

In the Door and Coming Back for More!

Barriers and Strategies for Engaging Adolescents in After- School Activities

Youth development programs are designed to ensure that young people experience healthy development, success in school, and smooth transitions to adulthood. They include activities such as social recreation, arts, sports, life skills, job training, after-school activities and academic enrichment. However, ensuring that adolescents participate in these programs is a continual challenge, especially as they age. Knowing that: 1) quality programs offer a dual focus of developing skills and competencies while reducing risk related behaviors, 2) young people often choose to be involved in unstructured activities during their discretionary time and 3) participation in structured activities decline as youth age...how do you involve youth in after-school programs and keep them engaged?

The Prevention Researcher - April 2005 issue provides a wealth of information to how change assumptions and modalities to entice and engage youth in your after-school programs. The real barrier(s) to youth participation in after school programs is ineffective design and marketing - that is after school programs need to answer the quintessential youth question: “*What’s in it for me?*” How do you get youth in the door and keep youth coming back for more? Answer the quintessential question! Here are some strategies:

Help youth and families understand the value of participation using direct measurable outcomes: Youth and their parents must receive clear messages regarding the connection between regular participation and a brighter future. This connection should highlight direct measurable outcomes. For example: “75% of participants in the ABC After-School Program reported that their grades improved while participating in the program.” Or “85% of XYZ After-School Program participants reported that they received invaluable assistance in helping them with the college research and application process.”

Hire program staff who understand the importance of developing real connections with participants, yet have solid program and behavior management skills: A program based on caring, trust, and respect will go a long way! Make sure staff convey that youth are valued and are expressively missed when they cannot attend the program. Ensure program staff are diverse and reflect the youth being served, allowing youth to identify with adult role models. Further, engage staff at all levels – not just in supervisory roles but engaging youth in activities.

Match program content and participant needs: The program must afford a safe experience not available at home, school or in their community otherwise and must be relevant to youth – that is, youth must have some internal reason or motivation for engagement (novelty, enjoyment, decrease boredom, community service, skill development, etc.). Furthermore, the schedule must meet participant needs and may need to be individual and flexible.

Offer engaging activities with breadth and depth: Youth have an underlying need to demonstrate cognitive, social or physical competence. Programs must offer the right balance of challenge for youth involved - activities that require youth to stretch their abilities, apply effort over time and learn new things - increase competence and motivate youth to come back for more. Offering a variety of diverse activities in an attractive and organized manner every day helps keep their interest and helps you recruit a diverse array of participants.

Offer autonomy and control and give high school youth extra opportunities: Youth, like all groups, have the need for control over their environment, freedom of choice and self-determined behavior. Youth must feel personal power and “ownership” of the programs and outcomes. Make sure to offer interesting service learning, paid employment, mentoring, career preparation activities to older youth. Space is also important – youth want and need to hang out in comfortably furnished spaces designed for youth.

Recruit friends to join together: Consider friendships as a potential recruiting and attendance strategy. Teens need and rely on strong social networks, emotional support, friendship and connectedness. Satisfying the need for nurturance and belonging engages and retains youth. Avoid recruiting large groups of friends together, instead recruit in pairs or small groups. Larger group may join and but also quit together. Consider targeting “at risk youth” using a “friend recruiting friend” strategy.

Focusing on the above “motivators” will help bring teens to your door and keep them coming back for more. Looking for other incentives? The following chart has been excerpted from Little, Priscilla (2005) *Engaging Adolescents in Out of School Time Programs: Learning What Works*, a feature article in the April 2005 issue of *The Prevention Researcher*.

<i>Common Barriers to Out of School Time Program Participation and Incentives to Counteract Them¹</i>	
<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Incentives</i>
Desire to relax and “hang out with friends after school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide both space and time at the center for recreation, snacks, and talking with friends. ▪ Offer field trips earned from attendance. ▪ Situate the program in a community center for students who need a “change of scenery” after school.
Desire or need to work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide structured employment preparation, resume writing, and volunteer or paid work experience for high school students.
Family responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Offer a 2/3/5 program enrollment schedule.* ▪ Remind families of homework assistance and opportunities for students to learn new skills. ▪ Accept younger siblings of participants.
Boredom or disinterest in the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conduct an assessment of both participant and non-participant activity interests. ▪ Engage participants with a rich variety of experiences, activities, and opportunities to develop new relationships with peers and adults. ▪ Allow students choice of activities on a daily basis. ▪ Staff the program with charismatic adults who want to engage young people. ▪ Offer older students leadership opportunities.
Lack of transportation/issue of safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Target children and youth who live close by and can participate most easily. ▪ Organize a “buddy system” of walkers. ▪ Pay responsible high school students to accompany groups of younger students home.
*A2/3/5 program allows students to enroll in the program 2, 3, 5 days per week- offering staff and students consistency and routine, as well as some flexibility.	

Sources:

Anderson – Butcher, D. (2005). Recruitment and retention in youth development programming

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Little, P & Lauver, S. (2005). Engaging adolescents in out of school time programs: Learning what works.

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