

Engaging Older Youth: Program Quality Improvement System



CENTER FOR YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT

Why Older Youth?

From the ages of twelve to twenty-four, youth go through a time of great change and transformation as they move out of the safety of elementary school, to the feverish world of adolescence, and eventually into adulthood. Urban youth face special challenges in making the successful transition to adulthood due to structural economic changes over the past fifty years, which have limited opportunities for living wage jobs and the number of positive role models available.

Concern about the situation for youth led to academic research into why some youth can overcome negative experiences and succeed in early adulthood (resiliency research). Organizations such as the Social Development Research Group and the Search Institute identified

risk and protective factors, while other researchers looked at why youth choose healthy versus risky behaviors. Summarizing this and other research, Youth Development Strategies, Inc. describe the key factors that can help youth succeed as: supportive relationships, challenging activities, meaningful involvement, and opportunities to contribute.

This research is at the heart of the **positive youth development (PYD)** approach, which guides the work of many youth



programs today. The PYD approach looks at youth holistically, as a group to be **worked with** rather than **provided for**, and seeks to support young people as they build on their strengths.

Despite the fact that youth development programs have proven effective in supporting positive youth outcomes, many youth never receive the benefits because they do not participate in programs at all or for long enough. Youth participation in afterschool programs drops off starting in middle school, as youth take on increased responsibilities and want to spend time with friends. As a result, a major challenge for youth development programs is to find creative strategies to bring in older youth and keep them coming for the skill development, opportunities, and support they need.

Community Youth Development

Community Youth Development refers to the relationship between healthy communities and positive youth development. The underlying principal behind community youth development is that “communities are dependent upon the minds, hearts and hands of their young people and youth are dependent upon the viability, vitality, protection and attention of their community.”

Community youth development looks at how community building efforts can enhance youth development and vice versa. Part of this approach is to involve youth in program planning and development, a practice found to be key in attracting and retaining older youth.

Other community youth development strategies include

engaging youth in service and activism related to pressing community issues they identify. By connecting learning and projects to issues that impact youth’s lives, programs can provide meaningful opportunities for youth to see themselves as capable of making positive change happen in their lives and their communities.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AT A GLANCE:

- Youth involvement in out of school time programs decreases sharply as they reach adolescence and only 1 in 4 teen participant attends on a regular basis (Anderson-Butcher, 2005).
- Youth with supportive relationships in early high school are twice as likely to have optimal developmental outcomes (Gambone et al, 2002).
- Engaging learning activities and opportunities for meaningful involvement increase the probability of positive outcomes by 71% and 42% respectively (Gambone et al, 2002).

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Serving and Supporting Older Youth	2
Quality Program Elements	2
Building Program Capacity	3
CYD’s TA Strategy	3

Serving and Supporting Older Youth



“Of all the quality program elements, staff’s ability to actively engage youth and form trusting relationships contributes most to positive youth outcomes.”

—Massachusetts After-School Research Study, 2003



Quality standards for out-of-school time programs are designed to apply to youth of all ages. However, traditional five day a week afterschool programs have been more focused on and successful in serving younger children, who need somewhere to keep them safe and occupied. Older youth still need support and opportunities to move to the future, but crave independence and often do not want to stay for programs on school grounds.

Out-of-school time programs for older youth take many forms, from informal drop-in centers to more intensive intervention programs. Funding and research have both focused most on problem preven-

tion and intervention. As a result, few quality models exist that provide age appropriate youth services along with needed opportunities and encouragement.

In order to effectively engage older youth, programs must take into account their developmental needs and characteristics. Pre-adolescence (from ten to fourteen years old) is a time of intense developmental change second only to early childhood in terms of brain and identity development. From fifteen to eighteen, youth continue to develop and test out their identity, then from nineteen to twenty-four they transition into the adult world.

Research shows that during

these periods youth need a range of opportunities and supports that contribute to positive youth development in four key areas:

- **B e l o n g i n g** — connections to caring adults, positive peer relationships, and a safe and inclusive environment.
- **M a s t e r y**—developing physical, social, intellectual, and emotional skills and engagement in learning.
- **I n d e p e n d e n c e** — identity formation, self-determination, and decision-making.
- **C o n t r i b u t i o n** — opportunities to see oneself as an active participant in the future and to value and practice service to others.

Quality Program Elements

Limited research looks comprehensively at the elements and standards of quality programs for older youth. Literature that does deal broadly with programming for older youth often focuses on recruitment and retention, due to the challenges in sustaining older youth participation.

The literature talks about recruitment and retention as part of an on-going effort to secure and sustain youth participation. To reach youth in different developmental stages or life situations, programs must develop distinct marketing and program strategies for each group. Other elements of quality programming mentioned in the literature fall into the categories of

framework, strategies, and delivery.

