

Core Competencies for Youth Work Professionals

Introduction

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), in collaboration with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and funded by the Wallace Foundation, is pleased to introduce Core Competencies for Youth Work Professionals, designed to raise the capacity of youth-serving organizations and staff to serve their participants more effectively.

This document is the result of efforts by a diverse group of direct service providers, intermediaries and researchers of out-of-school time programs in New York City to articulate a set of standards of competence for youth work professionals.

This document provides practical guidelines that apply to staff at all levels, with a focus on knowledge and skills that can be acquired; it is not about individual characteristics or attitudes. This list does not include additional knowledge and skills needed by senior staff and managers relating to program design, content, staff supervision and other organizational management issues, which will be developed separately.

As much as possible, the competencies listed relate specifically to youth work and exclude more general proficiencies such as communications and technology skills. These competencies are designed to be used as a tool to guide the professional development of the youth work professional NOT as a barrier for entry into the field.

Some of the indicators (e.g., “Interacts positively with participants, individually and in groups...”) may be assessed by observation. Others (e.g., “Demonstrates sufficient knowledge of subjects relating to job responsibilities”) may be assessed in a number of different ways, including tests and examination of lesson plans and portfolios of activity materials.

The competencies and related indicators that apply to staff serving youth of all ages are listed first, followed by additional indicators needed by staff working with older youth. However, they should be viewed holistically, which means that all the competencies are critical, and together they comprise the basic standards for promotion of positive youth development outcomes. The arrangement of the competencies reflects an attempt to place them in a logical order, starting with the most basic: knowledge of youth development principles and ability to comply with safety requirements.

Given the diversity of settings in which the work takes place and the variety of titles applied within each setting, it was important to define what is meant by youth work professional.

Youth Work Professional: A Definition

Youth work professionals are individuals who work with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social and educational development to enable them to gain voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence. Three assumptions help define the workforce:

- Youth work professionals are employed primarily in non-compulsory educational and developmental settings;
- Youth work professionals work with young people primarily between ages 6 and 18; and
- Youth work professionals, like social workers or nurses, can be employed by a variety of systems and settings.

Overarching Guiding Principles

The following critical principles are incorporated in all the core competencies:

- Embracing positive child and youth development principles and practices. These include building on youth strengths rather than focusing on youth deficits; setting and maintaining high expectations; understanding the centrality of and fostering positive relationships with peers and adults; providing age-appropriate and challenging programming; engaging participants as partners, not just as consumers of services¹; promoting positive identity formation and helping young people to fully develop their potential.
- Respecting and valuing the cultures and traditions of participants, their families and their communities, and treating all participants and staff equally, irrespective of race, religion, sex, gender identity, national origin, age or disability.
- Appreciating the range of abilities and diverse needs of children and youth.
- Understanding the mission, policies and practices of the program.

Core Competencies for Youth Work Professionals in Out-of-School Time Programs

1. Knowledge of the principles and practices of child and youth development and ability to use this knowledge to achieve the goals of the program.
2. Ability to comply with applicable safety and emergency requirements.
3. Ability to promote an inclusive, welcoming, and respectful environment that embraces diversity.
4. Ability to foster academic and non-academic skills and broaden participant horizons.
5. Ability to effectively implement curricula and program activities.
6. Ability to promote responsible and healthy decision-making among all participants.
7. Ability to develop leadership, team-building and self-advocacy skills among participants.
8. Ability to behave professionally.

Indicators of Core Competencies for Youth Work Professionals in Out-of-School Time Programs

1. Knowledge of the principles and practices of child and youth development and ability to use this knowledge to achieve the goals of the program

- Interacts positively with participants, individually and in groups, using strength-based approaches, respectful communication and affirmative techniques, such as developing trust, listening and engaging with participants.
- Offers maximum choice and voice and responds to priorities articulated by participants.
- Recognizes the necessity for assessment to determine whether program goals and participant outcomes are being achieved, and participates in data collection as required.
- Demonstrates basic knowledge of developmental milestones concerning the physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of children and youth.
- Meets requirements of government licensing and other relevant authorities such as New York State School-Age Child Care (SACC) regulations relating to staff training, qualifications, and supervision and Department of Education requirements relating to school-based after-school programs.
- Understands and can articulate the program mission.

