



# Module 2: Physical and Psychological Safety Fact Sheet

## Research Overview

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Youth programs that are both physically and psychologically safe help to provide settings where youth can maximize learning new skills, engagement in enjoyable activities, and development of positive personal characteristics and relationships. Youth program settings are characterized as physically safe when the program activities are housed in facilities that are health-promoting (e.g., no lead paint or lead in the water) and youth are at no or low risk to sustain injuries (e.g., no fighting among peers). Youth programs are characterized as psychologically safe when youth workers and administrators create an environment that increases positive and respectful peer and adult interactions while limiting confrontational and aggressive interactions (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The importance of safety in youth programs has significant agreement in the field of positive youth development (Vance, 2010), and there is recognition that ensuring safety for all youth in youth programs is a core competency expected of youth workers and program directors (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004). The developmental assets model of youth development (Benson, 2002; Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011) considers safety as part of the assets youth need to thrive. As such, creating environments that enable youth to feel physically and psychologically safe allows them to improve their internal assets (e.g., self-esteem, academic achievement, and social skills; Benson, 2006). Specifically, higher reports of psychological safety among adolescents in a youth program were related to more reports of adolescents indicating they had learned social skills in that program (Lee, Borden, Serido, & Perkins, 2009). Also, safe environments can positively contribute to individuals' sense of self as aspects of their identity are defined, in part, by others who share their physical space (Prince, 2014). Overall, youth report feeling safe in youth programs where youth workers build trust and supportive relationships, when youth are not concerned about physical or psychological harm, and where youth are able to have fun and learn (e.g., Daud & Carruthers, 2008).

## Elements of Physical and Psychological Safety

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Youth programs promote physical and psychological safety by having secure and health-promoting facilities and practices. They also promote these kinds of safety by encouraging positive and appropriate peer interactions while discouraging risky health practices and confrontational social situations (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003). Youth workers who create physically and psychologically safe environments do so by

- Preventing bullying
- Offering alternative models for positive social interactions and solving differences
- Managing conflict between youth following clear policies and procedures
- Ensuring that program facilities are structurally safe and well-maintained

## Implications for Youth Programs

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To create a *physically* safe environment in youth programs, the following issues should be considered:

- Do all youth workers understand policies regarding safety and have training to deal with issues of safety?
- Is the building where the program will be held safe and secure?
- Is there current insurance for program and facility needs?
- Do youth workers know where electric plugs, power cords, etc. are located?
- Are youth and youth workers given information on how to respond in the event of an emergency (e.g., fire drills, exit strategies, basic first aid, etc.)?
- Are all activities using safe materials?
- Are there first aid kits and water available at all times?
- Is there regular maintenance of the facility?

**To build a *psychologically safe environment* in youth programs, the following issues should be considered:**

- How do youth and youth workers demonstrate respect for each other?
- How is conflict managed in a positive and methodical way?
- What measures are in place to encourage youth and youth workers to use empathic and considerate language?
- How is youth inclusivity supported during program times?
- How are positive relationships modeled to youth? How do youth workers demonstrate respect to and regard for youth's families and community members?
- In what ways specifically does the program foster a safe, nurturing environment for youth?
- How do youth and youth workers collaborate to eliminate bullying and promote psychological safety?

**To promote organizational practices within youth programs that address physical and psychological safety, the following issues should be considered:**

- What policies are in place to ensure safety guidelines are followed?
- What is the continuous improvement plan to assess how well safety guidelines are implemented and achieved in the youth program?
- What youth program certification requirement trainings and other professional development opportunities are available for staff in areas of physical and psychological safety?
- How do the youth travel safely to and from the program?
- What kinds of check-in and check-out procedures do youth workers use to ensure youth are present and accounted for before, during, and after activities?
- Does the youth program utilize safety equipment such as helmets, safety gloves, etc.?
- Are youth workers CPR and First Aid Certificate holders, as determined by state licensing requirements?

**For a complete discussion of this topic and a full list of references, see the topic paper by the same name.**



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