



Module 3: Supportive Relationships Research Review

Supportive relationships are vital for individuals' well-being across the lifespan. Supportive relationships with caring adults are particularly important for youth as they navigate obstacles and changes during their transition to adulthood and develop the competencies necessary to become well-adjusted, self-sufficient young adults (Arnett, 2000; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson & Tran, 2014). Indeed, supportive non-parental adult relationships can foster resilience to mitigate the negative effects of stressors encountered by youth and provide youth with an array of opportunities for positive development and growth (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Grossman & Bulle, 2006). Youth can form supportive relationships in a number of different contexts and with people in a range of capacities (e.g., teachers, coaches, extended family). Youth programs provide one such context for youth to build relationships with non-parental adults (Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbretton, 2008). Given that youth programs encourage youth workers to be accessible, nurturing mentors and role models for youth and to build close relationships with youth (Catalano et al., 2004; Hirsch, 2005b; Pryce, 2012), these programs can provide an ideal opportunity for youth to engage in supportive relationships. The current paper will examine supportive relationships within the context of youth programs, offering a definition of supportive relationships, reviewing important youth outcomes related to supportive relationships, and discussing implications for youth programs and youth workers.

What are Supportive Relationships?

Supportive relationships in the context of youth programs are relationships between youth participating in programs and non-parental adult staff or volunteers working with youth. Within youth programs, several types of supportive adult relationships exist. For instance, some programs employ program staff to work with groups (Kahne et al., 2001), other programs pair youth with individual volunteer mentors (Powers, Schmidt, Sowers, & McCracken, 2015), and still others enable youth to choose an individual mentor from their community (Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2016). Across all of these relationship types with youth workers, there are certain elements that encourage the development of high-quality, supportive relationships as well as specific types of support that these relationships provide.

Elements of Supportive Relationships

Researchers, youth, and youth workers have described supportive relationships as ideally being genuine, safe, accepting, flexible, reciprocal, and caring (Griffith, 2016; Liang & Rhodes, 2007; Pryce, 2012). While many factors likely contribute to the success of a relationship between youth workers and youth, the elements most commonly identified as contributing to a strong supportive relationship within youth programs will be discussed.

Trusting. In research studies and guidelines for youth workers, trust is consistently listed as the most important element of the supportive relationships built in youth programs (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009; Hirsch, 2005b; Pryce, 2012). In fact, youth allowed to choose their mentors report that one of the most important characteristics to look for is trustworthiness (Spencer et al., 2016). Trust between youth workers and youth can take a significant amount of time to develop, and both members of the relationship must trust one another in order to build the most effective

relationship (Griffith, 2016; Hirsch, 2005b). For the majority of youth, trust in youth workers increases steadily over time, occasionally displaying large, quick increases when particular interactions promote greater trust. Although not all relationships between youth and youth workers end in high levels of trust, youth programs appear to be generally well-suited for building supportive relationships (Griffith, 2016).

Enduring and consistent. Relationships between youth workers and youth have the most positive effects for youth when they continue at least one year (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Hirsch, 2005b; Metz et al., 2008; Rhodes & Dubois, 2016), perhaps due to the time it takes to build trust and closeness. Consistency of the relationship is also an important element. Youth become more trusting of youth workers who display stable behaviors and expectations over time (Griffith, 2016; Hirsch, 2005b), and relationships between youth workers and youth who meet frequently and regularly have more positive impacts on youth (Hirsch, 2005b). Youth allowed to choose their own mentors pick individuals they describe as reliable and committed (Spencer et al., 2016).

Attuned and compatible. Relationship attunement and compatibility are other important elements of supportive relationships. Youth workers and youth indicate that relationships are stronger when individuals have similar personalities (e.g., shy, curious, humorous) and common interests (e.g., music, sports, movies; Powers et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2016). Additionally, youth workers' interpersonal skills play a role in the level of attunement and compatibility of the relationship (Powers et al., 2015; Rhodes & Dubois, 2016). Highly attuned (i.e., collaborative, youth-focused, understanding, flexible, creative, attentive) Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) mentors have much more positive mentee relationships than poorly attuned (i.e., self-focused, inflexible, inattentive) mentors (Pryce, 2012).

