



Module 8: Opportunities for Skill Building Fact Sheet

Research Overview

Skill building is an individual's opportunity to cultivate certain skills by taking part in intentional learning activities (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Skill building is particularly important for youth as they learn to become independent and contributing members of society. Skills can traditionally be categorized into hard skills and soft skills (Laker & Powell, 2011). Hard skills (technical skills) are the specific expertise necessary to succeed in certain activities such as playing sports, cooking meals, or operating machines. Soft skills (interpersonal and intrapersonal skills), on the other hand, are the social and emotional abilities needed to interact with other people and manage oneself (e.g., leadership skills, problem solving skills). Both hard and soft skills are important for positive youth development.

It is important to integrate skill building into youth programs because skill building is related to numerous positive youth development outcomes such as good grades, good physical health, and good interpersonal relationships. Moreover, youth's motivation and engagement with youth programs are enhanced if they know that they will have the opportunity to develop skills that can benefit them now and in the future (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Theoretically, the best skills to teach youth in youth programs are the ones that are within youth's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), suit youth's individual strengths and interests (Gardner, 2013), and help youth to succeed in 21st century society and the job market (Binkley et al., 2012).

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21st Century Skills

The framework of 21st century skills provides guidelines for skills and abilities that are required for students to prepare for the 21st century job market and society (Binkley et al., 2012). Besides the fundamental subjects (e.g., English, science, and economics) and basic skills (reading, writing, and mathematics) traditionally taught in schools, the following skills are identified by education experts, employers, and academics as critical for both work and life success in the 21st century (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015):

- Learning and innovation skills
 - Creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and learning new information
- Information, media, and technology skills
 - Accessing and managing information, analyzing and using media, and mastering new technologies efficiently
- Life and career skills
 - Adaptability, self-motivation, accountability, leadership, and understanding of the society and different cultures

Implications for Youth Programs

The following approaches should be used to design program activities to promote opportunities for skill building in youth programs:

- Allocate sufficient time and energy to implementing skill-building objectives
- Involve youth in the decision-making process and let them choose skills that are the most interesting to them
- Integrate aspects of the 21st century skills framework into the curriculum to prepare youth for the future job market
- Assess learners' skill levels and offer them lessons according to their skill levels
- Provide skill-building activities in multiple formats (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic) in order to meet the learning styles of different youth
- Sequence the skill-building activities so that each step is built upon the preceding step logically
- Sustain learning results and minimize learning loss by revisiting materials as needed

In order to help youth build useful skills, youth workers could:

- Encourage youth to participate in skill-building activities that are offered by youth programs
- Explicitly explain what skills youth will acquire in the program and set clear learning goals
- Receive training in teaching in order to better facilitate the skill-building process
- Demonstrate and model effective hard and soft skills that they want youth to learn
- Build positive relationships with youth so that youth feel secure and supported
- Listen to youth's needs and opinions in terms of what skills they wish to learn and how to learn them
- Recognize youth's efforts and accomplishments
- Challenge youth to move beyond current level of competency and reach higher learning goals
- Pay special attention to youth who are having difficulty learning and ensure no one is left behind

Youth program leaders could consider the following strategies to increase programs' capacities to offer youth with opportunities for skill building:

- Intentionally integrate skill building into program curriculum
- Communicate with parents, teachers, and researchers to find out what skills are important for positive youth development
- Partner with community agencies so that more resources are available for youth skill building
- Provide youth workers with career development opportunities in order to foster their teaching, communicating, and leadership skills
- Recruit youth workers with desired skills so that they can demonstrate and model these skills to youth

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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