

## Planning for Youth Engagement

### Youth Engagement Matters

Communities and organizations are increasingly acknowledging the need to work with youth and young adults as partners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, authenticity, and reciprocity. Any clinic, school, national, or community program can engage young people in respectful, mutually beneficial ways. In support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention grantee community, learning generated through YESS presents an opportunity to shift current thinking about substance use prevention and early intervention. Young people have a unique part to play in substance use prevention, including within Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) – a key strategy of focus among grantees. This increasingly means that roles for youth and young adults are transforming from service recipient to active participant or service partner and even to program developer and service provider. Wherever a program falls on this continuum, there is an opportunity to enhance work with youth in a mutually beneficial way.

**In this Brief:** To ensure a successful and productive partnership experience for youth and adults, it is important that organizations conduct proper planning and provide training.

### Why is Planning for Youth Engagement Important?

Although there are genuine opportunities for youth at all decision-making levels, an organization must carefully identify goals, objectives, and readiness to successfully support youth. It is important to recognize youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships naturally require a degree of experimentation and even conflict before a mutually beneficial system is in place.<sup>1,2,3</sup> This experimentation phase is time-consuming, as youth and adults test out methods of collaboration, communication, and shared decision-making. Even resolving the time, place, and processes of meetings can be critical to ensuring youth feel confident and empowered to share their opinions, lead presentations, or advocate for a course of action.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, steps may be taken during the planning and preparation stage that reduce the learning curve and enhance the youth engagement experience for adults and young people.

### Identify the Appropriate Level of Engagement

Youth engagement looks different across programs and settings. The type and scope of youth engagement depends on unique needs, goals, interests, and skills of the involved youth and adults and objectives of the program or organization. Both adults and youth will likely differ on levels of expertise, comfort with decision-making, interest in different roles, skills around specific tasks, or availability to engage. Some organizations are not ready to embark on intensive youth leadership activities, but

#### HART'S LADDER: LEVELS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



all are ready for youth engagement. Typologies, such as Hart's Ladder, frame youth engagement in the form of a hierarchy or continuum and are helpful to conceptualize levels of engagement.<sup>5</sup> The Hart's Ladder framework spans levels such as "Youth/Adult Equity" and "Completely Youth Driven" through "Youth-Informed" and – when not done well – "Tokenism" or "Decoration."<sup>6</sup> However, simply doing more engagement activities does not guarantee quality experiences for youth and adults. Instead, organizations are encouraged to prioritize reciprocity, respect, shared control, and decision-making wherever they fall on the continuum of youth engagement options.

If the resources, buy-in, or structures for ongoing engagement are not yet in place, it may be prudent for an agency to begin by soliciting youth input and ensuring youth are properly supported in this process. Or, agencies can begin by working with existing youth organizations or boards in their community; these groups can also help organizations to expand their youth capacity. Youth recovery organizations, for example, are often prepared and willing to offer their feedback on community initiatives.

### Establish Leadership Buy-in

Integrating youth into existing organizational frameworks might face resistance.<sup>7</sup> When decision-makers are not interested in youth input, participation will fizzle. If youth engagement is to develop and be sustainable at an organizational level, buy-in from leadership is a pre-requisite. As one member of the YESS Youth Advisory Board noted, *"Everyone needs to be on board [with] allowing youth engagement to come in and understanding the sacrifices and work that it takes."* However, there are concrete ways to appeal to the unique needs of adult leadership and foster buy-in. Training and education on benefits and predictable challenges of youth engagement is an important tool. If leadership is going to endorse an authentic role for youth on a program (or across programs), the case for youth engagement as positive, rewarding, and impactful for adults as well as youth needs to be made. Demonstrating how outcomes improve when youth are granted opportunities to be leaders, innovators, and change makers can inspire adult partners and create buy-in. Adult researchers and practitioners are often motivated by new scholarship and data-driven outcomes. The quality of information gathered and outcomes measured improves when youth become involved and engaged.

### Plan for the Youth-Adult Partnership

Adults and youth recognize the need to establish clear expectations to facilitate success. When planning for a youth-adult partnership, consider how best to approach issues such as fostering shared decision-making, promoting transparency, collaborating, and maintaining openness and flexibility.

**Shared Decision-making:** Fostering shared decision-making can be one of the most challenging aspects of youth engagement. However, it helps to be clear about expectations for youth and adult contributions early on, even delineating exactly how decision-making will be shared at each step.<sup>8</sup> Finding a middle ground between autonomy and guidance that acknowledges

### OTHER KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT SUCCESS: A SNAPSHOT

- **Avoid Tokenism:** Seek to work respectfully with youth at all levels of engagement and avoid stereotyping.
- **Ensure Diversity and Inclusion:** No single young person represents all youth. Seek diversity and inclusion in youth engagement efforts.
- **Recruit Youth:** Work with young people to identify and appeal to new youth participants and members. Consider strategies to bring in new perspectives.
- **Foster and Sustain Meaningful Engagement:** Leverage motivation, interests, and needs of youth to maintain engagement.
- **Commit Resources:** Responsible youth engagement takes time and incentives. Efforts that do not allocate resources will struggle.

*"Even when there is dedicated staff, if there is no ear for change, youth recommendations and contributions won't matter."*

—Stakeholder Interview

*"Make sure to be fair and give youth parameters. Set up the context, so they know what can and cannot be done. This will avoid setting up plans that will fail."*

—Stakeholder Interview

distinct skillsets, needs, and goals, while respecting the multifaceted lives and responsibilities of both adults and youth is essential, but difficult.<sup>9,10</sup> On the one hand, adults may seek to grant youth complete autonomy. However, withholding guidance may impede youth development if youth struggle to succeed without adult input. On the other hand, an inequitable and hierarchical relationship undermines potential benefits of a youth-adult partnership and renders power differentials highly visible.<sup>11</sup> For an ideal balance, avoid asking youth to do “busy work” or adults to hold back. Instead, elicit the unique skills and interests of all involved in the partnership.

