



Youth Inclusion Workshop Guide: Responding to Youth's Questions

Workshop Description: This workshop is a guide aimed at developing the necessary skills for being able to respond to controversial and sensitive topics. Among these skills are knowing what is controversial, what factors make issues controversial, and how to respond empathetically, all while setting a good example for youth.

Preparation Time: Preparation time for this workshop is approximately 15 to 20 minutes, which includes the background readings on the Youth Inclusion Training website, the background information in this workshop guide, collecting materials, and gathering any additional information you may need.

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

Materials:

- Sticky notes (several for each participant).
- Three large labels: "Hot," "Cold," and "Lukewarm."
- Blank wall space to hang the three labels.
- Notecards.
- Pens.
- Two large blank white sheets of paper or a whiteboard.

Preparation Instructions: You should read the content related to this topic on the Youth Inclusion Training website, specifically the content related to Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships. In addition, you should review the background information in this guide and any others related to the topic (e.g., Using Relational Strategies, Developmental Levels and Inclusion, etc.). Finally, gather the necessary materials and familiarize yourself with the activities. It may be helpful to brainstorm some responses and talking points for each of the discussions.

Knowledge: Understanding Strategies to Respond to Youth Questions

In supportive adult-youth relationships, youth may ask program staff questions about controversial or sensitive topics. There are strategies staff can take to prepare for this eventuality.

Approach the Topic. Program staff should take time to be familiar with the issues youth are facing. If the latest concern is teen suicide, then staff should understand how this issue is viewed in the community by youth, adults, school staff, etc. Understanding the issue will help the staff to be prepared to answer questions.

Words Matter. Youth, like adults, naturally notice the differences between people. They notice differences in the way people talk, look, act, etc. To deny it is to attempt to avoid the issues and tension these differences could create. Staff should be prepared to discuss uncomfortable topics with youth. Below are some basic strategies for entering these kinds of conversations:



Only share the facts. Do not rely on what you believe to be true. Know it is true before you share information, or tell the youth you do not know and suggest that you find the answers together.³⁶

Clearly answer the questions youth have. Think before you speak, and do not omit main points because they are uncomfortable or awkward.

Use language that is accurate, respectful, and age appropriate. Review the workshop titled Developmental Levels and Inclusion for more information about what is age appropriate. A good rule of thumb is when youth stop asking questions, it is time to stop providing information because they need time to process the information you have shared.

Build Empathy. Empathy is the ability to think about things from another person's point of view and the ability to recognize and respond to others' feelings appropriately. Youth will have varying skills in this area depending on their age and developmental level. Program staff can support the growth of empathy by incorporating discussions about current events and asking youth how they think the people in the stories might feel. Some topics in the news might be too sensitive, and staff may need to look for fictional characters from books, movies, or TV shows to find examples. Staff can also help youth reflect on situations in their own lives by asking questions like "How do you think she feels?" or "How would you like to be treated if you were in that situation?"

Set an Example. Youth mirror the examples they see around them at home, school, and in the youth programs they attend. Staff who work with youth need to be good examples for youth in how they should behave toward people from different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, abilities, orientations, etc. Since the program staff should reflect the youth in the program, how they interact with each other should reflect how the youth should interact. Staff should watch for and reward positive social behavior, even if it is a simple "good job," to let the youth know staff are proud of them.

Objectives:

- Recognize/identify factors that make issues controversial or sensitive.
- Build empathy by being able to identify and respond to emotions accurately.
- Model positive interactions with other staff members and youth.

Introduction (5-7 minutes):

- Introduce the topic of responding to difficult questions, emphasizing the fact that what you say and do matters.
 - What to say: "Today we are going to address the fact that while working with youth, you may receive questions about controversial or sensitive topics. How you respond to these questions is important for youth's understanding of the topic. Therefore, there are some skills that will be useful in these scenarios."
 - Restate most, if not all, of the background information provided to you earlier in this workshop guide. Highlight how you should approach the situation, why your words matter, and how you should set an example for youth.



