

YOUTH COLLABORATION TOOLKIT



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Welcome

Whenever decisions are being made that impact young people, it's important that youth are at the table and have equitable decision-making responsibilities. This can look a number of different ways: working with young people to establish a youth leadership body, including one or more youth representatives on a board of directors, and creating opportunities for young people to speak for themselves. Young people who are receiving services should be encouraged to participate in decisions that directly impact their housing and wellbeing.

Developed as a partnership between the National Youth Forum on Homelessness (NYFH) and the True Colors Fund, this toolkit was initiated by NYFH and the content was shaped by their voices. The ideas and concepts included in this toolkit will help ensure that young people are authentically engaged while collaborating with the affirming adults in their lives.

Authentic & Meaningful Partnership

What does authentic partnership look like with youth who have experienced housing instability or homelessness? It's important to consider how young people are invited to participate. It's up to the adults working with them to be intentional and transparent as the partnership is formed. Young people experiencing homelessness are often exploited and tokenized, even by those intending to support them. Youth are often asked to share their stories on panels, in the media, or at fundraising events, yet their ideas for impacting change are rarely included. This can be re-traumatizing for young people, especially when adults capitalize on their lived experiences. **Authentic youth collaboration is about more than inviting a young person to share the stories of their past; it is also about providing the space for them to share their visions for the future.**

What does meaningful partnership entail?

Equitable decision-making between youth and adults directly improves the quality of services young people receive.

Start by asking the following questions:

- “How are young people directly impacting decisions at my organization?”
- “How are young people generating solutions?”
- “How are young people at my organization benefiting from the value of their lived experience?”

Young people are the experts of their own truth. It's important that adult partners elevate youth voices, rather than speak for them. When involving young people in your work, be sure to build relationships in which their ideas inform the process.

Identifying Barriers

Make a point to identify and address any barriers that may inhibit authentic youth collaboration. Here are some potential barriers to consider along with strategies you can use to overcome them.



Building Trust

Establishing and building trust is essential to any effective working relationship. Once rapport is established, genuine collaboration can begin.

Potential Barriers

- **Cultural incompetence:**
Misunderstanding the needs and values of young adults whose lived experiences differ from your own.
- **Cultural insensitivity:**
The inability or unwillingness to identify and accept cultural differences and power imbalances.



Strategies to Consider

- Understand common traumas and stresses of young adults to avoid repeating them, which could be triggering.
- Maintain an accepting and affirming environment that meets physical and emotional safety needs.
- Anticipate cultural differences. Respond with sensitivity, compassion, and a commitment to learning.



Meaningful Engagement

In order for youth and adult partners to collaborate effectively, it's important that young people are meaningfully engaged throughout the process.

Potential Barriers

- **Tokenism:** Including representation from a certain group of people merely to create the illusion of diversity or equality.



Strategies to Consider

- Ask young people to identify meaningful ways they can benefit from collaboration.
- Work with young people to identify their skills, strengths, and special abilities so they can be centered in the collaborative process.
- Offer opportunities to youth that enrich their quality of life and promote personal and professional development.
- Facilitate meaningful person-to-person connections, such as mentorship.
- Create a safe atmosphere that values positive thoughts and behaviors and encourages productive feedback.
- Equip youth with the education and tools necessary to advocate for their immediate needs and collective goals.



Leadership Development

Promote and respect the autonomy of young adults while intentionally creating space for personal and professional growth.

Potential Barriers

- **Adultism:**
The belief that adults know more about what youth need than youth themselves. It is the systemic discrimination and prejudice against younger people based on their age.
- **Exploitation:**
Treating people unfairly in order to benefit from their efforts.



Strategies to Consider

- Invite young adults to make decisions that they feel are best for them and respect their choices.
- Encourage young people to advocate for themselves and their peers.
- Identify and remove organizational barriers between youth and higher management.
- Compensate young people equitably for their time, input, and lived experience.
- Make decisions through group discussion and critical analysis rather than simple majority votes.

Understanding Adultism

Consider the times you've heard someone say, "They're just kids." Authentic youth collaboration can be hindered when the ideas of young people are dismissed due to their age and presumed lack of knowledge or experience.

Language is an easy place to start addressing adultism. Referring to young people as "kids" can come across as condescending. Instead, try using terms like "young people" or "young adults." We'll explore other strategies in this section.

What is adultism?

Adultism is defined as prejudice toward and discrimination against children and younger adults based on their age.

Examples:

- Dismissing the choices young people make because you think you know better than them.
- Inviting young people with lived experience to share only their stories of trauma and not their expertise.
- Expecting young people to answer any question asked by an older adult, no matter how personal.



What is the difference between adultism and ageism?

Ageism is discrimination against elders and older adults based on their age.

