

# Implementation Tips for USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community

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## Definitions

**LGBTQ:** An umbrella term that refers to various sexual and gender identities. The acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer.

**Developmental relationship:** A close connection between a young person and an adult or between a young person and a peer that powerfully and positively shapes the young person's identity and helps the young person develop a thriving mindset.

Source: [Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework](#)

**Enabling Environment:** An environment that develops and supports young people's assets, agency, access to services, and opportunities, and strengthens their ability to avoid risks and to stay safe, secure, and protected and live without fear of violence or retribution. An enabling environment encourages and recognizes youth, while promoting their social and emotional competence to thrive. The term "environment" should be interpreted broadly and includes: social (e.g., relationships with peers and adults), normative (e.g., attitudes, norms and beliefs), structural (e.g., laws, policies, programs services, and systems), and physical (e.g., safe, supportive spaces).

Source: [Youth Power Positive Youth Development \(PYD\) Framework](#)

## Creating a Supportive Enabling Environment

**Q** How do you create a supportive enabling environment for youth?

**A** Research on youth development points to the importance of the enabling environment in advancing positive youth outcomes. USAID's Positive Youth Development Framework identifies five features of the enabling environment: (1) healthy relationships; (2) having a sense of belonging; (3) positive social norms, expectations, and perceptions; (4) safe spaces for youth; and (5) integrated youth services.

This *Implementation Tip* provides a brief description of four of these features and some guidance for advancing them. For information regarding healthy relationships, see the *Implementation Tip* on [Fostering Relationships with and Among Youth](#).

### How do programs create a sense of belonging for youth and promote inclusion?

During adolescence, having a sense of belonging is particularly important to one's identity, self-esteem, and connection to one's larger community. Youth programs can promote belonging through activities that promote teamwork, a sense of community, and cross-cultural social skills; staff practices that promote inclusion by identifying and supporting youth who might be excluded; and intentional recruitment strategies to ensure that the program is inclusive in its selection criteria.

**Program recruitment.** When defining the youth population it seeks to support, the program should aim, to the extent possible, to engage a diverse range of youth and be intentional in planning outreach to hard-to-reach groups, such as marginalized and vulnerable youth. Programs should have a clear idea of which populations they are trying to reach, set informal diversity goals to consider the multiple types of diversity [e.g., gender, youth with disabilities, orphan or vulnerable children (OVCs), minority groups], and develop plans to ensure they can proactively reach those goals. Organizations should engage youth and staff for ideas on how to reach more marginalized youth and use both a variety of outreach methods (e.g., social media, bulletin boards, and flyers) and appropriate languages during outreach.

## Resources

[Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework](#)

[YouthPower Action Guiding Principle for Building Soft Skills Among Adolescents and Young Adults](#)

[WHO Helping Parents in Developing Countries Improve Adolescents' Health](#)

[Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning](#)

**Activities to promote understanding and acceptance of others.** In addition to ensuring diversity among participants, youth programs should have structured activities and policies to promote acceptance of others, understanding of different stereotypes and their impact, and learning about and valuing people from different backgrounds. Group work, team building, and social activities can all enhance youth's sense of belonging within the program.

**Develop policies and staff training to ensure staff promote inclusivity within the program.** Youth programs should have specific policies and codes of conduct that prioritize treating youth with mutual respect and inclusion of other religions, ethnicities, genders, and abilities. Staff should be trained on topics relating to different types of diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion). The training should enable staff to promote socially equitable attitudes and behaviors and recognize their own attitudes and expectations of different social groups. Using real-life scenarios and/or role plays can help youth understand different perspectives and practice using strategies to reduce possible tensions among youth from different backgrounds.

**Develop strategies to identify youth with unique challenges that impede their participation.** Program staff should identify youth who might have challenges such as transportation issues, trouble in school, financial hindrances, or special needs. Staff should also be trained to recognize special needs (e.g., prior exposure to trauma or abuse), provide basic psycho-social support, or refer youth to specialized services.

