ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE 4-H EXPERIENCE

Belonging

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Introduction

Between family, school, after-school activities and hanging out with friends, much of a young person's day is spent in formal or informal groups. Bowlby's work (1969,1988) with attachment theorizes that belonging is one of the strongest human motivational needs. While the family is the first unit in which young people belong, they soon become a part of school and other community groups (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Everyone has a need to belong, to have positive interactions with others, and have the opportunity to be embraced by people around them. Adults may serve as crucial educators and supporters, as they promote learning, create positive environments, foster belonging and assist youth in realizing their full potential (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). From coast to coast – urban to rural communities – youth organizations work to help young people feel they belong.

Why is belonging important?

True belonging is more than sitting in a meeting. It requires being an active, valued participant in the group. Giving youth a chance to actively participate in the planning, organizing and running of meetings is one of the hallmarks of positive youth development (Pittman, 2003). By allowing young people to be a part of the organizational planning, they are allowed a "voice" in the group.

Individuals need to feel safe and at ease. During childhood and adolescence, being accepted into a group is critical to youth. Peer pressure is at its height during this time and having a circle of positive relationships helps youth make good choices (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Youth feel their input is important and they need to make comments and suggestions without fear of ridicule (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). They want to be a part of organizations that are inclusive and open to their input (Hensley, et al, 2007). That kind of inclusivity sets youth up to feel needed and become an integral part of the group.

Youth need to experience active participation and a sense of belonging (Walker & Dunham, 2002). Individuals who work with youth need to build positive environments in which youth can become involved. However, it can sometimes be difficult to identify what should be done to foster belonging within the group.

What does research show?

To establish the feeling of belonging, there are basic elements of positive youth development to consider when setting standards for youth development programs (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). The element of supportive relationships, is key to belonging as humans need social interaction from individuals in which they have established an attachment based upon trust (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). It is these relationships with adults and peers that form the basis for belonging in youth that is critical to the success of youth development programs of any size, shape, ethnicity, socio-economic class, form or function. Yet, belonging is a step beyond supportive relationships as it asks for a level of engagement from the participant.

It is critical for youth to have opportunities for long-term supportive relationships with adults other than parents, according to Kress (2004). In fact, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) indicate that mentoring relationships that last for less than one year can even be detrimental to youth. Hirsch's (2005) study of urban after-school programs found that the relationships between youth and staff are the most fundamental strength of the program. They serve as a "second home" for youth participants and "the primary reason [for youth participation] was the quality of relationships at the club rather than the physical characteristics of the site. Ties to adult staff were key in this regard".

Gambone, Klem, and Connell, (2002) discuss the importance of the connections youth make with parents, peers and adults. They claim that youth with strong mentors

are more productive in such things as school engagement, attendance, and are less likely to dropout. Furthermore, youth with positive peer relations are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as violence, drugs, and criminal activity. Relationships with other youth and adults are the source of emotional support and guidance that are critical to young people's capacity to feel connected to others (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000).

Eccles and Gootman (2002) profess that when the sense of belonging is present, youth are able to connect to a group and there is a greater chance of positive outcomes involving those youth. However, belonging is more than showing up at a meeting, or just having a good relationship with adults or peers. True belonging is a reciprocal process. The youth not only needs the group, but the group needs the youth. Part of belonging is actively participating in the group and being a part of the process (Walker & Dunham, 2002). Once youth have a connection established, Hall, Israel and Shortt (2004) believe that youth can achieve the positive outcome of skill building.

It is clear that supportive relationships are a foundational piece when creating a sense of belonging in any youth development program. They serve as the primary reason for youth participation in positive programs (Hirsch, 2005), as well as, a deterrent to risky behaviors (Gambone, Klem, and Connell, 2002). Relationships build a young person's connection to others through guidance and emotional support (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000). And, once the relationship is in place, skills can be built (Hall, Israel and Shortt, 2004). Furthermore, youth that feel a strong sense of belonging tend to increase their self-competence, school attitude and performance (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). As youth development programs work to plan programs, it is key to build opportunities for youth to develop close supportive relationships with staff. However, it is just as important to provide an environment where those youth are an integral part of the group as true belonging requires their participation for the success of the overall program. Only as active participants will youth feel thatthey have a real sense of belonging.

Summary

Knowing that belonging is vitally important to the positive outcomes of young people, it is obvious that organizations need to identify it as a priority when planning their programs. Youth development professionals and volunteers serve an important role for youth and assist in the formation of supportive relationships which are a critical building block when trying to foster belonging. Ties to staff were found to be more important than the physical characteristics of the site as to why youth participate in programs in Hirsh's (2005) study. Youth with strong mentors have higher school attendance and are less likely to drop out (Gambone, Klem, and Connell, 2002).

Once supportive relationships are in place, becoming an actively participating member of an organized youthgroup can be the result of a well designed program. Through these programs youth are able to acquire social,physical and intellectual skills. Youth need to be needed within the group structure. Intentional planning shouldbe made so youth have opportunities to build close supportive relationships with adults and peers. Thesenurturing relationships help youth move into fully participating roles within programs where they feel they trulybelong and are an integral and important part of the program.

Suggested Curricula

4-HCCS (http://4-hcurriculum.org/projectsonline.spx)

Cornell Youth Development Foundations for 4-H Camp Staff (www.cce.cornell.edu/delaware)

Reference Books:

Rohnke, K., (1991). The Bottomless Bag Again? Kendall/Hunt Publishing. Dubuque, IA.

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Gregson, B., (1982). The Outrageous Outdoor Games Book. Fearon Teacher Aids.

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Connell, J.P., Gambone, M.A., and Smith, T.J. (2000). Youth development in community settings: Challenges to our field and our approach. *In Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions* (pp.281-300). Philadelphia, PA: Private/Public Ventures.

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Hall, G., Israel, L., & Shortt, J. (2004). *It's About Time! A Look at Out of School Time for Urban Teens.* The National Institute on Out-of-School Time.

Hensley, S., Place, N., Jordan, J., & Israel, G., (2007). *Quality 4-H Youth Development Program: Belonging.* Journal of Extension, October, 45, 5.

Hirsch, B.J. (2005). *A Place to Call Home: After-School Programs for Urban Youth.* Washington, D.C. & New York, NY: American Psychology Association & Teachers College Press.

Kress, C., (2004). *Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development,* National 4-H Headquarters CSREES, USDA, www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/library/Essential_Element-Satellite.ppt

Pittman, K. (2003). *Some Things Do Make a Difference and We Can Prove it: Key Take-Aways From Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development.* Forum for Youth Investment Commentary. Washington, DC, Cady-Lee House.

Walker, J., & Dunham, T. (2002). *Understanding Youth Development Work.* Center for 4-H Youth Development, Regents of the University of Minnesota.

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