Recruitment and Retention in Youth Development Programming

By Dawn Anderson-Butcher, Ph.D.

Youth development programs are designed to ensure young people experience healthy development, success in school, and smooth transitions to adulthood. They include activities such as social recreation, arts, sports, life skills programs, job training, after-school programs, and academic enrichment. Quality programs have a dual focus: they develop skills, competencies, and knowledge as well as prevent problem behaviors by reducing risk and related risk factors.

Reviews and meta-analyses examining the outcomes associated with quality programs have found that participation is associated with enhanced academic achievement, school attendance and school engagement; less substance use and delinquency; enhanced social competence; and improved mental health (e.g., National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). These youth development outcomes are especially important for adolescents, as research suggests that involvement in youth development programs may reduce the risk for engaging in problem behaviors that is typically associated with increasing age (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Anderson-Butcher, Midle, et al., 2003).

Given these relationships, it is clear that these programs are important contributors to healthy youth development and positive outcomes, especially during the adolescent years. Ensuring participation in these programs, however, is a continual challenge. This article explores key issues related to recruiting and retaining involvement in youth development programs. It explores several factors that influence youths' initial decisions to attend, and also describes important motivators that impact their continued involvement.

The Challenge of Recruitment and Retention

Youth most often choose to be involved in unstructured activities during their discretionary time, as opposed to participating in more structured youth development programs (Larson, 2001). Recruitment of young people to these structured settings is a constant battle.

There also are issues related to retention. Participation in youth development programs tends to decline as youth age (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003), and only one in four adolescents enrolled in these programs actually attends on a regular basis (Anderson-Butcher, Midle, et al., 2003). When youth do participate, their involvement is most often characterized by engagement in less structured, less outcomes-oriented activities such as gameroom activities and pick-up recreational sports (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003), not in structured programs intentionally designed to develop and promote skills and competencies.

Youth involvement or lack thereof, continues to be a major challenge for youth development practitioners. Youth will not experience the benefits these programs are known to create if they do not attend, do not attend on a regular basis, or if when they do attend their involvement is primarily characterized by less-structured participation.

Initial Factors Relevant to Getting Youth Involved

Central to the recruitment process are the availability and accessibility of interesting and relevant programs and experiences. There are two factors at play here. First, is the basic issue of opportunity. Second, these opportunities need to be interesting and relevant.

Opportunities. At the forefront of any discussion about youth development programming is the obvious issue of opportunity. Youth cannot be recruited to programs if there are none, or if they are unaware the programs and activities exist. Additionally, they will not participate if they do not have the time and/or resources to engage in them.

An additional factor important to youths' initial involvement is the desire to experience something new and exciting. Essentially, many youth initially come to programs because they are afforded opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have access to within their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. These youth are excited to participate in activities they have never done before (Anderson-Butcher, Midle, et al., 2003). Therefore, simply creating the "same old same old" may not serve well when planning for the initial recruitment of young people.

Interest and Relevance. Youth also are initially attracted to youth development programs because of the activities that are offered. They often have some internal reason or interest that drives their initial participation. For instance, they may desire novelty, enjoyment, and decreased boredom. For some youth, they may simply be seeking out settings that fill their discretionary time in interesting ways. They may also believe that a program fits with some personal need or interest. For instance, they may be interested in making a difference in their community, and know that the program offers opportunities for community service and outreach. In the end, interesting and relevant opportunities are critical to examine as one thinks through initial motivators for youth involvement.

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Other Motivators Related to Involvement

Several theoretical perspectives, including self-determination theory, cognitive evaluation theory, achievement goal theory, and effectance or competence motivation theory (e.g., Harter, 1978; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Treasure, 2001; Vallerand, 2001), provide further insights in relation to understanding youths' motivation to become involved in youth development programs. In essence, these theories suggest that youth experience three key motivators. First, youth are motivated to develop or demonstrate competence in contexts that interest them. Second, they should experience a sense of control and/or power while engaging in the activity (i.e., autonomy). Third, youth must feel connected to others within that context (i.e., relatedness). When these three needs are met, it is projected that youth will experience fun and enjoyment, and in turn will have continued motivation for involvement.