The **Foundation** for quality programming forms the basic building blocks of operation, including staffing, and management, space, and safety. Research findings related to the program framework include skilled staff, continuous quality improvement, flexible accessible schedules, and a safe dedicated space.

Strategies for quality programs are the type of activities that interest and challenge older youth, which will draw youth to programs and help them develop key skills and competencies. Common strategies cited in the literature include academic support, career awareness and

skill building, leadership development, service learning, recreation, arts, and mentoring.

Engagement focuses on the way programs engage youth as active participants. Of all the quality program elements, staff’s ability to actively engage youth and form trusting relationships contributes most to positive youth outcomes. Other delivery elements include youth choice and participation in decision-making, social connections, project-based learning with real world skills, exposure to the world outside the neighborhood, and positive recognition.

Building Program Capacity to Impact Youth Outcomes

As out-of-school time programs face increasing pressure to show impact on youth outcomes, training and technical assistance providers can be a critical resource. Technical assistance activities can include both professional development and support in establishing systems to sustain new practices. Program staff describe the “ideal” technical assistance system as one that involves: assistance tailored to each organization, trusting relationships, significant on-site time, access to models and resources, training and peer networking, funding/resources to implement changes, cultural sensitivity, and staff capacity building.

Best practices for professional development of out-of-school time workers includes active trainings relevant to daily work, continued mentoring and support to implement learnings, and accompanying resource materials written in simple language. Trainings have proven most effective when they have clearly stated objectives that connect to past and future learning, use consistent language and theory, and are tailored to the level of staff attending (direct service or

management). Suggested training topics for managers focus on leadership and management issues, including staff management, program planning, and curriculum integration. Frontline staff training should focus on youth-centered practice in areas such as classroom management, conflict resolution, content area instruction, and homework help. Additional professional development activities described as models include peer exchange and networking, cross-site visits, learning communities, joint planning or problem solving, coaching and mentoring.

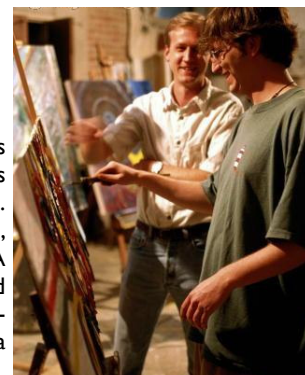
The California Afterschool Partnership, a model technical assistance system, describes its approach to building program capacity as a process of transformational change through which programs “acquire the knowledge, skills and motivation that empower them to think strategically and intentionally.”

Technical assistance providers serve as coaches and mentors in that process, by guiding and shaping attitudes and behaviors, helping programs remove barriers, reinforcing successes, and providing a

safety net that encourages and sustains continuous quality improvement. Working together, program staff and TA providers create tailored action plans, using indicators in each practice area to track progress.

Techniques to foster continual improvement in a group setting include encouraging dialogue, reflection, experimentation, and learning from what is not working as well as what is. This can happen through learning communities, which establish a process of inquiry that promotes understanding and appreciation for the work and increases providers’ awareness of not just what they do, but how and why this leads to positive program and youth outcomes.

Through these group and one-on-one practices, technical assistance providers help not only build program capacity but also “stimulate the local reinvention of best practices, so that they are contextually relevant to the circumstances and opportunities that exist within a particular neighborhood”.



“Capacity building takes place when programs have immediate and ongoing access to the support they need to acquire the knowledge, skills, and motivation that empower them to think strategically and act intentionally.”

—California Afterschool Partnership, 2004

Center for Youth Development’s Technical Assistance Strategy

CYD’s Technical Assistance Strategy is designed to help programs and neighborhoods build on their areas of strength, expand the use of best practices, and strengthen their ability to actively engage older youth. This will happen through:

- **Shared assessment process**—program staff and the TA provider work together to review findings from staff and youth surveys and activity observations to identify areas for improvement
- **Training and peer learning**—a sequence of topics covering critical knowledge and skill areas
- **Individualized improvement plans**—one-on-one support will help programs make changes in identified priority areas
- **Learning communities**—structured group discussions related to specific practices
- **Materials and linkages**—access to research, best practices, and model programs
- **Cross-site exchanges**—visits to successful programs in the neighborhood and region



References and Additional Resources

Articles

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Websites

- Promising Practices in Afterschool—<http://www.afterschool.org/programs.cfm>
- The Afterschool Corporation—http://www.tascorp.org/toolbox/promising_practices
- Programs for Teens—http://www.childtrends.org/what_works/clarkwww/clarkwww_intro.asp
- Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development—<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/>
- National Youth Leadership Council—http://www.nylc.org/resource_center.cfm

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Established in 1998 as an initiative of United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, CYD provides training and technical assistance to improve the quality and build the capacity of youth programs. It also helps communities organize their human, institutional and financial resources to provide youth with an array of developmental supports and opportunities to succeed in life.

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Fostering Positive Youth Development



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