

The Six Components of Balanced Youth Programming

The wisdom from the best Unitarian Universalist congregations, and from the current interfaith literature, defines good youth programming as having a balance of opportunities that are relevant to the ages and needs of youth. We believe that balanced programming has six basic components:

- (1) opportunities for *religious growth and learning* through structured programming;
- (2) *social programs* with peers, and with intergenerational groups and adults;
- (3) *worship and spiritual exploration* and expression;
- (4) hands-on projects for *service and social action*;
- (5) education and experience in *self-governance and leadership* skills.
- (6) positive, mutually respectful and empowering *youth/adult relations*.

(1) *Religious growth and learning* – Almost every aspect of youth programming can provide learning experiences for youth. Curricula are great resources for learning in youth programs, especially when youth are involved in leading them. However, curricula do not provide the only learning opportunities for youth. Discussion, sparked by the topic of a guest speaker, a movie, or from experience, is another great way to learn. UU youth programs are safe places for youth to engage in religious growth and learning.

(2) *Social programs* – Social programs at their best involve building community intentionally. Social programs are times for people to get to know one another, to break down cliques and age barriers. When community has been built, social programs can be time devoted to “hanging out.” Some of the most valuable experiences in youth programming happen during social activities – these are times to bond together, share values, establish trust, and practice acceptance. Both intergenerational and youth-only social opportunities are needed.

(3) *Worship and spiritual exploration* – Youth programs should be spiritual and religious homes for youth. Worship is an important and sacred part of many UU youth events. Youth worship tends to be interactive and non-traditional. It often takes place in a circle, with sharing as a focus. Youth lead Sunday morning worship on an annual basis in many UU congregations. Worship is a time and place for spiritual exploration, where we can share spirituality and caring with the larger community.

(4) *Service and social action* – Because youth have passionate opinions about social issues, UU youth have long been at the forefront of social action activities. Youth programs are places to express and explore values, and to engage in hands-on action consonant with those values. Social action projects are important ways for UU youth to put hands and feet on our UU principles while having fun.

(5) *Self-governance and leadership skills* – One of the biggest contributions UU youth programming makes to wider Unitarian Universalism is the development of youth leaders. Youth programs are primarily youth-led, programs in which youth have the opportunity to learn and practice their leadership skills in the company of caring adult advisors and mentors. In UU youth programming, leadership is about learning how to work together, facilitate, make decisions together through consensus, foster cooperation, and make sure every person gets heard.

(6) *Youth/adult relations* – This is essential to youth empowerment. UU youth communities where youth and adults work together and have power with each other have huge potential. Intergenerational environments encourage all of the other components of youth programming. Youth and adults can learn from each other, experience youth worship, build community, empower each other to lead, and make a difference in the world through social action. “We are all lifelong learners, we are all lifelong teachers, and we are all lifelong leaders!”

Congregations vary greatly in their arrangement of classes and youth groups, and there is no one right way to do youth programming. However, it is wise for every congregation to survey its offerings for youth to check out its balance of programming.