



A New Challenge for Summer Interns: Behavior Management

Researcher's Notebook

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As part of NIOST's work with summer learning programs in Massachusetts, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 youth interns working in five summer program sites across the state. Sites were grantees of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which is managed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Youth interns, who were high school students, generally worked six to eight hours a day for five to seven weeks of the summer. Their motives for participating in a summer intern program included the opportunity to explore a career pathway in out-of-school time (OST), youth development, or education and to improve general employment skills and knowledge in

a paid summer job. Interns had myriad responsibilities. They led small groups of children in activities such as arts, reading, math, science, and technology; co-planned activity plans with teacher mentors; managed children during informal social times; and supervised snacks, meals, and outdoor play.

One area that was particularly challenging for interns was behavior management. In analyzing interview transcripts, we grouped discussion on this topic into three themes: personal connections, professional development, and the aid of teacher mentors.

Personal Connections

Several interns reported that establishing personal connections with a child can set the foundation for

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a better approach to managing behavior. For example, interns would connect with children about their neighborhood or discover a common hobby, sport, or music preference.

Some interns mentioned that sometimes they built connections using a strong “intuitive” feeling they had from being an older sibling or from a previous background in other OST or childcare programs. One intern said that their experience as an older sibling enhanced their ability to teach children how to express their emotions in constructive ways. Another intern explained that they worked to project themselves as a person “you know you can come to if you need anything.”

Securing connections through personal conversations during activities and free social times helped the interns unpack some of the causes underlying a child’s behavior. Then they could move forward feeling they could, as one put it, “handle certain situations” with confidence.

Professional Development

All five summer programs provided specialized training for interns and often invited interns into professional development offered to teaching staff. Most programs’ intern training was held the week before the program started; sessions focused on professional skills such as conflict resolution, lesson planning, public speaking, multitasking, and community building. The workshops discussed how to apply these skills to common scenarios the interns would encounter while working with children.

One intern explained that developing a “teacher-like mindset” was an essential strategy for managing behavior. This intern described that mindset as including the establishment of base rules that children can incorporate into their daily routine. Setting boundaries that all children can follow is an important first step toward creating lasting habits and a supportive and predictable program environment.

Teacher Mentors

Interns took full advantage of the teacher mentors in their program, working closely with these mentors to pick up tips and advice they could apply to the situations they faced in daily programming. They cited approaches to positive behavior and engagement such as connecting with a child’s favorite teacher to share strategies, identifying meaningful rewards that could spark self-regulation, and generally adding flexibility into their work with children. One intern noticed that devising flexible daily activity plans made it easier to add children’s ideas and interests into an activity. Such adaptations raised the level of fun while creating a focused learning experience for all.

Interns benefited from observing as well as listening to mentors. One intern explained, “I actually imitated my mentors because I saw them dealing with the same thing.... [It] turned out to be working pretty well. Watching them makes a lot more sense than just letting them explain to you.”

How Interns Learned About Behavior Management

Investing in interns for summer learning programs can be a valuable strategy for growing staff numbers, enhancing connections with children in the program, and providing a first employment experience for local teens. Almost inevitably, young workers struggle with the challenge of behavior management. The interns we interviewed said that creating personal connections with children, using the skills they learned from pre-program professional development, and being receptive to the advice

of seasoned teacher mentors helped them create the toolbox they needed for a successful summer program internship.

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