FYSB Family & Youth
Services Bureau

Incorporating Youth–Adult Partnerships in Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programming

June 2024

TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR COORDINATING A YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIP

Getting Started

- Reflect on your organization's capacity and ability to truly partner with youth.
- Identify a staff person or committee that will coordinate the youth–adult partnership (YAP).
- Ensure that the YAP focus is important to both youth and adults.
- Establish a set of norms for participation.

Ensuring Success of Your Youth–Adult Partnership

- Reflect on privilege and power dynamics that would hinder a successful YAP, then create new structures that address those dynamics.
- Ensure that the youth partners represent the focal population.
- Compensate participants for their time, lived experience, and willingness to improve the system.
- Openly discuss power sharing and potential issues.
- Recognize that difficulties within this process are normal.
- Celebrate successes!

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent pregnancy prevention programs are uniquely positioned to support the development of young people's strengths, leadership skills, and healthy relationships (Dorsainvil & Dickinson, 2023). These programs can continue fostering opportunities for positive youth development by integrating youth–adult partnerships (YAPs) into their programs.

WHAT ARE YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIPS?

YAPs are "the practice of multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together in a collective (democratic) fashion over a sustained period of time through shared work intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or to affirmatively address a community issue" (Zeldin et al., 2013). Through shifts in norms, including power, communication, collaboration, decision-making, and shared responsibility, YAPs build and sustain fair and equal decision-making between young people and adults (Beattie, 2019; Zeldin et al., 2013).

Although youth-serving organizations understand the value of youth engagement, how youth are engaged still leaves room for improvement. For example, different levels of decision-making and agency can be offered to youth. These levels represent a range of power that begins with non-participation (i.e., manipulation) and ends with degrees of youth participation (i.e., youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults; Hart, 1992).

A YAP goes beyond incorporating youth voice and makes youth shared decision-makers with adults as they learn, plan, and work together as facilitators and educators, board members, researchers, media producers, community organizers, and fundraisers (Petrokubi & Janssen, 2017).

WHY ARE YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIPS VALUABLE?

For Youth:

Youth are the experts of their own lives, and authentic engagement with them can improve youth programming. YAPs create capacity-building opportunities for youth (e.g., problem-solving, teamwork, decision-making) while supporting their development in these roles through mentorship. They also increase leadership and socio-emotional learning skills. When engaging marginalized youth, YAPs help amplify their experience and ensure that programming resonates with them (Cammarotta & Fine, 2008).

For Adults:

YAPs can help adults learn about social justice and become more directly accountable to their programs and communities. They also build community by forging strong connections between adults and youth and creating shared values.

For Programs:

YAPs create a space for bidirectional learning, reflection, and growth that helps strengthen programs, policies, or systems. Youth and adults enter this partnership with unique skills and knowledge. For example, youth can bring unique perspectives and the ability to communicate best with peers. Adults can bring years of experience with systems. The strengths of both youth and adults can be woven together to create a more robust project. Programming can also become more effective when the perspectives of the people it serves are included in its development. Youth have a unique viewpoint from inside programming and can share firsthand experiences about program efficacy.
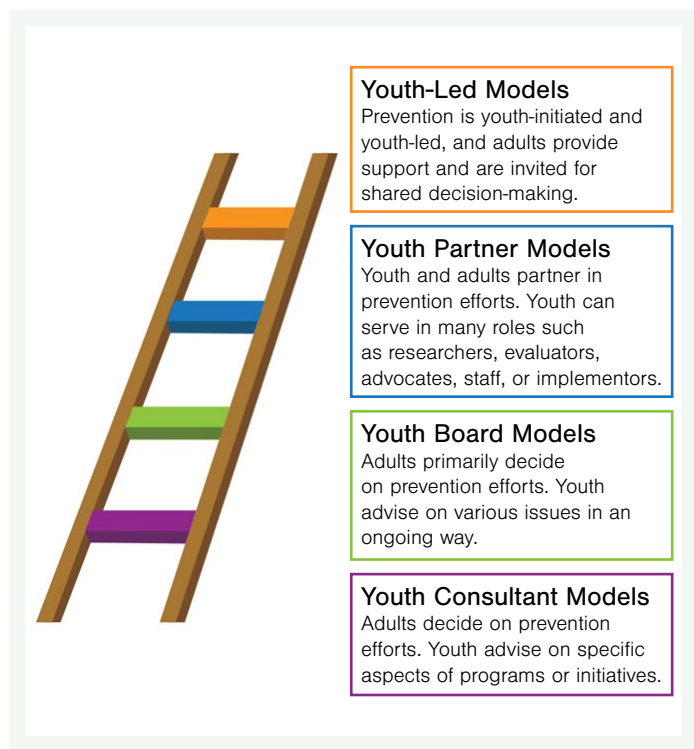
COMPONENTS OF YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

