

Kari Robideau:

Five Ways to Measure Youth and Adult Connections. This is our topic today on the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development Podcast series. My name is Kari Robideau and joining me today is Betsy Olson. We are both youth development extension educators. Thank you for joining me today Betsy.

Betsy Olson:

Thanks for having me Kari. It's great to talk with you.

Kari Robideau:

Absolutely well our topic today is about measuring youth and adult connections. As youth workers, we know how important caring adults are. I think we aren't always intentional about how we evaluate this important aspect to this non-formal environment. Can you start us off by telling us a little bit about you and how you became interested in how youth workers measure the impacts youth and adult partnerships can have?

Betsy Olson:

Sure. I've been working in 4-H and extension youth development for about seven or eight years. I worked in University of Wisconsin Extension System as a 4-H Extension Educator for five years and then now have been in Minnesota for three and a half, almost four years. I just have seen throughout that time the just really powerful impact that our volunteers have on the lives of youth. We are really pretty good at capturing learning outcomes of our youth, showing skill development, but that important role that volunteers play in helping youth develop those things I think is sometimes not captured fully by our programming evaluations.

Betsy Olson:

This is just something that I've seen really have a powerful effect on not just 4-H programming, but on all sorts of youth development programming and I think we pay attention to it as we develop the program but in evaluation it gets left behind. It was just something that I noticed could use a little bit more attention.

Kari Robideau:

That's exactly what captured my attention on a blog post that you recently wrote where you described five ways to measure strong connections between youth and those caring adults and their lives. You mentioned volunteers, but do you think this also relates to youth workers, to all of the adults who are in those non-formal learning environments with young people?

Betsy Olson:

Definitely, it relates to staff. It relates to other parents in your organization. As a 4-H'er myself, one of the strongest connections that I had was to a project leader who was a parent in my club. We worked together on sewing. We talked about life. We are still in contact. She's still is someone who supports me and helps me even as an adult, so that relationship was incredibly important to me as a young person and now is also really important in my life. I think we need to look at staff, volunteers and the peripheral adults in our program as well. Those impacts are critical.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah, and I appreciate what you said in your introduction about how when we're program planning in this out of school time we think about these adult-youth connections and you define five of those kinds of relationships, but we don't always go back and measure did that happen. Let's talk about that a little bit more. I'd like to go through each of those five and have you discuss that a little bit further and then perhaps at the end you could suggest some tools, somehow to actually measure ... after we measure them how do we measure them, what tools do we use and maybe a little bit on how we report that. Let's get on to the first one. The first in the youth-adult relationship that you talk about includes those informal connections, describe that for us and how do we think about measuring this.

Betsy Olson:

Yeah, so the informal connections are sometimes the things that we notice and we identify particularly in staff and volunteers that we want to work on this program are staff members that we want to extend their time with young people, mentoring relationships that are really strong. Those are the intangible thing that connects all of those is a really strong informal connection that ability to talk about things beyond just the program. The connection that makes you want to tell that person your good news. The connection that makes you interested in finding out more and checking in on that person and it's that part that we call a relationship. This informal connection really encompasses that part.

Betsy Olson:

Those are the things that keep youth coming back to our programs. Those informal connections that they have with the staff or volunteers and it also are the things that allow them to feel safe enough to grow and develop. It's something that we again pay attention to in just the way that we think about our programs but often not very tangibly and specifically. I think one of the best indicators of this relationship is that desire to seek someone out to have a conversation with them, the types of conversations that you have with that person. Is it just about the program? Are you talking just about the thing that you have in common or are you talking about life and your news and your family, those kind of things. Those are the indicators that that informal relationship is really strong.

Kari Robideau:

I'm working with a program and I'm wanting to know how well my volunteers or the other staff are connecting with those young people, I'm going to say to those adults so what do you know about these young people? What are you asking them about above and beyond this program? Do you know about a sporting event? Do you know about a choir or band that they've been a part of and continuing to ask them and congratulate them and acknowledging that you're keeping in touch with them above and beyond what you're working with on them in this particular program.

Betsy Olson:

That's exactly right. Those are also the indicators when we talk to staff and they say, "Oh little Johnny, these are the things that I know about him. This is the way that we've connected." You can feel that that staff member is doing well at building those informal connections.

Kari Robideau:

Okay, well let's move on to a second point that you've made. This is about adults helping youth reach their goals. How do you see this playing out in that youth adult relationship and again what are we measuring when we're looking at this aspect?

