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NRCYD

**National Resource Center
for Youth Development**

from the **Youth Leadership Toolkit** by NRCYD

Youth Engagement

Youth are valuable participants in the planning and implementation of programs which effect them—after all, who knows better what youth need than youth!

Seems like we need some sort of brief introduction here about youth engagement, before we go straight into discussion about culture...?

CULTURAL acknowledgement

Culture plays an important role in youth engagement. Culture determines the roles that children, youth, adults, and elders play in society. In order for youth engagement to occur, youth engagement must become a part of the culture's expectation. If youth engagement and involvement is not part of the culture's current expectation, then it becomes important to review the barriers that may be preventing it from happening. For example, in some cultures, a youth must receive approval from an elder before he/she can speak in a group. How will approval be given? When does the youth know it is okay to speak?

It is also important to acknowledge youth have their own culture. Often times, young people's language, communication style, dress, music, etc. are different than those of the adults with whom they are engaging. These differences can cause youth and adults to stereotype each other and react to the stereotype rather than engaging the person. It is essential that we recognize this behavior as a barrier to an effective working relationship and continually remind ourselves to value diversity.

CULTURE defined

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development defines culture as "a constantly changing, learned pattern of customs, beliefs, values, and behaviors, which are socially acquired and transmitted through symbols, rituals, and events, and convey widely shared meanings among its members. Culture includes everything about people including food, traditions, celebrations, relationships, ideas, and various choices we make in life. Gaining cultural competence is a long-term process of expanding horizons, thinking critically about the issues of power and oppression, and acting appropriately. Culturally competent individuals have a mixture of beliefs and attitudes, knowledge, and skills that help them establish trust and communicate with others (Advocates for Youth)."

WHEN TO INCLUDE youth in meetings and events

The National Resource Center for Youth Development believes that youth should be involved in the design and implementation of programs, policies, and practices which impact their lives. In the United States, youth participate on conference planning committees,

serve on youth panels, present workshops, and co-facilitate discussions at conferences and meetings. They also sit on organizational advisory boards, run their own youth boards, participate in community/agency strategic planning, conduct surveys, write

reports, design forms, and develop websites. Regardless of the activity in which youth are involved, best practice suggests both youth and adults need preparation for participation in whatever roles they are to play.

PREPARATION of youth and adults prior to event

Consider a briefing for youth: Though policies and good practice indicate that youth should be included in the proceedings, many may not feel comfortable talking in front of adults. When youth are addressed in a “youth only” setting it serves to make them feel more at ease and more willing to participate.

At the briefing: Describe the purpose of the event and ensure that youth understand the importance of their role in the event in which they will be participating. All too often, youth are invited to a meeting but not made aware of the purpose of their inclusion. Youth might just see it as a nice trip. If youth

are not told that they have a voice, they may not know that they have a right to use it. Not informing them of the power of their voice and importance of their participation is equal to not bringing them.

Address young people appropriately: In the United States, we avoid referring to adolescents as children or kids. Instead we refer to them as youth, young adults, or young people.

Wide DEVELOPMENT range

Youth aged 12 are not on the same developmental or cognitive level as youth aged 17; therefore, we suggest engaging the youth in developmentally appropriate activities. For example, if

youth ages 12-17 are to serve on a youth panel, make sure that the questions being asked are appropriate to the youth's development.

Aim for INTERACTION

Conduct workshops and activities that facilitate interaction between youth and adults: If youth and adults are to work in partnership, they may need practice working together. Activities that are physical in nature or those that

use technology tend to level the playing field. “New games” provide good opportunities for youth and adults to learn how to communicate and problem solve together.