Individualized. Individual time youth workers and youth spend together is important for fostering close relationships (Metz et al., 2008). The lower the ratio of youth workers to youth in youth programs, the closer these relationships are (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Metz et al., 2008; Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Importantly, each youth is different, and youth workers must treat all relationships uniquely and recognize each youth's individuality (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Liang & Rhodes, 2007).

Other lesser researched elements may be important to relationships between youth workers and youth. Some research suggests that youth workers and youth should be matched on demographic variables, such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, culture, race, or ethnicity, in order to foster closeness and understanding through a shared background and similar experiences (Metz et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2016). Individual and demographic characteristics of youth (e.g., abuse history, age) and youth workers (e.g., age, income, marital status) may even impact the duration of a supportive relationship (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). However, more research is necessary to understand whether these are vital elements impacting the quality of a supportive relationship in youth programs.

Types of Support Provided

Youth workers provide youth with several important types of support that are vital to their positive development and well-being. First, youth workers provide companionship and emotional support. This often includes listening to youth and expressing empathy, concern, encouragement, and praise (Brady, Dolan, & Canavan, 2015; Metz et al., 2008). This companionship can give youth a sense of belonging, increase youth's self-esteem, and provide individual attention that may not otherwise be available (Brady et al., 2015). Youth indicate that knowing an adult cares about them and is available to

support them is the most valuable part of a youth program (Spencer et al., 2016). Second, youth workers provide concrete or practical support. This support includes helping youth to engage in activities, introducing youth to a broader social network, connecting youth with academic and employment opportunities, and providing youth material goods (e.g., money, car rides, clothes, food) that they need (Brady et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2016). Third, youth workers provide guidance as a means of support. This includes advice and information about a variety of topics (e.g., careers, parenthood, relationships, school), with mentors providing their opinions and insights to youth (Brady et al., 2015; Hirsch, 2005b). Youth workers can also follow-up with youth about their goals to help hold them accountable (Spencer et al., 2016).

Overall, research and theory converge to suggest that supportive relationships are often the most important and impactful piece of youth programs and have an instrumental role in positive youth development. Regardless of the skills that youth learn or activities they participate in within these supportive relationships, the quality and closeness of the relationships is of the utmost importance (Antle et al., 2009; Brady et al., 2015; Hirsch, 2005a; Liang & Rhodes, 2007; Metz et al., 2008). Recognizing this, youth indicate that the relationships with youth workers are what they would miss most if programs were not available (Walker & Arbreton, 2004). In programs for impoverished youth, many youth view program spaces as their second home, and the majority of those youth identify supportive relationships as the reason they feel comfortable and cared for in those spaces. They also report the supportive relationships are the most positive element of their experience in youth programs (Hirsch, 2005a).

Theoretical Foundations of Supportive Relationships

The theoretical importance of supportive relationships is evident in both systems theories and theories of youth development. Systems theories help to clarify the role that youth programs and youth workers have on youth development. On the other hand, theories of youth development identify specific processes through which youth workers may impact cognitive, social, and emotional development of youth.

Systems Theories

Ecological systems theory was first developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986) and is most well-known for emphasizing the role of environment, as well as interactions between individuals and their environments, in conceptualizations of human development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory model presents five environmental systems or contexts in which development occurs: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem includes people and organizations that most closely and directly impact an individual (e.g., family, school, peers). The mesosystem includes the interactions and connections between the individual's microsystems (e.g., relationship between parents and school). The exosystem includes larger organizations and institutions that indirectly impact an individual (e.g., government agencies, social services, mass media). The macrosystem includes broad cultural contexts (e.g., attitudes, ideologies) surrounding the individual. Finally, the chronosystem includes a sense of time (e.g., life transitions, historical context; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). Within this model, youth programs and youth workers are a part of youth's microsystems, with the potential to directly impact development. Importantly, ecological systems theory provides a guiding framework for understanding

the complex interplay between the impacts that youth, youth workers, youth programs, and supportive relationships may have on one another and on youth development.

