

Five Things You Can Do **NOW** to Increase Safety

1. **Develop group agreements or ground rules regarding safety and regular group meetings to ensure that everyone feels physically, emotionally and culturally safe.**

Conduct a meeting with the program participants early on to express the commitment that in your program “every person has the right to feel safe, included and accepted.” Ask participants to define what these terms mean to them and what agreements and ground rules they want to make to ensure the right of safety. Decide together what happens when the safety agreements are broken. Train young people in a process to resolve differences and decide at what point an adult should be asked to intervene.

2. **Institute a regular group or “community” check-in meeting.**

If issues of safety and relationship building are important, set aside a regular time for the group to reflect on their experiences in the program to suggest ways in which the peer group can work together even better. Make room in the meeting for people to share appreciations for their peers who are contributing to make the program a positive and safe place. The *Tribes* book (Jeanne Gibbs) and Tribes trainings are also excellent resources for how to conduct community-building meetings with young people.

“Every year in the first week of school, I gather my students in our book corner, which is a cozy spot covered with a nice thick rug. We sit in a circle so that we can see each other’s faces and I tell the children that every week we will meet as a group to discuss how well we are getting along, what is working and what is not working and how to solve our problems.”

Mona Halaby

Belonging: Creating Community in the Classroom

3. **Include “no put-downs” in your group agreements.**

When developing group agreements or ground rules with young people, a request for a “no put-down” rule will usually surface early in the discussion. It is also important to discuss with the young people how everyone will support its enforcement. This takes real commitment, as many young people have learned to use “put-downs” as a defense against being hurt themselves. Adult staff members will have to follow through with great consistency, offering reminders that ask members to hold to this agreement, especially in the beginning. Take every slur you hear seriously, even if it is a teasing tone or participants claim it is okay. It is not okay because slurs hurt. It is helpful to hold group discussions or activities around “put-downs”, why they hurt and what we can do instead. As young people come to trust that you will enforce this policy, you will see a reduction in the number of “put-downs” and the sense of safety in the program will grow. Learning benefits of interacting without this kind of hurtful behavior at an early age teaches young people a profound lesson in the value of tolerance and mutual respect.

4. Assess the cultural, gender, ethnic and family structure background of your group.

Without asking unnecessarily probing questions, do what you can to learn who is in your program. Do the staff members and volunteers reflect these backgrounds? Do images and books in the classroom? Program activities and celebrations? Are there differences in who comes to program, who participates in which activities and which parents feel welcome at events?

5. Expand the group's knowledge of particular groups and cultures.

Start by educating yourself. Avoid tokenizing young people or others in your program or school by asking them to explain their culture. Instead, go to the library, look on the internet, attend local cultural events and call or visit organizations promoting equity for the group you are researching. Learn what you can about the history, art, literature, music, food, celebrations and struggles of a culture or group. Then help the young people in your program study different cultures and celebrate the contributions of different groups. You might learn about women, people of color and gay people who have contributed to your neighborhood. Celebrate various holidays as they are celebrated in different countries. Celebrate Black History Month, Women's History Month, Gay Pride Month or Cesar Chavez's Birthday. Young people can present what they've learned and adults may be willing to share food, decorations or music. Don't make assumptions about what any particular person might share. Be sure that these celebrations are part of an ongoing process of inclusion and education and that some groups aren't just segregated to certain "diversity days."

Five Things You Can Do NOW to Encourage Relationship Building

1. Make sure that each young person has one adult who knows him or her well.

An ongoing part of encouraging relationship building is making sure that everyone is connected in some way. Young people need to have a positive relationship with an adult if they are to get the most out of the program. At a staff meeting, go over your attendance list. Is there someone on staff or a volunteer who is connected with each young person? If there are some program participants who have “slipped through the cracks,” decide who will make a special effort to get to know these young people. It’s a good goal to be sure that each young person has one-to-one time each week with an adult.

