Quality Matters in 4-H

Reframing Conflict

Learn. Grow. Lead.

Quality Matters in 4-H

Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) Items: Supportive Environment

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University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development delivers education, training and professional development for adults who work with and on behalf of young people. Since 2000, the Extension Center for Youth Development has provided the latest youth development research and taught youth workers throughout Minnesota how to apply it in their work. The Extension Center for Youth Development is committed to expanding the knowledge and strengthening the practices of staff and volunteers who are committed to high-quality youth development experiences for young people.

Attachments and resources

In addition to the staff meeting and training activities included in the Welcoming, Engaging and Encouraging Toolkit, the Extension Center for Youth Development has provided the following attachments and resources:

- "What to Do When a Conflict Occurs," "Reframing Conflict: General Principles" and "Reframing Conflict Step By Step" — excerpts from HighScope's Youth Work Methods Series by Tom Akiva.
- "Eight Basic Youth Needs," "Proven Principles of Positive Youth Development" and "A Positive Youth Development Model" — excerpts from Youth Work Matters YWI series, by Gisela Konopka.

Credit and thanks

The activities included were based on two primary creative sources:

- "Reframing Conflict." (2007). Public session at the Quality Matters Road Trip conference. Presented by Jenny Wright, Minneapolis Beacons Network.
- Reframing Conflict. (2007). HighScope Youth Work Methods Series. Tom Akiva.
  For more information on High Scope go to ***youth.highscope.org***.

The Reframing Conflict Toolkit was written and adapted by Deborah Moore and Andrea Jasken Baker as part of the resources available through the Quality Matters Project.

Quality Matters is a technical assistance and training project of the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development focused on improving youth program quality. Our thanks to the Quality Matters coach and consultants and youth programs who participated in Quality Matters. In very important ways, the development of all related Quality Matters toolkits were based on spoken needs and wise advice learned in practice and training.

Our thanks as well to the McKnight Foundation and the Minnesota Department of Education for continued financial support.

Reframing Conflict

Staff Meeting and Training Activities
YPQA Items: Supportive Environment

Conflict occurs when two or more people's beliefs, actions or attitudes don't line up. This can happen between adults and youths. Conflict is a normal occurrence in youth programs, and it is also one of the most chronic issues noted by youth workers across Missouri. Until we are comfortable and consistent when we deal with conflict, we will continue to find it a distraction in daily program life.

According to HighScope, to provide a high quality program, youth workers must reframe conflict and find ways for growth and learning inside these often frustrating situations.

A few key behaviors that help reframe conflict:

- Staff approach the situation calmly and acknowledge feelings.
- Staff ask involved youths about the cause and the possible solutions.
- Staff encourage youths to consider the effects of their actions.
- There is follow-up afterward.

By reframing conflict using these behaviors, staff build a healthy, cohesive group and produce learning and growth for the young person. The following toolkit will review a few ways to discuss reframing conflict.

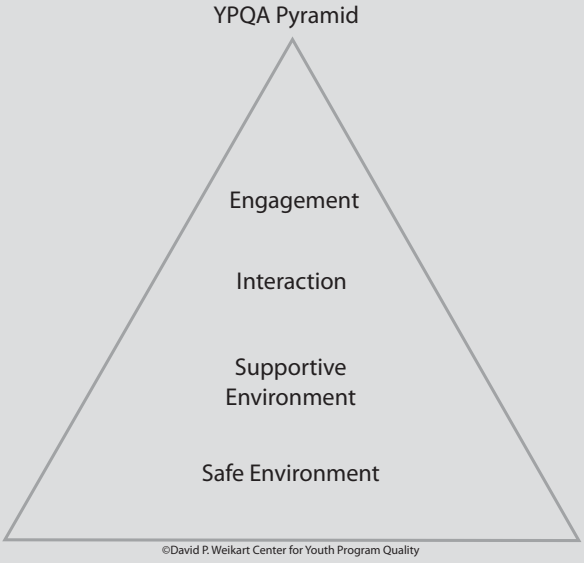
YPQA Related Indicator: Supportive Environment

Staff usually approach conflicts and negative behavior in a calm manner, stop any hurtful actions and acknowledge the youths' feelings.

