

Enhancing programs by using an asset-building lens

“Asset building is not a program. It merely lifts up positive aspects of our own programs, to take them from good to great.” (Norris Lineweaver)

Below are some things learned from Halton professionals who are enhancing their programs by looking through an asset-building lens.

Create a “Help Yourself” basket where you work – This is for people who may be in need of some basic things; put it beside the door so they can take something on their way out without anyone noticing. Engage your community to keep it full of interesting and/or gently used things.

Refresh letters that go home to parents/caregivers from deficit language to asset-rich language. For example, change the wording from, “We regret to inform you that Johnny has been suspended from school for five days for smoking marijuana on school property,” to something like, “Parenting teens isn’t always easy and we are here to help you. Johnny has been found using marijuana on school property. Although taking some risks is normal during adolescence, we are concerned about the choices that Johnny is making. During his suspension, we would like to invite you to a meeting where we can discuss how to better support Johnny in the future.”

Use parent volunteers in the classroom in leadership roles. For example, one childcare center invited a parent to present the solar system to the class. Her child had been begging to learn about this and the teachers didn’t have time to prepare something new. The parent did an outstanding job, with the help of her daughter. The kids were completely engaged with the “new teacher” and the teachers had a new resource that they could use again and again.

Greet children and youth first, then their parents. As one elementary school principal said, “This conveys a message that your program is a child centered place.”

Communicate to children and youth that you are proud of them in front of their families.

Catch them doing it right. Give positive tickets, coupons or notes when children and youth are demonstrating positive values and behaviors. Better yet, engage youth in giving out positive tickets to children.

Give cameras to children. Encourage them to take pictures of things that are important to them. Print them, celebrate them and use them in creative ways.

Consider that all of a child’s physical needs must be met before they can learn. Consider safety, hunger, bathroom breaks, elevated stress levels, etc. **Spend a few minutes checking in** with kids, with this in mind, before your program starts.

When hiring staff, **ask children and youth what characteristics would be important for the new hire** to demonstrate. Include those characteristics in your job posting and interview questions.

Teach youth about assets and empower them to work with children to increase assets for both.

Make or review rules/policies by asking, “What message is this sending to the kids?” For example, having the same dismissal procedure for grade 1s and grade 8s makes it easier for staff to manage but are we developing competencies in and empowering our grade 8s?

Ask the kids how your program could spend extra money. A school found \$1,000 in their school council budget that they didn’t know was there and instead of quickly spending it on what the admin wanted, they asked their graduating class how they thought it should be spent. The outcome was very different.

Give children and youth the opportunity to evaluate you and/or the program. A kindergarten class asks the kids at the end of each day, “What was your favorite part of the day today?” The teacher gets a sense of how her class and individual kids like to learn.

Reach out to your community to enhance everything that you do. For example, one of our elementary school teachers asked a community nutritionist to come to her class and present. A parent who is a martial artist taught staff about self-defense. A grandparent came in to talk about her journey across the ocean to make a better life here in Canada. A family donated an extra bike that they had sitting around in the garage. Everyone wins – especially the kids.

Give the kids a chance to celebrate you. Facilitate a way that they can write you a thank-you letter, express themselves on video, speak at your AGM/staff meeting, draw their favorite activity with you, etc. Too often we don’t do this because it sounds self-serving; however, it is an awesome way for kids to give back and supports development in social competencies and positive values. Plus, it fills our bucket, too.

Support the bond between parents and kids. Because we know how important this is, give parents positive feedback whenever possible. Offer activities for parents and kids to have fun. Contact parents regularly with good news, especially when there is bad news. Normalize their child’s behavior and help them strategize. Be creative and intentional about sending work home. A grade 4 teacher poses one question at the end of each week for the kids to ask their parents and then they discuss it on Monday morning. For example, “What books do you remember reading when you were my age?”

Develop ways to keep the kids connected to you. Because the relationships we develop with kids are so important, consider ways to keep kids connected once your program is done. Consider creating volunteer positions, or a youth committee, or an email that goes out once a month to youth who want to stay in touch.

Increase the number of adults available to kids. More adults equals increased sense of safety, more individualized time, increased relationships for kids. Think about engaging seniors, older students, parent volunteers, co-op placements, and student interns. Introduce your group to another professional by switching spots for a day.

Find meaningful ways for kids to have a voice. Kids are wise and know what is important to them. Consider ways to elevate their voice in community. Ask them to present to parents, at AGMs, to staff, etc. about matters that are important to them. Help them write letters to the editor. One class did a poster to the mayor depicting what an ideal town would look like to them. A high school hosted an all-candidates meeting during elections, and the youth asked the questions.