

IDENTIFYING HIGH QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

Information for Middle School Youth Professionals

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Overview

The purpose of this fact sheet is to inform Youth Development Professionals on research findings regarding important features of successful youth programs. The goal is to offer individuals who work with youth in grades 6-8 guidelines for identifying high quality programs.

Topic/Text

Studies repeatedly find that participating in well-run, quality youth programs is beneficial for young people (Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). The National Research Council (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) provides a framework describing eight features of positive youth development settings. The following is a summary of research recommendations and findings for youth professionals to consider when planning, designing, and evaluating a quality youth program for middle school youth.

Physical and Psychological Safety

Youth participate in diverse out-of-school programs to have fun with friends and learn new skills. These activities may be diverse and include sports, creative arts, and community service (Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004). For youth to benefit from their participation, these activities should take place in a location that is safe and inviting. To improve the quality of time spent in out-of-school activities, program settings should ensure that youth are safe from threat of violence, harassment or harm (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Appropriate Structure

Youth feel secure when there are clear rules and guidelines for behavior. While middle school youth need to explore their identity to figure out who they are, they still need supervision and limits. Adolescents with less supervision are more likely to participate in dangerous behavior due to peer pressure (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Many youth prefer to join structured activities when they are available (Hall, Israel, and Shortt, 2004).

Supportive Relationships

Youth believe they are a part of a high quality program when adults consistently demonstrate their concern and support for them (Duffett, Johnson, Farkas, Kung, & Ott, 2004). Youth benefit from positive role models outside of

their family (Miller, 2003). Successful youth programs are staffed by adults who are creative, well trained, and are able to build long-term relationships with youth participants (Hall, et al., 2004).

Opportunities to Belong

When youth experience a sense of belonging, they behave more responsibly. They feel more confident and have a better attitude toward school (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). It is important that youth feel that they are valued both as an individual and as part of a group. Quality programs provide youth with activities that offer a chance for recognition by friends, family, and community.

Positive Social Norms

In high quality programs, caring adults work with youth to set positive guidelines for behavior. Youth who join a team or club experience more positive outcomes than those who have a lot of time to themselves after school (Duffett, et al., 2004). Young people benefit from the chance to explore different life situations, viewpoints, and cultures. It is especially helpful to be around other youth who have positive goals (Miller, 2003). Research connects boredom and problem behavior (Duffett et al., 2004). Thus, participation in youth programs reduces juvenile crime and violence by offering youth a positive alternative for out-of-school hours (Hall, et al., 2004).

Support for Efficacy and Mattering

In high quality youth programs, young people are encouraged to better themselves and their communities (Miller, 2003). In such programs, youth and adults share

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

