

Evidence Brief

Best Practices for Youth-Led Program Planning & Implementation & Examples of Positive Change from Youth-Led Models

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "youth-led," "peer-to-peer," "youth engagement," "committee," and "positive outcomes." We then used the "related articles" function on Google Scholar to find additional articles.

Definitions of Key Terms

Within the literature, we found a variety of terms were used to describe similar concepts; below, we have briefly described the ones we thought were most relevant, and that appeared in the evidence we summarize in the rest of this brief:

- 1) Youth participation:** this term is not just about traditional ways of participating in democracy (e.g. voting); rather, it means that youth have "the right, the means, the space, and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engaging in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society" (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 5).
- 2) Youth civic engagement:** this term is closely related to participation (and is sometimes used interchangeably); civic engagement describes an individual or group of young people working towards improving their communities or the broader society, that allows space and time for reflection on their actions, and that is directed by youth (Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014).
- 3) Youth-led:** this concept has gained global attention in recent years, and it emphasizes the importance of giving youth real decision-making power so they can meaningfully contribute to civic society (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014). Using Hart's (1992) Ladder of Youth Voice, Damiani-Taraba et al. (2018) define 'youth-led' as projects that are initiated by youth who then share decision-making power with adults.

4) Youth-adult partnership: while ‘youth-led’ projects (as defined above) may perhaps be an ideal form of youth involvement, this concept has been criticized for over simplifying the complexities of power dynamics between youth and adults (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018). It may also not allow for engagement of all youth, as many youth require a balance of guidance and freedom from adults in order to participate. As such, ‘youth-adult partnership’ has emerged as a model that allows for youth and adults to work together towards shared goals (Ramey, Lawford & Rose-Krasnor, 2017; Ulrich, 2017; Pereira, 2007). Successful youth-adult partnerships rely on two key components: “youth voice in decision making and supportive adult relationships” (Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi & Sulaiman, 2014, p. 337).

Summary of Evidence

A. Nine Promising Practices

- 1) Programmers should be careful not to treat youth as tokens or decorations; rather, **youth should be engaged as partners**, with the **power to contribute to decision-making processes throughout program cycles** – for example, throughout program design, implementation, and evaluation (Martínez, Loyola & Cumsille, 2017; Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Ulrich, 2017; Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Council of Europe, 2008; Pereira, 2007; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; Camino & Zeldin, 2002). By giving youth power, adults are **explicitly valuing the skills and experiences that youth contribute**. However, youth should also know that adults are there to support them when necessary (Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornbluh & Collura, 2017).
- 2) Although genuinely sharing power with youth is important, equal decision-making may sometimes not be possible, especially if youth don’t have the technical skills required to do the work, if they will only be involved for a short period of time, or if the adult staff are financially responsible. In these situations, **adults should be transparent with youth about the limitations to sharing power, and other ways youth can meaningfully be involved** (Council of Europe, 2008; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005). Moreover, **“scaffolding” – gradually increasing the level of responsibility and leadership youth take on** – is an important way to ensure they can participate effectively in decision-making (Ulrich, 2017; Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Mitra, Lewis & Sanders, 2013; Pereira, 2007).
- 3) Before jumping into a youth-led project, it may be helpful for organizations to **evaluate the current level of youth leadership and engagement in their settings, and plan how to increase these opportunities**. Without this forethought, the organization may not be ready to support youth, even if they agree to participate (Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005). A major area to assess is **attitudes that adult staff may have about youth** (Camino & Zeldin, 2002),

and their **capacity to shift from traditional roles of ‘teacher,’ or ‘program leader,’ to a more collaborative, supportive or facilitating role** (Ulrich, 2017; Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Mitra, Lewis & Sanders, 2013). If it seems that staff hold implicit or explicit biases against having youth in positions of power, or if they are unsure about how to foster youth-adult partnerships, training can be used to challenge stereotypes and encourage respectful collaboration.

- 4) **Recognize the barriers to participation** that youth with intersecting identities may face, and **provide support to address challenges that arise** – for example, provide food, transportation, flexible meeting times, stipends, etc. (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016). Also, remember that this project is not the only interest or commitment youth have; **match the level and intensity of their responsibilities in your project with their life circumstances** (Council of Europe, 2008; Pereira, 2007; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; mindyourmind, n.d.).
- 5) Opportunities that youth are provided through their participation should **help youth build skills and capacities** (Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Heath & Moreau, 2017; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Council of Europe, 2008). **Formal training can also be provided**, as needed, to make sure youth have the skills they need to participate – for example, communication or technical skills, etc. (Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; Jans & De Backer, 2002).
- 6) Whenever possible, **offer youth mentorship opportunities** to enhance their skill-building (Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; mindyourmind, n.d.). Youth should feel **connected and supported** (Jans & De Backer, 2002); they should have access not just to physical space and resources, but also to **caring adults and communities** that they can count on (Martínez, Loyola & Cumsille, 2017).
- 7) To be most meaningful, youth participation should **involve a challenge for youth to work on that is interesting to them and directly relates to their everyday lives** (Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Council of Europe, 2008; Jans & De Backer, 2002).
- 8) **Recognize that youth will not participate in the program forever**; as youth “age out” or move on to other opportunities, it’s important to **actively recruit new youth** and perhaps to develop new, more challenging roles for youth who have been involved longer (Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005).
- 9) Ensure that **reflection and evaluation are built into any youth-led program or initiative** so