### **How can programs promote positive social norms, expectations, and perceptions of youth?**

Youth programs, much like organizations, have their own organizational culture and norms that influence how youth experience them. Research suggests that adolescents' perceptions of social norms have immediate and lasting effects on their behavior<sup>1</sup>. By promoting positive social norms within the program setting, youth will learn positive norms and values that they should apply in everyday life. Youth programs should define the social norms they wish to infuse throughout the program and work with youth to develop strategies to do so. Involving youth in defining norms and values, expectations of behavior, and consequences for violating them enhances ownership and agreement and is another form of youth engagement (See the *Implementation Tip* on [Youth Engagement Throughout the Program Cycle](#)). These norms should be promoted throughout the organization via posters and other communications materials and reinforced through activities and staff modeling.

<sup>1</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*

Staff and youth participants should be oriented on the organization's norms and expectations and asked to indicate their agreement upon joining the program.

Youth-serving programs should also promote positive social norms among family members, teachers, community leaders, religious leaders, and other people that influence norms on issues that affect youth such as gender-based violence, gender norms, and age of marriage. Youth can also be involved in promoting the change of norms in their own communities by participating in behavior-change activities, acting in skits, or creating their own messages and media to reach other youth.

Adult perceptions of youth, whether they are conscious or not, influence how they interact with and treat young people. Staff training should include opportunities for staff to reflect on their own biases, stereotypes, or perceptions of youth that could negatively affect their expectations of and relationships with youth. Negative perceptions of youth as lazy, stubborn, rebellious, or unreliable impacts how youth are treated. Such perceptions are often created and reinforced by all types of media – traditional, new, and social. Youth programs can work to realign perceptions, expectations, or norms around youth by highlighting youth voice through storytelling, promoting youth leaders who have succeeded in overcoming social barriers, and supporting youth media campaigns that showcase youth ideas and potential. Youth programs can also work with adults to shift perceptions through intergenerational dialogue and youth engagement in the community; in this way, adults can experience the competence of youth first-hand and begin to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors.

### **Why is it important to make youth feel safe and how can programs promote safe spaces?**

For young people to experience a program as safe, they must feel personally safe – both physically and emotionally. Physical safety means that young people feel safe from physical or bodily harm and confident that surrounding adults will protect them and assist them if peers or other adults threaten them. Emotional safety means that young people feel secure that they will be valued and accepted; that they can participate without fear of teasing or harassment; and that individual differences such as race, culture, or gender identification will be accepted by others and will not impact their ability to participate.

In such environments, where physical and emotional safety are promoted, youth will be more willing to try and fail because positive risk-taking is supported and making mistakes is accepted as part of growth. When youth have opportunities to learn and express themselves without fear, they are more likely to engage with their

## For More Information

For this or other issues of *Implementation Tips*, please visit [NGOConnect.net](https://ngoconnect.net).

The Web site is a dynamic and interactive portal dedicated to connecting and strengthening CSOs, networks, and CSO support organizations worldwide.

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parents, peers, and communities. They gain self-esteem and become positive role models. Similarly, research on resiliency identifies the experience of physical and emotional safety as critical to supporting young people's healthy development and ability to learn important life skills and competencies they will need in adulthood. Recent research into brain function reveals that a sense of safety is an important component of a person's readiness to learn.<sup>2,3</sup>

**Identifying and creating a safe space.** Youth-serving organizations should involve youth and family members to determine whether a space is safe. Safe spaces can mean different things to different segments of youth. Safe spaces must be utilized or set up with a clear understanding of the specific segment(s) of youth they aim to target (see the *Implementation Tip* on [Developing Tailored Youth Activities](#)) and understand the specific attributes and characteristics of that age group. Special attention should be given to the needs of OVCs, victims of bullying or prior trauma, young people with stigma such as former gang members, LGBTQ (see Definitions), or refugees. In environments with violent conflict or persecution, identifying a safe space will require additional considerations to ensure safety both getting to the program as well as at the program site. Programs should consider venues or facilities that are centrally located and easy to access. For young people who are fearful of being seen accessing support services—e.g., a health services provider or school counselor—a safe space may need to be more private so they can access information and support without fear of being judged or having to face the consequences of disclosure. This fear may be based on their own or others' negative experiences or inaccurate perceptions and beliefs of what they may encounter.

