



YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAKING YOUTH-SERVING PROGRAMS MORE INCLUSIVE

The culture of youth programming impacts all the youth and staff it touches, whether that culture is developed intentionally or not. When the creation of program culture is intentional, the impact on everyone can be more positive. Vermont Afterschool organized focus groups with youth to discuss the subtle features/characteristics of youth programming that make a youth program welcoming and more comfortable to participate in. Based on those conversations with youth, five main categories of recommendations emerged, which are included below. Please consider the following as they provide guidance for all youth programs to consider in opening their doors to youth and being intentional about culture creation with youth.

“Every time I am here, no matter who’s here, I have fun.”



PHYSICAL SPACE

In addition to being accessible and accommodating, the qualities of the physical space (location and layout of the space) also affect youth's experience at the program. Thus, it is important to intentionally create a physical space that is safe, welcoming, comfortable, and engaging to youth. Youth identified specific aspects of physical space that influence their experience. Please see below.

Factors Contributing to Positive Experiences:

- Within walking distance from the neighborhood, school, or community
- Bright, open, and colorful home-like space decorated with artwork that represents the youth the program serves
- One-way glass windows so that natural light comes in, but youth don't feel like they're being watched from outside when hanging out at the program space
- A quiet space with sensory products and dim lights to relax or for difficult conversations that require private space
- Plenty of space for youth to gather around and relax. An open floor plan and windows into office spaces to ensure transparency in physical space



“Feeling safe in a space provides room to grow into yourself.”

COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Youth want to be involved in developing a collective set of expectations, norms, or “rules” for their space. Thus, collaborating with them and intentionally creating space for youth engagement is crucial for the program’s success. Programs should treat youth as partners and co-designers in creating a space that promotes a sense of belonging, connectedness, a sense of community, and youth leadership skills. Please consider implementing the following to promote a collaborative culture in your space:

- Intentionally create space to empower the voices of marginalized groups
- Mutual trust and respect: Respect is earned, not demanded
- Make space to talk about challenging topics (identity, oppression, trauma, suicidal ideation, etc.), knowing that this requires relationships, skilled facilitation, room for growth, and deep trust
- Consistently display honesty and transparency: Providing clear reasoning other than “because I said so” or “that’s the way it is”
- Utilize and respect youth consent: Practice informed consent and respect the youths’ answers

“We have talked about things like police brutality and systemic racism before in our program. We can do this because staff make it possible.”



STAFF QUALITIES

Research has shown that a long-term relationship with a trustworthy adult serves as one of the most important protective factors in youth development. Staff who stay longer, show up often, keep their word, and create mentoring opportunities for youth are seen as resources by youth. Furthermore, staff's attitude and interaction with youth impacts youths' experiences in programs. Thus, staff who support the creation of a welcoming space for ALL youth, in which youth have opportunities to hear and understand different perspectives and opinions with respect, will have a long-lasting impact on the lives of youth. Focus group participants identified several qualities in staff that positively impact youths' experiences. Please see below for some of them:

- Representation matters: Staff composed of individuals youth can relate to and who normalize and destigmatize struggles that youth go through because of similar identities, backgrounds or experiences, supports positive youth development.
- Zero tolerance for oppression and marginalization: Take action when it is seen or heard and proactively work to create a culture against oppression and marginalization.
- Participate in activities as equals with youth instead of just supervising or being behind closed doors.
- Skilled at de-escalation and mediating conflicts instead of aggravating them. Support youth to learn and grow from their differences.
- Create and maintain healthy boundaries with youth and respect the boundaries youth set. Be consistent with the boundaries.
- Show consistency and reliability: Be consistent in what you do; no favoritism or discriminatory behavior toward any group, individual, or population. Be flexible, meet youth where they are, and empower youth to advocate for their needs.

“Staff make us feel like they’re listening to us. They understand what we’ve been through. Communicating with the adults is like talking to a friend.”



CONNECTION AND COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

Families play a very crucial role in the growth and development of youth. When organizations partner with parents and engage them by holding community events, it helps build connections and lines of communication with the families of youth they serve. This will help in making families feel more comfortable letting their youth participate. However, each youth's boundaries around this are unique and need to be respected. Sometimes youth come to the center to be their authentic selves that are not accepted at home and programs provide a safe space for them to be who they are. Youth need to know that the program and staff respect their boundaries with families while still connecting, communicating, and collaborating with them. Thus, communication with families must be done in support of the youth and their needs. Please see below:

- Let parents/guardians know what is happening in the program.
 - This is especially important for youth from families for whom English is not their first language.
- Connection to families must be youth-centered and youth-driven. Some youth come from unsupportive families, and youth could be at the program to escape their home life.
- Sometimes youth are forced out of their home, so parental consent shouldn't be required for their participation in the program.
- Help with skill development: Sometimes, there's food insecurity at home, and the program could provide a place to receive food and learn cooking skills that may not be taught at home but can be brought into the home by the youth.

“They ask for parent feedback and truly tell parents what is going on in the program. Staff diversity helps with language barriers”

“Before this program, I didn't like who I was and I'd do anything that would harm myself all the time. My family and I always got in arguments, and I'd do anything to get out of the house and I didn't have a place to go, but this place has helped me connect with others that happen to be in somewhat similar situations. Over time, I have gained self-confidence and I made new friends.”

QUALITY OF SUPPORT

Youth go through rapid physical, emotional, and developmental changes, and they need our support in navigating this complex world. They need both concrete and emotional support, as well as cultural and relational. When the support we provide stems from genuine relationships and connections with others, the impacts are deeper and long-lasting. Over-professionalized and sterile interactions with staff inhibit connection, trust, and relationship building. Thus, we must find ways to bridge the gap and provide the support that enables relationship building.

- Culturally relevant and gender-affirming programming is critical. Providing culturally pertinent and gender-affirming clothing, activities, and access to healthcare directly correlate with a positive increase in health and wellbeing.
- Make food, clothing, showers, and self-care strategies/supplies accessible for youth.
- Serve as a resource hub for youth: Help youth find and access community resources such as financial guidance, legal help, and work-training program. Provide any support they need in navigating the system and completing applications and ensure that they are driving what supports they are connecting with.

"Adults respecting the boundaries and using sentences like 'I notice you are feeling down, would you like to talk about it? If not, that's okay, I'll be here for you if/when you do,' supports growth and help build trusting relationships."



HOW DOES THE CO-CREATION OF PROGRAM CULTURE BENEFIT YOUTH PERSONALLY?

-  Supports character building and helps create a sense of belonging, acceptance, and support
-  Supports creating/developing healthy relationships and relationship skills in general, including conflict resolution and mediation skills
 -  Trauma-informed programming supports healing and results in improved mental health
-  Opportunities to bond with adults, develop healthy relationships with adults, and practice networking skills
-  Provides space to gain and improve self-confidence



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