that important information about the impact and effectiveness of youth involvement can help improve the program (Ulrich, 2017; Pereira, 2007; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; mindyourmind, n.d.).

B. Nine Examples of Positive Change

When youth are involved in programming in the various ways described above, research shows that this programming can:

- 1) Enhance youth's **problem-solving skills** (Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Heath & Moreau, 2017; Akiva, Cortina & Smith, 2014; Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson, Shaw, 2014; Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014), **independence, sense of purpose, social competence, and mastery** (Council of Europe, 2008; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; Norman, 2001; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Calvert, 2000).
- 2) Build youth **leadership capacity** and strengthen their **sense of ownership in organizations and programs** (Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014; Council of Europe, 2008; Pereira, 2007; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005).
- 3) Help **adults recognize youth capacity** and appreciate young people's perspectives (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Council of Europe, 2008; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2003).
- 4) Promote **successful youth development** (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014; Council of Europe, 2008) by shifting the focus from adults trying to solve youth's problems to giving youth opportunities to make contributions and build skills (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2003).
- 5) Prepare youth to become **active citizens as they approach adulthood by giving them opportunities to practice skills** (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014; Hart, 1992) and to develop **positive beliefs about their ability to make a difference**, and **compassion and empathy** (Akiva, Cortina & Smith, 2014; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Calvert, 2000; Giles Jr. & Eyler, 1994).
- 6) Help youth gain **confidence** (Weybright, Trauntvein & Deen, 2017; Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014; Council of Europe, 2008; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003) and **develop meaningful relationships**. Support them in **improving skills and gaining knowledge** – as well as, at times, **changing their attitudes and approaches to challenges**

(Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; Rajani, 2000) – and in **experiencing a sense of empowerment** (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson & Shaw, 2014; Christens & Peterson, 2012).

- 7) Allow youth to contribute to their communities through civic engagement, thereby **fostering resilience** (Council of Europe, 2008; Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005; Blum, 1998), as well as **building self-esteem, and developing a sense of self** (identity development), **optimism, and social support** (Ramey, Lawford & Rose-Krasnor, 2017; Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014). Moreover, youth participating in voluntary work and civic engagement is associated with **lower educational dropout rates** (Mahoney, 2000) and **youth doing better in school** (Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan & Dolan, 2014; Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001).
- 8) Increase youth's **openness to learning, taking initiative, being creative, participating in critical dialogue** (Marx, Finger & Mahler, 2005), and generating **critical consciousness** (Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006).
- 9) Help young people get a **better understanding of how democracy works**, and help them envision how they would like it to work (Council of Europe, 2008).

References

- Akiva, T., Cortina, K.S., & Smith, C. (2014). Involving youth in program decision-making: How common and what might it do for youth? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *43*(11), 1844-1860.
- Barber, B.L., Eccles, J.S., & Stone, M.R. (2001). Whatever happened to the jock, the brain, and the princess? Young adult pathways linked to adolescent activity involvement and social identity. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *16*, 429-455.
- Blanchet-Cohen, N., Manolson, S., & Shaw, K. (2014). Youth-led decision making in community development grants. *Youth & Society*, *46*(6), 819-834.
- Blum, R.W. (1998). Healthy youth development as a model for youth health promotion: A review. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *22*(5), 368-375.
- Camino, L., & Zeldin, S. (2002). From periphery to center: Pathways for youth civic engagement in the day-to-day life of communities. *Applied Developmental Science*, *6*(4), 213-220.
- Christens, B.D., & Peterson, N.A. (2012). The role of empowerment in youth development: A study of sociopolitical control as mediator of ecological systems' influence on developmental outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *41*, 623-635.
- Council of Europe. (2015). *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6>
- Council of Europe. (2008). *Have Your Say! Manual on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. Retrieved from <http://www.formacionsve.es/salida/documentos/14.pdf>
- Damiani-Taraba, G., Sky, I., Hegler, D., Woolridge, N., Anderson, B., & Koster, A. (2018). The Listen to Me Project: Creating lasting changes in voice and participation for children in care through a youth led project. *Child & Youth Services*, 1-34. DOI: 10.1080/0145935X.2018.1446825
- Dworkin, J.B., Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2003). Adolescents' accounts of growth experiences in youth activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *32*, 17-26.
- Giles Jr, D.E., & Eyler, J. (1994). The impact of a college community service laboratory on students' personal, social, and cognitive outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence*, *17*(4), 327-339.

