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Building Better Youth Programs

How you can improve your youth program for the benefit of your participants, staff, and community

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Introduction

One of the great things about youth programming is that you can look back on the lives you've touched and the good you've achieved while also looking ahead to consider how your program could be even better. If you're excited to enhance the quality of your youth program, take a close look at key areas.

Use the tips in this guide to build a more effective program.

1. Identify Gaps & Set Goals
2. Streamline Your Planning & Organization
3. Boost Family Engagement
4. Hire the Right People & Give Them the Right Tools
5. Create a Positive Learning Environment
6. Implement More Measurable Reporting



1. Identify Gaps & Set Goals

Start by envisioning exactly what you hope to achieve.

Imagine the ideal enrichment program and identify gaps between where you are now and where you want to be. Once you've defined success for your program, you can think about the steps needed to reach your goals.

Prioritize Your Goals

Building quality enrichment programs is a process that takes time. If there are many aspects of your program you want to improve, consider prioritizing the most critical areas and focusing on them before expanding to others.

Maybe this year, you want to focus on improving your backend administrative processes so you can systematically and efficiently manage planning, enrollment, and more. Then, next year, you can focus on improving your communications and family engagement strategy. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; determine which improvements will have the biggest impact on your overall program quality and start there, but keep those other goals in mind for the future.

Measure Your Progress

When you set a goal, you also need to consider how you'll measure your progress and achievement of that goal. What are the quality indicators or metrics you'll pay attention to?

For example, if you're looking to boost family engagement, higher attendance rates at a student showcase may be a good indicator of success. If you're trying to improve the employee experience, you may want to track employment metrics such as average turnover rates and send out surveys to hear directly from staff.

2. Streamline Your Planning & Organization

Early, robust planning is essential to ensure a successful program.

As one term or year ends, start planning for the next term right away, drawing from data and observations you collected about what is and isn't working to make changes and improvements.

Throughout your program, you also need to stay organized with your administrative functions. Everything from enrollment to hiring to event planning can come with administrative logistics, and it's easy for programs to settle for inefficient methods or get disorganized along the way.

Go digital to stay organized.

As you plan your program and manage administration, you need the right tools. Keeping your planning and administrative functions in a central, digital hub is an excellent way to stay organized and eliminate the hiccups that come with a complicated web of paper files, emails, and undocumented conversations. With a streamlined solution like Arly, you can make the most of your planning and set yourself up for a successful program.



3. Boost Family Engagement

Family engagement is good for the kids in your program!

Research shows that **parental involvement is associated** with higher academic achievement and improved attitudes and behaviors.

Try these tips to get families more involved:

- Educating staff on family engagement expectations in your program
- Hosting open houses and enrollment days
- Recruiting family volunteers
- Creating a family directory
- Hosting family events to socialize
- Planning fundraising events for parents, guardians, and community members
- Maintaining an active online presence
- Keeping lines of communication open with families
- Sending out a newsletter
- Using family engagement apps like Arly



Read more about family engagement plans to learn how to effectively drive participant and family satisfaction

4. Hire the Right People & Give them the Right Tools

Your youth program staff are indispensable to your mission. By choosing the best people for the job and investing in their success, you invest in the success of your program.

Start strong with onboarding

For professional development that packs a powerful punch, begin with an onboarding component that provides details about the program, its core values, staff expectations, and communication norms. This will help staff members get acclimated quickly.



As part of your program, be sure to offer education on:

- Your program's internal tools and how to use them effectively
- Managing participants and their information
- Internal data reporting standards
- Effective communication with families
- Policies and procedures of the program
- Program goals for students, staff, and administrators
- Any relevant program history
- The wider needs of the community the program serves and whether the program is addressing them

Implement everyday practices that empower staff success

The best programs help teachers, coaches, and volunteers thrive on a day-to-day basis. Here are some ways you can build a culture of support and empower your staff:

- **Prioritize accountability and restorative practices.** Encourage teachers to be responsive to and responsible for one another and their students. Integrating restorative practices into your program provides ample opportunities to practice important life skills.

- **Offer direct, compassionate, and consistent feedback.** Staff members need clear and specific feedback—both positive and constructive—to learn and grow. Staff should be able to rely on regular reviews to monitor their progress and continue to improve.