DURING the meeting/event

- ✔ Address the entire group with all stakeholders present, and provide expectations and guidelines for the entire group, including the youth. Youth will be more apt to participate if they know what is expected of them, and adults will be more receptive to youth input if adults clearly understand the youth role in the meeting.
- ✔ Ensure that youth understand what they are there for: expertise that only their firsthand experience can bring. Their insight will help to improve services not only for them but for others who come after them.
- ✔ Emphasize the expertise that youth bring to the adults in the room. Adults may be more apt to accept information from youth if this credibility is established up front.
- ✔ Make sure to let youth know that it's okay and expected for them to speak up, as their expertise really is the most valuable input that can come from the meeting.
- ✔ It is important to note that youth may need a little prompting. Just because they don't immediately volunteer information doesn't mean they have nothing to say; youth can be very intimidated, or may not know exactly which part of their experience would be most useful. The more experience a youth has with a particular type of event, the less guidance they will need.
- ✔ Adults may need to have questions available to prompt the youth and to make sure youth fully understand the process and what is happening in the meeting. Questions and presentations need to be developmentally appropriate. Fifteen to seventeen year olds may have more experience and better understanding of the system than twelve to fourteen year olds, but they both bring valuable perspectives as they are at different stages of the process of going through care.
- ✔ Stop and check with the youth while presenting new information. Ask youth, "do you understand what is going on in the meeting?" Ask a youth to reiterate the information given, and they can possibly relay it in more youth friendly terms to ensure that all youth are on board. At times, especially for youth who are not used to being seen as partners when working with adults, this can seem condescending to the youth. However, a great remedy for this situation is to have a youth co-facilitator during the entire meeting. Youth co-facilitators can relay questions and information back and forth from the youth to the adults and visa versa to ensure that both parties are benefitting from youth perspective. [Please see next section on "Why use youth as co-facilitators?"]
- ✔ Consider using "youth panels." Essentially, youth are customers of the services and their perspectives can paint the best picture. Youth panels are a good way for youth to talk about services they have received.
- ✔ With every new topic, stop and check in with the youth to ensure they are still on board, and if there is anything they would like to add.
- ✔ When brainstorming new topics or new ideas for systems improvement, make sure to ask youth directly "What do you think?" "What are your ideas?" Or "Would ABC idea have worked well in your situation?" Or, "If you had received XYZ service, do you feel your outcomes would have turned out differently?" These can also be asked in response to adults' ideas.
- ✔ If breaking up into small groups, be sure to allot time for youth to speak. As a facilitator of the meeting, walk around to each small group and either listen in or ask questions to ensure youth participation.

WHY USE YOUTH as co-facilitators?

Youth can not only be an incredibly valuable resource for input, but can also serve as very skilled co-facilitators. There are many compelling reasons for utilizing youth experience in this way:

- ✓ Youth are more familiar with youth culture and lingo.
- ✓ Youth participants are likely to relate better to someone they view as their 'peer,' even if that youth is older.
- ✓ Youth participants will feel less intimidated knowing that there is a youth leader in the room. When youth feel it is a safe environment, they will be willing to be more open and share more. Youth are taking a chance and sharing what can be some of the worst and most tragic moments of their lives, and it is important to have an appropriate, comfortable setting in which to do so.
- ✓ Youth co-facilitators can act as a 'translator,' not only to translate to the youth participants what the adults in the room are saying, but can also turn what the youth participants share as experiences into useable information for adults.
- ✓ Co-facilitation with youth shows the adults in the room that the agency is modeling youth engagement in practice, not just in policy. Also, youth are able to see that adults care about youth input.
- ✓ A youth facilitator can also help streamline the information gained from a youth. At times young people have not been trained on strategic sharing, or may just need to be heard somewhere, especially if they feel they are not heard by their workers in their case planning. A skilled youth co-facilitator allows the youth to share, while still gathering the valuable information needed by adults. Youth participants may also be more receptive to a youth leader 'limiting their sharing time' as opposed to an adult who may inadvertently recreate those feeling of "not being heard."
- ✓ Youth in the room may gain a better understanding of what type of information is needed from them if a youth co-facilitator is able to model sharing experiences in the beginning.



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- ✔ Youth co-facilitators have likely been youth participants and can empathize with the youths' position. This prior experience allows for youth co-facilitators to gain necessary information from the youth.
- ✔ Seeing a youth on an equal playing field with adults can inspire younger youth to become leaders as well.
- ✔ The youth co-facilitator can gain valuable experience by facilitating and co-leading the meeting.
- ✔ Adults can see the youth-adult partnership modeled in the facilitation of the meeting. This can allow for adults to have a more open view and a better understanding of how to work with youth after their experience at the meeting ends. For example, after participating in such a meeting as described above, a program director included several youth on the review board of his organization to ensure the best possible services were delivered to youth in the program.



AFTER the meeting/event

- ✔ Debrief with the youth after the event.
- ✔ Keep youth informed on follow-up activities or results that come from the event. Youth will benefit from feedback on their participation.
- ✔ Through this experience, youth will learn important skills that will help make them better citizens and will be better prepared to participate in future events. Adults will walk away with a different perspective on the positive effects of working with youth.

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