

Reprinted with permission from School-Age NOTES (www.SchoolAgeNotes.com), the most trusted publisher and provider of quality, innovative resources designed to elevate the skills of adults who create learning opportunities for children and youth.

School-Age Notes
National Institute on Out-of-School Time
March 2008
Georgia Hall, PhD

Getting Engaged: What Matters for Youth

There are many ways to play kickball! Neighborhood teams, random playground groupings of youth, and afterschool program children devise multiple game strategies, rules, and game protocols. There are high energy, exciting games of kickball and there are time-fillers. What most likely makes the difference is the quality and level of youth engagement.

Over the last few years much effort in professional development for out-of-school time workers has been focused on increasing youth engagement. But how do we “do” engagement? Researchers look at engagement in different ways. Some view engagement as a cognitive or mental process related to motivation or self-efficacy. Others study how the “learning context shapes engagement.”(1) Some research on engagement shows that there are three contextual factors that shape engagement: the instructional system/methods, facilitator’s role, and group norms. Findings from the statewide Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (June, 2005) helps to explain how we can create the context for engagement that can contribute towards high quality experiences for youth. (2)

Facilitators have a choice of instruction method whether the activity is kickball or an algebra refresher. Youth are more likely to be engaged if activities are: challenging and stimulate thinking; allow youth to modify or make choices based on own interests and abilities; are free from interruption and distraction; and well supplied and paced. Mixing instruction methods with allowance for adult mentoring, youth independence, youth leadership, and group problem-solving creates a learning context that stimulates enthusiasm and engagement.

Group leaders and facilitators can be coached on how to increase their engagement skills and behaviors. Staff can promote youth engagement by:

- Being energetic and enthusiastic
- Asking open-ended questions, posing a challenge
- Sharing control of activities
- Offering genuine encouraging remarks regularly
- Asking “how,” “why,” and “what if” questions
- Listening actively and patiently

- Regularly reserving time at the end of each activity time period for re-cap and reflection

Group or classroom dynamics can support youth engagement or derail community building and relationships. Learning group features such as (a) clear ground rules and instructions for activities; (b) group culture that is respectful of the social, cultural, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds of the youth; (c) and embedded opportunities to practice peer cooperation and negotiation skills can help to create a learning and living context that invites rich engagement.

Supervisors and front-line staff can build engagement skills through professional development and training. Experienced out-of-school time professionals and researchers regularly offer workshops on youth and staff engagement at local and national conferences. There is every reason to consider that for any period of time youth spend in community-based and school-based out-of-school time programs, youth are best served if those moments are richly engaging in positive social and learning experiences rather than just filling time. An engaging facilitator can step into an on-going kickball game and significantly shift youth experience. An engaged peer group can alter youth pathways towards healthy long-term outcomes. Understanding how the learning “context shapes engagement” allows us to influence youth engagement in positive ways. (1)

Notes

1. Beder, H., Tomkins, J., Medina, P, Riccioni, R., and Deng, W. (2006). Learners’ Engagement in Adult Literacy Education. NCSALL Report #28. Available at ERIC (ED491917).
2. The Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study was conducted from 2003-2005 and was a statewide study examining the links between afterschool program features and youth outcomes. The study was sponsored by the United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Massachusetts Department of Education, and the Massachusetts Office of Child Care Services, and was conducted by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the Intercultural Center for Research in Education.