Staff involve youths to determine cause and solution of conflicts and other negative behaviors.

Staff ask youths to resolve conflict and negative behaviors by looking at their actions and consequences.

Staff address conflicts and negative behavior in the moment and follow up afterward.



Session Setup and Materials

Setup

Set up tables for small group work and conversation with an open area toward the front of the room.

Post the workshop title, agenda and facilitator name on an easel pad.

Tape posters on the wall with the bottom taped up so they can't be read.

Agenda

- Welcome and intro activity
- Review introduction and definitions
- Activity and discussion
- Final activity
- Tools, resources and handouts
- Final questions and closing

Introduction Activity — 15 minutes

The facilitator asks that each participant share briefly as we go around the room:

- Your name
- The conflict you see most often in the program
- Some of your most typical feelings when facing conflict

The facilitator starts and models how to respond. As the participants share, the facilitator jots down words or common themes that emerge.

After everyone has shared, the facilitator reads aloud some of the common words and themes that were voiced around the room, and then facilitates a brief conversation using the following questions:

- Why might these feelings you just shared matter when we discuss conflict in youth programs?
- What are some of the commonalities or themes you see about conflicts in our programs?
- What do you hope to get out of today's session on conflict?

Finish this activity by briefly reviewing points from the introduction paragraph from page 1 of this document.

Definitions Activity — 5 minutes

Definitions

On a large sheet of paper write the words "Youth development" and "Conflict." Ask participants to begin by defining these two terms.

Youth development: Keywords might include: growth, learning, positive, strengths, opportunities, relationships, choices, understanding youth needs, youth in context, youths at the center of their own development.

Conflict: Keywords might include: negative, positive, verbal, physical, barrier, distraction, learning opportunity, youth to youth, youth to adult.

Discussion

Key points during definition discussion:

- Not all conflict is bad. For example, some youth development staff at camps create situations where youths have to learn how to manage conflict, such as a high ropes challenge. It can be a learning opportunity.
- Conflict can also be a huge challenge for youth development workers, and it can be a barrier or distraction to doing the work you want to do.
- Finding ways for youths to navigate toward self-discipline and growth is an important skill to practice in youth programs.

Today we will talk about conflict within the context of youth development strategies and a youth development framework.

"Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict."

— William Ellery Channing

(These highlights should be written on large pieces of easel paper or copied from the toolkit resources attached.)

As a refresher — a positive youth development framework

- prepares and promotes youths (not prevents or intervenes),
- focuses on support and opportunities,
- sees youths as resources,
- builds on the strengths and assets of youths, and
- works to meet the basic needs of youths.

Review Konopka's eight basic youth needs (page 14).

Finish by noting that when dealing with conflict in youth programs, research and practice tell us that focusing on relationships first and also considering the basic ideas of positive youth development are important things to keep in mind.

Reframing Conflict Activity and Discussion — 30 minutes

Introduction

Begin this activity by reading the following scenarios (which should be written on easel paper and posted on the wall). Let the table groups call out which one they would most like to discuss at their table.

Scenarios

1. **A terrible day**
   Your program partners with a school. When you arrive at a classroom to pick up a middle school student, her teacher comes up and says, "She was terrible in class today! She shouldn't get to go to your program and have fun." The student yells, "That's not fair!" and goes off to her locker.

2. **Fight or flight**
   A sixth-grade boy says, "I hate this program. I'm leaving," and begins to walk out the front door of the building. Your program is not set up as a drop-in where students are allowed to come and go as they choose.

3. **The great divide**
   Girls in the Middle School Girls Leadership group have formed two cliques — the Latina girls and the African-American girls. During group time, the girls begin name calling with each other.

