Program Options for Middle School Youth

photo by Sarah E. Round

A popular 1980s television series, "The Wonder Years," dramatized the experiences of Kevin Arnold, a fictional middleschool- ager, and his two-parent family. Set in the turbulent 1960s, the series introduced Kevin at the age of 12 and focused on his youthful discoveries about friendship, responsibility, and the mysteries of growing up.

The TV series may be over, but the wonder years are just beginning for thousands of New Jersey school-agers. Instead of the social upheavals of the 1960s, today's wonder-years kids have twenty-first-century interests, influences, and social challenges awaiting them beyond the classroom walls. Whatever the era, adolescent changes in body and mind are about to transform them in ways never imagined. Is it any wonder that school-age care programs designed for younger children just don't seem to attract the wonder-years set?

To meet the challenge, New Jersey school-age program providers and directors can build an entirely new tier of service. They can develop physical and social environments specifically designed for and suited to older children. This paper is intended to guide you in exploring ways to meet the challenge.

Characteristics of Middle School Youth

Prepubescence and adolescence puts kids through some pretty dramatic changes. Although we've all survived them, it's not easy to remember how those changes affected us. To make a school-age program meaningful for older children, program designers and planners have put themselves in touch with the effects of these changes. Use your own memories and experiences to add to the following brief lists.

Physical Development

• physical awkwardness, resulting from sporadic growth spurts
• radical shifts in energy and mood, from highly active to lethargic
• hormonal changes, including onset of puberty, sexual curiosity and exploration

Social and Emotional Outlook

• concern with self-definition and connectedness to others
• preoccupation with general appearance of clothing, hair, complexion
• peer group pressure, competing with adult-derived values and behavior
• hero worship of sports professionals, television performers, high-profile leaders

Cognitive Factors

• abstract thinking, leading to a more complex decision-making process
• hunger for practical information, to use as "facts" in decisions and conversation
• intensification of interests, leading to self-esteem through particular skills and knowledge

Developing Service for Children 10 and Older

Many current providers of school-age care want to develop services for older children but don't know how to go about doing so. The luxury of another space simply isn't available, and staff are at a loss as to what to do with older kids.

How, then, can one create distinctive program service for older children? Your chances for success increase tremendously when you treat the brand-new service as just that—brand new. And that means making a brand-new plan.

PLANNING:
A Sense of Ownership

Expert consultants, how-to books, and technical assistance papers can offer ideas, but don't rely solely on them. The best of these resources say that programs must be rooted in the community and shaped by local knowledge. Cookie-cutter approaches won't work when it comes to competing with such powerful influences as television,

shopping malls, and the homes of other kids.

For-profit businesses use market research and focus groups. So can you. Treat older children like the decision-makers they are. Solicit their input and participation in planning the new service. Give them the opportunity to get involved in ordering and purchasing equipment. Put design decisions within their reach. Give children as well as their parents some personal reasons to care about the program's location, look, and feel. In this regard, successful programs:

• demonstrate flexibility and adapt to accommodate children's current interests

• maximize relaxed opportunities for casual socializing

• teach respect for self and others

• build both openness and unity into decisions that affect the group

• create opportunities for kids to speak in private—with each other and with staff

• emphasize social values and family responsive program policies, as well as activities

LOCATION:
The Clubhouse Principle

Inevitably, a formal center-based program for older school-agers runs up against competition from a wide variety of other informal social groupings. Any informal group consisting primarily of school-agers seeks a separate physical space—perhaps a tree house, a basement, or a garage—as a base of operations. This space becomes the "home base," the place to share experiences with other group members.

To compete successfully, a school-age care program will define itself as a place where older children can also experience peer acceptance and social stability. That definition can't exist solely on paper. Advertising "a fun place to go after school" may get kids to give your program a try, but it won't keep them coming unless it's true. Clearly, the feeling of a program's physical quarters, its home base, will affect a program's chance for success.