Prior Knowledge (5-7 minutes):

- Ask the staff what they know about how to respond to a challenging question when asked by a youth. Staff can provide examples of situations where this has happened to them if applicable. Record responses.
- Then, ask staff how their own actions can set an example for youth. Have staff think about both good and bad examples of how youth program staff should interact with each other and with youth. Again, record responses.

Activities:

Activity: *Controversial Issues* (15 minutes):

- Describe the *Controversial Issues* activity:
 - What to say: “First, we are going to do an activity that will work to examine issues that are considered controversial and determine why they are considered that way.”
- Lead the *Controversial Issues* activity:
 - Give each participant some sticky notes, five or six per person.
 - Ask the staff to think of examples of controversial issues and to write them on their sticky notes.
 - *Instructor Note:* This activity works best when done in silence so as to not be influenced by anyone else.
 - Ask the staff to stick each of their sticky notes on the wall in the location that indicates how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel about talking to youth about that topic: “Cold” for completely comfortable, “Hot” for completely uncomfortable, and “Lukewarm” for no feelings either way.
 - Give participants a few minutes to look at the issues that others have chosen and where they have positioned them.
 - Arrange chairs or stand in a circle for discussion.
 - In the discussion, talk about the challenges that different types of issues pose. Follow up with a discussion about factors that make issues controversial. There is a sample Web of Factors in the Resources section of this document.

Activity: *Building Empathy* (35 minutes):

- Describe the *Building Empathy* activity:
 - What to say: “Being able to understand and share the feelings of others is empathy. This next activity will help us practice those skills.”
- Lead the *Building Empathy* activity:
 - Divide the participants into smaller groups of three to four and have them sit in a circle with their group.
 - Give each individual a notecard and have them write down a conflict they are dealing with, have dealt with, or think is a relevant conflict that can be used to build empathy.
 - Once all the group members are done writing their conflicts, have them drop the cards face down in a pile in the middle. Then, have each member randomly pick a card from the pile. It is okay if you have your own card.



- Taking turns, have each group member read the contents of the card as if the problem were their own. Once each card is read, group members are then to give advice and feedback.
- *Instructor Note:* The people speaking should know that for the entirety of the exercise, the notecard picked is their conflict. The group members should never out themselves as the owner of a conflict being read by someone else.
- Regroup for a brief discussion and debriefing as a large group. Ask the staff
 - “How did it feel to have someone else’s conflict as your own?”
 - “How did it feel having someone else living your conflict?”
 - “How can you incorporate empathy into difficult questions and situations youth may approach you with?”
- Remind the group that that depending on the age and developmental characteristics of a youth, some topics of discussion may be too sensitive and age appropriate examples should be used.
- Have staff brainstorm examples of conflict that youth (ages 9-11 or so) would be able to better relate to such as fictional characters from books, movies, or TV shows. This can be done as a whole group activity with staff brainstorming ideas and you writing them down as a list on a large hanging sheet of paper.

Activity: *Setting an Example* (15 minutes):

- Describe the *Setting an Example* activity:
 - Have the participants gather in a circle, either standing or sitting.
 - Before starting, write down the question to be answered on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper. The question is as follows:
 - “Imagine your day as a youth program worker. What does setting an example for youth look like to you? How should staff interact with each other and with other youth?”
- Lead the *Setting an Example* activity
 - Then, hand out notecards to each staff member and have them brainstorm quietly to themselves for 2 to 4 minutes.
 - When everyone has written down their ideas, you as a facilitator will call on one participant to share what they wrote first. Then, move around the circle until everyone has shared their ideas.
 - Record staff’s responses on a sheet of paper or whiteboard.

Reflection and Recap (5 minutes):

- Return to the staff’s responses from earlier. Ask 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: Sample of Web of Factors



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

The *Controversial Issues* activity was adapted from <https://rm.coe.int/16806948b6>

The *Building Empathy* activity was adapted from <https://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu/civil-dialogue-committee/files/Learning%20Empathy%20Training.Final.pdf>



Youth Inclusion Handout: Sample of Web of Factors