4. **A picture is worth 1,000 words**
   During an art activity with third-graders, one student draws a mean picture of another student and shows it to the group. Many of the other students laugh, and the child who was drawn is visibly angry and upset.

Instructions

Hand a paper out to each group along with stacks of sticky notes and pens.

Give the following instructions one at a time:

- Brainstorm as many possible responses to this scenario as you can. Write each response on a separate sticky note.
- After your group has had enough time, place all your notes on your easel paper.
- Have one member of your group read the responses aloud and group duplicates together.

Before the session, write the following on easel sheets. Fold and tape them so they cannot be seen by participants:

- Adults problem-solve the conflict and determine next steps...
- Youths and adults problem-solve the conflict and determine next steps...
- Youth problem-solve the conflict and determine next steps...

Peer learning

When the group has finished their discussion and come up with as many responses as they can, have them pass their papers clockwise around the room for a quick round with each of the other scenarios.

With each new scenario, have one member of the group read aloud the scenario and the possible responses. Discuss any missing or additional responses and add them on a sticky note marked with a star to show that they are new.

Repeat with all scenarios until the group ends up with their original paper.

The facilitator asks the original groups to read any new additions aloud to their group.

The facilitator asks each group to organize their notes on the easel paper into the three categories from the sidebar above, which are now also posted on the wall on three separate sheets of easel paper.

Each group sends up a representative to share their scenarios with the large group and places the groups of sticky notes on the easel paper in the appropriate categories.

Reflection

Reflect on what you notice about how the responses are clustered.

Finish by noting that this activity shows the continuum of solutions for a given situation and how responses can vary. Not all situations can be solved by adults for youths. To work toward a high quality program, staff must move toward youths resolving the conflict.

Closing Activity — 25 minutes

Introduction

Ask for two or three brave souls to role play one of the scenarios from the Reframing Conflict activity on page 6. You could also use one of the conflicts noted by staff in the introductory activity on page 4. Let the entire group know how the role play activity works:

- The volunteers will leave the room, and when they return they will run through their skit once with no interruption.
- They will then leave the room and return to do **exactly** the same skit over again for the group.
- During the second time they do the skit, **everyone** in the audience has the option of saying, "FREEZE!" at any point during the skit.
- Once you say "FREEZE!" you must tag in as the **youth worker** (only) and show a different way of handling the situation.
- When you tag in, you can begin at the exact moment in the scene where you jumped in or you could ask for a rewind and go back a bit.

Directions for role players

When the volunteers leave the room to prepare their role play, coach them to keep it simple but make it as real as possible. Ask the role play youth worker to demonstrate a more authoritarian approach where the adult increases the conflict with the student and attempts to make all the decisions. This will allow the other participants to try a more youth-centered approach when they jump in.

Role play process

The scenario can be repeated multiple times or you can also have people role play more than one role, depending on time and group enthusiasm.

Reflection

Each person who jumps in as the youth worker should be recognized afterward ("What did Jenny do well?" "What worked?"). Encourage the discussion and reflection.

Notations

This technique comes out of "Theater of the Oppressed" strategies adapted from Paolo Freire's work with oppressed people in Brazil, in which he used street theater as a way to help people imagine creating a different reality for themselves and their lives. It has deep social justice roots.

"I have found the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it."

— Harry Truman

Additional Ideas...

Conflict: What are your program rules?

Most programs have a formal or informal conflict process in place. Don't forget to look at the stated or unstated process the staff and volunteers are using when conflict occurs. Get those out and review with a Reframing Conflict lens in mind.

If you do not have any formal (or on paper) policies for managing conflicts, it might be time to get them on paper.

Conflict: Is the relationship first?

All youth workers know that relationships are key to good youth work. Don't forget that in times of conflict. Some of the best ways to reduce conflict are to work on strengthening the relationships staff have with youths. For example, each week ask staff to identify youths who are having problems. Then designate one to two ways staff will connect with that youth to build a relationship, outside any conflict processes. Try it!