You can maximize your chance for success by securing rooms, buildings, and outdoor areas specifically for older

children. While shared spaces may work well enough with less-demanding younger children, older children have an increased desire to personalize their surroundings. In a separate, dedicated area, you and the older school-agers can equip and decorate without having to worry about misuse by younger children. Strive to secure a comfortable location, restricted only by health factors, basic safety, structural integrity, and building codes.

In general-interest programs, natural furnishings contribute a great deal to older children's sense of ownership. After all, how can hard plastic chairs, cafeteria benches and tables, and cold linoleum floors make "a fun place to go after school"? Think in terms of a comfy sofa, big floor pillows, potted plants, wall posters, and whatever else young people might put in a clubhouse of their own.

A catchy name also helps establish the autonomy of an older children's program. Few 9-year-olds or 10-year-olds, and no self-respecting 12-year-old wants anything to do with something called day care or child care. Although you may use whatever name makes sense for legal documents, bring in the kids to help decide on your doing-business-as (dba) name, the one you'll use for general identification. Around the nation, programs with dba names chosen by kids— Club Mid, Funktion Junktion, Hot Shots, and Wise Guys— have attracted children's interest and support.

In addition:

• Permit access to appropriate equipment and materials. Especially in mixed-age programs, provide older children with shelves or storage areas for "their stuff" alone.

• Offer semiprivate activity areas, monitored by staff only at intervals. Use of dividers or even draperies can help provide this sense of special space.

STAFFING:

Personality Plus

When recruiting staff for your new service, look for people who aren't afraid of more independent children, people who won't resort to threats as a first response. Your top candidates won't be easily intimidated by youthful challenges to their authority. The best group leaders command respect without threats and

without shouting. They accomplish this through a combination of personal qualities that nearly every child can appreciate, including the traits listed below.

Emotional maturity - Dealing with tough issues such as alcoholism, drug use, teenage pregnancy, and gang activity comes with the territory. Potential staff will benefit from

Real-world presence – In the wonder years, children begin crafting socialized responses, begin forming personal respect for adults who can achieve something they admire. Someone who has no visible social role other than as "teacher" or "staff" won't have the best chance of gaining older children's trust or respect.

Chances are that some of your recruits will have hobbies, social connections, and personal goals in the local community that go beyond the role of school-age program group leader. Someone who plays guitar at the neighborhood bistro, who shows her craftwood at the mall, or who assistant-coaches in a basketball league has an ongoing presence in the community-at-large and therefore has much better hope for respect from older kids. In programs for older school-age children, successful group leaders also:

·   Defuse potentially explosive situations

·   Sensitively explore children's irrational sense of failure and incompetence

·   Comfortably allow children to make and carry out decisions on their own

·   Always keep a sense of humor

ACTIVITIES:

A Whole New Ball Game

Boredom is the most common factor affecting the enrollment and discipline of older children in out-of-school programs. Children age 10 and older strive for more advanced competencies, skill development, social interaction. A steady diet of homework, freeze tag, and crayon coloring contests just won't fit the bill.

"These kids won't settle for warmed-over day care activities. Getting used to the older kids means getting used to letting them tell you what they want to

2

do – and when they want to do it. It means going with the flow – letting the kids choose what they want to do."

Who knows better what kids might enjoy than the kids themselves? Parents and experienced staff agree that older children sometimes have the best ideas about what to do. Ask them. They frequently make specific, appropriate suggestions for individuals and group activities.

" They want to be challenged by innovative, exciting, and popular activities. It means stretching yourself. It also means getting used to a lot higher noise and activity level!"

Successful programs for older children:
- Support long-term projects relevant to the children's interests. Specialized training, particularly if their previous experience has been limited to early-childhood settings. However, no one can be trained to possess the emotional maturity called for by older children's legitimate concerns. Look for this quality from the outset.

Authentic cultural awareness - For role models, children tend to choose adults who mirror the qualities they wish to find in themselves. Discipline can become troublesome when you put children with an adult who possesses none of the cultural verbal, or body-language skills they respect. Hire people with whom children can identify naturally.

