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ask
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SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT





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ask listen encourage

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Revised edition, Fall 2011

Produced by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, a division of The Forum for Youth Investment.

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Acknowledgments

The youth development approach described in these pages was originally developed and tested at the HighScope Summer Workshop for Teens (founded in 1963), later called the Institute for IDEAS. In the late 1990s, HighScope's Youth Development Group took the learning approach developed at the Institute for IDEAS and delivered training for youth workers. These workshops, grounded in HighScope's direct experience, were extended by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality through research in positive youth development and evolved into what is currently our Youth Work Methods series.

The current training framework rests on a foundation developed by many, including David P. Weikart, Nicole Yohalem, John Weiss, Becky Prior, Kiku Johnson, Aaron Wilson-Ahlstrom, Laenne Thompson, Tom Akiva, Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom, David Martineau, Linda Horne, Mary Hohmann, Charles Hohmann, Charles Smith, Monica Jones, and many others.

The Weikart Center would also like to thank the Raikes Foundation, for providing funding for the revision of this series; the Robert Wood Johnson foundation for providing funding for the development of the original Youth Work Methods series; and the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, our original parent organization.



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table of contents

Introduction	1
Positive, Purposeful Interaction	2
The Method	5
Overview: Guiding Principles	6
Ask Effective Questions	8
Listen Actively	10
Encourage Success	11
Practice Activities	15
Converting Convergent Questions	16
Ms. Johnson	17
Distinguishing Praise From Encouragement	20
Alternatives to Praise	21
Extensions	23
Asking Questions with Depth and Variety	24
What? So what? Now what?	26
Roadblocks to Communication	27
Listening with Empathy	28
Is Praise Helpful or Harmful?	30
Across Age Groups	32
Across Content Areas	33
In Your Program	35
Planning for Questions	36
Sharing Ask-Listen-Encourage with Others	38
Resources	43
The Research	44
Ask-Listen-Encourage and the Active-Participatory Approach	52

positive, purposeful interaction

Ask-Listen-Encourage is a three-part Method, made up of three distinct but interrelated practices designed to support youth workers and educators as they interact with young people. This guide provides detailed information for each of the three parts. In this section, you will find a brief background and description of the benefits of employing this method in youth programs.

The Ask-Listen-Encourage Method was developed at the HighScope Institute for IDEAS, a residential summer program for teenagers that operated in Michigan from 1963-2005. Staff used the method to support youth in a wide variety of activities: science, language, and social studies workshops; work projects involving construction, welding, and landscaping; fine arts programming including music, dance, and painting; community building activities including community meetings, conflict resolution, and community cleanup. The method provided staff with the opportunity to formalize learning within a camp setting, which led to consistent, positive results for the youth involved in the program.

The Ask strategy is about asking effective questions, engaging youth in dialogue, and promoting critical thinking. Listen is about being attentive to youth when they speak and showing support through empathy. Encourage is about making specific observations about the decisions and actions of young people as they work, encouraging them to succeed without resorting to judgment.

Why do adult-youth interaction strategies matter? A key reason is that effective strategies can lead to positive, productive relationships for young people with peers and the adults in their lives. Aside from family members, the adults that many young people spend a substantial amount of time around are usually teachers and other school staff. For youth that participate in out-of-school-time activities, youth workers can also play a very important role in this social network; fostering positive relationships with youth and supporting them as they grow into adulthood. Ask-Listen-Encourage provides a clear framework for purposeful interaction for youth workers and educators.

