

Firelight Newsflash! 2 November 2009 – Focus on Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

What Is a Youth-Adult Partnership?

A true partnership is one in which each party has the opportunity to make suggestions and decisions and in which the contribution of each is recognized and valued.

A youth-adult partnership is one in which adults work in full partnership with young people on issues facing youth and/or on programs and policies affecting youth. Contributing to one's community is the heart of most youth-adult partnerships.

In addressing community-level issues, youth and adults can work together in a number of ways. Together, they can conduct a needs assessment, write a grant proposal, raise funds, design a program, train new staff, deliver services, implement ideas and projects, oversee a program, collect data, evaluate a program's effectiveness, improve unsuccessful aspects of a program, and replicate successful programs. Basically, youth can be involved in all aspects of planning, implementation and monitoring a program!

Sharing with youth the power to make decisions means adults' respecting and having confidence in young people's judgment. It means adults' recognizing youth's assets, understanding what the youth will bring to the partnership, and being willing to provide additional training and support when youth need it (just as when including other adults in making decisions). Both youth and adults may need to embrace change in order for the partnership to work. For example, adults may need to modify their ideas about what will and will not work and about times and conditions under which work proceeds. Similarly, youth may need to understand the limitations and realities that affect a program's development, operation, and evaluation.

Why Are Youth-Adult Partnerships Important?

Youth-adult partnerships arise from the conviction that young people have a right to participate in developing the programs that will serve them and a right to have a voice in shaping the policies that will affect them. In addition, advocates of youth-adult partnerships argue that programs are more sustainable and effective when youth are partners in their design, development, and implementation. Involving young people in decision making provides them with the essential opportunities and experiences (i.e. challenge, relevancy, voice, cause based action, skill building, adult structure, and affirmation) that are consistently shown to help young people achieve mastery, compassion, and health. Youth participation can also help young people resist stress and negative situations.

These benefits (discussed below) are produced and facilitated by effective youth-adult partnerships.

What Are The Potential Benefits For Youth?

Opportunities for youth's meaningful involvement, participation, and contribution to one's community—such as are found in youth-adult partnerships—may provide youth with:

- Social competence, including responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, and caring, communication skills, a sense of humor, and other pro-social behaviors
- Problem solving skills, including the ability to think abstractly, reflectively, and flexibly and the ability to arrive at alternative solutions to cognitive and social problems
- Autonomy, including a sense of identity and an ability to act independently and to exert control over one's environment
- Sense of purpose and future, including having healthy expectations, goals, an orientation toward success, motivation to achieve, educational aspirations, hopefulness, hardiness, and a sense of coherence.
- Development of an internal locus of control, or the feeling of being able to have an impact on one's environment and on others.
- Increase in their belief that people can make a difference and that people should be involved in community service and advocacy.

How can these partnerships support youth development?

Youth development is defined as the ongoing growth process in which youth are engaged in attempting to meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded, and build their skills and the competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives. Youth development is facilitated when young people have consistent opportunities to:

- Feel physically and emotionally safe
- Build relationships with caring, connected adults
- Acquire knowledge and information, and
- Engage in meaningful and purposeful activities in ways that offer both continuity and variety.

These opportunities are abundantly present in genuine youth-adult partnerships. Proponents of both youth development programs and youth-adult partnerships have in common a belief that youth are caring and capable individuals. **Rather**

than seeing youth as problems to be managed, true supporters of youth development view young people as valued resources with individual assets. Proponents of youth-adult partnerships see young people as individuals with the capacity to make positive and wide-ranging contributions when they receive support and the opportunity to develop their skills.

How Do Adults and Organizations Benefit from Adult-Youth Partnerships?

