

# Practices To Keep In After-School and Youth Programs



## The Social Group Work Approach: Promoting Individual Growth and Community Building





*Youth Development Institute*

**A Program of the Tides Center**

1440 Broadway, Suite 1601

New York, NY 10018

(646) 943-8820

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

Established in 1991 in New York City, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) is one of a growing number of intermediary organizations throughout the United States that seek to create a cohesive community infrastructure to support the positive development of youth. YDI approaches its work with an understanding of and a respect for the complexities of young people's lives and the critical role of youth-serving organizations in supporting young people's growth and development.

YDI's mission is to increase the capacity of communities to support the development of young people. YDI provides technical assistance, conducts research, and assists policy-makers in developing more effective approaches to support and offer opportunities to young people. At the core of YDI's work is a research-based approach to youth development. This work is asset-based in focusing on the strengths of young people, organizations and their staff. It seeks to bring together all of the resources in the lives of young people—school, community, and family—to build coherent and positive environments. The youth development framework identifies five principles that have been found to be present when youth, especially those with significant obstacles in their lives, achieve successful adulthood:

- Close relationships with adults
- High expectations
- Engaging activities
- Opportunities for contribution
- Continuity of adult supports over time

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) also strengthens non-profit organizations and public agencies and builds programs that address gaps in services, in New York City and nationally. It provides training and on-site technical assistance, conducts research, develops practice and policy innovations, and supports advocacy. This work enables organizations and agencies to apply the most promising lessons from research and practice so that they operate efficiently and the young people they serve grow and develop through powerful, sustained, and joyful experiences. YDI helps organizations to design their programs based on sound knowledge about what works and provides their leaders and staff with the information and skills to implement these strategies effectively. YDI addresses gaps in youth services by developing new programs and policies in areas and for populations that are addressed inadequately.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*The Social Group Work Approach* was researched and written by **Helene Onserud, Julie Stein Brockway**, and **Kristie Mancell** from the Center for Family Life with the assistance of **Michael Chavez Reilly**, a consultant to the Youth Development Institute.

We are grateful to The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Annie E. Casey Foundation for supporting YDI's Beacons National Strategy. *Practices to Keep In After-School and Youth Programs* is a product of this effort.

The authors wish to thank the following people who contributed their time and wisdom to this report:

*Center for Family Life Beacon Program at P.S. 1:*

**Kristie Mancell**, Assistant Director

**Shira Sameroff**, Lower Camp Director

**Danny Garcia**, CIT Coordinator

**David Garcia**, Youth Coordinator

All other Beacon staff and participants who allowed us to observe their work

*Youth Development Institute:*

**Peter Kleinbard**, Executive Director

**Sarah Zeller-Berkman**, Beacons National Strategy Director

**TJ Volonis**, Executive Assistant

**Ellen Wahl** for her work on the introduction

Special thanks to **Walis Johnson**, Former Director of Beacons National Strategy

And the rest of the staff of the Youth Development Institute

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# 1

Introduction

# 1. INTRODUCTION

*Practices to Keep In After-School and Youth Programs* is a series of documentation reports that highlight successful approaches in Beacons, which are community centers in school buildings that combine youth and community development to support young people, families, and neighborhoods. Developed for Beacons, these approaches are also widely used in the expanding world of After-School and Youth Programs.

The reports demonstrate how local ingenuity applied to key issues over time can leverage individual, neighborhood, and policy change. They contain ideas for practitioners to adapt to their own programs and for policymakers who seek practical responses to critical concerns—literacy and academic support for youth, preparation for work and participation in the labor force, strengthening families and preventing foster care placement, and creating opportunities to play important roles that strengthen the fabric of community social organization.

## *The Beacons Movement and After-School Programming*

Beacons were first established in New York City in 1991 as part of the Safe Cities Safe Streets program. Located in schools and operated by community-based organizations with core funding provided by New York City, the Beacons represent an innovative collaboration between the public and non-profit sectors to turn the school building into a true public resource. Today, more than 100 Beacons in five cities offer education, recreation, adult education, arts, and family programming after school, before school, on weekends, and during vacations. In New York City, Beacons serve more than 150,000 children, youth, and adults annually. Nationally they reach more than 250,000 individuals in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Denver, and West Palm Beach, Florida.