Adultism is discrimination against children, youth, and younger adults based on their age.

Reframing Adulthood

Adulthood, like racism or sexism, is an example of systemic oppression. Systemic oppressions are ingrained early in life and often go unrecognized – even though they're everywhere. The learned ideas and behaviors caused by adulthood can create divisive power imbalances in collaborations between young people and adult partners. The following chart presents solutions to common adultist behaviors.

Rooted in Adulthood

Assuming you know what is best for youth because you are older or more experienced than them.

Judging young people based on their appearances, thoughts, and actions, or your own personal preferences.

Inviting participation from youth merely to create the impression of inclusion and diversity.

Asking youth to speak publicly without proper information and training.

Not compensating young people for their input, time, and effort.

Soliciting the input of youth without first establishing transparent guidelines and expectations.

Committing youth to participate in broad discussions which may or may not be relevant to them.

Asking youth to talk about topics regarding their lived experience without considering their comfort level.

Asking youth to participate in a process, but not reporting back the impact of their contributions.

Rooted in Equity

Respecting youth as the experts of their own lives and experiences.

Anticipating, respecting, and celebrating differences among people.

Actively listening to the opinions of youth and young adults with the intention of creating solutions based on their feedback.

Educating and equipping youth with the tools needed to actively engage in advocacy.

Compensating youth in a way that's equivalent to adults doing the same work.

Establishing trust with young people by being clear and up-front about the parameters and goals of the collaboration.

Presenting youth with opportunities and asking if they are interested in participating.

Asking youth what topics they feel comfortable discussing and informing them in advance of the intended purpose, target audience, and reach.

Providing evidence of the impact and effectiveness of solutions and feedback offered by youth and young adults.

Activity: Undoing Adultism



This can be done independently or used to facilitate a guided discussion with adult partners.

Instructions

Read each scenario one at a time. After each scenario, ask the following questions:

- What about this scenario is adultist?
- If you were a young person, how might this interaction make you feel?
- How might you reframe this scenario?

If necessary, refer to the suggested reframe as an example.

1

Scenario:

Kasey meets with her case manager and divulges that her best friend passed away of an overdose the night before. Her case manager tells her, “I know just how you feel.”

Suggested Reframe:

Kasey meets with her case manager and divulges that her best friend passed away of an overdose the night before. Instead of responding or attempting to sympathize or empathize, her case manager actively listens and provides insight when asked.

Explanation:

Young people want to feel heard. Sometimes, just listening is best.

2

Scenario:

Jose delivers a powerful testimonial at a youth advisory board meeting. Afterwards, he is greeted by a caseworker who tells him, “I didn’t know you were so smart.”

Suggested Reframe:

Jose delivers a powerful testimonial at a youth advisory board meeting. Afterwards, he is greeted by a caseworker who tells him, “Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and expertise.”

Explanation:

Underestimating a young person’s capabilities can be dismissive and belittling.



Activity: Undoing Adulthood

3

Scenario:

After being released from jail, Chris stops by the drop-in center to shower and eat. The first case manager she sees says, “I told you that you’d end up in jail.” Chris feels embarrassed and leaves.

Suggested Reframe:

After being released from jail, Chris stops by the drop-in center to shower and eat. The first case manager she sees greets her with a smile, asks if she wants to talk, and invites her into a separate office. He asks Chris to tell him what happened and how she is doing, and tells her she was missed while she was away. Chris stays because she feels respected and understood, even though she made a mistake.

Explanation:

Instead of shaming young people, invite them to talk through mistakes and lessons learned. In these conversations, it’s important to do more listening than talking.

4

Scenario:

After reviewing his monthly budget with his case manager, Frank learns that he has overspent for the month. His case manager tells him, “You need help managing your money.”

Suggested Reframe:

After reviewing his monthly budget with his case manager, Frank learns that he has overspent for the month. His case manager asks Frank if he’d like assistance with managing his finances.

Explanation:

Instead of assuming young people are unable to handle situations on their own, ask them if they would like assistance.

Activity: Undoing Adulthood



5

Scenario:

Tre notices that Keisha is not her usual self when she walks through the doors of the drop-in center. The first thing he says is, “I know something’s wrong. Let’s talk about it.”

Suggested Reframe:

Tre notices that Keisha is not her usual self when she walks through the doors of the drop-in center. He greets her with a smile and asks her how she is. As they talk, Tre encourages Keisha to focus on what is going well in her life.

Explanation:

Focusing on negativity could further victimize young people. Instead, invite them to think of things they can celebrate.

6

Scenario:

Terrance walks into a group counseling session with bloodshot eyes and has a hard time writing his name on the sign-in sheet. Assuming he is under the influence, the group leader says, “You can’t participate in group while you’re high.”