Betsy Olson:

Yeah, so this really talks to especially for older youth we often get caught up in the goals of our program. Our program has these objectives and these goals. This really speaks to how youth identify their own goals within the program and are we attentive to those goals in the same way, are the adults attentive to those goals in the same way that they're attentive to the program goals. That's again that just sort of balance of that youth-adult partnership. The adult piece we see the program goals as very important. That's part of either our job or the goals that have been set up for our volunteer role.

Betsy Olson:

For youth, they have their own personal goals within the program. They're there for some of their own personal reasons and sometimes those goals really connect and sometimes they are slightly different. This really is talking about how are we building and improving and developing the skills that youth are self-identifying, are we in touch with what they are seeking within our program.

Kari Robideau:

Okay and essentially our adults going above and beyond their sight, what they think the program should be is that they're open to what the young people think.

Betsy Olson:

Exactly because the connection has to go back and forth. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kari Robideau:

Okay, okay, all right. A third connection you cite is that adults respect and encourage a young person's point of view. You mentioned using active listening for this as being something that would help you be successful.

Betsy Olson:

Exactly. It takes those first two pieces to get to this respect and encouragement. You need that informal connection with someone to be able to really respect their point of view. It takes knowing what they're seeking to be able to get in touch with that and encourage it. This really again builds on those other pieces that we have been talking about and I think the core component of this is that it not only puts youth in ... It not only sees youth as learners and developers, it sees them as their input is as valuable to the program as anyone else's as any adult or volunteer.

Kari Robideau:

There's some intentionality in those first two that you talk about and the adults helping them reach their goals and making those connections and as you said this seems like one that you could ask the youth themselves are you respected. In what ways are you able to do this and perhaps some of their examples would support the first two connections that we talked about?

Betsy Olson:

Exactly to what degree do they feel like their point of view is embraced in this group or club and by this adult volunteer in particular or by adults in general in the program. Do they feel like their choices are embraced and encouraged or are we too often basing the program activities on what the adults want?

There has to be a balance. Young people shouldn't be always driving the, bus but that doesn't mean that they never get a chance to steer the ship to mix my metaphors completely.

Kari Robideau:

Absolutely. Well we'll keep sailing here as we move on to number four. It's those adults listening to and trying on that youth perspective. How does that ... These are really building on each other.

Betsy Olson:

That's so true. Really trying on means not only respecting and encouraging it, but trying it out, seeing if that perspective is valid as your own and being willing to make that assumption even if in the end it turns out well maybe it wasn't the perfect way to look at it. It's trying it on enough to be able to communicate that really respectfully and on the same level as the young person is at.

Kari Robideau:

It's not the immediate no.

Betsy Olson:

Exactly, exactly. It's trying it out, being willing to just really put yourself in the young person's shoes and just delay judgment and say, "Well let's try this on. This is what it feels like when I try it on." That really shows a young person that you are willing to see them as an equal and that's really what we're building towards, willing to see their ideas as equal.

Kari Robideau:

I really like this one because I think as an adult it's so ... We've had the experiences and we've seen the world and sometimes we feel like we know well that's not going to work right away. This is that no just step back and say, "Well let's talk this through," and perhaps as the adult will see it in another way and we're able to say, "Hey, maybe this will work."

Betsy Olson:

Exactly. It doesn't mean taking unnecessary risks with your program. It also doesn't mean setting your expertise completely to the side. It just means an interest and a willingness to try it out.

Kari Robideau:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Betsy Olson:

Yeah to truly be empathetic in a way that's very real.

Kari Robideau:

In your fifth, I'd like to move into that fifth point now. You cite some mentoring research as your basis for number five which is having durable and trustworthy relationships. I think what you just said drives us into that final point that you're sharing with us today, talk more about that and how that mentoring research plays into all of this.

Betsy Olson:

Yeah, so I think we all can think of small relationships that have had an impact on us throughout, maybe a teacher that you were with for a year or maybe even a substitute teacher who came in and said something that really impacted you and changed how you were thinking about something. As people come in and out of our lives, there are impacts that people can have even over a short period of time, but if you think about the people who have really had a long and impactful that really durable relationship are the ones that have the most punch, the most impact. That's really what many of us are striving for in our youth development programs are young people that get connected to our program and are really able to have that durable and trustworthy relationship with the staff in our program and with our program itself, the representatives of our program.

