

BUILDING VIBRANT YOUTH GROUPS

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Why are some youth groups more effective than others? What are the distinguishing characteristics of highly effective youth groups? Some research which I recently conducted to identify the characteristics of such youth groups sheds some light on why some groups are better for youth development than others. For a year, I intensively studied five youth groups with 163 members from three randomly selected Montana counties. I participated in all their meetings, interviewed 27 key youth members, 7 adult group leaders, 12 parents and many others. In addition, I administered several survey instruments to measure satisfaction and self-confidence. The results have much to say to those of us who work with youth programs.

In trying to capture the essence of effective youth groups, I have adopted to concept of vibrancy. I first came across this term in Mary Pipher's seminal book about adolescent girls called *Reviving Ophelia*. According to Pipher, vibrancy is a characteristic of people whose psychological health is such that "they accept themselves rather than waiting for others to accept them." The concept of vibrancy is similar in many ways to the concept of autonomy developed by Piaget and elaborated upon by Constance Kamii. Vibrant youth groups, then, are pulsating with life, vigor and activity and foster a sense of influence over life's events rather than submission to the will and whims of others.

Vibrant youth groups helps youth reach their potential and become self-directing, autonomous adults. Vibrant youth groups are those which have achieved a sense of genuineness and possess a drive toward the future--not in some smug way but rather in a way that they believe in themselves and have a sense of inner confidence. Vibrant youth groups believe in what they do, celebrate their commitments to action and express a sense of hope and courage for youth and their role in it.

After a year of research into the specific distinguishing features of effective youth groups, I have identified ten essential characteristics of vibrant youth groups.

- **Vibrant youth groups are more concerned with weaning, not winning.**

Kids are the focus of vibrant groups. Effective youth groups help youngsters develop a sense that they "own" the group. Young people in such programs, particularly older members, want to feel that the group is theirs and want adults to reduce their part in decision-making. Fun, learning, growth--these are the important concerns in vibrant groups. Training youth to become independent, thinking people are the goals of vibrant groups. Less effective groups were focused on winning and beating others. Winning

awards, competitions, contests, numbers of ribbons or trophies and "being the best" are the greatest concerns in less effective youth groups.

- **Vibrant youth groups change how they do things but not what they do.**

Truly effective youth groups are "firm yet flexible." Vibrant youth groups experiment with seating arrangements, try new activities, and experiment within a certain accepted structure and organizational culture. As one youth put it, "Our club is really original in our meetings."

At the same time, though, vibrant groups provide a consistency and reliability on which members could always count. Other research has indicated that moderate levels of structure are often characteristic of healthy groups. Vibrant groups meet regularly and consistently. Traditions, rituals, and ceremonies are used to foster a sense of continuity with the past and with an organization larger than the local group.

- **Vibrant youth groups work hard and play hard.**

A common theme was that groups were not meeting just to meet or just to conduct business. Vibrant youth groups provided a way for members to do things together in fun ways--from ski trips, to weekend outings to roller skating parties. But vibrant youth groups also worked hard. They were involved in community service activities and fundraisers that spanned a wide variety of interests--cleaning up a section of highway to providing programs at a local nursing home. Effective clubs get involved and help youth develop an ethic of service to their community. As one youth observed: "In our group, you've got a lot of responsibility, but the work is fun. It's hard work, but it's worth it."

- **Vibrant youth groups empower rather than embalm young people.**

Empowerment means to "authorize, delegate, give authority, enable or permit a person to do something. In short, vibrant youth groups enable youth do do what they are qualified to do. Rather than try and preserve young people in some child-like state, vibrant youth groups empower members to develop personal responsibility.

- **Vibrant youth groups communicate and listen.**

Members in the vibrant youth groups I studied frequently mentioned that they felt listened to, respect, and their input was genuinely valued. Vibrant youth groups make a conscious effort to involve members in discussions and deliberations. Effective youth groups also communicate well and listen to one another. Vibrant youth groups viewed communication and leadership as two-way processes in which adults and youth shared responsibilities. Young people in vibrant youth groups felt listened to and included. Again, one member commented: "If I wanted to recruit somebody who is older into our group, I would tell them how they get to voice their opinions in a meeting without being ridiculed or being told, 'That's dumb!' by other people."

