



Supporting Military Families Through
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Supportive Relationships with Adults

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Supportive Relationships with Adults

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Introduction

When supportive relationships are present throughout one's lifespan, individuals can achieve better physical, mental, and family health (Perkins & Borden, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Research suggests that long-lasting relationships with caring adults can provide a buffer against many of the negative influences and high risk behaviors that youth navigate daily. Positive relationships with caring adults can support the development of academic achievement, resilience, and self-esteem for a young person. After school and youth development programs offer ideal settings for youth to establish relationships with non-parental adults and create secure attachments that can enhance social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

When youth participate in after school and youth development programs staffed by caring adults, they have the opportunity to experience a sense of connectedness, warmth, good communication and overall support (Blum & Rinehart, 1997; Dryfoos, 1990; Eccles, Wigfield, Schiefele, Damon, & Eisenberg, 1998; Ford & Harris, 1996; Grotevant, 1998; Lipsitz, 1980; Roth & Dauber, 2000).

Research Overview

Studies affirm the association of supportive parent-adolescent relationships with positive school motivation, better mental health, lower rates of drinking and drug use, less delinquency and less school misconduct (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Supportive adult relationships are particularly important for adolescents who may face challenging family life situations. Youth who experience frequent, high quality interactions with non-parental adults (e.g., teachers, coaches, 4-H club leaders, troop leaders) have fewer behavioral problems than their peers who do not have the same supports.

Research trends indicate that in early adolescence, young people begin to adopt patterns of behaviors that can follow them throughout their lives. Afterschool and youth development programs are particularly important at this stage of development to provide an environment which supports the creation of long-term healthy behavior patterns and attitudes (Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbreton, 2005). The support youth experience from adult staff is one of the most significant motivators for continued participation in afterschool and youth development programs (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). Youth program staff, in the role of informal mentor, may facilitate a wide range of life skills development including conflict resolution, learning to navigate different social settings and atmospheres, avoidance of risk behaviors including substance use and teen pregnancy, and development of long-term goals and high aspirations for the future (Hirsch, 2005).

In addition to the informal social supports adults provide, structured partnerships between youth and adults have emerged as a strategy for youth development. Increasingly, youth development and afterschool programs are recognizing and leveraging the commitment, energy and meaningful contributions of youth, with effective results (Klindera & Menderweld, 2001). Youth-adult partnerships are most successful when the adults are in the co-creator or co-learner role with the youth rather than taking the traditional lead in developing activities or managing a project. (McLaughlin, Leone, Warren, & Schofield, 1994).



Regardless of whether relationships are informal or structured partnerships, supportive relationships must be intentionally cultivated through a combination of well-designed program policies, and individual practices. Today's after school and youth development program professionals must be well prepared to facilitate opportunities for skill-building and empowerment and to establish respectful relationships. This preparation can be fostered in a number of ways.

Organizational Strategies for Promoting Supportive Relationships

To promote development of these important relationships between youth and adults in afterschool and youth development programs, consider the following strategies:

- Provide staff and volunteers regular opportunities to develop and model effective communication skills with youth—including active listening, reflection, focus and empathy.
- Foster support for youth adult partnerships through shared decision-making, planning and clear expectations of mutual respect and value for shared opinions and ideas.
- Include intentional periods of 'downtime' to allow for informal socializing and relationship development between adults and youth.
- Create a diverse staff with whom youth can identify in terms of culture, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and language.
- Maintain low youth-staff ratios in program activities.

Additional staffing and hiring practices that support the retention of high quality staff include:

- Provide coaching and development for staff to prepare them for promotion when opportunities arise in the organization.
- Create mentorship opportunities for new staff with more seasoned staff as a part of the orientation process.
- Recruit staff with skills necessary for programs the organization offers

By creating an organizational culture in which supportive relationships with youth is the ultimate goal of the adults working with the program, an environment can be created in which youth are connected, engaged and continue to participate.

Summary

Research emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships as essential for the long-term health and well-being of individuals. For young people, creating security attachment and sense of connectedness to healthy and caring adults can promote positive outcomes including positive school motivation, better mental health, lower rates of drinking and drug use, less delinquency, and less school misconduct (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Fostering supportive relationships is a critical aspect of development of effective youth programs. Drawing on findings from research in the youth mentoring field, and continued emerging research about the connectedness of youth with significant adults, youth development and afterschool programs are well positioned to provide one of the strongest protective factors in positive youth development: a caring relationship with a supportive adult.



Links

America's Promise Alliance—<http://www.americaspromise.org>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children & Families—
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/>

The Forum for Youth Investment—<http://www.forumfyi.org/>

National Youth Development Information Center—<http://www.nydic.org/nydic/index.html>

MENTOR—<http://www.mentoring.org>



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