While this method encompasses three distinct skills, the three depend on each other in order to form a complete method of positive, purposeful interaction. This guide will provide you with the building blocks of positive relationships; this method focuses on being purposeful in your interactions with youth, empowering youth to become more autonomous and self-confident, and demonstrating that you genuinely care for young people's well-being. In addition, improved relationships with youth can positively affect youth motivation and learning in the activities offered at your program.

overview: guiding principles

Ask-Listen-Encourage is a method for carrying out positive, purposeful interactions with young people. The method includes practices that can both foster positive relationships with youth and support young people in learning new skills. Three guiding principles underlie the strategies:





Be Purposeful — Interaction is often something that just happens, without thinking about the impact. But everything you do with youth matters, and they pay attention to the way you interact with them both when informally chatting and during planned activities. Youth deserve high-quality, engaging programming, and one of the marks of a high-quality program is purpose and intentionality. Things are done for a reason, with the needs of the youth involved taken into consideration.

Empower Youth — Because of their age, young people often find themselves in a position of disempowerment. Youth workers and educators can use the Ask-Listen-Encourage method to focus discussions on young people and acknowledge their accomplishments, which in turn serves to inspire confidence and feelings of competence.

Show that you Care — Youth need to know that they have a strong network of supportive, caring adults. By asking personalized questions, making contextualized observations and comments, and always listening, youth workers and educators can clearly and consistently demonstrate that they care about every aspect of a young person.

These three guiding principles are carried out in the specific ways shown in the Venn diagram above and detailed on the next few pages.

A Questioning Sequence: What? So What? Now What?

The “What? So What? Now What?” sequence was originally developed for experiential, team-based settings as a way to help a group debrief after a challenge or accomplishment. The sequence has been used in numerous settings including service learning, corporate team building, and rehabilitation. It is an effective tool for learning. Both individuals and groups can use it, and it is a relatively easy concept to keep in your head and use spontaneously when needed.

After an activity, young people are often eager to simply talk about what just happened. The “What?” section of this sequence provides the space for that to happen while leading into more complex questions about the circumstances and factors surrounding the experience. By providing scaffolding that supports youth where they are at - wanting to share their immediate experience – and then taking it a step further, the “What? So What? Now What?” sequence challenges young people to explore their experiences, make sense of them, and ultimately apply their learning.

The examples provided come from the debrief period after an activity in which youth had to cross an imaginary river as a team with certain rules and restrictions applied.

<p>WHAT?</p>	<p>What happened? What are the facts? How do you feel about them?</p> <p>In this stage of reflection, ask young people specific questions about their experience. Be sure to ask questions related to feelings. Use what you know about young people and the experience to frame specific questions.</p>	<p><i>Example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What happened while everyone was planning? - What happened during the actual “river” crossing? - What were some of the difficulties you had? - How did you feel about the rules of the activity?
<p>SO WHAT?</p>	<p>How does this relate to your past experiences? Why did it happen this way? Why does this matter?</p> <p>In this stage, help young people make connections between the experience and their knowledge and background. This is when young people begin to make sense of an experience.</p>	<p><i>Example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did your planning impact the outcome? - What does each element of the activity represent in real life? - In the end, why were you (un)successful? - How did your relationship with each other impact the activity?
<p>NOW WHAT?</p>	<p>How can you apply this?</p> <p>In this stage, help young people plan ways to apply their learning to future experiences.</p>	<p><i>Example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did you learn from this activity that we can apply in our future work together? - What do you think is the most important part of our teamwork to work on? - What will you remember most about this activity the next time we have to work as a team?

Is Praise Helpful or Harmful?

This section explores the research on praise and its effects on young people. For even more information, read The Research starting on page 44.

Do you make comments to youth like Good job, Way to go, or You're so smart? If so, you are like many adults who work with youth. A recent study found that over 80% of parents believe that praising young people's intelligence builds confidence and motivation to learn (Apter, 2006). Most of us have probably made statements like these for years. It is important to consider the fact that praise can have unintended consequences.

For example research suggests that certain forms of praise may...

