Evidence Brief

Seven Promising Practices to Support Youth with Social-Emotional Challenges

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using key terms that included "youth programs," "social-emotional challenges," "practices," and "support."

A. Understanding Key Terms

1) Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Social-emotional wellbeing can be understood as a "balanced, healthy way of interacting with others and the ability to appropriately respond to our own emotions" (Montie & Abery, 2011, p. 2). However, youth who have special needs may be "at higher risk for experiencing lower levels of social-emotional wellbeing than their peers… They are more likely to be bullied and harassed, have a limited number of friends, and engage in fewer extracurricular activities than their peers" (Montie & Abery, 2011, p. 2).

2) Social-Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defines social-emotional learning as a "process through which young people enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks" (as cited in YouthREX, 2016). This includes skills related to managing one's own emotions and behaviours, developing healthy relationships, and making good decisions (YouthREX, 2016). Adults can help foster an awareness of emotions and encourage reflection, calling attention to difficult feelings and providing alternate strategies on how to manage emotions. In this way, adults can encourage problem solving through emotional coaching (YouthREX, 2016).

3) Positive Youth Development

A positive youth development framework promotes youth assets rather than focusing on youth 'problems' or deficits. This framework is substantiated by extensive research demonstrating that certain identifiable assets within communities positively correlate with success in both youth and adulthood. Positive youth development encourages research, programs, and policies that create pathways to these assets within communities.

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The framework supports practices that develop five psychological, behavioural, and social characteristics in youth, referred to as the **'Five Cs'** of positive youth development (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012):

- Competence
- Confidence
- Connection
- Character
- Caring/Compassion

A positive youth development framework aligns well with strategies to support social-emotional learning (Smith et al., 2016), which include activities that guide youth in:

- managing emotions;
- practicing empathy;
- practicing teamwork;
- practicing responsibility;
- practicing initiative; and
- practicing problem-solving.

B. Summary of Evidence: Seven Promising Practices

1) Emphasize youth assets and strengths.

Youth with special needs who experience social-emotional challenges may find themselves in contexts where their perceived deficits or 'failures' are often the focus (Montie & Abery, 2011). Use a **strength-based approach** in programming and relationships that emphasizes young people's assets and abilities (Montie & Abery, 2011; D'Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014; Anderson & Devine, 2018). This can serve to **cultivate hope** in youth, which can increase wellbeing and protect against the negative effects of stress (Edwards & McClintock, 2013). Offer young people adaptations, accommodations, and supports as needed, without restricting opportunity (Anderson & Devine, 2018).

2) Foster inclusion.

By focusing on strengths, each young person will feel welcomed, accepted, and valued, regardless of their ability (Weiss & Riosa, 2015; Anderson & Devine, 2018). This can be integral to fostering inclusion, which includes **instilling a sense of relatedness** among youth: "Relatedness is generally concerned with an individual's overall feelings of 'fit' within a group and is often associated with perceptions of being accepted, valued, and needed. ... Close and meaningful relationships are a key ingredient of relatedness and are believed to develop progressively through a shared understanding about a common experience" (D'Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014, p. 464).

Recognize that **wellbeing is a holistic concept**, involving both the body (physical functioning) and the person (age, identity), as well as their social and environmental contexts (Anderson & Devine, 2018, p. 575). Consider ability and functionality at all three levels when removing barriers to accessibility.

3) Engage youth meaningfully.
Create opportunities for youth to contribute and participate in meaningful ways that allow their **voices to be heard** (Denny, 2004; Caldwell & Witt, 2018).

Consider the following **inclusive approaches to youth engagement** in the design and development of programs, and in facilitating relationships between adults/mentors and young people (MEAF, n.d., p. 8; Anderson & Devine, 2018, p. 592):

- Respect each person's dignity; focus on the person, emphasizing abilities, not limitations.
- Encourage honest discussions about needs and expectations, while respecting confidentiality; gently correct behaviours of participants who may not be accepting or respectful.
- Promote integrated decision making; do not speak for a young person, or make decisions on their behalf, and do not patronize or relate to young people in a condescending way.
- Emphasize *all* contributions.
- Focus on group challenges and activities; pay attention to group dynamics and draw excluded participants into the group.
- Identify and delegate tasks (see also practice 4, below).
- Develop symbiotic relationships.