Reinforce and Check the Learning a Few Times

Very few of us hear something once and make the change immediately. Changing the way we address conflict is a process, and we should support steps toward that change regularly. In some programs, checking on conflicts and behavior issues is even a regular staff meeting agenda item. Here are a few simple ways to follow up, discuss and reflect how we are moving toward new ways of addressing conflict in youth programs.

Once or twice a month, use this simple method of capturing how staff and volunteers respond to conflict.

Ask staff to quickly brainstorm conflicts that occurred in the last week or so. Write a few words on a sticky note that will help identify the conflict, such as "Taishia and Kelly in free time."

Next, draw the grid below on a large piece of paper. Ask participants to think about the conflict and place their sticky note where their response to the conflict most accurately fits.

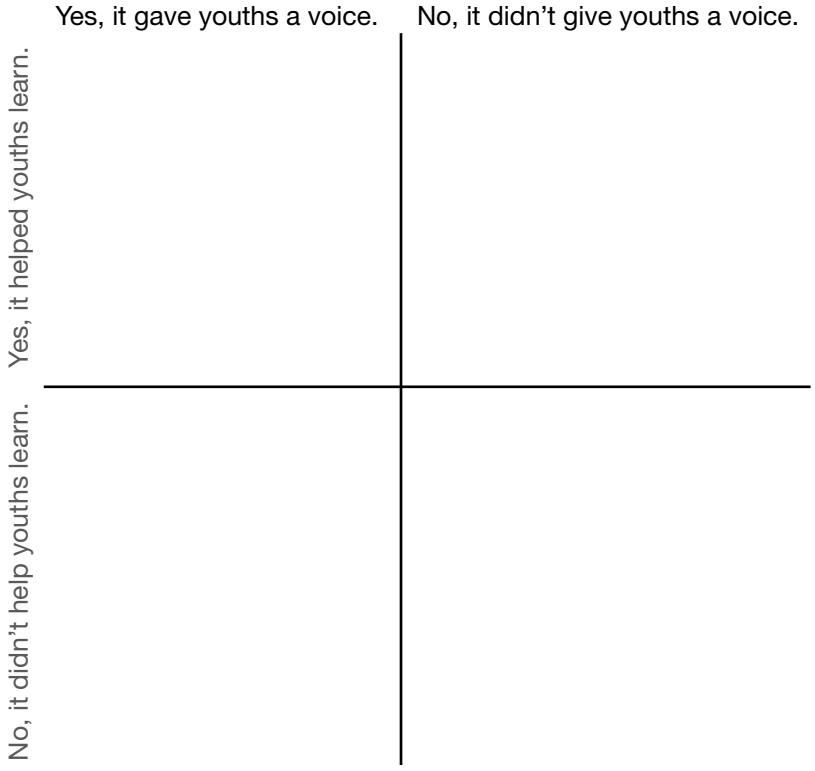
When all sticky notes are posted, review anything that jumps out at you about where the notes are placed.

Ask participants to pick one or two of the situations that did not give youths voice or provide learning. Talk through the situations so everyone knows what occurred. Then brainstorm different ways that staff or volunteers could handle the situation next time.

