

WHY are youth/adult partnerships important?

As the field of positive youth development grows and buzzwords like “youth voice,” “youth empowerment,” “youth-friendliness,” and “youth engagement” become commonplace, adult professionals are increasingly interested in partnering with youth to include their voices in their efforts. This includes partnering with youth in resource and program development as well as sharing research findings, program innovations, and adolescent-focused content at conferences and community events. Intentionally partnering with a diverse community of youth to ensure their experiences are centered in the work is vital to meeting the health care needs of young people. However, many adults do not have a roadmap on how to partner with adolescents and young adults effectively and authentically. Adults can be well-intentioned, but often, young people report feeling tokenized or under-utilized, or worse yet, disrespected. The best way to avoid tokenization and authentically engage youth in your work is to have them involved at all levels of your program or research. If this isn't possible, there are ways to ensure that youth are meaningfully engaged in the planning and execution of a workshop or presentation. Here are some ways to practice the motto “nothing about us, without us” when you partner with adolescents and young adults in this setting. There are a lot of suggestions and resource in this guide, don't feel overwhelmed trying to do everything listed. It can take time to build these partnerships and enact these strategies.

STRATEGIES for partnering with youth

Connect with youth that are a good fit for your presentation.

- Consider your population. Make sure that the youth partners are representative of the population you're addressing, and if you are working with a group, that it represents a diverse array of intersecting identities (Examples include, but are not limited to, socio-economic, racial, ethnic, sexuality, and gender diversity).
- If possible, connect with youth that you already have a rapport with and/or who know your work. At the same time, youth who do not regularly participate in leadership opportunities often provide unique perspectives; while it may be harder to recruit these youth, it can be invaluable to have their perspectives. Some strategies for how to recruit youth can be found in [Creating and Sustaining a Thriving Youth Council](#), a collection of youth experiences and recommendations compiled by the Adolescent Health Initiative (AHI).
- Identify youth partners through local organizations that have youth advisory councils such as a health department, city council, and hospital system if you do not have existing relationships with youth.
- If you need to partner with youth remotely, have a point person who has a relationship with the youth and can be their “go-to” contact.
- Set clear and tangible expectations when recruiting youth to participate. This should include the estimated hours of work, compensation, and overall outcomes.

Value youth experience through cultural humility.

People experience health care in unique ways dependent upon the intersecting identities they hold. It is impossible for anyone to fully understand the experiences and identities of others, but we can create spaces where young people feel their identities are represented and valued.

- Listen and validate the experiences of the young people you are working with.
 - Be an askable adult for youth by conveying warmth through body language, using a nonjudgmental tone of voice, utilizing open-ended questions, practicing active and reflective listening, avoiding assumptions while providing affirmations, and discussing confidentiality and boundaries. Learn more through AHI's Spark training on [Being an Askable Adult](#).
 - Ask for consent to talk about pieces of a youth's identity even if you have a trusting relationship with this young person and/or assume the information is common knowledge. For example, you could say, “Do you mind if I share....?” Or “Do you feel comfortable if I talk about....?” If possible, have the youth speak about their own identities and experiences.

- It's important to learn about your own identities to better understand how they impact the ways in which we all show up in health care spaces. Check out [this activity](#) you can practice with your team to further your learning.
 - Ask youth for their [pronouns](#) and chosen name. Use them during the presentation or any time you refer to them, even when they are not present. To learn more about pronouns, check out [MyPronouns](#).
 - Use neutral terms that avoid gendered language and heteronormative assumptions (instead of boy/girl, young man/lady, or sir/ma'am, or boyfriend/girlfriend use folx, everyone, y'all, their chosen name, or partner).
- Foster trust and safety by building a trauma-informed space for youth. Youth with histories of trauma may feel unsafe in unfamiliar spaces and situations, leading to anxiety and stress. Minor changes to your approach working with youth can improve their feelings of safety and create an atmosphere that reduces the likelihood of re-traumatization.
 - Spend some time getting to know the youth before you dive into presentation planning. If you have very limited time, this might be as simple as discussing interests or facilitating an icebreaker ([in-person](#) and [virtual](#) icebreaker examples) at the beginning of the meeting to build rapport.
 - Establish a meeting structure to help youth feel confident and secure. This could include developing objectives, group norms, and an agenda and sending it to youth before meeting.
 - Present a content warning when discussing potentially sensitive topics with youth. Allow space for youth to disengage with the work if they need to and provide information for a relevant crisis line or additional support resources. Review the [Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings](#) from the University of Michigan to learn more.
 - If discussing potentially sensitive topics with youth, provide supportive resources that youth can access if they are struggling. This could include state and/or national crisis hotlines, self-care resources like [these](#) from Asha (specifically for BIPOC youth), and any other resources or organizations that are specific to your community.
 - Provide spaces for youth to give feedback during and after your working relationship.
- Commit to ongoing learning by participating in professional development opportunities and discussions around discrimination, racism, and bias.
 - Reference [SAHM's Anti-Racist Toolkit](#) for suggestions on how to address racism and its harmful effects in your practice
 - AHI's [LGBTQ+ Youth Series](#) and [Cultural Responsiveness](#) Spark mini-trainings
 - American Academy of Family Physician's [Implicit Bias Training Guide](#)
 - Healthcare Education & Training's (HCET) [Addressing Implicit Bias to Better Serve Youth](#)

