

Best Practices in Community Programs for Young Adolescents

Regardless of their content and approach, programs that respond to the needs and interests of young adolescents follow certain principles of best practices. Responsive community programs for young adolescents should:

1. Tailor their content and processes to the needs and interests of young adolescents. Good programs listen carefully to the voices of young people at the planning stage and provide active, meaningful roles for youths throughout implementation.

2. Recognize, value, and respond to the diverse backgrounds and experiences that exist among young adolescents in contemporary America. Good programs are sensitive to the differences among young adolescents, particularly those based on race, ethnicity, family income, gender, and sexual orientation.

3. Work collectively as well as individually to extend their reach to underserved adolescents. Good programs work to increase the access of young people living in low-income areas to supportive community programs, keeping youth needs rather than organizational concerns at the center of their outreach efforts.

4. Actively compete for young people's time and attention. Good programs assess their competition (everything from television to youth gangs), and find ways to make their programs more attractive than passive or antisocial pursuits.

5. Strengthen the quality and diversity of their adult leadership. Good programs recruit carefully and invest in staff (and volunteer) development as a regular cost of doing business, recognizing that the quality of adult leadership is critical to program success.

6. Reach out to families, schools, and other community partners in youth development. Good programs strive to maintain solid working relationships with parents and other community institutions, on behalf of young people.

7. Enhance the role of young people as community resources. Good programs encourage young people to play meaningful leadership roles within their organization. They work actively to ensure that teenagers have opportunities to contribute their talents to the larger community.

8. Serve as vigorous advocates for and with youths. Good programs consider advocacy with and on behalf of youths a part of their work, to ensure that the best interests of children and youths are not ignored in decision-making forums.

9. Specify and evaluate their intended outcomes. Good programs are clear about the results they are trying to achieve, and they develop reliable documentation systems and realistic assessment measures.

10. Establish solid organizational structures, including energetic and committed board leadership. Good programs are generally found in well-governed and well-managed organizations that are stable enough to maintain continuity of relationships for young people at this critical juncture in their lives.