Suggested Reframe:

Terrance walks into a group counseling session with bloodshot eyes and has a hard time writing his name on the sign-in sheet. The group leader greets him and asks, “How is your day going?”

Explanation:

If you want to know what’s going on with a young person, ask first. Use open-ended questions to get as much information as possible instead of assuming things about them. Then, if necessary, ask more directly.



Activity: Undoing Adulthood

7

Scenario:

A group of youth with lived experience of homelessness has been assembled to provide feedback on how to improve services in their community. They are asked to only speak about ways to improve basic direct services and not how to address systemic issues within the services in their community.

Suggested Reframe:

A group of youth with lived experience of homelessness is invited to sit down with service providers and provide feedback on how to improve overall services in their community. They are viewed as equal stakeholders and their input is valued equally.

Explanation:

Value youth as equal stakeholders in the decision-making process.

8

Scenario:

Mrs. Dorsey notices that Jacob has started smoking cigarettes. Believing this behavior is unhealthy for him, she tells him that he needs to stop smoking before he dies of lung cancer.

Suggested Reframe:

Mrs. Dorsey notices that Jacob has started smoking cigarettes. She believes this is unhealthy for him but recognizes that he is responsible for his own choices. Instead of judging or scolding him, she works to understand why Jacob likes smoking cigarettes and offers a list of healthier alternatives that provide similar benefits for Jacob to consider.

Explanation:

Rather than telling young people what they should or need to do, assess what options they have considered and talk through them together.



Activity: Undoing Adulthood

9

Scenario:

Jordan has a new girlfriend and is convinced that she is the girl of their dreams. They confide in their mentor, telling him they think they're in love. Their mentor laughs and says, "You are too young to know what love is."

Suggested Reframe:

Jordan has a new girlfriend and is convinced that she is the girl of their dreams. They confide in their mentor, telling him they think they're in love. Their mentor congratulates them.

Explanation:

Age is not the same as expertise. When youth share information about their lives with you, take them seriously.

10

Scenario:

Mr. Dave is helping Jamie apply for colleges. Jamie is undecided about which school to attend. Mr. Dave knows that Jamie is very good at math and says they should attend Texas Tech because of its world-renowned math program.

Suggested Reframe:

Mr. Dave is helping Jamie apply for colleges. He asks Jamie what they would like to major in, where they would like to live, and if they have any schools in mind. Together, they research a list of schools that fit Jamie's interests. When asked, Mr. Dave provides feedback and insight.

Explanation:

Instead of suggesting what is best for young people, encourage them to consider all of the available options and invite them to make their own choices.

Collaborating on Services

In order to collaborate with youth who participate in your programs and services, it's important to honor their autonomy to make important decisions that impact their lives. For example, a service provider could use an intake form to educate young people about different available housing options rather than making the choice for them. This allows young people to make informed decisions for themselves.

Create safety by differentiating between a young person's role as a participant and as a collaborator. For example, provide a clearly written policy to assure youth that their experience and access to services will not be adversely affected if they offer negative feedback about the program.

Youth participants sometimes require support from adult partners to become equipped with the tools they need to make informed decisions. In order to have meaningful collaboration:

- Reduce power imbalances and their impacts.
- Create spaces where young people feel safe to make important decisions.
- Show youth that their decisions create results and matter.

Listening Sessions

Listening sessions are facilitated conversations that are centered around the ideas and suggestions of young adults. Adult partners in the room are asked to remain silent throughout the process to create space for the perspectives of young people with lived experience.

Listening sessions may be used to:

- Gain insight on the positive and negative aspects of various programs and systems.
- Establish the goals, vision, and mission of a collaboration between youth and adult partners.
- Identify the tools and trainings that will best equip youth to participate in the collaborative process.
- Form a youth leadership body, including the internal structure and decision-making processes.



Guiding Principles

Use these principles to center your collaboration in service provision or the creation of youth leadership bodies:

Set leaders up for success.

Before asking young people for their expertise, ensure they have the necessary tools to support them throughout the process. For instance, if you're having a conversation about policy, create a list of local, state, and federal agencies, including their acronyms and the work they do. You might also create a list of system terms and definitions in addition to organizational programs.

Reduce barriers to participation.

Provide various channels for young adult leaders to offer their input and feedback. Options could include organizing discussion groups and listening sessions, distributing printed materials to gather written responses, and collaborating on a shared drive or online document.

Set clear and realistic deadlines.

Be mindful that youth and young adults have personal lives outside of this work. Keep each other accountable by scheduling milestone dates together.

Highlight the impact of the work.

Give clear examples of how youth input was influential in the final decision or product. Consider both local and national impact.

BE AWESOME.



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