



Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction Program Structure

A program and environment where youth feel welcome and safe is intentionally structured to support positive peer relationships, foster cooperation between youth, involve youth on multiple levels, and create and expand opportunities for youth leadership. Let's explore each of these components of intentional program structure.

Supporting Peer Relationships

Positive peer interactions act as a buffer between negative experiences and undesired youth outcomes.²⁶ Facilitating positive experiences among youth is a critical element of creating a high-quality youth program that is safe and welcoming for all youth.³³ When youth are able to learn from one another, they develop a deeper understanding of others, which is a step toward preventing prejudiced behaviors.¹⁹ The results of positive peer relationships can also change how youth respond to bullying. Youth look to one another to decide how to respond to bullying, and in an environment where supportive peer relationships are the norm, youth feel empowered to stand up to bullies more often.²⁶ Also, when youth intervene, they can stop the bullying the majority of the time.⁴⁴

Strategies to Facilitate Positive Peer Relationships

- Teach:** Periodically teach problem and conflict resolution skills to youth through activities like role-playing and skits
- Model:** Model effective social skills such as positive reinforcement, listening to others, and waiting to speak
- Create:** Create opportunities for youth to share stories of their experiences with one another to support a sense of belonging, personal responsibility, and empowerment^{40, 29}
- Provide:** Provide opportunities for youth to try out new skills and offer constructive, respectful feedback to one another³⁹

Strategies to Support Youth Program Staff

- Teach:** Train them to lead youth in activities that teach them how to take direct positive action against bullying²⁶
- Train:** Train them on correction and redirection strategies for inappropriate behaviors
- Develop:** Develop clear expectations for youth behavior and train staff to understand how to implement them.



Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction

Program Structure

Fostering Cooperation

Collaborative activities that involve high levels of cooperation support positive youth relationships in a youth program. Collaborative activities do not emphasize competition or isolate youth.²⁹ Collaborative activities support youth working together toward a common goal, enhance youth involvement,⁴⁵ and promote relationships between youth from different backgrounds and circumstances.⁴⁶ These collaborative activities also increase the potential for youth to practice interpersonal skills and form friendships with one another, which increases youth's sense of belonging.¹⁹ Through collaborative activities, youth come to view each other more realistically rather than simply through stereotypes.¹⁹

As a short, stand-alone activity to help bring a group of youth together, or as an integrated component of a larger program, collaborative activities support interactions between youth.

Strategies to Foster Cooperation

Program staff may already be familiar with collaborative activities if they have ever led a team building exercise with a group of youth. This type of activity may be used as an icebreaker or as a way to get a group of youth to begin working together. To be successful, the group of youth must listen, respond, and plan together. Strategies for successfully using collaborative activities include the following:

- Develop:** Develop a variety of ways for youth to work together to meet common goals.^{19, 33, 20} For example, if the program centers on engineering, have the group build bridges out of newspaper or drinking straws. If the youth are interested in gardening, have the youth work together to build raised beds.
- Focus:** Ensure activities have a positive focus and do not involve judgment or winners and losers.¹⁹ Competitive activities put youth in a situation where they compare themselves with others and lead away from collaboration.
- Plan:** Ensure activities give equal status to all youth, regardless of the groups to which they belong.¹⁹

Multiple Levels of Youth Participation

Flexibility regarding the type of activities presented to youth and the ways they can be involved in those activities is important for high-quality, inclusive youth programs that provide a safe and welcoming space for all youth.²⁰ Developing activities that allow youth to participate in multiple ways and at multiple levels provides appropriate structure for a wide range of youth.⁸ This type of structure promotes increased participation and a sense of ownership for youth, which leads to a greater sense of belonging and confidence in youth that their preferences are understood and have an impact.^{45, 8} Youth participation and sense of ownership is strongly associated with program quality and can be used to



Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction Program Structure

measure the quality of the experience of youth in the program.⁴⁷ In addition, youth participation and sense of ownership is associated with greater positive impacts of youth programs.³³ A program that offers this flexibility to its youth participants offers multiple activity options at the same time.

Strategies to help develop Multiple Levels of Youth Participation

The development of youth participation on multiple levels within a youth program can be supported through these strategies:

- Plan:** Provide choice and flexibility to youth whenever possible.^{33, 20} Accomplish this by creating programs and activities with different roles in mind. Be sure to include leadership roles, participant roles, and observer roles to give youth options.^{45, 8}
- Offer:** Offer multiple activities simultaneously, making sure youth roles vary from activity to activity,⁸ and develop a set of strategies to encourage youth to participate and activities that interest different groups of youth.³⁶
- Train:** Train youth program staff to give instructions and directions in multiple ways for youth who may not be able to follow or understand certain formats.⁴⁵
- Respond:** Train youth program staff to be aware of youth who seem on the fringes of activities and to ask those youth how they would like to participate.²²
- Listen:** Develop systems for youth to provide feedback to get ideas on how to improve the program and their experiences.¹⁸

In addition to the strategies outlined in each section, program managers and trainers should reflect on how positive peer relationships, cooperation between youth, and youth involvement on multiple levels work together to create an intentional program structure that supports all youth.

Workshops related to Program Structure

Activity Planning 101

Really understanding which programs and activities are popular and why will help program staff to further expand and tailor the program for all youth and groups within the program.

Activity Planning 201

Competition pits youth against each other and may breakdown empathy and support between youth. Designing programs that have youth working together for the same goal can be a challenge. Identifying youth who may not interact on a regular basis and finding ways to have them combine their efforts is a challenge for every youth program staff.