

PROGRAMMING IN EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH

Research continues to confirm that to fully develop the attitude, knowledge and skills youth need to make good choices, resist negative peer pressures, and to succeed in life, they need a core set of services, supports, and opportunities. The following list identifies five of the most important ways programs can enhance and strengthen the capacity of youth. Under each item are examples of how programs can provide each of these services to youth.

- **Opportunities for caring, consistent relationships with responsible adults in their families and in the broader community.**

Adolescence is a time when young people struggle to establish their sense of independence. As they make the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescents begin to see themselves as distinct from parents and family and seek to develop their own identity and autonomy. A critical role youth programs can play at this time, is to ensure young people have dependable, mature adults with whom they can relate. While young people may be distancing themselves from their parents, they want and need other adults whom they can trust and depend on and who will help them navigate the choices they face.

To meet this need, many programs structure ample time for youth to work in small groups or individually with adults. It is important that at least one adult staff person or regular volunteer know each youth personally, communicate regularly on a one-on-one basis with that youth, and be available when the unpredictable “crises” of adolescence occur. Without paying special attention to how programs are structured and staff are assigned, it is possible that in a program serving 40 -50 or more youth, even with two or three staff and volunteers, that some youth will never get the individual attention and time they need from adults. Young people are making many decisions which are very personal and have potentially serious consequences—“how far to go” with your boyfriend or girlfriend, what does it mean to be a man or woman, whether to try cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs, whether to take school seriously, how to relate to their parents, etc. They need competent caring adults whom they trust to help them make the right choices.

- **Opportunities for positive social and recreational activities with peers and family.**

We all define ourselves in relation to others, particularly those persons closest to us—our family, friends, and co-workers. As adolescents seek their own identity they need increased opportunities to engage in positive activities with their peers and family. Learning the social skills needed to interact well with others, to participate in groups, to work cooperatively to accomplish goals, to value differences in other people, and to give

and accept praise and criticism are important tasks for adolescents as they mature and become responsible adults.

Well-structured programs are designed to assist youth in developing these social skills. This is a time when youth are seeking acceptance about who they are and need lots of positive feedback to reassure them that they are “normal” and “liked by others.” Programs should eliminate as much competition between and among youth as possible and structure opportunities for youth to work cooperatively and to recognize and celebrate the contributions of all members. The more varied the activities offered in a youth program, the more opportunities there are for all youth to excel and find their particular gift or talent, to have fun, and to enjoy being part of a group.

- **Opportunities to make positive contributions to their family, their neighborhood, and the community and to feel valued for their contribution.**

Young people are in between childhood and adulthood. They lack many of the skills and the maturity needed to function independently as adults, yet they are not children. They have ideas, energy, and skills with which to make a contribution to their families and to their communities. Youth are eager to be seen as capable, smart, “adult,” and as able to solve problems. They now see themselves as able to give rather than receive help from others—and they are.

High quality youth development programs recognize the importance of helping youth use their energy and idealism in constructive ways by engaging them in service projects in their communities, encouraging them to plan and conduct family dinners and events, engaging them in discussions and activities around real issues effecting their communities. Youth have cleaned up and equipped neighborhood parks, become peer tutors for younger students, painted local day care centers, organized sports events between youth and local police, organized and run book drives of community center libraries, and held forums to generate youth solutions to teen pregnancy, youth violence, and a host of other issues troubling their communities.

- **Opportunities to learn and test new skills through participation in a wide range of social, cultural, educational, service, and employability activities.**

It has been said that three things we know all youth must do are: “move, talk, and take risks.” Taking risks in socially unacceptable and often dangerous ways is the image of youth presented by the daily news. But there are endless opportunities for youth to “take risks” that are positive. Youth are eager to test their limits, to try new things, to take on a challenge. Youth want to know just how smart, strong, clever, talented, creative, resourceful they really are. They want to know about the world and figure out their place in it. They dream and imagine what they could be and could do.

Strong, well-planned youth development programs offer as many opportunities for youth to try new things and develop new skills as they can get into a day, a week, or a month. They create opportunities for youth to create plays, write stories, learn to paint or

draw or sculpt, play a musical instrument or join a chorus, play chess or tennis or soccer, attend the theater, visit the local arts museum, learn about various occupations, write, design and produce a newspaper, and more. The list is often as wide and as flexible as the imagination of a young person. Good programs use these opportunities to help young people learn about talents they didn't realize they had, learn about the resources of their community, and to develop a sense of the possibilities open to them with hard work and patience. Effective programs are constantly presenting their youth with opportunities to take a risk--and to grow.

- **Opportunities to assist in the design and implementation of programs and services in which they participate.**

As young people work to develop their own sense of identity and independence, they need opportunities to take more responsibility for themselves; to make more decisions about where they go and what they do. It is important for youth programs to help youth learn to think about options and about consequences—including the consequences their decisions have on others.

One avenue many successful youth programs use is to engage youth in the design and management of their own programs. Many agencies create youth advisory boards or councils where youth plan schedules, recommend new events and activities, develop the center rules and determine the consequences for youth who break the rules. To encourage as many youth as possible to be a part of the decision making process, many programs hold elections for council members, set terms which are fairly limited, create additional planning teams to design particular events, and have youth vote on various options being considered by the council. Programs also encourage older youth to serve as staff assistants or to supervise certain activities.

High quality youth programs are grounded in a clear understanding of the enormous developmental tasks faced by adolescents, in a sense of the energy, imagination, and joy of adolescents, and in an unwavering faith in the resilience and potential of every young person. Thousands of young people depend on the dedicated staff in these programs to help them solve problems, develop skills, and become the competent, caring adults our communities need. In turn, these programs depend upon the broader community for the resources and support needed to do their job well. The need and value of people working together is something we hope all youth learn—and all adults remember.