Opportunities to Belong

FACT SHEET

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Opportunities to Belong

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Introduction

The process of belonging begins with the emotional attachment and social relationships an individual establishes in the family, peer group, school, community or culture. Human development studies frequently describe bonding and attachment processes as the building blocks for how we form social connections, beginning in infancy. Positive bonding with an adult is crucial to the development of the capacity for adaptive responses and to become a healthy and functional adult (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Youth development programs are important venues to provide opportunities to create a sense of belonging that can foster positive identity formation and improve self-esteem.

Research Overview

There is a solid and growing empirical base that indicates that well-designed, well-implemented youth development programming can positively influence a diverse array of social, health and academic outcomes. As youth spend more than half of their waking hours outside of school, research demonstrates the benefits of participating in constructive and organized activities. Structured out-of-school time activities offer youth an opportunity to establish meaningful connections with others; a key factor in developing psychological growth and interpersonal competence. Research links participation in positive youth development programs with preventing negative activities and in turn making negative choices. Initial studies focusing on participation in well-designed and operated programs demonstrate a relationship between belonging and lower levels of depression and anxiety, lower levels of alcohol and marijuana use and higher levels of self-esteem, increased internal locus of control and increased pro-social behaviors (Miller, Gilman, & Martens, 2008).

Participation in organized, meaningful activities provides opportunities for youth to belong to a socially recognized and valued group (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). In order for youth to feel they belong in a group, they need to experience opportunities to participate actively and create meaningful connections with others. Afterschool and youth development programs that are successful in fostering a sense of belonging are ones in which youth feel comfortable to contribute, and feel their participation is important (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Features of such organizations include an environment inclusive and open to youth input (Hensley, Place, Jordan, & Israel, 2007), mutual respect among youth and adults; and a youth-centered and youth-directed program design (Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004).
Practical Application

Opportunities to make decisions about the program promote a sense of ownership, which in turn, has the potential to increase a young person’s sense of self-worth and belonging within the group.

_Belonging can be developed in program settings by providing youth with the following:_

- **An emotionally and physically safe environment**
  - Ensure that all youth are safe and address this issue through communications and observations. Establish policies and procedures to make certain youth are protected from unsafe conditions. (See the Fact Sheet and module for Physical and Psychological Safety for more information)

- **Respect from peers and youth development professionals**
  - Involve youth in defining a culture of respect and what that means to them individually, and as a group. Staff members can assist with enforcing these policies to encourage respect and acceptance. Showing respect for others is vital for the success of any program. It is important to emphasize that respect is shown at all times to everyone involved in the program.

- **Opportunities to develop a plan for the program**
  - Solicit ideas from youth participants for activities and programming. Include youth in developing the plans for new programming, including recruiting new youth, designing the activity, and provide leadership roles for youth to implement their ideas. For example, develop a youth-led orientation which allows the youth to set goals and make a calendar of activities to assist with the achievement of their goals

- **Opportunities to be heard and their opinions valued**
  - Actively engage youth in the program evaluation process. Develop a program policy to support this important step. Youth evaluations can be obtained verbally, in writing, or through technology. Make youth input as high a priority to address as input from other key stakeholders.
  - Develop a set of standards that are followed when others are speaking. Acknowledge each and every youth’s input in a positive manner.

- **Opportunities to mentor other youth**
  - Successful programming often engages older youth in leadership roles, who can serve as role models and mentors for younger youth. Older youth thus develop a sense of belonging and are further empowered knowing that they are trusted with responsibility for younger participants. In order for these types of opportunities to be meaningful, young people also need to feel included in planning and decision making, not just in carrying out adult directives (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Consult your state or community Mentoring Partnership to learn more about developing successful peer mentoring in your program.
Summary

Becoming a valued member of a well-organized youth group can provide young people with opportunities to develop skills they will use throughout their lives. Youth development professionals can create many opportunities to work together with youth to promote a sense of belonging in their programs. Organizational values that encourage staff to listen to young people and treat them with respect are critical to the effort. Research consistently demonstrates that when programs provide these types of opportunities, youth have the potential to acquire the vital social and emotional bonds needed to guide them successfully into adulthood. Opportunities to belong in a group are the same opportunities that can make them strong and confident adults that feel valued in society. Once youth have a connection established, they can achieve the most positive outcome of all: skill building (Hall, Israel, & Shortt, 2004). These skills may include emotional and social skills, career development and most importantly the skill of making good choices that will bring self-satisfaction in their lives.
References


