# TIP SHEET: UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING QUALITY IN YOUTH PROGRAMS

High-quality instructional practice at the program level is fundamental to building the skills young people need to succeed. In youth programs, quality is largely defined by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality's Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA). The PQA is a validated observational assessment designed to document the quality of youth program experiences. The PQA is used in numerous local, state- and county-wide accountability, evaluation, and improvement systems. This document summarizes the four domains of the Youth PQA.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

The Center for Youth Program Quality's "Pyramid of Program Quality" (pictured below) parallels Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[1] The pyramid provides a common language for those who work in youth programs to engage in meaningful dialogue about how to create productive learning environments.
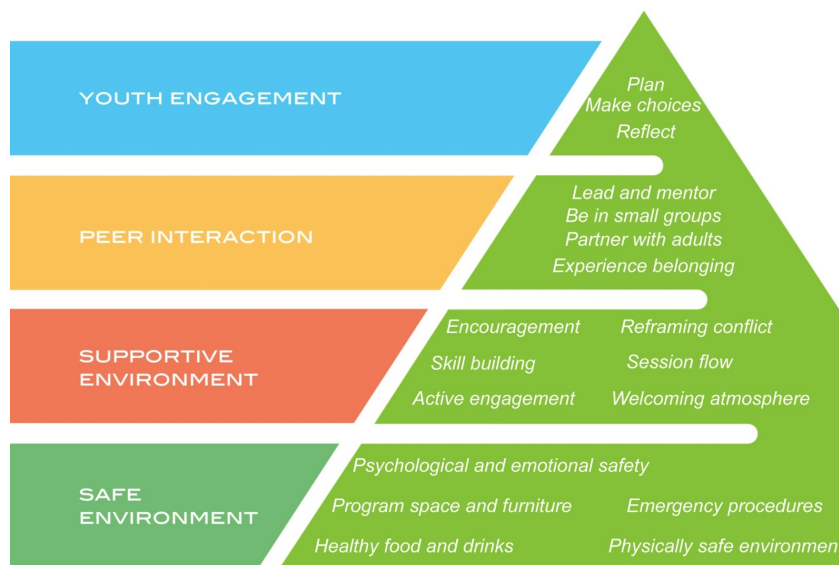
© Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

> **Safe Environment** – The safety of young people is necessary if they are to have an opportunity to learn. Safety is important in all of its aspects: physical, emotional and psychological. The Youth PQA assesses physical and emotional safety and includes indicators aimed at reducing bias in programs.

> **Supportive Environment** – Supportive environments provide young people with opportunities to meet and overcome challenges. When adults consistently offer encouragement rather than praise, they can help young people to develop a growth mindset. Supportive environments also recognize and address the social and emotional challenges that students face by creating program environments that respect culture, values, and diverse learning needs.

---

[1] Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review, 50*(4), 370–96. Retrieved from http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm

➤ **Interaction** – Young people, like all people, need to experience positive relationships with adults and peers. When they feel alienated, young people are more likely to seek out unhealthy or unsafe relationships in their search for connection. Developing exciting, challenging, and purposeful opportunities for young people to learn and interact with each other will increase their capacity to learn and grow. The Youth PQA details expectations for building peer-to-peer and youth-to-adult relationships in programs.

➤ **Youth Engagement** – When young people feel safe and experience a sense of belonging, this enables them to experience challenge and deepen their learning. Youth engagement is at the top of the Youth PQA pyramid and consists of two main ideas: voice and choice in programming at all levels and opportunities to set goals, make plans, and to reflect on experiences.

The PQA framework describes a way of working with young people that is essential for their growth, development and success, regardless of the specific content being taught. Research suggests that programs that reach the higher domains of the quality pyramid (positive interaction and engagement) can have significant positive effects on youth outcomes.[2]

ASSESSMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

When used as intended, the YPQA is a key component of a system of continuous quality improvement (the Youth Program Quality Intervention, or YPQI).
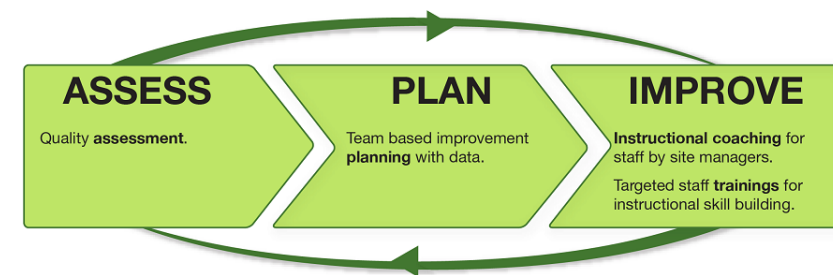
© Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

The YPQI improvement system includes both assessments and aligned trainings that can be used for professional development for youth workers, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for young people.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY:

➤ **School's Out Washington -** http://schoolsoutwashington.org/
School's Out Washington supports implementation of the Youth Program Quality Intervention across Washington State by offering training and technical assistance.

➤ **David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality -** http://cypq.org/
The Weikart Center, in conjunction with stakeholders around the country including partners in Washington State, developed the Youth PQA to assess, plan, and improve program environments for young people.

---

[2] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P. & Pachan, M. K. (2010). A meta-analysis of afterschool programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal Community Psychology*, 16, 294-309. doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9300-6.