

Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships*

By Jane Norman, Program Manager for Youth Empowerment Initiatives, Advocates for Youth

What Is a Youth-Adult Partnership?

A true partnership is one in which each party has the opportunity to make suggestions and decisions and in which the contribution of each is recognized and valued. A youth-adult partnership is one in which adults work in full partnership with young people on issues facing youth and/or on programs and policies affecting youth. Sharing with youth the power to make decisions means adults' respecting and having confidence in young people's judgment. It means adults' recognizing youth's assets, understanding what the youth will bring to the partnership, and being willing to provide additional training and support when youth need it (just as when including other adults in making decisions).

Why Are Youth-Adult Partnerships Important?

Youth-adult partnerships arise from the conviction that young people have a right to participate in developing the programs that will serve them and a right to have a voice in shaping the policies that will affect them. Effective youth-adult partnerships are beneficial to all involved parties including the youth, adults, and organizations. In addition, advocates of youth-adult partnerships argue that programs are more sustainable and effective when youth are partners in their design, development, and implementation. Proponents also assert that evaluation results are more honest and realistic when youth assist in gathering and providing the data on which evaluation is based.

How Do Youth-Adult Partnerships Benefit Youth?

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (a division of National 4-H Council) conducted a study on the effect of youth-adult partnerships which showed that "involving young people in decision making provides them with the essential opportunities and supports (i.e. challenge, relevancy, voice, cause based action, skill building, adult structure, and affirmation) that are consistently shown to help young people achieve mastery, compassion, and health."¹

Youth Benefits of Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships:

- Resiliency toward stress and negative situations through development of:
 - Social competence, including responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, and caring, communication skills, a sense of humor, and other pro-social behaviors

- Problem solving skills, including the ability to think abstractly, reflectively, and flexibly and the ability to arrive at alternative solutions to cognitive and social problems
- Autonomy, including a sense of identity and an ability to act independently and to exert control over one's environment
- A sense of purpose and future, including having healthy expectations, goals, an orientation toward success, motivation to achieve, educational aspirations, hopefulness, hardiness, and a sense of coherence.²
- Consistent opportunities of youth development to:
 - Feel physically and emotionally safe
 - Build relationships with caring, connected adults
 - Acquire knowledge and information, and
 - Engage in meaningful and purposeful activities in ways that offer both continuity and variety.²
- An internal locus of control, or the feeling of being able to have an impact on one's environment and on others.³
- Through contributing to one's community in partnership work:
 - Significantly increased belief that people can make a difference
 - Significantly increased belief that people should be involved in community service and advocacy
 - Significantly increased commitment to performing volunteer service.
 - Decreased likelihood to blame social services clients for their misfortunes
 - An increased likelihood to stress a need for equal opportunities.⁴

Youth-adult partnerships offer youth immediate opportunities for active participation and real challenge. Few things can more concretely demonstrate a belief in young people's capabilities than when trusted adults share with youth the power to make decisions.

How Do Youth-Adult Partnerships Benefit Adults and Organizations?

It would be a mistake to assume that the only benefits from youth-adult partnerships accrue to youth. Adults and the organizations in which these partnerships operate also benefit.

Adult Benefits of Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships:

- Experience the competence of youth first hand and begin to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors.
- Find their commitment and energy enhanced by working with youth.
- Feel more effective and more confident in working with and relating to youth.
- Understand the needs and concerns of youth, become more attuned to programming issues, and gain a stronger sense of connection to the community.
- Receive fresh ideas from different perspectives.
- Reach a broader spectrum of people.

