

High Quality Engagement

As a positive youth development organization, we strive to provide our youth with opportunities to develop and learn vital social and emotional skills. These skills provide our members with the tools necessary to succeed in life. However, for our programs, projects, and clubs to effectively instill these skills in participants, we must have high-quality youth engagement. An easy way to remember the relationship between engagement and success is that “youth engagement drives youth thrive” (Arnold, 2018). To ensure that your program is engaging youth to the highest quality it is essential to provide the correct environment, sustained by positive relationships while delivering worthy content.

The first step to successfully engaging youth is to ensure that the program’s environment provides a safe space both physically and emotionally. Physical safety can be identified as an area free from physical harm or threats. Emotional safety is defined as an experience that is free from bullying, harassment and humiliation while allowing others a place to freely express emotions, feel confident to take risks, and support in trying something new (Osher, Sprague, Axelrod, Keenan, Kendziora, & Zins, 2008). Environments that create a positive emotional climate encourage young people to help and support each other (Herman and Blyth, 2016). These environments should be free from bias, allowing youth of all backgrounds to feel comfortable in voicing opinions and trying new things (Smith et al 2012). Adult volunteers leading these activities are in control of creating and sustaining this place of safety, ideally, they are responsible for cultivating a learning environment where youth voices are expected and respected (Rusk et al., 2013).

Similar to building a safe emotional environment it is crucial to building strong relationships. Relationships with caring adults outside of the family are essential for youth to achieve their fullest potential (Blum & Rinehart, 1998). You can build off of a safe environment and create a strong relationship by showing that you have a genuine concern for all youth members. Be more aware of your tone and body language, and be sure to support, encourage, and recognize members who are making positive changes. Once youth members feel as if they are respected in an organization, they are more likely to make meaningful relationships. Clearly communicate with members that they have a voice in the organization and that their opinions matter when making decisions. A simple trick to make members feel personally respected is to ensure that they are being identified using their chosen name or that it is properly being pronounced. Display that the program accepts diversity by using words, scenarios, and examples so that all youth feel represented.

What keeps members engaged are strong intentional programs. The 4-H programs that you are leading should be high context and inspired by the “learn by doing” mantra. However, research shows that programs with high levels of engagement give youth numerous opportunities to have some involvement in the planning of activities (Herman, & Blyth, 2016). Three key aspects of strong youth development programs are to include members in on the planning, choice, and reflection. When planning programs include members in through simple group brainstorming and goal setting. Provide choices so that youth are allowed to decide things such as what activity they will participate in, what group they will work with, or what role they will play. Finally, you

must provide youth with opportunities to reflect on what they have done. A simple evaluation survey will provide adult leaders with feedback about activities as well as generate ideas for future programming. Creating a structured program that allows youth to engage in these ways, will be provided a learning opportunity that supports goal setting, decision-making, planning, and reflection (Smith et al, 2013).

Youth identity formation takes place when individuals have the opportunity for exploration (Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001). We must provide a safe place, strong relationships, and intentional programs for youth members to form their identity. By providing these quality learning programs youth will have higher chances of growing and developing essential social-emotional learning skills (Herman, & Blyth, 2016). Step by step small changes can be made to ensure that programs are striving at the above listed three areas.

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