- Limit students' intellectual growth (Apter, 2006)
- Encourage students to avoid difficult tasks (Dweck, 2007)
- Reduce interest in or liking of academic work (MacLellan, 2005)
- Create "praise junkies" dependent on praise (Kohn, 2001; Brophy, 1981)
- Diminish a young person's sense of worth (Brophy, 1981)
- Remind youth of the power of the person giving the praise (Kohn, 1999)
- Create a chemical need in the brain for constant reward (Bronson, 2007)
- Be ineffective (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

In short, praise may do the opposite of what we want it to do. The "good job" that is the refrain in classrooms and youth programs across the country at best does nothing and at worst can reduce motivation and self-worth.

It's easy to understand how too much praise can be a problem—kids stop hearing "good job" after a while (it may even annoy them) or they come to rely on it and worry when they don't receive praise.

Researchers have tried to sort out the different types of praise, using categories like person vs. process praise; task, process, self-regulation, or self-level feedback; and general versus specific praise.

Generally, this work suggests:

- Praise for a task or process is better than praise for a person
- Specific feedback is better than general praise
- Though manipulative praise may seem to work in the short run, it has negative long term consequences

Carol Dweck (2007) studied praise for over 30 years and argues that if you're interested in kids being motivated to achieve, then praise for effort is better than praise for intelligence. Though much current research supports a growth model of intelligence (i.e. intelligence can be enhanced through learning), many parents, teachers, and students believe in a fixed model of intelligence (i.e. you're born smart). Dweck's team gave 5th graders in New York public schools puzzle games, then gave them their scores and a single line of praise. Kids were either given intelligence praise ("You must be smart at this") or effort praise ("You must have worked really hard"). Then kids were given a chance to select another puzzle to do. 90% of the kids who had been praised for effort selected a harder puzzle and a majority of the kids who had been praised for intelligence chose the easy puzzle.

Another researcher, Alfie Kohn, wrote a book (1999) in which he reviews the research about the downsides of praise and rewards. Kohn argues that the evaluation component of praise is problematic. An adult giving praise is making a value judgment about the youth. Power shifts to the adult. Kohn (2001) suggests that praise can be manipulative and controlling and that it can rob kids of intrinsic (internal) motivation.

The first time you learn about the downsides of praise, you may have some of the following reactions:

- The kids I work with are different.
- Some kids don't get positive feedback anywhere else so I have to give it to them.
- They need praise from me to combat all the negative messages they hear about themselves.
- I praise them so that eventually they'll internalize those positive messages.

There is no doubt that we should support young people and help them feel good about themselves. Indeed, one of the clearest messages from research on youth programs is that the supportive relationships with adults they provide are beneficial (National Research Council, 2002). But the studies about praise look at diverse kids—rich ones and poor ones; rural, suburban, and city; with various racial and ethnic identities. If you're interested in helping young people feel competent and positive about themselves, praise may do just the opposite in the long term. For kids who don't receive a lot of positive messages in their lives, it is perhaps even more important that we help them develop internal strength.

Some researchers would argue that you should never use praise at all (Kohn, 1999), and others argue that if you praise it should be specific and about the task a youth is working on rather than the youth themselves (e.g. Dweck, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Most agree that too much praise is a bad thing and most agree that empty praise does little or nothing positive (Bronson, 2007). Whether you decide to praise or not, the good news is you can give kids positive attention without using praise. This Ask-Listen-Encourage Method can help motivate young people and help them to feel good about themselves and their efforts.

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Using the Guidebook

Bring Ask-Listen-Encourage ideas into your staff meetings by using the materials in this guidebook. Below are suggested activities to accompany each set of content.

Ask Effective Questions (pages 8-9)

15-20 minutes

Have staff read the description of Ask Effective Questions, then divide them into small groups to work on the activity Converting Convergent Questions. If you have time, they can also work on Creating Divergent Questions. Use whatever time you have left to discuss their answers, checking to make sure that everyone has grasped the difference between convergent and divergent questions.

Listen Actively (page 10) 20-30 minutes

Have staff read the description of Listen Actively. Ask two volunteers to act out the Ms. Johnson and Michael dialogue. Analyze the dialogue together, then distribute Roadblocks to Communication. Have staff work in pairs to rewrite the dialogue. For the last few minutes, have one or two pairs present their new dialogue to the whole group.

