



PREPARING  
YOUTH TO

# THRIVE

Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning

## 2.2 Emotion Management Practices



**Abilities to be aware of, and constructively handle, both positive and challenging emotions.**

### INTRODUCTION

Emotion management is the ability to be aware of, and constructively handle, both positive and challenging emotions. The emotional experiences that help youth learn include those that arise in program activities and projects as well as emotions that arise from other events in their lives, like a recent suicide or experiences of social injustice. For the former, the goal is helping youth learn to manage their emotions in ways that are functional for the work. In the latter, the developmental goals may be helping youth learn to process a range of feelings, while also learning self-advocacy skills through interactions with peers and authority figures. Emotion management is also about managing the *situations* that may trigger emotions for youth as well as being attuned to emotions in ways that allow one to harness the valuable information and motivation they can provide.

But the task of learning these skills often presents difficult challenges. Emotions are an integral component of human experience. They are ever-present and can impact a person's outlook, mood, and behavior. Emotions are also abstract processes that can seize consciousness, and they can distort healthy cognition. The anger, anxiety, and even joy that arise in everyday life can disrupt work, distort thinking, and sometimes lead people to act in ways they later regret. Furthermore, emotions can have deep roots in prior experiences in ways that young people may not fully comprehend, particularly if their social and emotional skills are less developed. At the same time, recent research has established that emotions can serve positive functions, including mobilizing effort in the service of important goals<sup>16</sup>, promoting and regulating social interactions<sup>17</sup>, and providing useful information that assists with mature decision making<sup>18</sup>. Although emotional development begins in infancy, adolescence is an important time when youth are able to acquire new metacognitive and executive skills that allow them to become more aware of emotions and learn to deliberately manage and harness them. Because puberty can increase emotional intensity<sup>19</sup>, it is a particularly critical period for teens to learn emotion management skills.

Research shows that this array of emotion-related skills is vital to mental health, positive relationships, school achievement, adult work, and general well-being. Youth programs that successfully teach emotion management foster environments where teens encounter a variety of emotions—excitement, anger, anxiety, pride—and explicit moments for expression of emotions that are well supported and safe, such as free writing, role playing, and group share. They also have opportunities to learn about these emotions, what causes them, and how to handle, use, and express them appropriately. These programs provide spaces for youth to talk about their feelings with others, learn to recognize, articulate, and understand them, and practice responding to emotions in healthy and beneficial ways<sup>20</sup>. The staff also intentionally create a culture and set of practices that encourages expressing and learning about emotions. Modeling and coaching by staff supports learning and growth.



Table 4. Emotion Management Standards and Practice Indicators

KEY YOUTH EXPERIENCES <span style="float: right;">YE</span>
<p><b>RANGE OF EMOTIONS.</b> Youth experience a range of positive and challenging emotions in a safe context.</p>
<p>(EM1) Youth engage in program work and activities in which emotions occur, are expressed, and are recognized as an important and often valuable component of human experience.</p>
<p>(EM2) Emotions are experienced within a shared program culture (e.g., rules, norms) structured to make emotional expression and reflection safe and supported.</p>
<p><b>EMOTION AWARENESS AND SKILL.</b> Youth practice and develop healthy and functional emotion skills.</p>
<p>Youth practice (EM3) being aware of, identifying, and naming emotions, (EM4) reasoning about causes and effects of emotion, (EM5) using strategies for healthy coping with strong emotions and for harnessing emotions to advance the program work.</p>
STAFF PRACTICES <span style="float: right;">SP</span>
<p><b>STRUCTURE.</b> Staff create and adjust the structure of daily activities to accommodate youth’s processing of emotion.</p>
<p>(EM6) Staff create time, space, or rituals within program activities for youth to process and learn from emotion. (EM7) Staff adapt program activities to respond to youth’s emotional readiness and needs.</p>
<p><b>MODELING.</b> Staff model healthy strategies for dealing with emotion within the context of caring, mutually-respectful relationships with youth.</p>
<p>(EM8) Staff model healthy strategies for dealing with emotions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) active listening, remaining calm during intense episodes, and using problem-solving methods;</li> <li>b) communicating effectively and honestly about emotions (including their own);</li> <li>c) respectfully acknowledging and validating emotions in others.</li> </ul>
<p><b>COACHING.</b> Staff provide coaching to youth about handling and learning from their ongoing emotional experiences.</p>
<p>(EM9) Staff provide coaching that is respectful of youth’s emotional autonomy, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) using deep understanding of youth and their emotional styles to monitor, appraise, and respond in the moment to youth’s ongoing emotions;</li> <li>b) fostering emotional awareness and reflection; helping youth frame the situation and emotion;</li> <li>c) encouraging problem solving in response to challenging emotions and the situations creating them; suggesting strategies for dealing with them.</li> </ul>



## KEY YOUTH EXPERIENCES

**RANGE OF EMOTIONS.** Youth experience a range of positive and challenging emotions in a safe context.



(EM1) Youth engage in program work and activities in which emotions occur, are expressed, and are recognized as an important and often valuable component of human experience.

Over the course of youth's participation in programs, they may experience a range of emotions. They may encounter frustration if their work is not progressing as expected. They may experience their own anger or the anger of others if a major setback occurs. They might feel anxiety due to a team member's lack of progress on a project's timeline. They may also feel the elation that comes from success or a powerful idea. Sometimes youth will bring in anxiety and anger from other areas of their lives. Emotions from events in the community and past personal experiences and traumas are often directly or indirectly manifested in program activities or discussions.

Emotions in programs often arise within the context of work on projects. Participating in a film or theater production that will be seen by hundreds, for example, can elicit both excitement and anxiety. Some youth in the SEL Challenge programs had to deal with the discouragement of officials who were perceived as difficult to approach or community service projects that did not meet original goals. Rachel Gunther, associate director at Youth on Board (YOB), shared this example:

We worked all spring to convince state legislators to pass the Governor's budget, which included progressive taxation that would have substantially benefited [the state's] families and community. However, the progressive measures did not pass, and there was disappointment in advocacy groups across the state and within Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC). We had to make sure that despite that disappointment, we celebrated the important advances we did make and continued to identify opportunities where we could advance understanding of tax policy.

