



The Research Behind Elevating Youth Voice

TNOYS believes young people should have opportunities to work collaboratively with adults and have a voice in decisions impacting their own lives and their communities. This belief is supported by research and practice-based evidence, which suggests youth-adult partnerships and the opportunity to have a voice strengthen outcomes for young people and make services more effective. Below is some of the research that supports a youth engagement approach:

Positive Youth Development

Youth engagement is a strategy of the positive youth development approach that views youth as resources, not problems. According to Karen Pittman, an originator of this approach, helping young people become “problem free” is not enough. Adults must engage with youth and offer them leadership opportunities so they can become “fully prepared” for adulthood and civic participation.¹

Trauma-Informed Care

Youth voice is a core component of Trauma-Informed Care. When young people who have experienced trauma such as abuse or neglect are not given the opportunity to use their voice to weigh in on basic decisions about their lives, they may experience re-traumatization. According to Gordan Hodas, a pioneer in the field of trauma-informed care, a major focus of trauma-informed services is empowerment.² Youth are able to retain some control of their lives and decisions by collaborating with providers in services and interventions when they are viewed as partners with valuable insights.³ When youth who have experienced abuse have the opportunity to use their voice to advocate for themselves and others like them, they are given back the power they lost through the initial trauma.⁴

¹ Pittman, K. (1999) The power of engagement. The Forum for Youth Investment. Washington, D.C. Online at <http://forumfyi.org/content/youth-today-power-engag>

² Hodas, G. (2006) Responding to childhood trauma: The promise and practice of trauma-informed care. Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, p.7.

³ Harris, M. & Fallot, R. (2001): Using trauma theory to design service systems. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Flasch, P., Murray, C. & Crowe, A. (2015) Overcoming Abuse: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Journey to Recovery from Past Intimate Partner Violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Volume: 32 issue: 22, page(s) 3373-3401.

Easton, S., Leone-Sheehan, D., Sophis, E. & Willis, D. (2015) “From That Moment on My Life Changed”: Turning Points in the Healing Process for Men Suffering from Sexual Abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, Volume: 24 issue 2, page(s) 152-173.

Prilleltensky, I., Nelson, G. & Pierson, L. (2001) The role of power and control in children’s lives: an ecological analysis of pathways towards wellness, resilience and problems. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, Volume: 11 issue: 2, page(s) 143-158.

Resilience

Empowerment and supportive relationships are two key factors that research demonstrates foster resilience in youth who have experienced abuse and other trauma.⁵ According to the Search Institute's well established and research-based 40 Development Assets,⁶ empowerment occurs when youth are viewed as valuable resources and are given meaningful roles to help strengthen or be of service to their communities. Supportive relationships can be built through opportunities to work in partnership with adults, such as by making collaborative decisions about one's care. It is widely known that youth who experience one meaningful positive relationship with a caring adult have better outcomes than those who do not. This may include a relationship with a youth worker, case worker, or other professional who respects and values the young person.

Youth-Driven Services and Policies

Furthermore, youth involvement in programming appears to be highly related to positive outcomes and can facilitate an ongoing youth-adult partnership that supports change.⁷ By experiencing strong, positive relationships with adults, youth are likely to develop leadership skills, build other strong relationships, and become a stronger part of the social fabric of their communities and society.⁸ Research also points to the need for youth and families to be involved in policymaking, in order to ground policies in real-world experiences and ensure the best outcomes for those they impact.⁹

For over 30 years, TNOYS has sought to strengthen, support, and protect critical services for Texas youth and their families to ensure their success. One of the key ways we do this is by working in partnership with young people to demonstrate what youth are capable of when people invest in them. It is an approach that has proven to be effective and rewarding. To learn more about our work in this area and access resources to support your own youth engagement efforts, visit tnoys.org/youth-engagement.

⁵ Jain, Buka, Subramanian, Molnar (2012) Protective Factors for Youth Exposed to Violence: Role of Developmental Assets in Building Emotional Resilience. *Youth Violence & Juvenile Justice*, Volume: 10 issue: 1, page(s): 107-129.

⁶ (1997) The Developmental Assets® Framework. Search Institute®. Minneapolis, Minn. Online at <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/>

⁷ Duncan, B., Miller, S., & Sparks, J. (2004) *The heroic client: A revolutionary way to improve effectiveness through client-directed, outcome-informed therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

⁸ Benard, B. *The Foundations of the Resiliency Framework*. Resiliency in Action. Solvang, Calif. Online at <https://www.resiliency.com/free-articles-resources/the-foundations-of-the-resiliency-framework/>

⁹ Vickers, M. & Wells, N. (2017) Nothing About Us Without Us. *Academic Pediatrics Journal*, Volume: 17 issue: 7, page(s): S20-S21.