It would be a mistake to assume that the only benefits from these partnerships accrue to youth. Adults and the organizations in which these partnerships operate also benefit from youth adult partnerships. Adults:

- Experience the competence of youth first hand and begin to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors.
- Find their commitment and energy enhanced by working with youth.
- Feel more effective and more confident in working with and relating to youth.
- Understand the needs and concerns of youth, become more attuned to programming issues, and gain a stronger sense of connection to the community.
- Receive fresh ideas from different perspectives.
- Reach a broader spectrum of people.
- Develop more relevant and responsive programming and services.
- Share knowledge.
- Increase creativity.
- Break down stereotypes about both youth and adults.

Positive outcomes for organizations are also possible:

- Young people help clarify and bring focus to the organization's mission.
- The adults and the organization, as a whole, become more connected and responsive to youth in the community, leading to programming improvements.
- Organizations place a greater value on inclusion and representation and see programs benefiting when multiple and diverse voices participate in making decisions.
- Youth's making decisions helps convince foundations and other funding agencies that the organization is truly committed to meaningful youth development and/or involvement.

What Is Not a Genuine Youth Adult Partnership?

Youth-adult partnerships are not ways to hide or obscure the fact that programs are designed, implemented, and run only by adults. Tokenism and non-

participation of youth can appear in many forms. This could include such actions as:

- Having young people around with no clear role to play
- Giving youth responsibility for activities but not engaging them in decision-making about key aspects of the activities
- Assigning youth only those tasks which adults do not want to fulfill
- Having youth make media appearances without any voice in developing the messages, programs, or policies that the youth are expected to talk about
- Having one youth on a board of directors or committee to appear as "youth involvement" without their voice being heard.

Adult-youth partnerships are not genuine participation when young people feeling used rather than empowered. The key to avoiding this is to share the power to make decisions. If youth have no power to make decisions, their participation is not one of partnership.

Tips for Partnering with Youth

- Treat youth as partners. Ensure that all members of the group, regardless of age, share the decision making power—equal voice and equal vote.
- Welcome, encourage, and affirm contributions and insights from both youth and adults.
- Encourage everyone to recognize the mutual benefits of youth and adults working together in partnership. Ensure that all the adult members "buy into" youth's participating in the process.
- Be selective about the youth and the adults who participate.
- Establish high expectations for everyone involved. Don't patronize youth by lowering expectations regarding them. On the other hand, don't expect more from young people than from adults.
- Provide training and build the capacities of both youth and adults.
- Schedule meetings when youth can attend and in locations accessible to them. Keep young people informed about plans and meeting times.
- Include room for growth and advancement for experienced youth and adults.
- Don't make assumptions about what individuals—of any age—are like.
- Take the time and make the effort to develop a good relationship with youth before expecting much. This work is often new to youth; take the time to explain. Youth may interpret adults' actions as a sign of disinterest in youth's participation; so, go slow and explain what's going on.
- Remember that there are times when youth need to say, "No." Their education, relationships, communities, and extracurricular activities are important, too.

Tips for Youth When Working with Adults

- Most adults have good intentions. Remember that they are seldom accustomed to working in partnership with young people.
- Criticism doesn't necessarily mean condescension or that an adult doesn't

value your contribution. It may mean the adult is treating you the same way he/she would an adult colleague. Remember that adults are used to critiquing each other's work and offering constructive ideas to improve a project. Disagreement doesn't mean disrespect.

- Adults may not be aware of the capabilities of young people. You may have to show them.
- Adults often feel responsible for the success or failure of the project. This makes it hard for them to share power. Reassure them that you will share in successes and failures.
- Adults are just as uncertain as youth. Many have just learned to disguise it better.
- Sometimes adults use phrases and expressions, whether consciously or not, that annoy young people and that indicate they aren't treating youth as partners. These phrases and expressions can erode a relationship. Be prepared to tell adults when their language is hurtful.
- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification. Adults often use words, phrases, and acronyms that you might not understand. Adults new to the program may not understand them either. The language of a special issue, like HIV, is riddled with terms that can bewilder any newcomer.
- Don't be afraid to say, "No." Adults will understand that you have other important commitments, like your education, family, friends, hobbies, and sports.

