

Age Appropriate Programming for Youth



Practitioner Fact Sheet #2

Most youth educators have formal training in age appropriate or developmentally appropriate programming for children. However, often times, the volunteers that youth development professionals recruit and engage most likely are subject matter experts and lack the basic foundation and knowledge of the stages of youth development. It is important for practitioners and volunteers to keep in mind age-appropriate practices and make every effort to implement the following key points when working to create and develop meaningful experiences for young people, even if it requires more work and effort.

KEY FACTS

1. Practitioners of youth programs must be familiar with age appropriate practices – In order to help youth achieve their potential, it is critically important to recognize the developmental needs and abilities. (Eller & Mulroy, 1993). Although practitioners may be familiar with all the different perspectives and theories of youth development, don't forget the foundation of those theories, "the child". Program offerings may focus on a similar topic area (ex: photography); however the project experiences and activities associated with that topic area need to be age appropriate and engage ALL members of the target audience. As a practitioner, do you train your volunteers singularly about a specific project area... or do you include training on the needs of the child? Just like program design, volunteer development and training should incorporate the topic of age appropriate programming.
2. Volunteers must be trained to identify and implement age appropriate practices – Does your youth program solicit and select volunteers primarily based on their understanding of a specific subject matter to meet program needs...or first and foremost based on their understanding of the emotional and physical development needs of children? (Duclos, 2010). It is a poor use of time for the volunteer and a frustrating experience for the youth if the subject-matter programming is above or below the mental or physical grasp of the youth audience. While it is important to understand and be able to coach the sport, it is infinitely more important to have a coach that understands the child (Duclos, 2010).
3. Age appropriate programming is worth the investment – Does your youth program take the "one size fits all" approach, regardless of the age and skill set of the participants...or are activities and experiences structured to meet the needs of the participants? Age appropriate programming takes thoughtful design and extra effort if the program audience includes a wide age range of youth (8-18 years old) or youth with different

skill sets or levels of experience (first year participant vs. six year participant). Designing programs that are age appropriate may take more time on the part of the practitioner; however, it is well worth the effort and more fulfilling for the youth participants.

4. Age appropriate programming is necessary for recruitment and retention – Youth programs that target a wide age range of students often struggle with recruitment and retention of older youth (mostly high school age students). Could it be because they become disengaged based on the project experiences and activities being offered by an organization? If youth feel that program experiences are repetitive year after year or are typically targeted to a younger audience, they will quickly find other activities to occupy their time, rather than returning to a program that is not fulfilling their needs (developmentally or emotionally) or challenging them to accomplish a new task or goal.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Children need to be engaged and challenged through their involvement in youth programs. They should be able to select areas of interest to focus their attention, work toward goals they have set for themselves, and feel a sense of accomplishment at the completion of their project work. However, it is important to keep in mind age appropriate practices so youth are not under-engaged or over-challenged, causing them to get frustrated or lose interest and leave the positive environment of your youth program.

REFERENCES

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