

A Tool Kit for Building Life Skills Using Experiential Education and Games

Abstract

The development of life skills in youth is a common goal of youth programs. The new research on positive youth development highlights intentional development of these skills. However, with the differences in skill levels of staff and volunteers, training is a challenge. By providing flexible tools training for all can occur in one session, and new skills are learned. The highlighted tool kit can be a guide for Extension professionals to create tool kits that work for their population. They are designed to be small and fit in a pocket, thus increasing the chance that they will be used.

Brian Brandt

WSU Extension
Faculty
College of Agriculture,
Human, and Natural
Resources
WSU Pierce County
Extension
Pullman, Washington
bbrandt@wsu.edu

Introduction

Many youth organizations play games for fun and the health benefits. There can also be the added benefit of intentional life skill development. This intentional process adds a life skill to focus on and uses experiential education debriefing as the technique to improve life skills. However, a challenge with any new technique is the existing skill levels of youth workers and volunteers. Youth development professional managers can counter this challenge by providing cards to staff and volunteers that are designed for beginners and advanced staff. Beginners can use the included life skill and scripted experiential debrief examples, or the advanced professional can use blanks to add their own. The Turning Games into Life Skill Builders cards have successfully worked with over 400 youth professionals, affecting over 18,402 youth. The cards are available free for download or can be used as the template for developing your own set of cards for your specific program or existing games that you frequently use.

Health and Life Skill Benefits

The tool kit focuses on three important outcomes for youth: fun, health benefits, and life skill development, or what others call "social emotion skills." This combined approach allows for success

on the three main goals. The physical games are a fun technique used in youth programs (DeBord, 1989). A review of over 850 articles and academic papers synthesized the benefits of physical activity on youth as improving health, movement skills, physical fitness, as well as concentration, academic performance, and increases positive youth behaviors. Also, the review identified that youth need to get 60 minutes of physical activity per day (Strong et al., 2005). One meta-study, done by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], shows that intentional Life Skill development has the benefits of improved social emotional skills of youth and increases school performance (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Combining the benefits of fun, physical activity, and intentional life skill development supports provides multiple benefits to the youth.

Intentional Design

The cards are designed utilizing the 4-H Targeted Life Skill curriculum and the CASEL research on proven items needed in programs that develop life skills. The 4-H Targeted Life Skills Model is a curriculum development resource tool that guides curricula in developing successful Life Skill development programs that compliment the content being taught, and use experiential education (Hendricks, 1998). Many youth programs report high youth outcomes with the use of the reflection process of experiential education (Ripberger, 2008; Torock, 2009). This shows up in the curriculum as encouraging the selection of a few life skills to discuss with youth and continually working on asking experiential questions to enhance learning. The CASEL meta-study shows that afterschool programs that are working on life skill development are most successful when, "The presence of four recommended practices associated with previously effective skill training (SAFE: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit) moderated several program outcomes." (Durlak, et al., 2010). The features of the cards meet these SAFE practices (Figure 1.)

Figure 1.
Example Cards

Index for Card Set		How to explain practicing life skills to youth Youth group conversation suggestions: "Throughout the course of the program we are getting better at certain skills. What are some skills we are getting better at?" (Most youth will talk about the team sport, art, or whatever your program does.) "What team skills do we need to do well to help us do the other activities well? Maybe it's cooperating and getting along. What are some others?" (This is where you and youth talk about life skills.) "We'll be working on some of team skills that you mentioned. Think of it like this. When you want to strengthen a muscle in your arm, you have to work it, practice, lift weights. It can be hard at first. Our team skills are similar. We have to practice team skills, kind of like lifting weights. The better our team skills are, the better our time together will be. This is done by the group answering some simple questions after the game. So be ready and let's have fun."
Purpose of cards explained	3	
How to explain practicing life skills to youth	4	
Example of Life Skill Wheel for ideas	5	
Example questions for 3 life skills	6	
Experiential Learning model	7	
Information on Experiential Learning Model (Reflection Process/Debriefing)	8	
Game cards	9-42	
Blank cards to add your own games	43-48	

<p>Circle Up Materials: None</p> <p>Life Skill: _____ Setting: Open space</p> <p>Count until the group is circled up, shoulder to shoulder, and quiet. Variation - remember the names of the people on each person's right and left. Have them move around, the leader calls out "Circle up" and they form a circle with the same people on the left and right. Try it a few times while counting and see how quickly they can do it. They may have trouble getting it the first time. They will soon realize the trick is the circle will move around whoever is calling "Circle up". During the activity we will be practicing the Life Skill _____. At the end we will see how well we did with that life skill.</p> <p>What: What happened with _____? So What: So what did you learn about _____? Now What: Now what can you do with your learning?</p>	<p>Circle Up Provided Options</p> <p>Life Skill: <u>Following directions</u></p> <p>Basic reflection What: What happened with following directions? What went well? So What: So what did you learn about following directions? Now What: Now what can we do to practice following directions here? Where will you use them tonight? Home? School?</p> <p>More in depth reflection What: What happened when everyone followed directions? When directions weren't followed? So What: What did you learn that can help you and the group to be successful at getting in a circle quickly and safely? Now What: Where else at your program is it helpful for the group to follow directions?</p>
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Tool Kit Objectives

Youth Goals

- Develop life skills/social emotional Skills
- Obtain the benefits of physical activity

Staff Goals

- Make it easy for beginning youth professionals to develop life skills in youth, using pre-developed activities and debrief questions
- Support staff in learning intentional programming a principle of positive youth development.
- Serve as an introduction and skill building in experiential education debriefing
- Encourage using experiential education debriefing with future youth groups

Features of Cards

1. Pre-made life skill questions provided
2. Resources on how to talk with youth to explain the importance of the life skill development occurring during the games
3. Activity cards use few to no props
4. Blank cards for facilitators to add games with targeted life skills
5. Facilitator only uses games that adapt to differing situations

How You Might Use a Card System

Using the Turning Games into Life Skill Builders cards, or designing your own set, will support the beginning or advanced facilitator of games to include intentional life skill development. Beginners may pick one life skill on which to work with their group and use the pre-made questions. Advanced professionals may write in a life skill that is important for their specific group in the blank area provided. The user may also use the group's rules or norms agreement as a source to select a life skill from. With the flexibility of the cards they are usable for staffs that are just learning about experiential education to advanced staff and can be all trained together.

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