4) Intentionally design activities within programs.
Evidence reveals the multiple benefits of structured activities outside of school settings (Durlak et al., 2010) and points to the **SAFE model** as an approach to designing activities that facilitate learning, skill development, and problem solving (Durlak et al., 2010; YouthREX, 2018):

Structured/Sequenced: a predictable routine; also, breaking down activities into smaller parts and sequencing them so youth can build specific skills.
Active: using engaging, hands-on, active strategies to help young people learn, rather than relying on rote learning.
Focused: sufficient time is focused on skill-building and instruction.
Explicit: clear goals about what the program will achieve that are communicated to participants in plain and understandable language.

Consider the importance of activities that are both structured and unstructured (Caldwell & Witt, 2018). Activities should be designed to cultivate **interest**, **intrinsic motivation**, and **flow** (Caldwell & Witt, 2018, p. 207): interest refers to the young person's engagement and is the opposite of boredom; intrinsic motivation refers to the young person having an "internal source of compulsion to engage in activity" (Caldwell & Witt, 2018, p. 207); and flow is a "state of consciousness in which one loses track of time and becomes completely engrossed in the activity… [which] contributes to positive youth development outcomes such as initiative, self-efficacy, and competence" (Caldwell & Witt, 2018, p. 208). When all three of these characteristics are present, a young person will feel rewarded by participating in an activity and will be more likely to continue participating (Caldwell & Witt, 2018, p. 208).

Some of the "most effective and efficient teaching strategies for many youth emphasize active forms of learning" (Durlak et al., 2010, p. 296). For youth with special needs and social-emotional challenges, intentionally exploring ways to teach social problem-solving, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation should be emphasized (Smith Myles, 2011, pp. 8-9).

5) Consider opportunities for mentorship.
Mentoring programs have been found to contribute to positive outcomes for youth who may be experiencing externalizing issues – including those related to behaviour, such as aggression, ADHD, and substance use – and internalizing issues – including those related to emotions, such as depression, social anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (La Valle, 2015). Mentoring relationships can be structured or unstructured, and can be facilitated between adults and youth or between peers.

Evidence shows that adults who work with youth give them a sense of empowerment, and model relationships that can result in positive engagement with others in their communities (Miller et al., 2015). Adults should remember the following practice principles (Caldwell & Witt, 2018, p. 202):

- Provide specific feedback in order to improve performance and create learning.
- Scaffold opportunities for youth to learn, be challenged, and be supported through success and failure.
- Provide support for efficacy and mattering (autonomy, growth, and improvement).
- Hold youth accountable and instill a sense of responsibility.
- Balance structure and supervision with young people making their own decisions and learning from their mistakes.
- Share in the fun of activities (having fun with adults is an important protective factor for youth!).

For youth with special needs, peer mentors or role models can provide an important opportunity for youth "to share with each other their feelings, talk about their experiences, discover common interests, and develop a mutual understanding, all of which are essential to developing meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging" (D'Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014, p. 476).

6) Consider mindfulness-based programming.
A review of the evidence on the impacts of mindfulness-based programming (Oritz & Sibinga, 2017) demonstrates that mindfulness can be an effective strategy for mitigating the effects of trauma and chronic stress in young people, which could include those with social-emotional challenges.

Mindfulness has been associated with:
- decreased symptoms of stress, trauma, anxiety, and depression;
- decreased emotional dysregulation;
- enhanced coping skills;
- lessened physical symptoms associated with stress;
- promotion of neurological changes that can positively influence executive functioning, such as the ability to reason and make decisions;
- fewer incidents of self-harm;
- increased ability to deal with conflict; and
- improved self-esteem.

7) Build connections to facilitate multidisciplinary supports.
Consider how your program can build connections across organizations and between young people, their families, and their support networks: "by widening social networks, linking environments, and actively nurturing a sense of belonging and stable relationships, we create conditions that support positive social-emotional wellbeing. By increasing the variety of inclusive school and community activities, we also expand role models for constructive coping, increase access to social support outside of the family, and enhance meaning in our lives" (Montie & Abery, 2011, p. 3)

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