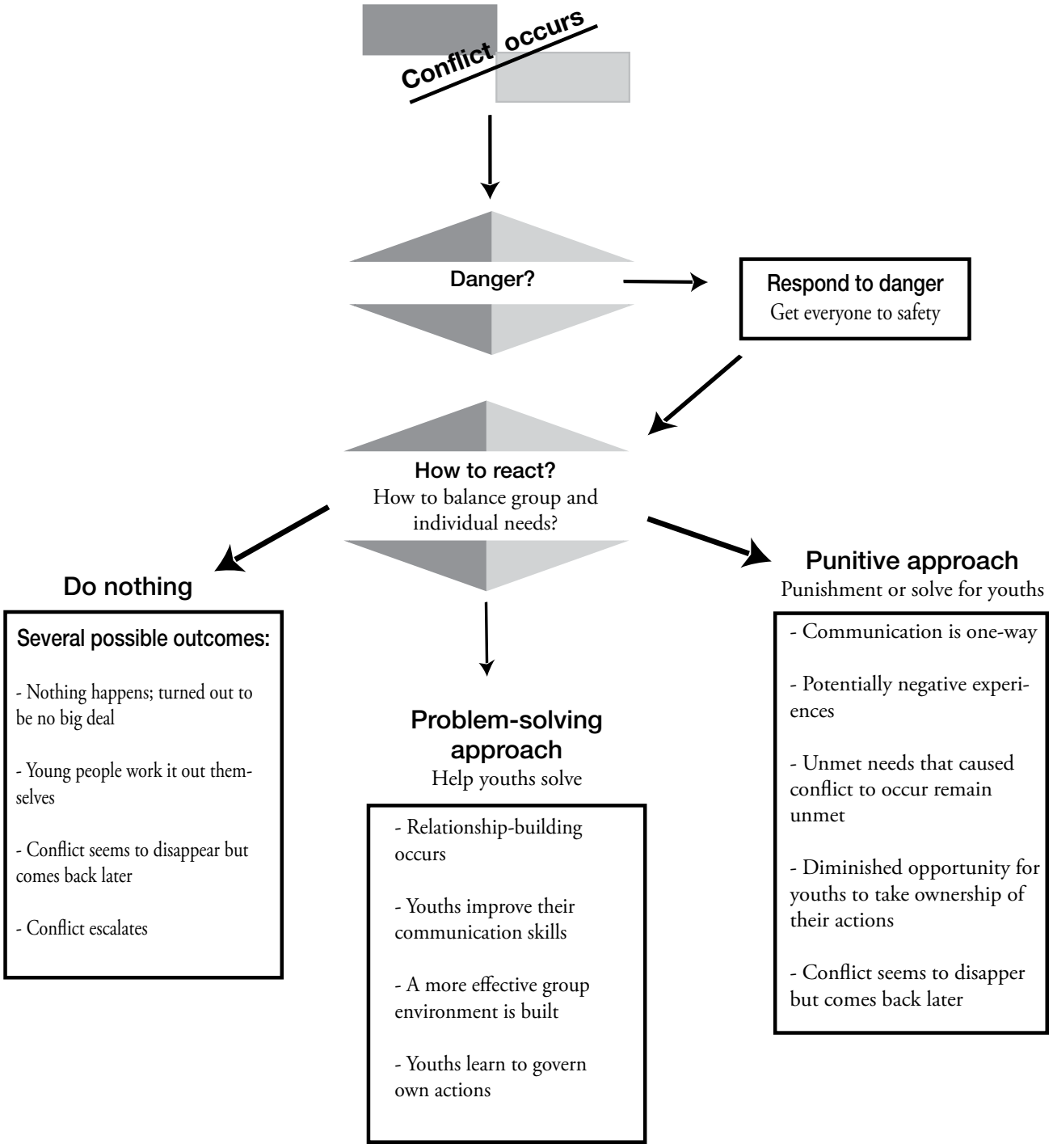
Finish by asking if anyone tried a new strategy for a conflict that seemed to work well since your last meeting. You might want to start capturing a "methods list" of successful responses to conflict. Create some shared program rituals (such as giving high-fives or "Huzzahs") for trying something different each week, or treat staff to a soda or piece of chocolate as a way to highlight each new method tried.

"Too often we give our children answers to remember rather than problems to solve."

— Roger Lewin



What to Do When a Conflict Occurs



Excerpts from High/Scope's Youth Worker Methods Series by Tom Akiva

What to Do When a Conflict Occurs

The illustration on the previous page is a rough flow chart for how a youth worker responds to conflict and the decisions he or she must make — no matter what approach he or she is using.

Danger?

