



***Transitions: The Rights. Respect. Responsibility.® Campaign***  
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Many adults still hold negative stereotypes about the perceptions and capabilities of teenagers. As these stories of activist youth have shown, teenagers and young adults have acute perception and immense capabilities. How, then, can adults tap into youth's energy, passion, and commitment? How do youth become involved in issues and actions like those described here? The key is adults' partnering with youth.

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## 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. In addressing adolescent sexual health issues, youth and adults can work together in a number of ways. Together, they can conduct a needs assessment, write a grant proposal, raise funds, design a program, train new staff, deliver services, implement ideas and projects, oversee a program, collect data, evaluate a program's effectiveness, improve unsuccessful aspects of a program, and replicate successful programs.

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). Both youth and adults may need to embrace change in order for the partnership to work. For example, adults may need to modify their ideas about what will and will not work and about times and conditions under which work proceeds. Similarly, youth may need to understand the limitations and realities that affect a program's development, operation, and evaluation.

## 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. 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.

Little research has been done on the effects that youth-adult partnerships may have on youth, adults, organizations, or the processes that these partnerships affect. Research provides some evidence, however, that partnering with youth and respecting their ability to contribute may provide important protective factors for young people. The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (a division of National 4-H Council) conducted one of the few existing studies on the effect of youth-adult partnerships. The study 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."<sup>1</sup>

Few links have been explicitly identified between resiliency research and the youth-adult partnership movement. However, research has identified many factors that help young people resist stress and negative situations. These factors (discussed below) are produced and facilitated by effective youth-adult partnerships.

First, resiliency research has identified 'protective factors' that seem to account for the difference between those young people who emerge from high risk situations with positive results and those who do not. While research shows that many factors influence health behaviors, resilient children, in particular, display some important characteristics, including:

- 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
- 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.<sup>2</sup>

Second, research identifies an internal locus of control, or the feeling of being able to have an impact on one's environment and on others, as a key protective factor possessed by resilient youth. In this regard, opportunities for meaningful involvement and participation—such as are found in youth-adult partnerships—may provide youth with opportunities to develop and/or strengthen his/her internal locus of control.<sup>3</sup>

Third, research shows that contributing to one's community has many positive outcomes. One study found that college students who provided community service for credit significantly increased their belief that people can make a difference and that people should be involved in community service and advocacy. They showed significantly increased commitment to performing volunteer service. Finally, they became less likely to blame social services clients for their misfortunes and more likely to stress a need for equal opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Contributing to one's community is the heart of most youth-adult partnerships.

Work in the field of youth development supports these findings. Youth development is defined as *the ongoing growth process in which youth are engaged in attempting to meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded, and build their skills and the competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives.*<sup>2</sup> Youth development is facilitated when young people have consistent opportunities 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.<sup>2</sup>
- These opportunities are abundantly present in genuine youth-adult partnerships.

Proponents of both youth development programs and youth-adult partnerships have in common a belief that youth are caring and capable individuals. Rather than seeing youth as problems to be managed, youth development proponents view young people as valued resources with individual assets. Proponents of youth-adult partnerships see young people as individuals with the capacity to make positive and wide-ranging contributions when they receive support and the opportunity to develop their skills.

Behavior change theory and research on resiliency suggest that, while the types of activities offered by successful youth development programs vary, "the emphasis lies in providing opportunities for active participation and real challenges."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, 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.

# Who Else Benefits?

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

- 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.<sup>1</sup>

The same study also identified positive outcomes for the organizations:

- 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.<sup>1</sup>

## What Is Not a Genuine Youth Adult Partnership?

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. Tokenism 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.

## What Are Important Elements of Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships?

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. The youth and the adults must understand what their roles and responsibilities will be in achieving the goals.<sup>6</sup>
- 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.
- 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.
- Are selective. Young people vary widely in their development and in their readiness and willingness to assume responsibility. Being clear about the goals of the partnership and the roles that youth will play will help in identifying young people who are committed, reliable, and effective. At the same time, effective partnerships are selective about adult participants. The 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. Effective partnerships don't set young people up for failure by throwing them into situations for which they are not prepared. Youth may need training in communication, leadership, assertiveness skills, interviewing, etc., as well as in specific areas of expertise, like HIV prevention education. Similarly, effective partnerships don't set adults up for failure by throwing them into situations for which they are not prepared. Adults may need training in communication, collaborative work, interviewing, or working with youth as well as in specific areas of expertise, such as HIV prevention education.
- Are aware that different styles of communication do not imply disrespect, disinterest, or different goals and expectations. Youth and adults say that the best way to resolve conflicts that arise out of different communication styles is to ask 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 youth's participation and what they bring. Effective partnerships hold high expectations for participating youth and are not afraid of holding youth accountable for their responsibilities.
- Value adults' participation and what they bring. Adults frequently offer the partnership knowledge, experience, and access to resources. Effective partnerships guard against discounting potential adult allies, assuming that all adults hold negative stereotypes about youth, or believing that adults will have nothing of value to contribute to a program intended for youth.
- Include room for growth—next steps. Where can youth and adults go next? For example, peer education programs are often great vehicles for empowering young people and helping them develop important skills. However, these programs seldom include opportunities for advancement or for peer educators to assume more responsibility over time. Effective programs ensure that youth and the adults who work with youth 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. Too often, adults will enthusiastically enlist the participation of a particularly effective and articulate young person in an overwhelming number of obligations and commitments. 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.

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 the beginning of building effective youth-adult partnerships.

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\*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.

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