



THE EXCHANGE



News from FYSB and the Youth Services Field

July 2002

Putting Real Youth Participation Into Practice

Youth participation, youth involvement, youth-adult partnership, youth leadership, and youth empowerment. While the meanings of these terms differ slightly, all express the youth service field's emphasis on making young people participants rather than merely spectators or recipients of services. Behind this concept also is the idea that young people and communities benefit when youth are active partners in projects that aim to build stronger, healthier communities.

In many youth service organizations, young people are being asked to take on responsible roles in service provision or community improvement projects. They are serving as board members, peer mentors and counselors, conference and workshop planners, and community service volunteers. They are helping write newsletters, conducting presentations, and carrying out a range of other responsible tasks.

Involving young people in service provision, program development, or community improvement efforts can provide them with new skills and the knowledge that they can make important contributions. Their participation also may increase public awareness of, and appreciation for, their capacity to contribute.

Creating an environment in which youth are valued, in turn, may help move communities toward a Positive Youth Development approach to meeting the needs of young people. Through that approach, all youth are provided opportunities to be involved in, and supported by, the community.

Yet youth involvement strategies are a component of, rather than synonymous with, the Positive Youth Development approach. The Positive Youth Development approach implies a shift in systems and services to give all young people access to services and opportunities, with an

emphasis on doing so through family and community. Through those systems and services, youth can develop into healthy adults by gaining a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and power. Youth participation can provide young people with some or all of these factors when they are offered support, meaningful activities, a real sense of participation, and opportunities to develop skills.

But youth involvement efforts do not automatically provide youth with developmental opportunities. As youth service professionals well know, if we ask youth to participate, we must give them the support they need to contribute in a significant way.

Without that support, when young people take on roles for which they do not have sufficient skills and experience, they may become discouraged by what is required of them. Further, they may not gain a realistic sense of what it means to be responsible and accountable for decisions.

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Providing the appropriate level of support to youth involved in agency activities requires that organizations have the following:

- Substantial agreement among adult staff about the goals of their youth participation efforts and the benefit to young people, the organization, and the community
- Adequate resources (staffing and funds) to provide proper training and support to staff and participating young people so that those goals can be reached
- Staff who have been provided sufficient organizational support to feel secure that young people's involvement will not negatively affect their role in the organization
- Clarity about which activities are appropriate for young people's involvement and which activities youth may not be ready to tackle
- The ability to disseminate information about youth participation opportunities to a wide range of young people (rather than only youth who are already involved in many youth-adult partnership efforts or who excel at certain activities, such as public speaking)
- Transportation that ensures that youth can reach events, especially where the lack of transportation presents a barrier to youth participation
- A system for addressing the liability issues that deter some organizations from including young people in organizational activities and projects

Those conditions are most easily created in agencies that have invested in developing sound organizational structures. Such structures include a clear sense of organizational mission and vision, an active and involved board, and training and ongoing

supervision for staff. Sound organizations also offer a full range of programs and services that have shown positive results, and conduct outreach and educational efforts that promote the organizational mission and vision in the broader community. With solid organizational practices in place, agencies are better positioned to implement new initiatives, including crafting or retooling their approach to youth participation.

Preparing for, Planning, and Implementing Youth Participation Efforts

Today, some organizations are reassessing their approach to involving young people. Over the years, for example, many of the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) grantees have taken a closer look at how they might enhance their youth involvement efforts, and then implemented new approaches.

On the basis of the FYSB grantees' experience, the following are steps that organizations might consider in implementing effective youth participation initiatives:

1. Analyzing Organizational Readiness for Youth Participation. Organizational leaders might begin by reflecting on the impact of their own leadership and management styles on youth involvement efforts (see page 6). Agency leaders' efforts to engage and

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support their staff in agency planning can provide a model for them in involving and guiding youth.

