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reframing conflict



SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT





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The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality,

a division of the Forum for Youth Investment, is dedicated to empowering education and human service leaders to adapt, implement, and scale best-in-class, research-validated quality improvement systems to advance child and youth development. The Weikart Center encourages managers to prioritize program quality. We offer training, technical assistance, and research services that all come together in the Youth Program Quality Intervention, a comprehensive system for improving the quality of youth programs.

Bringing together over fifty years of experience and the latest research,

the Youth Work Methods are proven strategies for working with youth. Whether you believe that the purpose of an out-of-school time program is to improve academics, to build life skills, or just to provide a place where kids can hang out and be kids, the approach presented in the Youth Work Methods series provides a foundation for building safe and productive places for youth.

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reframing conflict

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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.

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table of contents

Introduction	1
History and a New Approach	2
The Method	5
Overview	6
Programs and Activities	8
Principles and Policies	9
Steps for Responding to Conflict	11
Extensions	15
Conflict Response	16
Emotional Response	18
Productive Conflict	19
Across Age Groups	20
In Your Program	25
Engaging Activities=Less Conflict	26
Planning for Conflict	27
Giving Youth a Voice and Preparing Them for Next Time	28
Sharing Reframing Conflict with Others	30
Resources	35
The Research	36
Reframing Conflict and the Active-Participatory Approach	44

conflict management

History and a New Approach

This section provides a brief history of conflict management practices, with an eye toward a new and more effective way of using conflict to support program goals .

History of Conflict Management

Programs that serve youth have traditionally viewed conflict as a threat. This is not surprising when you think of the purpose of the first non-school programs. Poor houses, orphanages, and other charity-based organizations came into existence to manage a problem, youth with no parents to care for them. The first American schools had the important goal, of uplifting the population through education, but they still subscribed to the “child depravity model”- that kids were basically bad and a big part of the job of school was to control them, usually through very harsh methods. The 1880s brought about the Kindergarten, which introduced the importance of play for young children, and the “Moral Education” movement which promoted the idea that kids could be taught to behave – it’s hard to see it now, but this was a big step forward!

By the mid-20th century, other areas of study began to consider how people work together and get along with each other. Fields as diverse as physics and psychology contributed ideas about the nature of human relationships that were adopted by both educators and child welfare workers to dramatically improve conditions for children. Conflict took on a much more valuable role in the study of human development, as a way to help people grow!

A New Understanding of Conflict

When we think of conflict in our programs, it’s common to view it as a bad thing. Often it means hurt feelings and relationships that are hard to repair. It can slow everything down and sometimes it can have a permanent negative impact on a program. Reframing conflict is about changing our view of conflict from something that hurts to something that helps. When we make conflict a tool that can be used to challenge our old ideas, and help us develop as people, it becomes an opportunity for growth and a great way to support many different program goals. But changing our relationship with conflict is a challenge, too! It happens by creating a youth-centered program environment that offers great content and great staff practices.

overview

What is Reframing Conflict?

Reframing Conflict focuses on minimizing unproductive conflicts within your program through creating a positive environment that emphasizes highly engaging content and provides a youth-centered approach to handling conflict situations when they inevitably arise.

A defining component of the Reframing Conflict method is the youth-centered approach. Youth-centered means that youth are given a voice, or the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and feelings to the process, and that the ultimate goal is for youth to learn something from the conflict experience.