The Beacons forge partnerships across public, non-profit, and private institutions to fortify neighborhoods. They create pathways for participation between age groups and a continuum of programming that promotes healthy development and strong families. They contribute to local economic development by providing jobs to young people and adults. They help to make neighborhoods safe and connect residents to each other and to local resources. At a time when social services are increasingly located outside of the communities that need them, the Beacons serve as a hub for an array of social and educational supports.

Funding for the Beacon programs described in *Practices to Keep* comes from a wide variety of sources. The range demonstrates a commitment by both the public and private sectors to the comprehensive work of Beacons, with support located in education, labor, child welfare, and human services. Sources include:

- Local tax levy
- Local, state, and federal foster care
- Private foundations
- Public-school dollars
- State after-school funding sources
- Summer Youth Employment Program (OTDA, US DOL)
- Supplemental Education Services, part of No Child Left Behind (US DOE)
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers (US DOE)

- Youth Development and Delinquency Prevention (NYSOYD)
- Workforce Investment Act: In-School Youth; Out-of-School Youth; Literacy (USDOL)

The need for the Beacons and other programs that build on similar principles is more urgent today than ever. The economic crisis that began in 2008 has affected every sector of society, but will inevitably hit hardest in poor communities where the Beacons are located. Too often, services are removed from the very neighborhoods where they are needed most. The Beacons place services in the center of poor communities. The gains that the Beacons help create must be protected, as the need for comprehensive and coordinated services, high quality education and work preparation, and community safety increases. The Beacons have earned the trust and respect of local residents and provide a tested infrastructure for attaching additional or consolidated programs.

*Practices to Keep In After-School and Youth Programs* illustrates how Beacons provide young people with pathways to increasingly responsible roles, involve youth and adults in improving their communities, and create environments of support to keep families together.

# 2

**The Social Group Work Approach:**  
Promoting Individual Growth and Community Building

## 2. THE SOCIAL GROUP WORK APPROACH

*How people depend on each other and work together is the foundation of society. At the Center for Family Life in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, the use of social group work as a practice informs how the Beacon builds young people's capacity, grows staff from within, establishes enduring connections, and creates strong community linkages.*

On a grey, March afternoon at the Center for Family Life PS 1 Beacon, a new specialist, Dann, gathers a group of sixteen 11- 13 year olds and their group leader together for the first time. The youth are asked to arrange themselves in a loose circle. Dann asks the students to go around the circle, say their names, and recall the names stated before them. He takes out a rubber ball and asks the youth to recall the names of their peers as they throw the ball across the circle. After a few rounds, he pulls out two more balls from his pocket and asks them to move *all three* balls across the circle and continue to recall names. He then asks the youth to move the balls faster and faster through the circle without dropping them. A cacophony of laughter and names breaks out as the youth begin to drop the balls. Amidst the laughter, as if he were a coach, Dann exhorts the young people to stick with it, stay focused, and keep moving the balls across the circle. At the point of near chaos, amidst laughter and shouting, Dann ends the activity and asks the students to regroup.

Allowing the laughter to die down, he asks them why they think he started with this activity. One student raises her hand "to get to know each other's names." Another says, "Because it was fun - balls were flying all over the place." Dann agrees the purpose was to get to know each

other's names and have some fun. But, he points out "There were other skills you needed - in addition to memory, with each round you had to improve your concentration and focus on listening. You also had to coordinate and communicate with your partner across the circle if you were going to keep the ball from dropping to the ground." These are the skills, he says, the group is going to refine and draw upon throughout the year as they work as a team to perform group activities.

At the heart of Center for Family Life's school-based youth and community programs, as this activity illustrates, is a practice model founded on the theory and principles of social group work, a core methodology of the social work profession. Social group work, which traces its roots back to the Settlement House movement of the early twentieth century, aims to promote individual growth and social change in the context of a group experience. At Center for Family Life participants of all ages are engaged in group experiences that not only promote individual growth and social change but also support family life and contribute to a community-building process within the Beacon program and in the neighborhood. The theory of social group work guides program design and implementation with a framework for anticipating predictable stages of group development and for selecting activities purposefully to meet the needs of the group and its participants at each stage in the life of the group. Understanding what needs to happen at each stage of group development guides the changing role of the group leader.

