levels within a youth program can be supported through these strategies:

➔ Provide choice and flexibility to youth whenever possible.[33, 20] Accomplish this by creating programs and activities with different roles in mind. Be sure to include leadership roles, participant roles, and observer roles to give youth options.[45, 8]

➔ Offer multiple activities simultaneously, making sure youth roles vary from activity to activity,[8] and develop a set of strategies to encourage youth to participate and activities that interest different groups of youth.[36]

➔ Train youth program staff to give instructions and directions in multiple ways for youth who may not be able to follow or understand certain formats.[45]

➔ Train youth program staff to be aware of youth who seem on the fringes of activities and to ask those youth how they would like to participate.[22]

➔ Develop systems for youth to provide feedback to get ideas on how to improve the program and their experiences.[18]

In addition to the strategies outlined in each section, program managers and trainers should reflect on how positive peer relationships, cooperation between youth, and youth involvement on multiple levels work together to create an intentional program structure that supports all youth.

Program managers and trainers may want to discuss these questions with their staff to get input:

- How do current activities support the development of cliques and groups that may lead some youth to feel unwelcome? How could activities be changed to create a more inclusive and open environment?
- How do youth share their stories, points of view, and experiences with one another?
- Which activities involve youth working against each other to reach a certain goal? Could activities be framed differently so that youth work together to reach that same goal?
- What opportunities are there in the program for youth who are different from one another to interact?
- How do staff talk to each other? Do they model good communication and listening skills?
- How do program staff model cooperation? Are they willing to work with each other and with all youth?
- Which programs and activities have the highest participation? Is there a way to support programming to expand that participation?
- Who are the youth who seem to be on the fringes of many activities? How do staff find out what they need and want?

Staff Development Approaches

Background

Staff in a positive youth development program must balance program requirements, planning and delivering activities, and the individual needs of the youth in the program.[60] Many programs suffer from high turnover with recruitment and retention as constant challenges,[61] leaving youth program managers to hire new staff with potentially less experience in key skill areas.[62]

Professional development gives program staff the time they need to learn and practice skills. It provides the support the staff needs to adapt to current topics and delivery methods required for ever-changing youth needs.[63, 64] If done correctly, professional development helps to mitigate issues often caused by high staff turnover by indoctrinating new staff in the foundational elements of the program (i.e. rules,

systems, language, and program structure) and ensuring consistency.[47, 48] Through professional development, program staff can develop positive and open attitudes toward all youth and families.[22]

A good training program includes both formal and informal professional development practices.[19]

Formal. Training programs with set curricula ensure youth staff receive uniform training and materials. Formal training can improve youth program staff skills concerning adult-youth relationships and program development and delivery.[65] Formal professional development opportunities may take a variety of forms and may be facilitated by in-house trainers, program managers, or fellow youth program staff with expertise on specific topics. If your youth program is part of a larger organization, set curricula may already be selected for a variety of topics or may be offered via online modules or certificate programs.

Informal. Informal staff development doesn't rely on set curricula or uniformity. Informal staff development occurs through modeling, reflection, discussion, sharing, and relationship building. Informal professional development positively affects pride, ownership, communication, and development[61] and leads to program staff mirroring the same techniques with youth in the program.[66]

Strategies

A staff development program that uses both formal and informal strategies can support a more inclusive environment and program.

➔ Review program staff individual development plans and ensure that staff receive training to understand the impact of the positive youth development approach within their first year of employment. Key points to cover include the following:
  - When equality, cooperative learning, and positive peer relationships are intentionally developed, attitudes change and bias and prejudice decrease.[19]
  - The presence of prejudice and harassment creates a hostile climate that becomes a barrier to learning and positive youth development.[19]
  - High levels of conflict and bullying in environments erode a young person's sense of safety and are associated with increased aggression and low levels of youth learning.[26]
  - When youth programs are intentionally welcoming and safe for youth, programs are able to provide environments that develop all youth[29] and increase their ability to recover and ability to thrive.
➔ Review program staff individual development plans and ensure staff receive training on the purpose of the foundational aspects of an inclusive environment within their first year of employment. Key points to cover include the following:
  (Note: Training on the impact of the positive youth development approach and the purpose of the foundational aspects of an inclusive environment should be integrated into the topics you already cover, not additional topics added to the training plan.)
➔ Identify where informal staff development is happening successfully.