- Ginwright, S., Noguera, P., & Cammarota, J. (2006). *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*. New York: Routledge.
- Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF. Retrieved from https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf
- Heath, S. & Moreau, K. (2017, September 12). *The Engagement of Youth in Program Evaluation: The Results of a Scoping Review*. Presented at the Australasian Evaluation Society 2017 International Evaluation Conference, Canberra, Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.aes.asn.au/images/stories/files/conferences/2017/03SarahHeath.pdf>
- Jans, M., & De Backer, K. (2002). *Youth (-work) and social participation. Elements for a practical theory*. Project JeP!, Brussels: Flemish Youth Council.
- Larson, R.W., & Hansen, D. (2005). The development of strategic thinking: Learning to impact human systems in a youth activism program. *Human Development*, 48(6), 327–349.
- Mahoney, J.L. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development*, 72, 502–516.
- Martínez, M.L., Loyola, L.I., & Cumsille, P. (2017). Quality of participation in youth organizations: Relationships with identity and sense of sociopolitical control. *Youth & Society*, 49(7), 968–993.
- Marx, M., Finger, W., & Mahler, H. (2005). *Youth Participation Guide: Assessment, Planning, and Implementation*. Durham, North Carolina: Family Health International (in collaboration with Advocates for Youth). Retrieved from https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/youth_participation.pdf
- mindyourmind. (n.d.). *Youth Involvement*. London, ON: mindyourmind. Retrieved from https://mindyourmind.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/Youth_Involvement_at_mym.pdf
- Mitra, D., Lewis, T., & Sanders, F. (2013). Architects, captains, and dreamers: Creating advisor roles that foster youth-adult partnerships. *Journal of Educational Change*, 14(2), 177–201.

- Mitra, D.L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing “student voice” in schools lead to gains in youth development. *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651–688.
- Norman, J. (2001). Building effective youth-adult partnerships. *Transitions*, 14(1), 10-19. Retrieved from <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/transitions1401.pdf>
- Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health. (2016). *Walking the talk. A toolkit for engaging youth in mental health*. Ottawa, ON: Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health. Retrieved from <http://www.yetoolkit.ca>
- Pereira, N. (2007). *Ready... Set... Engage! Building effective youth/adult partnerships for a stronger child and youth mental health system*. Toronto, ON: Children’s Mental Health Ontario & Ottawa, ON: The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health.
- Pittman, K.J., Irby, M., Tolman, J., Yohalem, N., & Ferber, T. (2003). *Preventing problems, promoting development, encouraging engagement: Competing priorities or inseparable goals?* Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment. Retrieved from <http://forumfyi.org/content/preventing-problems-pr>
- Rajani, R.R. (2000). *Promoting Strategic Adolescent Participation Among Partners*. UNICEF. Retrieved from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/1770.pdf>
- Ramey, H.L., Lawford, H.L., & Rose-Krasnor, L. (2017). Doing for others: Youth’s contributing behaviors and psychological engagement in youth-adult partnerships. *Journal of Adolescence*, 55, 129-138.
- Shaw, A., Brady, B., McGrath, B., Brennan, M. A., & Dolan, P. (2014). Understanding youth civic engagement: Debates, discourses, and lessons from practice. *Community Development*, 45(4), 300-316.
- Ulrich, R.K. (2017). *Engagement in the Canadian Red Cross: Supporting Inuit Youth to Create Change in their Community*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Victoria, B.C.: Royal Roads University. Retrieved from https://viurrspace.ca/bitstream/handle/10613/5024/Ulrich_royalroads_1313O_10440.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

- Weybright, E.H., Trauntvein, N., & Deen, M.K. (2017). "It was like we were all equal": Maximizing youth development using youth-adult partnerships. *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*, 35(1), 5-19.
- Zeldin, S., Gauley, J., Krauss, S.E., Kornbluh, M., & Collura, J. (2017). Youth–adult partnership and youth civic development: Cross-national analyses for scholars and field professionals. *Youth & Society*, 49(7), 851-878.
- Zeldin, S., Krauss, S.E., Collura, J., Lucchesi, M., & Sulaiman, A.H. (2014). Conceptualizing and measuring youth–adult partnership in community programs: A cross national study. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54(3-4), 337-347.
- Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A.K., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in decision-making: A study on the impacts of youth on adults and organizations*. Chevy Chase, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development and National 4-H Council. Retrieved from http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/files/Youth_in_Decision_Making_Brochure.pdf