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ABC's of Professional, Purposeful, and Powerful Programming Practices.

Presented by
Mike Ashcraft



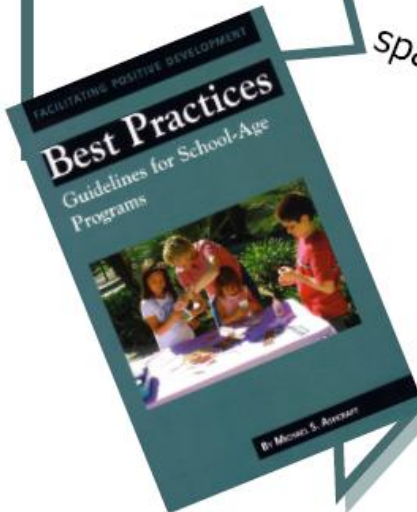
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ABC's of professional, purposeful, and powerful programming practices!

“Learning and development are interrelated from the child’s very first day of life.” – Lev Vygotsky

Autonomy

Autonomy is the ability to act independently. Using autonomy as a professional, purposeful, and powerful programming practice is a paradigm shift away from “herding.” Many in the school-age care profession view themselves as “herders of children.” After school, they herd children into an area where they take attendance, then they herd children into an area in which to “graze” on graham crackers and Kool-Aid, then they herd them into an area where they all sit quietly and work on their homework, then they herd them into an adult-controlled activity or onto the playground for free play until their parents arrive. Empowering everyone in the program and building their sense of autonomy allows children, families and staff to have a role in program design. Children plan and follow through with activity choices that have meaning for them, and the adults are empowered to offer activity choices that have meaning for them. Empowering adults ask children how they want to spend their time and empowering administrators ask the adults how they want the program to develop. Adults see themselves as facilitators of children’s dreams and ideas.

In order for kids to build a sense of autonomy, they must feel that the program community values and appreciates them. They must be given useful roles in the program. They must be involved in service to others. Autonomy creates a sense of ownership in the children and adults. Children with autonomy have the ability to resist negative pressures and engage in “creative distancing” from dysfunctional environments and situations. Children with autonomy have a strong sense of identity, sense of purpose and personal power. Children with autonomy are not controlled by adults – they are “self disciplined.”

Using self-discipline as a professional, purposeful, and powerful programming practice is a paradigm shift away from a “teacher-punished” or adult-controlled philosophy. Benjamin Barber said, “If you try to enforce duty only by the sword of the state, you never create a moral being who has any interest in compliance or who feels obligated to do anything other than simply avoid the penalties of law.” This is the point of an autonomous, self-disciplined philosophy.

Adults cannot control the behavior of children all the time. Children must learn to control their own behavior. The long-term consequences of over-supervision are children who cannot think and make decisions for themselves. Educators sometimes complain about how children are so irresponsible; in fact they are actually “a-responsible” because they do not understand the concept of responsibility have not been given a role to fill. To develop self-discipline, children must be given the opportunity to take risks without the fear of failure, and they must learn to try things repeatedly in order to succeed. If we do not give children the skills they need to solve their own problems, we cannot expect them to become independent problem solvers. Self-discipline has a positive effect on self-esteem, teaching children that they are significant and have autonomy and control over their own lives.

WE CANNOT ALWAYS BUILD THE
FUTURE FOR OUR YOUTH, BUT WE
CAN BUILD OUR YOUTH
FOR THE FUTURE
FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT



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Belonging

To become happy and successful adults, children need a sense of belonging and membership. Having a sense of belonging to a group makes children safer in their surroundings. Safety and a sense of belonging are basic needs that are critical to healthy development. Children and staff in quality afterschool programs must have a sense of belonging. Programs that foster a sense of belonging must be free of threat. Threat and chronic stress inhibit the ability to form strong bonds. Programs that are relaxing and playful foster a sense of belonging. Using playfulness as a professional, purposeful, and powerful programming practice is a paradigm shift away from “busy-ness.” The adults in our society are very busy and seem to want children to be just as busy. It is no wonder children are suffering from the same stress-related illnesses as busy adults. Children these days are being forced to grow up too fast, and this pressure makes it difficult for children to build strong relationships. They need time to play.