**Developing policies to protect youth.** Youth-serving organizations should develop policies and protocols for child and youth protection that define abuse and ill treatment—including physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; child labor and exploitation; human trafficking; and neglect. These policies and protocols should be disseminated and systems should be put in place to ensure enforcement. Organizations should train youth and adults to understand the policies, know how to recognize symptoms of abuses, and understand the protocols to be followed to report abuse. Programs should ensure that there are opportunities for private and confidential reporting of alleged abuses and that all youth and any adults—including employees, volunteers, mentors and other adults who interact with the program—document their agreement to follow these policies.

<sup>2</sup> Jensen, E., *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*

<sup>3</sup> Caine, R. and Geoffrey, C., *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*

**Promoting physical safety within program settings.** Programs should develop, implement, and share approved security and safety plans and procedures with youth, staff, and families to promote a strong sense of shared ownership and responsibility for following the plan. The plan should ensure that the space is free of all foreseeable safety hazards. Programs should also ensure that the space is accessible to individuals with multiple types of disability.

**Creating emotional safe spaces.** Programs can develop ground rules for group processes (e.g., listening, turn-taking, decision-making, and sharing of emotions) that are co-created with youth and develop activities that help youth build good communication and social skills to ensure positive interactions. Staff should ensure they do not discriminate among youth and promote inclusion to demonstrate that all youth are different, equal, and important. Programs should create structured opportunities for youth to share their personal stories and feelings and to listen to others as they share similar stories.

**Creating a stable environment with structure that has consistent routines, activities, and procedures.** This provides a sense of predictability and safety for youth. Applying clear and consistent expectations of behavior is also associated with positive developmental outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Youth programs will need to balance the need for structure and consistency with allowing for greater opportunities for youth to manage their own behavior. Younger adolescents will need greater structure than older adolescents who might resist too much control. Organizations should provide youth with greater levels of responsibility and independence to allow them to grow and take on new roles over time.

**How do we ensure there is integration among youth, families, and service providers to ensure communication and a continuum of care for youth?**

Youth outcomes are impacted by a large number of people—their families, teachers, health care providers, police, community leaders, and others. Youth programs should communicate with family members to ensure information flow and a cohesive approach to supporting a young person. By working with family members and service providers, a youth-serving organization or program can promote more consistent support and modelling for youth. Programs aimed at behavior change are more impactful when messages are consistent and reinforced at home, school, in the community, and by service providers.<sup>5</sup>

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4 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*

5 *ibid*

**Outreach to families.** At a minimum, programs should communicate with youth participants' parents so that they understand the types of activities their child is participating in and to ensure that parents understand the rules and expectations of participation. Ideally, there is regular communication between program staff and family members on the well-being of the young person, particularly with younger adolescents. Programs can also encourage family participation within youth programs through meetings with parents, family days or events that bring family members into the program setting, and involving parents in planning or even as board members to ensure parental input into decision-making. Programs can also set up parent support groups or provide parent education or other types of training to help parents understand how to care for adolescents, support their education, and understand their nutritional and health needs. Organizations could also create parent-youth programs to enhance inter-generational dialogue. Where feasible, programs could provide parents with additional training and support that impacts the family's overall well-being, such as adult education and training programs to address income generation, literacy, or social-emotional skills.

**Outreach to communities.** Programs can establish partnerships with community organizations that provide opportunities for youth to engage more actively in the community and for the community to become more aware of program events. By establishing partnerships with other community organizations, youth programs can share information and resources and collaborate on community initiatives. Partnerships could include guest speakers and mentorships, as well as provide opportunities for youth to participate in community service, campaigns, or advocacy initiatives.

**Communication with service providers.** Youth program staff should be trained to identify youth with special needs and know how to connect these youth to the appropriate local services providers (e.g., health providers, legal services, welfare services, etc). Protocols should be in place to track referrals to other service providers and staff should maintain communication with those providers to monitor youth needs and progress.