Encourage Success (pages 11-12, 20, 21, 30)

20-30 minutes

Have staff read the description of Encourage Success. Divide the group into trios and have them work on *Distinguishing Praise from Encouragement*. After reviewing the answers as a whole group, divide staff into pairs and have them work on *Alternatives to Praise*. Discuss the answers as a whole group. Assign the extension reading *Is Praise Helpful or Harmful?* as homework for a future discussion.

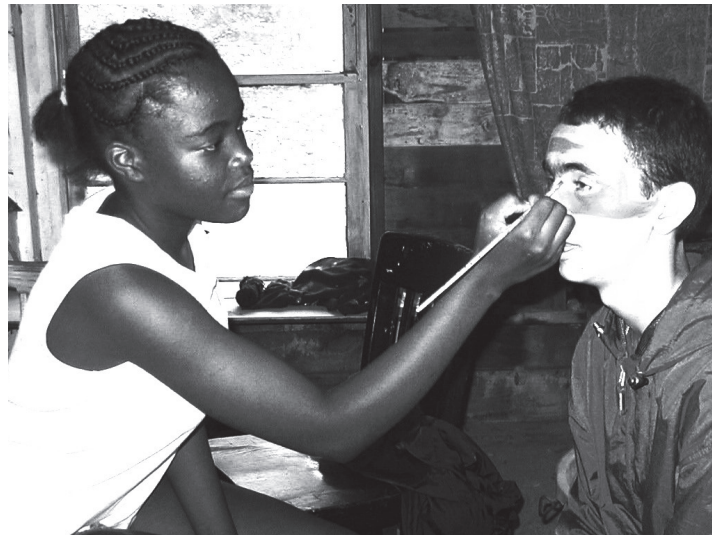
Across Age Groups & Content Areas (pages 32-33)

15-20 minutes

Write a different content area (e.g., art, math, literature, sports, etc.) at the top of large sheets of paper. Have staff rotate to each of the sheets and brainstorm lists of divergent questions and encouragement statements that could be used for each content area. After all the ideas are posted, have staff do a gallery walk to gather ideas from the posted sheets.

Research Review (pages 44-51) 20-30 minutes

Have staff read the Research Review before coming to the meeting. Begin the session by having staff underline two sentences in the text that stand out as important or intriguing. Have staff form group of no larger than 4. Have one person in each group begin by reading the statement that they underlined, without going into why they underlined it. The person to the left then shares their thoughts on the quote the leader read aloud. The next person shares their thoughts on that same quote, and so on until it gets back to the leader. Then the leader has the “last word” to share their thoughts. Then the leadership shifts to the next person. Debrief with the large group once all of the small groups have completed the exercise.



Ask-Listen-Encourage: The Research

“Great job!”

“I like how you’re cooperating with your group!”

“You’re so smart!”

“I’m glad you’re pleased with your project!”

As youth workers, we may find ourselves making statements like these all time. In everyday interactions with youth, praise statements like these might serve as a spontaneous expression of admiration (Brophy, 1981b). They might be aimed at reinforcing certain behaviors over others (Brophy, 1981b). Or, they might be our way of trying to make the youth we work with feel smart or capable (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). But does praise function in the way that we expect it to? Are certain kinds of comments more effective than others? What issues should youth workers be aware of as they try to encourage young people effectively?

Drawing on research conducted in schools and classrooms, this literature review defines three types of praise and the characteristics of praise associated with improvements in academic achievement, behavior, and important life skills such as persistence and task enjoyment. Although out-of-school time programs may emphasize socio-emotional development and strong youth-adult relationships more than the typical classroom, many programs today aim to improve academic achievement. In addition, most youth workers want to help young people become strong, effortful, and resilient in the face of challenge. The characteristics of effective praise described below can help youth workers ensure that the encouraging comments they offer youth strengthen their relationships while facilitating positive youth development and enhancing academic achievement.

