
WHY are youth/adult partnerships important?

As the field of positive youth development grows and buzzwords like youth voice, youth empowerment, youth-friendliness, and youth engagement become commonplace, adult professionals are increasingly interested in partnering with youth to share research findings, program innovations, and adolescent-focused content at conferences and community events. But many adults do not have a roadmap about how to effectively and authentically partner with adolescents and young adults, and they often do not have positive examples from when they were young. Adults can be well-intentioned, but often, young people report feeling tokenized or under-utilized, or worse yet, disrespected. When youth are meaningfully engaged in the planning and execution of a workshop or presentation, it can benefit everyone and ensure that adults are not speaking for youth. Here are some ways to practice the motto “Nothing about us, without us” when you partner with youth.

STRATEGIES for partnering with youth

Connect with youth that are a good fit for your presentation.

- Consider your population. Make sure that your youth partners are representative of the population you are addressing, and if you are working with a group, that it represents a diverse array of identities (e.g., socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and gender diversity).
- If possible, connect with youth that you already have a rapport with and/or who know your work. At the same time, youth who do not regularly participate in leadership opportunities often provide unique perspectives; while it may be harder to recruit these youth, it can be invaluable to have their perspectives.
- If you don't have existing relationships with youth, identify youth partners through local organizations that have youth advisory councils.
- If you need to partner with youth remotely, have a point person who has a relationship with the youth and can be their “go-to” contact.

Make time to plan and practice.

- Planning is essential to meaningful partnerships. It helps establish rapport, creates a clear sense of shared purpose, provides an opportunity for questions to be answered, clarifies expectations, and reduces the chance of surprises for everyone.
- Youth have busy schedules! Find out what times work for them and accommodate. Between school, extra-curricular activities, jobs, and other obligations, they are often unable to meet during typical office hours.
- Find out what means of communication is best for them. Some youth rarely check email; some don't have a consistent cell phone number, or may not always have phone privileges. Even if their mode is not second nature or convenient to you, adapt. Communication can be challenging and the adult needs to remove as many barriers as possible.
- Spend some time getting to know the youth before you dive into presentation planning. If you have very limited time, this might be as simple as discussing interests to build rapport.

- Make time for you and the youth co-facilitators to practice well before the presentation. Ideally, this is done at a face-to-face meeting; if this isn't possible, video conferencing may be more personal than a phone call. If you cannot meet beforehand, be sure to give yourself plenty of time to meet the day of before the actual presentation.
- Review or co-create the questions that the youth will be asked. This is a time to allow your youth co-facilitators to decide what they want to disclose and not disclose, practice a story, and choose the best details to share.
- If you're partnering with more than one young person, acknowledge ahead of time that they may disagree with each other. You might say "If you disagree with something another panelist says, that's okay – it shows that not all youth have the same experiences or opinions. You might say, 'I respect what Ahmed said, though my experience is different. In my friend group, we often...'"

Prepare, prepare, prepare.

- Share information about the presentation setting with your youth partners, such as who the audience will be, how many people are expected, how the room will be set up, how people will be dressed, when to arrive and where to meet, what to do if anyone is running late, if there will be meals, and if they need to bring anything.
- If any youth are minors, look into whether a parent/guardian permission form is needed. If there is a chance they'll be photographed or recorded, be sure to have a media release form signed. If they are part of an organized youth council, these forms may already be on file.
- Compensation is important. Make sure you are compensating your youth partners for their time. This can be in the form of a gift card or check. If possible, include food at planning sessions and events, and check for dietary restrictions ahead of time.

Select the best format for your presentation.

- Consider your audience, tone, purpose, and length of presentation when you're creating your outline. Factors such as how much time you have to plan, what your content area is, which parts are most important for youth to address, and what your desired outcomes are for the presentation will help you determine the best format for your session.
- There are many different types of presentation formats that lend itself to youth co-facilitation. Here are some that we've seen work well, but this is not an exhaustive list. Be creative! If possible, plan with youth to determine format.
 - Traditional panel (mixed adult/youth or just youth)
 - Youth-driven panel - see details below*
 - Fishbowl (youth face each other and discuss pre-selected questions as if adults are not there)
 - TED-style talks
 - Co-facilitation on content
 - Spoken word/poetry reading/musical performance/rap
 - Role play, theater
 - Youth-created scenarios and youth-led debrief/discussion
- Youth can also lead brief activities during the presentation, such as workshopping participant ideas in small groups facilitated by youth, group formation activities, and ice breakers and energizers. These can include relevant content, such as a "Find Someone Who" activity where the statements identify who's in the room, or "Step Forward If" that focuses on participants' values, experiences, or biases.

