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Research Brief

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Essential Elements of Effective Youth Development Programs

Allen Taggart and Peter A. Witt

Introduction

If you were to develop, lead or observe an ideal youth development program, what would it look like? What programmatic, leadership and structural elements would be present? All youth development organizations and programs wrestle with this question. In the early 2000's, a group of youth development scholars and practitioners met under the auspices of the National Research Council to develop a list of eight essential elements for a quality youth development programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004). Practitioners developing and leading youth development programs should strongly consider the extent to which their programming efforts incorporate each of these programmatic elements in their current efforts. The eight program elements identified by the National Research Council panel were:

- 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

In the following sections, each of these program elements is described.

Physical and Psychological Safety: Providing a safe physical and psychological environment is vital to the construction of program settings that help youth develop. Settings must be free from the threat and reality of violence and unsafe conditions (e.g., poorly maintained or age inappropriate equipment). Thus, program leaders need to prevent bullying, create a setting where all participants feel welcomed and valued, and create the opportunity where individuals feel safe to express their ideas and establish their individual identities. Witnessing or being threatened with violence can lead to psychological problems (Larson, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004). Sanctioning or denying program access to individuals who would contribute to a physically or psychologically unsafe environment may be necessary. Safety, in all its forms, is a basic precondition for any positive youth development program.

Appropriate Structure: Stability and order are critical to the success of youth programs. Research suggests that settings with support and structure help facilitate positive development in a variety of areas (Steinberg, 2001). In terms of implementing this principle, Eccles and Gootman (2002, 2004, p. 130) assert: "Appropriate structure and community programs for youth includes developing clear and consistent roles and expectations, setting limits, and being clear about behavioral expectations." The program structure must also be age, developmentally, and

culturally appropriate. Youth input regarding how activities should be organized is also critical. As youth get older, they should be given increased levels of responsibility with regard to program organization, content and leadership. Ultimately, activities should be structured in ways that maximize the likelihood of positive experiences, such as mastery/success, engagement, fun, learning, creative production, friendship, and service.

Supportive Relationships: In any youth development context, it is imperative that youth have a strong, healthy, positive relationship with one or more caring adults. Their interactions with such adults will provide an “environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual, psychological, and social growth” (Eccles & Gootman 2002 p. 96). Relationships should supply both emotional support (caring and responsiveness) and instrumental support (e.g., guidance).

Opportunities to Belong: Youth need the opportunity to feel that they are valued by program leaders and other participants within a program setting. Being valued can lead to feeling comfortable within the setting. Failure to feel that one belongs can be a significant barrier that can keep youth from joining activities or, once they have joined, lack of opportunities to sense belonging can lead to suspending participation (Larson, 1994). Additionally, youth should be able to feel that individuals of their gender, age, sexual orientation, or ethnicity are welcome to participate. To create a sense of belonging programs should provide opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making, have activities that are cooperative rather than competitive, have individualized contact between youth, and help them feel valued (Medicine, 2000b).

Positive Social Norms: Quality programs create positive expectations for attitudes and behaviors expressed by group members. These expectations are set by both peers and group leaders (Brown, 1990). Peer pressure and expectations work to promote positive boundaries, rules, and procedures for how participants are expected to interact with each other (Scales & Leffert, 1999). For example, leaders can work with youth to create positive norms for how they treat peers (e.g., respect, non-acceptance of bullying), and help create a climate that reinforces commitment to and support of other group members to achieve group goals. Within positive programs youth can help develop pro-social norms and work together to avoid the development of attitudes or behaviors that would harm individual or group functioning (Larson, Eccles, & Gottman, 2004).

Support for Efficacy and Mattering: “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” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 103). Settings need to be youth-centered by providing youth opportunities to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Youth also should be given the opportunity to face challenges, develop skills to overcome those challenges and feel the sense of personal efficacy associated with being a critical actor in their own lives (Bandura, 1994). For example, developing positive decision making skills helps youth develop confidence in their own abilities and increases the likelihood that they will be successful in deal with everyday problems they face in their lives (Larson, Eccles, & Gottman, 2004).

Opportunities for Skill Building: Youth programs are important settings for youth to build and master social, physical, relationship, problem solving, cultural and a variety of other skills that can lead to success in later life. The development of a toolkit of skills can help youth feel

confident that they can master situations at school, within their families, within work settings and in their social lives. Involving youth in activities consistent with their interests is important, but almost any activity setting can be constructed to afford opportunities for youth to increase their competencies. Thus, programs should be seen as intentional learning environments designed to help youth gain a wide-variety of life skills.

Integration of Family, School and Community Efforts: Programs work best when they can work across family, school and community settings. The adage “it takes a village to raise a child” suggests that youth development is maximized when there are similarities in norms and expectations across settings, where communities develop systems of opportunities that work together to promote youth development, and when all of the supports, opportunities, programs and services available to youth are part of a well thought out system. This approach requires communication between adults involved in these various settings and the development of an integrated set of opportunities. When these efforts are not synchronized or in line with each other, the chances for positive development are decreased (Romo & Falbo, 1996). An integrated approach requires community goal setting, planning and evaluation of success.

Implications for Practice

Developing programs that adhere to these principles will help program developers plan and execute programs that maximize the potential of youth developing into fully functioning adults. While every youth organization has its own unique contribution to this overall goal, the eight listed program elements will guide youth programs to be much more effective and create lasting change.

When conducting evaluations of program effectiveness and outcomes, the first step is carefully examining the program structure itself to make sure that the program is devised utilizing elements that have the best chance of achieving desired outcomes. The eight listed elements have been shown over and over again to be essential to creating programs that can make positive contributions to positive programmatic outcomes.

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