Below, we describe the five critical components that make an effective YAP and provide examples of these behaviors (Wu et al., 2014).

COMPONENT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Authentic decision-making	Youth are fully involved in meaningful decision-making.	Youth challenge routines, and new ideas are discussed thoroughly; Adults collaborate with youth on decisions. (i.e., planning a special event).
Bidirectional mentors	Adults intentionally build relationships with youth to support their development.	Adults connect youth with specific contacts or information that could enhance their resources or networks; Adults discuss some progress, strengths, or successes youth have achieved; Youth are encouraged to reflect on their experiences.
Reciprocity	Youth and adults work together as partners.	Youth and adults co-create meeting agendas ahead of time; Youth and adults regularly collaborate to complete tasks.
Community connectedness	Youth are engaged in communities.	The activities provide youth with meaningful opportunities to engage in communities outside of the organization; Youth identify as active members of the group or program.
A core group of committed members	Members commit to spending time and resources on the shared goals of the project.	Both youth and adults set aside a certain number of hours for participation in YAP programming.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MODELS

There are a variety of ways that organizations can engage young people in partnership, with varying levels of decision-making and agency given to young people. Below, we describe four models that programs can implement to engage youth based on their organizational needs (Ballard et al., 2023).

- **Youth-Led Models**: In organizations with longstanding partnerships with youth, trained and experienced youth, trained and experienced youth lead projects or initiatives with support from the organization.

- **Youth Partner Models**: In organizations with existing capacity and established youth partnerships, trained and experienced youth co-lead projects and initiatives, including selecting, implementing, and evaluating programming, in an ongoing or one-time effort.

Youth-Led Models
Prevention is youth-initiated and youth-led, and adults provide support and are invited for shared decision-making.

Youth Partner Models
Youth and adults partner in prevention efforts. Youth can serve in many roles such as researchers, evaluators, advocates, staff, or implementors.

Youth Board Models
Adults primarily decide on prevention efforts. Youth advise on various issues in an ongoing way.

Youth Consultant Models
Adults decide on prevention efforts. Youth advise on specific aspects of programs or initiatives.

Adapted from Ballard et al. (2023).

- **Youth Board Models:** In organizations with some youth engagement capacity that want to develop an infrastructure, a group of youth provide ongoing input and feedback on the organization's activities, policies, or procedures, including program planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- **Youth Consultant Models:** In organizations just starting out in youth engagement, youth are invited to provide input on a specific topic or initiative. This can be structured as a project commitment or on an "as needed" basis.

TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR COORDINATING A YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIP

Getting Started

- **Reflect on your organization's capacity and ability to truly partner with youth** (NYU Steinhardt, 2024). Is there a staff person with enough time and resources to serve as a coordinator? Does the culture of the organization support youth voice? Is your team ready to implement changes suggested by youth?
- **Identify a staff person or committee that will coordinate the YAP.** These need to be people who are invested and interested in working with young people.
- **Ensure that the YAP focus is important to both youth and adults.** Check in on the team's interests annually.
- **Establish a set of norms for participation** (Beattie, 2019). This is typically a set of values and practices that foster mutual respect and create opportunities for cooperative engagement. For example, creating time for critical reflection on the work allows everyone to share a mutual understanding of project goals and progress.