- **Vibrant youth groups are able to achieve a balance between chaos and rigidity.**

Effective youth groups were able to achieve a certain harmony between too much chaos and too much rigidity-- ordered chaos, or as the new buzzword puts it--chaordic. When circumstances change, vibrant youth groups are able to adapt by making the necessary changes in rules, power structures or relations to move on. Ineffective groups are devastated by change and are so rigid as to be unable to fit in to new circumstances.

- **Vibrant youth groups affirm and support one another.**

From my research, it was evident that healthy youth groups celebrated the successes of all members and did not define themselves by any single accomplishment of the group or its members. Instead, they took pride in and celebrated the collective efforts of all members. One parent commented that their goal was "not necessarily to be the best but to do our best." Adult leaders in such groups encouraged youth with specific, positive feedback. Discouraging comments were rarely heard in vibrant youth groups whereas discounting and demeaning comments were voiced in control-oriented groups.

- **Vibrant youth groups use a mentoring system to socialize newcomers into the club environment.**

Helping new members feel welcomed into the group is a hallmark of vibrant youth groups. Such efforts help new members learn the language and traditions of the program or organization. Buddy systems were common in vibrant groups where older, more experienced members adopted younger members and served as practical role models for them.

- **Vibrant youth groups value and practice service to others.**

Although community service is a key value for many youth groups, vibrant groups actively practices and treasured community service. Community service was not viewed in these groups as just another requirement for a charter or as program expectation, but rather community service was valued as important in itself. Indeed, vibrant youth groups perceived community service as a part of the group's fundamental experiences. One member said: "Helping is the fun part."

- **Vibrant youth groups take time for training.**

Effective youth groups set aside time to train youth for the roles they will assume in adulthood. Adults saw as one of their primary responsibilities of training and development of young people to become involved as equal partners in the process of planning, implementation, and evaluation. This is a key characteristic of vibrancy. Research has demonstrated that well-functioning groups do not just happen. Rather, they result from consistent efforts to create, maintain, and (occasionally) restore conditions that foster effective learning.

- **The whole is greater than the sum of these elements.**

There is a synergy that develops in vibrant youth groups that creates an energy far in excess of the contributions of the ten previous elements. Effective youth groups are effective precisely because all the various parts work in harmony toward the larger goal of youth development. A synergistic relationship can be detected in vibrant groups and is evident in the way these groups approach tasks and activities. The synergy is reflected in the quality of their accomplishments as well.

In essence, then, it's not enough to possess just some of these characteristics to be truly vibrant. Instead, all these elements must be present, and all these elements work together to create a synergy that would be absent otherwise. There is a synergy in vibrant groups that creates an energy far in excess of the contributions of individual components. Effective youth programs that help youth develop life skills focus on developing these skills in an educational context. As Alfie Kohn observed, youth "acquire a sense of significance from doing significant things, from being active participants in their own education." Real success will mean doing a better job of listening to young people and sharing leadership with them.

From: Astroth, Kirk A. (1996). *Welcome to the Club: Education Where the Bell Never Rings*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Bozeman, MT: Montana State University.

Would you like to know how "vibrant" your own youth group is? A program self-assessment tool and scoring matrix is available for both volunteer leaders and professional staff (specify which instrument you would like). This instrument measures vibrancy in five broad domains: staff, programs, philosophy, culture and power structure. Write to Dr. Kirk Astroth, Montana State University, 210 Taylor Hall, Bozeman, MT 59717-0358 or call 406-994-3501. For a full explanation of the *Domains of Vibrancy*, refer to Astroth's 1997 article titled "Beyond Resiliency: Fostering Vibrancy in Youth Groups," *New Designs for Youth Development, 13(4): 5-11.*

In addition, you can examine some of the strategies for increasing the vibrancy of your youth group by clicking here: [Strategies for Improving Vibrancy](#)