

# The Importance of Strong, Supportive Teen-Adult Relationships

Any discussions of high-quality facilitation must be anchored in an understanding of strong, supportive teen-adult relationships. The relationship a facilitator creates with teens in their TOP Club is the foundation for effective facilitation.

Adolescence is a time of rapid change and growth—physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. One of the most important and effective resources we can offer is a positive relationship with an adult. Young people may interact with many adults in their daily lives—parents, teachers, relatives, community members, coaches and youth development professionals. A strong, supportive relationship with any of these adults can have a formative effect on a teen’s life.

A strong supportive adult-youth relationship is developed when adults exhibit the following:

- Express genuine compassion, warmth and encouragement—it is important that the young person knows they are cared for
- Challenge youth to grow by expressing high expectations
- Provide support in achieving goals, empowering the youth and building their confidence along the way
- Establish a balance of power that builds mutual respect and gives youth opportunities to lead.

The impact these efforts can make on the lives of adolescents spans a variety of areas that are all closely linked to successful transition to adulthood. Research shows that youth who experience a strong developmental relationship with an adult are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors and demonstrate positive social and emotional skills such as emotion management, self-awareness and responsibility. School related outcomes have also been shown to benefit from a supportive adult relationship, including increased positive attitudes about school, academic motivation and school attendance. Strong developmental relationships have also been found to be associated with decreased engagement in risk behaviors, such as substance use, sexual activity and delinquency. The benefits afforded by a strong developmental relationship contribute to improved resiliency skills in youth and can help mitigate the effects of stressful or traumatic events.

Adolescents are in a unique developmental stage where receiving the right kind of support can make the difference between thriving and struggling, and adults are in a key position to provide it. By intentionally taking a positive youth development approach, adults can re-engage potentially disconnected youth and encourage them to build competencies and develop a sense of connectedness to others and their communities. By providing stable, reliable support and guidance, an adult can serve as a model by demonstrating positive behaviors, skills and coping strategies, as well as offering an example of what a healthy relationship looks like and ultimately supporting youth as agents of their own development.

# High-Quality Facilitation of TOP

TOP is most likely to impact youth outcomes when it is delivered with sufficient dosage (fidelity) and in the context of a high-quality facilitation and Club experience. A high-quality facilitation and Club experience fosters the development of a teen-facilitator relationship that is a stable and reliable source of support and guidance.

### **High-quality adult facilitation of TOP is observable, with the following characteristics:**

- Respectful, supportive and friendly
- Modeling of healthy emotion management strategies—for example, active listening, remaining calm, communicating effectively and honestly about emotion, respectfully acknowledging and validating emotions in others
- Coaching teens in managing their emotions—for example, encouraging problem-solving in response to challenging emotions; suggesting strategies for dealing with them
- Modeling of empathy skills
- Cultivating a safe and caring space—for example, employing appropriate structure for sharing different cultural backgrounds, personal beliefs and stories (particularly those that are emotionally charged) without judgement
- Encouraging teens to persist through challenging work
- Providing assistance as needed to help teens learn and solve problems on their own
- Successfully structuring dialogue within the group—for example, frequently using open-ended questions, building on comments of teens, bringing issues relevant to teens into discussion, drawing teens into the conversation
- Keeping the group focused and on topic, including redirecting any off topic comments in a firm but positive way
- Showing enthusiasm throughout the lesson/activity
- Demonstrating respect for different viewpoints throughout the lesson/activity, including not presenting any particular belief system as better than others

It is also essential that teens feel engaged and empowered during their TOP experience. For example, high-quality program translates into teens:

- Having a choice in selecting their community service projects
- Feeling their community service work is engaging and meaningful
- Displaying attentiveness and engagement in group discussions and activities
- Perceiving the Club environment as physically and emotionally safe, including feeling their facilitator cares, supports and accepts them
- Developing positive relationships with their TOP Club peers

# Effective Facilitator Behaviors and Techniques

Effective facilitators often move through different roles during a TOP Club—individually supporting a young person, responding to challenges that arise within the group, keeping the group focused on the lesson plan, etc.

**Facilitators use four types of practices to support high-quality TOP Clubs:**

### Facilitating

Facilitators help to foster or sustain youth-led group dynamics and successful collaboration. They might assist a group in thinking about the way its members work together, help to ensure the group meetings run well, conversations are fair and respectful and group norms are upheld, especially during times of conflict. For example, if a group is having a conflict, facilitating might involve pausing the group, asking members to each identify one thing they can do to make the group more successful and restarting the group.

