

# Evidence Brief

## Strategies for Youth Empowerment

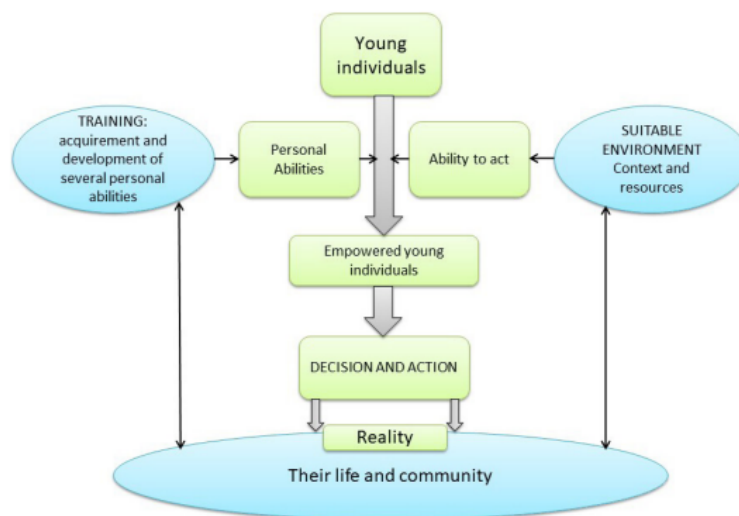
### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX’s Library for Youth Work, and searched online databases using the following key terms: “youth,” “young people,” “teenagers,” “teens,” “adolescents,” **and** “empowerment,” “empower.” We also searched keywords such as “youth,” “young people,” “teenagers,” “teens,” “adolescents,” **and** “learn” **and** “responsibility.” We used a number of keywords to solicit information on promising practices for how to best support youth who have various intersecting identities and experiences.

### Key Terms

**Empowerment** is the process that increases the opportunities to decide and act consistently on everything that affects an individual’s life, to participate in decision-making, and to intervene in a shared and responsible way in the issues affecting the community. At the core of empowerment is the ability to decide (knowledge, values, skills), and the ability to act accordingly (political, economic, legal and material conditions). Maso et al. (2017) provide the following figure to demonstrate the concept of empowerment:

Figure 1. The concept of empowerment



**Responsibility** has been defined as the character trait of someone who follows through with and completes obligations (Salusky et al., 2014). Through fulfilling obligations and tasks, people can develop responsibility.

Settings that foster youth empowerment help youth to gain the responsibilities, skills, and confidence necessary to develop into healthy adults. Thus, through intentionally structuring programming around fostering youth empowerment, youth can learn responsibility (Roberts, Wood & Smith, 2005, as cited in Salusky et al., 2014).

## Summary of Evidence

### a) Empowerment

There are numerous models/approaches to youth empowerment. Here, we focus on commonalities between the models to provide a foundation for the **how to** of working with youth so that they feel empowered. These are presented in no particular order, as the approaches do not rank these strategies, and you will notice that some strategies overlap.

#### ***How To Work With Youth So They Feel Empowered:***

**Recognize youth strengths and accomplishments:** To be empowered, youth need to have the confidence to believe they can impact change. Foster confidence within programming by setting and celebrating goals, normalizing mistakes as integral to the learning process, and recognizing strengths and accomplishments (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009; Crooks, Chiodo & Thomas, 2010).

**Include a knowledge/educational component:** Youth cannot participate in decision-making and social justice initiatives (which lead to empowerment) without adequate knowledge (Russell et al., 2009). This knowledge includes learning about the community, skill development, and learning life skills (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2013; Maso et al., 2017; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2011). This knowledge component is not simply formal education, but also recognizes the environmental contexts and life settings of youth as educational tools (Maso et al., 2017).

**Provide a welcoming, supportive, and safe environment:** To fully engage youth in the empowerment process, they must be provided with a safe, supportive, fun, and caring environment (Jennings et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Such an environment provides a space where youth can rise to challenges, express their creativity, and try out new skills and roles — while also having fun (Jennings et al., 2006). Youth must feel a sense of ownership over this environment (Pearrow, 2008).

