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Evidence-Based Domains for High-Quality Youth Programs

Your guide to understanding, creating, and implementing research-backed best practices

Introduction

The benefits of high-quality youth programs are far-reaching for both participants and the programs themselves.

Evidence shows that youth who participate in high-quality programs:

- Increase academic growth and performance
- Strength key life skills, such as social emotional skills
- Improve standardized assessment performance
- Increase engagement and interest in learning
- Reduce school year behavioral referrals
- Improve school year attendance
- Increase engagement at home with caregivers
- Improve physical and mental health



Introduction

Programs that embed evidence-based practices into their programs see:



Higher enrollment and attendance



Greater access to funding streams



Increased staff retention and satisfaction



Strengthened positive engagement between youth and staff



Increased operational efficiency and positive climate



Family confidence in staff and satisfaction in program

Introduction

What defines evidence-based practices and how do they elevate program quality? To understand, create, and implement the practices that make a high-quality program, we've broken down best practices into seven research-based domains. These domains form the foundation for effective program development and delivery.

1. Evaluation & Assessment
2. Program Management
3. Staff Management
4. Youth Management
5. Culture & Climate
6. Family Engagement
7. Curriculum & Instruction



1. Evaluation & Assessment

High-quality programs inspect what they expect.

In youth programs, data informs planning and instruction, measuring growth and progress towards goals. It's pivotal for accessing funding, building buy-in from community leaders, and driving quality improvement.

Start by creating a data collection and analysis plan including both qualitative (surveys, open-ended questions) and quantitative data (enrollment and retention, attendance rates, tests, assessments).

Use post-program assessment to strengthen programming and to report outcomes to the community in recruitment materials, social media, and more.

When creating your data plan, ask questions like:

- "What are my program goals and benchmarks?"
- "What tools will I use to gather data?"
- "How will I share this data with stakeholders?"

2. Program Management

High-quality programs are intentional, organized, and efficient.

Research shows that program planning is crucial to quality and impact. After all, how can you meet and exceed your goals if they aren't set?

Plan for quality by:

- Conducting a community needs assessment to set focused and targeted program goals
- Setting an operating calendar with consistent daily and weekly schedules
- Determining formal processes for budget, program planning, and enrollment
- Making sure technology, materials, and systems are in-place
- Setting an approach to creating and managing your budget



Download Program Planning Highlights for a quick start guide to planning a high-quality out-of-school time program.

3. Staff Management

High-quality programs implement well thought-out hiring practices and provide ongoing professional development.

The right staff is a significant part of what makes your program succeed and keeps families engaged and coming back each year. When hiring, prioritize motivation and effectiveness and look for staff who have a great rapport with kids, a growth mindset, and subject-matter expertise.

Staffing success doesn't stop with hiring - you need to empower your staff to expand and refine their skills throughout the program. Be sure to provide ongoing professional development and opportunities for coaching and feedback for staff.



Read more about offering pre-program professional development and training to get staff ready to take on your program launch with confidence.

4. Youth Management

High-quality programs have concise, consistent, and youth-focused positive strategies in place before the program starts.

Since attendance in out-of-school time programs is not mandatory, it's important to set clear expectations for participants and their parents. Attendance is key to making a difference, as consistent engagement allows youth to contribute meaningfully and experience high-quality outcomes. Programs should focus on creating engaging experiences that motivate youth to return day after day, ensuring their continued impact and growth.

Focus on quality youth outcomes by:

- Creating a formal attendance and participation policy that is tracked and incentivized
- Keeping small group sizes small and youth-to-staff ratio high
- Making sure your enrollment and rostering processes are organized
- Maintaining a structured setting with clear expectations and supportive supervision
- Creating accurate and inclusive recruiting materials

Make sure your recruitment materials:

- Are in the students' primary language
- Use images that are representative of the community you serve
- Use accessible language
- Are distributed where potential participants' families are: schools & community centers, on social media & relevant websites, or by direct mail

5. Culture & Climate

High-quality programs use intentional and well-designed strategies implemented by trained staff across all settings.

Culture and climate set the tone of any youth program. Youth that feel safe, secure, and welcome will achieve more than peers without that type of environment. Research tells us that a strong culture and positive climate is essential in developing this type of environment.

When developing strategies to strengthen the culture and climate of your program, ask:

- How would I describe the ideal culture & climate for my program?
- What are some steps I can take to achieve the ideal culture & climate?
- How will I promote positive behavior in my program?



Download 7 Steps to a Positive Learning Environment to learn how your program can create a positive culture where both participants and staff thrive.

6. Family Engagement

High-quality programs create a welcoming environment for families through proactive planning.

Studies show that youth thrive when families are actively involved in their activities. When the After-School Corporation studied 96 school-based afterschool programs, it found that connections between program staff and families was a shared feature of the highest-performing programs.

Creating an environment for families to feel engaged and valued as partners in their children's experiences is a vital part of a high-quality youth program. To do this be sure to provide frequent and meaningful family communication as well as opportunities for in-person engagement.



Encourage family collaboration and communication across your youth program by exploring

Ways Your Team Can Get Involved in Family Engagement Strategies

7. Curriculum & Instruction

High-quality programs use outcome-oriented planning, engaging instructional strategies, and quality curriculum.

Curriculum is often associated with academics, but curriculum and instruction are applicable to any youth program from STEAM to the arts, leadership, and everything in between, and are critical to driving quality.

For example, if your program goals include providing an academic boost or enrichment experiences, ensure you incorporate quality curriculum and engaging instructional strategies. Give students the opportunity to share opinions and make choices in their learning to increase their interest and engagement.

The checklist to the right includes action items that experts agree are valuable to driving program quality.

Curriculum & Instruction Checklist

- ▹ Select or adapt a written curriculum for each grade/subject that aligns to standards, student needs and background, and program goals
- ▹ Provide daily lesson plans
- ▹ Align curricular activities to program goals
- ▹ Select age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and engaging activities
- ▹ Hire enrichment staff with strong content knowledge
- ▹ Cap class size at 15 participants per instructor
- ▹ Plan lessons to include sequenced activities to build skills

Use the right software to facilitate your youth programming.

The right technology can make a world of difference when it comes to your ability to provide high-quality youth programming. With tools and resources to help you create and implement research-based best practices along with the data to prove your outcomes, Arly makes it easy to manage and elevate your youth programming.



Arly is the comprehensive youth programming platform that streamlines all your management tools and resources in one place so you can focus on what matters most: **creating high-quality, impactful experiences for your community.**

Ready to embed evidence-based practices into your program?

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