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Collaborating for Social Change: Promising Practices for Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

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Collaborating for Social Change: Promising Practices for Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

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Abstract. Youth-adult partnerships are a powerful means to nurture and amplify youths' voices and create social change. Drawing on our own framework, critical positive youth development, and our experience pilot testing the #PassTheMicYouth curriculum, we identified four promising practices to cultivate youth-adult partnerships. 4-H professionals can use these strategies with youths to prepare them to partner with community-based organizations and to maintain enduring and effective relationships.

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of youth-adult partnerships have become increasingly apparent in recent years as young people have taken on leadership roles and been recognized for their valuable contributions (Jenkins et al., 2019). These partnerships in which youths and adults work together towards shared goals have gained attention—particularly those connected to social change movements led by young people in areas such as racial, gender (Jackson et al., 2020), and climate justice (Klein & Steffo, 2022). Studies show that youth-adult partnerships can foster community engagement (Jones et al., 2008) and enhance learning outcomes (Chong, 2006). Furthermore, when young people are given opportunities to express their opinions and are supported by nurturing adults, these partnerships are associated with positive outcomes for youth development in the areas of communication, cognitive and emotional development, leadership (e.g., greater empowerment, self- and political efficacy), psychological agency, and community connectedness (Ramey et al., 2017; Weybright et al., 2016; Weybright et al., 2017).

Although youth-adult partnerships are an essential aspect of youth development programs, these partnerships depend on the availability of resources, appropriate training, and adequate support (Arnold et al., 2008). Pittman (2019) found that young people often feel disconnected from the adults in their lives and that this disconnection impedes meaningful relationships. To bridge this gap, adults must be willing to listen to and learn from young people and be open to their ideas and perspectives. This bridge can be built through meaningful partnerships that value and harness the energy, ideas, and contributions of youths. As Chong (2006) states, “Youth-adult partnerships [should] focus on collaboration and emphasize youths as fresh resources with unique gifts to share” (p. 2).

Building youth-adult partnerships in Extension's youth development programs is a key ingredient to success (Jenkins et al., 2019). #PassTheMicYouth, an Extension program out of North Carolina State University, illustrates the power of effective youth-adult partnerships. This program aims to amplify young voices through a youth-led, youth-centered podcast and blog, a storytelling-for-social-change curriculum, and practitioner resources for fostering youth-led community engagement (Gonzalez et al., 2019). #PassTheMicYouth and its corresponding storytelling curriculum are rooted in a Critical Positive Youth Development (CPYD) framework, an approach to understanding and promoting the positive development of young people that emphasizes the importance of social justice, equity, informed action, and collaborative engagement (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Drawing on relevant youth development scholarship and our experiences piloting the #PassTheMicYouth curriculum, we identified four promising practices for building effective youth-adult partnership opportunities in our program. The practices outlined below are structured as a checklist and intended to be used by other youth-serving professionals

and organizations as a reflective tool to strengthen youth leadership, collaboration, and community engagement through positive youth-adult partnerships. We also provide practitioner resources related to each practice.

PRACTICES FOR FOSTERING PROMISING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

In order to build promising youth-adult partnerships, youth-serving professionals and organizations can implement the following practices to ensure that they are providing opportunities for partnerships with youth: (a) cultivate mutual respect and trust; (b) amplify youth voices; (c) practice cultural responsiveness; and (d) celebrate successes. Below, each practice is broken down into specific, actionable items that aim to create an inclusive and supportive environment for young people. The goal of this tool is to create an empowering space where young people feel comfortable expressing themselves, sharing their ideas, and actively participating in decision-making processes with adults.

CULTIVATE MUTUAL RESPECT AND TRUST

Cultivating mutual respect and trust involves creating a safe and supportive environment where youths feel valued, heard, and respected, fostering open communication and collaboration. The steps listed below all contribute to the creation of this environment.

