

# SUMMER LEARNING INTERACTION AND ENGAGEMENT

Summer programs can help children and youth develop both academic and social skills that will help them be successful in school and life. However, to achieve these results, providers need to deliver programs that offer opportunities for high-quality experiences and positive connections with peers and adults.

This brief describes two elements that are necessary for creating summer programs that will contribute to children's development and have them wanting to return year after year. The first is **interaction**, which describes the ways that children relate to and work with other children in the program, as well as with program staff. The second element is **engagement**. This refers to how children are involved in planning, participating in and reflecting on the activities and projects available to them during the summer program.

Examples from high-quality programs across the country are also featured throughout the brief to further illustrate practices that support students' positive interaction and engagement in summer programs.



PARKS & PEOPLE FOUNDATION | BALTIMORE, MD

## Interaction

Interacting through cooperative learning and leadership activities develops youth's ability to relate to and work with others. Programs can provide opportunities for youth to interact with their peers and adults during summer programs by:

- » creating a sense of belonging;
- » allowing children and youth to collaborate with others and take on leadership roles; and
- » allowing children and youth to work as partners with adults.

## Belonging

If children and youth do not feel a caring connection to the adults or participants in a summer camp or program, then they will not want to come back every day or actively participate in the learning and enrichment opportunities. Children develop a sense of belonging when they feel they are part of something special and are comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas with others.

Program leaders and staff members can support feelings of belonging through "ice-breakers" and structured get-to-know-you activities in which children learn about each other and find out what they have in common. Having group mottos or routines can also help children feel attached to their peers in the group. For example, every time children line up to transition from one activity to another, they can make a fist pump and shout in unison "onward to excellence!"

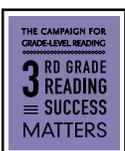
It is important, however, that such routines or games are a consistent and authentic part of the daily program experience, and that mottos and value statements are not empty words. Friendships, moods and social groups can change quickly among children and youth, so it is important for staff members to return to these team-building activities and reinforce a positive culture throughout the program.

## Assessing Program Quality

To assist in measuring the level of interaction and engagement in program, the Summer Learning Program Quality Assessment (SLPQA) is a tool designed to measure staff practices and the experiences of children and youth in summer programs. It can be used as a self-assessment or by an outside observer. The observation tool covers the following dimensions: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. It also assesses programs on giving youth a voice in governance and professional learning opportunities for staff members.

[Learn more here.](#)

SUMMER LEARNING | **Program Quality Intervention**



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## Strategies for increasing belonging in your program

- » **Create avenues for community building** through icebreakers, organized introductions, and other team-building activities.
- » **Be involved and mindful** of issues of power, youth comfort levels, the experiences of new members, and group stage development.
- » **Encourage full engagement** of activities and conversations you lead, and support youth in fostering a spirit of inclusivity among their peers.
- » **Promote respect for diversity.**



AIM HIGH | CALIFORNIA

### Spotlight on: Aim High

**Aim High is a summer enrichment program serving more than 2,000 students from low-income neighborhoods in northern California. As part of weekly advisory periods for groups of about 10 students, Community Building Circles are held to give children opportunities to talk about their feelings and get to know each other. Agreements are made among the students so that everyone will feel safe to participate, and a “talking piece” is passed around to indicate whose turn it is to talk. Questions to get the conversation started might include, “What color is your mood right now,” or “If you were a weather pattern, what would it be?” And in discussions about core values, students might talk about a new opportunity they’ve had in the past year or someone they respect and why. At first, the facilitator, or Circle Keeper, is a teacher, but students take on that role as they become comfortable with the process.**

## Collaboration and Leadership

Interaction takes place when children have a job to do together, and each child has a unique contribution to make to a finished project or presentation. This type of collaboration is increasingly part of students’ learning experiences in school and this practice can benefit them outside of school well. Children learn to consider others’ perspectives and to take responsibility for their part of the project. Producing a play is one example of giving students interdependent roles. Some students might be the actors, while others might be sewing costumes, building sets or even handling the lighting and sound. Each child is needed for the final production to be a success.

When children collaborate, they are learning important social skills such listening without interrupting, contributing to the discussion and taking turns. Staff members should organize children into groups and monitor their interaction to make sure those who are more naturally outgoing do not dominate the discussion.

