

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

Youth Engagement refers to the intentional and meaningful engagement of youth in all parts of a campaign or program, from ideation and design to implementation and evaluation. This happens by creating an environment where youth voices are heard without stigma or judgement. Meaningful youth engagement integrates the experiences and ideas of young people into program design while also building on their skills and strengths.

Youth Engagement Models common in the prevention field include *youth as resources* and *social development model*; they are distinct and complementary. Taken together, these engagement models suggest that youth benefit from opportunities to develop their personal strengths and contribute to the strengths of their communities with a group of pro-social peers.

| Youth Engagement Models | |
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| Youth as Resources | Social Development Model |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shifts from framing youth as being or having problems that need fixing to framing youth, families, and communities as having strengths to develop Prevention efforts should be focused on environmental, rather than individual, change Provide youth with alternatives that consist of a nurturing context and opportunities to participate meaningfully | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth membership in a pro-social group results in pro-social behaviors, just as membership in an anti-social group results in anti-social behaviors Membership requires bonding with a group which is defined as youth having a role, having skills to fulfill that role, and receiving positive signals for fulfilling that role |

Youth as Resources aims to engage youth in positive *alternatives* to the behaviors traditionally prioritized by prevention programs. For example, youth might take leadership roles in program design or offer meaningful guidance on a coalition’s priorities.

Social Development Model demonstrates the impact of *peer groups* on behavior, positing that stable membership in a pro-social group of peers can positively influence an adolescent who has exhibited some anti-social behavior. This means providing spaces for whole peer groups to form, gather, and learn and create, especially after someone makes a mistake.

“What is clear from research on resilient youth – youth who have become healthy adults in spite of adversity – is the significant role played by the opportunity to experience *somewhere in their lives* a caring, nurturing environment which encourages their *active participation* in meaningful activities” (Benard, 1990).

For some youth, their local prevention coalition is that place!

Youth Engagement Strategies

Youth peer advocates are paid, part-time, professionals who support coalition coordinators and act as a liaison between the program, its youth participants, and community partners.

Youth-adult partnerships bring youth and adults together in partnership to learn the requisite skills to meet their shared goals.

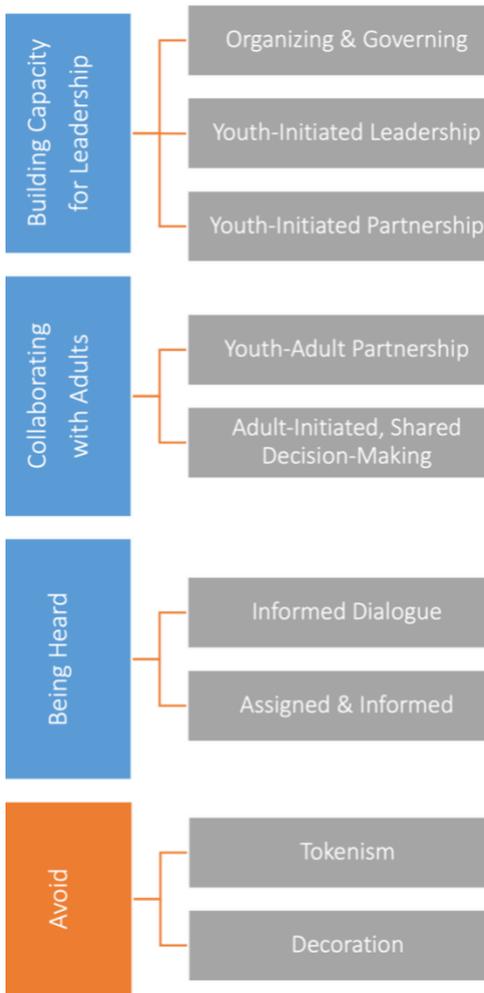
Youth leadership within the formal coalition structure can be scaffolded to support full involvement while youth develop leadership skills.

Youth councils or youth coalitions may act as a subcommittee within the coalition and offer excellent leadership development opportunities.

Informal youth engagement strategies like events, outreach, and providing nurturing spaces where youth can spend time can also yield insights and guidance.



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Thinking of Youth Engagement as a System precludes relying on one-off engagement or feedback opportunities and focuses on offering expansive involvement for youth that brings them progressively closer to, and eventually positions them as, organizational and community leaders.

