

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

This product was prepared for the Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council (DD Council) by Community! Youth Concepts (CYC) with input from the ID Action Youth Advisory Board. This document outlines best practices for youth engagement and working with youth with disabilities. It was guided by the ID Action Youth Advisory Board's input, observations by adult facilitators, and research on best practice in youth development. The piece begins with an overview of youth engagement best practices, discusses essential components of youth-serving programs, and concludes with considerations for working with youth with disabilities.

Youth Engagement Best Practices

First, an overview of youth engagement best practices is given. This is included with the understanding that youth with disabilities are youth first, and what works to engage youth as a whole also works for youth with disabilities. In the last section of this publication, specific considerations for working with youth with disabilities are noted. The following best practices are evidence and research-based.

- 1.** Youth must feel safe and supported. In order to focus on higher-level thinking and engagement, youth need to feel that their basic needs are being met. This follows Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in that once basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety are met, individuals can move up the hierarchy to aim for self-actualization. The National Academy of Sciences further defines physical and psychologically safe environments as those that use "practices that increase safe peer group interaction and decrease unsafe or confrontational peer interactions".¹
- 2.** Youth should feel that adults care about them and want them to succeed. A critical component to youth development is that youth feel that the adults supporting them care about them and want them to succeed. While an adult and a youth may sometimes disagree, it should be very clear that in all circumstances, the adult cares about the youth and their success. This may become clear through the two individuals' interaction, report, tone of voice, body language, and general demeanor. Furthermore, youth succeed most when they are presented with high expectations, making it critically important that groups are structured in a way that expects and supports the development of new skills. "Good programs encourage learning beyond a specific skill set, such as artistic ability. They can encourage the development of good habits and a wide range of competencies and life skills, through the use of a [model] that systematically cycles through planning, practice, and performance".²

¹ National Academy of Sciences, 2002. Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² McLaughlin, M., 2000. Community Counts: How Youth Organizations Matter for Youth Development. Washington, DC: Public Education Network.

3. Youth should be given voice and choice through a method that works for them. Youth will be more likely to be fully engaged in a project or activity when they are given voice and choice. This means that youth are empowered to make decisions about the program they attend. Whether it is a matter of deciding which community issue they want to impact and how, or having a say in which topic areas they study as a group, youth should have the opportunity for input, and that feedback should impact decisions about the program.
4. Adults should build upon a youth's own motivation and provide an environment that encourages this. In motivational theory, intrinsic motivation is ultimately more powerful for youth than extrinsic motivation. That is to say external motivational factors (i.e. compliments, rewards for good behavior) may motivate youth in the short-term, but internal motivational factors (i.e. a goal to finish high school, a desire to become an engineer) are what sustain motivation. Adult facilitators should build upon a youth's individual sense of motivation and provide an environment that encourages this. Feedback to youth from adults should be individualized and recognize youth contributions as they relate to their goals. According to a vast array of research studies, overly controlling environments that do not provide opportunities for autonomy undermine motivation, self-concepts, expectations, and direction and induce learned helplessness in response to difficult tasks. Furthermore, "adolescents in youth-centered activities develop new cognitive skills that increase their confidence and ability to make positive decisions".^{3 4}
5. Adults should listen more than they speak. Youth programs are about the development of the people they serve – youth. The focus should not be on adult needs or processing, but instead, on youth. Adults should foster this processing by asking open-ended questions instead of closed-ended questions (i.e. that require a yes or no, or one-word answer). This allows youth the opportunity to create their own meaning from experiences and allow them to further define what is important to them.
6. The learning process is more important than a project outcome. It is easy to get side-tracked as an adult and forget that learning happens throughout a project, and the outcome is less important than the things that take place throughout the initiative. If youth are not achieving the outcomes desired by the adult, there may be a learning opportunity in the midst. For instance, if youth plant seeds too early for a community garden and a frost wipes out the plants, adults could use this as an opportunity to teach youth about the importance of planning for weather. Ideally, adults would enable youth to try again and learn from mishaps or mistakes. This type of supportive relationship provides an environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback necessary for physical, intellectual, psychological, and social growth. It also fosters an individual's willingness to take on challenge.⁵
7. It is important for adults to set appropriate boundaries. It is the responsibility of the adult facilitator to set appropriate social, emotional, and physical boundaries with youth. While youth need to know their adult facilitator is a real person, personal stories should be shared when appropriate and relevant to learning objectives. Youth should be sharing more than the adult shares, and adult stories should not distract from the youth's experience.