Respect youth partners' expertise while providing guidance.

- Remember that youth are experts on their own lived experiences.
- Build in the opportunity for youth to respond to participants' questions, and expect that youth perspectives may not always align with your point of view. Allow room for disagreement; just as your opinions and values differ from others your age, not all youth have the same opinions and values, and it's helpful to remind the audience of this.
- Respect that youth may not feel comfortable sharing certain personal information. You may suggest to youth that if a participant asks a personal question, they might respond by saying something like, "I've seen that in my friend group/school," or, "That's common among people my age," or even, "A friend of mine had this experience." Tell youth ahead of time that they can decline answering any questions that they do not feel comfortable answering. Remind youth not to name names or organizations when sharing personal stories.
- Public speaking and facilitation are professional development for youth. Provide mentorship and recognize that for many youth, this may be their first experience in this setting.

Set aside time for reflection after every meeting and presentation.

- Ideally, provide at least ten minutes after the presentation to debrief. Ask the youth how they felt about the presentation and their experience overall. Give descriptive feedback about the strengths; instead of saying "good job," tell them specifically what they did well.
- Share any follow-up, including evaluation results or feedback or videos/photos of them that they might enjoy seeing.

Additional RESOURCES

- [Rationale for Youth Engagement](#) and [Youth Engagement Toolkit](#). School-Based Health Alliance provides a toolkit designed for school-based or community health professionals that want to engage youth in their mission and work.
- [Spark trainings](#) are AHI's free, ready-to-use mini-trainings on adolescent health for teams of health care or community-based professionals on topics including adolescent brain development, being youth-friendly, cultural humility, and more.
- [AHI's guidebook: Creating and Sustaining a Thriving Youth Advisory Council](#) was created in partnership with youth on the best practices for developing and maintaining a Youth Advisory Council.
- [Youth-Adult Partnerships](#). Advocates for Youth provides links with detailed information about youth involvement in youth-adult partnerships.
- [Eight Successful Youth Engagement Approaches](#), outlined on the HHS Office of Adolescent Health webpage.
- [Youth Today](#). A national online publication that provides media coverage on a variety of topics for youth service professionals.
- [Youth Engagement Ladder](#). Framework from the Texas Network of Youth Services illustrating the levels of youth engagement.

APPENDIX

*Youth-Driven Panel

This format allows for significant content to be conveyed through youth voices in a polished but not overly rehearsed way. The key is the planning session. Convene with 4-6 youth well before the session and prepare a few discussion prompts addressing the content area that will allow them to talk freely about their personal experiences and values with each other and with you. Together, decide what main themes emerge, and write questions together that will allow them to respond with the experiences that they want to disclose. Help them frame negative experiences in a solution-focused way (“This negative experience happened; I wish my doctor would have handled it this way instead”), and help them decide which details are useful to share and which they may not want to share. Create the outline together on a projector, listing each question as a header and making notes about which youth will share which anecdotes or points after. Here is a sample outline that was created in a planning session with youth and adult facilitators in this format.

<p><i>“Wait, we’re NOT supposed to say ‘preferred pronouns’ anymore? How to keep up and not give up with transgender youth”</i></p>		
Time	Content	Presenter
5 min.	<p>Introductions – share structure; audience should write down questions and save for discussion at the end</p> <p>[Youth names]: name, pronouns, role, age, school/orgs</p>	All of us
40 min.	<p>Norms/overview: [Youth name]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiences are individual – youth are there to start detailed conversation Okay for us to disagree; we have a range of views and so do your patients Education on trans people should not start and end here <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What’s your experience with healthcare professionals? Each person shares 1-2 minutes Rest of session, we’ll focus in on language [For each question that follows, youth presenters share responses that they’ve planned ahead of time] Common pitfalls or personal experiences What do you think cisgender people get wrong about transgender identities and terminology? What positive interactions have you had with providers? What made it great? How can providers approach the need to do sex-specific tests and not call you the wrong gender? “All women need a pap smear” Growth charts – Helpful or harmful? “Because you’re male, we have to use this growth chart” How do you recommend asking about sexual practices/partners? When discussing bodies, what words do people use that are helpful/harmful? What are your recommendations about how to ask? How to handle mistakes 	<p>Youth do intro</p> <p>Questions asked by adult facilitators</p> <p>Youth names by the points they want to make</p>
15 min.	<p>Q and A - Guidelines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Okay for youth to pass on answering a question There are many perspectives and we speak for ourselves 	Youth/all of us