

Recommendations to Engage and Partner with Youth and Young Adults

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This article is the second installment of a five article series that shares recommendations from the report, *Positive Youth Development: Supporting Colorado Youth to Reach Their Full Potential*. This report describes the results of a statewide assessment to determine what supports are needed and desired from communities to increase positive youth development efforts across Colorado. It is organized by each positive youth development principles. This article focuses on Principles #2 and #3 – Youth Engagement and Youth-Adult Partnerships.

Positive Youth Development Principle No. 2: Youth Engagement

Youth engagement is a key underpinning of positive youth development. It encompasses how the community supports youth in cultivating a sense of self and actively connects youth with peers, adults and their environment. Research demonstrates that engaging a youth voice is an essential element of effective organizational development among community and youth-serving organizations¹. Involving the target population in the identification of needs and the development of high-quality programs is one way of improving current prevention programs.² Moreover, involving young people in program development and implementation can increase the potential for success. Included below are recommendations for youth-serving professionals, policy and decision makers, and public and private funders.

Youth-serving professionals can:

1. Involve diverse young people in the development and implementation of programs with focus groups, internships, apprenticeships and as consultants throughout the entire process of program assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation. Support this principle and practice with the necessary financial and logistical resources, such as a budget for youth participation (e.g., stipends or hourly fees for youth consultation, transportation reimbursement, food expenses, staff time for outreach, coordination, communication and training development).
2. Utilize one of Colorado's 84 youth advisory boards when making decisions that affect youth. Go to www.healthyyouthcolorado.org to see a list with contact information for each group.
3. Assure successful youth engagement, partnership and collaboration by
 - o training youth on the skills and background knowledge required for meaningful engagement;
 - o training decision-makers and power-holders on how to engage youth in providing input, how to partner with them and what to do if their "hands are tied" and they are unable to act on the youth's or families' suggestions and ideas;
 - o providing communication training for both youth and youth-serving professionals;
 - o being clear about the roles, responsibilities and benefits of youth and adult partners;
 - o creating line items in organization, agency and program budgets that support diverse youth engagement in decision making. (See Appendix G: Example Positive Youth Development Line Items.)
4. Intentionally engage youth with diverse backgrounds, such as youth with varying developmental disabilities, youth in military families, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender youth in positive youth development efforts. Use recruiting strategies that ensure diverse representation.
5. Increase attention to youth's family and cultural assets to encourage celebration of their culture.
6. Honor and support the myriad of learning styles and interests of youth. Young people are problem solvers and are intrinsically motivated by their own interests and concerns. Inquire about what those interests and concerns are and build from them in your organization's planning. Allow for them to be cultivated through a variety of media: visually, orally, experientially, kinesthetically, etc.
7. Provide a diverse array of school and after-school programming to effectively reach out and engage all youth in their learning, development and enrichment.
8. Offer adult support for young people to lead efforts that address their concerns and interests.

Positive Youth Development Principle No. 3: Youth-Adult Partnerships

A youth-adult partnership is defined as an intentional relationship “between young people and adults that relies on adults acknowledging and empowering the ability, perspectives, ideas, and knowledge of young people throughout the relationship.”³ Research indicates that programs using youth-adult partnerships often demonstrate greater effectiveness, and offer potential benefits not only to youth, but to the adults and organizations that serve them.⁴ The critical component to engaging youth in the community and developing youth-adult partnerships is that youth are supported in participating in decision-making processes that currently may be reserved only for adults. The ultimate goal is for youth and adults to work together to make more effective decisions that positively affect youth, youth-serving organizations and communities. (See the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Youth Partnership for Health’s DVD, *Nothing About Us Without Us*, and guidebook, *Engage Youth! Colorado’s Guide to Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships* at www.healthyyouthcolorado.org).

Youth from across the state shared what they feel is needed in adults to make the youth-adult partnership work. This includes

- 1) attempting to make things fun;
- 2) having a positive focus;
- 3) having an open mind;
- 4) having confidence in young people’s abilities;
- 5) encouraging youth to take on new leadership roles;
- 6) being a supportive role model;
- 7) being relatable; and
- 8) being actively and authentically interested in developing a relationship with youth.

Youth-serving professionals can:

1. Share decision-making with young people in the development and implementation of programs through focus groups, internships, apprenticeships and as consultants throughout the entire process of program assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation. Support this principle and practice with the necessary financial and logistical resources, such as a budget for youth participation (e.g., stipends or hourly fees for youth consultation, transportation reimbursement, food expenses, staff time for outreach, coordination, communication and training development).
2. Assure successful youth-adult partnership and collaboration by providing and participating in youth-adult partnership training, such as the Assets for Colorado Youth training series. Visit www.buildassets.org for more information.
3. Offer adult support for young people to lead efforts that address their concerns and interests.
4. Encourage and support educators to create student-driven classes so they are more engaged and invested in their education.

The next *Partners in Prevention* newsletter will cover positive youth development principles #4 and #5 – Culturally Responsive and Inclusive of ALL Youth. So stay tuned!

In addition, the full report will be available in 2010 at www.healthyyouthcolorado.org.

¹ Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Development Science*, 8(2), 75-90.

² Olson, J.R., Goddard, H.W., Solheim, C.A., & Sandt, L. (2004). Making a case for engaging adolescents in program decision-making. *Journal of Extension*, 42(6), 1-10.

³ Fletcher, A. (2008). *The freechild project youth voice toolbox*. www.freechild.org/YouthVoice

⁴ Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). Youth in decision-making: A study on the impacts of youth and adults on organizations. Chevy Chase, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development a Division of National 4-H Council. <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/358.html>