Competence. One key contributor to youths' motivation is competence. In essence, we are all goal-directed and intentional in our actions, and we desire to deal effectively within our environments (Harter, 1978; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is this underlying need to develop or demonstrate cognitive, social, and/or physical competence that drives youth toward the successful mastery of certain tasks within youth development programs.

When considering the construct of competence, it seems that the relative balance between successes and failures matters most (Harter, 1978). If youth experience only failures, they will be discouraged from involvement and potentially discontinue participation. On the other hand, if youth experience only successes, they will perceive the tasks as too easy, become bored, and discontinue their involvement. As such, it is the optimal degree of challenge that creates the most satisfaction. Activities that require youth to stretch their abilities, apply effort over time, and learn new things contribute most to the development of competence motivation (Harter, 1978).

Given these relationships, there are several strategies program staff may use to increase the probability that young people will experience competence. These include:

• Design activities that optimally match youths' skills and needs with appropriate levels of challenge.

• Develop skill-building activities in areas that are meaningful and interesting to youth.

• Offer activities and opportunities that youth have not been exposed to before.

• Provide opportunities for youth to learn and apply new skills and abilities in multiple domains.

• Encourage youth to try new things or do things differently while simultaneously giving them multiple chances to succeed.

• Provide informative, contingent, and specific feedback as youth learn new skills so they are able to correct errors and experience mastery and success.

• Help youth make linkages between the effort they applied over time, the successful mastery of skills, and resultant experiences.

• Downplay the importance of outcomes such as winning; instead provide positive reinforcement for improvement, progress, and mastery.

• Acknowledge that it is okay to make mistakes as youth learn and try new things. In other words, make it safe for risk-taking.

• Provide a quality learning experience through direct instruction, modeling, pacing, and allotting appropriate amounts of time to complete tasks. Realize that some youth will need more time to develop skills.

• Provide opportunities for guided and independent practice and application. Assist youth in generalizing their skills to other achievement domains (for example, explain how skills are valuable later in life and in different settings).

Autonomy. Experiencing autonomy is another factor which influences youths' motivation for involvement. Individuals have a basic need to display personal control over their environments. We all have a need for freedom of choice and a desire to experience our behavior as self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In relation to youth, young people must perceive they have some internal control or "a say" in what they do and how they do it. They desire to have internal responsibility for their actions and behaviors, and prefer to work things out independently as opposed to having adults figure things out for them. This in turn leads to higher perceptions of competence because youth will feel personally responsible for their actions and learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

On the other hand, external incentives, such as prizes, imposed goals, and other tangible rewards or threats, may diminish youths' motivation for involvement because they reduce locus of causality (Vallerand, 2001). In essence, youth may no longer feel personal power and control over their experience and may even feel manipulated by others who are in control. In the end, they may discontinue participation because they feel little ownership, sense of responsibility, or locus of causality in relation to their involvement.

There are many ways program staff can encourage autonomy and independence within their programming, including:

• Allow youth to have "a say" in how programs are structured and how activities are offered. Involve them in decision making and program planning, incorporating their ideas, interests and needs into program activities.

• Provide opportunities for youth to serve as leaders, display responsibility, and experience independence.

• Encourage youth to take responsibility for themselves, exercising personal control and power.

• Provide youth with choices and freedoms, allowing them to exercise personal control and power in relation to their involvement.

• Develop programs that do not rely on strict attendance and eligibility requirements. Provide enough flexibility so that youth feel they still have "a say" in their involvement.

• Find out what activities motivate youth to participate. Try to understand what types of things excite and engage them.

• Provide structure and consistency, allowing youth to understand expectations and experience stability within the program context.

• Encourage youths' needs for independence by designing programs that foster identity exploration and development.

• Develop self-management and monitoring skills, promoting the use of self-rewards and internal regulation.

• Allow youth to see the linkage between their own decisions or actions and resultant outcomes.

