

Component 2: Guidelines on Interactions Between Individuals

Goal

To ensure the safety of youth in their interactions with employees/volunteers and with each other.

General Principles

Guidelines on interactions between individuals should be determined by an organization's mission and activities. For example, organizations that promote one-on-one activities between adults and youth may need different interaction guidelines than programs built around group activities. Organizations should develop interaction policies before situations arise. The strategies listed below should be tailored to the developmental age and maturity of the youth and employees/volunteers. Strategies should also match the cultural context of the population served by the organization. In this section, "adult" refers to any individual in a supervisory position, including youth.

Balancing positive and negative

- Find a balance between encouraging positive and appropriate interactions and discouraging inappropriate and harmful interactions.
- Adopt strategies with this balance in mind to ensure that youth benefit from your program without risk of sexual abuse or harm.

Critical Strategies for Guidelines on Interactions between Individuals

Appropriate/inappropriate/harmful behaviors

Appropriate, positive interactions among youth and between employees/volunteers and youth are essential in supporting positive youth development, making youth feel valued, and providing the caring connections that serve as protective factors for youth. Conversely, inappropriate or harmful interactions put youth at risk for adverse physical and emotional outcomes. Organizations should identify behaviors that fall into the categories of appropriate, inappropriate, and harmful. These categorizations can be spelled out in your code of conduct or ethics. Carefully balance the benefits of appropriate interactions with the risks associated with inappropriate interactions. See page 10 for examples of appropriate/innappropriate/harmful behaviors.

Ratios of employees/volunteers to youth

The goal of setting ratios for the numbers of employees/volunteers to youth is to ensure the safety of the youth. There is no standard ratio for all situations. When making decisions about ratios, consider contextual variables such as:

- Age and developmental level of youth and employees/volunteers. If youth or employees/volunteers are young, you may need a lower ratio, that is, fewer youth per adult.
- Risk of the activity. Does it involve a great deal of isolation from others?
- Location of the activity. Is it in a classroom that is easy to monitor or at a park, where it is easier to lose track of individuals?

Encourage employees/volunteers to actively interact with the youth to maintain adequate supervision and monitoring. Even with a satisfactory ratio of employees/volunteers to youth, the youth are not being monitored if all of the employees/volunteers are immersed in their own conversations in a corner of the room.

Examples of Appropriate/Inappropriate/Harmful Behavior from Youth-serving Organizations

Sometimes it is unclear if a behavior is appropriate, inappropriate, or harmful. For example, intimate contact, such as kissing, may be developmentally appropriate for older youth, but may be inappropriate within the confines of the organization. It may even be harmful if the kissing is coercive. Another example involves hugging. Hugging may be appropriate and positive in some circumstances, but it can also be inappropriate if the child is not receptive, if the employee/volunteer is hugging too often or for too long, or if the contact is romanticized or sexually intimate.

Verbal communication

Appropriate:

- Praise
- Positive reinforcement for good work/behavior

Inappropriate/harmful:

- Sexually provocative or degrading comments
- Risqué jokes

Physical behavior

Appropriate:

- Pats on the back or shoulder

Inappropriate/harmful:

- Patting the buttocks
- Intimate/romantic/sexual contact
- Corporal punishment
- Showing pornography or involving youth in pornographic activities

One-on-one interactions

Some organizations have a policy to limit one-on-one interactions between youth and adults (i.e., having at least two adults present at all times with youth). The goal of such a policy is to prevent the isolation of one adult and one youth, a situation that elevates the risk for child sexual abuse. This strategy must be modified based on the mission of your organization.

- Limit one-on-one interactions whenever possible by having at least two adults present at all times with youth.
- Choose one of three options relating to this policy:
 - Make this a mandatory policy at all times.
 - Make this policy dependent on the risk of the activity or situation, such as overnight trips.
 - Maintain other safeguards such as extra supervision or contact with youth and employees/volunteers and more stringent screening if the mission of your organization requires one-on-one time between employees/volunteers and youth (e.g., mentoring programs).



Risk of interactions between youth

Your organization needs to address interactions among youth in addition to monitoring interactions between employees/volunteers and youth. Many strategies that focus on the interactions between employees/volunteers and youth can be tailored to address interactions among youth.

- Address all situations where unsupervised youth can sexually or physically abuse other youth. For example, if your organization has a policy that prevents adults from being present in locker rooms because of the risk of child sexual abuse, this may result in a situation where unsupervised youth can sexually or physically abuse other youth. A potential solution is adopting a policy that requires more than one adult to be present at all times.
- Develop policies to deal with bullying and sexual abuse so that positive interactions can be promoted while acknowledging that some interactions are inappropriate or harmful.

Prohibitions and restrictions on certain activities

Some activities, such as hazing and secret ceremonies, overnight trips, bathing, changing, bathroom interactions, and nighttime activities, pose greater risks for child sexual abuse. Prohibiting or restricting such activities will depend largely on the context of your organization. For example, a sleep-away camp would not be able to prohibit overnight trips or bathing.

Out-of-program contact restrictions

There are two types of out-of-program contact restrictions. The first type involves the contact of youth with employees/volunteers outside the context of the program. Your organization should limit contact between employees/volunteers and youth to organization-sanctioned activities and programs and/or to certain locations, such as activities within your organization's building.

The second type is contact between youth and people not affiliated with your organization that occurs while youth are under the care of your organization.

- Develop a system for monitoring the comings and goings of all youth and adults who enter and leave your facility. This system might include procedures for signing in and out.
- Develop specific policies about interactions between youth and people not affiliated with your organization if it is located in a building that houses more than just your program or if your organization's activities take place in public areas (e.g., sports field).

Caregiver information and permission

Your organization should obtain addresses and contact information for youth and caregivers (i.e., parents and guardians). This information should never be released to unauthorized individuals. Your organization also should obtain permission from caregivers for youth to participate in certain activities, such as field trips, late-night activities, and overnight trips.

- Inform caregivers about what their children/youth will be doing and where they will be going.
- Allow caregivers to have input on what activities or interactions they are comfortable with for their children.



Responsibility for youth

Your organization should clarify when it is responsible for youth and when caregivers are responsible.

- Develop a policy on when your organization starts and stops being responsible for youth.
- Consider who is responsible for youth before and after activities officially begin.
- Communicate the policy to caregivers and youth in writing. Organizations may also want caregivers to sign an acknowledgement that they have read and understand the policy.

Additional Strategies to Consider

Other ways to control interactions between individuals

Identify ways to monitor interactions, such as instituting a buddy system to prevent isolation of youth with employees/volunteers.