



YOUTH ARE THE FUTURE OF AMERICA

FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

We hear this statement almost every day—from newscasters, politicians, spokespeople—but how many adults really believe this? According to a 1999 report by Public Agenda, 37 percent of Americans believe that today's children after reaching maturity will make this country "a better place." Additionally, 65 percent of Americans who say they have a lot of contact with teenagers describe teens disapprovingly. In the same article, when asked what first comes to mind when they think about today's teenagers, survey respondents used adjectives such as "rude," "irresponsible," and "wild."

A parallel issue is the fact that youth have accepted and adopted the negative perceptions of adults. Even though 70 percent of teenagers believe people should help each other because it is "the right thing to do," only one third of teenagers are convinced they can make the country a better place. This lack of self-confidence found in youth may be a direct result of adults' lack of faith in youth. Many times, youth are challenged by adultism, a situation where adults assume that they are better than young people are and entitled to act for them without their consent. Adults forget that age is not synonymous with wisdom. Under adultist conditions, youth find it difficult to let their voices be equally heard in a primarily adult arena. Incidents of adultism include devaluing a young person's less "traditional" experience, talking in a condescending manner, assuming that a young person will be too young to understand something, or expecting that a young person will only know about youth, not about other issues. Adultism is something that pervades American society, and most times adults are unconscious of their attitudes and behaviors. However, it is this underlying belief that keeps youth from feeling like they can make a difference. Valuing youth as equal members of our society, as contributors now and in the future, changes the dynamic between youth and adults and establishes the foundation for a healthier and more productive relationship.



Why Promote Youth/Adult Partnerships for Healthy Development?

For the most part youth want the guidance of adults. Some adults feel comfortable volunteering to mentor youth. However, in order to combat adultism and empower youth, adults need to accept a different role—a partnership role. Adults and youth have a great deal to offer each other—in a youth/adult partnership they can offer each other different perspectives and experiences that can lead to creating the best of both worlds. Both youth and adults have the opportunity to grow in this type of relationship. These partnerships can be used in all types of situations, from the board of a city council to a committee designing after-school programming to clinical work in crisis settings.

Youth participation is not a new idea. However, youth participation does not automatically equate to youth/adult partnerships and does not necessarily aid in the healthy development of youth. In fact, a relationship between an adult staff member and youth participant can even be, for example, if a youth is put into a situation where the power is unevenly distributed in favor of the adult, the youth will simply continue to feel unheard and unengaged. This type of power sharing is tokenism, where adults set the agenda and make the decisions. Although young persons may be asked for their input, it is often not taken seriously or implemented. This lack of power contributes to the youths' feelings that they are unable to make changes in situations and issues that affect them. In a true youth/adult partnership, all members are able to practice and develop the skills that allow them to make important contributions. Both youth and adults can develop in an environment that promotes healthy mental and spiritual growth.

What are the Strategies for Creating Youth/Adult Partnerships?

To create partnerships that depart from traditional youth and adult relationships based on imbalances of power, adult partners must first let go of their assumptions about young people's qualifications and competencies. For true power sharing to begin adults must give their youth partners the support to succeed. This usually means identifying and providing the training necessary for youth and adults to work together on chosen issues and activities, while having joint accountability and shared responsibility for those ventures.

Like every partnership, the purpose of a youth/adult partnership must be clear, mutually understood, and valuable to both partners. To foster this sense of shared responsibility both partners must feel that they have unique and important skills to contribute. Because many youth have not been regarded by adults as partners, and lack the confidence to work at their sides without feeling inferior, it is very important that adult partners recognize the powerlessness of youth in our society and impact on their youth colleagues.

Adults must be up front with youth about how few rights young people actually have (this varies state by state), and must also recognize their own adult privileges. This may mean, making some special considerations regarding issues such as time and location of meetings/events, so that they are convenient to both youth and adults. Adult partners will need to continuously familiarize themselves with the issues facing youth in their communities so that they can be sure that their language, behavior, and ideas will be culturally relevant to youth. This process of better understanding youth experiences will simultaneously give adults new ways to approach their own lives and work.

What Differences Can Youth/Adult Partnerships Make?

