Tips for Staying Connected to Community Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic as communities are asked to take precautions including canceling meetings and events, adult mentors can still stay connected to the youth they serve. Caring adults who serve youth in any capacity whether it is through a community club, recreation center, church, etc. are a key protective factor for our youth. Protective factors help lower negative risks that youth may encounter such as stressful conditions, events, or circumstances (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Community adult leaders can be advocates and resources to help protect the youth they serve.

Community Adult Leader Connection and Positive Youth Development

Community recreation center art class teachers are doing more than teaching techniques; on the field, soccer coaches are doing more than prepping the team for the next game; the space that church youth group leaders create for youth do more than grow faith. Community adult leaders can provide impactful positive youth development, regardless of the settings and time contributed.

Developmental relationships are essential to helping youth grow up successfully. There are five elements exhibited by mentors to foster developmental relationships between youth and adults (Search Institute, 2018). These elements are:

- **Express Care** – Leaders show youth that they matter to them
- **Challenge Growth** – Youth are pushed to keep getting better
- **Provide Support** – Leaders help youth complete tasks and achieve goals
- **Share Power** – Youth are treated with respect and given a say
- **Expand Possibilities** – Leaders connect youth with people and places that broaden their world

At this time when it is less safe for adult leaders to hold meetings or practices, these elements can continue to be nurtured. Communication focused around youth’s current interests is key to creating engaging content that will foster environments for mentoring relationships (Arnold, 2018). Below are traditional and innovative methods to engage youth and maintain healthy relationships to prevent social isolation.

**Expressing Care**

*Traditional Methods*

A hand-written note

These days taking the time to track down a pen and paper has a greater meaning than it did in the past. A quick trip to a dollar store can get you a couple nice and even funny greeting cards or a whole pack of note cards. If writing to the whole team or group is too daunting, consider thinking of the two or three who could use a little extra support and care.
A phone call

A great way to show youth they matter to you is to give them a call – its timeless. You could even reassure them if they express concern about the pandemic. Practice good listening skills during the call, be warm, and encouraging. Take the opportunity to praise them for their efforts and achievements.

Innovative Methods

A text

Especially to youth, a brief text can speak volumes to how much a community leader cares about them. A text or two can give leaders the opportunity to ask how the youth is doing with the cancelations and express that they are happy to have them in the group or class. Group messages can also help youth feel a sense of community, even without sharing a physical meeting location.

An email

Most youth these days have an email that they use for school, similarly parent emails can also be used to send a message to team/class youth. Parents can be asked to forward or share the email content. An email can help youth know that you see and value them as well as be a way to provide any group updates.

Online meetings

Today’s technology brings the ability to meet virtually. Even a brief meeting to check-in on the group or team and express care would go a long way. Keeping youth’s current interests or traditional meeting objectives at the center of the discussion can help bring a sense of normalcy to an unusual delivery mode.

Challenging Growth

Any of these communication mediums can also be used to challenge growth. Knowing each team/group member can help to know the most appropriate way to push youth to get better. “Getting better” may look different depending on the type of youth program community adults provide. Some ways to challenge growth include:

- Expecting the youth’s best – helping them live up to their potential by setting realistic goals
- Stretch youth by pushing them to go further
- Hold youth accountable – insist they take responsibility for their actions
- Reflect on failures – help youth learn from mistakes and setbacks

Notes, phone calls, texts, emails, and online meetings can all contain challenges for growth. Youth can be encouraged to practice skills at home, take time to read up on a technique, take responsibility for maintaining skills, etc. Online meetings may
especially be a powerful way to keep youth growing as individuals and as a team/group.

**Providing Support**

*Traditional Methods*

**Fliers, Newsletters, and Bulletin Boards**

Broad, basic communication methods can be directed toward youth in the community to explain the same message – Adult mentors are available to guide youth through problems during this time that they have not faced before. Adults can explain that youth can take precautions to build confidence and sense of control in their lives to reduce social anxieties that may be forthcoming.

*Innovative Methods*

**Fact Based Social Media Posts**

Social media posts portraying factual information from reliable sources about resources that are available for youth will help them feel empowered. Youth should feel that mentors are available to advocate for their needs.

**Live Video Streaming**

Providing youth activities in innovative ways will set social boundaries to keep communities healthy and socially engaged. These activities will help keep youth on track toward personal goals, without sacrificing their safety.

**Sharing Power**

*Traditional Methods*

**Phone Tree**

Adults can collaborate with youth to develop systematic communication with those who may be in need in their communities. One way for youth to feel included and respected by adult mentors is to allow them to take the lead. Youth can work with adult mentors to telecommunicate with their contacts to see if any assistance is needed in their communities. Youth can then communicate with their adult leaders to decide how to help moving forward.

*Innovative Methods*

**Video Conferencing**
As an updated version of the phone tree, youth can work with adults to systematically check on each other and their community members via Facetime, Zoom, Skype or other video conferencing platforms. These interactions can be the most similar to in-person communication and can be a useful tool in creating an inclusive environment during an isolating time.

Expanding Possibilities

Innovative Methods

Online Collaboration Challenges
Adults can inspire youth to see possibilities in their future by connecting them with peers who are currently facing the same challenges. Adults can create shared online resources through Google Docs or other platforms for youth to share new ideas and connect with others. These forums can be formal with specific challenges for youth to solve based on their current interests, or informal, virtual gatherings in an environment where it is safe to share new ideas.

Best Practices

Community adult leaders should always review program policy prior to connecting with youth outside of program class/team/group meeting times. Including a second adult regardless of the communication type is highly advised. Even when a note is written, it can be addressed so that it is sent in-care-of the parents. Texts can include both parent and youth numbers or be addressed to youth through parent phones. These and any similar types of practices help protect both the community adult leaders and the youth.

As communication content is chosen, keep in mind that discussions that occur virtually can be interpreted very differently from each viewer. Especially during a time when youth are turning to adult mentors for increased protection and advocacy, adults should create safe, inclusive, and engaging environments. The five developmental relationship elements from Search Institute should act as an umbrella over youth interests maintained as the focal point of the meetings and communication.

Conclusion

The preventative safety measures taken during a pandemic such as COVID-19, while helpful and for the greater good of communities, can grow confusion and anxiety in youth. Taking the time as community leaders to stay connected to the youth they serve will show young people that adults care. Continuing connection can provide a form of stability, even without coming together in person.
After ensuring that mentors’ own families are healthy and taken care of, adults are encouraged to look into which method(s) of communication is most realistic, doable, and appropriate for the youth they serve.

**Resources**

Search Institute and Developmental Relationships  
https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/

Youth Development and Sparks (Youth Interest)  
https://health.oregonstate.edu/thriving-model/training-materials-educators