Relational developmental systems theory provides a more recent framework for conceptualizing positive youth development (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Lerner et al., 2014). Drawing from ecological systems theory, this framework asserts that development occurs within complex systems of relations between individuals and multiple levels of their environments, which impact each other over time. The framework utilizes this broad view to specifically examine relations between youth and their environments, including youth programs, as they relate to positive youth development. In particular, relational developmental systems theory is useful for understanding when, for whom, and under what conditions these youth-environment relations lead to positive, healthy youth development (Benson et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2014). A strong emphasis is placed on the view that, because individual-environment relations can impact one another over time in many ways, there is always the potential for change, whether positive or negative, and there are ample opportunities for youth development to be enhanced by changes to the environment (Benson et al., 2006; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). Within this framework, supportive relationships between youth workers and youth are one example of an individual-environment relation that has the potential to positively impact youth development (Lerner et al., 2014).

Youth Development Theories

There are numerous theories of youth development, and many address specific domains of development (e.g., emotional, social, cognitive, physical). Lev Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (1978) provides a basis for how youth workers may impact youth's cognitive development. The concept is embedded within a larger theory of cultural and cognitive development, which rather than conceptualize cognitive development as a solitary task, emphasizes the social and interactional nature of learning and development. In this theory, learning often happens when a teacher and student work together and collaborate toward a shared understanding. As the student actively constructs their own ideas and knowledge about a concept, the teacher gradually removes assistance, and the student internalizes the concept and becomes independent in related tasks (Vygotsky, 1978). In this learning process, the zone of proximal development is the space or distance between what the student can currently do independently and what they have the ability to learn how to do with assistance. Meaningful tasks within this zone of proximal development are thought to provide the highest potential for learning. As the student gains mastery within the zone of proximal development, the zone moves and what was previously the zone of proximal development becomes part of what the student can do independently. This learning process is how cognitive development progresses over time (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's theory has important implications for cognitive development in the context of youth programs. First, cognitive development is supported in a social context by the youth worker acting as the knowledgeable teacher who provides challenges and guidance (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). The youth worker's role is to provide activities and discussions that place youth in their zone of proximal development to give them the best opportunity to learn (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Harland, 2003; Shabani et al., 2010). Second, the quality of the relationship between the youth and youth worker is essential to the youth's cognitive development because social interactions play a vital role in the process. Relationships and affect are inextricably linked to cognitive development in this developmental model (Shabani et al., 2010).

Attachment theory is a framework with important implications for how youth workers may impact youth social and emotional development. Attachment theory suggests that a strong emotional connection with a caregiver is essential for healthy development (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1958, 1982; Bretherton, 1992). When a parent or caregiver is responsive to a child, it provides a sense of security from which to learn and explore. However, development is severely negatively impacted for children who are not provided with the opportunity to form a secure attachment (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Sapienza & Masten, 2011). Early attachment greatly influences a child's later adjustment and well-being, including providing a template for future relationships (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1958, 1982; Bretherton, 1992; Werner, 1993).

A non-parental supportive relationship with a caring adult can be highly beneficial for youth development, particularly for youth with less-than-optimal parent relationships (Metz et al., 2008; Rhodes et al., 2006; Sapienza & Masten, 2011; Werner, 1993). Indeed, Rhodes and colleagues (2006) assert that these non-parental figures, including youth workers, can sometimes act as secondary attachment figures for youth, enhancing their social and emotional development through three processes. First, youth workers provide youth safe, caring companionship, which is particularly important for those lacking adult companionship from other adults in their lives. Second, youth workers can teach youth healthy emotion regulation skills by modeling skills and providing security. Finally, youth workers may be able to change negative, unhealthy youth expectations or templates about caregivers by making youth feel cared for, safe, and supported (Rhodes et al., 2006). In summary, these theoretical frameworks aide in conceptualizing what role a supportive relationship with a youth worker may have within youth's developmental context and on particular domains of development.

