



Module 3: Supportive Relationships Fact Sheet

Research Overview

Supportive relationships with caring adults are vital for youth as they navigate obstacles and changes during their transition to adulthood and develop the competencies necessary to become well-adjusted, self-sufficient young adults (Arnett, 2000; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson & Tran, 2014). Indeed, supportive non-parental adult relationships can foster resilience to mitigate the negative effects of stressors encountered by youth and provide youth with an array of opportunities for positive development and growth (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Grossman & Bulle, 2006). Youth can form supportive relationships in a number of different contexts and with people in a range of capacities (e.g., teachers, coaches, extended family).

Many programs that focus on providing youth with opportunities to build supportive relationships have shown positive youth development outcomes across a wide range of competency domains.

Youth programs provide an ideal context for such relationships, especially given that programs encourage youth workers to be accessible nurturing mentors and role models for youth (Catalano et al., 2004; Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbreton, 2008). Within youth programs, supportive relationships are defined as relationships between youth participating in programs and non-parental adult staff or volunteers working with youth. Many programs that focus on providing youth with opportunities to build supportive relationships have shown positive youth development outcomes across a wide range of competency domains (e.g., emotional, behavioral, social, academic; Brady, Dolan, & Canavan, 2015; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2007; Jekielik, Moore, & Hair, 2002). In fact, youth program participants with the highest relationship quality with youth workers display more positive developmental outcomes than those with lower quality relationships (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Clearly, the quality of the relationships that youth workers and youth form have tremendous influence upon youth and their positive development.

Elements of Supportive Relationships

There are several elements of supportive relationships that youth workers should strive to foster in order to ensure high-quality interactions with youth, including the following:

- Trusting, caring, and genuine
- Safe and accepting
- Reciprocal or mutually beneficial
- Consistent and long-lasting
- Attuned and compatible
- Attentive and individualized
- Tailored to the youth's needs

Implications for Youth Programs

In order to promote supportive relationships between youth and youth workers, the following strategies should be considered regarding program activities:

- Provide youth workers with regular opportunities to develop and model effective communication skills with youth
- Maintain low ratios of youth to youth workers to allow for individualized attention
- Foster support for youth-adult partnerships through shared decision-making and collaboration
- Highlight youth and youth workers' mutual interests to help strengthen relationships
- Include opportunities for youth workers to provide multiple types of support (e.g., emotional support, guidance or teaching, connecting with opportunities)
- Offer opportunities for youth workers to provide scaffolding for youth tasks

To build caring, supportive relationships with youth, the following approaches may be useful for youth workers:

- Provide clear expectations for mutual respect and valuing of shared ideas and opinions
- Include intentional periods of unscheduled time during youth programs to allow for informal socializing and relationship development
- Show genuine interest in connecting with youth and building relationships
- Maintain long-term relationships with youth, considering close, trusting relationships with youth are built over time
- Engage in ongoing training and education to increase skills important for building supportive relationships with youth (e.g., active listening, conflict resolution, cooperation)
- Display consistent expectations and behaviors over time in order to promote trust
- Carefully attend to youth and respond flexibly to youth's needs

Organizational practices that provide the best opportunities for building supportive relationships in youth programs include the following:

- Recruit youth workers with the skills necessary to build strong, supportive youth relationships
- Employ a diverse staff with whom youth can identify in terms of culture, gender, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation
- Create mentorship opportunities for new youth workers to learn from experienced youth workers about building supportive relationships
- Provide youth workers with continual supervision and coaching to assist with problems in relationships with youth and to encourage continuous skill development
- In order to retain high-quality employees, offer youth workers competitive salaries and benefits, professional development opportunities, and rewards for talent and hard work
- To reduce staff burnout, avoid long hours and heavy workloads for youth workers
- Foster a program culture that emphasizes building supportive relationships

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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