



Essential Elements

Essential elements are critical to effective youth development programs. These elements help youth become competent, contributing citizens. Created from traditional and applied research characteristics that contribute to positive youth development, they help professionals and volunteers who work with youth view the whole young person, rather than focus on a single aspect of life or development. These elements focus on social, physical, and emotional well-being, and are necessary for positive youth development. Each individual element is important. However, it is the combination of these elements that create an environment that promotes positive youth development. It is important to be aware of these elements when designing activities because they help professionals and volunteers ensure that experiences, programs, and activities intentionally offer opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning in environments where youth feel safe, can master new skills and abilities, and develop the confidence they need to contribute to their local communities in a positive way.

PYD Connection

4-H promotes positive youth development by giving youth opportunities to get involved and develop to their full potential. Positive youth development is a framework that highlights the things youth need to become successful. It focuses on strengths instead of limitations and is associated with the five Cs - competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring. Researchers have suggested that a sixth C, contribution (to oneself and others) comes about when the 5 Cs are present in a young person's life.

Using Essential Elements in Activities

Using essential elements in activities is important to positive youth development in a number of ways. They reinforce sustained youth-adult relationships and emphasize mastering skills that can be used in the real world. If these experiences take place in safe and inclusive environments, youth are more likely to become involved civically. Supportive communities can undergird young people's sense of worthiness and competence, and help them contribute to the well-being of the larger community.

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See chart on next page.



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Essential Element	Definition	Examples	Integrating into Learning
Positive Relationship with Caring Adult	Young people have an adult or two in their lives that they can depend on, have positive interactions with, and feel safe, trusted and nurtured.	A volunteer/educator who provides a listening ear, follows through on commitments to youth, and really gets to know a young person through their interaction.	Keep the ratio of adults to youth low. Have adults actively engaged in learning with youth. Provide time for informal conversation and learning along with structured activities to build trust.
A Safe Environment	An environment is created where young people feel safe to express themselves, and are free from exposure to injury, abuse, or ridicule.	Young people are educated and provided examples of boundaries, how to perform activities safely, and ways to get assistance when needed. Reflective listening is utilized.	Provide intentional opportunities for individual ideas within a group discussion so all voices can be heard. Insure that youth are never alone with just one adult. Empower adult and youth participants to self-regulate negative comments, actions, and attitudes.
An Inclusive Environment	Young people feel welcomed into an environment regardless of their background, beliefs, ideas, and culture.	Provide t-shirts for everyone to feel a sense of group identity, honor special celebrations in young people's lives, and conduct team building activities.	Conduct get-acquainted activities. Greet each other by name during learning activities. Recognize individual members for their actions and/or accomplishments.
Engagement in Learning	Young people are actively engaged in different learning environments and are challenged to pursue their own learning.	Youth research areas of interest related to their project and present it back to their group.	Provide different methods for learning to take place including experiential learning and scientific inquiry. Use varying forms of media in presenting or seeking information and communicating with young people.
Opportunity for Mastery	Mastery is achieving a certain level of expertise of a subject matter so that you are able to share it with others.	Adults listen, observe, and interact with youth to discover their passions and/or what they want to excel in and assist with opportunities for mastery in area.	Expose youth to multiple skills, events, and learning opportunities to gain a breadth of what is possible. Build in opportunities for youth to sharpen or advance their skills and practices beyond the basics.
Opportunity to see Oneself as an Active Participant in the Future	Youth can look ahead, vision, and see themselves doing great things, creating a positive outlook on the future.	As a group, envision what your group is doing or has accomplished in one year. Have youth brainstorm ways to run the meetings more effectively in the future.	Engage youth in visioning opportunities. Have youth relate skills they are learning now to future career opportunities. Tie skills learned to leadership roles in their future.
Opportunity for Self-Determination	Young people are able to set their own goals, determine how they will get there, and who they want to become as an individual.	Youth share their goals of learning for the year and adults look to ways to support them in the attainment of their goals.	Build individual goal setting into educational activities. Assist youth in determining the desired goals and outcomes of the educational program or activity, and plan action steps for how to make it happen.
Opportunity to Value and Practice Service for Others	The opportunity to give back to others in meaningful ways.	Youth plan and conduct a community service project, assist other members in their groups, and youth share ideas for how to improve their 4-H program.	Address an issue in community through civic service. Have youth bring items of value to share with others. Challenge youth to give back to their community as a follow up to what they have been learning.