These shared experiences of disappointment, pride, and success were recognized in the program as opportunities for learning about the emotions accompanying difficult work.

At the Philadelphia Wooden Boat Factory (PWBF), youth had many experiences with the ups and downs in the work of collective construction requiring complex problem solving. A young participant, Randy, recounted:

A lot of times it's really frustrating, like when you have to figure out how to do something because you aren't given a direct answer on how to do it. It's frustrating because I personally am used to just being told, "This is the way it is," and I don't really have to think about it that much. But here it's not like that. You have to learn how to deal with the frustration of not knowing the answer and having to figure out the answer.

Randy's experience demonstrates the value of learning about emotions in the context of authentic work and the types of challenges it can create. Youth in project-based programs like YOB and PWBF learn not to just cope with emotions but also to anticipate them and use these anticipated emotions as valuable cues about where their work may be headed. For example, anticipation of disappointment, frustration, and anxiety can help youth better plan their work and navigate obstacles more effectively in the future<sup>21</sup>.

Youth in the SEL Challenge also experienced and learned from emotions in the program activities that helped them respond to situations in their own lives or communities. For example, the youth in the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee (BGCGM) were discussing the issue of gun violence as a theme for their theatrical production, and the conversation turned to the recent news events regarding Trayvon Martin, a young, unarmed African American male who was shot and killed by a neighbor. La'Ketta Caldwell, senior program manager of Social Emotional Learning, shared her observations of the interaction:

As the discussion went on, it became clear that our African American males don't feel safe around law enforcement. They don't feel like they can trust them because if they move or act in a certain way it could mean their life because life on the street is tougher on the African American male. Then it came out that

one of the youth's uncles had been killed. It was emotional. Depending on how personal it is for them, it becomes a real discussion about how that issue has impacted their personal lives.

The discussion became an opportunity for youth to talk about, and reflect on, how issues shaping their everyday lives influence their emotional experience. Discussing their personal experiences of anger and fear also helped youth cultivate important moral sensibilities about perceived social injustices.

Embracing positive emotions, such as excitement or happiness, is also a necessary skill. These emotions can strengthen groups, help youth to be more open to new ways of thinking creatively, and can be a source of motivation. An important component of many of the SEL Challenge programs was the celebration of accomplished work. Although it plays a role in initiative and problem solving as well, celebration of effort and success may elicit emotional responses from youth. At BGCGM, La'Ketta Caldwell reported:

The celebration brings a lot of excitement. We look back and we talk. The biggest thing is excitement and laughter. It's amazing how young people don't believe that you're going to do what you say you're going to do because they've been let down so often. So it's a lot of, "Well I can't believe that we did that."



Beth Chandler, vice president of programs at YWCA Boston (YW Boston), recalled the closing ceremony for Immersion Week at her organization:

The delegates and the counselors were standing in a circle, holding hands and sharing something about that week that really impacted them. That's a very moving experience because some people do something in spoken word, somebody may sing. Everyone finds different ways to express just how meaningful the week was for them.

In the SEL Challenge, and in new data from Reed Larson's research, we have seen that youth learning to experience satisfaction and pride in their projects can help motivate and guide them in future work<sup>22</sup>. These examples give an indication of the variety of occurrences in SEL Challenge programs where emotions are valued as part of the human experience and are an intended part of the learning process.

**RANGE OF EMOTIONS.** Youth experience a range of positive and challenging emotions in a safe context.

YE

(EM2) Emotions are experienced within a shared program culture (e.g., rules, norms) structured to make emotional expression and reflection safe and supported.

We define program culture as the values, beliefs, and ways of acting that are embraced by all who are a part of the program. In effective programs, the culture is cultivated through the leaders' interactions with youth and then passed down among members from session to session. Youth's experience of a program culture that recognizes the importance of emotions and provides support for youth to name, express, and discuss them is critical to youth's learning about emotions. This culture creates norms and rules among program members that help youth to feel safe engaging in emotional expression and reflection. An effective emotion culture also contains rich exemplars of healthy emotion management and includes ways of thinking about, talking about, and expressing emotions that support learning.

At AHA!, learning ways to express emotions in a healthy way is an important part of the curriculum. According to Jennifer Freed, co-executive director, writing, roleplaying, or group sharing helps generalize emotion into “something relatable for all the girls.” New youth at AHA! are immersed in a culture in which emotions are not feared; they are expressed, analyzed, celebrated, and sometimes laughed about.

At some programs, the flow of the sessions or the content of the projects allows for regular expression of emotion. At PWBF, the day starts with mindfulness meditation that helps youth let go of everything else and focus on themselves, their feelings, and the work. One youth commented on the atmosphere at PWBF and why it made sharing of emotions feel safe:

It’s a very peaceful environment. There’s no yelling. There’s no screaming. I mean, you may do something wrong, but you’re not going to get yelled at for it. You’re just going to be led in the right direction of how to do it the right way.

Additionally, the physical task of working with wood provides some youth an outlet to express their emotions. One youth explained how it worked for him:

I used to think of this program as more of an outlet, too. Whenever I used to have a bad day, I needed to come here. You’re dealing with wood, you’re cutting wood and stuff. That’s a great outlet for bringing out some of the anger or depression you have. It really helps you control yourself.

At BGCGM, they abide by the “Vegas Rule”: Whatever happens at the program stays at the program. Two youth participants in the program spoke about the significance of this trust in creating a safe space to let down their guard and build deeper relationships:

You know you can trust them so you’re just going to say [whatever you want] because whatever you say stays in the room. So, just like if you’re feeling some type of way, you can just speak and ain’t nobody going to judge you. They’re just going to support you.

