

Impactful Practices and Strategies in Out-of-School Time Programs: Relationships are the Work

RESEARCH BRIEF

Understanding Impactful Practices and Strategies in Out-of-School Time Programs

Out-of-school time (OST) youth development programs are critical settings for promoting positive youth development and thriving [1]. OST programs often serve as a safe haven or “second home” for young people to discover their sparks, build trusting relationships with peers and adults, cultivate character strengths, and grow into their full selves. OST programs can be especially important for youth who have been marginalized. Programs have the potential to support positive development through intentional efforts to foster important strengths, such as critical consciousness, cultural pride, resilience against discrimination, and other assets that are particularly identity-affirming in the context of unjust systemic structures [2].

Given the affordances of OST youth development programs, **what are some impactful practices and strategies** for ensuring that young people feel known, nurtured, and activated so that they can show up as their full selves? To answer this question, we interviewed 15 insightful youth development professionals from 12 programs; 19 young people from five programs; and 18 of their parenting adults (see [the Appendix](#) for details). The promising practices and strategies they shared are summarized below and described in more detail throughout this research brief.

The program setting should be:

- Relationship-rich and reflect the elements of [developmental relationships](#)
- Safe and accessible for youth participants and their families

Programming should be designed in ways that:

- Center youth voice and leadership
- Promote skills, assets, and [social capital](#)

The organization should cultivate:

- Growth-oriented program structures, staff development, and culture
- A range of community partnerships

Understanding the impactful practices and strategies for ensuring that each young person’s inherent value is known, nurtured, and activated is important because *quality matters* in OST programs. The strategies and practices in this brief align well with standards and frameworks for high-quality youth development programs (e.g., National Afterschool Association’s [Core Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies](#); [Future of Youth Development](#) Features of Positive Developmental Settings). Simply, the impactful practices and strategies are key ingredients for optimizing the promises of OST youth development programs.

1. Relationship-rich settings

Youth development professionals, youth participants, and caregivers emphasized that relationships lay the foundation for impactful practices in youth development programs. Through meaningful, [developmental relationships](#), youth discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them [3].

Build developmental relationships with youth

- Express care by connecting with youth around shared backgrounds (e.g., language, culture), interests and hobbies. Remember the small things that youth share with you and be curious about what brings youth joy.
- Provide support based on youth's individual needs, including being developmentally responsive and trauma informed.
- Build reciprocity: mutual relationships allow both youth and adults to be known and valued.
- Communicate regularly and openly; e.g., through check-ins and newsletters.

“Ensuring that you can say the name correctly, that you are honoring pronouns, that you are remembering what they tell you, you know. One of these young men says he's getting an award for school tomorrow, so next time I see him– how'd that go? Remembering, recalling, those are the ways that you build those relationships.”

-Kilgore (youth development professional)

Cultivate a relationally-rich program climate.

- Model positive adult-adult relationships.
- Facilitate positive youth-youth peer dynamics (e.g., cooperative learning, teach youth to be considerate and respectful of each other).
- Integrate developmental relationships into program training, curriculum, norms and routines.



Relationship building is a dynamic, intentional, and responsive process.

Check out our [Developmental Relationships Framework](#) for more strategies on building relationships or take the [Relational Culture Checkup](#).

2. Safe and accessible environments

Developmental relationships go hand-in-hand with the next category of impactful practices and strategies, which is about making your program a safe and accessible environment where youth can count on feeling known and nurtured.

Co-create emotional and physical safety

- Do regular emotional check-ins with youth and staff.
- Be a consistent space for youth, for example by offering events during school breaks to sustain engagement.
- When feasible, offer nutritious snacks- this can be especially critical for youth from economically marginalized communities who may experience hunger outside of school time.

“We always do a check in so everybody gets time to share about themselves, share about how they're feeling, how they're doing things, just whatever they want to share in our check in... It's helping them just gain confidence in something so simple as, ‘Hi, my name is Molly, and I'm feeling tired.’ Like, giving them just that space to talk about themselves for a minute.”

-Molly (youth development professional)

Co-design with equity and accessibility.

- Gather insights from youth and families to identify potential inequities in program access and outcomes, and develop plans for improvement.
- Translate outreach materials into the different languages represented in the communities and families you serve.
- Expand your programming to communities that may currently be underserved.



The key here is to keep safety and accessibility at the forefront of programming, while utilizing your programs resources and strengths. Check out [this blog post](#) for more strategies on creating safe spaces.

3. Centering youth voice and leadership

Practitioners, youth, and families emphasize the importance of putting youth at the center of the program and positioning adults as their cheerleaders and supporters. Youth voice offers a pathway for influencing programming, and youth leadership can support action. These strategies reflect the importance of sharing power, challenging growth, and expanding possibilities—three of the elements from the Developmental Relationships framework.