Supportive Relationships and Youth Development Outcomes

Supportive relationships with youth workers play a vital role in youth programs and can improve youth's well-being in a number of ways. A meta-analysis on supportive relationships in youth programs found that youth with the highest relationship quality with youth workers have more positive developmental outcomes across domains (e.g., emotional, behavioral, social, academic) than those with lower quality relationships (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Clearly, the quality of the relationships that youth workers and youth form has tremendous influence on youth. Research about the impact of supportive relationships will be reviewed for several domains of development outcomes.

Behavioral. Mentorship programs, which primarily focus on developing supportive mentor relationships, can help reduce youth behavioral problems. Youth with program mentors, compared to those without mentors, display decreased externalizing problems, school truancy, substance use, and delinquent behaviors (Brady et al., 2015; Herrera et al., 2007; Jekielik, Moore, & Hair, 2002). The length of the relationship likely affects the impact of the relationship on youth behavior. For instance, youth involved in the BBBS program display decreased drug and alcohol use only with mentor relationships lasting at least one year (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Quality of the supportive relationship influences impacts youth development as well, and only youth with the most positive mentor relationships are significantly less likely to use drugs and alcohol than those without mentors (Grossman & Johnson, 1999).

Academic. Youth in mentorship programs report improved school performance and attitudes toward school, and they attribute these academic improvements to supportive mentor relationships (Jekielik et al., 2002). Youth involved in the BBBS program perceive school as more valuable, have higher

self-efficacy in school, have higher quality schoolwork, and complete more assignments than youth without mentors (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2007). Importantly, the stronger the youth's relationship with their youth worker, the more they value school and feel competent at school following participation (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005). However, there are mixed findings in regards to whether or not supportive relationships are associated with better grades among mentored youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2007; Jekielik et al., 2002).

Social. Supportive relationships with youth workers may in turn improve other youth relationships. Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) propose that participating in youth programs and collaborating with youth workers can be an ideal environment to develop youth's interpersonal skills (e.g., communication, cooperation, leadership). Indeed, adults in youth's lives indicate that youth in mentorship programs have improved relationships with others and are more knowledgeable about how to interact with others (Brady et al., 2015). Youth also report significant improvements in relationships with family and peers, specifically reporting increases in trust, patience, respect, emotional support, and acceptance (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Spencer et al., 2016; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, Nancy, 1995). Importantly, youth with high-quality, trusting relationships with mentors show greater improvements in interpersonal skills (e.g., cooperation, self-control, assertiveness, empathy) than those with poorer-quality mentor relationships (Sale, Bellamy, Springer, & Wang, 2008), suggesting a high-quality supportive relationship is a vital piece of social development in youth programs.

Emotional. Self-concept, including self-esteem, self-perception, and self-confidence, is one of the most commonly researched emotional outcomes for youth participating in youth programs; however, it remains unclear whether youth programs and supportive relationships with youth workers impact self-concept. Youth have a more positive self-concept following some mentorship programs (Hirsch, 2005a, 2005b; Spencer et al., 2016) while other programs do not affect self-concept or have effects on only certain groups of youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Tierney et al., 1995). Several factors may influence the effect of a supportive relationship on self-concept. Youth in the BBBS program with mentor relationships lasting one year or more have the largest improvements in self-worth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). In after-school programs for disadvantaged youth, those living in the most violent neighborhoods have the greatest increases in self-esteem from supportive relationships (Hirsch, 2005b). Overall, the effects of supportive relationships on youth self-concept may depend on a variety of programmatic and individual factors, and additional research is needed. Youth may receive other emotional benefits from supportive relationships such as feeling more confident, happy, and calm after spending time with mentors (Brady et al., 2015); however, more research is needed on the emotional benefits of supportive relationships in youth programs.