Before I started Can You Hear Us Now? (CYHUN), I was angry. I didn’t trust nobody. When I got to CYHUN, they made me feel like I could trust people. They showed me that they was here for me. I used to not think nobody was there for me. I used to be angry at the world and lash out on people. [At CYHUN] I told people stuff that I’ve never told. I told about my life, and they got to see a different part of me.

Youth awaken to the important emotional dimensions of their experience when program norms encourage them to pay attention to their emotions and provide them with a safe space in which emotions can be expressed. These opportunities are vitally important because many youth grow up in families or attend schools in which emotions are not appropriately expressed or the expression of emotions is discouraged or even punished, leading to emotional denial or stunted emotional development.



Youth practice (EM3) being aware of, identifying, and naming emotions.

As youth experience repeated episodes of positive and challenging emotions in the program, they may begin to identify patterns of emotional responses. Over time, these patterns can help youth to identify the cues in their body, voice, and thought patterns that are associated with different emotions. Identifying one's own emotions is important to managing the expression of emotions, becoming comfortable in having and expressing emotions, adapting emotional expression to suit the context, and anticipating the influence of emotional reactions on oneself and others. To do so, youth may need to work through a taboo learned from their families against expressing emotion. Being able to name emotions allows them to be discussed and enables youth to learn from each other.

At AHA!, learning about emotions is a core feature of the curriculum. It is central to the organization's purpose of helping young women explore and understand human relationships. The group sharing and activities provide content and opportunities to identify emotions. Jennifer Freed at AHA! described how they focus on developing emotional awareness and understanding:

We're talking about—and this is huge—how do you know what you're feeling? So really helping girls start to identify cues that they have in their bodies around anger and fear. We do the work around the healthy expression of anger versus the destructive expression of anger. We work on fear and how to self soothe when you get in an anxious state. We work on laughing and humor.

YOB staff use peer counseling sessions to provide youth participants the opportunity to express themselves. Teena-Marie Johnson, education organizer, explained:

It's really just like, "I'm here, you have X amount of minutes, do whatever you want. I'm all eyes and ears. You have my full attention." I'm really actively listening, and being very intentional about making sure that I'm giving you an opportunity to really get out what you want to get out, while also sort of pushing you to get out what you might be holding back.

Youth eventually hold peer-counseling sessions for each other using what they've learned from staff modeling. When youth offer peer counseling to each other, the learning is twofold: Youth sharing their emotions are expressing themselves in a safe, supportive environment, and listeners are practicing recognizing the emotions of their peers.

Youth in SEL Challenge programs learn from experience to name their emotions and tell others about them. One youth participant from Voyageur Outward Bound School (VOBS), Kailey, explained the significance of the program in helping her feel comfortable sharing and expressing her emotions to others:

My family is not supportive about showing emotions or being peppy. We do have fun and we do love each other, but we don't show it as much as we should. I've learned it isn't so great living this way. Outward Bound gave me a reason to not only be open to my own emotions, but to others as well. It showed me that it's okay to take support and help from others; there is no shame in it. I also learned that others won't understand or know what I want if I don't tell them. I have to be more expressive for myself. Outward Bound taught me to not only be dependent, but also independent.

Kailey learned the advantages and support gained from recognizing and embracing her emotions. In this example from AHA!, a young woman described what it was like to learn how to identify the emotions she was feeling:

I remember in my Ally [Leadership Program] group we learned how to know what emotion you're feeling because sometimes you don't know what exactly you're feeling, so you don't know how to manage it. I learned how to know when I'm feeling sad or when I'm feeling mad or when I'm feeling happy. It sounds kind of obvious that you would have to know how to do that, but once they actually [teach you to] do that, you realize this whole time you haven't been knowing what to do with what you're feeling.

Another AHA! youth shared how the daily reflection activity helped her develop a vocabulary for describing her emotions:

Every time you do thorn and rose, they make you think about how you're really feeling and really evaluate your emotions by yourself. So you also work on your vocabulary and your ability to describe things.

SEL Challenge programs also consistently provided youth with repeated opportunities to recognize and name emotions within themselves and constructively share those emotions with others.

**EMOTION AWARENESS AND SKILL.** Youth practice and develop healthy and functional emotion skills.



Youth practice (EM4) reasoning about causes and effects of emotion.

Repeated experiences of emotions within an emotionally supportive culture provide opportunities for youth to reason about the factors that cause specific emotions and about how those emotions influence them. Causes may include both immediate and recent situational events and conditions that triggered the emotions, as well as longer-term biographical experiences in youth's lives (often including traumatic experiences) that predispose them to particular emotional reactions. Effects may include how emotions influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They also include anticipation of how these effects might influence others or play out within the group.

One example of youth learning about the causes and effects of emotions comes from PWBF. Victoria Guidi, program director, provided feedback to a youth participant about his poor performance as a team leader. The youth's reaction was a decision to step down as team leader and leave the program. Upon hearing this, Victoria requested a one-on-one discussion and learned that the youth's father consistently put him down and he never felt good enough:

During the discussion he said, "Wow I never thought about this before. When you said to me that I wasn't doing a good job of being the team leader, I thought back to my dad. You know, when I think about it, the relationship that I have with my dad and never being good enough and then hearing that from you triggered that reaction, which was really, really hard. I was stuck for the entire weekend. I have deep-rooted feelings about not being good enough that come from my dad."

After Victoria and the youth had an open, honest discussion, he decided he was going to stay on as team leader. Analyzing the causes of his emotions and realizing how they had affected his behavior allowed the youth to move beyond what had been a major obstacle in his life.

Sometimes the causes of emotions may be obvious, but other times youth may need to first examine the effects emotions are having on their progress before they are able to clearly identify the cause. Elizabeth "Poppy" Potter, Director of Operations at VOBS, described the realization youth may come to:

They realize their limits on the rock climb. They realize "Wow, I'm way more scared than I thought I was, and I feel like I'm in a dangerous situation and I need to come back down from this climb." That's an okay thing to learn, that it's not just about getting to the top. It's that self-management that connects to the social and emotional skills, experiencing that and feeling that so they know where those lines are for themselves. Everybody has different fears and even if someone maybe not able to get through that correct move, there's still a ton of learning that can come from it. It might be disappointing because they hit a limit, or they wish they had tried harder. That is a great teachable moment.