➔ Brainstorm with your staff on ways to further incorporate informal professional development (i.e. mentoring, modeling, or discussing and sharing)

➔ Reflect on how you will know if the informal professional development is systematized and successful.

➔ Reflect on how you will know when informal professional development becomes a distraction from the work.

➔ Design staff development targeted to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills for working with diverse populations and focused on the known diversity present in the program.[27]

➔ Train youth program staff to understand that not all differences are visible and that they need to remain open to the idea that they may not always know an individual's history, cultural identification, sexual orientation, or gender identity.[24, 27]

➔ Use informal professional development practices to promote positive interactions,[36] and use close relationships and strong rapport to enforce rules and develop respect rather than doing so through authoritarian means.[36]

Stop and Think

- How are diversity, cultural sensitivity, and inclusion discussed within the youth program? What are typical responses to the topic?

- What are the things staff currently do in the program to foster a welcoming and safe environment?

- What are some of the difficulties faced when trying to create a welcoming and safe environment in the program? How can those barriers be overcome?

- How are staff trained to think about and react to youth who may see themselves as different?

- Is there annual training for youth program staff to account for staff turnover, new issues in the community, etc.?

- Who are the youth in the program who would be willing to speak with staff about the specific issues and challenges they face?

- What kind of diversity is present in the youth participants of the program? Who are community members that could be involved in an intergroup discussion about issues various youth in the program may face?

- What type of diversity is present in the program staff?

- Who are the people around whom youth program staff feel uncomfortable? Why? How would it feel to sit down with a person from that group for a conversation?

Conclusion

By using a combination of strategies, high-quality youth programs can support youth and enhance positive youth development. Programs that empower and actively work to have contribution from all youth help youth to feel valued for who they are.[6] Creating a solid foundation of inclusion, structuring activities intentionally, providing ongoing training for program staff, communicating with parents, and consistently responding to youth will allow for a robust youth program that enhances the outcomes of all youth.

Checklist for an Inclusive Youth Environment

Adapted from Simpkins & Riggs, 2014 and Simpkins et al., 2017

- ✓ Written rules and systems address the ways activities are welcoming and safe for all youth
- ✓ Procedures to report and address incidents of bullying, harassment, or discrimination are in place
- ✓ Language in print and electronic media (e.g., paperwork) reflects the diversity of the youth population and does not marginalize any groups or individuals
- ✓ Program environment is safe and welcoming for all families and youth
- ✓ All groups have equal status
- ✓ Program staff are aware of their own biases and identities and how they interact with youth in the program
- ✓ Youth program staff avoid language that demeans any group of individuals
- ✓ Activities offer multiple levels of involvement
- ✓ Youth work with program staff to develop rules and make decisions
- ✓ Communication is available in multiple styles
- ✓ Youth-peer relationships are supported through active inclusion and facilitation
- ✓ Program staff focus on building upon youth strengths
- ✓ Adult-youth relationships are intentionally cultivated
- ✓ Youth are given opportunities to provide leadership within the program
- ✓ Youth identities are respected and valued
- ✓ Program staff help bridge differences among youth
- ✓ The expectations for behavior do not favor one particular group or culture
- ✓ Expectations of youth participation are discussed with youth, and youth contribute to their development
- ✓ Youth are able to have input in identifying ways to make the program relevant to them
- ✓ Youth are encouraged to express their needs, interests, and opinions
- ✓ Program staff use incidents of bullying or put-downs as teachable moments
- ✓ Parents and caregivers have opportunities to be involved in the program, to get to know one another, and to provide feedback
- ✓ Youth program staff make an effort to reach out to families that may be difficult to reach
- ✓ Program staff are sensitive to family and youth needs
- ✓ All youth are respected by program staff and by other youth

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