



Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

Supportive adult-youth relationships are an important component of youth programs and critical for those programs that want to create a welcoming and safe environment. Supportive adult-youth relationships help youth achieve better physical, mental, and family health.^{33, 29, 30, 31, 32} When long-lasting, these relationships cushion youth against many of the negative influences and high-risk behaviors they navigate daily by reinforcing their sense of belonging, physical and psychological safety, and perception that they can make a contribution that matters.^{34, 15, 35, 36} Youth programs are ideal settings for youth to establish relationships with adults other than their parents.

Often the visible indication of a supportive relationship is the response program staff have to youth, particularly when staff witness discrimination, harassment, or bullying. Program staff indicate their support through consistent responses to inappropriate language, behavior, and bullying.^{38, 22}

Staff should keep an open mind during all interactions with youth, paying special attention to those who see themselves as different due to social class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship, race, ethnicity, or culture. Program staff should be willing to learn from youth and to be sensitive to their values and those of their families, working to bridge any differences or conflicts.⁶

Working with any population of youth offers opportunities for a wide variety of interactions and youth program staff need to know how to leverage all interactions, especially the negative ones, into positive outcomes.

Characteristics of Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

Supportive adult-youth relationships are important because they help young people recover quickly from difficulties in their lives and lessen the negative effects of stressors they may encounter.

In order for an adult-youth relationship to be considered high quality and supportive, certain characteristics should be considered.

Consider if the relationships are

- Trusting, caring, and genuine
- Safe and accepting
- Reciprocal or mutually beneficial
- Consistent and long-lasting
- Attuned and compatible
- Attentive and individualized
- Tailored to the youth's needs

Strategies for Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

Train. Train staff on how to create and maintain supportive adult-youth relationships.



Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

- Ensure.** Ensure staff understand the benefits of supportive adult-youth relationships on youths' development.
- Establish.** Establish and enforce clear boundaries for adult-youth relationships (i.e., invitations to parties, to connect via social media, etc.).
- Create.** Create a group where youth program staff can seek out advice or assistance from each other when they are unsure of how to address certain situations or support certain youth.²⁷
- Respond.** Train staff on how to respond to bullying; negative and rude language; verbal or physical aggression; youth viewing inappropriate material online; and youth with cognitive, social, physical, or emotional delays and immaturity or withdrawal.
- Discuss.** Periodically discuss and answer questions about the populations represented within the youth program.

Workshops related to Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

Using Relational Strategies

It is not always clear how to establish a supportive adult-youth relationship. That is because relationships between individuals develop differently. Program staff should try to grow positive, trusting relationships with youth through intentional investments of time and through interactions called *relational strategies*.

Understanding Developmental Levels

Youth develop through four major areas of development: physical, social, emotional, and intellectual (cognitive). Understanding the developmental levels of youth helps us understand why youth interact the way they do in many situations. Growth in these areas can vary from youth to youth, and our understanding of them can help us anticipate how youth interact and react to daily situations.

Responding to Bullying

Bullying is intentional behavior that is unkind, cruel, or malicious. It involves an imbalance of power between youth and is repeated over time. Program staff need to be able to recognize and respond to bullying consistently within the program.

Responding to Put-Downs

Language is a powerful tool in helping to make a program feel welcoming and safe for all youth, and program staff need to recognize speech from youth and adults that degrades or puts down individuals or groups. These remarks could be racist, sexist, homophobic, or demeaning.



Youth Inclusion Facilitator Instruction

Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

Responding to Questions

In a supportive adult-youth relationship, youth may ask program staff questions about controversial or sensitive topics. These conversations may focus on current events or private events in the youth's life. Being prepared to hear the youth's concerns and respond is an important role for youth program staff.

Supporting LGBTQ Youth

LGBTQ youth are particularly susceptible to discrimination and may feel less safe in a variety of environments. In addition, they are more likely to have been bullied or harassed than non-LGBTQ youth. It is important for program staff to be supportive of all youth.

Suicide

Program staff need to be trained on how to respond to a youth who reveals thoughts of suicide.