*"Everybody has different fears and even if someone maybe not able to get through that correct move, there's still a ton of learning that can come from it. It might be disappointing because they hit a limit, or they wish they had tried harder. That is a great teachable moment."*

—Poppy Potter, VOBS

In this case, a youth might learn skills to manage and overcome fear by identifying the root of the fear and deciding to work through it.

Youth practice (EM5) using strategies for healthy coping with strong emotions and for harnessing emotions to advance the program work.

Youth in SEL Challenge programs learn to cope with and harness strong emotions. Coping generally refers to the process of coming to terms with or terminating challenging emotions or their causes. Harnessing refers to a wider set of situations in which the goal is learning not to eliminate an emotion but to channel the emotion and to use it as information or motivation. Youth may use emotions like distress, anger over injustice, pain, frustration, or compassion to pick a related project, learn from experience, or creatively express their feelings. Handling emotions may also include learning to modify expressions of pride or anger so that the work of the group is not disrupted.

The youth learn and practice strategies to handle their emotions or the situations that created them. Youth reported learning to avoid situations that caused frustration, refraining from expression of anger towards others in the program, using breathing and other techniques to calm themselves in heated situations, and communicating effectively about their emotions. The following are some excerpts from focus group conversations with youth who discussed how they learned to appropriately handle their emotions:

At AHA!, one youth said: There's a time and a place for emotions, and sometimes we just get so flooded and we need to learn how to manage them. If we are having a conflict, we approach it in a safe way or in a way that's not going to be destructive for us later. You need to, like, I don't know, be smart about it.

At BCGGM, one youth said: We had to focus. So I controlled my feelings by deep breathing.

At The Possibility Project (TPP), one youth said: We learned techniques to calm it down, de-escalators. We learned about blood flow. If you're tense and you're breathing heavy then less blood is going to your head so you're not thinking as straight. You're angry. Take deep breaths. Try not to raise your voice. Don't use curse words. Use "I" statements as opposed to "you" statements. So it's more like, "When I feel like I'm not being listened to, I feel hurt because then I feel like I don't matter. But I love you. This is what I need and this is what I'm willing to give." Conflicts can go, one of two ways, and we just learn how to take those negative forces and turn it into something else.

In Larson's research<sup>25</sup>, youth reported learning to restrain the impulse to express pride or anger so that it didn't disrupt the work of the group. What was particularly striking about the SEL Challenge programs was how often the learning the youth were doing was not just about coping or "handling" their emotions but harnessing them.

When youth experience dismay or anger at circumstances in their communities, they have opportunities to practice and learn how to channel what they were feeling into motivation, focused attention, and constructive action. Teena-Marie Johnson at YOB offered this example:

Right now seventh and eighth graders [in the school district] are going to lose their yellow school bus and are now required to take the MBTA here in

Larson and Rusk's research on youth's emotional learning in out-of-school programs provides results from more extensive data that help identify what youth learn about the causes and effects of emotions as well as how they learn them. Effective programs can help youth learn about how personalities, nuanced situations, others' emotions, and physical states influence one's own emotions. Youth also acquire knowledge of the effects of emotions on their thoughts, attention, and motivation and learn firsthand how emotions can be contagious and change the dynamics within groups<sup>23</sup>.

This research also shows that, in addition to learning from staff, youth learn about emotions through reflection, trial-and-error, and practice. Youth in these studies described learning by making comparisons across emotional episodes and between people, from trying things out, and sometimes just from "thought experiments," where they visualized what would happen if they made different decisions about how to handle an emotion<sup>24</sup>. Experiencing emotions in the context of supportive program culture allows youth to experiment and learn to manage and harness a wide range of emotional experiences.

Boston [to get to school.] Our young folks, they're in high school and so that doesn't affect them directly, but they got so mad and so angry and so sad just knowing that these young people had a decision made on their behalf without being asked how they felt about it. That was the feeling of things happening to you without you being aware of them or being asked. It got them really fired up, and they decided that this is something that they really want to work on.

Another example of harnessing emotion took place in the Wyman program where youth planted a community garden in memory of a club member who was struck and killed by a drunk driver. Although this may seem like a simple act of kindness, the context of the situation added to the emotional intensity. The young woman had joined the Teen Outreach Program (TOP®) when her club from East St. Louis, IL, was merged with the Wyman club on the Near South Side of downtown St. Louis, MO. While very close in geography—separated only by a river and a short drive—there was a natural rivalry between these areas. Staff described the merging of the clubs as a trying time: the youth were at times combative with each other and it nearly brought the program to a close. Over time, however, the youth began to work through their differences and form relationships based in trust.

After the club member's death, dealing with their grief took its toll. The youth needed an outlet for their grief. DeVonne Bernard, director of TOP, said it took the club a while to “really get their momentum back. We kept doing TOP, but they were very passionate about doing something.” The teens planned and orchestrated the dedication of the community garden at the site of the young woman's home agency. To this day, the garden is maintained in her memory by the TOP club. While many of the current TOP teens do not know her, they have experienced tragic loss among their peers and can identify from an emotional perspective on why this project matters and has meaning.

At BGCGM, poetry is a vehicle for expressing and harnessing emotion. In the following example, one youth was initially uncomfortable and dismissive when others expressed strong emotion. Eventually, she used poetry as a creative emotional outlet, as Natalie Cooper, senior director of social emotional learning, described:

One CYHUN participant named Chantelle used to get frustrated when the other youth in the group would express too much emotion. She shared that she thought it was not necessary for them to share all of their “business” and start crying during the session. Yet Chantelle kept coming back to CYHUN each week. During one of the sessions the participants had the opportunity to write poetry about their life experience. To the facilitator's surprise, Chantelle came back the next week and shared the poem that she wrote. Chantelle's poem depicted her battle with low self-esteem and not having an outlet to feel safe to share her feelings. After coming to CYHUN for many weeks, Chantelle felt part of a community and trusted the group enough to share her personal struggles. Chantelle's story is a great example of social and emotional growth. She has really gained skills in using the anger and fear she felt inside and transforming that into a positive experience.