They then might involve their board and staff in assessing the outcomes of past youth involvement efforts and the attitudes of the organization's board and staff toward youth participation (see page 7). Organizational leaders might promote a realistic discussion of key issues through questions such as the following:

- What were the goals of the organization's past youth participation efforts? Were those goals achieved? What were the measurable outcomes of those efforts for young people and the agency?
- How did the young people who were involved feel about the effort and what was achieved? How were they supervised and coached in their roles? Did they feel that they were provided with adequate supervision and support to carry out the tasks in which they were engaged?
- What are the organization's goals for future youth participation initiatives, and how do these fit into the organizational mission?
- In which types of activities and decisions is it appropriate to include young people? Which may not be appropriate for young people's involvement?

- What concerns are there among the staff and board about having greater youth participation in organizational programs and projects?
- How do we engage young people in the organizational planning process?

In processing these questions as a group, organizational leaders and staff might have a frank dialog about the obstacles to implementing meaningful youth participation initiatives. (If agency staff have concerns about involving young people, for example, the agency will need to address these before engaging youth in agency activities.) Most organizations that have identified youth involvement as being essential to their mission have found ways to make youth participation work for both young people and the community.

In some cases, though, staff and leaders may decide that the organization is not yet ready to implement a youth involvement initiative. In that case, the organization might set a timeline for doing so.

2. Developing a Youth Participation Plan. Should the organization decide to move forward or continue with a youth involvement effort, staff might use the results of the foregoing analysis to design an implementation plan. This plan might include the following:

- Identifying projects and activities that could fit into the organization's goals for its youth-adult partnership efforts (which were identified in step 1)
- Choosing and training the staff responsible for implementing the effort
- Identifying staff and outside resources who could provide orientation and training to youth and adults as part of the initiative
- Designing a process for recruiting young people and/or adults to participate in the effort
- Establishing a timeline for implementation
- Creating a process for sharing information about the effort
- Obtaining advice regarding liability issues

The organization then could identify the resources needed to put these components into place and develop a strategy for obtaining that support. The organization might, for example, seek outside funding dedicated to youth involvement projects, seek facilities for the project from inside or outside the community, and secure transportation for young people, as necessary.

3. Implementing the Youth Participation Plan. Organizations can use the plan to develop or adapt youth

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participation projects. The following tips may be helpful in designing projects that are tailored to the needs of young people:

- **Involve youth in projects that move quickly from the planning stages to action.** Youth, like many adults with limited experience in community projects, usually prefer action to planning and process. They therefore are best engaged when projects have goals that are set and acted on within a relatively short period.
- **Give young people roles in which they are likely to succeed.** Build young people's confidence in their abilities by giving them tasks that they can easily master before moving on to those that involve skill building or knowledge development. Rather than assigning young people to chair board meetings, for example, have them work for a period with adults who are accomplished in that role. Have debriefings with them about what they observed. As they gain more experience, they can slowly assume more responsibility. They might, for example, progress from being responsible for some aspect of meeting logistics, to taking notes on small-group discussions, to helping to develop and distribute an agenda, to facilitating a discussion about an agenda item.
- **Give youth responsibilities that help them build relationships.** Usually, one of the aims of youth involvement efforts is to help strengthen young people's connections to the community. In planning projects, therefore, organizations might ensure that they facilitate young people's interactions with, and connection to, caring adults and other young people.
- **Create structures to support youth serving on decision-making bodies.** Help youth to feel comfortable when they participate with adults in groups that have authority by not always expecting them to represent the "youth viewpoint." That expectation can put youth in the awkward position of having to accurately represent peers whose views may be quite diverse.

One alternative might be to assign a different adult member of the group at each meeting to partner with youth to represent young people's points of view when youth-related topics arise. Those adults could help the youth involved solicit, analyze, and report on the input of their peers.

In addition, staff might clarify the role of the youth representative with all young people who would be affected by choices made by the decisionmaking body. Other youth might be made aware, for example, that youth representatives do not necessarily control, nor can they be expected to be responsible for, final decisions that the group makes.

In doing so, the organization can help keep youth representatives from becoming targets of their peers' criticism for decisions about which disagreement exists. Moreover, adult staff can teach young people how to work with their peers in a way that does not appear patronizing.

