



Module 4: Opportunities to Belong Fact Sheet

Research Overview

There are psychological and emotional experiences, such as perceptions of belonging and connectedness, that play a role in youth's involvement in programs' environment, relationships, and activities. Belonging has been defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Based on theories of belonging within the context of attachment, Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed two features of the need to belong as part of their belongingness hypothesis: the need for frequent personal interactions with others and the need for a relationship or bond that includes stability, emotional concern, and maintenance into the future. The need to belong is based on an intrinsic motivating force (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014) and this force can create a sense of belonging or connectedness to a group. Among youth programs, one of the goals is to provide opportunities for youth to feel a sense of belonging with peers, youth workers, and the youth program.

Among youth programs, one of the goals is to provide opportunities for youth to feel a sense of belonging with peers, youth workers, and the youth program.

A reoccurring theme in the literature is the relationship between belonging and youth participation or attendance in a youth program (e.g., Hensley, Place, Jordan, & Israel, 2007). Specifically, how often youth attended a youth program in a month was positively associated with self-reports of belonging. Also, youth worker practices that were viewed as welcoming (e.g., being friendly with youth) were positively related to youth's sense of belonging (Akiva, Cortina, Eccles, & Smith, 2013). Further, a sense of belonging has been positively linked to youth's sense of social responsibility (the belief about respecting the rights of others), engaging in adaptive behaviors, and avoiding maladaptive behaviors while in a youth program (McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, 2013). Programs that engage youth in experiences that actively contribute to their communities and neighborhoods may increase youth's connection to the youth program itself (Borden & Serido, 2009). In summary, through a combination of activities, social interactions with peers, and interpersonal interactions with youth workers, youth programs are well-suited to help fulfill youth's need to belong and foster positive youth development.

Elements of Opportunities to Belong

A successful youth program has multiple features and characteristics that provide opportunities to enhance youth's sense of belonging and connectedness. Feeling connected to or a sense of belonging within an environment is a bidirectional process in that it includes feeling cared for by individuals in the environment as well as caring about those same individuals. Youth programs that create opportunities to belong consist of

- Social interactions and active engagement with youth in programming so they feel connected
- Diverse activities that allow a wide range of youth the opportunity to find activities they can invest in and build new skills
- An environment where trusting peer and adult relationships promote inclusion and acceptance

Implications for Youth Programs

To create opportunities to belong in youth programs, the following suggestions are offered:

- Involve youth in defining the overall culture of the program and direction of the activities to help them feel more connected and invested in the implementation and outcomes of programming
- Assess youth's strengths as they begin the youth program so that youth workers can develop activities that tap those strengths and increase the likelihood of their connection to the program
- Create programming focused on team-building and inclusion to help youth feel a sense of belonging to their peers and youth workers
- Offer routine seminars and workshops for youth workers to build and maintain skills on connectedness so that they can connect with a diverse range of youth

To promote organizational practices within youth programs that address opportunities to belong, the following issues should be considered:

- What policies are in place to support youth workers' advance training on inclusion and diversity?
- What youth program certification trainings and other professional development opportunities are available for staff in areas of belonging and connectedness?
- What is the continuous improvement plan to assess how well opportunities to belong are achieved in the youth program?
- If a lack of opportunities to belong are found within the youth program, how are those gaps remedied?

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



This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through grant/cooperative agreement Award No. 2009-48667-05833 with The University of Minnesota.