youth development initiative

Theory Based Programming: The Social Development Model

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this brief is to introduce the social development model (Hawkins & Weis, 1985) and show how it can be used to guide youth programming efforts. A key but often overlooked aspect of intentional programming is the integration of a guiding theoretical framework. The incorporation of theory in programming can provide practitioners valuable insights into essential processes and principles of successful programming. While numerous theories can inform youth development practice, the translation of theory to practice can be cumbersome. Luckily, the social development model offers a concise perspective of key program processes.

The social developmental model (SDM; see Figure 1) suggests that individuals develop bonds to groups and organizations when they experience opportunities for involvement, possess necessary skills for involvement, and receive positive feedback regarding their involvement (Hawkins, Catalano, & Arthur, 2002). Once an individual bonds to a context they are more likely to behave according to the group's norms and beliefs. The SDM highlights the steps to developing programs that promote bonding and positive behavior development. The following research to practice points provide specific SDM programming guidelines.
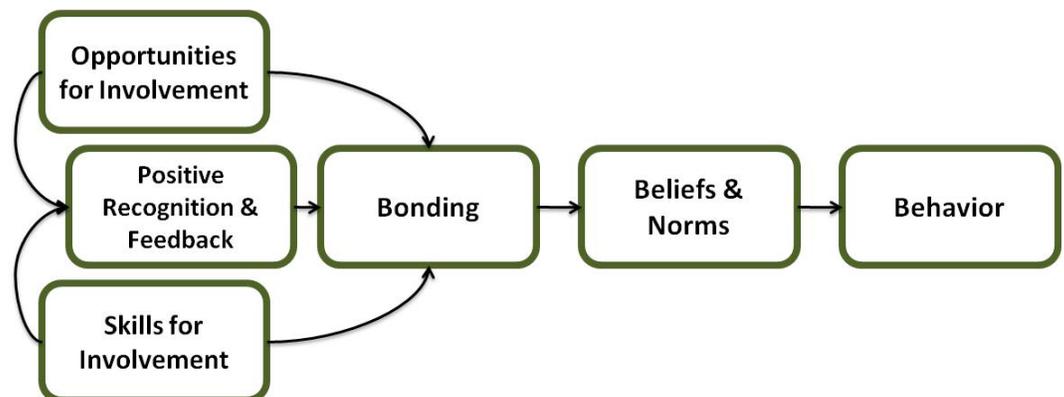

Figure 1. Social Development Model (adapted from Hawkins & Weis, 1985)

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. Successful youth programs provide youth opportunities for meaningful involvement.
2. Youth need to receive frequent, positive, and specific feedback.
3. Practitioners need to insure that youth possess and or develop the necessary

skills to successfully participate in program activities.
4. Programmers need to intentionally identify the beliefs, norms and ultimately behaviors they want to promote through their programs.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

Successful youth programs provide youth opportunities for meaningful involvement.
Youth need to be more than passive participants in programs; they need opportunities to assume significant roles and to make important decisions. Youth are more likely to feel engaged when they feel their opinions are valued and have a certain degree of choice (Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, & Arbreton, 2000). Examples of meaningful involvement could include forming a youth council, allowing youth to make decision about program offerings, and soliciting feedback from youth and then actually using it to inform programming.

Youth need to receive frequent, positive, and specific feedback.
When youth receive positive feedback about their participation from program staff it instills communicates to them that they are important members of the program community. Specific feedback is especially effective as it provides youth insights into the exact behaviors for which they are being recognized and is therefore more likely to promote the continuation of said desired behaviors. For example, a simple "good job" is too general to reinforce behavior, whereas "I really like how you kept working at the activity and didn't give up until you succeeded" validates and enforces the importance of perseverance and hard work exhibited by the youth.

Practitioners need to assure that youth possess and or develop the necessary skills to successfully participate in program activities.
To experience the full benefit of participation youth need to be able to successfully complete the program's associated activities. While this does not mean youth need to exhibit full competence at the beginning of a program, steps should be taken to continually develop applicable skills. For example, rather than simply playing sports, programmers should consider incorporating skill building activities as well. This can help less skilled youth increase their abilities as well as provide opportunities for peer mentoring between youth of different skill levels.

Programmers need to intentionally identify the beliefs, norms and ultimately behaviors they want to promote through their programs.
While facilitating involvement, positive feedback, and skill development will increase participants sense of bonding, this bonding is only likely to lead to behavior adoption if the beliefs and norms of the program are effectively communicated. At the core of intentional programming is the identification of targeted outcomes and underlying beliefs. Once identified, these beliefs and outcomes need to be incorporated into the language and culture of the organization. For example, environmental education programmers would want to clearly communicate their beliefs about the importance of conservation and the need to promote pro-environmental behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Intentional programming is essential in order for out-of-school time programs to provide participants with transformative experiences. This process can be further enhanced when programs incorporate applicable theoretical frameworks in the design process. The SDM is an example of such a framework as it helps us to identify the steps programmers need to undertake to facilitate a program experience that will promote bonding and adoption of targeted beliefs and behaviors. Programmers should review the components of the SDM and then evaluate their own programs to see how they could more intentionally incorporate the concepts of meaningful involvement, positive feedback, and necessary skill development.

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