4. Involving Young People Who Have a Variety of Experiences. A 1996 study for the Independent Sector by the Gallup Organization found that youth were four times more likely to volunteer if they were asked to do so than if they were not.¹

1. *Volunteering and Giving Among Teenagers 12 to 17 Years of Age*. Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 1997.

The challenge for organizations is to reach out beyond the “high achievers” to other youth whose participation is often not requested for a variety of reasons (and therefore, whose experiences often go unheard). These may include not being outspoken, having skills that are less easily recognized, having a busy work and school schedule, or having a disability that is perceived as a barrier to participation. In doing so, organizations can avoid overcommitting young people who have obvious leadership abilities while neglecting to involve other young people who may have untapped and less evident, yet important, skills.

Organizations might reach these youth by looking beyond their own circles of contacts to publicize youth-adult involvement opportunities to a range of community organizations, such as teacher groups, local businesses, neighborhood associations, and parent groups. In addition, through their everyday contacts with youth, organizational staff might be alert for opportunities to involve them. If, for example, a young person who has not shown much interest in youth-adult partnership projects mentions an area of interest or concern, staff might encourage the young person to help address that issue (always with adult support).

5. Selecting and Training

Adult Participants. In recruiting adult community members for participation in youth-adult partnership projects, it is important to have a well-planned process for recruiting, screening, and providing orientation and training to these individuals. One of the goals of youth-adult partnerships is for young people to establish supportive relationships with adults. Adults, then, should have the skills and attitudes required for building positive connections with youth.

Organizations might find the following points helpful when planning to involve adults:

- **Recruiting and screening.**

Conduct outreach to publicize the youth involvement effort among adults from a range of backgrounds. Then screen candidates to find out whether those expressing interest possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to interact with young people in appropriate and supportive ways. Ask potential adult participants about the following:

- Their experience and skills relevant to the effort, and why they are interested in becoming involved
- How they interact with young people (for example, what experiences have they had that show that they relate well to young people and are interested in their

welfare?) and how they might deal with difficulties in relating to youth (for example, how have they handled criticism directed toward them by a young person?)

- Their attitudes regarding people from backgrounds different from their own; for example, individuals from lower income groups, those who are gay or lesbian, or people from other racial/ethnic backgrounds

(The organization obviously would not wish to involve adults who express views that could be hurtful or discouraging to youth. Rather, as appropriate, organizations could offer such individuals other opportunities that do not involve contact with youth. Agencies also might link these individuals with appropriate educational and training opportunities. These could help them understand the impact of hurtful and discriminatory views or learn about how adults can support young people’s healthy development.)

- **Training.** Provide adults selected for participation with an orientation. You might discuss the purpose and goals of the effort, how the project or initiative will function, what is expected of adult participants,

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Providing Leadership on Youth Involvement: A Self-Assessment

1. What values, beliefs, and paradigms about young people and youth involvement do I hold? Which are important to me, and which do I need to rethink?
2. What process do I use to engage young people in examining the agency's continuing value and applicability to young people and the community?
3. What agency or community activities do I choose to involve youth in, and what process do I use to ensure their full involvement?
4. What decisions do I choose to involve youth in making, and what process do I use to ensure their full involvement?
5. What are my greatest fears when I think about involving young people in the work of my organization? What methods can I use to handle those fears when the agency begins to more fully engage young people?
6. Do I continually ask questions of young people, and do I really listen to their answers?
7. Do I provide opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles? What actions have I taken recently to build leadership skills among young people in my agency's community?
8. How would youth, community members, or other youth service organizations rate the agency's commitment to youth involvement?