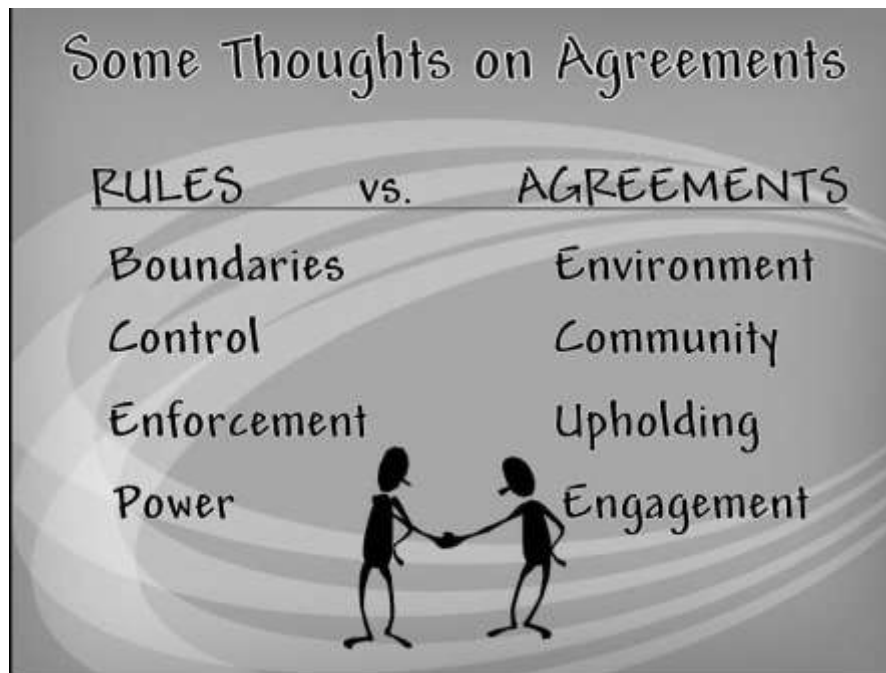
2. Institute a check-in circle

A check-in circle doesn’t need to take very long and can greatly benefit both young people and program staff. In small groups (20 or fewer), begin the day by sitting quietly in a circle and letting each person speak briefly. Sometimes it helps to have a special item to pass around the group like a talking stick that identifies the one who has the “rapt attention” of the group. When you first start instituting the check-in circle, it helps to plan a safe and interesting check-in question, such as, “What is your favorite thing to do at recess?” or “If you could go any-where in the world for one day, where would you go?” Later on, after some practice, you might have each person share one thing about their day or say how the group is working together.

3. Develop agreements with young people

Have the group brainstorm a list of ground rules for how you will treat each other in the program. Ask them to explain why each rule might be important. Narrow the list down no more than seven items, so that the rules can be easily remembered. (One way to do this is to give each person three stickers. Ask them to vote by placing their stickers next to the agreements they think are most important.) Ask the group if they all feel they can agree to try to live by these agreements. Promise that you will help them remember and let them know that they can remind each other as well.

Upholding agreements is the critical part to making this work. Regular check-ins by the group on how well they are upholding the agreements is the key to success on this issue. Check-in at the beginning of each meeting, after breaks and at the end of each meeting so that the group can reflect on where they are doing well and where they need improvement. In addition, it is good to review the agreements before any activity or time which may cause group members to be more vulnerable. The chart below explains some of the things which differentiate agreements from rules.



4. Hold a conflict resolution training for Young People

When young people have the skills to resolve conflict in healthy and respectful ways, they are kinder and happier and require less adult intervention. They also feel safer in the after-school program knowing that they can solve problems together and that they can get help if they need it. You can also train “conflict managers” to help peers or younger children to resolve conflict.

5. Participate in a youth development training or another training in group process and collaborative learning.

Building high quality, positive relationships in your program takes careful planning and attention. Supporting relationships requires a number of skills. Professional trainers who have studied this process, such as those working at the Youth Development Network, can help staff members hone these skills. If not this particular training, be sure your program’s ongoing commitment to organizational improvement includes some type of training in group process.

Five Things You Can Do Now to Foster Meaningful Youth Participation

1. Train Participation in Groups Decision Making Skills

A good place to start is to train your young people in the process of transforming and group decision making. Group decision making skills can be put to use immediately in developing the needed group agreements regarding how people want to be treated, how they will care for their materials and supplies, etc. Make sure adult staff members have skills for leading brainstorming sessions and facilitating group decision-making before you start.