It is important to note that the literature on praise contains what appear at first glance to be contradictory findings. Some scholars have found that praise has a positive effect on young people’s

academic achievement (Emmer, 1988; Sutherland, 2000), helps them stay-on task, decreases disruptive behavior (Fullerton, Conroy, & Correa, 2009; Stormont & Reinkey, 2009; Sutherland, 2000), and increases positive interactions in the classroom (Stormont & Reinkey, 2009). Others have found that praise is not correlated with achievement and can humiliate students, reduce the credibility of teachers, lead students to reject future praise (Brophy, 1981b), and shut down classroom discussions (Wong & Waring, 2009). Similarly, a number of scholars have found that praise can improve young people’s interest (Deci, Ryan, & Koestner, 1999), engagement (Fullerton et al., 2009), and motivation (Emmer, 1988)—particularly their intrinsic, or internal, motivation (Deci et al., 1999; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002) and desire to learn (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Others have found that praise reduces young people’s intrinsic motivation (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002) and leads youth to value doing well over learning (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). In several studies, praise also has been shown to reduce young people’s task persistence and enjoyment (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Making sense of these contradictory findings involves unpacking the term praise and the purposes of praise. The literature identifies three types of encouraging statements:

General Praise—General praise is exactly that—a general evaluative statement that expresses approval, admiration, or conveys a sense of young people’s worth (Brophy, 1981b). “I think you’re so smart!” and “Good job!” are examples of this kind of praise.

Specific Praise—Specific praise, sometimes called behavior-specific praise, is evaluative praise that is directed towards a particular child and describes his or her behavior (Fullerton et al., 2009) while making the teacher or youth worker’s expectations clear (Stormont & Reinkey, 2009). The concept of specific praise can be extended to groups of young people or to everyday activities that aren’t exactly behaviors such as cognitive strategies or relationship maintenance. “Great job cleaning up after yourself, Tameka,” “I like the way your group thought through

three different fundraising ideas before settling on this one,” and “Jerry, I appreciate the sincerity of your apology to Kanley” are examples of specific praise.

Encouragement—Whereas praise and specific praise are evaluative, encouragement is non-judgmental and focused on sharing observations and feelings (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976). “It looks as if you spent a lot of time thinking that through, Samin” and “Look at the way you used light and shade to convey emotion, Salvador” are examples of encouragement. Unlike general and specific praise, encouragement can also take the form of a question, where a youth worker asks a young person to share their thoughts about their work. “What do you like about your dance, Artenisha?” and “How did you come to that decision, Khalid?” are examples of this kind of encouragement.

The literature is clear that specific praise produces more positive results than general praise (Emmer, 1988; Fullerton et al., 2009; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Stormont & Reinkey, 2009; Sutherland, 2000). For example, most studies that find positive effects for praising young people’s behavior have focused on specific praise (Fullerton et al., 2009; Stormont & Reinkey, 2009; Sutherland, 2000). However, it’s difficult to say from the extant research how the effects of general or specific praise might differ from encouragement. A small surge of parenting and practitioner guidelines argue in favor of encouragement. Drawing on the work of Alfie Kohn and others (Hintz & Driscoll, 1989; Kohn, 2001), they contend that general and specific praise undermine efforts to empower young people and may inhibit their intrinsic motivation. Because of the evaluative nature of general and specific praise, an adult offering such praise is making a value judgment about a youth. In this situation, the adult holds all the power; it is his or her value judgment that matters. Encouragement still directs attention to and recognizes the same kinds of accomplishments as specific praise but does so in a way that focuses attention on young people’s opinions, actions, and thinking patterns. This point of view is reflected in the famous teaching methods of Maria Montessori.

