



Sample Article

Title makes it clear that this will be easy to read, and pertinent.

10 Things Every Community Volunteer Should Know About Youth Development

Perhaps the most surprising thing about being a community volunteer is how easy it is to have a positive influence on our kids. Special talents are not required; what matters is showing up, making yourself available and reminding yourself of the stage in the human development process that is called adolescence. Positive attention on the part of adults is something that children and adolescents crave, and that's a key ingredient in their development – as important as an essential vitamin. Here are ten things every community volunteer should know about youth development:

Demystifies a potentially intimidating idea.

Mentoring is critical to youth development

Most of us have heard about mentoring, but few of us realize just how important it is to the healthy development of youth. One important reason is that, as kids reach adolescence, they often find it easier to engage with adults *other* than their parents. This means that even limited time with mentors willing to act as role models can have an enormous influence on helping young people find direction. The irony is that this interaction also enhances young people's trust in their own parents.

Presents an important problem that is not so hard to fix.

Young people need to find ways to connect to their communities

Many of us are surprised when we find out that one of the most common – and serious – challenges faced by young people is social isolation. Many teens spend far too much time alone watching TV and wishing for positive social interactions. A recent nationwide study found that kids typically have about 2000 hours of unstructured time during the year – about as much as a full-time job. Our state has the highest percentage in the country of children age 12 and over who are alone at home every single afternoon. One of the important roles of adult volunteers is to make sure that these hours are met with opportunities, not risks or stagnation by helping bring kids into healthy social situations.

Introduces the simplifying model of brain architecture.

Young people's brain architecture is not fully developed

We've gotten used to hearing about how babies' brains are developing at a furious rate in the first few years of life. What many of us don't realize is that this process of brain development continues until early adulthood. The neurons in young people's brains, for example, are still forming new connections, and this process is directly influenced by what kinds of experiences they have, both positive and negative.

Shifts away from a "mentalist" and to a "materialist" perspective.

Builds on previous point – after introducing materialist perspective.

Young people's capacity to make good judgments is limited

It's often said that while youth may look like adults on the outside, they often act more like kids. One reason for this is that young people's brain architecture is not fully developed, especially in areas relating to understanding consequences of actions. They need practice, over time, to grow the foundation for reliable responses to a wide array of situations that will present themselves in the community. Providing opportunities for that consistent practice is our job, as guides. Every successful interaction, commitment met, teamwork shared -- builds the foundation for positive community engagement in a young person.

Contrary to popular opinion, youth don't live on a "different planet" from the rest of us.

Surveys tell us that the values young people rank highest are being honest, working hard, being a good student, and giving time to helping others. The more that adults pay attention to media stereotypes, the easier it is to think of young people's lives as entirely separate from our own – they do spend a lot of time at the mall or alone in their rooms – and to assume that we're completely invisible to them. In fact, most young people are keenly interested in what goes on in the world. What they often lack is the opportunity to express that interest. Helping them do that is the job we signed up for, and it's what communities can do very well, when they focus on what's real, not what's in the news.

Addresses common myths, but only *after* having provided a more productive frame earlier in the article.

How young people are portrayed in the media is not necessarily accurate

Studies have shown that media coverage of teens is often slanted, and that in fact most youth do their homework, help around the house, and want to do well in school. The reality is that teens are often generous and idealistic, rather than the surly, disrespectful, selfish, and even dangerous teens that dominate media coverage.

Reinforces the development frame.

Youth development is not just intellectual achievement

This is about helping kids mature, not hurrying them or filling their heads with more facts. A "Solid" kid is emotionally healthy, well-adjusted, stable, and ready

to deal with life. A "Decent" kid is one who treats others well and makes the community a better place to live. These outcomes are Developmental goals that are just as important as intellectual achievement, and just as influenced by positive and negative experiences with others. These are outcomes that every parent and every community member wants for all kids.

Young people are waiting to be recruited

Brings the focus back to the larger social context, and to the concerns of the volunteer.

According to child psychologists, the most widespread problems facing our youth include social isolation and depression. Adolescents often lack the social skills to reach out to others and to integrate themselves in the larger community. The good news is that in many cases it doesn't take much to help them "break the ice" and get connected to others. Welcoming communities can go a long way toward turning empty hours into productive ones, and forging relationships that will last a lifetime. But the programs have to be there in the first place. That's why youth development is the work of citizens who make sure the community is doing its part. We do it when we volunteer, and we also do it when we hold communities accountable to making investments in youth.

Youth development is community development

As volunteers, it is easy to think of young people as individuals whom we'd like to help. What should be kept in mind, however, is that communities (and, more generally, others besides the young people themselves) stand to benefit significantly from programs that promote healthy development in youth. When we make positive youth development opportunities available to young people, we make an investment that will reap economic and social rewards for the community for years to come.

Everyone has a stake in getting youth development right

But don't keep your experiences with young people a secret. Even those who may never volunteer need to know why youth development should be every community's business. Investments in youth programs have been shown to be among the most cost-effective that a community can make. Repeated studies have established that kids who participate in quality programs are more likely to be active voting citizens, settled in stable personal relationships, employed and economically self-sufficient and happy with their lives as young adults compared to those who did not participate. These are all measurable, and important, benefits to the community.