Involving Youth: The Board and Staff Role

1. What values, beliefs, and paradigms about young people and youth involvement do I hold? Which are important to me, and which do I need to rethink? Are they consistent with those of the agency with which I work and, if not, how do I effectively address those differences?
2. If my agency does not actively involve youth, how can I learn enough about the value of youth involvement to effectively advocate for focusing the agency's attention and resources on this approach?
3. What strengths and skills do I bring to the agency's efforts to involve youth?
4. How can I best support the agency's leadership in involving youth?
5. How can I use my current position to most effectively engage young people?
6. What process do I use to solicit youth input about agency services and then to share that feedback with the agency leadership?
7. Do I continually ask questions of young people, and do I really listen to their answers?
8. Do I provide opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles? What actions have I taken recently to build leadership skills among young people in my agency's community?

difficulties they might encounter, where they can go for assistance, and how they can best support youth as part of the effort (see page 10). In addition, adults who participate in a program's youth involvement activities should be required to participate in ongoing training about their assigned roles and about working with adolescents.

6. Providing Orientation to and Support for Young People.

Young people's initial experiences in youth participation efforts can be crucial to their future involvement in community projects. Early in a youth participation effort, young people often are able to sense the degree to which the organization takes their roles seriously by evaluating the support that they are provided.

For this reason, it is critical to have a strong process for offering an orientation to young people, identifying youth roles, providing them support and training, and giving them opportunities to talk about their experience:

- **Offering an orientation.**

Orientation sessions are opportunities for organizational staff to learn from young people the goals they have for their participation and to share the organization's goals for their involvement. During orientation, organizational staff and youth with experience in youth-adult partnerships can offer young people tips on

working alongside adults, answer young people's questions, and provide information on the specific goals of the effort in which they will be involved.

- **Identifying youth roles.** Once young people have completed an orientation, staff can work with them to identify their interests, skills, and experiences and use this information to discuss potential roles for them. Youth and staff then can work together to set goals for young people's participation.

It is important to assign young people tasks in which they are likely to succeed; just like adults, young people need to feel competent in performing lower level tasks before they progress to more complicated assignments. When young people start with less complicated tasks, they gain skills and experience that increase the likelihood that they will have opportunities to tackle more challenging tasks.

- **Providing support through a well-trained adult mentor.**

Youth participants might be assigned an adult mentor, who can provide them with support, help them learn specific skills, assist them in monitoring progress toward their goals, provide them with background information on substantive issues, offer advice on protocol and manners among adults, and listen and respond to their

frustrations or concerns.

Access to mentors is important for all young people in youth-adult partnerships. Mentors, however, are especially important for youth from at-risk circumstances, many of whom may have been victimized by adults and adult-run systems. Their participation in the youth involvement effort may be the first time they have been asked by adults to contribute their skills and insights. Some young people therefore may, with good reason, be initially mistrustful of projects designed by adults. A mentor can help youth rebuild their trust and confidence in adults and the community.

- **Providing training.** Organizations should provide youth with ongoing training on performing their assigned roles. In some cases, young people's initial training may occur on the job. In other cases, it may be useful to have an adult staffperson or an outside resource person provide more formal training to young people, especially before they begin performing a new role.
- **Debriefing.** When young people end their involvement in an effort, or when a project ends, organizational staff might meet with them to discuss how they felt about the experience, whether they met the goals that they set for themselves, and what future agency projects or services might interest them.

Through these individual debriefings, staff also can link youth with other programs within the organization, allowing agency staff to remain in contact with them and young people to remain involved.

Further, agency staff, preferably staff who did not work directly with the participating young people, might be assigned to bring together project participants to evaluate the results of the effort. Through these group debriefings, participants can discuss which elements of the effort were effective and which were not, talk about how they felt about their involvement, and identify successes to share with the community. Staff also can use this information to develop lessons learned to incorporate into future projects and to use in providing assistance to other community organizations carrying out youth involvement efforts.

7. Promoting Youth Involvement Efforts in the Community. Sharing information in the community about youth participation efforts can help build positive images of young people and in turn provide individuals and other organizations with ideas on ways they might tap young people's talents and energy.

Organizational staff might first meet with youth participants to provide information on different

strategies that might be used to encourage the community to involve young people. Depending on the communication strategy chosen, young people and adults might then develop information about the effort for display through fliers, newsletters, billboards, and special events. Youth and adults also might write news articles about the initiative for submission to the media or approach local journalists most likely to be interested in covering youth-related projects.