Methodological Considerations

Several methodological issues should be taken into account when considering the literature on supportive relationships in youth programs. First, much research on the impact of supportive adults in youth's lives is conducted regarding natural mentors—mentors that youth know outside of youth programs and acquire through day-to-day activities; these mentors can include coaches, pastors, and extended family members (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Research on natural mentors was not included in the above review given the current focus on relationships within youth programs. Second, the majority of youth programs assessing the impact of supportive youth worker relationships examine mentorship programs specifically, especially the BBBS program (Brady et al., 2015; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002;

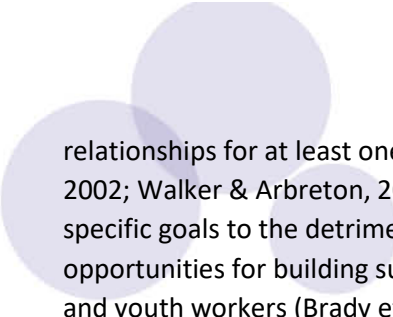
Powers et al., 2015; Pryce, 2012; Rhodes & Dubois, 2016; Spencer et al., 2016). While this literature was reviewed here, it is unclear how the results may relate to supportive relationships in other types of youth programs. In addition, there are several types of youth programs, which vary in terms of program focus, setting, structure, and several other factors, making it difficult to draw broad conclusions regarding supportive relationship outcomes across all types of youth programs (Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). Third, there is a lack of research and evaluation of high-quality youth programs, including few studies with long-term follow-ups of the effects of youth programs and supportive relationships within youth programs (Catalano et al., 2004; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004; Stone, Garza, & Borden, 2004; Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Finally, outcome measures in studies on youth programs are frequently limited to youth self-report or to overall program outcomes rather than outcomes regarding supportive relationships specifically (Brady et al., 2015; Griffith, 2016; Hansen et al., 2003; Hirsch, 2005a; Powers et al., 2015), and more research is needed on supportive relationships in youth programs.

Implications for Youth Programs

Ultimately, supportive relationships with youth workers play a large role in determining the success of youth programs. Youth workers provide youth with developmental opportunities and have a substantial impact in youth outcomes. Therefore, it is important that youth programs and youth workers attend to and emphasize the supportive relationship (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Hirsch, 2005a).

Because close, trusting, supportive relationships are built over time, turnover of youth workers can be damaging to relationship development (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Hirsch, 2005a; Metz et al., 2008; Walker & Arbreton, 2004). In fact, mentoring relationships that end prematurely can have a negative impact on youth, including decreased self-worth, lower academic self-efficacy, and increased alcohol use (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Youth often describe feeling abandoned or sad when youth workers leave youth programs, and youth with previous relationship losses or instability may be particularly vulnerable and hurt by a relationship ending (Brady et al., 2015; Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Ongoing supportive relationships with youth workers are also paramount in recruitment, attendance, and maintenance of youth participants in these programs (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Metz et al., 2008). Youth and parents report that supportive relationships are the most common reason youth go to and continue to participate in youth programs (Arbreton, Sheldon, & Herrera, 2005), and youth who find more supportive youth workers participate in programs longer (Walker & Arbreton, 2004). To avoid turnover and inconsistency, several experts have suggested that youth programs improve job satisfaction and career conditions for youth workers. Suggestions include increasing salaries and benefits, providing more professional development and promotion opportunities, reducing long hours and heavy workloads, and providing rewards for talent and hard work (Hirsch, 2005a; Metz et al., 2008; Stone et al., 2004).