- Implement structured feedback mechanisms like suggestion boxes, anonymous surveys, needs assessment, or regular listening sessions to encourage youth to openly share their thoughts and ideas.
- Encourage active listening practices—such as paraphrasing and summarizing each other’s thoughts—to foster a more empathetic and attentive environment.
- Provide staff training on giving and receiving constructive youth feedback, emphasizing the importance of youth collaboration and voice.
- Establish a transparent process for responding to and incorporating youth feedback.
- Demonstrate to participants how feedback directly influences program improvements and decision-making.

Consider reading Kokozos & Gonzalez’s (2019) *Getting Smart* blog post for additional resources or for more tips to build trust, connection, and support with young people.

AMPLIFY YOUTH VOICES

The importance of amplifying youth voices lies in empowering young people to actively participate in decision-making processes, ensuring their perspectives, ideas, and concerns are recognized and integrated into community initiatives to promote meaningful youth engagement. Make their voices count following the steps below.

- Actively involve young people in decision-making related to the partnership, including program planning, goal-setting, and project implementation.
- Provide support and resources to help young people develop their leadership and communication skills, empowering them to lead discussions and presentations within the partnership and share thoughts, experiences, and ideas with peers and adults.
- Establish a youth advisory board or council to give young people a formal voice in shaping the partnership’s policies and activities.
- Create a platform for youths to share their stories, opinions, and perspectives through multiple channels—like blogs, podcasts, videos, or social media.
- Incorporate opportunities for community involvement to engage participants in projects that directly tackle the root causes of social issues.

Hart’s Ladder of Youth Participation is a useful tool in assessing how power is distributed between youths and adults and determining the extent to which youths are meaningfully engaged in decision-making.

Social Change via Partnerships

PRACTICE CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Practicing cultural responsiveness—which involves considering and integrating youths’ cultural experiences into programming and facilitation—is essential in acknowledging and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of all participants, fostering inclusivity and equity within the partnership, and creating a space where everyone feels represented and understood. Follow these steps to create a foundation based in cultural responsiveness.

- Adhere to practices and protocols that promote inclusivity and equity, considering the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of all participants.
- Integrate culturally relevant content into activities and programs, including diverse stories, examples, and role models.
- Organize events or activities that celebrate the cultural backgrounds and talents of youths and adults, including those involved in the partnership.
- Consider the dietary, religious, accessibility, and transportation needs of all participants when planning meetings, events, and activities.
- Provide language accessibility for participants with limited English proficiency—through translations, interpreters, or bilingual materials—as needed.
- Offer cultural awareness training to both youths and adults, encouraging responsiveness to diverse perspectives and understanding of cultural biases.
- Ensure decision-making processes include youths and adults from diverse backgrounds to promote open discussions with multiple perspectives and experiences.

Check out the article by Will & Najarro (2022) that defines cultural responsiveness and outlines strategies for strengthening culturally responsive instruction and facilitation.

CELEBRATE SUCCESSES

Recognizing and celebrating the achievements and contributions of young people and adult partners not only boosts their morale and motivation but also reinforces a culture of appreciation and gratitude within the partnership, promoting a positive and supportive atmosphere. Follow these steps to celebrate success in its various forms.

- Organize recognition events or award ceremonies to acknowledge the achievements and contributions of both young people and adult partners.
- Create a showcase, exhibition, or display highlighting the outcomes and impacts of youth-adult partnership projects and activities.
- Foster a culture of appreciation and gratitude within the youth-adult partnership by regularly expressing thanks and recognizing efforts.
- Seek media coverage for successful partnership initiatives or projects to share the stories of young leaders and their impact on the community.

This comprehensive resource from *Community Toolbox* (<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/spirituality-and-community-building/gratitude-appreciation/main>) provides a framework for integrating appreciation and gratitude into the community-building process.

CONCLUSION

Partnerships between youths and adults are most impactful when they are intentionally designed and carefully managed. The four practices we provide in this article serve as an opportunity to prepare youths for decision-making as they establish trust and respect and learn how to collaborate strategically with adults. By using this checklist, youth development professionals can ensure that their programs foster meaningful and effective youth-adult partnerships, leading to positive outcomes for both youths and adults involved in the collaboration.

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