

BUILDING A CONCRETE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR OLDER YOUTH AND ADULT MENTORS

By Molly Jackson

ABSTRACT

Current trends in youth work place a high value on measurable outcomes and data-informed practices. Research based assessments meant to measure the impact of programming are used to secure funding. Accountability for high quality programs and the number of children qualifying for special education has increased. These two factors contribute to a rise in cost to provide care. This presents a challenge for programs to offer safe spaces for learners and meet other program objectives. Utilizing youth interns can help keep costs manageable and positively impact students' lives. Including youth employment opportunities invites the responsibility for intentional professional development for both interns and adult staff. Having a concrete plan that considers the training needs of both groups supports the best outcome for youth employment success.

INTRODUCTION

Increased accountability to provide program outcomes has not changed a primary function of youth programs to provide safe and welcoming environments for youth to learn and grow. It is especially important to protect these values in times of growth and change. Over the last several years, youth programs have experienced an increase in persistent disruptive behavior, and the need for special education services and trauma-informed care. Including youth interns as staff can help meet this demand. Older youth who seek a valuable work experience offer a unique perspective and skill set to younger program participants. Given the tools and knowledge of how to use them, youth interns can increase positive program outcomes and help keep the cost of programming affordable.

YOUTH INTERNS

Youth interns with the help of adult mentors have the ability to provide excellent support as educational assistants and learn to support younger youth in their academic and social emotional development. The importance of planning a comprehensive work program that sets interns up for success on the job is vital (Interagency Working group on Youth Programs, 2016). This includes offering youth skills training, direct work experience, educational and life supports, and mentoring relationships.

SKILLS TRAINING

Skills that are practiced day-in and day-out through on-the-job training and interactions with adult staff include learning to communicate in a professional, respectful tone both verbally and in writing. Interns learn to receive and give important feedback on how things are going, and what they need to do their job well. This includes learning what they can bring to the work, but also what they need from others to be successful. Interns practice decision making, problem solving, and learning to take initiative and responsibility for their time and actions. Throughout the course of the internship it's important to maximize the ongoing opportunities for interns to foster a positive attitude, build character, convey integrity and practice etiquette. Interns need time allocated for reflection and to process their experiences. Thinking through ethical decision making with youth interns is also a critical part of skills training. Being accountable to the mission and values of an organization, as well as developing a sense of one's own values and guiding principles, helps interns mature and grow in their understanding of themselves and others (Davis, 2013).

DIRECT WORK EXPERIENCE

If youth interns are casually placed into direct work experiences without any prior training, or understanding of their role, the result can be a lot of confusion. While nothing quite prepares interns (even after receiving training) for the direct work experience, it is crucial to provide some context to the job through professional development training prior to interns starting in the role of educational assistant. A written job description provides a guide for youth interns to follow, but as they get going, interns will need different supports to process their responsibilities and gain a sense of understanding regarding the full nature of the job. During this time, it is important that adults give feedback and instruction on what is expected from interns, but also to clarify questions, or nuances that may have been missed during training on how to complete their work responsibilities successfully.

CONVICTION THAT YOUTH ARE CAPABLE AND CAN CONTRIBUTE

It is important that adult staff is there to support and guide youth interns with an attitude of respect and conviction that youth are capable and can make valuable contributions. This is important because demonstrating an attitude and desire to include everyone creates a positive work environment and communicates the value of the individual to the organization. Most importantly this simply communicates that youth inherently deserve to be treated fairly and with respect.

EDUCATIONAL AND LIFE SUPPORTS

When employing youth, it is important to remember they are growing in their skills and understanding just as adults are learning and growing through different life stages and development. Youth may have needs for additional life supports and education, including navigating situations that make it difficult to perform job duties, or make it to work. Supporting Youth through challenges that arise such as transportation, housing, physical and mental health and wellness and family obligations provides opportunities to help youth build confidence, resiliency and effective coping strategies to be prepared to overcome life challenges (Wilson-Ahlstrom, Ravindranath, Yohalem, & Tseng, 2010). Adult mentors can help youth develop strong work habits and positive adaptive coping strategies by modeling and sharing about their own process of learning. When additional education and supports are needed it is helpful to have a list of creditable resources available and help the youth connect with what they need outside of work to be healthy.