Make time to plan and practice.

- Prioritize planning as essential to meaningful partnerships. It helps establish rapport, creates a clear sense of shared purpose, provides an opportunity for questions to be answered, clarifies expectations, and reduces the chance of surprises for everyone.
- Accommodate youth's busy schedules! Find out what times work for them and plan around them. Between school, extra-curricular activities, jobs, and other obligations, they are often unable to meet during typical office hours.
- Find out what means of communication is best for them. Some youth rarely check email; some don't have a consistent cell phone number or may not always have phone privileges. Even if their mode isn't convenient to you, adapt. Communication can be challenging, and you need to remove as many barriers as possible.
- If youth are interested, have them co-facilitate the planning meetings with you to create another level of comfort and engagement. They can choose pieces of the agenda to lead such as the icebreaker, brainstorming activities, etc.

Creating Successful Youth Partnerships in Presentations

- Make time for you and the youth co-facilitators to practice well before the presentation. Ideally, the practice should take place in the same format that the presentation will be delivered in; if this isn't possible, video conferencing may be more personal than a phone call. If you can't meet beforehand, be sure to give yourself plenty of time to meet the day of before the actual presentation.
 - If the event is being hosted virtually, don't assume the youth you are working with have experience with the software being used. For example, many conferences use virtual event hosting platforms that are new to adults and youth alike. Take time to navigate the platform with youth ahead of the event.
- Review or co-create the questions that the youth will be asked. This is a time to allow your youth co-facilitators to decide what they want to disclose and not disclose, practice a story, and choose the best details to share.
- If you're partnering with more than one young person, acknowledge ahead of time that they may disagree with each other. You might say "If you disagree with something another panelist says, that's okay – it shows that not all youth have the same experiences or opinions. Perhaps respond, 'I respect what they said, though my experience is different. In my friend group, we often...'"

Prepare, prepare, prepare.

- Share information about the in-person presentation setting with your youth partners including:
 - The audience
 - Number of people expected
 - Room set up
 - When to arrive and where to meet
 - What to do and who to contact if they're running late
 - How others in attendance will be dressed
 - Information on meals
 - What they need to bring
- Explain the environment that young people are entering to the best of your ability and allow them to choose how they show up. There are many standards of professionalism that exist in our society that often privilege the values of white and Western individuals and leave behind people of color, such as standards of appearance (clothes, hair, tattoos, etc.), language/vocabulary, and even the structure of activities and events. Check out Stanford's [The Bias of 'Professionalism' Standards](#) for more information.
- If the event is in-person, be sure to consider hotel, travel, and meal accommodations.
 - Depending on the company or locations, hotels may have a minimum age a person must be to reserve a room or check-in by themselves. Similarly, some rideshares have minimum age requirements to book and travel in rideshare vehicles.
 - Youth under 18 years old may have to be accompanied in their hotel or when traveling by a caregiver or a chaperone from your organization.
 - Check for dietary restrictions ahead of time. If possible, include food or meal stipends at planning sessions and events.
 - If possible, invite the youth to show up to the presentation setting early so they can get a feel for the environment and ask any questions they have.
- Talk to your youth partners about safety procedures before, during, and after the event.
 - Make sure you've established emergency protocols. Explain these protocols to the young people you are working with.
 - Consider creating a handout that details emergency protocols, contact information, and other important event-specific details so everyone is on the same page.
- Be organized when it comes to any forms that youth or their caregivers need to fill out prior to the event.
 - If any youth are minors, investigate whether a parent/caregiver permission form, medical information form, or transportation permissions, are needed.
 - If there is a chance they'll be photographed or recorded, be sure to have a media release form signed. If they are part of an organized youth council, these forms may already be on file.

- Prioritize compensation. Make sure you are compensating youth partners equitably for their time. We encourage compensating youth at a rate similar to what you pay adults for equal work. This will vary by state and situation. This can be in the form of a gift card or stipend. To learn more about pay equity among youth, read [this](#) article.

