



Module 6: Appropriate Structure Fact Sheet

Research Overview

Appropriate structure and supervision are important for the execution of the other features of high-quality youth programs such as safety, supportive relationships, and opportunities for skill-building (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Structure refers to the rules and expectations that regulate and govern participants' behaviors as well as how relationships and activities are arranged within the program (Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Vest Ettekal, & Okamoto, 2017). Features of highly structured youth activities include participation schedules, rule-guided engagement, emphasis on skill development, and activities that require sustained attention (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Supervision is an aspect of the structure of a youth program and refers to monitoring youth's behaviors within the program setting and age-appropriate leadership and/or facilitation of youth's programming and activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Supervision can be provided by youth workers, administrators, youth's family, or community members (e.g., Brandt, 2016). Youth programs that have appropriate structure and supervision enable both youth and youth workers to better understand each other's roles within the program and improve their ability to work collaboratively. Furthermore, structure and supervision are related in that the level of adult supervision helps to determine the amount of structure in the youth program.

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Supervision and structure within youth programs are based on research related to scaffolding (e.g., Bruner, 1975), parenting styles (e.g., Baumrind, 1967, 2005), and classroom structure and management within schools (e.g., Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Greater structure in youth programs (Gerstenblith, Soule, & Gottfredson, 2005; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000) and smaller group sizes for youth activities (Gottfredson & Cross, 2007) have been linked to fewer youth antisocial behaviors. Youth programs that were structured to intentionally teach life skills (e.g., healthy relationships, self-regulation) yielded more positive reports of program quality and higher reports of youth outcomes (e.g., prosocial values) than programs that were less structured in teaching life skills (Bean & Forneris, 2016). Youth workers tend to exercise more control (e.g., setting limits) when preparing for or during activities when their goals are to keep youth safe, meet deadlines, or avoid pragmatic problems (Larson, Izenstark, Rodriguez, & Perry, 2015). Overall, current literature suggests that sufficient structure and age-appropriate supervision are vital for youth programs, and without them, other characteristics of high-quality youth programs (e.g., safety, positive relationships, opportunities to belong, etc.) become less relevant (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Elements of Appropriate Structure and Supervision

A successful youth program incorporates various types of activity structures and age-appropriate supervision. That being said, structure and supervision will vary across youth programs as a result of differing objectives, goals, staffing, and demographics of the youth and families who attend the program (e.g., Simpkins et al., 2017). Youth programs that develop appropriate structure do so by considering the following:

- The amount of supervision needed for youth based on factors such as the number of youth in a program as well as youth's ages, skill-level, and activity goals
- The safety of the surrounding community where the youth program is located
- The mission and the goals of the youth program and the type of activities that help to achieve those goals
- Youth's current general knowledge and skills and the experiences youth programs can offer to increase youth's competencies

Implications for Youth Programs

To develop appropriate structure in youth programs, the following suggestions are offered:

- Implement activities with a variety of structures for youth at different knowledge and skill levels
- Create opportunities for youth workers and youth to work collaboratively to develop a balance between highly structured and less-structured activities
- Develop and post general rules and guidelines for youth program participation, including expectations that may be specific to certain activities (e.g., field trips)
- Incorporate a combination of youth-led and adult-led activities
- Offer youth-to-adult ratios that consider age-appropriate supervision needs for youth

To promote organizational practices within youth programs that address appropriate structure, the following issues should be considered:

- Ensure that policies are in place to support youth workers' advance training appropriate structure and supervision
- Advertise youth program certification trainings and other professional development opportunities available for staff in areas of program implementation
- Develop a continuous improvement plan to assess how developmentally and culturally relevant activities are and whether or not they contain appropriate structure and supervision
- Create strategies that ensure youth and youth workers are compliant with rules and guidelines

**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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