

Youth Involvement in Prevention Programming

That *young people gain more from an experience when they are actively involved* is a core premise of youth development/sexual health programming.¹ Research also suggests that programs for youth which are developed through a partnership of youth and adults may be highly effective in building young people's skills and reducing their sexual risk-taking behaviors. Such programs benefit the youth who help to develop them and also have a greater impact on the young people served.²

Too often, however, the attitudes of well-intentioned adults undermine effective youth involvement. Programs may involve young people merely as *token* representatives. Programs may involve youth without sufficient preparation of either staff or youth. Tokenism and insufficient preparation are both recipes for failure. Both youth and adults may have high expectations about successful cooperation. However, when planners put little time and effort into building the skills of both adults and youth to work in partnership or attempt to use young people in meaningless ways, efforts to involve youth will seldom succeed.

Genuine and effective youth involvement requires a serious commitment by an organization and all staff members. Adults who intend to involve and integrate youth meaningfully into prevention programs will need to examine the organizational structure and culture in which they work in order to identify and dismantle barriers to youth involvement. Moreover, staff must understand and accept that effective youth involvement in prevention programming often means changing rules and practices. For example, when government funding does not cover expenses for meals, young people are often unable to participate. Programs will then need to identify other funding sources to cover youth's expenses. Other typical changes might include redefining business hours, modifying meeting spaces, and/or altering communication styles of involved adults and youth.

Benefits of Youth Involvement

Direct youth involvement offers potential benefits both to youth and to the organizations that serve them. To name but a few – youth gain experience and confidence; organizations gain a fresh perspective on youth culture; and organizations develop more effective outreach. However, organizations must clearly identify and articulate these benefits if youth and adults are to embrace the concept of youth involvement.³

Involving young people may provide an organization with the following benefits:

- Fresh ideas, unshackled by *the way things have always been done*
- New perspectives on decision making, including more relevant information about young people's needs and interests
- Candid responses about existing services
- Additional data for analysis and planning that may be available only to youth
- More effective outreach that provides important information peer to peer
- Additional human resources as youth and adults share responsibility
- Greater acceptance of messages, services, and decisions because youth were involved in shaping them
- Increased synergy from partnering youth's energy and enthusiasm with adults' professional skills and experience
- Enhanced credibility of the organization to both youth and advocates.

Involving young people may benefit the young people themselves in these ways:

- Increased status and stature in the community
- Improved competencies and increased self-esteem
- Stronger skills and experience as leaders
- Greater knowledge and understanding of other cultures
- Increased self-discipline and schedule management
- Greater appreciation of the multiple roles of adults
- Broader career choices.⁴

Involving young people can make a difference in program success. One example is the Project Northland Peer Participation Program, implemented in several school districts and adjacent communities in northeastern Minnesota. The program involved students in the planning and promotion of alcohol-free social activities in order to determine whether such participation is associated with reduced alcohol use among students. Evaluation demonstrated a positive correlation between student involvement in planning the activities and a lower rate of alcohol use among involved students as compared with uninvolved students. In addition, evaluation showed increased acceptance of alcohol-free events by the student population as a whole. This study suggests that involving teens in planning their own activities may be effective both in preventing or reducing alcohol use among involved youth and in changing attitudes among non-involved youth.

Youth/Adult Partnerships

The essence of youth involvement is a *partnership* between adults and young people. Effective youth/adult partnerships work toward solving community problems. Working partnerships also acknowledge the contributions of all participants – youth and adults. In theory, creating such partnerships sounds good and makes a lot of sense, but putting such partnerships into practice is not always easy.

Power dynamics, usually rooted in cultural norms, may make it difficult for young people and adults to feel comfortable working together. Years of formal instruction in school often teach young people to expect answers from adults. Some youth expect their own ideas to be largely ignored, derided, or vetoed. Adults frequently underestimate the knowledge and creativity of young people. Adults are also accustomed to making decisions without input from youth, even when youth are directly affected by those decisions. Therefore, joint efforts toward solving problems can be difficult, requiring deliberate effort on the part of both adults and young people.

One researcher developed the ‘Spectrum of Attitudes’ theory and identified three different attitudes that adults hold toward young people.⁴ These attitudes affect adults’ ability to believe that young people can make good decisions. These attitudes also determine the extent to which adults may be willing to involve young people as significant partners in decisions about program design, development, implementation, and evaluation. The three attitudes represent seeing 1) youth as objects, 2) youth as recipients, or 3) youth as partners.

Youth as Objects – Adults who have this attitude subscribe to the myth of adult wisdom. They believe adults know what is best for young people. They attempt to control situations in which young people are involved. They believe that young people have little to contribute. Further, they may feel the need, based on their own prior experiences, to protect young people from suffering the potential consequences of mistakes. Adults who see youth as objects seldom permit more than token youth involvement and usually have no intention of meaningfully involving youth. One example might be an adult writing a letter to an elected official about an issue pertinent to youth and using a young person’s name and signature for impact.

Youth as Recipients – Adults who have this attitude believe that adults must assist youth to adapt to adult society. They permit young people to take part in making decisions because they think the experience will be good for them and assume that youth are not yet “real people” and need practice to learn to “think like adults.” These adults usually delegate to young people trivial responsibilities and tasks that the adults do not want to undertake. Adults who see youth as recipients usually dictate the terms of youth’s involvement and expect young people to adhere to those terms. One example might be adults extending an invitation to one young person to join a board of directors otherwise comprised solely of adults. In such a milieu, a young person’s voice is seldom raised and little heard. Adults do not expect the young person to contribute, and the young person knows that adults deliberately retain all power and control.