3 Heath, S.B., 1999. Dimensions of Language Development: Lessons from Older Children. Pp. 59-75 in Cultural Processes in Child Development: The Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology, A.S. Masten, Ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

4 McLaughlin et al., 1994. Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

5 Csikszentmihalyi, M., and K. Rathunde, 1998. The Development of Person: An Experimental Perspective on the Ontogenesis of Psychological Complexity. Pp. 635-684 in The Handbook of Child Psychology: Theoretical Models of Human Development, Fifth, R.M. Lerner, Volume Ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

8. Use social media as appropriate, but focus on building relationships in person. Social media has become a fast way to exchange information. At the heart of the use of technology remains the core of psychological theory that states developing individuals need a stable environment, which is predictable, and allows for experiences that can be assimilated, accommodated, or rejected within their thinking processes. Furthermore, adolescents benefit from experiencing clear rules, discipline, and consistently enforced limits on their behavior. This is even more important when considering youth who may have delayed cognitive abilities related to the interpretation of social cues. Therefore, it can be irresponsible to expect youth to develop relationships through a medium that is anything but predictable, clear, and consistent. Prior to use of social media, adults, including parents, should determine how social media can be used appropriately for their initiative or program, keeping in mind the goal of enhancing the capabilities of youth. While it may not be appropriate for an adult to connect with a youth outside of the program using social media, it might be appropriate for a group of youth to celebrate their accomplishments by posting a video on YouTube and sharing it with their friends and family. It is often assumed that youth are digital natives, they know how to use social media, and feel comfortable using it. These assumptions can be detrimental to youth development, so adults must utilize social media with care. It can be helpful to have a discussion with youth, as well as parents, about projecting a positive image on social media and how to use various programs. Ultimately, the relationship between the adult and the youth should be built in person to avoid potential challenges, but projects and activities can be supported by social media when permission has been given by youth and their parents to engage in that venue. This strategy came out of the public forums held by CYC to explore needs and strategies to address needs for youth with disabilities.

9. Youth must be engaged in planning projects and activities. Youth skills can be developed through their engagement in planning projects and activities. Creativity can be fostered through youth input, and youth will be more engaged in activities if they are invested in the process. This concept is built upon the work of Piaget and Erickson and recognizes that positive development is not something adults do to young people, but rather something that young people do for themselves with a lot of help from parents and others. They are the agents of their own development. To foster development, settings need to be youth centered, providing youth - both individually and in groups - the opportunity to be efficacious and to make a difference in their social worlds. It must also be emphasized that “opportunity” is not experienced as “challenge” unless youth identify with it: adolescents need to be engaged by opportunities that are meaningful to them.⁶

10. Use reflection to solidify learning in youth programming. Research points to reflection as the key component that solidifies learning during and following a program activity. There should be a reason for doing activities with youth, and the purpose should be clear to them. Adults should provide youth with the opportunity to process activities through large group discussion, individual reflection, or small group conversations. Through the reflection process, youth are able to once again create their own meaning and learning from activities. It also allows them a chance for pause to consider different ways in which to solve problems or complete a task. This type of learning allows them to shape their future actions, learning from their own successes and mistakes, without the authority figure telling them what they did or did not do correctly.

11. Incorporate healthy snacks and physical activity into youth programs. Giving youth an outlet for healthy eating habits and physical activity is critical to their development of healthy habits for life. Plan snacks and exercise that support youth energy, sustenance, and wellbeing. With a growing epidemic of obesity, it is vital that adults are strong role models and provide access to healthy alternatives whenever possible.

12. Plan activities with multiple intelligence theory in mind. Individuals learn in a variety of ways, and adults tend to plan activities that fit their own intelligence style. It is important to plan activities that use multiple intelligences, so youth remain engaged. According to Howard Gardner, these styles include body kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, musical and rhythmic, verbal and linguistic, logical and mathematical, visual and spatial, and naturalist. By keeping these intelligences in mind, the adult will be forced to think about how to carry out an activity in a way that will keep structured programming fresh, innovative, and engaging.