When a conflict occurs, the first decision to make (indicated by the top diamond in the figure) involves assessing if there is danger — physical or otherwise. If youths are physically in danger, getting them to safety is the first priority. This guide does not deal directly with strategies for this; however, many resources are available for guidelines on physical restraint and other methods for making a situation physically safe.

What type of conflict?

It's important to be clear about what type of conflict you're dealing with in terms of adult-youth or youth-youth. However, whether you are personally having a conflict with a youth (adult-youth) or you're dealing with two or more youths in conflict (youth-youth), the diagram applies.

How to balance group and individual needs?

One of the key decisions a youth worker must make (often numerous times throughout the day) is how to balance the needs of a youth or a few youths in conflict with the needs of the entire group. You would not want, for example, to spend 10 minutes helping two young people solve a minor conflict while the rest of the group has nothing to do. The key is to find a balance between getting both sets of needs met in ways that work.

Three responses

The flow chart gives three ways to respond. Most of the rest of this guide will try to convince you that the problem-solving approach is generally a really good way to go. It should be noted, though, that sometimes ignoring a behavior is the most effective course of action. Sometimes a quick check on a youth (such as, "Quiet, please.") is much more productive than a youth voice approach. Generally, the best approach is to use strategies for keeping a group moving and to pull out the more substantial Reframing Conflict pieces when necessary.

Reframing Conflict: General Principles

Reframing conflict flips the more common adult-centered approach to working with youths upside down. Rather than solve problems for young people by enforcing rules or punishment, adults partner with youths to help them find and carry out solutions. Not only is this approach effective, it also can turn conflict situations into opportunities for youths to learn valuable life skills.

Reframing is not the same as solving or resolving. The American Heritage Dictionary lists several definitions for resolve, including "to make a firm decision about" and "to bring to a usually successful conclusion." Frame, on the other hand, is defined as "to conceive or design" or "to arrange or adjust for a purpose."[1] The purpose of reframing is not necessarily to get youths to see things the way we see things. It is, rather, to establish an effective process for moving beyond the conflict. Reframing also means changing blaming and problem-based language into more positive and productive language.

HighScope provides a step-by-step model for dealing with two young people in an escalating conflict (see page 10). Specific conflicts, however, are infinitely varied. The following general conflict-resolution principles provide an overall framework:

- Provide opportunities for positive participation
- Respond quickly to problems
- Focus on the problem and not the person
- Deal with problems on a situation-by-situation basis — and don't hold grudges
- Listen to young people

These guidelines are explored in more depth on the next few pages.

Provide opportunities for positive participation

The most effective tool for reframing conflict is the program itself. Creating a learning environment that is fun, productive and interesting for youths is a proactive way to head off potential problems. By engaging or reengaging individuals in activities, you can redirect negative energy (which might be the result of boredom or frustration) into productive avenues. When a youth program offers exciting and challenging activities, young people share experiences, develop new skills and have positive things to talk about.

A key aspect of positive participation is the opportunity for young people to experience success. These successes can be the individual's or group's. Providing youths with ample opportunities to feel successful is key to building a safe and productive learning environment.

Positive participation can also improve the likelihood that young people feel a sense of group belonging, which can also lead to diminished conflict.

When a conflict does occur, you can work with youths individually to help them reengage with a project or activity. This might involve working one-on-one with a young person to discover something he or she finds interesting and challenging about the topic or project at hand.

Respond quickly to problems

Approach problems when they occur or as soon afterward as possible. This is particularly important for your relationship and image with the youths as an adult who follows through on commitments. By responding quickly to possible problems, you send the message that limits are real and you can be counted on to keep the group accountable, safe and focused.

In addition, holding a young person accountable for an incident or behavior that happened three days before and went unaddressed or unnoticed is not fair or productive. Whenever possible, the youth worker present during the incident should be the one to engage the youths in problem-solving. You should not simply observe a problem and report it later to the program director. The goal is to have a problem addressed quickly by someone who witnessed it, rather than addressed much later by a director who has no direct experience with the problem.