### *Social Group Work from a Youth Development Perspective*

There have been many meaningful accomplishments within the field of youth development over the past thirty years. One of the most important

has been transforming early assumptions about adolescence to a strengths-based appreciation of young people. The youth development field has also identified specific experiences that help youth develop successfully and has established core competencies for youth workers who aim to promote desirable outcomes for youth. Social group work makes a unique and important contribution to the youth development field by providing a professional framework for achieving youth development goals in group and community contexts.

While the PS1 Beacon provides a wide range of activities (including arts, soccer, basketball and other sports, dance and other performing arts, sewing, educational activities, and community service projects) that teach young people specific skills, there is also a common thread of competencies that runs through all Beacon activities. The group context provides an opportunity for youth to work on interpersonal skill development with peers and staff and to cultivate the following abilities as their group involvement deepens over time:

- The ability to be a member of a team, to work well with others, to complete projects together, and to develop the capacity for mutual aid;
- The ability to work constructively on conflicts and relationships, including giving and receiving feedback;
- The ability to think critically about one's own ideas, to develop an appreciation for different perspectives and opinions, and to integrate other points of view;
- The capacity to share leadership with the group leader and other members and to take increasing responsibility for the group process through shared decision-making and problem-solving;

- The ability to see oneself and the group as part of a larger, multi-generational community that values the contributions of participants of all ages and strives to have a positive impact on the lives of children and families.

Pursuing these competencies within a group setting and community-building model based on social group work keeps young people participating and engaged with their peers and adults in the Beacon community throughout childhood, middle school years and adolescence.

### *Navigating The Stages of Group Development*

In seeking to meet the changing needs of participants over the course of their group experience, practitioners at Center for Family Life are guided by a commonly used social group work model of predictable stages of group development - Beginnings, Middles and Endings.

In the Beginning stage of group development members are nervous and fluctuate between interest in being part of the group and keeping their distance. At this stage, staffs need to take an active role in the group, acknowledging feelings, setting the tone and creating safety. The group's purpose, norms and values need to be discussed and agreed upon. Commonalities among members need to be recognized so members can feel connected to one another.

In the Middle stage of group development, members have begun to feel more comfortable and invested in the group. During this stage, which comprises the bulk of the group experience, there is increased intimacy resulting in more complicated group dynamics and issues related to jockeying for status, formation of cliques and emergence of individual roles (e.g., scapegoat, bully, monopolizer). Conflicts arise in the group and from a social group work perspective this is seen as a necessary and useful part of the

process. Conflict offers an opportunity for individual and group growth and for relationships to deepen as the group is engaged in conflict resolution.

During periods of conflict and anxiety the group leader needs to assume a more central role to ensure group safety. As the group is increasingly able to work through difficulties and to complete group projects and as members have learned to help one another (mutual aid) the worker can encourage members to assume more responsibility for the functioning of the group. When the group is cohesive and functioning well, the leader can pull back and support the growing capacity for members to assume increasing leadership. Shared leadership between members and leader is an important concept in social group work theory.

In the Ending stage of group development, members experience a range of emotions in reaction to the ending of the group. Members may deny that it's really an end, revert to behavior exhibited at earlier stages of the group's development, or miss meetings and show anger toward the group or leader. The leader, taking a more active role again to offer the group stability, needs to help members share feelings they have about the group ending, while creating opportunities for members to reflect on their experience and progress.

### *The Purposeful Use of Activities*

The use of activity in groups can make a significant contribution to the achievement of the group's purpose and to the realization of the goals of individual members. Activities are in fact often the most effective way to work with youth in a group context. However, it is crucial to choose activities that are appropriate for the stage of group development and one must be clear about the purpose of any activity used with the group. In the Beginning stage, the use of safe, structured

activities in which the leader takes an active role helps members become oriented to the group. Activities that help members get acquainted with one another and staff and which promote participation, cooperation, and respect for self and others help establish important group norms and shape the group process. When a group is in Middles, members are ready for more sophisticated functioning and activities can be used with increasing levels of intimacy and skill demand. Activities can be designed to address conflict, help group members communicate about difficult topics, enhance the group's ability to work together and promote shared decision-making and leadership. During the Ending stage, specific ending activities can be used to review and evaluate the group experience and to recognize group and individual progress. The repetition of earlier, well-liked activities can meet the needs of group members to express feelings symbolically, to stabilize gains made and to reminisce.