Additional Indicators for Those Working with Middle and High School Participants

- Recognizes and understands current youth cultures, such as use of technologies, vocabulary, clothing and music.
- Demonstrates awareness of the centrality of identity formation among adolescents, encouraging expression of identity² and managing related tensions.

2. Ability to comply with applicable safety and emergency requirements

- Knows and can comply with safety and health requirements of licensing and other relevant authorities, including safety and first aid procedures.
- Can recognize and report unsafe conditions and inadequate safety procedures, and is aware of program's policies with regard to risk management, such as the number of chaperones required for group outings, emergency procedures, record-keeping and record-retention.³
- Complies with prescribed agency procedures, such as monitoring the whereabouts of participants, including their arrival and departure.
- Reports concerns about issues such as child abuse, domestic violence and bullying, and demonstrates ability to fulfill responsibilities as a mandated reporter of child abuse and neglect.

Additional Indicator for Those Working with Middle and High School Participants

- Reports concerns about issues such as gang activity, dating violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse and mental health issues.

3. Ability to promote an inclusive, welcoming, and respectful environment that embraces diversity

- Actively engages children and youth and fosters positive relationships (a) with the participants; and (b) between the participants and their peers.
- Makes children and youth feel physically and emotionally safe and part of the group; for example, fostering an inclusive environment, addressing bullying and teasing, effectively managing groups, including disruptive behavior and conflict, and maintains a sense of order.
- Identifies and responds to factors that give rise to feelings of exclusion among children and youth such as being perceived as “different” because of culture, language, race, ethnicity; physical, emotional or cognitive disability; atypical behavior or appearance.⁴
- Demonstrates appreciation for and sensitivity to the diverse languages, cultures, traditions, family structures and perspectives of others; for example, by providing opportunities for participants to appreciate and celebrate the cultures and traditions of others.
- Demonstrates knowledge of own culture, traditions and biases, and promotes inclusiveness by challenging unexamined assumptions and stereotypes.
- Interacts constructively with colleagues, participants, families, school personnel and others to support participants’ learning and to defuse conflict.

Additional Indicator for Those Working with Middle and High School Participants

- Addresses issues of special concern to adolescents, such as sexual identity and orientation.

4. Ability to foster academic and non-academic skills and broaden participant horizons

- Demonstrates sufficient knowledge of subjects relating to job responsibilities. Level of knowledge required will depend upon the ages of the participants and nature of the activities. Key topics are likely to include English Language Arts, mathematics, social studies or science.
- Fosters an effective learning environment for all participants, for example, by ensuring that participants are able to study individually or in small groups without disruption.
- Helps children and youth develop learning skills by exploring their ideas and challenging their thinking, for example, by encouraging them to be questioning, helping them develop good study skills and promoting problem-solving approaches.
- Uses formal and informal activities to stimulate curiosity and enhance student learning.
- Engages participants in project-based activities and group discussions, and introduces them to cultural, educational and technological resources to help them explore opportunities that will enrich their lives.

Additional Indicator for Those Working with Middle and High School Participants

- Helps adolescents to value education and appreciate the importance of graduating from high school and pursuing advanced training or post-secondary education.

5. Ability to effectively implement curricula and program activities

- Demonstrates relevant knowledge, skills, experience and ability to access relevant resources to implement curricula and oversee activities.
- Prepares lesson plans that engage participants.
- Manages structured and unstructured activities in accordance with the principles of positive reinforcement. For example, fosters good behavior using techniques based on encouragement, praise, and other incentives.
- Routinely assesses progress towards goals and adjusts activities as necessary.

6. Ability to promote responsible and healthy decision-making among all participants

- Can convey with competence and sensitivity the key elements of healthy and safe living and precautions and procedures for staying safe, in accordance with program policy, for example, the importance of a healthy diet, regular exercise, dental hygiene and avoidance of risk behaviors. (Note: organizational policies may vary with regard to the extent to which certain types of health risk behaviors can be addressed within the program.)
- Promotes awareness of special health issues affecting participants and their communities such as obesity, diabetes and HIV/AIDS.
- Fosters responsible decision-making by helping children and youth understand the implications of their personal choices. For younger children, examples might include not talking to strangers, not playing with fire/matches, proper road safety/street conduct, knowing your own address, phone number and parental/guardian contact information.
- Understands and responds to the needs of participants to develop positive identities and feelings of self-efficacy.

