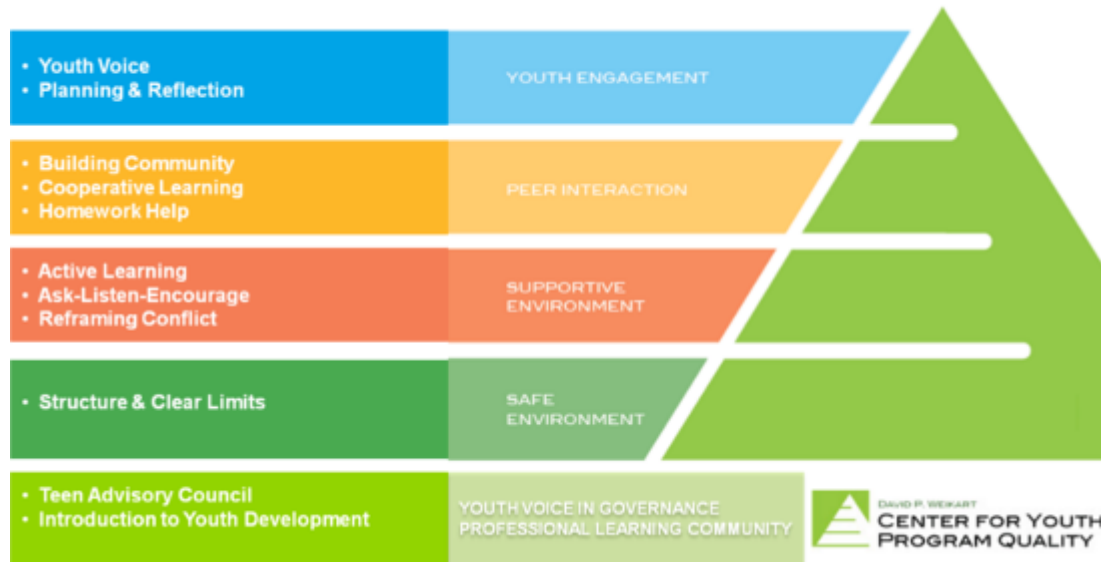## What is Youth Development?

Our positive youth development approach assumes that youth programs are more than places to baby sit young people in the non-school hours, but that they have learning and development purposes. Whether you believe that the purpose of an out-of-school time program is to improve academics, to build life skills, or just to provide a place where kids can hang out and be kids, our approach provides the foundations for building a safe and productive environment for young people. In short, the approach is based on the belief that it is a youth worker's job to set up an environment for young people in which their needs are met and learning is encouraged—to set up a space in which youth needs are met so that they can thrive!

The youth development approach (pictured above) has parallels to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The pyramid provides a way to organize the many, many things a youth worker does to build a great experience for young people. The parts of the pyramid are explained below, with courses in this series in italics:

Safe Environment- It is sometimes not within your power to make kids feel safe; however, you can do what you can to make sure they are safe. It's important for young people to feel both physically and emotionally safe. Physical safety is mostly about the space in which your youth program runs and these safety issues are generally dealt with by supervisors or through licensing. Emotional safety on the other hand is a big important thing and it can be hard to establish in many youth environments. One way to move towards an emotionally safe environment is by maintaining *structure and clear limits*. It's key to let young people know they can trust you to maintain safety, order, fairness, etc. Ultimately you want to try to create a space in which youth feel like they can "be themselves" without either being laughed at or teased by their peers, or acting in ways that threaten or mislead others.

Supportive Environment- As a youth worker, it is your job to a build supportive environment. You can do this by establish healthy, productive relationships with youth using the *ask-listen-encourage* strategies. You can also do this by *reframing conflict* when conflict situations arise. Finally, you can do this by putting in place the basic learning supports of *active learning* and *scaffolding for success. Active Learning* is about supporting youth to engage hands-on with their bodies and minds. *Scaffolding for success* is about presenting youth with relishing challenges and helping them set and meet high expectations.

Peer Interaction-The peer culture that exists is one of the most powerful forces that shape a youth program-and it can have big impacts on young lives. As an adult, you can positively affect this culture by expectations and routines you put in place. You can help young people get to know each other and treat each other well by using *building community* techniques. You can help young people have successful experiences together by using *cooperative learning* techniques.

Youth Engagement- When young people feel safe and experience a sense of belonging, this clears the way for them to experience challenge and pursue learning. Youth engagement is at the top of the pyramid and it consist of two main ideas. First, it's critical for young people to have *voice and choice*- that is, a say in how the program operates, and choices about how they spend their time. The other component is *planning and reflection*-providing young people with plentiful opportunities to set goals, make plans, and to reflect on their experiences.

Putting it all together, the pyramid defines a way of working with young people that is healthy for their growth and development, regardless of the specific content that is being delivered. The Youth Work Methods series really works. They've been used by countless youth workers for decades with great success.