Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

SNIPPET # 10 Building Supportive OST Communities Part 3: Strengthening Relationships

Creating an inclusive environment benefits everyone involved, in part because an inclusive environment strengthens relationships. At the same time, in order to create an inclusive, welcoming after-school program it is necessary to build strong relationships. As after-school program staff, the major relationships you build on a daily basis are with your students (of course!), your colleagues, your students' families, and the school-day staff. Your relationship with your students, both as individuals and as a group, is the foundation of all of these other relationships. Families are there because of students, school-day teachers are there because of the students, and you are there because of the students. That common thread is important to recognize as you go about building relationships with all of your stakeholders.

In SNIPPET number 8, we wrote about building community and why it is so important. (Please go back and read it if you haven't already!) This issue dives deeper into how we form the individual relationships that come together to make an inclusive community. Often, an organization reaches out to SNIP about one particular child's challenging behavior – when the adults are "at the end of their rope".

However, successful inclusion depends on a web of relationships among all students, staff, families, and daytime staff, not just "fixing" one particular relationship. The sense of community and inclusion is only as strong as the sum of those individual relationships. Program staff therefore must make an intentional effort to cultivate a welcoming environment – and starting with one particular relationship is just fine. The following tips, however, apply to all of the relationships in an inclusive community.

Do sweat the small stuff

"Hi," a nod, "What's up?," a smile, a high five, "buen provecho" or "bon appetit" before a snack…. These small acknowledgments go a long way toward showing others that we are open and want to connect with them. Smiling and offering assistance to someone in the halls makes them feel welcome to the program (and acknowledging and taking note of visitors is also important for safety reasons).

Regular, positive interactions build trust among individuals. Trust allows you to work through challenging moments together with more ease. For the child who is shy, or

has difficulty communicating, subtle but consistent non-verbal acknowledgment helps them feel as welcome as their more talkative peers.

Tip! Press the reset button by greeting your students individually at the beginning of your day, on the yard or the cafeteria before their first transition to ASP. This could look like lining up your students to come in from the yard and doing air high-fives (like you're saying "good game" to the opposing team after a soccer match, but not actually touching hands). Be sure to make eye contact!

Notice the positive

It's almost a reflex to call home when a child displays challenging behaviors, but how often do you tell a parent about a success in their child's day? A quick comment during pickup or a scribbled note in a backpack can share big or small achievements and give caregiver and child food for great conversation on the way home.

If you would call home to discuss a challenging behavior, try calling home to share a positive behavior. Alerting both child and parent to small and large successes reinforces those positive behaviors so you're more likely to see more of them and fewer of the challenging ones! Acknowledging positive behavior is a powerful tool for turning around tough behavior – look for small changes that are little "wins". Jenny usually has a hard time sharing? Notice when she takes turns at kickball and call it out. George is usually doing something else – anything else – during homework time? Acknowledge his effort when he gets out his homework and looks at it…. before he's had time to get sidetracked.

Tip! Create a stack of postcards in the beginning of the year (you can even have the kids write the addresses themselves) and send them home with a specific, positive message of success. By the end of the year (or semester) each family will have received one.

Take it to the staff room. Of course adults should model positive interactions for students. But does it matter when there aren't any kids around? Yes! Staff can use strengths-based approaches for working with each other and with families just as they would with students. Acknowledging what works signals that you would like to see more of that behavior. "Thank you so much, Señora Gomez, for filling out the early pick-up form. We really appreciate it." "Hey, Ms. T, thanks a ton for helping Aisha out on the playground today when I was refereeing the ball game." This strategy goes for "managing up" as well as "managing down" – your supervisor thrives on positive acknowledgment too! Tell her what works for you and you'll get more of it. "Ana, that was a really engaging training– I'm gonna use some of it today in program." This short article is a compelling example of community building among staff: [click here.](#)

Tip! Make a stack of cards for your each of your staff, too, and acknowledge their successes. They especially enjoy a card with a drawing or handprint from the kids. For acknowledging extraordinary staff work, send an email thanking them (be specific!) and copy your boss. Wow!

Expectations

Setting clear rules and expectations is important for supporting positive student behavior, of course. But communicating clearly also contributes to a welcoming atmosphere. For example, posting clear signs and directions for parents in the beginning of the year so they feel welcomed, rather than lost, as they learn their way around the program. Using a visual schedule or a visual "noise-o-meter" communicates what you are expecting of your students so they are more likely to be successful. Visuals like these, coupled with the usual verbal instructions, allow you to reach more students, not just those who respond best to words. Structure, routine, and clear expectations all contribute to students feeling safe and therefore more able to be themselves in program.

Noise Thermometer

5	Red voice = Yelling Outside	
4	Orange voice = Loud Outside	
3	Yellow Voice = Normal Inside voice public	
2	Green Voice = Quiet Inside voice private	
1	Blue Voice = Little Talking or Whisper Quiet!	
0	Gray Voice = No Talking Quiet!	

Tip! Write your program expectations (aka "rules") so they say what students should be doing, rather than what they should not be doing. Try "walk" instead of "don't run" … this way you avoid skipping, jumping, twirling, bouncing etc.

How to apply these ideas

Use your strengths. The first step is to notice what works well – use a strengths-based approach when evaluating the relationship building skills of yourself and your program. What kind of welcoming and inclusive behaviors do you do without even thinking about it? Which ones do you want to consciously cultivate? What do your students do? Being aware of these strengths is the first step toward making them a more explicit part of your program.

Be genuine. None of these tips are useful if you're faking it. That may mean you have to think really, really, really hard to find a success or positive moment in a student's behavior – but there is always something, especially if you catch them early and look for little wins. "Way to get out your pencil for homework, keep it up!" "Wow, you brought all of your materials from school to afterschool today – great job being organized!". In fact, that might not be such a "little" thing for some kids! You can use that acknowledgment to direct them toward success and away from trouble, too. "Nice big smile! I see your energy is high today, let's put that to work in kickball".

Ask questions and LISTEN. When we truly listen, we are more likely to actually understand an individual's experience, and in turn understand how we can better include them. When a student tantrums, find out why. When a co-worker is short-tempered, ask about their day (not at the same time, though). You may learn that someone hasn't eaten yet (often the culprit for cranky grown-ups as well as kids), felt left out at recess, or had no idea that their behavior was objectionable. Often, children can tell us what they need to be successfully included, but sometimes adults forget to listen. To foster inclusion, start with an open-mind, look for strengths, and put on those listening ears.

Resources:

Tony Schwartz "What If You Could Truly Be Yourself at Work?" Harvard Business Review, January 23, 2013 http://blogs.hbr.org/schwartz/2013/01/what-if-you-could-truly-be-referral=00563&cm_mmc=email-_-newsletter-_-daily_alert-_-alert_date&utm_source=newsletter_daily_alert&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=alert_date

Submitted by Alexis Filippini, Ph.D. is the founder of Buildling on the Best educational consulting and associate dean of teaching and learning K-8 at the Bentley School."