

Evidence Brief

Eight Good Practices for Organizations Serving Black Youth & Their Families

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Library for Youth Work, and searched online databases using the following key terms: "Black youth," "Black youth engagement," "critical youth work." We then used the 'related articles' function on Google Scholar to find additional resources.

Summary of Evidence: Eight Good Practices

Here are eight good practices for organizations serving Black youth and their families:

1. **Understand youth in terms of their strengths, assets, and excellence.**

Youth organizations can better serve Black youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Youth organizations can also engage with Black youth in a more humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the "deficit is within a society and a school system that has failed Black youth" (Baldrige, 2014, p. 467). Develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people's strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

2. **Facilitate positive race-based experiences.**

Research shows that early to middle adolescence (from about ages 11 to 16) is a critical time to facilitate positive race-based experiences for Black youth, which ultimately contribute to a strong ethnic-racial identity. Whereas younger children can recognize racial and ethnic groups, adolescence is the time when Black youth are developing their own ethnic-racial identity. The development of a strong ethnic-racial identity "protects against the negative effects of racial and ethnic discrimination and is associated with health and positive development" (Loyd & Williams, 2017, p. 30).

3. **Engage family and caregivers in cultural programming for Black youth.**

In addition to offering youth-only programming, agencies should consider offering programs or activities that involve family and caregivers. Black youth develop their own

identity through *racial-ethnic socialization*, which occurs when parents or caregivers “communicate with their children about race and ethnicity” (Loyd & Williams, 2017, p. 30). This process can occur indirectly, through food or cultural symbols, or directly, through conversations about heritage, cultural origin, and experiences affecting Black youth and families. Youth organizations can help to facilitate this process by engaging family and community members to offer culturally-relevant programs and to create spaces for Black youth to talk about the issues impacting their lives.

Informal social support networks among Black youth and families can also act as an important protective factor in mental and emotional wellness (Levine, Taylor, Nguyen, Chatters & Himle, 2015); facilitating positive bonds and supportive relationships can strengthen these supports.

4. **Seek feedback from caregivers and create different ways for caregivers to engage in programming.**

Parents and caregivers can be engaged in a young person’s life in many different ways, but mainstream institutions (e.g. schools) often have a very narrow understanding of parent/caregiver engagement. This can be particularly harmful for Black parents/caregivers, who often also face anti-Black racism from officials in other settings.

Youth organizations should seek feedback from families and caregivers to better understand whether and how they want to be engaged in programming for Black youth, and to identify barriers to participation. Organizations may find it effective to create different opportunities for families and caregivers to engage in programming with youth. For example, offering programming in a familiar setting (e.g. church, community centre, neighbourhood venue), inviting caregivers to participate in-person, and sharing information about programming or activities for parents or caregivers who cannot attend but still want to stay connected. Organizations can address structural barriers to participation by ensuring programs are accessible by public transit, financially accessible, and culturally-appropriate (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).

5. **Recognize intergenerational differences.**

The Black Experience Project (2017) studied the experiences of Black people in the Greater Toronto Area. The study found that Canadian-born Black youth differed in important ways from parents who had immigrated to Canada. For example, Black youth are likely to be “more diverse in terms of their identities and the racial composition of their friendship networks,” and to have completed a higher level of education than their parents or caregivers (p. 11). Notably, Black youth born in Canada are more likely than their caregivers

to say that they experience racism, and are more likely to report being negatively affected by racism, suggesting that Black youth “are more impatient with the failure of Canadian society to deliver on the country’s promise of equality” (The Black Experience Project, p. 20).

Youth organizations can be sensitive to intergenerational differences when delivering programming to Black youth and their families. This practice further supports the need to provide positive race-based experiences for Black youth, facilitating consciousness-raising and creating opportunities for Black youth to engage with social issues (see also #6, below).

6. Raise critical consciousness in Black youth.

Many Black youth want to talk about the issues affecting their lives, but schools and educators may shy away from, or shut down, conversations about race. Youth organizations can facilitate *critical consciousness* – “the ability to perceive and interrogate the various forms of oppression that shape one’s life, and to take collective action against the status quo” (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013, p. 1701). Agencies can do this by listening to Black youth, offering validation, and encouraging them to reflect on the broader political and social context.

7. Acknowledge the many ways Black youth may understand and relate to their racial-ethnic identity/ies.

Considering the diversity within the Black community/ies, it is important to ensure programming is welcoming and accessible to youth who may have very different experiences. Research shows that effective programming adopts a culturally-specific approach, and creates space for Black youth to talk about issues. Some youth may find it helpful to talk about the anti-Black racism they experience in their daily lives, within the safe space of a Black-centred organization. At the same time, conversations about racism and discrimination can cause Black youth to distance themselves psychologically from identifying as Black. Youth organizations should strive to balance the need to create space for Black youth to discuss and understand their experiences with facilitating positive race-based experiences (as described above) (Litchmore, Safdar, & O’Doherty, 2016).

8. Use creative processes and outlets to facilitate positive self-identity.

Creative processes and outlets can offer an important opportunity for Black youth to explore and strengthen their own ethnic-racial identity, and to develop positive self-talk. By creating space for this in a culturally-specific, Afro-centric setting, Black youth can have the opportunity to define themselves in terms of strengths and assets, rather than deficits or stereotypes associated with anti-Black racism. For example, one study examined how young

Black girls use YouTube video blogging ('vlogging') to discuss natural hairstyles and resist white, Eurocentric beauty standards (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016). The researchers found that these 'vlogs' demonstrated a strong, positive Black identity and positive self-talk, through which the girls articulated love, appreciation, and admiration for Black beauty (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016).

Youth organizations (with the resources and capacity to do so) can facilitate workshops for youth to explore their experiences through creative outlets (e.g. writing, vlogging) – or empower youth to lead this type of program! Alternatively, organizations can use existing media (e.g. YouTube vlogs) in their programming to start conversations about Black youth participants' own experiences, ideas, and identities. Magazines and media aimed at youth are increasingly including better representation of Black youth, and content written by and for Black youth (see Juicebox, 2016). Organizations may also wish to engage with youth directly using Twitter, or incorporate resources and discussions from Twitter into their programming. For example, there are often vibrant discussions on Twitter under the hashtags #BlackTwitter, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackBoyJoy, which offer positive representations of Black excellence.

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