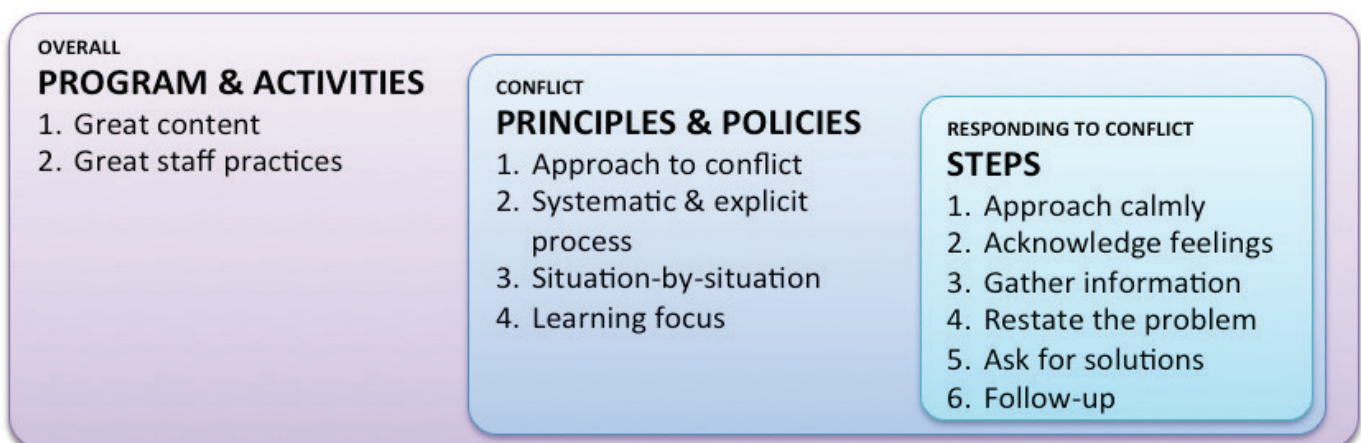
One way to give youth practice in managing conflict experiences is to create opportunities for productive conflict. Productive conflict happens when we have disagreements about ideas and discuss why we disagree. For example, students may disagree about something as simple as the best sport or music. Topics such as these present opportunities for students to practice articulating the reasons for their choices and listening to others in a safe environment. These skills are essential for managing conflict when strong feelings are involved and the stakes are much higher.

Why is Reframing Conflict important?

Conflict is an inescapable part of any youth program. Staff and youth come with different goals, expectations, interests, and needs. Poorly managed conflict can become dangerous, threatening both program goals as well as the safety of the participants. Reframing Conflict is a set of proven strategies that can operationalize conflict experiences and help create a safe program environment that respects individuals, encourages different perspectives, and builds communication skills.

The Method

The method for Reframing Conflict has three areas of focus: the overall program and activities; the foundational principles and conflict policies; and a six-step, proven conflict resolution process. A more descriptive explanation of each follows.



OVERALL

PROGRAM & ACTIVITIES

1. Safety
2. Support
3. Meaningful activities
4. Empowerment

Programs that are organized around youth needs are better positioned to make conflict productive. To create a program environment that supports youth needs, staff can:

1. Create an environment that is both physically and emotionally safe.
2. Develop supportive relationships with youth.
3. Create opportunities for participation in meaningful activities.
4. Empower youth by creating opportunities for making choices about their learning.



CONFLICT

PRINCIPLES & POLICIES

1. Approach to conflict
2. Systematic & explicit process
3. Situation-by-situation
4. Learning focus

RESPONDING TO CONFLICT

STEPS

1. Approach calmly
2. Acknowledge feelings
3. Gather information
4. Restate the problem
5. Ask for solutions
6. Follow-up

A consistent program policy for conflict can ensure that staff members are on the same page when it comes to thinking about what conflict can mean for youth.

1. Approach all conflict as an opportunity for learning. Systemically and explicitly teach a process for handling conflict.
2. Deal with conflict on a situation by situation basis.
3. Focus on the learning by giving youth a voice.

Staff or youth can reframe conflict situations as productive interactions through the use of a consistent, youth-centered process.