Activate youth voice

- Share power by creating space for youth to offer input on what your program should look and feel like (e.g., from learning topics and activities to trips and guest speakers).
- Regularly gather youth feedback (e.g., through short surveys or check-ins) and “back up the talk”: take youth input seriously by following through.
- Empower youth with a sense of agency and ownership over your program; e.g., ask youth to explain the “why” behind what you do in the program.
- Pass the mic: give youth the floor by “not being the loudest in the room”, encourage youth to share what's going on in their lives and in their communities.

“With any meeting that we have, we do group norms with the teens, and they're the ones that really come up with those and setting like agreements with the whole team... So it's not just the adults saying what can and can't be done, but they are holding themselves accountable for that. Also... they're the ones to really plan out the school year and telling us what it is that they're wanting to do.”

-Frankie (youth development professional)

Support youth leadership

- Share power by bringing youth to the decision making table.
- Challenge growth and expand possibilities by encouraging youth to try out opportunities that push them outside of their comfort zone (e.g., become a speaker at an event).
- Build leadership opportunities into your program structure, e.g., set up a youth advisory committee or ways for youth to mentor younger peers.



Youth voice and leadership are not about relinquishing power; rather, they reflect a paradigm shift that recognizes the assets young people bring to the program. **Check out our [Student Voice Toolkit](#) for more strategies on elevating youth voice.**

4. Skills, assets, and social capital building

Youth thrive when they are equipped with relevant skills and connected to people and opportunities that broaden their horizons. These strategies are a way of expanding possibilities for youth participants.

Scaffold the development of skills that support youth in becoming their full selves.

- Provide spaces for youth to make and learn from mistakes
- Intentionally embed opportunities into your programming that strengthen social and emotional development

Introduce youth to a variety of resources and opportunities, including...

- Pathways for contributing to and supporting their communities (e.g., volunteer opportunities)
- Information that they can use for planning their education and career pathways. For younger participants this could be inviting community and family members to talk about their careers; for older youth, job fairs, college fairs, and financial aid resources can be useful.
- Exposure to extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, technology) that balance education and play.

“They like, go out of their way to make us be aware of like, different organizations that are in our community, they help us connect with them. Like, they asked me about what I wanted to study in college, and then told me about what they did to, like, make their college journey easier for them, and they gave me help with that.”
-Yaritza (youth)

Cultures are an asset: Celebrate them.

- Include diverse representation in programming, for example, by intentionally inviting guest speakers from a range of backgrounds
- Connect youth with people who they can relate to (i.e., mirrors) as well as people with lived experiences different from their own (i.e., windows).



The key to building youth's skills, assets, and social capital is following young people's lead. Every youth deserves adults who cheer and support them on their current and future paths. **Check out our [Youth Opportunity Toolkit](#) for more ways to become a social capital promoting organization.**

5. Staff development and support

Thriving youth development professionals are needed for thriving youth. Ongoing staff development can strengthen program quality and protect against burnout. The next category of impactful practices is about empowering adults with the skills, mindsets, and capacities that they need to best serve youth.

Build growth-oriented program structures, culture and climate

- Provide training on Developmental Relationships, social capital-promoting practices, and other evidence-based approaches to positive youth development.
- Build in time and resources for staff development.
- Cultivate a supportive mindset: when work gets hard or confusing, remind yourself of your program's mission and stay true to purpose.
- Encourage staff to understand and explore their positionality, that is, how their personal backgrounds and identities shape the way they show up for and interact with youth.
- Build connections and learning and support networks across youth development programs in your community

"We should be people who are lifetime learners. What we know today, information is still going to be changing. So I think being able to go to trainings on trauma-informed care or trainings about youth mental health and resources for that, it's very vital to serving our youth. If we're not going to those professional developments and growing in our profession, then we are not able to help our youth grow."

-Mr. Woodbury (youth development professional)



In environments rich with priorities and possibilities, programs are learning that time spent developing staff multiplies impact elsewhere, making it essential and beneficial to protect time for staff development and support. **Check out our [Resources Hub](#) for free tools and strategies to apply strengths-based language and approaches to Positive Youth Development and our [Professional Learning](#) opportunities to build capacity and drive meaningful change.**

6. Community partnerships and integration

The final category of impactful practices and strategies is about building a strong network of relationships, or a “relational ecosystem,” that collectively fosters positive development.

Cultivate and Diversify Partnerships

- Build collaborations with other mission-aligned organizations/programs, for example through hosting joint events, volunteering at each other’s sites, and exchanging resources and ideas.
- Share power with families, for example through inviting parenting adults to contribute to programming, hosting family nights, doing home visits, and conducting empathy interviews.
- Engage other sectors in the community that play a role in shaping youth thriving, for example through school visits and town hall meetings.
- Seek mission aligned funding.

“..one thing myself, my co-worker, and our CEO tried to develop was hosting these community safety meetings where we invited leaders from the police department, as well as the [community center] and residents who are affected by [issues of safety]. So we post monthly meetings where we can all come to the table and discuss how we can make our families and our youth and our community feel safe. Just to make sure that everybody has a seat at the table. From those meetings, it led to us kind of further developing a relationship with the Afghani community. Basically, we are now hosting ESL classes for women at our center every Thursday.”