- **Provide support for students.** Teachers can't do it all. Built-in support for students helps teachers prioritize education and encourages them to build a program that values the whole student—not just their grades or achievements.

- **Listen to teacher feedback.** Teamwork makes the dream work for effective programs, so keep your ears open and engaged. Teachers can help you build a stronger, more effective program, so solicit feedback and listen to what they have to say.

Offer ongoing opportunities for professional development

Provide access to professional development training to help staff members continually sharpen their skills. Every exceptional professional development program has at least three characteristics:

- It offers consistent, relevant training.
- It is self-paced, so teachers and staff can fit it into their lives.
- It offers proof of accomplishments so staff can highlight their skills and achievements.

If you don't have a formalized solution for professional development, implement one that checks these boxes and is designed for youth program workers for maximum impact.

5. Create a Positive Learning Environment

The learning environment you create can be a powerful factor in nurturing students' learning and development.

Use research to get it right

Cultural norms, personal experiences, and many other factors can influence program coordinators' intuitions about how to structure effective programs. However, the most effective programs are evidence-based, drawing on proven science to support learning and engagement. Focus on building **21st-century learning skills** and doing so in a way that's fun and encouraging.

Build community

Kids want to feel known and valued by their peers and teachers. Take time to get to know the kids in your program and find ways to encourage positive relationships and collaboration between staff and kids and among your student population. Even something as simple as cheerfully addressing kids by their name as they arrive can show you care.



Read 4 Keys to Creating a Positive Learning Environment to learn how to unlock participant potential and transform your program

Cultivate a positive environment

Encourage conscious, deliberate cultivation of a positive environment. These strategies can help:

- **Positive reinforcement:** Reinforce the behavior you want to see by noticing and rewarding it and building reinforcement structures into the curriculum.
- **Clear teaching styles:** Aggressive and passive teaching approaches can cause similar problems. Assertive teachers establish clear, specific expectations, follow through on consequences, and nurture meaningful relationships with the students they support.
- **Positive discipline:** Teach young people to become responsible, respectful, and resourceful members of their communities. Positive discipline teaches important social and life skills in a manner that is encouraging for both children and adults.
- **Responsive environment:** The program environment should be student-centered and focus on building emotional intelligence. Use evidence-based practices designed to create a safe, joyful, and engaging environment for both students and staff.
- **Restorative practices:** Everyone makes mistakes, and learning from them is key. Teach restorative practices through modeling and direct instruction so kids can fix relationships, reduce antisocial behavior, and begin to restore order in their immediate surroundings.

6. Implement More Measurable Reporting

The right data can help you continuously adapt your youth programming to the needs of the children and communities you serve.

You may have a general sense of how your program is doing each year, but do you have hard data to paint a more objective and detailed picture? Measurable reporting can help in several ways. Armed with numbers and insights from participants and staff:

- **You'll make better use of resources.** The right data tells you which interventions work best allowing you to pour your resources into the services that already work.
- **You'll set clearer, more specific goals.** Tracking data requires measurable goals. With well articulated goals, you can align all the elements of your program to fulfill the goals most important to your program.
- **You'll gain the recruiting insight you need.** The right data tracking allows you to answer questions like: How do programming decisions affect enrollment? Which programs draw in the most children?
- **You'll seamlessly manage enrollment.** Having enrollment insights from day one allows you to make decisions that create the best learning environment.
- **You'll gain the power to assess program performance.** The right data tracking software empowers you to measure the program areas relevant to your success.
- **You'll be able to demonstrate value to stakeholders.** Share your data with community members, funding partners, and families to demonstrate your program's value.

Track the right metrics.

The metrics you track should be relevant to your program's goals, such as:

- Average daily attendance
- Number of children served
- The age range of participants
- Hours of professional development
- Program satisfaction
- Social and emotional growth

Build a Program You're Proud of with Arly

A quality youth program is something worth working for. These programs help kids grow and develop vital skills while creating richer connections within the community. For many programs, the difference between good and great is totally within reach; they just need help getting there with the right resources and tools.

This is where Arly comes in. We empower youth programmers to reach their goals with our suite of digital solutions, ranging from enrollment management to family communications to professional development and beyond.



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 the youth in your community.**

Ready to elevate your youth program?

REQUEST A DEMO

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