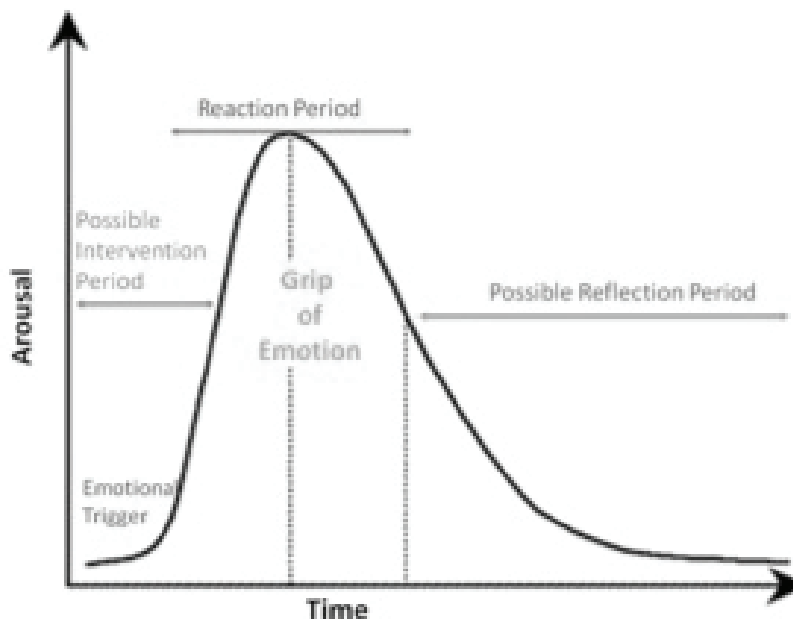
Emotional Response

Having a great conflict policy can go a long way toward heading off a lot of potential conflict situations, but every once in a while emotions will flare before you have time to institute either your carefully constructed conflict policy or the six-step reframing process. When emotions like anger are triggered, there may be a period of time, before an individual reacts, where they are open to intervention. Often, when feelings are acknowledged and expressed, feelings can subside and balance may be regained.

If an emotional response is allowed to escalate and the individual reaches a reaction stage, often referred to as “fight or flight”, the individual may be “blinded by emotions” and their thinking cannot take in information that does not fit, maintain, or justify the emotion he or she is feeling.

In this case, youth may be in such a heightened emotional state that they are unable to consider any rational solutions. In this “fight or flight” condition you must have a way to separate the youth from the situation, not for punishment, but to help them calm down from this unproductive emotional state. This is an opportunity to protect everyone from bad decisions made in an over-emotional state and should be worked into your conflict policy. Hopefully there will be a place that is private and safe to give youth an opportunity to restore emotional balance so they will be able to rejoin the group as soon as possible and begin the reframing process in order to properly address the conflict.

Eventually, emotions subside. At this point, there is an opportunity to engage the individual in reflection and provide follow-up support. Very often this is where reframing starts.



Productive Conflict

“Whenever you’re in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.”

-William James

Productive conflict is the opportunity to challenge existing beliefs. Conflict is essential for growth! It is conflict with our environment, new ideas, different attitudes and beliefs that allows us to develop as well-rounded human beings. It is through the successful navigation of conflict that we develop tolerance and a deeper understanding of the world around us.

Staff can intentionally create productive conflict experiences by exposing youth to different cultures; engaging youth in discussions of laws that affect youth; notions of justice, healthy habits, priorities and preferences. Discussions will give youth an opportunity to develop necessary skills, like an appropriate emotional response to disagreement, which will support the learning focus of the conflict experience.

Try some of these activities to promote Productive Conflict:

1. Discussing current events
2. Having a debate
3. Talking about the best ways to accomplish an important task (e.g., most important job skills; best ways to start college; best ways to make money in high school)
4. Best: classes; music; movies; sports; travel destinations
5. Worst: food; classes; tv shows etc.
6. Hardest: jobs; classes
7. Most challenging experiences
8. Each of these topics creates an environment for students to practice voicing their opinions and defending and articulating their choices – essential communication skills that strengthen conflict resolution abilities.

Ideally, you can create productive conflict experiences on a regular basis. The more youth are faced with challenging ideas, the better able they are to deal with other types of conflict. The more youth are expected to articulate their reactions through conversation, the stronger their communication skills will grow. The more youth are challenged to articulate their feelings and beliefs in an environment that is safe and encourages thoughtful exploration, the more resilient they will be to criticism and conflicting opinions.

Conflicts that may turn into valuable learning experiences can sometimes be less apparent than those that present obvious threats to the environment. But it is through conflict that we learn how to listen to others, share our values, get our needs met, find common ground, and grow.





