

The Texas Model: Youth Engagement

Regularly engaging with youth in a playful manner will build lasting trust-based connections that facilitate the development of secure attachment to the caregiver. Many of the youth we serve have sensory difficulties and must be given opportunities to engage the different sensory pathways in their brains and bodies in order to further the development of sensory integration.

Self-Regulation: Practice Makes Perfect

No one becomes a master of monitoring and balancing their energy level, emotional state, and behavior without practice. The activities in this toolkit are designed to begin building the infrastructure required to master self-regulation.

The benefits of self-regulation are numerous. In general, people who are adept at self-regulating tend to see the good in others, view challenges as opportunities, maintain open communication, are clear about their intentions, put forth their best effort, keep going through difficult times, remain flexible and adapt to situations, and can calm themselves when upset and cheer themselves when feeling down.

Just Breathe

Recent research indicates that just by manipulating our breath, we can alter how we feel, accounting for as much as a 40 percent variance in feelings of anger, fear, joy, and sadness. The breathing instructions used in the study? "Breathe and exhale slowly and deeply through the nose."

When the Going Gets Tough

Practicing youth engagement is not without its share of stress and challenges for both youth and staff. The daily challenges of Youth Development Coaches can be daunting, requiring you to wear many different hats to ensure the safety and well-being of our youth. Regulating activities are designed to assist in building proactive stress mastery skills for you, too!

Scheduling Activities

Consistently moving youth between dysregulated and regulated states is a delicate balancing act of both energy and emotional levels:

- High-effort activities should be followed by a regulating activity.
- Sedentary time should be followed by moderate- to high-effort activities.

Low Engine Rev Ups!

High-effort activities get the body moving and engage the competitive spirit. Numerous studies have shown that a lack of oxygenated-blood to the brain can negatively affect a person's mood, making exercise (while having fun) a great mood lifter! The suggested activities are grouped into 5 to 15 minute and 15+ minute activities. Group two or three 5 to 15 minute activities to customize!

Just Right Engine Regulators

These activities include some physical movement, such as casual walking or stretching with pro-social and interpersonal skill building. To assist you in selecting an activity, they are grouped into 5 to 15 minute, 15 to 30 minute, and 30+ minute activities.

High Engine Regulators

Build calming, focusing, and mindfulness skills. These activities include checking-in and mindful breathing. Kindness and gratitude activities are designed to intentionally direct thoughts and imagination to think positive thoughts and feelings.

Proprioceptive Regulation

Proprioception is closely related to the vestibular system, and together they help us to develop body awareness, inform our sense of posture and equilibrium (balance), and help us to stabilize our head and eyes while moving.

Bi-Lateral Brain Activation Activities

Engaging in bi-lateral movements increases the hemispheric connections in the brain allowing the left and right hemispheres to communicate with one another more easily and effectively. This will increase the individual's ability to understand the sensory information they are receiving and more quickly make positive choices regarding the information received.

Coaching Assists

In the words of Vince Lombardi, "Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence." This section contains common challenges with youth and ideas to tackle those obstacles.

Art is Therapy

Art is a great therapeutic approach to keep stress levels low and contentedness high. Artistic talent isn't a requirement to enjoy its many benefits, after all the goal is not to create a masterpiece but to express oneself freely through art; the artistic results are secondary to the emotional benefits.

Make Every Activity An Engaging One!

Ask questions, start discussions, and encourage dialog after every activity:

- If the activity was challenging, ask why it was a challenge.
- If the activity was a team activity, ask the teams:
 - What went right? What went wrong?
 - Was it hard to communicate as a team? Why or why not?
 - What obstacles did your team have to overcome? How did you overcome those obstacles?

Coaching Tips

- Thoroughly read and understand each activity prior to beginning an activity or game.
- Use your regular speaking voice and your own words to guide participants through activities.
- When facilitating activities for youth, it is common to encounter reluctance and rebelliousness when it comes to completing a task. By framing activities as a game or competition, you ignite their competitive spirit.
- Some activities may call for participants to close their eyes. Never have them close their eyes unless/until they are comfortable.

- If you are conducting a competitive team building activity, be sure to clearly communicate the rules and safety considerations of the activity. Be vigilant during the game or activity and watch out for the safety of the participants.
- Be you, be inclusive, use humor, allow for spontaneity, and have some fun!

Four at the Door

An easy way to engage youth is by standing at the door and greeting them using the following suggested points:

- *Name to Name:* Greet each youth using their name.
- *Eye to Eye:* Our eyes are a way of building a connection with another person. They reflect our sincerity, integrity and comfort. Be intentional and role model what it looks like to make good eye contact with those around you.
- *Hand to Hand:* Human beings were built to be relational. Belonging is all about the relationships we build. Find some form of appropriate human contact and intentionally connect with others. This could be a handshake, fist bump, hi-five or some other form of creative hand to hand greeting.
- *Heart to Heart:* Mention something to the youth about their world. For example, last night's basketball game or anything that is of interest to the youth that shows that they are known and matter.