⁶ National Academy of Sciences, 2002. Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press

Essential Components of Youth-Serving Programs

The following components are things to look for in a youth-serving program. While program implementation styles vary, there are certain elements that are essential to providing youth with opportunities that help them develop. These essential elements to a youth program include:

1. The sponsoring organization has a way to evaluate the program's quality. The organization may hire a third-party evaluator, survey youth and/or parent(s) for feedback, evaluate their program using a quality measurement tool, and/or participate in program monitoring and improvement processes. These are each indicators that an organization places importance on the quality of their programming. They also suggest that programs are more likely to be constructed based on research and adapted to utilize strategies that work.
2. Youth are given opportunities for voice and choice. The organization offers ongoing opportunities for youth to provide input and feedback to inform the programming. This may be evident through the inclusion of youth on the governing board, the creation of a Youth Advisory Board that is consulted for advice, and/or program planning that includes youth in brainstorming.
3. Youth like their adult facilitator and feel they care about them. It should be evident that the adult facilitator likes the youth they work with, and vice versa. While adults need to maintain appropriate boundaries with youth, participants should feel that the adult cares about their wellbeing and success. That basic level of trust is needed for youth to fully develop.
4. Youth talk time is high, and adult talk time is low. Youth should do the majority of the talking during discussion. In youth development, it is important for youth to process and reflect on activities to solidify learning. An archaic model of an adult lecturing to youth will not help them learn how to think.
5. Adult to youth ratios provide a safe environment for participants. Programs should provide enough supervision to allow youth participants to feel safe and supported. As a rule of thumb, the number of adults should be higher with younger youth and when youth have greater needs.
6. Bullying and conflict are addressed and not ignored. Adult facilitators should be monitoring the group closely for conflict and bullying and should address each swiftly. While an adult may not see every instance of bullying firsthand, it is important that he or she do everything in their power to prevent it and address it when necessary.
7. Youth like the program. It may sound simple, but youth opinions of a program will speak volumes. Parents and adult allies should ask youth whether they feel comfortable, how safe they feel, and what they are learning or getting out of the program.
8. The organization should conduct background checks and carry insurance policies for liability and transportation. An organization that serves youth regularly should conduct background checks on all employees and volunteers who work with youth. Youth-serving organizations should also carry liability and transportation insurance in case of accidents. These components may be indicators of how seriously the organization considers the safety and wellbeing of their youth participants and employees.

Working with Youth with Disabilities

In the final section, specific considerations for working with youth with disabilities are outlined. These considerations have been compiled using input from the ID Action Youth Advisory Board, public forums, and observations from adult facilitators of the group.

- 1.** Youth with disabilities are youth first. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and youth should be given the opportunity to be known as youth first. Their disabilities may have a variety of impacts on their lives, or little to no impact on their lives. When asked about the differences between youth with and without disabilities, the ID Action Youth Advisory Board members indicated the following: Our similarities are that both youth with and without disabilities have unique opportunities in life to succeed. These may include school activities or things outside of school. One difference is that youth with disabilities have more opportunities to work with counselors and other people who help them. Another difference is that youth with disabilities have a harder time understanding things sometimes, but that can also be what they have in common with other youth. The third difference is that youth with disabilities have a better sense of what it is like to overcome a challenge.
- 2.** Use people first language. Instead of using words like “handicapped”, “disabled”, and “special needs”, use the word “people” before discussing a person’s disability. For instance, instead of saying, “She’s confined to a wheelchair” or “She’s autistic”, say, “She uses a wheelchair” or “She has autism”. Make your description more about the person and their strengths than their disability. Understand that language used to describe disability evolves and changes, and what might be acceptable language during one decade may change and be considered stigmatizing in the next. Also understand that youth may come from areas or backgrounds where more stigmatizing language is used. In this case, it may be appropriate to lead a discussion on the history of disability culture and why language is important.
- 3.** Familiarize yourself with disability etiquette and expectations. Meeting locations should be accessible to people who use assistive technology and may have mobility challenges. A person’s assistive technology (i.e. wheelchair, communication device, cane, braces) should be considered their property, and others should respect it as such. For instance, if a person is using a wheelchair, it is not okay to push the chair without their permission. It should not be assumed that a person requires assistance to use their assistive technology. When in doubt, ask first. Youth with disabilities also may have certain accommodations that they need to access information or participate in activities. Adults should ask youth about the accommodations they may need. Program forms should ask about accommodations needed and should be available in a variety of formats. For instance, a youth may take more time to process information and have an accommodation to allow them more time to take a test. Another example may be that a person who is deaf may require a sign language interpreter to help them communicate. When possible, adults should also inquire if the person who is deaf would prefer a male or female interpreter.