Promoting Youth-Adult Relationships Through Youth Participation

By sharing information about their youth involvement efforts, organizations can promote positive images of young people in the present, while affecting communities' approaches to young people far into the future. Through supported youth participation activities, organizations can learn how to draw on what youth do best and facilitate opportunities for young people and adults to build positive relationships. In turn, youth can gain the skills to contribute to future community-building efforts and develop relationships with adults and the community that help them feel they belong and are valued.

Today, then, the challenge is to encourage and support communities in engaging young people in positive and

meaningful youth participation experiences. FYSB grantees, and other youth service providers, are playing important roles in achieving both goals.

For More Information

If you would like to receive a list of publications related to youth involvement or more information on Positive Youth Development, please contact the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth (NCFY) at:

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NCFY publications, including *Reconnecting Youth & Community: A Youth Development Approach* and *Translating Youth Development Into Action* (the December 1998 issue of *The Exchange*), also are available on the NCFY Web site at: www.ncfy.com.

Building Partnerships With Young People

In our culture, working in partnership is not always easy. This is particularly true for youth-adult partnerships, which require a shift from the traditional relationships in which adults are presumed to be the leaders and young people the followers. Youth-adult partnerships, in fact, are based on adults and young people working together and learning from each other. Below are ideas for adults interested in building creative partnerships with young people:

- Learn more about working with young people, both individually and in groups. The more knowledge you have about adolescence and group process, the more comfortable you will feel during your work with young people.
 - Think about how to treat youth with the same respect that you would other adults. Just like adults, young people usually respond positively when they feel valued. So doing simple things matters: learning their names, asking for their opinions, listening when they are talking, being sensitive when offering advice, and speaking directly to them.
 - Remember that the success of a project in which youth and adults work together has a lot to do with the relationships youth and adults establish. So even while focusing on project goals, look for chances to engage with the young people involved.
 - Listen more than talk. Young people have spent at least a decade as listeners in most situations. During adolescence, they want and need the chance to share their feelings and ideas. Ask young people questions that allow them to talk about their experiences.
 - Encourage young people to express their opinions thoughtfully and positively. During adolescence, youth are learning both how to reason and how to express their views appropriately.
 - Check in with young people often about how things are going. Understandably, youth sometimes do not tell adults when they feel uncertain or frustrated with tasks or situations. That is especially true when things are new and unfamiliar for them. Be on the alert for signs that they might need support or advice.
 - Expect that young people will make mistakes. We all do. Moreover, adolescence is a time for learning, gaining skills, and building confidence. As part of that process, young people will do the wrong thing sometimes. Don't be afraid to address those mistakes, but offer guidance in a way that shows you care and are trying to help. In addition, model appropriate behavior after making mistakes by apologizing and working with others to create a positive outcome.
 - Share your experience. Be willing to talk about how you approach situations and build positive relationships. Remember that young people continue to look to adults for guidance even as they move toward greater autonomy.
 - Remember your own adolescence: your changing feelings, anger at authority, and fears and hopes. Look at the behavior of young people in the context of those memories to help you keep perspective.
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The National Youth Summit

Youth Participation in Action: A Case Study

Since fall 1999, the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) and numerous other key Federal agencies with a youth program focus have been collaborating regarding how to promote the Positive Youth Development approach to youth policy and programming.

Through a series of meetings of the “Blueprint for Youth” working group, these Federal agencies and their national organization partners agreed on a set of principles about Positive Youth Development. These have been widely distributed through the brochure, *Toward a Blueprint for Youth: Making Positive Youth Development a National Priority*.

In fall 2001, FYSB and its partners decided that they might best promote the Positive Youth Development approach through a national summit designed to bring together leaders in the youth service and related fields. The purpose of the conference was to build synergy among leading policymakers and practitioners about the steps necessary to further the field of Positive Youth Development. A Summit Planning Committee was established to develop themes; subcommittees identified key workshop tracks and began selecting speakers.

Through this initial planning process, however, the Planning Committee quickly recognized that planning and hosting a National Youth Summit without

the involvement of young people did not fit the Positive Youth Development model. Youth development is about partnering with young people and communities to address the challenges and opportunities associated with adolescence.