Giving Youth a Voice and Preparing Them for Next Time

The way you respond to conflict can have a big impact on the young people involved. The following two key questions can help determine if your response is positive and productive:

1. Does the response give the youth(s) involved a voice?
2. Does the response provide the opportunity for youth(s) to learn?

Consider several ways of responding to a specific conflict. In which cells do these responses fit? Which cell or cells do you want your response to be in

		Does the response give youth a voice?	
		Yes, it gives a voice (V).	No, it does not give a voice (NV).
Does the response help youth learn what to do next time a similar conflict occurs? No, it does not help youth learn for next time (NL).	Yes, it helps youth learn what to do next time (L).		
	No, it does not help youth learn for next time (NL).		

Using the Guidebook

These short activities could fit into a staff meeting or planning time. Alternatively, combine several of these activities to create a mini-workshop on Reframing Conflict.

The Method (pages 5-14) 10-15 minutes

Discuss with staff the three focus areas of the method. Have staff brainstorm ways they address each of the areas in their programs. You might also facilitate a rotation brainstorming activity with some of the following questions:

- What do you think are some of the benefits of conflict?
- What do you think are some of the challenges of managing conflict in your program?
- What are some positive experiences you have had in your personal experience with conflict in school, at home, or in the workplace?
- What are some negative experiences you have had in your personal experience with conflict in school, at home, or in the workplace?

Debrief staff responses with some of the following questions:

- Was anyone surprised by the answers their colleagues gave?
- Do people seem to have similar experiences and perspectives on conflict? Why/why not?
- What else do you notice about the answers?
- How do we make sense of there being both positive and negative experiences?

Engaging Activities = Less Conflict (page 26)

10-15 minutes

Guide participants through the questions. Challenge them to think about how their program activities might better meet the interests of youth and how to measure student interest in the program. Invite staff to share ideas that have worked as well as ideas that have flopped. Encourage creativity in new ideas.

Conflict Response and Appropriate Interventions (pages 16-17) 20-30 minutes

Read page 16 and use page 17 to decide as a group what types of responses are appropriate for a variety of situations. When will you ignore conflict or allow youth to work it out themselves? When is punishment or immediate cessation of conflict appropriate? And when and how will you support youth in solving a conflict? As individuals share their opinions, be respectful and model positive communication skills – the more these are practiced, the more naturally they will come when a conflict arises.

Emotional Response (page 18) 10-15 minutes

After reading page 18, have staff act out a scenario where heightened emotions are involved. The first time staff act out the scenario, allow the emotions to escalate. Then have the staff act out the same scenario a second time (or have different staff act out a different scenario) and have other staff freeze the scene when they would like to intervene, in order to prevent continued emotional escalation. Then have the staff act out a third scenario and have other staff demonstrate when and how they would intervene during a potential reflection period. Debrief the actions of the staff who intervene.

Productive Conflict (page 19) 10-15 minutes

As a group, read out loud the definition of Productive Conflict. Facilitate a brief discussion about how staff already apply productive conflict in their program offerings. Encourage staff to attempt some of the suggested activities and return to the next meeting with a summary of how it went with youth.

Giving Youth a Voice (pages 28) 15-20 minutes

Reproduce the matrix on page 28 on chart paper or a white board. Have staff consider recent interactions they have had with youth, considering seemingly innocuous interactions as well as more targeted interactions. Have them summarize the interaction on a stick note. One at a time, have staff share their story and place it on the matrix in the appropriate quadrant. Debrief: Which cell or cells do you want most of the responses to be in? Why?

Across Age Groups (page 20) 10-15 minutes

Write a different focus area (Program and Activities, Principles and Policies, and Steps) at the top of large sheets of paper. Have staff rotate to each of the sheets and brainstorm ways to introduce reframing conflict to different age groups in each of the areas. After all the ideas are posted, have staff do a gallery walk to gather ideas from the posted sheets.

The Research (pages 36-43) 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.



Reframing Conflict: The Research

Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict.

(Saul Alinsky, 1971, p.21)

Aggression is mismanaged conflict.