### Scaffolding

Facilitators set up or adapt skill-building opportunities to suit youth's current skill level, interests or connections, keeping their TOP experiences challenging but possible. For example, a facilitator might use extensions on a lesson to further challenge youth; or, a facilitator might decide to begin with a more basic Community Service Learning project in order to give a younger group an initially successful experience with Community Service Learning, then increase the challenge during their next project.

### Modeling

Facilitators demonstrate or exhibit practices, characteristics, or skills they intend for the youth to use or develop. Effective modeling requires strong, appropriate interpersonal relationships.

### Coaching

Facilitators are constantly monitoring and supporting youth's learning experience by providing feedback or encouragement. For example, facilitators may acknowledge behaviors they see during a Club that contribute to effective group work and intentionally call this out to the group. Facilitators may provide coaching to individual youth as well, to help enrich their experiences, or help them problem-solve around a challenging behavior.

**Facilitators effectively move between actions of coaching, modeling, scaffolding and facilitating in real time as challenges occur.**

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Adapted from Smith, C., McGovern, G., Larson, R., Hillaker, B., Peck, S.C. (2016) Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices in Social and Emotional Learning. Forum for Youth Investment, Washington, D.C.

# Facilitation Techniques to Create Safe Space

Building a safe environment in a TOP Club is a baseline for effective facilitation and meets a critical adolescent developmental need. Four practices are essential to creating a safe space and environment:

1. Facilitate the use of ground rules for group processes (Ex: listening, turn-taking, decision-making) and model healthy sharing of emotions. Agreeing on and reinforcing group norms creates an environment where youth feel heard, are respectful of each other and where there is a sense of confidentiality that encourages sharing.

Group processes work best when facilitators do the following:

- Establish ground rules for group processes at the very beginning of the TOP Club
  - Coach and remind the group of expectations and agreements frequently until the group members begin to remind and enforce them with one another
  - Emphasize the importance of confidentiality within the group, as well as limits on confidentiality
  - Model consistency
2. Facilitate the creation of a TOP Club culture around the principles that all members are different, equal and important, and that members of the group will actively care for, appreciate and include each other in all activities of Club. Through words and actions, facilitators model and encourage interactions based in understanding and appreciation. Cultivating a sense of belonging is a critical element of youth's positive development and sense of safety.
  3. Facilitate and model experiences where learning from mistakes and failures is highly valued. Making it clear that youth will receive support when they try new things or make an error encourages youth to try again, make adjustments and improve. Failure can be an important part of the learning process and an opportunity to coach youth to grow their skills.
  4. Scaffold TOP Club with consistent routines, activities, roles and procedures to provide a structured and predictable experience. Youth can relax when they can anticipate what comes next. Especially for youth who have experienced instability or trauma, establishing a predictable environment can be reassuring. TOP Curriculum lessons are written with a consistent routine. In addition to the flow of lessons, facilitators can organize their Club around other routines which may include having a snack, how youth are greeted when they walk into the room and a routine "check-out" process at the end.

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# Maintaining Healthy Boundaries within Facilitation

Issues will come up in TOP for which facilitators are unprepared, or which push on a facilitator's own set of values or experiences. Facilitators should teach youth HOW to think and not WHAT to think by fostering an environment that allows youth to express their own thoughts, feelings and views.

Each lesson has a "Knowing Yourself and Your Teens" section, designed to help facilitators anticipate issues that may come up within each lesson. Thinking through how to best respond to challenging questions or situations ahead of time can help ensure high-quality facilitation.

The following questions can help a facilitator clarify appropriate boundaries for their interactions with youth, facilitate a non-judgemental approach and create an inclusive Club experience for all.

- What are the values expressed by the curriculum and my organization? How do I feel about these values?
- What is the line between supporting the group and individual members as an appropriate adult resource and becoming too personally involved with an adolescent, thereby jeopardizing an ongoing, healthy relationship?
- If I divulge personal information on this topic, is there a possibility that my sharing would have unintentional consequences such as shaming the teens in my group or judging them? How does that affect my key responsibility of providing a safe environment and a climate of acceptance for all group members?
- How can I engage the group in a discussion of the issue that is informative, engaging and allows all members to express and explore their values free from shame or judgement?
- Does this issue involve a threat to the safety of a teen or others? What are my legal, employment and moral obligations in this case? (Note: All adults working and volunteering with teens should understand their roles and responsibilities as mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect and in reporting suicidal ideations or self-harm per their agency/ organization policy and their state law.)