Additional Reading - Youth Leadership: Recommendations for Sustainability of Youth-Led Organizations

http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/youth_sustainability.pdf

Participatory Exercise: The River

Purpose: To remind adults of the pressures that youth may be facing

Materials: A blindfold, masking tape, several pieces of newspaper, index cards, newsprint and markers

Time: 20 to 25 minutes

Planning Notes: Below are the various character roles. Depending on the size of your group, use as many or few of the characters as appropriate. Be sure that one person gets the "Young Person" role.

- Young Person—Listen to all those who are trying to guide you down the river.
- Parent/Foster Parent—You know best. Tell the Young Person what to do, keeping his/her best interests in mind. Use phrases like, "When I was your

- age ..." Feel free to be creative in your role!
- Grandparent—You know best. Tell the Young Person what to do, keeping his/her best interests in mind. Use phrases like, "When I was your age ..." Feel free to be creative in your role!
 - Minister—You are the moral guide for the Young Person. Feel free to be creative in your role!
 - Friend—You are the "good" friend. You truly care about the Young Person. Feel free to be creative in your role!
 - Teacher—Stress the importance of school. Give guidance where you see fit. Feel free to be creative in your role!
 - Social Worker—Give advice to the Young Person around issues such as drug use, sex, family, school, etc. Feel free to be creative in your role!
 - Media—Think of all the influences in the media (TV, movies, magazines, etc.) Some examples of media messages may include sex, violence, money, etc. Feel free to be creative in your role!
 - Friend—You are the "bad" friend. You are a bad influence on the Young Person. Feel free to be creative in your role!
 - Health Care Provider—Give advice to the Young Person regarding his/her health and general well-being. Some examples: talking about smoking, sex, nutrition. Feel free to be creative in your role!

Steps:

1. Explain that too often, as adults, we forget what it is like to be a teenager with competing pressures and influences in our lives. This exercise is an effective way to understand some of the pressures that teens face.
2. Set up "the river," laying out two long pieces of tape or rope or tree branches to form it.
3. Place stones or papers as barriers throughout "the river." Be creative, calling them crocodiles, white water, etc.
4. Ask for volunteers for the roleplay. Select up to 10 volunteers and assign a character role to each participant.
5. Give volunteers about two minutes to think about their roles.
6. Explain that there are many conflicting influences in the lives of youth, today more than ever. These influences may affect the decisions that young people make, including decisions about sexuality.
7. Ask all of the volunteers to come up to the front of the room and stand on either side of "the river."
8. Ask the Young Person to come forward and blindfold him/her.
9. Explain that the various characters must guide the Young Person down "the river," helping her/him to avoid the danger spots (crocodiles, white water, etc.). Give the other characters about 10 minutes to guide the Young Person down "the river."
10. Conclude the activity using the discussion points.

Discussion Points:

- What did you think of this exercise? Is this what happens to young

- people? Why? Why not?
- How did it feel to be the Young Person?
 - Were you faced with similar pressures and influences when you were a teen?
 - How do these influences affect a teen's ability to make decisions?

Content for this Newsflash was adapted from Advocates for Youth Adult-Youth Partnership materials, which can be found at:

http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=910&Itemid=115.

Advocates for Youth champions efforts that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health. Advocates focuses its work on young people ages 14-25 around the globe -- focusing on rights, respect and responsibility. To learn more about their work, see:

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org>

As part of the Firelight Foundation's Monitoring, Evaluation and Technical Assistance (META) Program, Firelight provides "Newsflashes" to share relevant resources and information with our active grantee-partners via weekly emails and via post on a monthly basis. We hope that by facilitating access to information for grassroots, community-focused organizations, programming for children and families, as well as organizational development, is enhanced. Past editions of the Firelight Newsflash can be found on our website:

<http://www.firelightfoundation.org/newsflash.htm>.

We welcome your comments, feedback and ideas for upcoming Newsflashes at newsletter@firelightfoundation.org.