2. Encourage Self-Reliance and Responsibility to the Group

Allow young people to responsibly address their own needs, whether it is access to the drinking fountain or the art supplies. Design your program space and storage system in a way that allows young people free access to needed project supplies, materials and equipment. The privilege of access comes with responsibilities of caring for and returning things to their proper place. Brainstorm the needed agreements with your group to ensure the respectful use of these materials.

3. Give Young People Choices

Young people feel more involved in a program when they are given real choices. Schedule program times when the young people can individually choose what they wish to do. Some may prefer group games; others may wish to work alone, drawing or reading, while some may simply want to socialize.

Young people can participate in planning activities. You may want to start with a small activity or block of time that they are responsible for planning, and then build up. Let them know about constraints from the beginning. Within those constraints, try to really trust their ideas and enthusiasm. If a planned activity doesn't work, it presents an opportunity for the group to analyze and learn. Once a process for reflection has been established with the young people involved in planning, it can be used regularly.

4. Provide Opportunities for Young People to Help Others

Everyone feels more involved when they have responsibilities to those around them and are able to use what they know to help others. Allow participants to share responsibilities for the proper care and maintenance of their program assets, making and serving snacks, and assisting peers within their program. Young people can be trained to effectively assist peers during homework time and during other activities. Try to give every child or young person an opportunity to help another, so that some aren't always in the helper position and others always in the position is being helped. Newcomers to the program can be assigned buddies to show them around the room, explain ground rules, and help them learn the routine. You can also teach a skill to a small group and then "deputize" them to teach others. Older youth are also excellent helpers for younger children, and the helper role often brings

out the best of them. Duties can include serving as “Reading buddies,” homework helpers, escorts, or making informational presentations to the younger groups. Providing service to the larger community is also an excellent way for young people to apply their planning and leadership skills, while experiment how their efforts impact others.

5. Involve Young People in Serving on Formal Decision-Making Bodies

There are many way to involve young people in organizations decision-making bodies. They can serve on the planning, safety, fundraising, hiring or other committees. With experiences and support, they can also serve as youth representatives on the organization’s Board of Directors. However, the place to begin is not with young people, but with the adults within the organization. Are they committed to taking the time and effort to involve young people and do they have the skills to know to do this effectively?

Before inviting young people to serve on committees or boards, it is important for the adults involved to do their homework. This means gathering information and building the capacity to facilitate the involvement of young people in decision-making and governance. Consider the necessary training to prepare everyone for this work and give yourselves sufficient time to prepare so that you won’t rush the process. We recommend that after-school programs seek guidance from organizations with expertise in this area, such as Youth on Board and the Youth Leadership Institute.

It is also helpful to identify a youth serving organization that has successfully involved young people in their decision making. Invite them to speak to your organization and share what they’ve learned. Make sure you speak with their youth leaders about the experiences; that may lead you to other resources.

You will probably be advised to start small. It is a good idea to choose a committee or activity that is time-limited, that holds obvious interest for the young people involved, and that involves adult participants who are committed to making the experience work for young people.

It is also a good idea to have an experienced mentor assigned to support young people who may be inexperienced at this kind of work. The mentor can help by establishing a relationship with the young people, explaining before meetings what will happen, and why is it important to the organization, and checking in with young people after the meetings to be sure there are no questions or problems. Be sure that meetings and the committee work can be scheduled around school hours, and encourage adult members to avoid unnecessary jargon or overly restrictive rules or order. Once you have a pool of young people, staff and other adults who have successfully completed some projects together, you can look for ways of involving young people at higher levels of governance in the organization.

Five Things You Can Do Now to Increase Community Involvement

1. Invite a speaker from the community to come to your program.

This can be most effective when the topic is linked to something the students are studying in school, or to a project they are working on in the program. For example, if they are learning about the Civil Rights movement, you might invite neighbors who lived through those days to talk about what it was like. If they are studying butterflies, you might find a local entomologist to visit. Firefighters and other people with exciting jobs are always welcome speakers. Community colleges; museums, parks, volunteer centers, community centers, and even the phonebook are all good places to start looking for guest speakers.