Betsy Olson:

Youth really need that in order to try out the really hard stuff, to feel safe enough to not just change a little, but develop and mentoring has been really good at testing out relationships and being really intentional because they are more one on one. They have been really a leader in research on adult-youth connections and relationships. Their research has definitely highlighted the importance of in order to make large changes in a young person life you really need to have adult support that lasts over time and that a young person can trust to be there and lean on.

Kari Robideau:

Even if you're not seeing your program as a mentoring program what we take from the success of mentoring programs is the relationships over time, the relationships that build and all of those other points that you've talked about today, they don't happen in a session or two.

Betsy Olson:

How well said, how well said Kari. That's exactly what I would say. Mentoring relationships are not the only impactful relationships that young people can have with adults. Even one adult who leads a larger group of young people can have a durable and trustworthy relationship with a young person and still encourage their development in a very similar way. Those long-term relationships are what really allow young people to change regardless of whether it's in a one on one or in a group or in a mentoring relationship or in a club leader relationship or in a troop leader relationship, all of those things can have this impact if they're built correctly.

Kari Robideau:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You have talked us through these kind of connections that youth and adults can have that make the greatest impacts. We know that. We know that if all of this is a part of your program that if we as adults are intentional about making these kinds of connections with the young people in our programs, there's going to be success there. Let's wrap around then to what we want to know today about measuring this. I'm sensing there's some observation, measuring observation. There's some qualitative pieces here. What would you say to someone who wants to know well how do I show the impact of these connections? How do I gather that information and how do I show the impact?

Betsy Olson:

Yeah, I think that the most important thing is to decide that this is something that you want to measure within your program. Because as we've said at the beginning this is often something that we just we know needs to happen for our programs to work so we work on it programmatically and we don't think

about communicating that impact. What I hope comes across in the blog and in this conversation is that our stakeholders probably really want to know about how many youth and adults are developing connections and that that ... Since it really does connect to research on how impactful it can be in young people's lives that data on how many youth and adult connections we are building in our program really can be impactful to our stakeholders to show the strength and the depth of our program.

Betsy Olson:

The first step is really deciding this is something that I want to communicate to people about the strength of my program. This is something that's strong and this is something that I know is having an impact on the young people in my program and I want to communicate that to my stakeholders. The next part is figuring out what piece of it you want to communicate, so is it the length of the connections that you have with adults and youth working together. Do you have one club leader working with youth for their entire career in your program? Because that would be an incredibly impactful number. Is that really where you feel like the strength of your youth adult connections lie or is it in that depth of the informal relationships that they're building that they have an informal relationship with many adults through your program? Or is it that you really are able to show that your program really tries on a young person's point of view?

Betsy Olson:

Those are the ... I think that the way that we have broken apart the youth-adult connections can help you think through which part of it you want to ... You feel is strongest in your program that you really want to communicate to your stakeholders. Then I think you're right Kari you can do it through observation. You can do it through interviews with young people. I think the pre, post test is maybe the least effective way to identify these more soft social emotional skills that we have been talking about, but open-ended questions, qualitative methods are really going to be your most successful way of ... and think about doing an interview both with your adults and with your youth. Do the adults see these things happening too and in what ways are they working towards it?

Betsy Olson:

Those are my general suggestions for how we can capture these pieces.

Kari Robideau:

Well Betsy I want to thank you for challenging us today to look intentionally at our youth and adult connections that we have in our programs and think about the reasons, the impacts and communicate that about our program to others. Thank you for this conversation today.

Betsy Olson:

Thank you Kari. It's exciting to talk about this topic.

Kari Robideau:

I can tell you have a lot of passion. The other thing I should mention is Betsy is very good at evaluation as well as years of experience as a youth worker. You bringing these two expertise areas of yours together today has been very interesting and I think gives us a lot to not only think about but do in our programs.

Betsy Olson:

Well thank you. I'm excited to get this conversation started and I'm interested in hearing what others have to say about the topic as well.

Kari Robideau:

For anybody out there listening, for more information and conversations on youth adult partnerships, please find us at our website at www.extension.umn.edu/youth. That's where you'll also discover other research, training and events and you can also check out our Minnesota 4-H program. Keep this conversation going by checking out our youth development insight blog, that's where you will find Betsy's blog from October 2016. You can keep those conversations going. Those never expire. You can always contribute to those, so if you would like to connect with Betsy on that, that'd be a great place to start. That will wrap up our podcast for today. My name is Kari Robideau from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.