

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

DESCRIPTION

Youth engagement involves a set of strategies to ensure that school mental health programs, activities, systems, and services have been developed and implemented with active involvement from students. Youth voice, a key underpinning to positive youth development, occurs when young people participate in decision-making (as equals) with adults, mobilize, create, or change public policy, and take influential leadership roles in organizations and institutions.

RATIONALE

Youth voice benefits organizations and communities as well as contributes to the positive development of young people themselves. Engaged youth possess a sense of belonging and purpose, which are both protective factors that promote positive youth development. In addition, the quality of services and programming improve when the engaged consumer has a central role. Therefore, actively involving youth is necessary in all levels of school mental health, including service delivery and program development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The most effective way to increase youth engagement is by meaningfully involving and respecting youth voices. The first section below describes concrete strategies for increasing youth engagement in both service delivery and program development.

Strategies to increase youth engagement in school mental health program development

1. Approach students who both receive and who do not receive services about their interest in having a voice in how mental health services are delivered.
2. Invite youth to participate on a school mental health advisory council. Youth and families may need training and support to know how to be an effective participant in team meetings, advisory groups, etc.
3. Use a variety of mechanisms to obtain student feedback regarding school mental health programs and services. Examples may include:
 - Create a “suggestion box” to elicit anonymous input from students.
 - Talk to students in the lunch room about what services they would like to see at the school.
 - Invite students to participate in focus groups and involve them in the analysis and after a focus group, survey, or evaluation.
4. Share results of feedback with students.
5. Attend a student council, or other student organization meeting to recruit involvement from youth
6. Collaborate on an activity (Wellness Fair, After-School Walk, etc.) with other in-school support services, like a Peer Mediation Program or a Wellness Club.
7. Recruit youth stakeholders to create a marketing/public education campaign to improve the perception of mental health and increase tolerance for everyone.

Strategies to increase youth engagement in service delivery

1. Encourage youth clients to be actively involved in designing their own counseling plans.
2. Consider welcoming another young person onto a treatment team or team meeting if the student requests it.

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3. Utilize youth as trainers or presenters to reach out to other students and/or staff to offer youth perspectives on wellness issues.
4. Challenge stigma or misperceptions voiced by students or school staff around what “types” of students utilize mental health services at school.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUTH

The following recommendations are an example of youth voice in action, taken from discussion groups with youth held by the National Assembly on School Based Health Care’s School Mental Health Capacity Building Partnership. To see the full set of detailed recommendations and direct quotes from youth, see [“What Students Say about Mental Health.”](#)

1. [Confidentiality](#) is important when helping students.
2. Students are most likely to talk to adults they trust, regardless of their training.
3. Staff-student interaction is critical to gaining the trust of students and making them feel supported.
4. Extracurricular activities provide many positive benefits for students.
5. School staff should be open to and learn more about students’ backgrounds and cultures.
6. Schools play an important role in reducing barriers to accessing mental health services.
7. School staff needs to be [trained](#) on mental health issues and policies.
8. A positive school environment is critical to the mental health of all students.
9. Students with mental health issues may require special attention and may have individual needs.
10. Youth should be considered in the development of school mental health programs and policies.

The following recommendations for schools, school mental health staff, and stakeholders offer strategies on how to use this feedback in order to promote positive youth development for all students.

1. Build a positive climate in schools that is supportive to all students.
2. Establish and monitor school policies and procedures for how school personnel interact with students.
3. Establish their roles and responsibilities in supporting students, particularly those with mental health problems.
4. Engage youth in extracurricular activities and in school mental health initiatives.
5. Develop and implement effective and [culturally appropriate policies, programs, and services](#).
6. Offer an annual training for adults involved with mental health services on how to effectively partner with youth, and how authentic student involvement benefits not only the student, but adults, and the community as well.

REFERENCES

National Assembly on School Based Health Care’s School Mental Health Capacity Building Partnership (n.d.) *What Students Say about Mental Health*. Retrieved from http://www.nasbhc.org/atf/cf/%7BCD9949F2-2761-42FB-BC7A-CEE165C701D9%7D/MH_What%20Students%20Say.pdf.

RESOURCES

<http://www.systemsofcare.samhsa.gov/headermenus/docsHM/youthguidedlink.pdf>

Youth Involvement in Systems of Care, A Guide to Empowerment.

<http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/PDF/dt158.pdf>

Children's Perspectives of Their Mental Health Services, a literature review examining foster children's perspectives of child and adolescent mental health services

<http://www.actforyouth.net/documents/YD%20Manual%20Complete%20web%209-6-06.pdf>

Youth Involvement, Act for Youth's Positive Youth Development Resource Manual

Youthmove.us

Youth M.O.V.E. is a youth led national organization devoted to improving services and systems that support positive youth development.

<http://www.youthengagementandvoice.org/about.cfm>

YouthEngagementAndVoice.org is a collaborative resource organized by the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University.