-Raymond (youth development professional)

“No one person can ensure that all young people have the resources, opportunities, and relationships needed to thrive. But together we can.” In fact, not one person nor one youth development program can provide everything that a youth needs to thrive.



Mobilizing cross-organizational and community-level collaborations toward positive youth development is critical. **Check out our [Map of Community Connections](#) activity to begin to identify strengths, and also gaps that could be filled or goals of establishing or strengthening community partners.**

Structural Barriers that Impact Implementation

As important as it is to empower youth development professionals with impactful practices and strategies, we should also recognize and proactively address the many, realistic structural and institutional barriers that they face. The youth development professionals and families we interviewed shared four major barriers for character-nurturing out-of-school time programs.

- **Inequitable access**

Some youth and families have to overcome more hurdles than others to join the program, this includes for example transportation and language barriers.

- **Funding restrictions**

Many youth development professionals voice their concerns that the inequitable access to their program is often exacerbated by funding constraints, such as only being able to serve families in certain zip codes.

- **Lack of a shared mindset among staff**

When staff are not on the same page, for example on how to use asset-based as opposed to deficit-based language in the program, that translates to youth's experiences. Program-level policies and norms are important for addressing such differences between staff mindset and behaviors.

- **Limited program time**

Finally, an obvious but nonetheless important barrier is the limited time each program/staff have with youth. Fostering positive youth development and building relationships takes time, yet youth development programs often have more limited time with youth compared to other settings like schools.

Conclusion, Reflection and More Resources

The impactful strategies and practices outlined in this brief are by no means prescriptive solutions—**what works best for one program might not be as responsive for another given the community it serves.** In fact, high quality youth development programs are skilled at adapting to different needs, strengths, and contexts. With this mindset, we invite you to reflect on the following questions:

- **Relationships are the work**
What is one example of a recent meaningful connection I had with a youth participant?
- **Safe & accessible environments**
What signals do youth give that they feel safe at my program?
- **Safe & accessible environments**
What kinds of inequity (e.g., in access, experience, or outcomes) might be going unnoticed in my program?
- **Youth voice and leadership**
How did I “pass the mic” to young people this month?
- **Skills, assets, and social capital**
How have I helped a young person connect to a “next step” recently?
- **Staff development & support**
How am I growing in my own practice?
- **Community partnerships and integration:**
What new or deepened partnership could benefit our youth right now?

Additional Resources

In closing, we thank you for reading this report and for your effort in understanding out-of-school time youth development programs as a critical setting for youth thriving. Search Institute’s approach is grounded in the belief that thriving youth are the foundation of thriving communities. Through deep partnerships and intentional learning, we help spread and sustain conditions that allow youth—and the adults who support them—to thrive together. As you continue your journey, we’re sharing additional resources to support you in your work:

- Read our [blog](#).
- Gain [insights](#) regarding our frameworks.
- Learn how [communities of practice](#) can foster relationship-building.

Appendix: Study context

[Excel Academy](#) is a community of practice for youth development professionals in San Antonio, Texas, supported by [UP Partnership](#). Each year, about 30 youth development professionals, including both direct service staff and program managers/leaders, participate in Excel Academy, representing youth programs such as Good Samaritan Community Services, Youth Code Jam, YMCA and YWCA. Check out [Rooted in Relationships: Cultivating Character Through Communities of Practice](#) for more information.

The voices elevated in this brief came from the following participants of Excel Academy.

- 15 youth development professionals:
 - 47% Hispanic/Latino/a/e, 33% White, 13% Multiracial, 7% Black/African American
 - 73% female, 20% male, 7% non-binary
 - Most have been working in the youth development field for more than 10 years. Median time in their current position = 2 years.
 - representing 12 different youth development programs
- 19 youth:
 - median time in the program = 2 years
 - representing five different youth development programs
- 18 parents/guardians:
 - 78% Hispanic/Latino/a/e, 11% Black/African American (11% missing racial/ethnic information)
 - representing five different youth development programs

The youth development professionals, youth, and parents/guardians in this study participated in 90-minute focus groups in spring 2023 and 2024 that ask them to share about how their youth development program fosters developmental relationships, racial equity, and character strength. Some focus group questions that informed this brief include “generate a list of the most impactful practices or strategies your organization does to nurture developmental relationships, racial equity, and/or character development” and “what systems, structures, or practices help youth in your organization develop the positive qualities and traits they need to succeed?”. The youth and parent/guardian focus groups took place in person, whereas the youth development professional focus groups took place online. The youth development professional and youth focus groups were conducted in English; two of the four parent/guardian focus groups were conducted in Spanish. Each participant was compensated \$50 for their time and insights.

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About Search Institute

We collaborate with schools and youth-serving organizations to conduct applied research, co-design solutions, and create an environment where each and every young person can thrive. Through professional learning experiences, surveys, measurement tools, and support for continuous improvement, we build capacity and inspire change.

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