Play is useful and beneficial, and children need to be encouraged to remember the nature and importance of play and how to use play to “de-stress” and “de-busy” their lives. Play is more than having fun, more than resting; it is the essence of childhood learning. Children who are forced to be busy all day, to be quiet while waiting, to make an art project just like the example a caregiver made, and to walk in single-file lines while in transition are stressed. Stressed children do not learn well, and do not test well. Playful staff are an important model for children. When children and staff play and have fun in afterschool programs they remember what they learn better and they develop a strong sense of belonging and a strong sense of community. What we learn with pleasure, we never forget.

“Community Building” as professional, purposeful, and powerful programming practice is a paradigm shift away from “activity-led” programming. “Activity-led” philosophies create a curriculum that is centered on the activities without attention to purpose, to the ethical dimension of community building, thus missing an opportunity to facilitate the social development of the child. Community building must be built into intentional programming in the environment, relationships, and experiences. It involves leadership sharing, teaching caring behaviors, teaching altruism, and teaching empathy. Service projects facilitate the development of these skills, competencies and behaviors, and they lead to a strong sense of belonging. Every decision that children and adults make is filtered through the understanding of who they are and how they fit in to the group. Giving children and staff in our programs useful roles, meaningful work and tasks to accomplish builds a strong sense of community and belonging and membership to the group.

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Competencies

Poor social skills are linked to a number of problems in adolescence and adulthood including delinquency, school suspensions, truancy, drop out rates, and mental health problems. To succeed in life, children must acquire adequate attitudes, behaviors, and skills = competencies. When the basic needs of safety, self-awareness, self-worth, opportunities for growth, sense of belonging, belonging, sense of purpose and sense of autonomy are met, children and staff are most equipped to develop competencies such as: planning, decision-making, resistance skills, health skills, social, emotional, intellectual, and physical competencies.

The school-age years are critical to positive development, and afterschool programs have a unique opportunity to facilitate the development of crucial competencies and the skills needed for maturity. Building maturity as a professional, purposeful, and powerful programming practice is a paradigm shift away from “sophistication.” People often exclaim how children are “so much more mature now than in the past.” What they actually mean is that children are more sophisticated or precocious. They know so much more about sex, drugs, and the dark side of human behavior or “street smarts.” This is sophistication, not maturity. This sophistication comes from the rapid bombardment and exposure to adult information freely accessed through television, the Internet, and developing technology. Children develop maturity through interactions with others under the guidance of mature adults. Adults facilitate children’s maturity by helping children to develop the skills needed to process adult information and formulate ethical questions. Only through significant interaction between adults and children can children become more mature.

Maturity is all about skill building. Social skills can be taught formally and informally. Staff can sit kids down and describe the skill and provide opportunities to practice the skill through activities, skits, or role plays. Staff can also teach skills informally using the teachable moment in a natural setting – teaching conflict resolution when a conflict occurs, or teaching patience skills when a lack of patience occurs. The message for afterschool programs is to be intentional – to design the environment, relationships, and experiences of the program in a way that strategically targets specific developmental outcomes for children and staff.

Think about what skills your children need to learn at their unique stage of development, and design your activities around teaching that skill, OR think about what skills are needed or can be taught through an activity you already enjoy and incorporate specific skill building into the activity. Ensure all of your activities have a purpose – building competencies. Make the continual development of skills a powerful part of the culture of the entire afterschool organization.

For staff, incorporate skill building into staff meetings, coaching sessions, performance evaluations and informal daily contact. Leaders in afterschool must consider themselves to be the lead learner of their organizations – role models for continuous skill-building.