**Transparency:** Adults should be honest at the outset about what is possible and define parameters. For example: Are there budgetary restrictions? Pre-established objectives or outcomes set by a funder? An approval process that needs to be followed? Acknowledging such constraints as soon as realistic will reduce unnecessary disappointment and conflict. If an idea is not implemented or changed, it should be communicated to the youth with proper explanation.

**Collaboration:** In some contexts, it is ideal for a dedicated adult advisor to work with a youth advisory or governing group if only for the purpose of working through programmatic ideas that are feasible and measurable. These staff can be young, perhaps former youth advisory board members, and translate ideas for older staff. Thinking through solutions that respect the time of all parties, such as virtual meetings and online discussion posts for collaboration, is one part of appropriately working alongside youth.

**Openness and Flexibility:** Youth need a safe space to begin with broad creative ideas – no matter how unfeasible – to generate their best thinking. The YESS Youth Advisory Board emphasized that a general attitude of flexibility is important – the extent to which youth will contribute and/or lead depends on the group and the context, and there should be space to mutually agree on more or less work based on realistic levels of commitment.

## Train Adults and Youth

Ongoing training, possibly from a third-party, is essential for both youth and adult partners. Priority training topics include sustaining effective youth-adult partnerships, cross-generational communication, disclosure and personal storytelling, adultism and tokenism, facilitation skills, and resolving conflicts.<sup>12,13</sup> However, it can be difficult to identify freely available and complete training packages. It is possible to gather components from external trainings and individualize training based on what is needed in the community or context. Please see Additional Resources for helpful training and assessment tools.

Youth engagement benefits youth, adults, programs, and communities. As described in this brief, with proper planning and readiness, the experience can have a lasting positive impact on all involved.

*“Create a space where young people feel safe to explore and experiment with ideas together, and reiterate that if something fails, it’s okay. If they don’t get the outcomes they hoped, reassure them that the adults still have their back.”*

—Stakeholder Interview

*“Ask the youth to help decide what’s most important in terms of trade-offs. Guide them to get there themselves by having them critically analyze the idea.”*

—Stakeholder Interview

*“Training with both youth and adults helps to avoid power struggles and teach both parties how to partner.”*

—Stakeholder Interview

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Youth-Adult Partnerships in Community Decision Making](#)
- [Being Y-AP Savvy: A Primer on Creating and Sustaining Youth-Adult Partnerships](#)
- [Participatory Action Research Toolkit](#)
- [Say Y.E.S. to Youth: Youth Engagement Strategies](#)
- [Lead the Way: Engaging Youth in Health Care](#)
- [Youth Engagement in School-Based Health Care – Substance Use Prevention](#)
- [Walking the Talk: A Toolkit for Engaging Youth in Mental Health](#)



The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation recognizes that SBIRT for adolescents has historically been developed, implemented, and informed by adult perspectives. In an effort to bring youth and young adult voices to the Strategic Initiative and transform how we think about substance use prevention and early intervention, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is partnering with the Center for Social Innovation (C4) to explore current status and potential opportunities for youth engagement with grantees. Youth Engagement Strategies and Support (YESS) leverages the learning of pioneers in youth engagement and explores how these lessons can be applied to adolescent substance use prevention and early intervention. Please refer to additional briefs on *Defining and Understanding the Benefits of Youth Engagement*, *Recruiting Youth and Sustaining Engagement*, and *Bringing Youth Voice to SBIRT* for more insight from the YESS project.

<sup>1</sup>Camino, L. (2005). Pitfalls and promising practices of youth–adult partnerships: An evaluator’s reflections. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 75-85.

<sup>2</sup>Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(2), 75-90.

<sup>3</sup>Murdock, S., Paterson, C., & Gatmaitan, M. C. L. (2008). Youth in community decision-making: A study of youth-adult partnerships. *Journal of Youth Development*, 2(3), 74-86.

<sup>4</sup>Finlay, S. (2010). Carving out meaningful spaces for youth participation and engagement in decision-making. *Youth Studies Australia*, 29(4), 53.

<sup>5</sup>Wong, N. T., Zimmerman, M. A., & Parker, E. A. (2010). A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(1-2), 100-114.

<sup>6</sup>Wong, et al., 2010.

<sup>7</sup>Damon, W., Callon, C., Wiebe, L., Small, W., Kerr, T., & McNeil, R. (2017). Community-based participatory research in a heavily researched inner city neighbourhood: Perspectives of people who use drugs on their experiences as peer researchers. *Social Science & Medicine*, 176, 85-92.

<sup>8</sup>Soleimanpour, S., Brindis, C., Geierstanger, S., Kandawalla, S., & Kurlaender, T. (2008). Incorporating youth-led community participatory research into school health center programs and policies. *Public Health Reports*, 123(6), 709-716.

<sup>9</sup>Mance, G. A., Mendelson, T., Byrd III, B., Jones, J., & Tandon, D. (2010). Utilizing community-based participatory research to adapt a mental health intervention for African American emerging adults. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*, 4(2), 131-140.

<sup>10</sup>Wong, et al., 2010.

<sup>11</sup>Damon, et al., 2007.

<sup>12</sup>Camino, L. (2005). Pitfalls and promising practices of youth-adult partnerships: An evaluator’s reflections. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 75-85.

<sup>13</sup>Einspruch, E. L. & Wunrow, J. J. (2002). Assessing youth/adult partnerships: The seven circles (AK) experience. *Journal of Drug Education*, 32(1), 1-12.