(Shantz & Hartup, 1992, p.4)

Conflict exists in every culture and is a natural part of the human experience. Its presence can enliven discourse, strengthen individuals' commitment to their ideas and challenge people to think more deeply and to examine closely held beliefs (Bodine & Crawford, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Uline, et al, 2003). The inevitable "friction" of conflict--with people, ideas, and experiences--challenges us and provides a critical ingredient in our personal and cognitive development (Piaget, 1937; Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). That is, conflict can produce growth and change. Indeed, conflict is at the heart of every major theory of developmental change!

But conflict can be disruptive and can make the job of youth workers extremely difficult. Conflict involving one or more youth can affect the physical and psychological safety of other youth present. For these reasons, conflict is typically viewed as negative when it occurs in educational contexts. It is ever present in the lives of many young people, and can be a near-constant concern of parents, teachers and youth workers.

A challenge with research in this area is that there are many aspects of conflict to consider (Valsiner & Cairns, 1992; Perlman, 2000; Vallacher et. al., 2010). As a field of general study, conflict resolution has been marked by an avalanche of data but a dearth of comprehensive theory. For the purposes of this review, we will focus on conflict and approaches to conflict resolution associated with young people in educational settings. Specifically, this research review will provide a brief background on conflict resolution and the

body of research that surrounds it. We will discuss history associated with conflict resolution theory, and then define the idea of framing and reframing conflict. Finally, we will introduce and explain the Weikart Center's approach to Reframing Conflict.

A Brief History of Conflict Resolution Theory Historically, at least through the early 20th century in America, the idea of conflict management with respect to young people could have been summed up in the phrase, "spare the rod and spoil the child." In some cases, conflict between young people in learning environments (e.g school, church) was viewed as disruption and disruption was not only unwelcome but was considered an affront against God ("the rod of correction" was "an ordinance of God."(Brown, 1910. pg. 136; cf Travers, 1980)). Corporal punishment and public humiliation were typical conflict management policy through the beginning of the 20th century. However, by the early 1900s, organizations concerned with the welfare of children began to promote approaches that reflected some of the more benevolent values of religion and certain immigrant populations (Sweeney, 1996; Travers, 1980); however, punishment-based responses to conflict remained predominant.

The turning point in conflict resolution education came near the end of the 1960s when educators explored approaches that were more in line with the thinking of the day, specifically with a more nuanced consideration of participants' concerns and a greater respect for the ideas and feelings of young people (Sweeney, 1996; cf Duryea, 1992). Traditional punishment-oriented forms of conflict management have since been shown to be ineffective (Irwin, 1994; Bodine and Crawford, 1998; Glasser, 1998; Edwards, 2000; Jones, 2006; Deutsch, et. al., 2006; Mattaini and McGuire, 2006; and others). Many zero-tolerance policies (born of the fear that followed the 1999 school shootings at Columbine, CO where 12 students were killed and another 21 were injured) and still prevalent in many US schools, are a reminder of how pertinent this topic continues to be.

Although there are many approaches to modern

Reframing Conflict 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.

Reframing Conflict and Other Youth Work Methods

Reframing Conflict is complemented by other strategies. Following are examples of how other Youth Work Methods reinforce Reframing Conflict.

Reducing conflict starts by increasing safety. **The Structure and Clear Limits Method** is a natural companion to **Reframing Conflict**. In this method, learn how structure contributes to youths' sense of security and how clear expectations for youth can reduce confusion and chaos.

One way to reduce conflict in your program is to build a supportive and welcoming community. The Building Community method has lots of ideas for how to use structured activities to strengthen the sense of group unity.

Planning and Reflection make learning intentional. By building in time for planning and reflection, you can teach youth to be intentional and to consider their actions, two strategies that can also help them to reduce conflict in their lives.

Cooperative Learning can provide youth a variety of opportunities to interact with others, particularly those who might be different from them. Youth will learn about each other, but also about themselves when cooperative learning is used effectively.