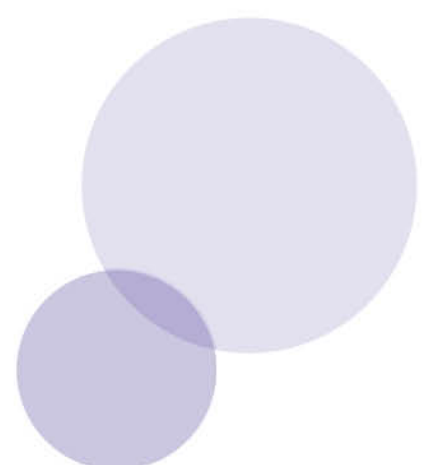
In addition to retaining quality youth workers, there is a need for youth programs to emphasize supportive relationships within the structure, planning, and activities of the program. First, it is important that youth workers and youth receive adequate training on how to build supportive relationships. This includes training on relationship skills, such as active listening, conflict resolution, and cooperation (Metz et al., 2008; Stone et al., 2004). It is also important to provide youth workers with information about appropriate expectations for supportive relationships, ongoing supervision of relationships, and clearly defined roles within the program (Hirsch, 2005a; Liang & Rhodes, 2007). In planning the structure of a youth program, it is necessary to consider factors influencing the quality of the relationships between youth and youth workers. Youth programs should aim to maintain



relationships for at least one year and to have low youth to youth worker ratios (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Finally, programs should avoid over-structuring activities or prioritizing specific goals to the detriment of relationship building. Activities of youth programs should provide opportunities for building supportive relationships, including informal socializing time between youth and youth workers (Brady et al., 2015; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Hirsch, 2005a).

Conclusions

Supportive relationships between youth workers and youth in youth programs clearly play a key role in both program success and youth development. These relationships must be characterized by trust, caring, consistency, and several other factors that youth workers must foster with youth in order for relationships to be successful. Youth workers provide several types of support to youth, including emotional support and companionship, practical support, and guidance or advice, which all contribute to youth development in many ways. Supportive relationships foster youth development across a number of developmental domains as well, helping youth to gain behavioral, academic, social, and emotional competence. Although more research is needed in the area of supportive relationships, it is clear that these relationships are a central part of youth programs. Because of the importance of supportive relationships, youth programs and youth workers must attend closely to the development of these relationships and emphasize the relationships within all youth programs.



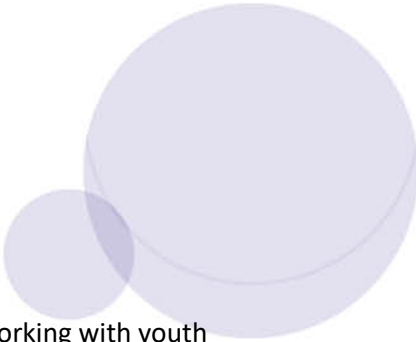
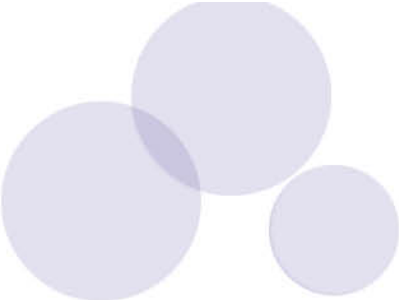
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Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Positive youth development: a strengths-based, holistic approach to studying and working with youth that focuses on promoting healthy development. Positive youth development research and practice tends to emphasize environmental rather than internal influences on development, altering systems that may foster positive and healthy youth development. In research and practice, the term “positive youth development” may refer to a developmental process, an approach to youth programming, or a specific program or organization.

Youth programs: programs that foster youth’s personal development (e.g., social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies), participation, and empowerment while fostering relationships between supportive adults and young people. Youth programs are diverse in their structure, goals, and the youth they serve. These programs may be referred to as after-school, out-of-school, and/or youth programs; throughout this report the term “youth program” refers to any of these programs.

Youth workers: volunteers and paid staff, including administrators and individuals engaged in direct service, who engage in youth development work in a variety of settings and programs outside the regular school day. Similar terms include youth development professionals, after-school providers, and youth leaders. For the purpose of this paper, the term "youth worker" will be used to describe all professionals who work in youth programs.



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