EXAMPLES OF YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

- CHAMACOS Youth Council ⬈ is a program of the Center for the Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas (CHAMACOS), comprising young people dedicated to addressing environmental justice and health issues affecting the health of the local farmworker community in Salinas, CA. The Youth Council has been involved in several Youth Participatory Action Research projects ⬈ with CHAMACOS through the Center for Environmental Research and Community Health (CERCH) at UC Berkeley, including a study examining local Latina girls' exposure to chemicals in makeup.
- Reproductive Health Access Project ⬈ is a youth-led, youth-serving project that aims to increase sexual and reproductive health education and access at El Rio Community Health Center clinics in Tucson, AZ. The project listens to youth who identify barriers and gaps to services and then works together to eliminate or close the issues. The project uses peer educators to provide sexual education sessions where young people can learn about services and ask questions before seeing a provider ⬈ (see case study, page 68).
- The Young Adult Consultant Program of the Children's Bureau engages young people who were previously in foster care to improve the lives of children and families involved in the foster care system. Young Adult Consultants engage in professional development opportunities in the child welfare field, including attending conferences, developing relevant resources that address issues, and helping states develop creative solutions.

Ensuring Success of Your Youth–Adult Partnership

- **Reflect on privilege and power dynamics that would hinder a successful YAP, then create new structures that address those dynamics.** For example, people from privileged groups may feel more comfortable speaking up in group spaces compared to participants from less privileged groups (National Network for Youth, 2023; NYU Steinhardt, 2024). Create norms that allow everyone to participate and ensure equitable communication.

- **Ensure that the youth partners represent the focal population.** Consider race, gender, sexuality, engagement with the system being examined, socioeconomic status, and other kinds of community involvement. Remember, representation also includes those who may feel disconnected from systems like schooling and who may not be the first to volunteer or engage.

- **Compensate participants for their time, lived experience, and willingness to improve the system** (Division X Technical Assistance Team, 2022). This includes payment in a form that works well for participants (e.g., cash or gift card depending on preference) and social and academic supports such as authorship, resume reviews, or letters of recommendation.

- **Openly discuss power sharing and potential issues** (NYU Steinhardt, 2024; Texas 4H, n.d.). Open communication is the best way to ensure partnership and connection.

- **Recognize that difficulties within this process are normal** (California School Health Centers Association, 2011). You are co-creating a new process and are likely to experience successes and setbacks.

- **Celebrate successes!** Host group celebrations when a milestone is reached and share accomplishments in newsletters and group updates.

CONCLUSION

YAPs are an innovative strategy to ensure power is shared among individuals with resources, specialized knowledge, and lived experience. Youth are experts in their own experience and can provide valuable insight into the ways systems affect their well-being and accomplish social justice goals. Adolescent pregnancy prevention programs are well-suited to develop YAPs to foster participant growth and ensure their youth programming meets the needs of their audience.

RESOURCES

Youth Leadership Development

- Family and Youth Services Bureau: Building on Strengths: The Role of Positive Youth Development in Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programming (infographic)
- Family and Youth Services Bureau: Using PREP Programs to Develop Youth Leadership Skills (webinar)

Developing a YAP

- Family and Youth Services Bureau: Integrating Youth-Adult Partnerships to Deliver Trauma-informed Programming in the Context of Community Violence & Societal Tragedies (webinar)
- National Equity Project: Youth-Adult Co-Design and Design Partnerships ⬈
- University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension: Y-AP Rationale ⬈
- Wake Forest University School of Medicine: Engaging Youth to Improve Substance Misuse Prevention ⬈

Assessment Tools

- Family and Youth Services Bureau: Trauma-Informed Practices and Youth–Adult Partnerships Organizational Discussion Tool
- Michigan State University: Youth-Adult Partnership RUBRIC ⬈
- Up for Learning: Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric ⬈

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