When children demonstrate or explain their work, or help their peers, they are developing leadership skills. Older students can share their knowledge and experience with younger participants, and a child who attended the program the previous year can help guide newcomers. These opportunities to lead and explain can build children’s confidence and their connection to the group. It is important that all participants get the opportunity to lead an activity or a discussion, and staff members can organize groups so that everyone has a chance to be a leader.



FRESNO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION



## Strategies for increasing collaboration and leadership in your program

- » **Create multiple opportunities for group work** so youth can experience a wide range of group formations and peers.
- » **Establish clear goals**, expectations, and roles, soliciting input from youth when possible.
- » **Promote collaboration** so youth can take on interdependent roles and have opportunities to practice group-process skills.
- » **Provide leadership opportunities for all youth**, not just the presumed leaders.

## Partnering with Adults

Working alongside adults helps young people learn that they have valuable contributions to make to the group and that their skills and opinions are important. Interacting with program leaders will benefit children as they participate as members of their community. Summer programs are likely to provide youth with more opportunities to partner with adults than they would have in school.

Program leaders are more likely to turn some responsibilities over to older students in a program, but younger students are also capable of working as partners with adults by being allowed to have input into certain aspects of the program. Staff members can share responsibility with youth by letting them choose discussion topics, suggest group norms, or make decisions about how to present what they are learning. Program staff, however, often need guidance in how to achieve this balance of power and set appropriate limits so the overall learning goals of the program are still met.

Interaction increases between children and adults when the adults participate in activities and lessons with students. Effective summer program staff members or volunteers do not just sit behind a desk and give instructions. They actively take part in students' projects and games to model skills and contribute to a positive environment. Finally, sharing responsibilities for the program with youth teaches them accountability. They learn that others are counting on them to complete the tasks they agreed to do and to uphold behavior expectations for the group. Staff members also adhere to the same expectations to demonstrate mutual accountability. To help younger students understand accountability, a "contract" can be signed at the beginning of the program and used as a reminder of the agreement.

Overall, staff members and other adults serve as positive examples of emotional regulation and provide children with clear limits, guidance and constructive feedback in a warm and caring manner.



### Strategies for increasing adult-youth partnerships

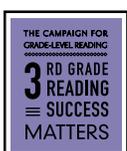
- » Share control of most activities with youth, providing guidance and facilitation while retaining overall responsibility.
- » Remain actively involved in most activities with youth.
- » Youth and adults should hold each other accountable for positive behavior expectations and consequences.



GRADUATE TACOMA

### Spotlight on: Turn the Page KC

Turn the Page KC was launched by Kansas City, Mo., Mayor Sly James to improve early reading performance in the early grades. As part of the initiative, adult tutors are hired and trained to work on reading skills with children over the summer. In schools across the city, AmeriCorps VISTAs serve as positive role models and foster a love of reading. "When I walked in every day there was a kid at the door saying, 'Ms. Brown's here!'" says one tutor. "They get so excited. We allowed them to choose their own books and they loved going to the library. There is a big push to have them reading on their level, but there comes a time when you have to say, 'I know you like Spiderman, so let's read it!' That way the kid can say they read it and get excited about it. Seeing that one kid that finally gets it is everything."



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## Engagement

High-quality summer programs do more than enrich students' lives while they are in the program; they also contribute to students' ongoing development and equip them with skills they will use throughout their lives. Summer programs accomplish this by using a "plan-do-review" cycle that involves students in all phases of their learning. Programs can help youth learn and grow by:

- » providing opportunities for **planning, choice, and reflection**;
- » supporting the development of academic mindsets and **learning strategies**; and
- » supporting youth in reflecting and developing **higher order thinking** skills.

## Planning, choice, and reflection

High-quality summer programs engage children and youth in their learning by inviting them to think about what they want to accomplish and how they want to get it done. The more opportunities that children and youth get to plan the details of a project or activity, the better they will get at organizing their time and setting realistic goals. Youth are engaged when they have opportunities to make choices about the various aspects of a project, such as the materials they might use, what they want to grow in a garden or the photos they want to use in a slideshow from their field trip. Program leaders should also give youth a say in how they complete their project.

Finally, youth gain from their summer program experiences when they have a chance to think about the activities they did and consider what they gained from the work. Journals and group discussions are two ways that students can share what they learned and think about what they might change if they could repeat the project. Staff members can also seek students' feedback throughout the program, both through informal conversations and through more structured ways, such as feedback forms.



