

YOUTH SUCCESS MOVEMENT

Gatherings

What a village does when it gets together, and how to run it

Village Series · Document 8 of 10

For Village Leaders, councils, and anyone helping to run an event.

Never miss a reason to gather.

A baby born, a student reaching grade level, a season ending, a holiday, a Saturday with good weather. The reason barely matters. What matters is that the people in a village keep seeing each other, because a village that only exists online is a mailing list.

Youth Success Movement · Success4rkids · Gary S. Smith, Founder

Version 1.0

1. Why this matters more than it looks like it should

Gatherings look like the soft part of the work. They are not. They are the part that turns a list of families into a village, and a village that stops gathering quietly becomes a program with a newsletter.

Three things happen at a gathering that cannot happen any other way.

- A family discovers they are not the only one. For a parent who has spent years assuming something is uniquely wrong with their child or their household, this is often the most relieving thing that happens all year.
- People meet the neighbors they will later ask for help. Nobody asks a stranger. They ask the person they stood next to at a cookout.
- The village becomes visible. Families who joined and drifted come back when something is happening. People who never joined see it exists.

Two practical rules that decide whether anyone comes.

Provide food. Not a full meal necessarily, but something. People stay longer, talk more, and bring their families.

Provide childcare, or make it explicitly child-friendly. A gathering that requires parents to arrange a sitter is a gathering for people who can afford one — which is the opposite of who a village exists to reach.

2. The rhythm of a year

A working village gathers at least quarterly and ideally more. Here is a realistic year for a village in steady state. Adjust it to your community, your climate, and what your councils want.

When	What	Notes
Quarterly	Welcome Celebration	The babies born in the village since the last one. The flagship gathering.
As needed	New family orientation	Whenever you have three or more new families. Group them.
2–4 times	Group training	One topic, one hour. See Section 4.
Annually	Celebration of Student Success	The biggest event of the year. Every student named.
2–3 times	Plain social	A cookout, a park afternoon, a potluck. No agenda at all.
Ongoing	Youth Council events	Whatever they decide to run. Let them.
As they happen	Milestone moments	A student reaches grade level, a senior graduates, a family finishes the program. Mark it.

That is roughly ten to fifteen touchpoints a year. It sounds like a lot until you notice that most of them are an hour long and half of them are somebody bringing folding chairs to a park.

3. The gatherings, one by one

The Welcome Celebration

Every quarter, the village celebrates the babies born in it since the last one. This is the single most important recurring event a village runs, and the reason is not sentiment.

A new parent's first months are when isolation does the most damage and when asking for help is hardest. If the village waits until that family has a problem, it has waited too long. The Welcome Celebration makes the introduction before anything is needed — and it reaches families in the years that matter most, which is exactly where the Movement wants to be.

Who	Everyone in the village. Not only the new families — the whole point is that they meet the rest.
When	Quarterly. A weekend afternoon works best.
How long	Ninety minutes. New parents are tired.
Format	Food, an open room, and one short moment in the middle where each new family is welcomed by name and the baby is introduced. Then back to talking.
What you need	A room or a park, food, name tags, a small gift or card for each new family, and someone to make the introductions.
Do	Invite every new family personally, by phone, not just by post. Pair each with their Mother Mentor at the event if that has not happened yet.
Don't	Do not turn it into a presentation about the Movement. Nobody came to hear about the Movement. Two sentences at most.

New family orientation

When three or more families join around the same time, bring them in together rather than one at a time. It saves your Ambassadors hours and it does something one-at-a-time onboarding cannot: it shows each family that they are not the only one.

Who	New families, their Ambassadors, and one or two families who joined six months ago.
When	Whenever you have accumulated three or more.
How long	Ninety minutes.
Format	Welcome and food. What the village is, in ten minutes. What we ask and what we promise. Set up accounts on the spot. Questions. Then the experienced families talk, which is worth more than anything you will say.
What you need	Wi-Fi, a few spare devices, the welcome packets, and the pledge forms.
Do	Have the older families speak. A parent saying “I didn’t think it would work either” lands in a way a Village Leader cannot.
Don't	Do not do the diagnostic work here. That is private, and it belongs with the Ambassador.

Group training

One topic, one hour, two to four times a year. These are the sessions where the village passes on what parents were never taught anywhere else.

Topics	Mindset and effort. What builds a child’s brain in the first five years. When behavior is hard. Understanding adverse experience and stress. Preparing for a school meeting. Reading aloud well.
Who	Any family in the village, whether or not they are enrolled. These are a good front door.
How long	One hour, including questions. Not two.
Format	A short presentation, then discussion. The discussion is the valuable half — protect at least twenty minutes for it.
Who leads	The Village Leader, a Family Ambassador, or a local professional who will do it for free. Many will.
Do	Send everyone away with one thing to try this week. One, not a handout with nine.
Don’t	Do not let a guest speaker turn it into a sales pitch for their practice. Agree that in advance.

The Annual Celebration of Student Success

The biggest thing the village does all year. Every student who has been working gets named, whether or not they hit a target.