- Develop more relevant and responsive programming and services.
- Share knowledge.
- Increase creativity.
- Break down stereotypes about both youth and adults.¹

Organizational Benefits of Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships:

- Young people help clarify and bring focus to the organization's mission.
- The adults and the organization, as a whole, become more connected and responsive to youth in the community, leading to programming improvements.
- Organizations place a greater value on inclusion and representation and see programs benefiting when multiple and diverse voices participate in making decisions.
- Youth's making decisions helps convince foundations and other funding agencies that the organization is truly committed to meaningful youth development and/or involvement.¹

The Do's and Don'ts of Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

Don't:

Youth-adult partnerships are *not* ways to hide or obscure the fact that programs are designed, implemented, and run only by adults. Tokenism is not partnership. Tokenism can appear in many forms and could include such actions as:

- Having young people around with no clear role to play
- Assigning youth only those tasks which adults do not want to fulfill
- Having youth make media appearances without any voice in developing the messages, programs, or policies that the youth are expected to talk about
- Having one youth on a board of directors or council to point to as "youth involvement."

Tokenism will leave young people feeling used rather than empowered. The key to avoiding tokenism is to share with youth the power to make real decisions.

Do:

It can be challenging to build effective, sustainable, genuinely collaborative youth-adult partnerships. Successful partnerships have some important elements in common. Effective partnerships:

- Establish clear goals for the partnership.
 - Youth and adults alike must understand what their roles and responsibilities will be in achieving the goals.⁶

- Ensure that each adult and young person enters the partnership with a clear understanding of *everyone's* roles and responsibilities.
 - Not all adults will want to work with youth and not all youth will want to work with adults in a partnership capacity.
- Share the power to make decisions.
 - If youth have no power to make decisions, their participation is not one of *partnership*.
- Get the highest levels of the organization to commit fully to youth's participation in the organization's work.
- Are selective.
 - Youth -- Identify those who are committed, reliable, and effective by being clear about the goals of the partnership and the roles that youth will play.
 - Adults -- Must believe that young people are assets and be willing and able to advocate on behalf of youth when stereotyping or negative assumptions about teens arise.
- Provide capacity building and training where needed.
 - Youth -- May need training in communication, leadership, assertiveness skills, interviewing, etc., as well as in specific areas of expertise.
 - Adults -- May need training in communication, collaborative work, interviewing, or working with youth as well as in specific areas of expertise.
- Are aware of different styles of communication.
 - Resolve conflicts that arise out of different communication styles by asking questions when one does not understand what is being said or why it is being said.
 - Keeping the common goal in mind can also help resolve conflicts arising out of different communication styles.
- Value everyone's participation and what they bring to the partnership.
 - Youth -- Effective partnerships hold high expectations for participating youth and are not afraid of holding youth accountable for their responsibilities.
 - Adults -- Effective partnerships should not discount potential adult allies, assume that all adults hold negative stereotypes about youth, or believe that adults will have nothing of value to contribute to a program intended for youth.
- Include room for growth.
 - Effective programs ensure that both youth and adults have opportunities for advancement. Both youth and adults will have valuable experience and insights to bring to more senior positions in the organization.
- Remember that youth have other interests and priorities.
 - Check in often with partnership youth to ensure that they are taking on only as much as they can manage without neglecting other important aspects of their lives, such as family, friends, and education.
 - Try to assist youth in recognizing when it is wise to say, "No," and support their decisions.

- Recognize and dismantle barriers of working across age differences.
 - If barriers remain in place, they will undermine the best intentions and waylay even the best-laid plans.

Barriers to Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

It is important to understand the common barriers of youth-adult partnerships, which can come in many forms.

Attitudes as Barriers:

Cultural norms may lead adults to believe that young people's opinions don't matter, that youth are not capable of contributing in a valuable way, and that adults have nothing to learn from youth. These attitudes are *biased*. However, by involving young people at high levels of responsibility and decision making, adults are able to see youth as thoughtful and contributing people. When anyone comes to see a formerly undifferentiated group as varying and diverse, that person is much more open to disbelieving and refuting negative stereotypes about the group and to valuing the individuals within the group.

