



Supporting Military Families Through
Research and Outreach

Physical and Psychological Safety



FACT SHEET

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Physical and Psychological Safety

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Introduction

Young people need reliable access to places where they feel safe to explore their interests and opinions. Settings that do not meet these basic needs may inhibit youth learning and development. Youth programs that offer a safe environment provide opportunities for young people to explore their world, develop skills, and gain a sense of belonging with peers and adults, as well as explore their individual identities (Perkins & Borden, 2003).

Purpose

In order for a young person to establish supportive and positive relationships and build new skills, programs must first ensure physical and psychological safety. This fact sheet provides youth development professionals a research summary on the importance of designing programs that ensure safety and considers practical applications for use in youth-serving organizations and programs.

Research

In order for youth to become committed to and engaged in out-of-school time programs, they must feel secure and comfortable in their environments. Creating environments for youth that promote physical and psychological safety significantly enhances the success of the program and the healthy development of young people who participate in these programs.

Physical and psychological safety is a context in which secure and health-promoting facilities and practices encourage positive and appropriate peer interactions and discourage risky health practices and confrontational social situations (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2005). Physical and psychological safety is defined as:

- keeping youth from emotionally hurting one another
- preventing bullying
- offering alternative models for positive social interactions and solving differences
- managing conflict between youth following clear policies and procedures
- ensuring that program facilities are structurally safe and well-maintained

Maslow's (1943) needs hierarchy underscored that basic needs, such as safety, must be satisfied before more advanced needs are acquired. Research has demonstrated that youth participation in well-organized, intentionally designed and supervised programs assists youth in experiencing positive outcomes (Perkins et al., 2007; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).



Social and emotional connections to others are vital to youth's comfort and safety levels. Brofenbrenner (1970) enumerated the different systems that make up the various ecology of human development in which physical and psychological safety is fundamental. Ecological theory conceptualizes the environment as more than physical space; it also comprises the relationships that occur within that environment (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 1998). More recently, research studies have also begun to look deeper into neighborhood connections and their influence on youth development (Theokas & Lerner, 2006). Numerous studies have also identified the critical elements of social contexts that foster positive youth development (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Benson, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gamberone & Connell, 2004). High-quality and intentionally-designed youth development programs foster a healthy environment that consistently build upon a foundation grounded in physical and psychological safety (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003).



Positive youth development programs create a safe, pleasant environment in which all youth feel protected, comfortable and wanted. First and foremost, youth must have their basic needs met and be free from exposure to environmental hazards, infectious agents and various types of injuries (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Moreover, youth who feel their input and involvement are important, valued, and heard will feel safe to engage in programs more fully, for example, by making comments and suggestions without fear of ridicule (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Feeling safe is also about establishing a trusting environment fostered by supportive relationships between adult staff and youth participants. In a positive environment, youth will not be distracted by concerns for their safety or the safety of others and instead can benefit from the positive offerings of the program.

Practical Application

When thinking about physical safety consider the following questions:

- Do all staff members understand the importance of physical safety?
- Do all staff members understand policies regarding safety and have training to deal with issues of safety?
- Is the building where the program will be held safe and secure?
- Is there current insurance for program and facility needs?
- Do all staff know where electric plugs, power cords, etc. are located?
- Are safety issues addressed with the youth during program times (e.g., fire drills, exit strategies, basic first aid, bathroom facilities, etc.)?
- Are all activities using safe materials?
- Is there a first aid kit and water available at all times?
- Is there regular maintenance of the facility?



When evaluating psychological safety consider the following questions:

- How are the youth and staff respectful of each other?
- How is conflict managed in a positive and methodical way?
- What measures are in place to keep youth and adults from hurting each other's feelings?
- How is youth inclusivity during program times encouraged?
- How are positive relationships modeled to youth? Are the adults respectful to other adults and guests?
- In what ways specifically does the program foster a nurturing environment for youth?
- What policies are in place to ensure emotional safety?
- How do youth and staff work together to eliminate bullying or hazing?

When evaluating a youth program consider the following questions:

- Is there a training schedule for staff that reflects state youth program certification requirements?
- What is the youth–adult ratio in the program, and does it follow state standards?
- What types of professional development plans exist for staff?
- How do the youth travel safely to and from the program?
- What kinds of check-in and check-out procedures are practiced?
- Does the program utilize safety equipment, such as, helmets, safety gloves, etc.?
- Are all of the staff CPR and First Aid Certificate holders, as determined by state licensing requirements?

When engaging the staff in assessing the intentionality of promoting a safe environment, consider the following questions to prompt further discussion and action planning:

- How do the young people in the program feel? Why do you think they feel that way?
- How does the staff encourage a safe environment?
- When was the last safety drill? Does everyone know safety procedures and policies?
- What do I feel most positive about in the program? How do I encourage a safe environment?

Summary

Youth programs that embrace physical and psychological safety concepts and provide the structure and policies to ensure that youth in these settings feel safe and secure, increase the potential for youth to engage fully in the program. For this reason, many studies underscore the importance of the environment's safety characteristics as an essential component of youth development programs (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Youth programs should target emotional and physical safety as a prerequisite to providing the foundation for promoting positive youth development outcomes.



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