

Youth Development 101

WHAT IS YOUTH DEVELOPMENT?

The term 'youth development' is used in various ways to mean different things. The Center for Youth Development defines it as "...the ongoing growth process in which all youth are engaged in attempting to (1) meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, and be useful and be spiritually grounded, and (2) to build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives."

This definition focuses on seeing youth as assets to our community.

Many youth programs focus on the negative: "pregnancy prevention," "drug treatment," or "drop-out prevention." The downsides of these problem-centered approaches are that:

- They encourage "categorical" (or single issue) funding from government, resulting in hundreds of separate programs to "solve" problems in these specific categories. While some of these programs have been successful, the approach fails to fully account for the fact that these problems are interrelated. In addition, money is often wasted because services overlap.
- Problem-centered approaches also reinforce negative stereotypes of youth by unfairly casting them as problems to deal with – as opposed to valuable resources to be developed.

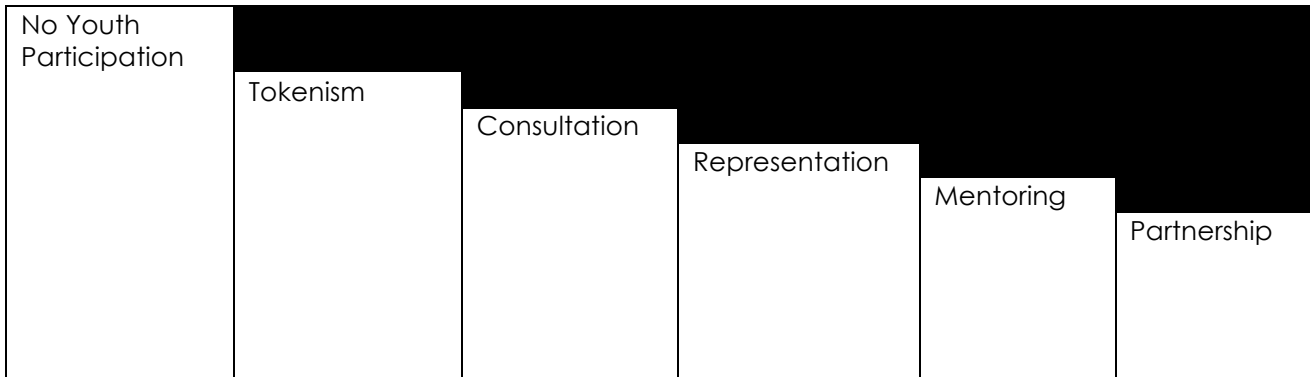
By contrast, true youth development focuses on the positive attributes of young people. It does not simply look to reduce risky behaviors. It holds high, rather than low, expectations for teens. Proponents of the youth development approach look for meaningful ways to engage and involve youth so that they develop a specific array of skills, knowledge and attitudes – which they call "competencies" – that will enable a young person to succeed. Youth development advocates seek to mobilize entire communities to provide "assets" that enable youth to achieve positive results.

Some of the "assets" that enable youth to thrive include:

- Belief by adults that youth are resources for development not problems to solve
- Connection to community
- Supportive and communicative families
- Relationships with caring adults
- Personal safety
- Access to positive and creative youth programs
- Spiritual development
- Ability to plan and make decisions

Power Continuum Table

The following table presents a range of ways to make decisions to divide power and decision-making responsibilities between adults and youth.



White area represents adult power; shaded area represents youth power.

POWER CONTINUUM DETAILS

The elements presented in the previous table are elaborated below:

No youth participation: Unchallenged authority of adults

Tokenism: Adults set agenda and make decisions. One or two young people maybe included, but often without training and without a promise that their suggestions will be taken.

Consultation: Adults seek advice from young people, but on terms set by adults.

Representation: A select number of young people are put forward as representing their peers, usually via a committee system and with varying degrees of accountability.

Mentoring: Adults provide encouragement and impart skills/values to help a young person achieve success.

Partnership: Young people and adults set agenda together, decide on issues and activities, and have joint accountability and shared responsibility.

WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Only your group can decide which of these approaches is right for you. Based on the skills or experience level of the members, some groups may not be ready for a true partnership – which is OK if all the members agree with that arrangement. The important thing is for your group to decide the nature of the relationship and set expectations accordingly.

TIPS for Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

Your team will no doubt encounter conflict at some point during your work together. Rather than viewing the conflict as an indicator that the youth development model is not working, recognize that it is normal for any group of people (regardless of their ages) to encounter conflict. Keeping this in mind here are some suggestions:

Tip #1: Age and Wisdom are Not the Same Thing!

People tend to think adults know all the answers and that, when youth and adults disagree, the adults are usually correct. To have an effective youth-adult partnership, everyone (including the youth) must cast aside this stereotype. Instead, adult superiority is not assumed; everyone earns the right to influence another's work and beliefs.

Tip #2: Different Experiences Bring Different Strengths to the Partnership

Adults often have more education or formal training than youth, while youth typically have a better first-hand knowledge of pressures affecting teens. Partnerships are stronger when adults and youth work together to identify those strengths.

Tip #3: Youth and Adults Must Share Power

This means that if adults make all the decisions (when meetings occur, who can join the group, what projects are conducted, etc.), then there is not a true partnership. Similarly, if the youth are not consulting with the adults, the youth are not being true to the partnership either. Even though shared decision-making takes more time, it is integral to youth development.

Tip #4: Youth Members are Not Spokespeople for All Youth

Do not make the mistake of placing youth in a position to try to represent the view of "all youth." In fact, it is not ethical for youth to think they fairly can represent all teens – since youths' views differ just as adults' views do. The same principle applies to adults. It is wise to encourage everyone to be very clear whose ideas they are representing – their own or a larger group.

Making Youth-Adult Partnerships Work

REMINDERS FOR YOUTH

Don't take on more than you can do: Sometimes youth – in an effort to keep the adults from taking over – volunteer for too much. Youth will earn more respect from their adult peers by following through on commitments, even if those commitments are fewer. *Related: Be on time.*

Create a way for adults to reach you: Youth are in school all day and thus hard to reach. Your adult and youth partners may not want to spend their evenings trying to track you down. Options include email addresses (which you can get for free at www.yahoo.com) or phone answering machines. Bottom line: whatever system you choose, check it for messages often.

Be a good role model: The more youth do to set good examples for their peers and adults, the stronger their own credibility. Behave in a way that earns respect from peers and adults. For example, no one will take a school clean-up campaign seriously if the organizers are frequently seen littering in the schoolyard.

Don't be afraid to take the lead: If you know there is a meeting coming up, volunteer to draft the agenda. At the meeting, volunteer to lead the discussion. Every time you show leadership, you reinforce the idea that youth are up to the challenge of sharing power and making decisions.

REMINDERS FOR ADULTS

Stay nonpartisan: This is important so youth feel comfortable exploring a range of issues and perspectives. (Even if you disagree with the youth in your group, encourage them to explore their own beliefs.)

Have youth take the lead: Ideally, each meeting or event will be led or co-led by a young person from your group.

Be a good mentor and role model: Stay positive and encourage youth to build new skills. Don't try to be a parent or a playmate. Instead, be a role model that earns the youths' respect.

Let youth learn by doing – and by making mistakes: Be careful not to get in the mode of “It'll be quicker if I just do this myself...” You want youth to take ownership of tasks and complete them – even if that means they sometimes must do it again to get it right.

Establish clear lines of communication: Make sure everyone knows when and where meetings are, who's responsible for what, how they are getting there, etc. Your members must be part of this process. Perhaps one youth is assigned to send email reminders to all members before meetings.