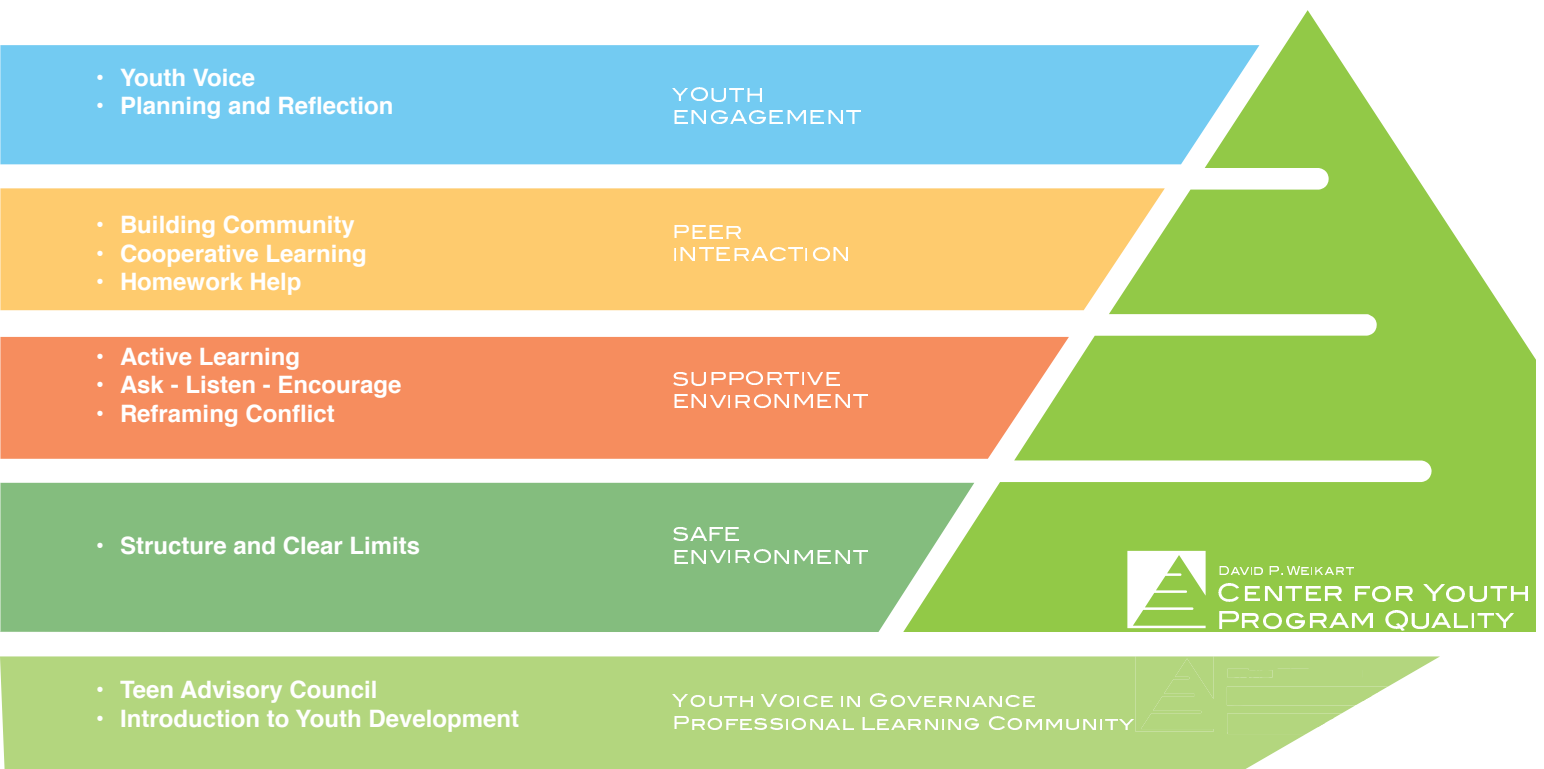
Building opportunities for **Youth Voice** into your program can help to empower youth to feel a sense of ownership and belongingness with the program. Youth who feel connected to the program are less likely to incite conflict situations.



To learn more about the history of the Active Participatory Approach, visit www.highscope.org.

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.



To learn more about these and other Weikart Center workshops, please visit www.cypq.org.