Who	Every family, every volunteer, the councils, the school, local partners, and anyone who helped.
When	Once a year. End of the school year works well.
How long	Two hours.
Format	A real meal if you can manage it. Every student named and recognized. Certificates. A parent speaks. A student speaks. Photographs, with permission.
Recognize	Progress, not just achievement. A student who moved two grade levels and a student who showed up every week for a year both belong on that stage.
Do	Invite the principal, the funders, and the local paper. This is the event that makes the village real to your community.
Don’t	Do not rank students or announce scores. Ever. Celebrate individually, report only in aggregate.

The plain social

A cookout. A park afternoon. A potluck in a church hall in February. No agenda, no presentation, no sign-in sheet.

These are the easiest events to skip and among the most valuable, because relationships between families are what make a village survive the departure of any particular leader. Two or three a year.

Format	Food and space. That is the entire format.
Who runs it	The Parent Council. Hand it over completely and let them run it their way.
Do	Make it easy to bring children, and easy to leave early.
Don't	Do not use it to recruit, pitch, or hand out forms. People can tell, and it spoils the thing.

Milestone moments

Not events so much as habits. When something good happens to a family, mark it — with their permission, publicly.

- A student reaches grade level
- A student finishes the training program
- A senior graduates, or gets into a program, or lands a job
- A family completes their first ninety days
- A parent becomes a Family Ambassador or a Mother Mentor

A post on the village page with a photograph and two sentences takes five minutes and does more for morale than anything else the Village Leader does that week. Always ask permission first, and never publish a score.

4. Running a gathering

Three weeks before

☐	Fix the date, time, and place Weekend afternoons and immediately after school work best. Avoid competing with school events, sports, and religious services.
☐	Book somewhere free School rooms, libraries, community centres, congregation halls, park shelters. A village should almost never pay for space.
☐	Decide the food Potluck, donated, or cheap. Ask a local business — many will donate for a mention.
☐	Decide who is doing what Every task has a name on it. The Village Leader should not be doing more than two of them.

Two weeks before

☐	Post it on the village page and the calendar With the date, the time, the place, whether there is food, and whether children are welcome. That last one gets forgotten and it decides who comes.
☐	Ambassadors invite their families personally This is the step that actually fills a room. A post reaches people; a text from someone they know brings them.

☐	Arrange childcare or confirm it is child-friendly Say so explicitly in every invitation.
☐	Ask about access needs Wheelchair access, translation, and anything else. Ask rather than assume.

The week of

☐	Send a reminder Two days before, and again the morning of. People forget, and they do not mind being reminded.
☐	Confirm your helpers Including the second adult if young people will be present.
☐	Prepare name tags Small thing, large effect. Nobody talks to someone whose name they cannot remember.

On the day

☐	Arrive thirty minutes early Something will need fixing.
☐	Greet every single person who walks in By name if you can. Assign this to someone if you cannot do it yourself.
☐	Watch for the person standing alone There will be one, and they are usually the person who most needed to come. Introduce them to someone.
☐	Take photographs, with permission Ask first, every time. No location, no full names when posting.
☐	Start on time and end on time Ending on time is the one people notice and remember.

Afterward

☐	Post photographs and two sentences within two days This does as much work as the event itself, because it reaches the people who did not come.
☐	Thank whoever helped, by name Publicly.
☐	Follow up with anyone new Someone who came for the first time gets a personal message that week.
☐	Note what to change Two lines. You will not remember by next quarter.

5. Safety at gatherings

Children will be at almost every event. The rules are the same ones that govern every other part of the village, and they apply to gatherings without exception.

- No adult is ever alone with a child who is not their own. Two adults at all times where children are present.
- Every volunteer working with children at an event has passed a background check.
- Children remain the responsibility of their own parent unless childcare is formally arranged, staffed, and supervised.
- Photographs only with permission. Written permission for children. No full names, no locations.
- Know where the exits are, who has a first aid kit, and who is calling for help if something happens.
- If anything concerning occurs, it goes to the Village Leader that day.

6. Why gatherings fail

What happens	Why, and what to do
Nobody comes	Almost always because invitations were posted rather than made. Have the Ambassadors call their families. Ten personal invitations beat a hundred impressions.
The same eight people every time	The village is gathering for its volunteers rather than its families. Ask the Parent Council what would make other people come, then do that instead of what you had planned.
It turns into a presentation	The Village Leader talks for forty minutes. People came to meet each other. Cut your part to five minutes and mean it.
Only families who can arrange childcare attend	Make every event child-friendly by default, and say so in the invitation.
It stops happening	One cancellation, then a gap, then a year. Put the whole year on the calendar in advance so each event is already scheduled rather than needing to be decided.
The Leader is exhausted	You are running events instead of handing them to the councils. That is the actual problem, and it is fixable.

7. Your year, on one page

Fill this in once a year, with your councils, and post it. Everything is easier when the dates already exist.

Quarter	Welcome Celebration	Training or social	Who is running it
Q1			
Q2			
Q3			
Q4			
Annual	Celebration of Student Success		

The measure of a gathering

Not how many came, and not how well it ran. Whether two people who did not know each other before are now in contact.

That is what you are building. Everything else — the food, the name tags, the folding chairs — exists to make that happen.