At YW Boston, youth are responsible for leading a social action project at their schools, but they are likely to face challenges that create barriers to their success. The way youth handle their emotional response to these roadblocks can influence the ultimate outcome. If youth are able to use the setbacks to re-group and re-motivate, they are more likely to achieve their goals. Program Director Beth Chandler shared the struggles youth had with getting both administration and students to take action. In order to renew their motivation and persevere, the youth had to handle the shift from excitement to disappointment and frustration as well as handle interpersonal emotions:

[It] is frustrating because the youth have this idea. They're really excited about moving it forward and now they're hitting roadblocks. They finally figured out their own interpersonal stuff and now they're hitting roadblocks from the administration. [They] had to just keep going back and back and back.

Youth from YW Boston shared how much more productive it is to have calm conversations about sensitive topics with people who may have opposing views than it is to berate someone for disagreeing:

Us being mad at you is counterproductive. So when you're standing up for something, you can't bash other people's ideas just because they're different from yours, and I think that's the most important thing to come out of social justice work. It's not to have one group versus the other. It's to slowly, but surely, get the most from the non-supportive group and bring them with you. I don't attack them. I just try to ask them more questions just to clear up any confusion and kind of create an understanding.

## STAFF PRACTICES

**STRUCTURE.** Staff create and adjust the structure of daily activities to accommodate youth's processing of emotion. SP

(EM6) Staff create time, space, or rituals within program activities for youth to process and learn from emotion.

One way we found the SEL Challenge programs prioritize supporting youth in learning to process and handle emotion effectively is by creating rituals, or particular times and spaces, for dealing with and processing emotion. In this way, the programs are deliberately structured to create safe spaces for youth to experience emotions, express them, and learn about handling their own emotions and the emotions of others. YOB has regularly scheduled peer-counseling sessions for the explicit purpose of processing emotions that arise in the course of community action work. VOBS has its Restore ritual for addressing conflict (the idea is to restore or bring back what has been lost: trust, open communication, respect, etc.). TPP creates theater spaces where emotions are both a part of the play and a part of youth's experience in creating the play. AHA! has lessons and activities to learn about and get in touch with emotion stored in the body. BGCGM creates activities designed to trigger emotions, and other SEL Challenge programs have activity structures for youth to explore emotions around specific issues, like gender, sexuality, and injustice. Staff from the programs discussed these activities and sessions in the examples following.

In all of the programs, agreeing on group norms for interaction is an important early step in establishing how the group will work together (see Teamwork). In particular, staff may cultivate group dynamics that create a positive learning climate for everyone as emotions are shared. Jennifer Freed of AHA! pointed out how staff structure sharing activities to ensure that everyone learns:

What we don't generally do is focus on one girl for too long because that becomes more like therapy. So we learn how to take the specifics of what one girl might be struggling with or sharing and bring in the rest of the group in terms of generalizing that experience into something relatable for all the girls.



And at YW Boston, where youth discuss topics that they may not have discussed before with individuals who may have perspectives different from theirs, staff actively monitor and redirect conversations to help youth learn to be respectful of each other. Julie Thayer, InIt program manager, elaborated:

Youth are allowed to express their emotions because they are often peers, but they learn to do it and/or are supported to do it in a way that is not hurtful to others. And so they're allowed to talk about stuff they may have been feeling or thinking but never had a chance to talk about before. They develop the ability to feel comfortable voicing their opinions and understanding that they may not be the same opinions held by others, but they're at least going to be respected in saying them and having them.

With activities in the curriculum that are known or designed to elicit emotional responses in youth, staff recognized the importance of building in enough time for youth to process and debrief the experience and adjusting the timing to make sure emotional closure is reached. Julie Thayer at YW Boston explained how during an intensive, week-long summer program, youth can go in-depth on issues:

I think that the more important thing is that there's closure at the end of each workshop. We have this whole theory called Trust the Process. Sometimes we'll be in the middle of a workshop and people are crying and upset and some of the students will be like, "Why are we doing this?" We'll tell them to trust the process and, sure enough, within the next half an hour after the next activity or whatever the case is the students have moved through it and have come to a much greater point of understanding. Even if we have to get off schedule we won't just arbitrarily end a workshop just because that time's up. We make sure that the students are in a good place overall.

Laura Greenlee Karp, program coordinator at VOBS, described how "we run a bunch of initiatives that push them a little bit, push them to work together, and then we also have those guided conversations to get them thinking and sharing what they're feeling." The structured debriefing time that follows the activity gives youth an opportunity to process and sort out their emotional responses.

Staff from AHA! and YOB discussed a process of "zipping back up" after youth had "unzipped" during the session. As youth open up and expose raw emotion during the session, it's important that they experience a sense of closure before leaving the safe space of the group. Staff might open the floor for



other youth in the group to offer supportive words to the individual or may ask the individual an off-the-wall question to draw attention away from their feelings and lead them back into something silly and lighthearted. The youth from the AHA! focus group identify a principle learned from a daily ritual:

So we always do gratitude at the end, which is a way to walk out on a good note and realize that you don't have to be so discouraged by the negative. It's important to take a moment to recognize the positive in your life.

In hearing these appreciations, youth learn from introspection and from the words of others.

Some programs provide appropriate times and places for sharing personal experience that are separate from the time on project tasks. At YOB, they offer a peer-counseling group that meets biweekly and is a place where the only agenda is for youth to share what is going on in their lives and gain the support they need. Director Jenny Sazama commented:

I think it's giving them a chance to feel and express what they are going through. We also cry quite a bit around here. We think crying is great. We try to encourage people to cry with discipline. The reason we started the peer counseling groups was because we weren't leaving enough room for structured social and emotional pieces. And if you have the structured piece then you can be more disciplined about the work piece. But they bleed into each other too much if you don't have the structures. And there's a job that needs to get done that is about social emotional learning, but it's not always about your personal crisis.