Select the best format for your presentation.

- Encourage youth and young adults to define their own engagement. For example, decide together which parts of the presentation youth feel comfortable engaging in. They may feel fine facilitating an activity but don't want to speak about a certain topic. You can get creative here, engaging youth to make videos or art that can be shared during the presentation instead of them presenting live if they don't feel comfortable with that.
- Collect information on the accessibility needs of the youth you are partnering with when deciding the format of their engagement. This could include, but isn't limited to, visual/audio needs, access to technology, transportation (virtual vs. in-person), wheelchair access, and interpretation needs. Check out this [resource](#) from Youth.gov to learn more.
- Consider your audience, tone, purpose, and length of presentation when you're creating your outline. Factors such as how much time you have to plan, what your content area is, which parts are most important for youth to address, and your desired outcomes for the presentation will help you determine the best format for your session.
- Talk through some of the many different types of presentation formats that lend themselves to youth co-facilitation. Here are some that we've seen work well, but this is not an exhaustive list. Be creative! If possible, plan with youth to determine format.
 - Traditional panel (mixed adult/youth or just youth)
 - Youth-driven panel - see details below *
 - Fishbowl (youth face each other and discuss pre-selected questions as if adults are not there)
 - [TED-style talks](#)
 - Co-facilitation on content
 - Spoken word/poetry reading/musical performance/rap
 - Role play, theater
 - Youth-created scenarios and youth-led debrief/discussion
- Engage youth in leading brief activities during the presentation, such as workshopping participant ideas in small groups facilitated by youth, group formation activities, and ice breakers and energizers. These can include relevant content, such as a ["Find Someone Who"](#) activity where the statements identify who's in the room, or ["Step Forward If"](#) that focuses on participants' values, experiences, or biases.
- If you're asking a young person to facilitate a discussion, make sure to equip them with the skills to navigate things like bringing people and out of the discussion, responding to participants, addressing something that might be off topic or harmful, etc.

Respect youth partners' expertise while providing guidance.

- Consider public speaking and facilitation as professional development for youth. Provide mentorship and recognize that for many youth, this may be their first experience in this setting.
- Remember that youth are experts on their own lived experiences. Build in the opportunity for youth to respond to participants' questions and expect that youth perspectives may not always align with your point of view. Allow room for disagreement; just as your opinions and values differ from others your age, not all youth have the same opinions and values, and it's helpful to remind the audience of this.
- Respect that youth may not feel comfortable sharing certain personal information. You may suggest to youth that if a participant asks a personal question, they might respond by saying something like, "I've seen that in my friend group/school," or, "That's common among people my age," or even, "A friend of mine had this experience." Remind youth not to name names or organizations when sharing personal stories.

Creating Successful Youth Partnerships in Presentations

- Tell youth ahead of time that they can decline answering any questions that they do not feel comfortable answering. Be prepared to intervene if an audience member asks a question that is inappropriate or that the young person is not prepared to answer. One strategy to mitigate any inappropriate or questions is to have participants submit questions before, during, or after the presentation so you can preview the questions before they are asked.

Set aside time for reflection after every meeting and presentation.

- Ideally, provide at least ten minutes after the presentation to debrief. Ask the youth how they felt about the presentation and their experience overall. Give descriptive feedback about the strengths; instead of saying “good job,” tell them specifically what they did well.
- It can be helpful with two or more adult co-facilitators to have one who is taking a backstage role pay special attention to what the youth did well and where they can improve, perhaps even taking written notes.
- Share any follow-up, including evaluation results or feedback or videos/photos of them that they might enjoy seeing.

Additional RESOURCES

- AHI’s guidebook: [Creating and Sustaining a Thriving Youth Advisory Council](#) was created in partnership with youth on the best practices for developing and maintaining a Youth Advisory Council.
- AHI’s [LGBTQ+ Youth-Friendly Services](#) Starter Guide. A toolkit by AHI, this starter guide provides recommendations for creating a more LGBTQ-friendly physical and social environment for youth and links additional resources for language and practice change.
- [AHI's Spark trainings](#) are free, ready-to-use mini-trainings on adolescent health for teams of health care or community-based professionals on topics including adolescent brain development, being youth-friendly, cultural humility, and more.
- AHI’s [Youth in Health: Inclusive Stock Photography Collection](#). With support and funding from the Community Health Access Initiative of Washtenaw County, this set of inclusive youth-centered stock photos features authentic, diverse youth voices, identities, and experiences in health care systems.
- [Eight Successful Youth Engagement Approaches](#), outlined on the HHS Office of Adolescent Health webpage.
- [Rationale for Youth Engagement](#) and [Youth Engagement Toolkit](#). School-Based Health Alliance provides a toolkit designed for school-based or community health professionals that want to engage youth in their mission and work.
- [UM Children on Campus](#) has many [useful guides](#) around addressing the health, safety and security of children and youth through programming and partnerships as well as [example forms](#).
- [Youth-Adult Partnerships](#). Advocates for Youth provides links with detailed information about youth involvement in youth-adult partnerships.
- [Youth Engaged 4 Change](#) (YE4C) provides youth-focused resources and opportunities that inspire and empower young people to make a difference in their lives and in the world around them by improving their knowledge and leadership skills.
- [Youth Engagement Ladder](#). Framework from the Texas Network of Youth Services illustrating the levels of youth engagement.
- [Youth Today](#). A national online publication that provides media coverage on a variety of topics for youth service professionals.