### Strategies for increasing planning, choice, and reflection

- » **Set aside explicit, dedicated time** for planning and reflection in activities.
- » **Give youth tools and activities** to help structure their planning and reflection time.
- » **Provide youth opportunities to make choices that are relevant and meaningful to them**, and adult support in make those choices.



AIM HIGH

### Spotlight on: Job Experience and Training (JET)

**Job Experience and Training (JET)** is an eight-week, work-based learning program in which children and teens partner with professionals working in Five Rivers Metro Parks facilities in Dayton, Ohio. All participants keep a self-directed learning journal in which they write about the conservation and other park-related work they are doing. They reflect on what they like, what they do not like and what they hope to gain from their summer experience. They learn to interview people in the parks and recreation field and discuss what they have learned with others in the group. Youth who have already participated for a couple summers can also contribute to an internal blog in which they share their thoughts and suggestions with peers and program leaders. Youth are encouraged to spend time on their journal entries and not just complete them right before the group gets together to share.



JOB EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING (JET) | OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

## Learning strategies

Summer programs are different from the school year, but students can still pick up strategies and techniques that will help them be more successful academically. Program leaders should guide youth in finding the strategies that work best for individual students and encourage them along the way. Staff members can ask questions to encourage students to problem-solve and correct mistakes. They can suggest different learning strategies, listen for ideas from students, and recognize students for persevering to complete a challenging task. These practices help children realize that they are in control of their success and that they can learn how to learn. .



### Strategies to increase learning

» **Emphasize learning strategies** so youth become aware of how they are learning, not just what they are learning.

» **Attribute youth success to effort, strategy, practice or persistence** whenever possible.

#### Spotlight on: Miracle Makers

East End Community Services runs **Miracle Makers**, a maker-themed summer learning program serving children from low-income families in Dayton, Ohio. As part of the six-week session, held at Ruskin School, participants have several “spark” classes from which to choose, such as engineering, forensic science, and culinary arts. Drawing on academic knowledge, the students contribute to a final project in which they integrate all that they have learned and share it with a variety of audiences. In a documentary film project, for example, the students interviewed for specific roles, such as producer, videographer and editor. When the film was complete, they held screenings for community groups. “They’re documenting and explaining their thought process,” says Ellen Mays, who leads the program. “It’s not just kids teaching other kids; it’s about kids teaching the community.”

## Conclusion

Summer programs have an opportunity to extend children’s learning in ways that are different from what students experience during the school year. They create a sense of community by giving youth multiple ways to interact with each other and provide an engaging environment in which students can learn and apply new skills.



MIRACLE MAKERS | DAYTON, OH

## Higher Order Thinking

When summer program staff create a positive and supportive culture, children and youth feel safe to take risks and less concerned that something they say will be wrong. Staff members should encourage youth to go beyond giving simple answers and to analyze, make predictions and to look at topics in new ways. Staff members can inspire students to use these higher order thinking skills by asking open-ended questions that invite students to apply what they have already learned to new problems and situations. This helps students connect the dots between what they already know and what they hope to learn. Staff members should encourage children to be curious about a topic and creative in solving problems. Engagement increases when children feel that their ideas are valued and that they have contributed to others’ learning.



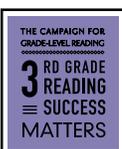
### Strategies for increasing higher order thinking

» **Encourage youth to deepen or extend their knowledge** by asking “why” questions.

» **Help student make connections** to previous knowledge, experiences, and interests by asking questions about “what else”.



MIRACLE MAKERS



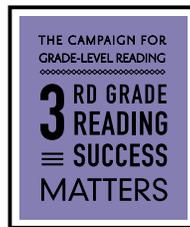
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### **About the National Summer Learning Association**

The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is the only national nonprofit exclusively focused on closing the achievement gap by increasing access to high-quality summer learning opportunities. NSLA recognizes and disseminates what works, offers expertise and support for programs and communities, and advocates for summer learning as a solution for equity and excellence in education. NSLA's work is driven by the belief that all children and youth deserve high-quality summer learning experiences that will help them succeed in college, career, and life.

[www.summerlearning.org](http://www.summerlearning.org)



### **About the Campaign for Grade-level Reading**

The Campaign for Grade-level Reading is a collaborative effort by foundations, nonprofit partners, business leaders, government agencies, states and communities across the nation to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship. The Campaign focuses on an important predictor of school success and high school graduation—grade-level reading by the end of third grade.

[www.gradelevelreading.net](http://www.gradelevelreading.net)