### *From Group Membership to Community Membership*

In the same way individuals in a group go through different stages of development as they become a group (rather than a collection of individuals), groups go through different stages of development on a macro level before they can become a cohesive community. At the PS1 Beacon, the first circle of group membership begins with the Lower Camp component of the School-Aged Child Care program, which is attended by elementary school-aged youth, ages five through eight. As the youth enter fourth grade, they are transitioned into the Upper Camp program that includes the middle school groups. Another option for older youth is to become participants in the Neighborhood Center program which provides them with a variety of activity group options that they can select based on their own needs and interests. As youth enter adolescence, they have a choice to join the Counselor-in Training program. The CFL structure and

community building model offers participants the opportunity to move from one program to another while staff are keeping track and communicating with each other about their needs and progress as they become members of multiple programs and of the wider community.

There is a concerted effort made at CFL to ensure that this community building takes place at all levels of the agency. Leaders of the different programs are brought together in several levels of staff groups. For example, the CFL Beacon at PS 1 holds a weekly leadership team meeting that brings together staff leaders of the Lower Camp, Upper Camp, Neighborhood Center and Counselor-in-Training programs. That group must develop a common vision of the Beacon community that will bring their separate programs and staff together in a planned sequence of special events. The directors, coordinators and more seasoned specialists guide the rest of the staff in a parallel group work process that mirrors the experience of participants. This allows everyone to keep learning experientially and establishes integrity of practice: “We do not ask participants to open themselves up to a process we are not willing to embrace ourselves.” Within the leadership team and within each individual program, staff go through the same stages of group development and experience the excitement, struggles, and rewards of being group members.

### *Retaining Young People*

The social group work method in an intergenerational setting such as the one located at PS 1, provides enough options to help retain youth in the Beacon as they move towards adulthood. Neighborhood Center Program Director Kristie Mancell explains why a community-building model with intergenerational programming is so important:

*We believe in intergenerational programs...It can be challenging to attract a*

*large number of middle school students to your program without having a prior relationship with them. We start working with children at the elementary level. The youth build relationships with other youth and with caring adult staff when they are in our after school program. They continue to participate when they get to middle school because of those relationships and because our program offers ways for them to take on leadership, as they get older. They also see older adolescents, people they can look up to, contributing and acting as leaders, whether it's as a coach in the gym or as a Counselor-in-Training. Each age group has to be able to see themselves in the next level of programming.*

As might be surmised from the competencies developed in the CFL Beacon groups and programs, young people quickly become natural group leaders, having internalized the social group work culture. When they transition to the Counselor-in-Training program, these young people begin to practice the group work skills they have absorbed over the years. They continue to learn and integrate knowledge and information through experience, supervision and formal training. Promoting youth development through a purposeful ladder of leadership has been a core feature of our youth and community programs for the past 25 years. The ladder of leadership results in retention of youth from elementary age through college as they progress into paid staff positions. There is a continuity of service, a deepening sense of community, and the ongoing cultivation of new leadership as youth who began as program participants become Counselors-in-Training, group leaders, coordinators and directors.

The spiraling process of personal development through group membership and community membership is summed up by Beacon Director Helene Onserud as follows: "The social group work methodology allows us to go beyond individual development and to give young people an opportunity to see and understand themselves as contributors in relation to larger entities in increasingly concentric circles: first the group, then the Beacon program, and eventually the larger community."

*For more information on Center for Family Life Beacon at PS 1, contact H el ene Onserud: (718) 788-3500 or (718) 492-2619.*

# 3

Beacons Movement and  
Youth Programming

## *The Beacons Movement and Youth Programming*

Beacons forge partnerships across public, non-profit, and private institutions to fortify neighborhoods. They create pathways for participation across age groups and a continuum of programming that promotes healthy development and strong families. They provide jobs to young people and adults, which contribute to local economic development. They help to make neighborhoods safe and connect residents to each other and to local resources. At a time when social services are increasingly located outside of the communities that need them, they serve as a hub for an array of social and educational supports.

