

# IDENTIFYING HIGH QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

## *Information for Parents*

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### Overview

Participation in community programs can make a positive difference in the lives of youth as they cope with physical, psychological, social, and academic changes during the teenage years (McLaughlin, 2000). The purpose of this fact sheet is to introduce parents and youth to the features of community programs that best serve youth by enhancing positive life skills. These eight features (see insert, right) are based on the research discussed in the National Research Council's 2002 report, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*.

### Physical and Psychological Safety

"Safety First!" is a common motto. This is especially appropriate for youth programs since ensuring a safe environment is the first step to creating a quality youth development program (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

A quality youth program includes having procedures and policies in place to maintain a physically safe environment and to ensure effective action in case of emergency. Ensuring the psychological safety of youth is equally important, thus program staff should be trained in developing positive youth outcomes, skilled at building relationships with youth, and willing to make a long-term commitment to the program (Hall, Israel & Shortt, 2004). Adult staff members need to be attentive to the interactions among youth participants in the program, respond appropriately to issues as they arise, and continually model appropriate behavior (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004).

### Key Questions for Parents Regarding Program Safety

- Does the program location/facility appear to be well-maintained? Are emergency exits clearly marked and appropriate doors left unlocked during program hours?

- Are program information and emergency procedures provided in writing to youth and parents?
- How long have staff worked with the program? What kind of training did they receive? Do they receive training updates on a regular basis?
- Do youth feel safe from bullying and violence?
- Do the participants receive an orientation to the program?

### Appropriate Structure

Rules and expectations should be clear, communicated regularly, and consistently enforced. Research has shown that youth benefit from an environment with clear rules, discipline, and consistent limits on behavior (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). A quality youth program will actively involve the youth participants in the decision-making process of the program, including planning activities and setting expectations. The activities should be relevant to the interests of youth and appropriate for the age group of the participants (Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, & Wilson, 2003).

#### 8 Features of Positive Youth Development 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

## Key Questions for Parents Regarding Program Structure

- How are youth informed about the program's basic rules and expectations? Is there a written list available?
- Is there advance discussion provided on consequences for inappropriate action? How does the staff make sure expectations are consistently enforced for all youth?
- Does the program provide a sense of what to expect regarding program structure and program activities?
- Is there a weekly or monthly schedule of upcoming activities?

## Supportive Relationships

Successful youth programs develop a family-like atmosphere with program leaders who are warm, caring, and supportive (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Beuhring and colleagues (1997) found that a positive relationship with a teacher had a stronger influence on teen's health-related behaviors than other protective factors such as classroom size or amount of teacher training. Building relationships and trust takes time and genuine effort by program staff. Youth programs should include sufficient free time for youth professionals to socialize with and talk to youth. Further, program design should incorporate recreational and service activities that engage both adults and youth in partnership. Youth's perception of whether an adult is supportive is based on how well the adult listens and responds to the young person's situation and needs. This requires ongoing and direct positive interaction (National Research Council, 2002).

## Key Questions for Parents Regarding Supportive Relationships

- How much experience do the youth workers have in managing youth programs?
- What is the ratio of staff to youth participants?
- What types of training does the program provide to enhance the interpersonal skills of the youth workers?
- How much interaction is there between the youth workers and the participants?
- How do youth workers talk about youth participants? How do youth participants talk about the adult staff?

## Opportunities to Belong

An essential question for young people who walk into a new situation with other youth is "Will I fit in with this group of people?" Youth want to belong in a program that is

fun, fresh, and interactive (National Research Council, 2002). To be effective, community youth programs must recognize that youth participants come from diverse backgrounds and have different learning and social styles. A quality youth program will include a variety of opportunities and activities to attract and retain youth participants of different ages and interests (McLaughlin, 2000).

## Key Questions for Parents Regarding Belonging

- What steps are taken to ensure that youth feel welcome?
- Is there diversity among the program staff and youth participants?
- How much training and experience do the youth workers have in teaching youth to deal constructively with group interactions and diversity?

## Positive Social Norms

Parents may cringe at the words "peer pressure" because of an association with negative behaviors such as smoking and drinking; however, peer influence can be a powerful motivator for young people to make positive choices (Brown, 1990). All groups (families, churches, classrooms, youth programs) develop accepted practices: habits, rules, and procedures. Since internal group norms contribute to a youth's understanding of appropriate conduct, it is essential that youth workers understand the group norms fostered within their program (National Research Council, 2002). Most youth programs have a mission statement, objectives, and goals. Effective program leaders, in partnership with youth members, use this information to create a positive program environment.

## Key Questions for Parents Regarding Positive Social Norms

- Does the youth organization have a stated mission, objectives, and goals for its program?
- Does the youth organization maintain social norms that are compatible with your family's social norms?

## Support for Efficacy and Mattering

Programs that promote the long-term positive development of youth and support their successful transition to adulthood must offer youth the opportunity to participate in meaningful opportunities and activities. Program staff should see their youth as partners rather than just passive participants. This shared leadership model enables youth to develop the responsibility and decision-making skills needed when people depend on their leadership (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). A quality program will help youth realize that they have the ability to contribute meaningfully to the community.

## Key Questions for Parents Regarding Efficacy and Mattering

- How much responsibility do youth have in the leadership and planning of the program and its activities?
- Do youth feel challenged, empowered, and engaged as participants of this program?

## Opportunities for Skill Building

Most youth programs emphasize specific activities such as sports, arts, or academic tutoring. In addition to teaching valuable and specific skills, such as learning to bunt a baseball, a quality program will promote and model life skills, including teamwork, cooperation, critical thinking, and trust (McLaughlin, 2000). Program leaders should not assume that these life skills will naturally develop during activities. They must take the time to emphasize and discuss them with youth to help youth apply them in other parts of their lives (Larsen, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004).

## Key Questions for Parents Regarding Skill Building

- Does the youth organization provide opportunities for participants to learn and practice life skills such as problem-solving and teamwork?
- Are opportunities available for participants to master specialized skills in the youth program?

## Integration of Family, School and Community Efforts

Quality youth programs are an important part of a healthy community. A quality youth program will initiate cooperation and communication with parents, schools, and the general community about program accomplishments and how they are meeting the needs of local youth (Larsen, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004). For a program to be effective, it must form connections with both the youth members and their parents (National Research Council, 2002). Parents should be aware of the activities and life skills emphasized in the program so that they can offer support through practice and reinforcement at home.

## Key Questions for Parents

- Does the youth program have a newsletter or website available for parents and other interested community leaders?
- Do program leaders cooperate with schools and other community organizations? Does the program receive support and resources from other organizations in the community?
- Does the program have clearly defined goals and objectives? Does the program include information about the life skills to be developed? Does the

program offer suggestions about how parents can reinforce these new skills at home?

Community programs promote healthy youth development and provide opportunities to participate in positive leisure activities. However, programs differ in terms of quality and fit for meeting the diverse needs of adolescents. Parents and youth need to select programs that are committed to healthy youth development and include many of the features of positive developmental settings.

## Internet Resources

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

**Boys and Girls Clubs of America:** The Boys and Girls Clubs of America website provides information on its mission, programs, their partners, and updates. They also provide a pdf document of their 2004 Year in Review, a list of board members, and how to start a Boys and Girls Club. There is also a kid's center with links regarding youth members' achievements and its National Youth Day. <http://www.bgca.org/>

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

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

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

**Youth Service America:** The Youth Service America website provides information regarding its programs and services, awards and grants, memberships, news and events, partners

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

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[cals.arizona.edu/pubs/family/az1403e.pdf](http://cals.arizona.edu/pubs/family/az1403e.pdf)

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