**Build connections to larger networks and to the community:** Connections to larger networks and to the community motivate people to continue their social change efforts (Russell et al., 2009). Here, youth are provided with opportunities to connect with youth and adults in their community

and/or different organizations and/or businesses (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). To support this process, provide opportunities for youth to unite with others (especially other youth) as they work towards social action, and provide opportunities to develop skills for working with teams (Jennings et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008).

**Create opportunities for youth to be leaders:** A goal within empowering youth is for youth to achieve some level of power (Maso et al., 2017). The ability to influence and exert power can be achieved through youth leadership opportunities (Crooks, Chiodo & Thomas, 2010; Maso et al., 2017). Leadership opportunities should provide room for ideas to be fostered and grow, and for youth to learn through a certain number of mistakes, as well as prepare youth to work together as leaders (Maso et al., 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

**Provide positive adult role models, intergenerational partnerships, and/or mentorship:** Youth need adult support to move into empowered leadership roles (Crooks, Chiodo & Thomas, 2010). Relationships should be built on mutual trust and prepare youth to work with adults as equals (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Ensure mentorship is from a strength-based perspective that focuses on providing role models to collaborate with youth to affect social change, and not to ‘save’ youth (Albright, Hurd & Hussain, 2017). Provide training for adult workers/volunteers to understand the systemic issues that youth participants face in their daily lives (Albright, Hurd & Hussain, 2017).

**Share power and decision-making and create a sense of ownership:** Shared power is critical for youth to feel that their participation is meaningful and that their voice is valued (Jennings et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008). This increases a sense of ownership among youth, which increases the degree to which youth understand that they influence how the work gets done (Bulanda & Byro Johnson, 2016). To foster power and decision-making as shared, support youth in identifying issues, prioritizing issues, and problem-solving approaches (Jennings et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008). Then, incrementally transfer power to youth as their capacity grows. This strategy involves approaching youth as experts of their own experiences (Crooks, Chiodo & Thomas, 2010).

**Create opportunities to take action that can lead to change:** Strengthening the best attitudes, skills, and competencies for empowerment involves learning by doing (Maso et al., 2017). Opportunities for action should ideally include a balance between structured plans of action with boundaries set by adult leaders, and less structured plans that provide youth with opportunities to act on decisions they make (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009; King Ledford et al., 2013; Maso et al., 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Support youth in understanding how actions and/or responsibilities fit into the goals of the project/organization (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009). These actions should provide opportunities for youth to impact individual, organizational, and community change (Crooks, Chiodo & Thomas, 2010; Jennings et al., 2006; Maso et al., 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

**Foster critical reflection:** When youth are critically aware, they are able to recognize and analyze the issues that affect their lives, and can then strategize ways of influencing change (King Ledford et al., 2013). Pearrow (2008) emphasizes that this is especially important for the critical youth empowerment model that emphasizes critical reflection around issues of power, which can include societal values (culture, beliefs, values), policies and resources, institutions, and individual behaviours (Crooks et al., 2010). Critical consciousness can be developed through intentional discussions around issues of power, and around discussions of problematization (why is it a problem that...?) (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009).

## **b) Learning Responsibility**

There is very little research on how adults can support youth developing responsibility through structured programming. However, organized youth programming with leadership components (such as yours) provide an important context for youth to develop responsibility (Salusky et al., 2014). To support youth's responsibility development, adult leaders need the skills to create and modify roles for youth that balance a good level of challenge and agency, as well as skills to balance holding youth to high expectations while providing a supportive and nurturing environment (Salusky et al., 2014).

Salusky et al. (2014) suggest that youth develop responsibility in youth programming through a four-step cycle:

1. Youth take on obligations, often in the form of a structured role. This process tends to be voluntary, or semi-voluntary;
2. Youth experience challenge and strain as a normal experience;
3. Youth are motivated to fulfill their obligations (attributed to a pre-existing disposition within themselves to follow through on obligations, high expectations of leaders, and a sense of solidarity with peers);
4. Youth experience fulfilling obligations, which make them feel more responsible and lead to them engaging in more responsible actions within other contexts of their lives.

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