



Youth Inclusion Workshop Guide: Managing Difficult Communication

Workshop Description: This workshop guide includes interactive activities exploring techniques for effectively communicating with youth's upset or misinformed parent, guardian, etc. These skills are vital for communicating pertinent program information, rules, or values to parents in a respectful manner.

Preparation Time: The designated preparation time for this workshop is approximately 15 to 20 minutes. This time allocation takes into account the background reading on the Youth Inclusion Training website, the background information in this module, collecting materials, and gathering any additional information you may need.

Instruction Time: It will take approximately 50 minutes to 1 hour to complete all activities within this guide.

Materials:

- Printed copies of the handout, *Role Playing Scenarios* (enough copies for each staff member)
- Printed copies of the handout, *Confidentiality Worksheet* (enough copies for each staff member)
- Two large blank white sheets of paper or a whiteboard
- Markers and pens (enough for each staff member)

Preparation Instructions: You should read the content related to this topic on the Youth Inclusion Training website, especially pertaining to Community and Communication. In addition, you should review the background information in this module and any others related to the topic (e.g., Print and Electronic Communication and Social Media). Finally, gather the necessary materials and familiarize yourself with both the worksheet and the scenarios. It may be helpful to brainstorm some talking points regarding what effective and ineffective strategies for handling difficult communication scenarios look like.

Knowledge: Understanding Strategies for Managing Difficult Communication

Not all questions are answered through print or electronic communication. Youth program staff should be prepared to respond to concerned, unhappy, upset, or misinformed adults. These adults may be parents or guardians, concerned community members, or even organizational leaders. Prepared program staff are advocates for all youth in the program. Prepare staff by coaching them in the following techniques:

Check the Attitude. When approached by an upset parent, guardian, or other adult, staff should be careful to model how they want the other adult to act and not mirror the upset parent's behavior. Mirroring happens when a person subconsciously imitates the gestures, attitudes, and speech of another. Defensive language and behavior will only further agitate an upset parent. Instead, stay calm, show compassion, and try to take the upset parent's perspective. Staff should understand that parents have their child's



best interests in mind. To help staff with this technique, they should imagine how they would like to be treated if they were upset. Staff should remember the parent or guardian is not necessarily upset with them but something else in the program and that this interaction is likely not personal.

Listen and Agree. Youth program staff need to make the time to listen to parents and to send signals that they are receiving the feedback. If youth are present, move the discussion to a more private location. Allow the upset adult to tell you everything they need to say. Try not to interrupt them as this appears to be a defensive act. Indicate you are listening by maintaining eye contact and providing non-verbal signals such as nodding, taking notes, etc. Listening to the parent's concerns is a sign of respect and may help to diffuse any tension, allowing for calmer discussions and conversations.

Staff can and should agree that there is an issue to resolve. Agreeing there is an issue does not indicate the parent or guardian is right, only that there is an issue and that it should be resolved.

Sort the Issue. One of the best techniques staff can learn is how to sort the issue. If the problem is about the facility, rules, and systems, or other areas out of staff's control, they should immediately refer the upset parent or guardian to the program manager.

However, if the issue is about an activity plan, group rules, or some other part of the program under the direct control of the program staff, they should provide a simple and clear explanation about it and how it supports program values regarding making the environment a welcoming place for all youth. Youth program staff should make this explanation without being defensive. If the parent or guardian is not satisfied, refer them to the program manager.

Defending Youth. Sometimes an upset or concerned parent will disagree with a rule or system and use that disagreement as a pretense to attack youth in the program. In this case, simply sorting the issue as being a topic out of staff's control will undermine the trust and respect that staff need to maintain positive adult-youth relationships. Instead, the staff should first explain the rules, system, or other topic to the parent as well as why it is important and how it benefits all youth in the program. After this, the youth program staff should refer the parent to the program manager for further clarification.

Protecting the Youth's Confidentiality. Youth program staff should be trained to know the difference between privileged communication and information that they are required to report (e.g., intent to harm self or others). There are two outcomes for youth program staff in understanding this distinction. First, it is a critical component of developing trusting adult-youth relationships and maintaining safe environments for all youth. If staff disclose privileged communication, youth will no longer trust the adult to keep these confidences and will disengage from activities.²⁴ Second, understanding the line between privileged information and information that youth program staff are



required to report helps staff to form responses to parents or other stakeholders who may have concerns about program values. Being able to articulate how the adult-youth relationship supports positive youth development will help most parents understand why staff cannot reveal private discussions with their child.