Beacons were among the first citywide after-school initiatives. The massive expansion of after-school programs that began in 1992 was fueled in part by the early example of the Beacon movement. But while after-school programs use a service-delivery approach, Beacons use a comprehensive community development model with a focus on youth development. Activities in every area, from after-school to adult education, are embedded in the process of building community that:

- Supports and engages local youth.
- Feels a sense of ownership, with a desire to convert a school building into a community center.
- Recognizes and supports community resources, builds the capacity of youth and other community members to identify needs, address issues, and capitalize on different strengths.

The Beacons, while diverse and responsive to neighborhood interests and strengths, are shaped by a core set of youth development principles that

research has shown help people to achieve stronger outcomes: caring relationships, high expectations, opportunities to contribute, engaging activities, and continuity in relationships.

As a result of their experience in developing Beacons, many organizations that started as “mom and pop” associations in response to neighborhood needs now offer extensive family and youth-supporting services including foster care, drop out prevention, summer youth employment, and out-of-school time activities. In New York City and San Francisco, these organizations advance school reform efforts. Applying youth development principles and a commitment to the success of all students, they have helped to reshape high schools, making them more personalized, and sharply increasing graduation rates among youth who previously would have dropped out.

The Beacons provide multiple opportunities for young people to build the 21st-century skills that are essential to their development and success as workers, citizens, and environmental stewards. They help young people respond to the changing demands of the workplace and the increased need for post-secondary education. In Beacons, young people:

- Work in teams, solve problems, and master critical skills.
- Take on powerful roles that make a difference to their peers and their communities
- Get involved in planning projects, assessing their communities, analyzing results, and taking action to address local problems.
- Master core literacy skills in reading, writing, media, and technology.
- Teach, mentor, and serve as role models for younger children.
- Collaborate with adults around important issues.

All these opportunities build the skills and knowledge the next generation needs to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to sustain the well-being of the nation and earth.

Each Beacon city also includes an intermediary organization that provides training and support to the Beacon and works with policy makers to sustain the vision. For example, in New York City, the Youth Development Initiative, is one such intermediary that offers training and coaching to sites, develops programs, and works with the city and advocacy groups to support best practices. In San Francisco, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, convenes a citywide group of leaders in philanthropy and public agencies to build support for the Beacons, raise funds, and provide training and related supports to sites.

### *Evidence of Success & Continuing Need*

Evaluations in New York and San Francisco find that Beacons attract participants of all ages, many of whom attend on a regular basis. Participation by substantial numbers of adolescents, traditionally the hardest to recruit and retain in out-of-school programs, is the result of adherence to youth development principles. Among adolescents, the Beacons increase young people's self-efficacy and the level of effort they put into school, which are both critical factors in school success and persistence (Walker & Arbureton, 2004). They provide extensive homework help, enrichment activities that build skills and knowledge, and connections with schools and families on academic issues (Warren, 1999, pp 3-6). They help youth avoid negative behaviors such as drug use and fighting, and foster leadership and provide opportunities for volunteering and contributing to community (Ibid, p. 5). In neighborhoods like Red Hook in Brooklyn, where residents were once afraid to leave their apartments at night, the Beacon is not only a haven, but has, through its programs and networks, made the whole commu-

nity safer (see *Practices to Keep: Preventing Placement in Foster Care: Strengthening Family and Community Ties*. Youth Development Institute, 2009).

The need for Beacons and other programs that build on similar principles is more urgent today than ever. The economic crisis that began in 2008 has affected every sector of society, but will inevitably hit poor communities where Beacons are located the hardest. Too often, services are removed from the very neighborhoods where they are needed most. The Beacons place services in the center of poor communities. The gains that Beacons helped create must be protected, as need increases for comprehensive and coordinated services, high quality education, work preparation, and community safety. Beacons have earned the trust and respect of the local residents, and provide a tested infrastructure for attaching additional or consolidating programs.

*Practices to Keep* illustrates how Beacons provide young people with pathways to increasingly responsible roles, involve youth and adults in improving their communities, and create environments of support to keep families together. They all depend on partnerships and all recognize that their impact is inextricably tied to collective action. All told, these efforts add up to potent forces for local economic development and building cohesive communities.