

# ENCOURAGING HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

This practice brief is part of a series highlighting pedagogical strategies that supported youth social and emotional well-being during the summer of 2020. These approaches acknowledged both their present realities as youth coped with the pandemic, and their future lives as they prepared to pursue professional opportunities.

It draws on a larger study and report, **Youth Empowerment Summer: Crisis Response and Lessons for the Future of Collective Action and Work-based Learning**, which analyzed and documented the efforts of a New York City-based coalition of advocates, educators, community leaders, and youth activists. The YES coalition organized in 2020 following the onset of Covid-19 to create conditions that provided the city's most vulnerable youth with robust work-based learning experiences during a period of uncertainty, precarity, and unprecedented need.

Find the full report on the YES coalition and other practice briefs at [www.yes2020.nyc](http://www.yes2020.nyc)

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## ENCOURAGING HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Becoming lost or stuck is a natural part of the learning process, especially for youth who are simultaneously learning work-readiness skills, remote learning technologies, and professional norms. Help-seeking behaviors allow youth to mobilize social supports and institutional resources to resolve these issues and move forward. Yet, help-seeking behavior is highly stratified by class (Calarco, 2011), and associated with negative emotions for many youth (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Youth and young adults from nondominant backgrounds, for example, may experience discomfort with using email to formulate a request for help (Berardi, 2013), distrust in the process of receiving help from adults who do not share similar personal experiences (Garraway & Pistrang, 2010), and fear of being rebuffed or stigmatized for requesting help (Colletta, 1987).

Three pedagogical strategies that programs used to encourage help-seeking behavior are featured here:

- + **streamline help requests**
- + **create peer-to-peer support channels**
- + **use supportive non-punitive messaging**

### YOUTH

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“ I need to push myself to communicate more. I don't know why, but for some reason I feel like in person, it's not okay to talk because they're gonna judge you.

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

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“ We've noticed in our program that a lot of students seem nervous to ask for help, or nervous to say that they're behind, or nervous to say 'You know, I can't come', or nervous to let us know kind of what's going on, and my presumption about that is, maybe they've experienced sort of punitive responses or put down responses to that.

*Probably every learner has had an experience where they were ... like, 'I don't know what's going on and I have to say something, but I'm so scared that everyone's gonna laugh at me.'*

### QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

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- What steps is your program taking to help youth:
- + Submit help requests in a simple and streamlined way?
  - + Create peer-to-peer support channels?
  - + Feel supported, not punished, for requesting help?

## ENCOURAGING HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR STREAMLINE HELP REQUESTS

### What did we see?

One program in our study used Google Forms to systematize and simplify the process by which youth asked for help. The program set up general forms that youth could fill out and submit to address specific issues that youth were commonly facing around stipend payments and technology glitches.

These Google Forms were streamlined to include a few yes/no questions and a space to upload screenshots. This created a simple youth-to-adult communication process for youth, who could then reach out for assistance without having to craft a professional email from scratch and figure out which staff member to send the email to.

These Google Forms also conveyed an underlying supportive message to youth: These issues are commonly experienced, you are not alone in facing them, and you do not need to feel embarrassed for requesting help. The program director articulated this underlying message: “We know these are problems; don’t be scared in letting us know.”

The program reported that the Google Forms were widely used by youth, and allowed adults to individually follow up with and respond to issues that youth were facing.

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

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“ One way we decided to go about it is sending Google Forms with questions, so we would send separate ones. If you felt like you weren’t paid justly, why? So we would create a Google Form and allow them to respond and tell us why they should have been paid fully.

*We felt it was an easier way of communication, because when we asked them, and when we brought these situations to them, and said, ‘We’re aware of these problems, now you use this general form, you don’t have to email us, just click yes, yes, and upload the picture.’ I think it was a little bit easier for them because they didn’t feel the pressure of writing a professional email—there’s a bunch of us—they didn’t know who to email, and we kind of did the work for them.*

## **ENCOURAGING HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR CREATE PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT CHANNELS**

### **What did we see?**

One program supported youth's help-seeking behavior by extending their synchronous work sessions by an extra half hour and using that time and space as a forum for youth to provide each other with peer-to-peer assistance around issues such as workload management and troubleshooting technology. Youth participation was informal and optional.

In these forums for peer support, youth had frank discussions as they shared specific strategies around topics such as how to keep up with the

SYEP workload and how to navigate technology platforms so as not to lose their work in progress.

These forums appeared to allow youth to take ownership over the help-seeking process, to place trust in the process in which they learned solutions that had worked for their peers, and to take comfort in knowing that they were not alone in facing problems—essentially, that they didn't need to feel embarrassed for requesting help.

One program, Finance You, encouraged students to create their own Slack channels to ask each other for help as needed. Youth created a channel dedicated to clarifying assignment instructions and troubleshooting tech issues. As the program director noted, "I love it when I see students answering other students' questions...I think there's definitely room for empowering that peer-to-peer communication, which happens on the job all the time."

### **PROGRAM DIRECTOR**

“ I think one thing that we have done well with them is teach them how to ask for support when it's overwhelming. So we get a lot of that on their text messages, but we've also tried to enforce the sisterhood that you should ask someone else. So learning how to communicate with your peers.

### **PROGRAM DIRECTOR**

“ I think the reason why we extended it is 'cause we found if we gave the space and made space for it, some students who stayed behind would problem solve with each other, similar to this peer consultancy model, they would start making suggestions to each other.

*That was something that came out: tips, like real proven tips for others, trusted messenger tips. You're going through the same things I am. You're getting real-time, real-world suggestions, and I'm seeing that's something I can try.*

## ENCOURAGING HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR USE SUPPORTIVE MESSAGING

### What did we see?

Program leaders at Tech Possible actively monitored the individual project progress of each of the thirteen youth they served. When they noticed someone falling behind on their project, they reached out individually to check on the youth to offer support.

When a program leader noticed that a youth who was very engaged in discussions was not making progress on their individual project, she wondered, “Is the student not having confidence in their tech abilities? Are they missing instructions? Are we not delivering instructions in a way that

worked for that student?” When she checked on the youth, the youth claimed that everything was fine and that they didn’t need help. Yet, the youth continued to not make any project progress.

The program leader put herself in the youth’s shoes: “I think had we just kept being like, ‘Do you know what’s going on? Are you with us? Are you following along?’ I wouldn’t wanna say, ‘I’m lost’ to the person who was asking me that kind of question.”

She worked to use messaging that was encouraging and not punitive: “I think, what we saw in this instance was that the student didn’t feel like they could say they were behind, until we said, really explicitly, “You’re not in trouble if you’re feeling behind. It’s not gonna affect your pay, or anything. We’re just here to support you. And if something happened, it’s okay.”

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ Sometimes we’re focused on making sure we’re moving forward, that we don’t always make our language as understanding or our tone as understanding as it could be, ‘cause it’s so easy to assume that someone is choosing not to do something, follow along, when, really, an early mistake, an early oops can cause so much...such a ripple effect.

*It became really evident that if we told a student, ‘You’re not gonna get in trouble.*

*It’s not gonna affect your pay, it’s okay, we’re here to help you, there’s no reason to be embarrassed or worried,’ that students were much more able and ready to admit like, ‘Yeah, I fell behind.’ Or, ‘Yeah, I need some help.’ And then they were able to catch up.*

*And even giving the student a benefit of the doubt, and an out, and saying, ‘It seems like maybe there was a glitch or it seems like maybe it didn’t save. That’s such a frustrating thing.’ Or, ‘You forgot your password, ugh, what a frustrating thing. We can help you.’*