

The Role of Adults in Youth Development Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Adults can play an important role in youth development programs. The impact of youth-adult relationships can last beyond the time spent in a program (Bocarro and Witt, 2005). The Search Institute (2010) says non-parental adults can help provide the supports, boundaries, and expectations critical to positive youth development. Rutter (1987) called non-parent adults the most common protective factor in helping young people be resilient in difficult life circumstances.

While adults are critical to the success of youth programs, the young people themselves must be full participants in program development, execution, management, and leadership. Involvement promotes youths' positive development. The key is to create a balance between youth-driven or adult-driven programs so young people can benefit from working with adults, but also be empowered to develop their own abilities.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. Adults should help cultivate youth input.
2. Adults should provide structure and monitoring.
3. Adults should empower youth to do more than they think is possible.
4. Adults should know their own personality traits and how those traits can promote or discourage positive youth development.
5. Adults should promote positive youth development through their words and actions.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

Adults should help cultivate youth input (Walker and Larson, 2004).

For youth to feel they have ownership of a program, they need opportunities to give and receive input about the program. Non-parental adults are key players in facilitating this process. Listening (Larson et al., 2005), responding positively, and regularly implementing youths' ideas can cultivate this environment. When youth feel they are being heard and taken seriously, they engage more in programs and are more likely to benefit.

Adults should provide structure and monitoring (Walker and Larson, 2004).

Adults should set up guidelines and structure for activities in the youth program, and then monitor the activities (Walker and Larson, 2004). Providing structure gives young people the freedom to complete the tasks in their own way, while enabling adults to provide guidance. Monitoring helps youth stay on track, and encourages and provides assistance when requested. For example, asking questions can help raise practical issues for young people to think about, but still leaves the responsibility for addressing the issues with the young participants (Larson, Walker, and Pearce, 2005).

Adults should empower youths to do more than they think is possible (Walker and Larson, 2004).

Adults should emphasize the potential in young people (Walker and White, 1998), and create expectations that motivate youth to rise to their potential. This requires adolescents to move out of their comfort zone and try out new roles and ideas (Walker and Larson, 2004). Cargo, et al. (2003) suggest that adults can empower youth by providing a welcoming environment where young people can try out these new roles and ideas and be supported whether they fail or succeed. Even failure can sow the seeds for future success.

Adults should know their own personality traits and how those traits can promote or discourage positive youth development.

Some adults seem to have a natural way with youth, while others have to work at it. McLaughlin, Irby and Langman (1994) referred to individuals with natural skills as “wizards,” and identified five traits common among them (McLaughlin et al., 1994; Walker and White, 1998). Wizards see young people as what they can be, make the individual their priority, empower themselves and others, are genuine, and are motivated to help their communities. Organizations need these natural leaders, and also must offer staff training to help adult youth workers improve their skills and abilities to interact with youth.

Adults should promote positive youth development through their words and actions (Bocarro and Witt, 2005).

Youth programs need a clear and well-developed philosophy that guides program development and presentation (Larson et al., 2005). Adult youth workers should know, understand, and implement this philosophy. Their role as practitioners or volunteers is to achieve the goal related to them by the program officials through their words and actions. Intentionality requires planning, organizing, and evaluating to ensure that program goals are being achieved through developmental relationships (Bocarro and Witt, 2005). Adults can establish developmental relationships by creating multifaceted and flexible, hands-on, committed and consistent, patient and empathetic, mutually caring, and respectful relationships with young people (Bocarro and Witt, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Adults can play many roles in youth development programs. Program developers must decide what their youth development philosophy is and how it will be woven into the framework of the program. Is it youth-driven, adult-driven, or somewhere in between? What roles will adults play? What roles will the youth play? Once this issue is addressed, programs need to train adult leaders and volunteers on program philosophy and practices. For the greatest developmental impact, adults should provide support, empowerment, opportunities, boundaries, and structure for young participants. When adults understand their role in a program, they are more effective in working toward the intended goal, and youths will benefit. Through activities and interactions with caring adults, youths acquire assets that protect them from participating in high-risk behaviors and promote their chances of thriving (Scales, Benson, and Mannes, 2006). They also learn how to participate in their communities (Serido et al., 2009), which can lead them to become better citizens.

AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

Additional research is needed on practical ways to implement research-based strategies regarding adult roles in youth development programs. A list of ideas for adults participating at each level of program on the youth-driven/adult-driven continuum could provide practitioners with ideas to implement.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Youth Development Research Project, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at <http://youthdev.illinois.edu/index.htm> . This website contains a collection of research articles related to youth development.

Please share your thoughts about this research brief at <http://bit.ly/YDIresources>

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