Using a Code of Conduct with youth participants

TIP SHEET

What is a Code of Conduct?

A Code of Conduct, or Conduct Code, is a set of written program expectations that are agreed to by participants prior to the beginning of participation in a program. Participants acknowledge agreement by signing the Code of Conduct. Oftentimes, parents/guardians and program staff also sign the Code to acknowledge their roles in supporting successful program participation.

Why use a Code of Conduct?

Conduct Codes allow everyone to have a shared set of guidelines and expectations from the outset as to what is and isn't acceptable behavior in a program.

The Code provides:

...participants with a road map to success, including clear examples of what is expected and what is not allowed. Youth want to know the rules of the game- a code of conduct provides the rulebook.

...parents/guardians with information on their important role in supporting their child's success, and also reminders about important program policies. Busy parents/guardians need to know what is most important to pay attention to when it comes to their child's successful completion of the program.

...staff with a tool to refer back to when addressing issues as they arise; a Code of Conduct provides a roadmap for addressing problems objectively and consistently, by outlining pre-determined consequences of failing to follow agreed upon expectations. Remember, these tools are only as good as they are put into use; it is important to follow through when a participant or parent/guardian does not comply with agreed upon expectations.

Components of a Code of Conduct

A well-written Code of Conduct should include:

✓ A brief description of the purpose of the program
✓ Sections pertaining to participants, parents and guardians, and staff with required signatures from all three groups
✓ For participants- clear examples of behaviors you expect to see; also specific behaviors that are not allowed, including what behaviors may lead to dismissal from a program
✓ For parents and guardians- important program policies that need extra emphasis; also statements about how to support their child's success
✓ A stepwise process for addressing violations of the Code.
Incorporating a Code of Conduct into your program

These steps allow you to easily incorporate a code of conduct into your program:

1. Customize your Code so that it aligns in tone and substance with your program purpose, expectations and core values. Refer to sample Codes (appendix 1 & 2).
2. Incorporate Conduct Codes into your intake or orientation process.
   a. Have parents send signed Conduct Codes with other paperwork, such as health information forms, prior to program start. Note on signatures: embedding signatures within Conduct Codes allows for a higher likelihood that the content will be read.
3. Train staff on the Code.
   a. Discuss your expectations for how staff should address Code violations when they arise.
      i. Practice following through with stepwise corrective actions using scenarios. (examples in appendix 3)
      ii. Share your corrective action/behavior contract templates and discuss how to use them.
      iii. Clarify staff roles in taking action on behavior problems. For example, some staff may be empowered to de-escalate situations or provide verbal warnings. Sending a youth home, contacting a parent/guardian or deciding to dismiss a youth altogether may be decisions that only a program lead can make.
      iv. Describe internal documentation protocols for any incidents and/or actions taken by staff.
4. Seek ways to reinforce the key points of the codes throughout the program. Examples may include:
   a. (younger youth) using the themes *listen, communicate, participate, and respect*, create catchy mnemonics, songs or games to remind youth of what is meant by these. Also consider doing mini-lessons about these themes throughout the program to continually keep these on everyone's radar.
   b. (older youth) Begin your program by creating group agreements that allow youth to contribute their own expectations and values to a shared set of agreements. This can be used as a companion to the code of conduct.

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1-Sample participant code of conduct_elementary

Appendix 2-Sample participant code of conduct_teen

Appendix 3-Conduct code scenario examples