When the ID Action Youth Advisory Board was asked what is important for people to know about working with youth with disabilities, they indicated the following: When adults work with youth with disabilities, they need to know what is safe, what is going on with youth, and what is going on in the community. They need to be in touch with the youth of today and not bring pre-conceived notions of the youth generation to the table. They should know that it helps to have more than one adult facilitator with a group of youth to give everyone the attention they need or want. They should know that we like our independence and being able to do things ourselves. It is important for adults to know what youth need and things they need help advocating for, such as accommodations. It is important for adults to know the specific needs of youth and their individual desires and goals. It is important for adults to interact with youth with patience.

- Engagement of youth is the adult’s responsibility. It is not uncommon for there to be a fear component of the unknown for an adult who has not worked with youth with disabilities before. The responsibility is the adult’s for engagement, and youth should not be expected to provide guidance on expectations. For this purpose, disability service providers, advocates, and family members of the youth can provide guidance on general expectations, accommodations needed, and effective learning strategies that have worked in the past.
- Not everyone is in the same place about their identification as a youth with a disability. Many youth have never been told they have a disability, how it might affect them, or their rights. On the flip side, other youth might have been told they cannot do things because of their disability. It is important to know the difference between helping a youth know information for the purpose of advocating for themselves and giving youth information with the intent of convincing them they should not try something new. Adults should meet youth where they are in their identity and assist them in finding information with the intent of enabling them to achieve their goals. Individual reflection can be a powerful tool to help youth develop and grow as people and recognize their progress toward personal goals.
- Youth need to have a social component or benefit to a group. Youth want to have fun, and their social needs should have an outlet. While not everyone has to be friends within a group, there has to be a benefit for the youth for them to maintain attendance. They need to feel a connection to others, and that can be fostered through social activities. Social outlets were cited as a need, particularly for youth in middle and high school, in the public forums hosted by CYC.
- Youth with disabilities need the freedom to make mistakes. Many youth with disabilities are prevented by well-meaning parents or providers from doing things that expand their comfort zones, broaden their experiences, or challenge them. Everyone learns from mistakes, and youth with disabilities need this opportunity as well. They need the freedom to explore things they excel in, try new things, and potentially fail, so they can learn. This was another component that was highlighted in the public forums hosted by CYC.
- Including a broad spectrum of disabilities in a youth group presents challenges but also provides a learning opportunity for youth. Within the ID Action Youth Advisory Board, a variety of disabilities are represented. This broad representation can present challenges, such as the need to scaffold learning activities, but it also reaps benefits. For one, youth tend to see their commonalities and less of their differences. They also seem less likely to stigmatize based on diagnosis, since they each have different diagnoses. There are no comments like, “Well, we do that because we have autism.” Youth can learn from others who have overcome barriers. These barriers may be different from their own but may utilize similar tools. Adults should focus on finding areas of common interests through which youth can unite and work as a group.
- Offer the program opportunity widely, offer youth a chance to try the group out, and follow through. As was heard time and time again in the public forums and ID Action Youth Advisory Board meetings, it is critical for youth with disabilities to feel welcome. Going into a new group can be daunting for any youth, and youth with disabilities may face greater fears because of past history with bullying or non-inclusion. The adult should offer programs widely to a variety of stakeholders – youth, parents, providers, and educators – to maximize outreach potential. Adults should encourage youth to try the group out at their comfort level. If it helps them to bring a friend or trusted adult, adults should make it happen. When youth visit, adults should follow up and find out what they thought. They can get feedback on what was working well for youth and how they can best feel comfortable with a group of new people.

- Active and intentional inclusion is important. While most program providers know the benefits of inclusion, some may not know how to actively work to enable it to happen. Inclusion of youth with disabilities is all the more important because it is likely that they have not been included in the past. Adults should introduce new youth to the group, create icebreakers and team-building games to allow group members to get to know one another, and facilitate discussion and activities in a manner that enables all members to participate. For instance, if a youth is sitting to the side by themselves, it can be helpful for the adult to approach the youth and ask about their interests and how their day is going. A potential barrier to inclusion may be discovered from this conversation, and the adult can make plans with the youth about how they can be an active participant.
- Shift the power dynamic. Many youth with disabilities have more often been the recipients of services than the leaders of such services, and it can be very empowering to shift the dynamic. Ask youth to engage in projects of their choice, so they can provide meaningful input to their communities. Think big, and when youth rise to the occasion, recognize their leadership qualities. Adults should be focused on enabling youth to see their own leadership potential.