Teachers using her methods are taught to avoid praising students in favor of “acknowledging positive behavior in a way that allows the child to have his/her own feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment” because doing so will increase the likelihood that the child will want to experience those feelings again (North American Montessori Center, p. 211).

While differentiating among different types of praise can help make sense of the contradictory findings outlined above, it is important to remember that youth workers praise and encourage students for a variety of reasons. One leading scholar found that most teachers are not very deliberate in their use of praise in the classroom and often spontaneously praise students for a number of reasons: to express surprise or admiration, to balance criticism, to break the ice, to make peace, or to console young people (Brophy, 1981b). This kind of spontaneous praise may not be as effective as more systematic praise designed to reinforce certain behaviors (Brophy, 1981b; Fullerton et al., 2009; Stormont & Reinkey, 2009; Sutherland, 2000) or enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). In this way, the literature suggests that youth workers should think about their intentions when they praise or offer encouragement to young people. Only by thinking through what they hope to accomplish, can youth workers consciously choose strategies and tactics that will help them realize their aims.

Scholars have found that certain strategies work best when praise is intended to promote certain actions or behaviors. These include specificity, sincerity (Brophy, 1981a, 1981b), and contingency (Brophy, 1981a, 1981b; Sutherland, 2000). To work effectively as a form of reinforcement, praise must be specific and describe the details of the behavior being reinforced (Brophy, 1981b; Fullerton et al., 2009; Stormont & Reinkey, 2009). In addition to helping young people understand the kind of behavior that a youth worker prefers, specificity can help youth workers demonstrate their sincerity (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). This is important because young people, especially adolescents, often reject praise they believe to be insincere and may view the adults

Ask-Listen-Encourage and the Active-Participatory Approach

Youth and adults learn best through hands-on experiences with people, materials, events, and ideas. The experiential learning model — validated by decades of research and rooted in our early work as part of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation — is the basis of our approach to teaching and learning.

The Youth Work Methods

Ask-Listen-Encourage is unique among the methods because it encapsulates tools and skills that youth workers and educators should employ throughout their programs, even informal times like greetings or meals. The method describes positive, purposeful interaction, which is something that should be sought out in every aspect of youth work. With that said, there are specific ways that the method relates to other Youth Work Methods. Below, you will find a brief description of how Ask-Listen-Encourage relates directly to a select list of methods.

Active Learning cannot actually take place if youth do not have the opportunity to answer effective questions about what they are doing and planning. The encouragement strategies also place adults alongside youth as they engage with materials and ideas, which in turn facilitates Active Learning.

Cooperative Learning - Different groupings of youth need the opportunity to respond to effective questions and receive specific observations as they work, but they should also have the opportunity to be listened to as they debrief their work together. Cooperative Learning can often involve some tension or conflict among group members. The ask and listen strategies can be very useful in these moments.