2. Encourage parents, older siblings, and neighbors of the school to become involved in the program.

Parents can provide wonderful support for cultural activities. Members of the community might volunteer as tutors, mentors, or for snack preparation or story reading. Older siblings and recent program graduates can serve as tutors or helpers, and this can provide a link between the high schools and middle school-aged youth. These volunteers will require training and support but the investment pays off in a decreased youth/adult ratio and in increased relationship building opportunities for the young people.

3. Invite the community into your program to celebrate the talents of your young people

Stage an open house or performance at your pro-program space. Share young people's art, theater, dance, music, or other performance with the community. Publish a newsletter, 'zine, or collection of poetry. Invite parents and neighbors to see how your program works. This is one way to let young people shine and give back to the community at the same time.

4. Get out of the building!

Any time you leave familiar space you are allowing young people to extend their horizons. Take a field trip to a regional park or museum. Visit a local establishment, service, or branch of government to learn how it works. Attend a program or activity at a local non-profit organization such as the Red Cross, Sierra Club, a social justice or civil rights organization, or local arts center or library. Practice using public transportation, and let young people help figure out how to get where you are going.

5. Plan a project that will benefit the community.

Clean up or plant trees or flowers at a local park, speak out at a public forum on a youth or community issue, visit elders at the senior center, serve snacks at a neighborhood fair, design and paint a mural. The possibilities are endless! Try to match projects to the interests of young people, and look for existing programs that can help you prepare young people for a meaningful experience.

Five Things You Can Do NOW to Create Challenging and Engaging Learning Experiences

1. Create a safe place to learn

What makes a program a safe place to learn? Who better to ask than your young participants? What do the young people you work with think about mistakes? To get discussion started, read a book on famous mistakes that resulted in amazing inventions. Using this information, develop agreements and rules with the young people in your group to ensure the right of safety. Decide together what to do when agreements are broken. Post any agreements on the wall and refer to them often. What about program staff, how do they respond to young people when mistakes are made? Consider how you can establish a program “culture” where everyone’s mistakes are seen as opportunities for new learning and the process of inquiry and discovery is more important than always having the correct answers.

2. Plan for the skills and knowledge you want your participants to acquire in your program

Often when planning programs, staff people go straight to lining up activities to fill a determined stretch of time, without thinking through what the learning goals are for a project or the overall program. Instead of identifying activities, work with staff to determine what kinds of knowledge or skills you want your young people to acquire over time through their participation in your program. They might be academic skills, study skills, leadership or team skills. Now, consider what kinds of experiences and activities you can provide over time that will meet your learning agenda. Don’t feel like you have to do it alone! You can use or adapt curriculum materials to align with your participants’ interests and needs and draw on teachers and others around you who may have more experience in planning against learning outcomes.

3. Use portfolios to help participants reflect on their progress and accomplishments

If your participants have consistent enrollment over time or if participants engage in long term projects where they increase their skills ongoing, consider how you might collect their work over time. You can create a portfolio or personal file with your young participants to serve as an ongoing record of their work. After several months or at the end of a project, sit down with them to review their record of accomplishments. What do they think about it? What does their portfolio reflect back to them? What kinds of records can be stored? For younger children, it might be a portfolio of self portraits that were done monthly, or simply their own

file they use over time to store things they have done that they are proud of. For older youth who might be developing a set of skills over time, say in the arts or technology, communicate your project learning goals and ask them to develop personal learning goals, if appropriate. Assist them in assessing which goals they have met over time.

4. Increase independent access to diverse learning materials

Within your program, provide access to learning materials that young people can independently access. This allows young people to pursue their own interests or engage in their own inquiry without the need for adult-led structure, and is perfect for younger people who finish their work ahead of schedule or who want to disengage for a period of time from group activities. These may take the form of reading materials (books, magazines) or websites that are related to their interests or topics of study within your program. They can also be in the form of learning kits that have instructions and experiments with which they can involve themselves. It is important that the materials are diverse and representative of the culture, gender and abilities of your young people.

5. Recognize the accomplishments of your young people

Put in place opportunities for young people to be recognized for their accomplishments by others outside of the program. This can take place through performances, exhibits/presentations of completed projects or celebrations where each child is acknowledged for his or her special accomplishments and contributions. Sharing accomplishments with outsiders raises everyone's sense of accountability for deadlines and excellence. After a successful event, the positive effect on a group's sense of community and the individual's experience of accomplishment can be quite profound.