The focus of the peer-counseling group is emotional processing and learning. Having this built into the culture and purpose of the group allows free expression of emotion. It also contains the emotion and creates a culture where emotion is accepted and embraced, but its expression is structured and disciplined. This allows the expression of emotion to benefit and support the youth, and to enhance rather than interfere, with the work.

The structures described above provide built-in venues for youth's processing of emotions. As the content and curriculum of the programs may elicit emotional responses from youth, having planned processes and activities for youth to learn from their emotions is integral for both positive youth development and program success.

**STRUCTURE.** Staff create and adjust the structure of daily activities to accommodate youth's processing of emotion.

SP

(EM7) Staff adapt program activities to respond to youth's emotional readiness and needs.

In addition to these planned structures, the staff in the SEL Challenge programs also recognized the importance of being flexible and adjusting the structure or flow of activities in order to adapt to the needs of the youth. Staff are attuned to youth's emotional states so that they can adjust the day's activities according to the needs of the youth. La'Ketta Caldwell at BGCGM said:

Maybe what we're doing today we need to shift because they're already not having a good day. We need to maybe play and try to figure out how we can get them to process through that. We know we have to hit outcomes and stay on schedule, but our kids are the number one priority in outcome. We can push our agenda, but our agenda is not as important as their agenda and what's going on with them, the whole child.

Natalie Cooper at BGCGM added that the staff practices and expectations they set help them respond quickly and adapt to youths' needs:

My staff are expected to be standing and engaging with the kids at all times. I taught them years ago to scope a room when they walk in. So just doing an immediate, one-minute scan when you're going in a room, you can tell who's happy in this moment, who's a little sad; who normally is vibrant, but is kind of down. When you do that and you begin an activity, you know who you need to pay attention to when you are working the room to provide support for the kids during their individual activities or work... Sometimes there are days where the kids have to just focus on something that happened in their neighborhood that has nothing to do with the session, but it's real for them so it becomes real for us, and we process it as a group. We rally around each other when a club member is going through something. We support and show love.

Paul Griffin, Founder and Executive Director of TPP, and Laura Greenlee Karp at VOBS also emphasized being aware of the youth and listening in order to determine if the plan for the day needs to be adjusted to meet the needs of the youth:

Paul: We try not to make any assumptions about our young people. We listen first. So the production team, which is the youth leadership team, they're listening as well. So they can reorder that according to what they're hearing, and they do. They may say, "Let's not do that, let's do this because this is what we're sensing." That kind of flexibility is absolutely necessary because it allows them to listen and understand and respond to the actual people they're working with rather than trying to get those people punched in to some formula we have that's supposed to be good for them that produces these outcomes.

Laura: Giving the students a space to be who they are and meet them where they are is important. If they are not in a place to have a long conversation, then staff modify the conversation and come back to it. Knowing where the students are and coming together so that the students are successful.

These examples emphasize how important it is to withhold pre-judgment, be attuned to the emotional states of the youth on any particular day, and be flexible with program structure to allow youth opportunities to cope with their emotions.

**MODELING.** Staff model healthy strategies for dealing with emotion within the context of caring, mutually-respectful relationships with youth.

SP

(EM8) Staff model healthy strategies for dealing with emotions such as:

- a) active listening, remaining calm during intense episodes, and using problem-solving methods;
- b) communicating effectively and honestly about emotions (including their own);
- c) respectfully acknowledging and validating emotions in others.

Leaders in successful SEL Challenge programs serve as models of mature expression and management of their own emotions and how to respond to the emotions of others. This modeling includes accepting and naming emotions, setting boundaries on what personal information is shared, and use of patient and open problem solving to resolve emotionally-charged issues.

This modeling occurs within the context of caring relationships with the youth at both individual and group levels. Leaders are not detached models youth view from a distance. Youth learn working models of healthy bi-directional relationships through their participation in positive, caring interactions with the leaders and through observation of leaders' similar caring interactions with other youth. Griffith and Larson<sup>26</sup> found these model relationships to be particularly powerful because many youth haven't experienced them in the past. Laura Greenlee Karp from VOBS helps youth to "redefine how they see authority figures" by presenting models of emotion management that youth may not typically see from other authority figures. By seeing adults express emotions appropriately, youth become motivated to study and apply what they see in this healthy model—first with other youth in the program, and then in their relationships beyond the program. In some cases, this includes relationships with their parents and guardians.

Sharing by adult facilitators can make youth feel more comfortable expressing their personal experiences with the group. At AHA!, the staff learn how much to share in groups:

The facilitators are trained to "create space for heartfelt sharing and learning, and to hold the container and share authentically, to serve as solid, dependable resources and affirmative influences for youth, but not as peers or 'friends.' Staff share their troubles in a bracketed and appropriate manner so as to avoid burdening youth or overtaking groups' emotional climate with their own issues. Enough to model truly showing up with openness and vulnerability, but not so much that their issues drive the emotional tenor of the group."

Staff use themselves as role models through personal sharing. For instance, at an AHA! Girls' Group meeting, participants were asked to share a time they really "lost it emotionally." Jennifer Freed described her observation of when Leo Corporal, an AHA! facilitator shared an example of being emotionally exhausted with the Girls' Group:



Her baby son was up all night vomiting. She was so exhausted after working all day she just wanted to scream and run away. Leo said she turned to her husband and asked him if he would hold her for five minutes and reassure her and give her a needed break from her son. Many girls said that Leo's story was impactful: she knew what she needed, she asked for it, and, as a result, she was able to rally for her son and her husband.

One youth, Maci, described how much of an impact it made when a staff member from a similar background shared personal stories:

Jennifer Freed, oh man, I am so, so grateful for her. She knew me. She would pull me aside, and I guess we could relate because she would tell me stories, and that also helped knowing that she came from a rough past, you know. She went through some stuff that I was going through.