Hyperlinks in this document can be accessed by viewing the electronic version, available for download at <http://www.umhs-adolescenthealth.org/improving-care/starter-guides/>.

APPENDICES

***Youth-Driven Panel**

This format allows for significant content to be conveyed through youth voices in a polished but not overly rehearsed way. The key is the planning session. Convene with 4-6 youth well before the session and prepare a few discussion prompts addressing the content area that will allow them to talk freely about their personal experiences and values with each other and with you. Together, decide what main themes emerge, and write questions together that will allow them to respond with the experiences that they want to disclose. Help them frame negative experiences in a solution-focused way (“This negative experience happened; I wish my doctor would have handled it this way instead”) and help them decide which details are useful to share and which they may not want to share. Create the outline together on a projector, listing each question as a header and making notes about which youth will share which anecdotes or points after. Here is a sample outline that was created in a planning session with youth and adult facilitators in this format.

<p><i>“Wait, we’re NOT supposed to say ‘preferred pronouns’ anymore? How to keep up and not give up with transgender youth”</i></p>		
Time	Content	Presenter
5 min.	<p>Introductions – share structure; audience should write down questions and save for discussion at the end</p> <p>[Youth names]: name, pronouns, role, age, school/orgs</p>	All of us
40 min.	<p>Norms/overview: [Youth name]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences are individual – youth are there to start detailed conversation • Okay for us to disagree; we have a range of views and so do your patients • Education on trans people should not start and end here <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What’s your experience with healthcare professionals? Each person shares 1-2 minutes 2. Rest of session, we’ll focus in on language [For each question that follows, youth presenters share responses that they’ve planned ahead of time] 3. Common pitfalls or personal experiences 4. What do you think cisgender people get wrong about transgender identities and terminology? 5. What positive interactions have you had with providers? What made it great? 6. How can providers approach the need to do sex-specific tests and not call you the wrong gender? “All women need a pap smear” 7. Growth charts – Helpful or harmful? “Because you’re male, we have to use this growth chart” 8. How do you recommend asking about sexual practices/partners? 9. When discussing bodies, what words do people use that are helpful/harmful? 10. What are your recommendations about how to ask? 11. How to handle mistakes 	<p>Youth do intro</p> <p>Questions asked by adult facilitators</p> <p>Youth names by the points they want to make</p>
15 min.	<p>Q and A - Guidelines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Okay for youth to pass on answering a question - There are many perspectives and we speak for ourselves 	Youth/all of us

***Theatre-based Peer Education Presentation**

This format allows both for an engaging presentation and audience involvement. Note that it requires a longer process for training the youth both to act in the short vignette as well as to knowledgeably talk about the presentation topic. Many times, youth are sharing their own stories, so have them think before the presentation what they would like to disclose and what they would like to keep private. Here is a sample outline for a presentation that the [Corner Health Center of Ypsilanti](#) has used to educate teachers, administrators, and health professionals about the issues that affect young transgender students.

<i>I am Cory: A Theatre-Based Peer Education Performance on Transgender Issues</i>		
Time	Content	Presenter
5 min.	Introductions – share structure and topic; audience should write down questions, comments, and reactions while they are watching the vignette and save for discussion at the end.	Adult Facilitator
15 min.	Presentation of the rehearsed play which portrays a transgender adolescent in three different scenes – getting bullied, explaining their journey, and talking to a friend about how that friend can support them.	Youth Actors
30 min.	Actors stay “in-character” (they continue to portray the people they were in the play) and answer audience questions about the characters’ motivations, thoughts, and actions.	Adult/lead peer facilitated, youth answer
30 min.	Actors answer a Q and A about their experiences on the topic – Guidelines: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Okay for youth to pass on answering a question - There are many perspectives, and we speak for ourselves - Adult facilitator only steps in when directly asked, or when a clarification/correction is needed. 	Adult/lead peer facilitated, youth answer