

IDENTIFYING HIGH QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

Information for Youth Development Professionals Overview

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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