MENTORING AND JOB COACHING

Interns come into the workplace with many tangible skills. An exciting part of a mentor's role is helping interns further develop their talents and skills by making connections to real-life situations. One example of this is using prior knowledge of basic computer skills to then write and send professional emails, make calendar invites and schedule appointments. Another example is identifying strengths such as a passion for art, music, sports, math, dance or other specific talents. Helping Youth Interns express those skills on the job can take time, but is well worth the effort. While interns are at different places in their professional development, every intern can learn to use their current skills in the work place, develop new skills, and teach others what they have learned. It may not take long for adult mentors to realize that they have a lot to learn from youth interns, just as youth interns have a lot to learn from adult mentors.

GENUINE RESPECT FOR YOUTH AND ADULT-YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

Another aspect of being intentional when working with youth interns is recognizing the importance of building relationships. Talking together to discuss why certain situations happen, and ways to resolve conflict or misunderstandings is key to establishing mutual trust. When trust is built and mutual understanding happens, youth are more likely to be comfortable taking ownership of their work experience. Establishing a safe and supportive atmosphere to explore various opportunities on the job can help interns be themselves without fear of embarrassment or judgement (Smith, McGovern, & Peck, 2016).

PROGRAM ACCOUNTABILITY

In this day and age we have access to many program improvement materials. Many grant organizations, boards of directors, and parents seek evidence of program quality and want to see organizations implement one or more of these research-based tools. Using tools to train and develop youth staff can help programs meet stakeholders' interests and address program challenges in effective ways. It is important to remember that it's not necessary to know everything about training and employing youth to begin doing it. The key is to start on a small scale, build efforts over time and measure and improve as youth employment opportunities continue.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Many cities have coordinated youth employment programs for older youth and young adults. It may benefit your organization to connect with an established youth employment initiative such as the STEP-UP Program in Minneapolis, to establish a youth employment framework. Advocating for the inclusion of Youth Interns begins with valuing their unique perspectives and the diversity of ways they know to solve problems. Youth Interns can attract the participation of younger students by modeling appropriate behavior and making it cool to be a smart, engaged student. It is important when deciding to include youth staff, to recognize their developmental stage and design professional development training relevant to them. Youth Voice is an extremely valuable and important aspect of including older youth in staff culture (Warren, 2014). They should have an active role in all aspects of planning and implementing meaningful experiences for their professional growth and employment experience. Examining policies that might inhibit youth hiring or

the foundation needed to build success will help your organization provide excellent youth employment opportunities.

Youth development builds on the strengths of young people and recognizes their need for both ongoing support and challenging opportunities. Adults will need professional development opportunities to adopt a pedagogy that involves hands-on education, cooperative learning, and age-appropriate strategies for mentoring youth interns. Training adult mentors in the skills to empower youth will strengthen the adult–youth team and maximize efforts to meet program goals, develop strategic plans, and meet outcomes (Micari, Gould, & Lainez, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Youth programs serve more than 30 million young people each year, making this system second only to the public schools. The need for special education services and trauma-informed care, as well as for accountability for quality programs has increased the cost to provide programming. Including older youth as staff can help address these program challenges. This beckons the call for a concrete professional development plan for both youth interns and adult mentors. Evidence-based resources are available online and can be used to build a professional development plan for your organization. While many of the experiences that promote skill building happen organically throughout the course of the summer, other skills are fostered as we intentionally plan and design experiences to build competency. Nurturing these skills and other vocational competencies for youth will help foster a sense of purpose and belief in the future, spark educational aspirations and support meaningful preparation for work and family life for our youth.

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ABOUT MOLLY JACKSON

Molly Jackson grew up in the central neighborhood of South Minneapolis and has worked in the field of Early Childhood Education and youth programming for 20 years. In addition to working with STEP-UP interns at Kaleidoscope Place, Molly's two adult children were participants of STEP-UP, so she knows first-hand how important youth employment opportunities are to our youth, families and communities. As a recent graduate from Metropolitan State University with a focus on Life Span development, Molly is acquainted with the challenge of prioritizing professional development in her own life. This is similar to the dynamics of implementing innovative professional development options for our youth amidst busy work environments and full schedules. Molly is committed to collaborating with youth work professionals, parents, business partners, research professionals and importantly the youth themselves to align youth training opportunities to college and career readiness.
