

## TNOYS Best Practices for Working with Youth (and Adults)

From TNOYS orientation materials for staff, interns, contractors, and youth partners



*“Young engagement” is a subset of the youth development approach to working with youth, which “...acknowledges both youth as resources in rebuilding communities and that helping young people requires strengthening families and communities. It has three components:*

1. *Viewing young people and families as partners, rather than clients, and involving them in designing, delivering, and evaluating programs and services;*
2. *Giving all youth access to both prevention and intervention services and programs that meet their developmental needs;*
3. *Offering youth opportunities to develop relationships with caring, supportive adults.”*

**“Youth engagement happens in youth-adult partnerships that are structured so that both groups contribute, teach, and learn from each other. In all aspects of TNOYS programs, the following should be looked at as guidelines for working with youth.**

- Be conscious of young people’s schedules when planning meetings
- Be clear on roles & responsibilities for both youth and adults
- Involve young people from the very beginning to build ownership
- Think of and act as if young people are full, equal partners in the project
- Provide opportunities to foster mutual learning

Once these guidelines are taken into considerations, consider the following examples for every day work with a youth partner a successful experience for both parties.

### Key Tips for Making Youth / Adult Partnerships Work

#### Challenges

- Adults assume youth are not serious
- Both groups think what the other says is set in stone
- Adults make decisions for the good of the young people and youth make decisions without involving adults
- Either group assumes they have been left out of the loop
- Either group assumes the worst of the other
- Adults think they know what youth want & what is “best” for young people

#### Solutions

- Listen:** Have real conversations without making assumptions
- Question:** Ask open-ended questions to get more ideas. Be willing to ask for clarification
- Share:** Discuss how decisions will be made and who will have more weight in deciding; sometimes youth and sometimes adults
- Talk:** Find ways to communicate and share aside from meetings
- Trust:** Adults must know that youth have important things to contribute: same with youth
- Involve:** Ask young people what is “best” for them. Youth are resources and partners in community development.

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### Building Rapport with Youth

At TNOYS, we engage youth in a diverse set of projects and activities. No matter what the work looks like, building rapport with youth is essential for a successful collaboration. Some basic principles to keep in mind when working with youth in different capacities are as follows.

One time occurrences: You will need to build rapport quickly so focus on the following:

- Be honest about expectations for the project (what you want the youth to contribute, and how you hope to benefit from youth participation).
- Listen and be engaged!
- Maintain eye contact the same way the responding youth does.
- Make sure you respect the young person's space: if they step back, you step back a bit as well.
- Use head nods to show agreement.
- Reflect back what they say to show you understand them.
- Ask the young person if they have any questions or want to be referred for any services
- Thank the youth for their help with the project.

Ongoing relationships: You will have more time with the youth, so your honesty, respect, and active listening explained above are important; continuing to show them their impact is key.

- Make sure youth will participate in meaningful ways. Young people should be involved in making decisions from the beginning to the end of a project or initiative.
- Let them know their involvement is important. Make sure to show the ways their position, their feedback, their voice is being heard.
- Schedule meetings when youth can attend and in a location accessible to them. Like everyone else, keep young people informed about plans and meeting times.
- Make the work interactive, fun, and valuable. Like adults, youth are more likely to get involved and remain active in projects that are interesting and fulfilling. Offering food and drink is a great way to keep them involved.

Whether you are an adult participant, a youth committee member, youth co-worker, or a young person receiving services, the best practices of engaging people are the same!

- Respect everyone as a person of worth who has something to contribute.
- We are all doing our best with what we've got and all people have untapped resources.
- There's no such thing as failure; only feedback.

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<sup>1</sup> National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth (1996) *Reconnecting youth and community: A developmental approach*. Washington D.C.: Family & Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) p. 11

<sup>2</sup> ACT for Youth Center of Excellence: Available online at [http://www.actforyouth.net/youth\\_development/engagement/](http://www.actforyouth.net/youth_development/engagement/)

<sup>3</sup> 8 Considerations for Creating Youth-Adult Partnerships~ Youth Service America: [http://www.ysa.org/tip\\_sheet.cfm](http://www.ysa.org/tip_sheet.cfm)

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, M. & Lazarus, R. (2001) Partners in leadership: Lessons from the field. *CYD Journal* 2(20), 46-48

<sup>5</sup> Tips for working with adults: (2001) *Transitions*, 14(1), (Developed by Youth Advisory Board members) Available online at <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advyf/documents/transitions1401.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/674-tips-for-working-with-youth>

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### **Tips for Working with Adults**

- Most adults have good intentions. Remember that they are simply not used to partnering with young people.
- Criticism doesn't necessarily mean condescension or that adults don't value our contributions. It may mean that the adult is treating you like an adult and they are used to critiquing each other's work.
- Adults may not be aware of the capabilities of young people. They can be told 100 times that we are mature. Showing them is the best way to make our case.
- Adults often feel responsible for the success or failure of a project and that makes it hard for them to share power. They need reassurance that youth are willing to share successes as well as failures.
- Adults are just as uncertain as youth. They may have just learned to disguise it better.
- Sometimes adults use phrases and expressions that annoy young people and are red flags that they aren't treating youth as partners. Be prepared to call adults on their language.
- Ask for clarification when you need it. Adults often use words, phrases, and acronyms that youth might not understand and they need reminding to talk normal.
- Don't be afraid to say "No". Adults will understand that youth have other important commitments, like they do.