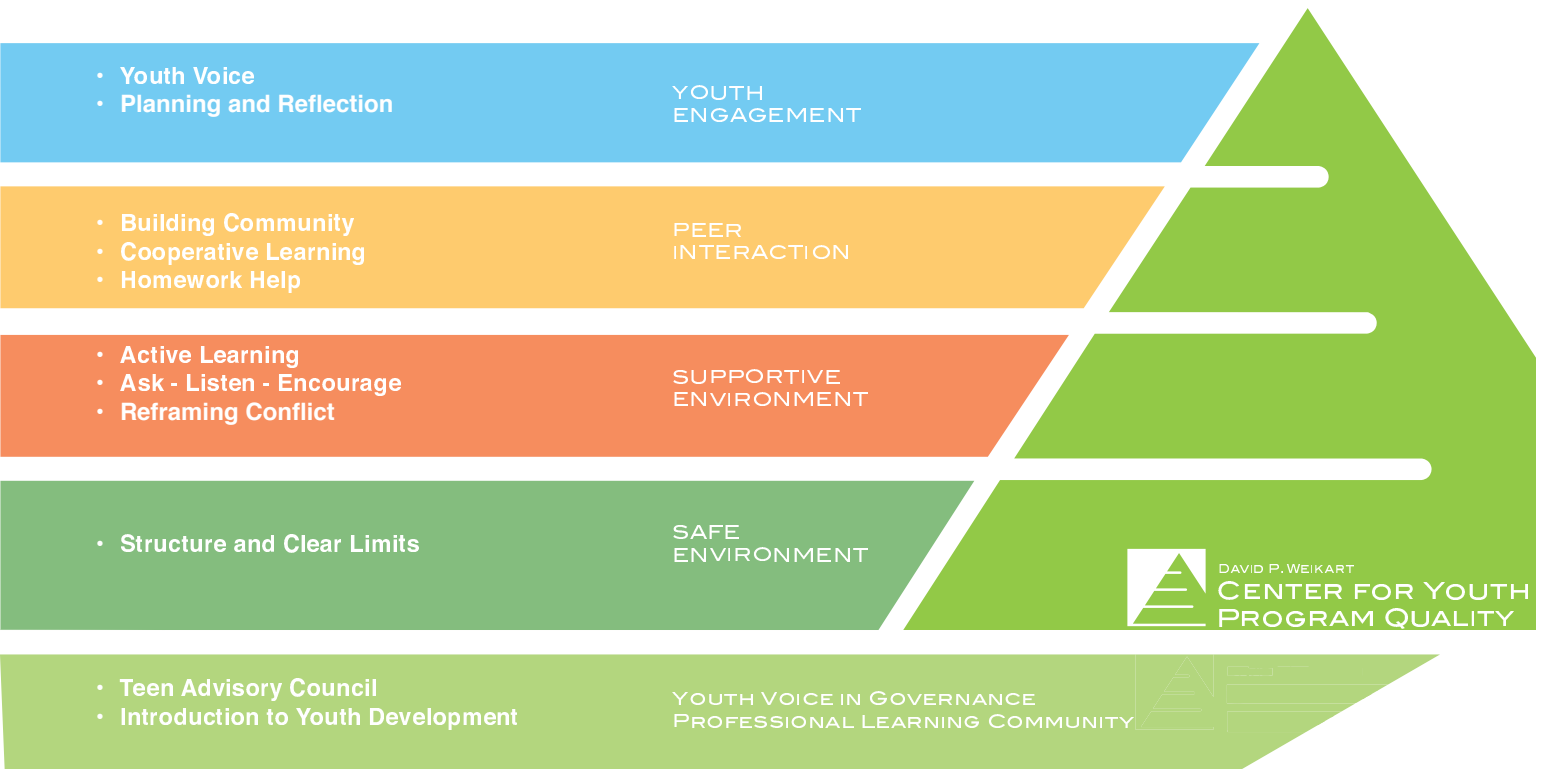
Reframing Conflict - The asking and listening skills described in this method become particularly important and useful in a moment of crisis or conflict. These are the times when young people have the most urgent need for positive interaction with adults. By employing the strategies from this method with those described in Redefine Conflict, adults should feel much more confident in supporting young people through conflicts.

Homework Help - As adults support young people with school work in out-of-school settings, the Ask-Listen-Encourage strategies can help to ensure communication between staff and youth as well as building trust, which can help when youth are asked to set concrete goals for themselves and finish tasks on time.

Voice and Choice - Both Voice and Choice and Ask-Listen-Encourage focus directly on empowering young people and are complementary methods. The tools and skills of one fuels the effectiveness of the other and vice versa. In some ways, Ask-Listen-Encourage is the building block for incorporating voice and choice in your program.

The Youth Work Methods Series

The Youth Work Methods are powerful strategies for working with young people, based on positive youth development. The Methods are a key part of the Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI), a comprehensive system for integrating assessment and training. Each Method is linked to assessment items and designed to help youth workers improve the areas they choose to focus on.



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