Youth program managers should support clear understanding of the line between privileged communication and mandated reporting by training staff to understand what they can and cannot share with parents and by clearly articulating the rule in both print and electronic media.

Time Away. No one should have to take verbal abuse whether that is in the form of inappropriate, hateful, or angry language from a parent. If a parent or guardian refuses to discuss an issue civilly, youth program staff should refuse to discuss further until the parent has calmed down. A short cool down period where the staff leaves the parent for a short time or a longer period where the staff schedules a meeting for another day or time can be effective ways of giving parents space to gain control.

Objectives:

- Develop communication strategies for responding to and communicating with parents, guardians, concerned community members, organizational leaders, etc.
- Understand the differences between youth’s confidential information and information that staff are required to report.
- Learn how to develop a trusting staff-youth relationship while maintaining a safe environment for youth.

Introduction (5-7 minutes):

- Introduce the topic of effective communication strategies to use in difficult situations and the importance of confidentiality.
 - Facilitators can introduce the topic by saying “Today we are going to talk about how to respond to an individual who is concerned, upset, or misinformed, such as youth’s parents or guardians. Also, there are important distinctions between what can and should be shared with a parent, guardian, etc. and what is considered to be confidential.”
- Transition into the Prior Knowledge activity by briefly outlining the importance of listening, agreeing, remaining calm and modeling how you would like the other adult to act (mirroring), defending youth, and sorting out the issue respectfully.

Prior Knowledge (5-7 minutes):

- Ask the staff what strategies for managing conflict they know about already (they can be both things you should and should not do). Write down staff responses on either a whiteboard (if available) or a blank sheet of white paper.



- Questions can be phrased as follows: “What do you think are effective ways to deal with conflict, specifically conflict that involves interacting with someone who is unhappy, upset, or misinformed?” A follow-up question could be “What are some ineffective methods of handling conflict?”
- Ask the staff what they think would be considered confidential information. If responses are not applicable to youth programs, then you can rephrase the question as follows: “What information can you share with a parent and what kind of information can you not?” Another question could be “Is there any kind of information that you can think of that you would be required to report?” Write staff’s responses on a separate sheet of paper or space on the whiteboard.
- Ask the staff what they still want to know about this topic or if there is anything they need clarification on. Again, write staff responses on a sheet of paper.

Activities:

Activity: *Role Playing* (30 minutes)

- Describe the *Role Playing* activity:
 - What to say: “We are going to do an activity that illustrates some effective techniques to use when talking to a concerned adult about youth or the program.”
- Lead the *Role Playing* activity:
 - Introduce this portion of the workshop by first splitting the staff into smaller groups of two or three. Assign each group one of the scenarios. The scenarios include:
 - Check the Attitude, Listen and Agree, Sort the Issue, Defending Youth, Protecting Youth’s Confidentiality, and Time Away
 - Handout: The *Role Playing* activity scenarios are located at the end of this workshop guide.
 - Explain to the groups that they are to read the scenario that was given to them and decide who will be the adult and who will be the program staff. Each group will then make a short 1 to 2 minute skit based on the scenario and how the staff responds to the adult.
 - Each scenario will indicate whether the staff’s response should be effective or ineffective. The skit should be developed accordingly.
 - Allow the staff approximately 15 minutes to come up with a skit and practice a few times.
 - Bring all the groups back together and have them perform their skit in front of the larger group
 - After each skit, have the audience answer these questions:
 - “What was the problem that needed to be solved?”
 - “What was effective/ineffective about the communication?”
 - “Can you think of any other communication strategies that could have worked?”



Activity: *Confidentiality* (15 minutes)

- Describe the *Confidentiality* activity:
 - What to say: “Now we are going to discuss the guidelines regarding the kind of information you as program staff can share and what information you are required to report.”
- Lead the *Confidentiality* activity:
 - Hand out a Confidentiality Worksheet and a pen to each staff member.
 - Provide instructions for the worksheet:
 - The worksheet includes a list of either scenarios or pieces of information. In the left column, mark whether or not you believe you can share that information with parents with an S for share, or mark with a C if you think it should be kept confidential. If you think that the information listed requires mandated reporting, mark it with an M.
 - Allow about 5 minutes for staff to fill out the worksheet, although staff may not need this much time. You can gauge a stopping point based on when it looks like the majority of individuals are finished.
 - Come back together as a whole group and discuss responses to each question.
 - For discussion of the worksheet, go through each question and have staff raise their hand if they put either S, C, or M and then ask for a volunteer from each response group to explain their answer.

