Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction
Introduction to Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development is an approach to youth programs that emphasizes the strengths of youth while considering their physical, mental, and social well-being. Program staff who practice a positive youth development approach believe that youth success requires not just the absence of problematic behavior but also the existence of healthy development.[1, 2, 3] Rather than intervening only when young people are at risk for engaging in problematic behaviors, program staff use a positive youth development approach to promote favorable behaviors and development by supporting the skills, interests, qualities, and abilities of all youth.[1, 4]

Program staff should also understand that youth live in a series of support systems. They are members of families, teams, clubs, and likely attend school. A youth program is most effective when it strengthens and collaborates with existing support systems.[3] Staff who practice positive youth development emphasize environmental rather than internal influences on development, working to alter systems that may promote positive and healthy youth development.[5]

High-quality youth programs support young people and enhance positive youth development by allowing youth to contribute to decisions that guide their lives, which empowers them to feel valued for who they are.[6] *It is important that this sense of empowerment and value extend to all youth within youth programs.*

There are eight features considered essential for a high-quality youth program:[7] (1) physical and psychological safety; (2) appropriate structure; (3) supportive relationships; (4) opportunities to belong; (5) positive social norms; (6) support for efficacy and mattering; (7) opportunities for skill building; and (8) integration of family, school, and community efforts. While all of these features contribute to the development of a youth program that is welcoming and safe for all youth, physical and psychological safety, opportunities to belong, and support for efficacy and mattering are the most critical and should be the focus when creating a welcoming and safe environment.[8]

> *Physical and psychological safety* are present in environments that are free from violence, bullying, harassment, and other threats to a young person's physical or psychological well-being.[7] Structurally-safe and well-maintained facilities are important for physical safety, and many programs have clear rules around bullying. However, youth who believe they are different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture need environments that offer models for positive social interactions to ensure their physical and emotional safety.[9, 10, 11]

> *Belonging* describes a young person's sense that they are accepted, included, and valued,[12] and a sense of belonging can come from interactions with other youth or adults.[13] This sense of belonging helps to build a sense of connection for the youth which is associated with positive outcomes like positive identity, improved self-esteem, and resilience.[14, 15, 16, 17]

Efficacy and mattering is the sense of purpose youth have when they believe their voices are being heard and that their contributions matter. Programs can support this sense of purpose by creating programs with experiences that contribute to this sense of purpose such as making decisions about activities and the environment and leading activities.[7, 18, 16] For youth who see themselves as different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture, this input is important. It builds a sense of belonging and safety.[19, 11, 20]