Similarly, power dynamics, usually rooted in cultural norms, may make it difficult for young people and adults to feel comfortable working together. Formal instruction in school often teaches youth to expect answers from adults, and youth may expect adults to ignore, deride, or veto their ideas. Adults frequently underestimate the knowledge and creativity of young people and may be accustomed to making decisions without input from youth, even when youth are directly affected by the decisions. Therefore, joint efforts toward solving problems can be difficult, requiring deliberate effort on the part of both adults and youth.

Logistical and Organizational Barriers:

Adults who endorse the concept of youth-adult partnerships must be willing to identify and alter the organizational environment where institutional barriers can be especially significant for young people. Institutional barriers that make genuine youth-adult partnerships difficult include:

- **Hours for Meetings and Work**—Program planners must find nontraditional times at which to hold important meetings which do not conflict with youth's school or work schedules. Scheduling conflicts can be difficult to overcome but compromise is vital if an organization is to create successful youth-adult partnerships.
 - For adults -- this may mean altering schedules to hold meetings in the late afternoon, early evening, or on the weekend.
 - For youth -- this may mean using school community service hours to attend a daytime meeting.

- **Transportation**—Many young people do not have assured means or access to transportation. Program planners should schedule meetings in easily accessible locations and provide youth with travel vouchers and/or immediate reimbursement for the cost of travel.
- **Food**—Few young people have the income to purchase meals in business districts or dinners in restaurants. When a meeting occurs at mealtime, the organization should provide young people with food or with sufficient funds to pay for the meal.
- **Equipment and Support**—Agencies should provide youth with the same equipment as other employees, such as computer workstation, mailbox, voice mail, E-mail, and business cards. Failure to do so carries a powerful message that these youth—whether they are volunteers, interns, or peer educators, full-time or part-time—are not important or, at least, are not as important as adult employees.
- **Procedures and Policies**—With input from both youth and adults, organizations should develop policies on youth/adult interactions. For example, if a program involves overnight travel, youth and adults should be clear about their roles and responsibilities in traveling together. The policies will need to respect youth's desire for independence and, at the same time, address the legal liability of the organization, the comfort level and legal responsibilities of adult staff, and parental concerns about security. Organizations may consider establishing policies requiring the consent of parent or guardian for youth's participation, for staff's driving young people somewhere, etc. The setting and purpose of each youth-adult partnership will help determine other institutional factors that may need to be addressed in the organization's policies and procedures.
- **Training**—In agencies that have always operated from an exclusively adult perspective, staff may need cultural competency training. Staff—whether working directly with youth or not—will need to accept young people's perspectives and ideas and adapt to changing workplace rules to meet the needs of youth. Each organization and each staff member must make determined efforts to let each young person know he/she is valued.

Youth-adult partnerships offer much to youth, adults, and organizations that participate in them. Effective partnerships may be difficult to achieve. However, the benefits they offer are wide-ranging and significant. The first step is to acknowledge that youth have value and that their contributions have value. Commitment to youth's rights and a determination to recognize their rights and to hear their voices is key in building effective youth-adult partnerships.

This article is drawn, in part, from Klindera K, Menderweld J, and Norman J. [*Barriers to Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships*](#). [Transitions, Volume 14, No. 1, Oct 2001]. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, © 2001.

References:

1. Shepherd Z, et al. *Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations*. Madison, WI: National 4-H Council, 2000.
2. Pittman KJ, et al. *Youth Development and Resiliency Research*. Washington, DC: Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 1993.
3. Blum R. Healthy youth development as a model for youth health promotion. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 1998;22:368-375.
4. Giles DE, Eyler J. The impact of a college community service laboratory on students' personal, social, and cognitive outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence* 1994;17:327-339.
5. Roth J, et al. Promoting healthy adolescents: synthesis of youth development program evaluations. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 1998;8:423-459.
6. Sylwander L. *Children as Participants: Swedish Experience of Child Participation in Society's Decision-Making Processes*. Stockholm: Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2001.

*Different terms may refer to similar concepts. 'Youth involvement' and 'youth-adult partnerships' may be used interchangeably. Advocates for Youth prefers the partnership language because, for some, 'involvement' may imply tokenism or detachment.