



Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

SPECIAL NEEDS INCLUSION PROJECT, SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES
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SNIPPET #8 Building Supportive OST Communities Part I: It Starts with Staff

What is community building, and why is it important in our program?

Community building in out-of-school time programs means helping all children feel welcomed and included. As educators, we can create an environment in which each individual's strengths are celebrated, and accommodations are available so that every child, with and without disabilities, can thrive. This is part of an ongoing process for out-of-school (OST) staff, children and families. A single conversation isn't enough to create an inclusive environment.

Research has shown that ongoing positive relationships with adults promote healthy development for children and youth. When young people feel valued they thrive at home, in the community and academically. Through collaboration and communication, out-of-school time program staff can make a big difference in helping young people form positive relationships. As adults we provide leadership, knowledge, an open ear and resources for children and youth.

According to the Search Institute, a national leader in research on child development,

"relationships with adults in school and community settings add valuable sources of protection from risk." Children from kindergarten to fifth grade are learning how to navigate their school environment, pushing boundaries and expectations. The best way to empower and support children is by modeling appropriate relationships for them. Youth in grades six through twelve who have support systems either in school, at home, or in the community are less likely to be in violent relationships, abuse drugs or alcohol, and participate in risky sexual activity. A study of diverse youth from low income families showed that a positive school climate contributed to higher levels of self-esteem two years later, even beyond the positive impact of support from family and friends. Fostering healthy relationships with children and youth does not take much time, but requires some effort. When we invest in relationships with children and youth, everyone benefits from the outcomes.

What is my role in building a community in my program?

Program directors and site coordinators are often the link between the school and the OST staff. OST staff are then the connection between the students, their families and the program. Each staff

member plays a key role so it is important that every staff member knows the philosophy of the program and how they personally contribute to that philosophy. When each of us understands the importance of community building, we can work together towards developing a strong and supportive sense of community within our out-of-school time programs. Here are some ways the program director and staff can begin to build community:

- Set up regular team meetings to specifically discuss community building in the program (not just the regular logistical issues!). In these meetings discuss the common vision of the program, program philosophy, activities that have been used and worked, or ways to modify curriculum to best serve the needs of the youth. Provide time for staff to reflect, plan and collaborate with one another.
- Talk to the school's principal to see which curriculum is already being used to help build community. San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) currently recommends that Restorative Practice be used in schools. Other sites may be using different curriculums such as Caring School Communities, TRIBES or Second Step. It is important for OST staff to become familiar with practices already being used so that staff can use language and refer to concepts that children and youth recognize. This promotes cohesiveness and continuity between the school day and OST.
- Collaborate with school day teachers; respectful collaboration and communication between the programs provides continuity for children and models respectful cooperation.

How do I build a welcoming and inclusive community in my program?

A big part of building a community is making sure that everyone feels valued, heard, safe, and able to participate. The book *Open Minds to Equality* describes "a trusting classroom community as the foundation for both opening minds to equality and for strong academic learning." Developing this community is a process, so consistency and patience are key. Start by acknowledging that each person has differences which are normal. Everyone benefits from different tools to encourage participation in the community. Becoming familiar with what empowers and enables each child, what impedes them, and how OST teachers can support all children are crucial parts of building a welcoming and inclusive program community. Strategies that help staff develop welcoming and inclusive classrooms include:

- Consulting with other staff members about children's strengths and useful strategies. Asking the question, "What is the meaning behind an action?" rather than, "Why?" can be a helpful way to reflect on a child's message and development.
- Encourage dialogue with children, youth and families on what can help support them to be more successful.

- Encourage staff and students to get to know each other as individuals. Select and structure activities to help children feel safe. For example, start sharing in pairs and move to small groups before encouraging children to participate in large group activities.
- Set up community norms that are respectful to all points of view, consistent with the school day policies, and developmentally appropriate.
- Be open to non-conventional interventions. Recognize that in order to be equal at times we need to provide more for one student than another. Individualization provides inclusion and equality for all students.

What activities can I introduce to start building a community in my program?

Start building community right from the beginning of the year. When everyone is getting to know each other, use icebreaker activities to help students feel more relaxed and have fun. Here are some activities taken from the book *Open Minds to Equality*:

- **Name Game:** Children introduce themselves and say something they are good at or like to do. As they go around the circle, each person repeats the names and skills of the three to five people before them.
- **People Scavenger Hunt:** Instead of searching for items, create a list of strengths, skills and interests that children need to identify amongst their peers e.g.: Who is someone who likes to cook? Who has a good memory?
- **Listening-Checking:** Choose a discussion topic that could be controversial or something that students are likely to have an opinion about (e.g.: Should students receive detention for incomplete homework? Is it better to be a boy or a girl?) Ask a student to express their opinion; the next student needs to accurately rephrase the previous student's statement before making their own.

Introducing these games at the beginning of the year will allow children to become acquainted with each other and start developing positive and respectful relationships early.

Other games used with children and youth can also be tools to help in establishing relationships and building community. Choose co-operative games that enable everyone to participate. Spending time together helps to foster community and understanding of one another.

Continuous dialogue among staff and with students about program community will ensure that growth within the staff, children, and youth continues. With a strong community of respect as a foundation, you can address all topics in a safe and inclusive way.

References & Other Resources:

Resources:

- Caring School Community Program: <http://www.devstu.org/caring-school-community>
- Tribes: www.tribes.com
- Second Step: <http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/overview/>

Other icebreakers:

- Sports 4 Kids has a free playbook which has icebreaker activities starting on page 39. (www.sports4kids.org)

References:

- www.search-institute.org
- Jeanne Gibbs. 2001. Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together. Windsor, CA: Center Source Systems.
- Nancy Schniedewind & Ellen Davidson. 1998. Open Minds to Equality. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon.

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