• Teach youth how to set realistic goals and how to accomplish these goals through effort and perseverance.

Relatedness. Motivation also is driven by individual needs for relatedness. The role of significant others is critical to this process. This is because we often initially engage in certain activities because

the behaviors are prompted, modeled, or valued by significant others to whom we feel (or want to feel) attached. Our continued involvement is often maintained based on the amount and type of social reinforcement we receive (Harter, 1978).

In relation to youth development programming, young people often seek friendships with peers and strong social networks. They desire belonging and connectedness. They search for emotional support and approval from caring adults and community members. They try out different activities as they search for identity matches. As such, fostering and nurturing relatedness is a central process within youth development programming. The more programs satisfy this need, the more likely youth are to maintain and continue their involvement. A few examples include:

- Have staff get to know youth personally and learn all participants' names.
- Develop and sustain strong positive adult-youth relationships based on caring, trust, and respect.
- Ensure program staff are diverse and reflect the youth being served, allowing youth to identify with adult role models.
- Involve adult staff actively in all aspects of the program, as opposed to only serving in supervisory roles (for example, join youth playing basketball, practicing life skills with youth).
- Have adults and peers who are already connected to youth (e.g., teachers, coaches, parents, friends) refer youth to the program and/or work within the programs.
- Strive for all youth to feel welcome, supported, and included by ensuring cultural sensitivity, appreciating diversity, and using inclusive language.
- Create opportunities for youth to experience a sense of belonging.
- Provide opportunities for team building, cooperative learning, and sharing.
- Help youth develop and maintain positive peer friendships via their participation. Provide opportunities for youth to hang out, socialize, and network.
- Encourage young people to socialize with peers and others who would ordinarily be outside their social networks, increasing empathy and appreciation for those that may be different.
- Develop and reinforce strong, pro-social identities and connect these identities with positive opportunities.
- Provide social approval by having significant adults and peers recognize, reinforce, and validate involvement in the program.
- Provide opportunities for youth to help and serve others, developing a sense of community and related social capital.

Other Lessons Related to Recruitment and Retention

Essentially, youth development practitioners must strategically plan for the ongoing recruitment and retention of youth by examining opportunity structures, youths' interests, and youths' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Focusing on these important motivators will assist in initially getting youth in the door, keeping them coming back, and ensuring that they are involved in ways that allow them to reap the benefits associated with participation in youth development programs.

Table 1.1 synthesizes these primary motivators for youth involvement, critically exploring the various influences that contribute to youths' decisions about participation (e.g., Anderson-Butcher, Midle, et al., 2003; Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, et al., 2003; Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002). There are some additional aspects related to the design and implementation of youth development programs that must also be considered when fostering motivation for involvement. These

lessons from the research will further assist youth development practitioners in their recruitment and retention efforts.

First, what motivates certain types of youth may not be the same factors that influence others' decisions to participate. For instance, some youth will initially participate because their friends do, while others may become involved because a certain activity interests them. As such, youth development practitioners need to develop many types of activities to attract and retain different kinds of youth. In other words, programs must have multiple components and utilize diversified strategies, therefore attracting a variety of young people with different interests and needs. In addition, these strategies also must be individualized, as "one size fits all" approaches will not work. It is also imperative that programs target those youth who need them the most, creating an important match between youths' needs and program designs (while also ensuring the utilization of resources where they are needed most).

Second, what initially gets youth in the door may be entirely different than what keeps them coming back. For instance, youth may initially attend the program because they want to play basketball. Their continued involvement, however, may be a product of the meaningful relationships they have developed with caring adult staff. Essentially, motives for participation and interests may change over time, especially as youth age and develop further competencies, relationships, personal control, and independence.

Third, it is not uncommon for youth to drop out of one program and move on to another (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002). It should be expected that youth will move in and out of programs depending on their ongoing development, changing interests, and continual search for self. Therefore, it is important to have multiple types of activities and programs available in schools and communities, so that when youth "go shopping" they find pro-social instead of anti-social opportunities.