Moving towards power sharing is an exciting process. Deeper, stronger relationships have the possibility to form, as control, influence, self-expression and accountability are valued differently. In a mental health setting, the creation of youth/adult partnerships serves as a catalyst for personal and professional development when youth learn to help themselves, and adults learn new ways to approach their work.

When an adult counselor and a youth program participant (we suggest using this language instead of "client") work together to figure out ways for the youth partner to manage his/her own mental health issues that are practical and sustainable, the counselor is freed of the

burden of "fixing" the youth, and the youth is able to be more independent. An example of how youth/adult partnerships in a mental health setting stimulates people to reevaluate their attitudes and to approach familiar tasks in new ways, is found at Huckleberry House in Columbus, Ohio.

For years Huckleberry House, a youth-focused, family-centered agency committed to providing high quality services to young people and their families, has fully integrated youth counselors, aged 18 years and under, into the team structure that coordinates intake and evaluation, including the assessment of lethality. These part-time staff positions are identical to part-time adult positions in training, responsibilities, and wages, but are specially designated shifts during the after school hours that end before 10 p.m., so that they support most youth's daily schedule, an important part of youth culture.

Youth/adult partnerships at Huckleberry House have catalyzed situations and behaviors that lead to needs getting met, create conditions necessary for optimal growth, and build competencies. The youth staff have been supported by the team structure and have learned important skills from their adult partners. The adult staff have learned from the youth staff that are deft at engaging, or helping the participants "open up." Also, youth program participants have benefited significantly from youth/adult partnerships at the Huckleberry House because the youth staff are more adept at picking up on some of the participants' more hidden conflicts and pressures.

Implications for Mental Health Agencies and Clinicians

Many mental health agencies now have guiding principles for providing services. One such principle is "promoting independence." The struggle for mental health agencies is how to work with youth in achieving independence. Additionally, some mental health standards or best practice require or encourage use of a strengths-based approach in working with youth and families.

In Franklin County, where Huckleberry House is located, the mental health board has standards for teams of clinicians that are providing support services to youth who have a severe mental health diagnosis and are at imminent risk of needing to be placed out of the home or have need of a psychiatric hospitalization. A portion of the standards requires that the teams be strength-based and needs driven. All teams must include a component in treatment plans that includes not only the strengths of the

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young person but also the strengths of the family. As the team develops ongoing plans with the family they must show in the treatment plan how they are building on the young person's and family's strengths. While it is still a challenge to get clinicians to think in this manner, these standards help immensely. All too often clinicians are focused on finding the "problem" and this helps them to refocus efforts on building young people's strengths.

Youth/adult partnerships are fundamentally rooted in a strengths-based approach and take this premise a step further by honoring the right of young people to make decisions about their lives. In this way, the foundation of equality is laid. The clinician's role is to support, affirm and build on strengths rather than serve as the expert who fixes problems. The youth is an active participant in treatment planning, not a compliant object nor a consultant outside of the process.

According to Evadna Fitch a former team leader at Huckleberry House: "Working in a youth/adult partnership mode is especially difficult for clinicians working with youth because they frequently don't think youth program participants have the resources or knowledge to achieve to be a partner. Clinicians frequently plan groups on site at their agencies as opposed to looking for places to meet in the community. The latter approach gives youth the chance to learn about that community resource while attending a meeting. At Huckleberry House, very often it is the teen mothers who have better knowledge of how to access resources than do the clinicians. The staff learn a great deal from these young women. This is only possible because staff see these young people as a resource."

It is commonly assumed that young people in crisis or dealing with serious mental health or other challenges cannot make responsible decisions, cannot contribute, and cannot exert leadership. On the contrary, this behavior often occurs—we simply choose not to recognize it because we don't like it or view it as inappropriate. Environments with adults in charge designed to control youths' behavior beg for rebellion (a clear expression of leadership). Environments established by youth and adults together, built on mutual trust and responsibility, promote respect and accountability. Huckleberry House is an excellent example of a mental health setting that turns no young person away and yet maintains a positive sense of chaotic order through the strong youth/ adult partnership values that permeate the agency.

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References

Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation, A Report from Public

Agenda,
New York, NY.
This report can be found at www.publicagenda.org

time acknowledging differences (e.g. age, experience, access to resources, ideas, etc.)

- Understand the potential trouble spots of creating youth/ adult partnerships
- Strive for full participation by all parties involved