Another component of modeling is when the emotions of the staff motivate youth. Laura Greenlee Karp spoke from her experience at VOBS:

I think one of the most important things I share with staff is that their energy and excitement is contagious. So the way that you approach an activity, for example, if they are excited, even if a few students are not excited, will help the group be excited and get students engaged. Their energy will spread throughout the group. This energy will help the students get invested and bought into the day. The same goes the other way. If staff are weary of doing an activity and they don't know how it is going to go, the group will pick up on that energy. Because of the staff's uncertainty, the group will be uncertain and uncomfortable and may not want to participate.

Staff also model effective emotion skills when interacting with youth directly. Regarding the incident previously described where a PWB staff had a rift in her relationship with a youth based on something she said, Victoria Guidi shared how she approached a resolution for the situation:

I was transparent with him and really open and also apologizing to him. I let him know we adults mess up sometimes or we say the wrong thing sometimes. I'm not perfect, and I'm continually growing, too. Life is just a journey of learning and growing.

Revealing her humanity to the youth in this situation demonstrated to the youth how to communicate openly and candidly about emotions, how to own one's emotions, and how to move past them personally and with others. The close relationships that staff build with youth provide a necessary backdrop for modeling healthy emotion strategies. For BGCGM's La'Ketta Caldwell, communication is everything. She stressed the importance of remaining calm and refraining from using brash communication styles that the youth may be confronted with in other settings:

It's important to be able to effectively communicate with the teens. And not always what you say, but really the nonverbal communication that you have with them. I've been in schools where people are yelling. I'm not doing that. I don't yell at kids. I walk away before I yell. I need them to see how no matter how angry somebody is that it's not okay for them to cuss or to just say things. Because you can't take back words.

Approaching a situation calmly means sometimes leaving time for the emotions to settle before addressing them. Below, La'Ketta Caldwell described how she might follow up with a young person after a heated experience:

I'm more patient. Sometimes, I know that because I'm sensitive, we've really got to address this some other day. I say, "That hurt my feelings." If I cry or I'm frustrated, I talk about it or write it out, and then when I come back I say "What did you mean when you said that? Can we talk?"

In this environment of heartfelt care and trust, staff can also feel safe to share their emotions, which may result from things youth share. La'Ketta Caldwell described when and why she sometimes shares her raw emotions with the youth:

Sometimes I cry. And I cry with them because I hear something and it throws me off. If you don't show that you can cry, then they feel they're on a battlefield. Part of the issue is they're expected to be strong, and expected to be a soldier because if you're not a soldier you're going to die. And that's jacked up. An adult and a kid shouldn't have to deal with that. So being able to be transparent and to share, to a degree, one time my heart was broken, and I felt like I didn't know how to keep it together. It might look like I got it together all the time, but sometimes I don't. You need to share that. I think it's important for them to see that we all go through ebbs and flows in life. And to inspire, to show them, "Yeah, we're here and this is ugly, but there are other parts to life. Life is not always this. There's bad and there's good. So this is the good."

Letting the youth see her express her emotions and process through them sends a message to the youth that they can share their emotions, too, and that there is value in that. One youth shared the lesson she learned about showing emotion:

About your feelings, you can't just keep them closed in 'cause then nobody is going to know how you feel. Like if I was mad in here and people were messing with me and I'm not telling I'm mad, stop messing with me, they're going to keep messing with me until I tell them. So being more open with people is better than keeping it closed in.

**COACHING.** Staff provide coaching to youth about handling and learning from their ongoing emotional experiences. 

(EM9) Staff provide coaching that is respectful of youth's emotional autonomy:

Staff show respect for youth's emotional autonomy by taking care not to manipulate youth or tell them what they should feel. This process is sometimes called emotion coaching. The key idea is that the coach is a "guide on the side" who contributes interpretations, guiding questions, suggestions, encouragement, and support in unobtrusive ways that respect autonomy as a youth experiences and attempts to manage ongoing emotional episodes<sup>27</sup>. Through sensitive and timely coaching, staff support youth in learning effective emotion skills. Staff goals in dealing with emotions include not just helping youth resolve a situation but helping youth learn about the complex and irregular dynamics of emotions and emotional situations. The types of coaching staff provide may include fostering awareness and reflection, suggesting strategies, and encouraging problem solving<sup>28</sup>. Three elements of this coaching stood out in the SEL Challenge programs.

(EM9) Staff provide coaching that is respectful of youth's emotional autonomy, including:

- a) using deep understanding of youth and their emotional styles to monitor, appraise, and respond in the moment to youth's ongoing emotions.

Leaders in the SEL Challenge programs stressed the importance of getting to know youth so they could adjust their response to suit the needs, interests, and readiness of particular individuals. This means they must monitor and read the emotions of each individual. This process depends on staff knowing youth well, listening, and being finely attuned to youth. Staff take care to listen to youth and be aware of the emotional signals they give. Getting to know the youth well and building relationships helps staff to read youth, to notice if they are behaving uncharacteristically, and to respond with sensitivity. Victoria Guidi at PWBF said:

I try to get a really good feel of where the students are at when we first come in. Also developing personal relationships lets me know where their strengths are and what their challenges are, so I can work with them to manage any emotions that are going on.

Paul Griffin from TPP added:

It's different for every young person because some are good fakers. So sometimes if they're smiling a little too hard or they're a little too expressive they would seem a little "off." You just want to check in and see if everything is all right. You want to talk to the production team and see if they know what's going on. And that being "off" means you need to understand what "on" is for that person. Because you don't want to assume, "Well, they're not very happy." That may be a person who's never happy. That's their orientation. They've made a decision to be that way. That doesn't necessarily indicate anything.