The Planning Committee established a Youth Committee; the youth selected to participate were recommended by agencies with which they already were involved in internships or other planning capacities.

Federal staff helped to facilitate the Youth Committee discussions, which took place by conference call because of budget and time constraints. The Youth Committee members reviewed workshop topics and helped to plan the youth entertainment component of the Summit. While most Summit participants rated the event highly, most youth participants encouraged the planners to more actively engage young people in all aspects of Summit planning and implementation. More important, they stressed the need for young people to be involved early in the planning process so that they could help shape the event.

The Summit Planning Committee members would be the first to admit that the process of engaging young people in the Summit was far from perfect, primarily because of the short timeframe in which the event needed to be planned. In

debriefing their experience, they identified the following lessons learned regarding engaging young people in planning a national conference:

- Create a Youth Committee to provide ongoing input into the overall conference planning, with a special focus on the role and interests of youth. Invite the Youth Committee to select several of its members to participate in the overall Conference Planning Committee.
- Establish a Conference Planning Committee comprising young people and adults who are interested in promoting youth involvement in planning and operating the conference.
- Involve young people early in the planning process, but take the time first to establish a process for planning the event that ensures that young people will be involved in ways that provide them with new skills, the opportunity to contribute, and the chance to work with adult mentors.
- Ensure that adults who are involved in planning or who will be participating in the event are aware of the need to support young people’s involvement continuously throughout the event. Ask the adult mentors to routinely provide feedback to the Planning Committee about the experience of the youth with

whom they are working and the degree to which all youth involved feel listened to and engaged in the planning process and the conference.

- Set appropriate expectations for youth at the beginning of the planning process by being clear about the roles and expectations of the Youth Committee. The overall Planning Committee can provide guidance and offer youth choices from the range of options available to the conference organizers, and explain time and budget constraints that impact the options available to them.
- Use the conference planning process as an opportunity to educate young people about government policies and practices and how to work with myriad agencies and personalities. If you will need to invite only key political officials to speak at the event's plenary sessions, for example, explain the reasons why to the youth involved.

Planning a conference or other major event provides a great opportunity for young people to experience the need to work with others collaboratively, compromise to achieve event goals, and defer to the leadership, when necessary.

- Involve youth in more than the standard plenary speaking sessions. Instead, offer them opportunities to learn how conferences really function.

They can gain invaluable experience by monitoring workshops, greeting speakers, checking room setups, helping with registration, collecting tickets at meal functions, and contributing to the preparation and distribution of conference materials.

- Encourage the youth involved to design interactive workshops with a focus on topics of interest to young people; put them in charge of monitoring and supporting youth involvement in all the conference workshops.
- Encourage youth feedback about the conference, and provide youth with training on how to constructively offer their ideas for future events.

Those and other youth messages heard at the Summit are not new; they simply need to be acted on as consistently as possible by adults in all settings. When FYSB previously asked its grantees to have young people answer the question, "What would you like to say to adults about how to best involve young people in community projects?" they said the following:

- Give us the chance to talk about our experiences, and consider what we share as seriously as you would the experiences of adults.
- Help establish roles for us in the community, and ask us what we think the needs of our communities are.

- Involve us in decisionmaking, and find ways for us to take charge of projects.

Without question, the best planning processes are inclusive, and youth are important partners in designing and implementing the Positive Youth Development approach for national conferences and in every community. FYSB and its partners plan to take advantage of the experiences, perspectives, and energy that young people can bring to the planning of the next National Youth Summit.

Watch for more information about the next National Youth Summit on the FYSB Web site at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in collaboration with eight other Federal agencies, hosted the National Youth Summit, held June 26–28, 2002, in Washington, D.C. The Summit brought together a diverse audience of nearly 2,000 young people and adults to explore the steps necessary to further the field of Positive Youth Development.

The Summit Planning Committee welcomes your ideas for the next Summit and is particularly interested in involving youth in planning for the event. If you would like to share your ideas, please send an e-mail to the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth at summit@ncfy.com.