Reflection and Recap (5 minutes):

- Return to the staff’s responses gathered at the start of the workshop (see Prior Knowledge activity). Ask the staff what they learned during the course of the workshop and record the information on the same paper or a new blank page if there is no room. Draw attention to topics that were on the list generated earlier, new topics, and questions that were answered.
- Ask follow-up questions, such as “What part of the activity made you realize that?”

Resources:

Handout: *Role Playing Scenarios*

Worksheet: *Confidentiality*

Instructional Aid: *Confidentiality – Answer Key*

Sources:

Footnotes in this document can be found as references within the Youth Inclusion Implementation Guide at http://reach.umn.edu/inclusion/pdf/Youth_Inclusion_Implementation_Manual.pdf

Questions for Confidentiality worksheet were adapted from National Afterschool Alliance. (2009, January). National Afterschool Alliance Code of Ethics. Retrieved August 18, 2018, from <http://naaweb.org/images/NAACodeofEthics.pdf>



Youth Inclusion Handout: Role Playing Scenarios

Directions: Cut between each scenario on the dotted line and distribute per instructions as part of the Managing Difficult Communications Workshop.

Scenario: A parent approaches you at the end of the day, upset because they feel like their child isn't getting anything out of the program and that the program is a waste of time. They also want to know why their child isn't interacting with the other children more.

- ❖ Response: Listen and Agree. Staff should send signals that they are receiving feedback from the parent.

Scenario: A legal guardian approaches you yelling about a situation that took place regarding their child and another youth in the program. The two youth got into a minor fight, and the parent is furious about how this happened. They are yelling in front of other program staff and youth.

- ❖ Response: Check the Attitude. Model how you want the adult to act (mirroring). Avoid defensive language and behavior; stay calm and show compassion.

Scenario: A parent approaches you regarding a specific activity their child participated in under your oversight. Their concern is that the activity promotes too much competition in a way that puts their child at a disadvantage compared to the other children (e.g., a sports/physically oriented activity and their child struggles with sports).

- ❖ Response: Sort the Issue. Provide a simple explanation about why the activity is the way it is and how it supports the program in making the environment a welcoming place for youth.



Youth Inclusion Handout: Role Playing Scenarios

Scenario: An issue is brought to your attention regarding facility rules where your program is hosted. The concerned parent is adamant that this facility isn't safe and that the program should be hosted elsewhere.

- ❖ Response: Sort the Issue. Refer the parent/guardian to the program manager because the source conflict is out of your control.

Scenario: An upset and concerned parent disagrees with the fact that youth can't work individually on STEM/academic activities and is using this as a pretense to attack another child in the program. They are saying that the other youth is not intelligent and holding their child back.

- ❖ Response: Defending Youth. Explain the rules and system of the program to the parent, why it is important, and how it benefits all youth. Then refer the parent to the program manager for further clarification.

Scenario: You are receiving verbal abuse from a parent that is completely inappropriate, inaccurate, and includes hateful language. How do you respond?

- ❖ Response: Time Away. If a parent/guardian refuses to discuss the matter civilly, you should refuse to discuss the matter further until they have calmed down.



Youth Inclusion Worksheet: Confidentiality

Directions: Mark the following statements regarding confidentiality as either True or False (in your role as program staff).

- _____ 1. Only report child abuse or neglect when you have physical proof.
- _____ 2. Share information with families that help them understand the youth's growth.
- _____ 3. Any data provided by the youth about the program is private.
- _____ 4. Share information regarding a youth to someone who is not their guardian or caretaker.
- _____ 5. Written records regarding youth are considered private and should be treated as such.
- _____ 6. You do not have to involve families in significant decisions involving their youth.



Youth Inclusion Instructional Aid: Confidentiality – Answer Key

Key:

- F 1. Only report child abuse or neglect when you have physical proof.
- T 2. Share information with families that help them understand the youth's growth.
- T 3. Any data provided by the youth about the program is private.
- F 4. Share information regarding a youth to someone who is not their guardian or caretaker.
- T 5. Written records regarding youth are considered private and should be treated as such.
- F 6. You do not have to involve families in significant decisions involving their youth.