- incorporate opportunities for personal expression through theater, dance, and fine arts
- ensure that young people find some challenge in sports, games, and intellectual activities
- encourage community service such as neighborhood cleanup or mentoring
- sponsor frequent trips outside the center to places like a skating rink or beach
- link with other programs for intramural sports, social opportunities, and resources
- avoid activities involving television, gender stereotypes, and games of destruction

Winning Ideas for Middle School Youth

Create a Special place for the older children:

- · Set aside an area just for them.
- · Help organize specific-interest "clubs".
- · Assign a group leader (adult).
- · Develop up-to-date snack and meal plans.

Invite responsible assistance from older children:

- · Have them help plan and cook snacks and meals.
- · Get their input on scheduling homework, sports, and other activities.
- · Let them decorate bulletin boards and halls.
- · Authorize them to be informal "leaders" of younger children's groups.

Orient written activity plans around older children's choices:

- · Use weekly or biweekly charts, not forced hourly rotation.
- · Try a multiweek cycle system for theme activities.
- · Organize intersite round-robin tournaments.

Schedule activities related to social development

- · Personal growth workshops
- · Community or neighborhood projects
- · Discussion groups with local artists, celebrities and business people
- · Cooperative programs through local colleges
- · Computer labs or internet chat
- · Mixed-gender activities

Support staff in meeting challenges of older children:

- · Cast staff as facilitators who encourage children to make responsible choices.
- · Engage staff at regular intervals to solve problems and generate new ideas.
- · Encourage staff to express personal views and relate experiences
- · Supply staff with appropriate materials and equipment

Work with parents or guardians:

- · Negotiate realistic goals for homework, sports and other activities.
- · Negotiate part-time program attendance schedules and fees.
- · Make it possible for children to check in by phone with parents or guardians.
- · Facilitate parent education and parent involvement.

Program Spotlight

Although programs for older school-age children are a relatively recent development in the child care field, they have grown rapidly in numbers, popularity, and diversity. Their presence gives practical dimension to the issues and elements discussed in this paper. The following capsule descriptions illustrate ways in which school-age providers in New Jersey meet the challenge of serving children in the wonder years.

Summer Enrichment Program

The West Windsor—Plainsboro Community Education Program runs a summer enrichment program that operates full days, five days per week, and offers the children choices of activity areas such as cooking, video, sports, or computers for morning and afternoon blocks of time. The program, paid for through parent fees, runs for four two-week sessions.

Teen Program

In Paterson, the Father English Community Center has added a program after school for young people ages 12 to 15, which provides opportunities for them to help others and have fun in a safe, healthy environment. Weekly activities outside the center give them the opportunity to visit nearby places such as colleges and museums, while daily activities, such as helping with snacks and meals for the younger children, give them a stronger sense of responsibility and independence. Group meetings and discussions focus on topics of interest and importance to youth, and a life skills program provides opportunities to improve knowledge of health and safety, job interview techniques, and other important personal skills.

Community Involvement

The South Brunswick Community Education Before and After School Program integrates service to the community and family involvement through student-written newsletters, family holiday celebrations, and student participation in community projects. Students have raked leaves for seniors, collected household items for a battered-family shelter, and run a carwash to raise money for the Brigantine Mammal Life Study Center. The program also collaborates with high school activity clubs and area agencies and businesses. One group of children visited a local TV studio and produced a short show. Community groups and organizations such as drug prevention agencies visit to share their programs.

Info Box

A New Way to Think of the Middle-School Program

Imagine that an after-school program for middle schoolers looks like a three dimensional chessboard. The top board is where decisions are made about what kinds of activities will be offered; the middle board is where social values and character building happen by means of the activities; the bottom board is the care structure dimension- that is, the policies, procedures, and routines of the program, and the contractual obligations between the provider and the families.

Imagine that each chessboard has squares that represent different options in a particular dimension. Each board can be rotated so that a particular activity can be lined up with a specific group of values, which in turn can be lined up over a particular care structure. The "program configuration" could then be found by putting a pick-up stick through all three boards, resulting in a specific combination of activity, values, and type of care structure.

This conceptual framework, designed by the Work/Family Directions Middle School Design Team, may help you think creatively about programming for older children.

photo by Diane Genco

4