Additional Indicators for Those Working with Middle and High School Participants

- Highlights the risks of smoking, alcohol, drugs, sexual activity, and involvement in gangs and criminal behaviors.
- Responds appropriately if there are indications that participants are experiencing dating violence as victims or as perpetrators.

7. Ability to develop leadership, team-work and self-advocacy skills among participants

- Provides opportunities for children and youth to participate in decision-making about program activities and lead team projects.
- Fosters decision-making and problem-solving skills.
- Highlights topics and issues relevant to the interests of participants, their families and communities, and teaches self-advocacy.
- Encourages participants to take responsibility for the content and process of group work, learn from each other, and demonstrate increased leadership.
- Develops participants' capacity for self-reflection, communication, empathy and tolerance of diverse opinions and cultures.

8. Ability to behave professionally

- Sets and maintains appropriate and culturally sensitive physical, emotional and sexual boundaries in interactions with program participants and staff.⁵
- Maintains confidentiality, keeping with applicable laws and agency policy.
- Strives for professional growth, by demonstrating interest and willingness to pursue available training and professional development.
- Gives and receives constructive feedback and continuously reflects on own performance.
- Recognizes own strengths and limitations and seeks assistance from supervisors when needed.⁶
- Models key elements of affirmative relationships, including: responsiveness, respectfulness, sensitivity to needs and different work- and learning-styles and willingness to listen, share, be supportive and collaborate.
- Connects participants to local community resources where appropriate; for example, helps a participant obtain a library card.
- Recognizes cases where direct assistance is inappropriate and reports concerns to a supervisor or other senior staff, for example, when sudden behavior changes are observed or a participant discloses information about a family crisis.

Organizations that Participated in the Development of the Core Competencies for Youth Work Professionals

- Big Brothers, Big Sisters of New York City
- Center for After School Excellence
- Child Care, Inc.
- Child Center of New York
- Children's Aid Society
- Cornell Cooperative Extension – NYC Programs
- Department of Extended Learning Time, After School, and Services (DELTAS)
- Good Shepherd Services
- JFK Jr. Institute for Worker Education – City University of New York
- National Institute on Out of School Time (NIOST)
- NYC Department of Youth and Community Development
- Office of the Mayor – City of New York
- Partnership for Afterschool Education (PASE)
- Queens Community House
- The After School Corporation (TASC)
- The Wallace Foundation
- York College – City University of New York
- Youth Development Institute (YDI)

References

- ¹ Hamilton, S.F., Hamilton, M.A., & Pittman, K. Principles for Youth Development. In S.F. Hamilton & M.A. Hamilton (Eds.) 2004, *The youth development handbook: Coming of age in American communities* (pp. 3-22). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- ² See, for example, Erik H. Erikson. *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1968.
- ³ See, for example, Risk Management for 4-H Youth Development Work. April 2005.
- ⁴ See for example, Enhancing Cultural Competence In Out-Of-School Time Programs: What Is It, And Why Is It So Important. Child Trends Research-To-Results, February 2007 http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2007_01_31_RB_CultureCompt.pdf; Cultural Competencies for Washington State University Extension <http://ext.wsu.edu/diversity/pdf/CulturalCompetencies.pdf>; Stages of Multicultural School Transformation by [Paul Gorski](#) for EdChange and the [Multicultural Pavilion](#), http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/resources/school_transformation.html; and Gary R. Howard. As Diversity Grows, So Must We, *Education Leadership* Volume 64 Number 6 March 2007, <http://www.ascd.org/infocon/>.
- ⁵ See, for example, National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp> National Youth Agency (UK) Ethical Conduct in Youth Work http://www.nya.org.uk/Shared_ASP_Files/UploadedFiles/6DDF925A-598F-4AEE-A44C-326A932BD92D_Bournemouthethicalconductpolicy2002.doc
- ⁶ See for example, Jessica Sheldon and Leigh Hopkins. Supporting Success: Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs. February 2008, The James Irvine Foundation and Public/Private Ventures. http://www.ppv.org/ppv/youth/youth_publications.asp?section_id=8#pub227.