Fourth, youth often have multiple motives driving their participation (Anderson-Butcher & Ferrari, 2002; Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002). There typically is not one, but many reasons youth attend the program. They may want to develop skills, build relationships with peers, and experience new opportunities simultaneously. Youth development practitioners must continually assess and attempt to meet these multiple needs, incorporating diversified recruitment and retention strategies into their program designs.

Fifth, it is imperative that quality programs and activities be in place once youth make the decision to participate. Essentially, it doesn't do much good to recruit and involve youth if little strategic programming occurs after they are there. To emphasize, these programs must be more than safe havens, only focused on supervising youth during out-of-school hours. They need to be intentionally designed to develop skills and competencies and reduce risk and related risk factors among youth when they are there. These quality, well-balanced program designs also will double as important motivators that influence youths' decisions to keep coming back. In other words, youth will experience more successes, fulfillment, competence, and fun, and as a result will continue to return to the program.

Finally, youth development practitioners must balance less structured strategies that are critical for recruitment and retention with those that are more outcome-focused and create results. This is a lot like walking a tight-rope. Youth development practitioners must provide fun, engaging, and interesting activities (often unstructured ones) while simultaneously engaging youth in more structured programs that enhance competencies in domains that are important to youths' healthy development.

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Table 1.1
What Youth Say Motivates Their Participation

OPPORTUNITIES	INTEREST and REVELANCE	COMPETENCE	AUTONOMY	RELATEDNESS
• Have programs and activities available in their community • Have programs and activities in locations where youth will go (e.g, school- or community- based, etc.) • Have awareness of the programs and activities (e.g., marketing, someone refers them, etc.) • Have financial resources to support involvement • Have a stable enough home environment so connections can be made to an activity domain (e.g., family and community mobility and transitions shouldn't interfere) • Have time to participate (not engaged in other activities such as home responsibilities, jobs, other extracurricular activities) • Want to experience new opportunities one hasn't done before	• Are bored and want something to do (especially nights and weekends for adolescents) • Want to hang out • Desire physical and psychological safety (e.g., get off the streets) • Desire to increase the quality of one's life • Expand horizons • Seek out opportunities for enjoyment, fun, and excitement • Desire novelty, satisfy curiosity, or because of aesthetic value • Experience creativity and resourcefulness • Fits with developmental stage • Meets needs (e.g., help with school work, support working parents, etc.) • Attracted to the activity • Perceive the activity or outcome as meaningful • See a match between the program and one's personal goals and values • Desire to help/Contributes to the community/Makes a difference	• Learn new skills • Practice and apply skills • Improve skills • Compare skills to others • Display skills at which one is good • Experience a challenge • Display effort over time • Get help with work • Achieve personal goals • Experience mastery and accomplishment • Relieve stress • Enhance fitness/Get in shape/Get stronger • Enhance appearance	• Parents or significant others make one attend or wants one to attend (especially for younger youth) • Experience and display personal control • Exercise choice in what one wants to do • Develop and display one's own personal identity • Exercise independence • Experience a sense of responsibility and ownership • Desire to accomplish a goal and work hard at something • Desire for consistency, sense of order, and predictability	• Make friends • Be with friends • Be part of a group or team • Experience inclusion in settings that value diversity • Gain social acceptance • Experience caring and belonging • Connection with adults and peers • Experience relationships with caring adults • Get approval from significant adults • Enjoy and respect the adults • Receive recognition and reinforcement for involvement • Desire to fit into the social norm • Perceive the activity as fitting with their own self-identity

Summary

In the end, getting and keeping youth involved in programming starts with five key questions: (1) Are opportunities available and accessible? (2) Are the opportunities of interest and relevance to youth? (3) How do programs build competence? (4) How do programs encourage autonomy? and (5) How are youths' needs for relatedness satisfied via programming? This article provides an initial framework for exploring the answers to these questions. These answers are critical, because we must ensure the benefits associated with participation in these important developmental settings are maximized. Recruitment and retention are central because youth will not benefit from these programs if they are not there.

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