

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

At the core of Advocates for Youths' (Advocates) mission and vision is centering young people and working alongside them to fight for sexual health, rights, and justice. To do this, Advocates uses a youth-adult partnership (YAP) framework to guide everything we do. The following definition and purpose (what, why, outcomes) have been taken from the following Advocates' documents: [Engaging Young Parents: A Toolkit for Youth-Serving Organizations and Agencies](#) and [Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships](#).

YAP Definition:

Youth-Adult Partnerships entail the:

- Integration of young people's lived experiences and expertise with adults' experiences and expertise;
- Opportunity for each party to suggest and make decisions; and
- Recognition and valuing of the contributions of adults and young people

In short, the YAP framework empowers young people and adults to work in full partnership envisioning, developing, implementing, and evaluating programs and/or policies that impact young people.

Purpose

What - Youth-adult partnerships is a framework that centers young people's voices and lived experiences. Adult allies work in collaboration with young people to identify the problems and barriers young people face and together advocate for the equitable and just opportunities and resources due them.

The essence of **youth involvement** is a **full partnership** between adults and young people. Full partnership means that each party has the opportunity to make suggestions and decisions and in which the contribution of each is recognized and valued.

TRANSPARENCY IN YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

The "gold standard" of youth-adult partnerships is young people and adults working in *full partnership*. This often requires organizations to make a conscious shift in how their systems, projects, and staff function to make a concerted effort to involve young people. It takes a commitment from adults and young people to make this possible. We recognize that it takes effort for this shift to the "gold standard" to occur, and it might not always be possible due to constraints such as time and funding. It is important to recognize the constraints in which an organization, and its projects, are operating and work to address these barriers through leadership buy-in, training, and shifting mindsets. **Our goal is for young people to continuously move from being objects of a project (not involved or tokenized) towards being recipients (involved but only surface-level) and further towards being full partners initiating projects and making decisions with adults.**

Why - Youth-serving organizations that actively involve young people in their work are often more relevant and sustainable than organizations that develop programs designed, implemented, and evaluated only by adults. Indeed, organizations that build young people's skills as activists and spokespeople have the added impact of helping them to develop skills that will serve them long into adulthood, while also creating a pipeline of emerging young leaders for the organization and the field.

Sharing with young people the **power** to make decisions means adults respect and have confidence in young people's judgment. It means adults recognize youth's assets. They understand what young people will bring to the partnership, and are willing to provide additional training, funding, and support when needed (just as organizations would do for adults). Both young people and adults may need to embrace change for the partnership to work.

YOUTH, ADULTS, POWER, & OPPRESSION

Historically, young people have been understood as "problems to be solved." Entities in power fail to recognize or acknowledge how contributing factors such as structural racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and education inequities perpetuate this idea. Instead of valuing and elevating young people as resources and assets, organizational policies and practices often lead to the continued oppression of young people.

Through misguided research questions/priorities and adult-centered policies and programs, young people are frequently blamed for high infection rates, vulnerabilities, and risk factors. By focusing on the need to solve the "problems" of "high risk" youth, organizations fail to recognize the myriad ways that young people can contribute.

Over the last twenty years, there has been a gradual shift by entities in power in the sexual and reproductive health field from viewing young people as problems to valuing and engaging young people as partners with shared decision-making power, and as competent members of a community able to address societal issues that impact them. This paradigm shift of working with young people has strengthened organizations and their approach to program and policy development, implementation, and evaluation.



Outcomes:

Outcomes for young people

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (a division of the US-based National 4-H Council) conducted one of the few existing studies on the effect of youth-adult partnerships. The study showed that “involving young people in decision making provides them with the essential opportunities and supports (i.e., challenge, relevancy, voice, cause based action, skill building, adult structure, and affirmation) that are consistently shown to help young people achieve mastery, compassion, and health.”¹

Research identifies an internal locus of control, or the feeling of being able to have an impact on one’s environment and others, as a key protective factor possessed by resilient youth. In this regard, opportunities for meaningful involvement and participation—such as in youth-adult partnerships—may provide the young person with opportunities to develop and/or strengthen their internal locus of control.²

Outcomes for adults

- Experience the competence of youth firsthand and begin to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors
- Find their commitment and energy enhanced by working with youth
- Feel more effective and more confident in working with and relating to youth
- Understand the needs and concerns of youth, become more attuned to programming issues, and gain a stronger sense of connection to the community
- Receive fresh ideas from different perspectives
- Reach a broader spectrum of people
- Develop more relevant and responsive programming and services
- Share knowledge

Outcomes for organizations

Programs are more **sustainable** and **effective** when youth are partners in their design, development, and implementation. Evaluation results are more honest and realistic when youth assist in gathering and providing the data on which evaluation is based.

- Young people help clarify and bring focus to the organization’s mission.
- The adults and the organization, as a whole, become more connected and responsive to youth in the community, leading to programming improvements.
- Organizations place a greater value on inclusion and representation and see programs benefiting when multiple and diverse voices participate in making decisions.
- Youth decision-making helps convince foundations and other funding agencies that the organization is committed to meaningful youth development and youth involvement.¹

1. Shepherd Z, et al. Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations. Madison, WI: National 4-H Council, 2000.

2. Blum R. Healthy youth development as a model for youth health promotion. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 1998; 22: 368-375.

3. Shepherd Z, et al. Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations. Madison, WI: National 4-H Council, 2000.

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