The *Youth Engagement Ladder* to the left visualizes a spectrum of youth engagement practices that can be taken separately but are best viewed as a progressive structure which youth ascend through active participation and interest in leadership opportunities. Remember that the key to effective youth engagement is *meaningful* participation. Adolescents are highly motivated by peer relationships and social status, making leadership opportunities an excellent context for meaningful participation. ([Nowicki & Hart, n/d](#))

Youth might start *Being Heard* as participants at outreach events or in teen spaces and be pulled into dialogue or shared responsibilities. Next, youth may begin *Collaborating with Adults* by informing decisions or embarking on learning experiences together. *Building Capacity for Leadership* must have reliable and formal structures, beginning as youth-initiated partnerships or youth-initiated leadership - that is, youth broaden the community by bringing new people or organizations to the table or create and lead project or program plans with minimal support – and culminating in youth-governance structures with substantive decision-making power.

Just as there are aspirational ways of engaging youth, there are problematic ways. Those include using youth solely as decoration or entertainment, exploiting their stories for publicity or resources, or offering only symbolic decision-making authority.

Youth Engagement Readiness Assessments like the one to the right, offers a clear, simple framework for highlighting key insights about your stakeholders' current capacity, how a hopeful youth engagement initiative might take shape or how a current initiative might be strengthened. More details [here](#) and [here](#).

Remember:

- The youth you engage are typically minors, meaning they need parental consent and often have school or extra-curricular activities that affect their availability.
- Good engagement requires competent staff, structured supports, and interested youth. If no young folks want to help lead your program, perhaps they'd like to help redesign it.
- Make sure your participation numbers are supported by sufficient staff, youth leaders, and volunteers – for safety and fun.

| | | |
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| In what activities will youth participate? | <input type="checkbox"/> Program design <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitation <input type="checkbox"/> Program evaluation <input type="checkbox"/> Budgeting <input type="checkbox"/> Researching | <input type="checkbox"/> Policy-making <input type="checkbox"/> Board of Directors <input type="checkbox"/> Advocacy <input type="checkbox"/> Strategy and planning <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| Which youth will participate? | <input type="checkbox"/> Existing participants <input type="checkbox"/> New participants <input type="checkbox"/> System-involved youth <input type="checkbox"/> Unsheltered youth | <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting or pregnant youth <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple communities <input type="checkbox"/> Historically-oppressed youth <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| How many youth will participate? | <input type="checkbox"/> A few (2-15) <input type="checkbox"/> A medium group (16-50) <input type="checkbox"/> A large group (51-100) <input type="checkbox"/> Very many (100+) <input type="checkbox"/> Whole community | <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple communities <input type="checkbox"/> Statewide <input type="checkbox"/> Nationwide <input type="checkbox"/> Global <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| Who will support youth and with what funding? | <input type="checkbox"/> An older youth <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer <input type="checkbox"/> One paid staff <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple paid staff <input type="checkbox"/> Other | <input type="checkbox"/> Grant funding <input type="checkbox"/> Donations <input type="checkbox"/> Operational budget <input type="checkbox"/> No funding <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| What roles will youth have? | <input type="checkbox"/> Contract stipend <input type="checkbox"/> Paid staff <input type="checkbox"/> Advisor <input type="checkbox"/> Voting Member | <input type="checkbox"/> Participant <input type="checkbox"/> Intern <input type="checkbox"/> Peer mentor <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| Are adults ready? | <input type="checkbox"/> Respect for youth <input type="checkbox"/> Willing to part with power/control <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys being with young people <input type="checkbox"/> Comfortable with chaos | <input type="checkbox"/> Patient <input type="checkbox"/> Listens carefully <input type="checkbox"/> Willing to admit when wrong <input type="checkbox"/> Likes trying new things |
| Are youth ready? | <input type="checkbox"/> Willing to partner with adults <input type="checkbox"/> Willing/able to take on more responsibility <input type="checkbox"/> Want to try new and different things | <input type="checkbox"/> Open to guidance <input type="checkbox"/> Listens carefully <input type="checkbox"/> Willing to ask questions <input type="checkbox"/> Willing to admit when wrong things |