It's totally normal to be reluctant to intervene when you observe problems or challenging behavior. You might feel like you don't have time to deal with it, especially if you're the only adult present and you're working with a

1 The language we use affects how we view situations. Definitions for "resolve" and "frame" are from The American Heritage College Dictionary. (2000). 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Reframing Conflict: General Principles (cont.)

group of young people. Balancing time spent with the group with time spent addressing conflict requires careful consideration, sometimes without much time to do so.

Also, it is not always easy to address conflict, especially if you're not used to playing the role of authority figure. You want to be the "cool" adult, right? Well truthfully, being clear about limits and responding quickly to problems can actually help establish your relationship with youths. And it becomes easier with practice, particularly, when you see how much easier it is to lead a group activity when problems are addressed rather than ignored.

Consistency among the staff you work with is important — though you don't always have control over this. It is important for young people to know that the whole staff is interested in supporting them. If staff members intervene each time in the same manner, youths will eventually discover that through this practice they and others are more successful and comfortable.

Focus on the problem and not the person

It is critical when a conflict or challenging behavior arises to focus on the incident rather than the individual or individuals involved. When a behavior is separated from the individual and examined in a more objective light, youths feel less personally attacked and can often understand more clearly how their behavior affects others. You need to make clear to young people involved that you are not being critical of them, but rather of the isolated incident or behavior. For young people who spend a lot of time in the principal's office or in detention and who have come to consider themselves as "bad kids" in the eyes of authority, this approach might seem foreign. However, it is critical in helping to reverse young people's negative understanding of themselves and to support their potentially positive roles within the youth program, community, school or family.

Reframing Conflict Step By Step

Here is a step-by-step model for constructively approaching a conflict situation:

1. **Approach calmly.**

   Remember, things might not be what they seem! Try to keep an open mind and approach conflicts calmly and matter-of-factly. In this way, you model the acceptance of conflict as a healthy and normal part of social interaction. If more than one youth is involved, you might need to negotiate time between them — taking turns usually works.

2. **Acknowledge feelings.**

   Because it is difficult for young people to think about solutions when they are filled with strong feelings, help them express these feelings until they are brought back into balance. Sometimes a little time and space can really help a young person get into a problem-solving frame of mind.

3. **Gather information.**

   It is very important to understand the details of a conflict in order to help youths come up with the most effective solutions.

4. **Restate the problem.**

   This demonstrates that you are listening to all sides and provides an opportunity to model appropriate language for youths. This strategy is particularly helpful with youths who have a difficult time stating their feelings and perspectives in a positive or respectful manner.

5. **Ask for solutions and choose one together.**

   One strategy that supports youths in coming up with appropriate solutions to conflicts is to ask divergent questions. These questions can help them to articulate what needs to change and generate solutions to the current problem. For young people who cannot come up with solutions on their own, offer a choice of solutions. These strategies provide youths with developmentally appropriate support.

6. **Be prepared to give follow-up support.**

   The problem-solving approach is a learning process. Young people will vary in their development of problem-solving skills. Follow-up support should occur here as with any learning situation. For example, after an initial conflict is resolved, the young people involved may make plans for the future. An adult then can check with them later on to see how the plan went. Or, an adult can offer support to help youths carry out their plan if the problem arises again.

Basic Youth Needs

- Feel a sense of safety and structure
- Experience active participation, group membership and belonging
- Develop self-worth through meaningful contribution
- Experiment to discover self, gain independence and gain control over one's life
- Develop significant quality relationships with peers and at least one adult
- Discuss conflicting values and form their own
- Feel pride of competence and mastery
- Expand their capacity to enjoy life and know that success is possible

Adapted from:

Konopka, G. (1973). Requirements for healthy development of adolescent youth. Adolescence 8(31), 2-25.

Pittman, K.J. and Wright, M. (1991). A rationale for enhancing the role of the non-school voluntary sector in youth development. (Commissioned for the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.) Washington, D.C.: Center for Youth Development and Policy Research.

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