Youth as Partners – Adults who have this attitude respect young people and believe that young people have significant contributions to make now. These adults encourage youth to become involved and firmly believe that youth involvement is critical to a program’s success. These adults accept youth’s having an equal voice in decisions. They recognize that youth and adults both have abilities,

strengths, and experience to contribute. Adults who have this attitude will be as comfortable working with youth as with adults and enjoy an environment with both youth and adults. Adults who see youth as partners believe that genuine participation by young people enriches adults just as adult participation enriches youth and that a mutually respectful relationship recognizes the strengths that each offers. One example might be hiring a young person to participate from the beginning in developing a proposal to be submitted to a funding institution.

An excellent example of youth being viewed as partners is the Pennsylvania Youth Adult Roundtable implemented by the HIV Prevention Community Planning Group in Pennsylvania. This program, sponsored by the Department of Health, encourages youth's input into a statewide planning process that prioritizes programs for HIV prevention funding. Throughout the state, seven groups of youth in high risk situations meet quarterly to discuss current prevention efforts targeted at young people and to offer ideas for future prevention efforts. Participants receive both a stipend and a free meal. At each roundtable, adult and youth facilitators set agendas, lead meetings, and promote dialogue among those attending. Clearly, the role of young people is equal to that of adults in this process. Adults and youth are working in partnership to develop the statewide plan.

Making Youth Involvement Work

To make youth involvement work, good intentions are not enough. Adults who endorse the concept of youth/adult partnerships must be willing to identify and alter the organizational environment where institutional barriers can be especially significant. Institutional barriers that make genuine youth involvement difficult include:

- **Hours for Meetings and Work** – An agency's hours of operation usually coincide with times when young people are at school or work. To engage youth, program planners must find nontraditional times at which to hold important meetings. Often, the conflict between adults' and youth's schedules can be difficult to overcome. However, compromise is necessary if an organization is to enjoy genuine youth involvement. For adults, this may mean holding meetings in the late afternoon or evening or on weekends. For youth, this may mean using the school community service hours to attend daytime meetings.
- **Transportation** – Many young people do not have personal vehicles. Program planners should schedule meetings in easily accessible locations and should provide travel vouchers or promptly reimburse youth for transportation costs.
- **Food** – Few young people have the income to purchase meals in business districts or dinners in restaurants. When meetings occur at meal times, organizations should provide young people either with food or with sufficient funds to pay for meals.
- **Agency Staff and Policies** – In agencies that have always operated from an exclusively adult perspective, staff usually needs cultural competency training prior to involving youth meaningfully. Staff must accept young people's perspectives and ideas and be willing to change rules to meet the needs of youth. Agencies should provide young people, even those who are part-time, with the same equipment provided to other employees, such as computer work station, mailbox, voice mail, E-mail, and business cards. Each organization and its staff must make determined efforts to let each young person know he/she is a valued, contributing member of the organization. Finally, with input from both youth and adults, organizations should develop policies on youth/adult interactions. For example, if a program involves overnight travel, youth and adults should be clear about their roles and responsibilities in traveling together. Policies must respect youth and their desire for independence and, at the same time, address parental concerns about security as well as the legal liability of the organization.

Elements of Effective Youth Involvement Programs

Research suggests successful youth involvement programs share important elements that include the following:

- Young people make significant decisions. They identify issues of importance, develop plans of action, and write proposals to fund and implement those plans.
- Young people have opportunities to gain knowledge and develop new skills as a result of their involvement.
- The organization undertakes meaningful activities to address the issues and needs of young people in the community and does not contrive activities to give youth practice at being adults.
- Youth and adults have opportunities to explore what each brings to the table. They also have opportunities to express what they need and expect from the other. In this way, each begins to recognize and value the positive contributions of the other.
- Young people and adults have collegial relationships, partnerships focused on common goals. Neither young person nor adult is necessarily subordinate to the other.

- The organization allocates resources to involving youth.
- Young people experience opportunities to achieve successes and to know that they make a difference. Young people develop feelings of self-efficacy.
- Equal numbers of young people and adults comprise advisory boards, councils, and committees.
- Young people and adults experience synergy and believe that they can accomplish more together than they could alone.
- Activities occur in a genuine community rather than in an artificial one created for practice. Activities focus neither on the individual nor on the organization.
- Young people have regular opportunities to reflect on their work.

It is work to achieve meaningful youth involvement in programs that target youth, and it is not easy work. However, the benefits are enormous for young people and for organizations that care about young people. When youth and adults keep the potential benefits in mind, they will find that the work is worthwhile, and it may be easier than they thought it would be.

References

- ¹ Pittman KJ, Zeldin S. *Premises, Principles, and Practices: Defining the Why, What, and How of Promoting Youth Development through Organizational Practice*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development, Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 1995.
- ² Stevens J. *Peer Education: Promoting Healthy Behaviors*. [The Facts] Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 1997.
- ³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *The Prevention Marketing Initiative: Youth Involvement*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, 1997.
- ⁴ National 4-H Council. *Creating Youth/Adult Partnerships: the Training Curricula for Youth, Adults, and Youth/Adult Teams*. Chevy Chase, MD: The Council, 1997.