SEL Challenge staff use their knowledge of individuals to respond flexibly in ways that support individual and group learning and respect youth's autonomy. Depending on the situation and the emotion, they may address upsetting emotions fluidly in the moment. For example, with anxiety or anger, a response might be necessary in the moment. In other cases, staff wait for the right time. They may help youth process the situation individually, or sometimes group processing is appropriate. In some cases, youth need time and space to experience release from the grip of a strong emotional reaction to a situation before being ready to reason through the causes and effects of that emotion. Wyman uses an approach where staff members create time and space in the moment—even in the middle of a lesson—to check in with a youth individually. DeVonne Bernard, director, Teen Outreach Program, offered the following example:

In club, I would honestly say that we have a really talkative group and if someone comes in and they are not talking or they are completely shut down, we'll attend to them. One of our long-term facilitators really modeled this. If he saw somebody struggling, he wouldn't stop the lesson. He would make sure there was someone else to continue, but he was going to make sure that the individual teen was okay.

One youth from AHA! described how staff adjust their responses according to the individual youth, which is something they're able to do because they begin by developing personal relationships with each youth:

She says, "Tell me why you're scared or tell me why you don't want to do it. Is it because you're lazy? Are you feeling ill today? Is that why you don't want to do it?" But she says it in this way with this grin, like, challenging me, you know? First they learn your personality, so they know which way they can talk to you. If she would have talked this way to, like, let's say Kimberly, Kimberly would have been so scared, right? But they know I'm the type because they learned about me. They got to work with my personality, which is a skill that's so amazing to me.

And this story about a young woman at BGCGM who opened up to the group about her feelings for her family shows how La'Ketta Caldwell responded in the moment to meet the youth's needs. The young woman had shared how she felt unloved by her family. She was overcome by emotion and left the room. Here's what happened next:

I went to go get her, and I was like “We need you to come back.” So our session stopped. What we were supposed to do? I was like, “Okay, I need everybody to make a half circle. Right now she needs love, and we’re a family and we support our family. So I need everybody to tell her why she’s loved, why you love her.” One of our young men is so silly every week. That’s the first time he was serious. He told the young lady why she was loved. The next week she came back with a poem.

In these ways, SEL Challenge staff were nimble in their responses, adjusting their tone or manner based on the youth and the situation. Staff’s responsive practices simultaneously balanced the relationships with youth, the goals for the project, and the needs of the group.

**COACHING.** Staff provide coaching to youth about handling and learning from their ongoing emotional experiences. 

- (EM9) Staff provide coaching that is respectful of youth’s emotional autonomy, including:
- b) fostering emotional awareness and reflection; helping youth frame the situation and emotion;

When staff coach, they gently support a journey where the youth learn to articulate their emotions. They do this by encouraging youth to process and reflect on their emotions and their lives and take the lead in their emotional learning. Even with positive emotions, staff come alongside to gently encourage reflection and emotional growth. Rendy Freeman, co-executive director at AHA!, explained how she responded to a teen who has just expressed to her romantic crush that she likes her:

She is on cloud nine. She acts like all of her problems of self-worth are solved. I helped her feel great about her skills without making it about the love object. Her hope and optimism about the relationship make her feel important, loved, worthwhile. I showed excitement with her, affirming her powerful feelings and guiding her in her choice in the matter.

This staff member’s response shows support for the youth and creates space for the young person to process her feelings and make a next decision. Another example from Teena-Marie Johnson at YOB shows how staff reached out to a young person they noticed:

There’s a story behind why they can’t really articulate their emotions. You know they try not to be emotional. They’re not like affectionate or whatever. We’ll really try to get that person’s story during support group because that’s really what that space is for. And it’s a process. It’s not something that is figured out right away, and we are fine with letting that take as long as it needs. We’re not rushing anyone, and the young people really decide what to work on. We’re following their lead.

At TPP, when youth see that their cast members are taking care of each other, they feel safe to be able to express their thoughts and feelings more openly:

For a very long time in my life I’ve felt like I had to suppress whatever it was I was feeling. I never had a place where I could just let go. I felt like I always had to keep it in and be tough for the people around me, right? But in the program—I mean I still struggle with that today—but something that I’ve learned and I’m trying to grow from because of The Possibility Project is that it’s okay to let people in. It’s okay to ask for help. It’s okay to have people there and to allow them to be there for me.

**COACHING.** Staff provide coaching to youth about handling and learning from their ongoing emotional experiences. 

- (EM9) Staff provide coaching that is respectful of youth’s emotional autonomy, including:
- c) encouraging problem solving in response to challenging emotions and the situations creating them; suggesting strategies for dealing with them.

Staff often provide emotion coaching by asking questions that encourage reflection and problem solving. Allison Williams, senior vice president of programs at Wyman, spoke from a youth’s perspective:

I think you'd hear them say, "They don't tell us what to do, but they ask us lots of questions. And they ask us lots of questions about why we would make a choice one way or the other, and what do we think about the benefits of that one way or the other." I think you might hear some of them say, "We may get all frustrated because they ask us more questions and I just want an answer from them," but we believe our role is to facilitate their thinking, reflection, and learning, as opposed to simply telling youth what to do.

Elizabeth Howard, artistic director of the Afterschool Program at TPP, provided an example of a situation where two cast members were in a physical altercation, and staff encouraged the youth in the cast to problem-solve:

For my part, I just pointed out to them, which happens often, that we were building a show with some intense emotions and no wonder the two people who are playing the "bad guys" in our show are now fighting. Things that we're building are starting to resonate with us and causing us to take on those emotions, and so it's hard to take on those emotions. What are we going to do to support each other? That's when they ended up in that cast circle sharing what had happened from their point of view. We're not just building a show. It's about each other and our lives and what we want to do. The cast handled that in that way. They focused on how we are going to support each other.

Staff may help youth to problem-solve in response to challenging emotions, whether they affect an individual or a larger group.

In some cases staff also help youth channel strong emotion into new goals (e.g., turning an emotional response into a program goal or plan) or motivation to keep making progress toward existing goals. At YW Boston, much of the content is focused on raising awareness of disparities among social groups, and Beth Chandler shared that an important part of the work is "to help the youth think about steps they can take to not just feel frustrated or helpless, but there are some systemic issues that exist that you too can help address now that you are aware of them."

