Youth Voice

Young people are powerful contributors to society, but too often adults don’t seek or hear their voices. Youth voice is not about “letting” youths help, but about working with youths as partners, leaders, and advocates to improve the world.

Following are some tips on working effectively with young people:

Make sure you are ready. Do you or other adults within your organization really want to listen to youths? Why? Are you doing so because it is the “in” thing? Will the youths be fully integrated, or will they be tokens? Are there assumptions or stereotypes of youth involvement that need to be challenged? Are you committed to putting in the time and possibly funding to get the training necessary?

Provide training for the youths and adults. Adults don’t always understand youths, and vice versa. When working on projects together, youth and adult styles may vary. Training is vital.

Connect with other groups who have fully integrated youths into decision-making and programming. Find out what worked and what didn’t. Select the youths carefully. This does not mean select “the cream of the crop.” Often the strongest potential youth leaders are those yet to be identified. So, avoid over-committed youths, or those whose interests don’t match the organization’s goals. Have young people help in establishing selection criteria, including the number of youths, ages, diversity of ethnic backgrounds, experience, and interests.

Loosen up! Try to be flexible and do things in different ways. If your group normally meets in a classroom or meeting room with tables and chairs, try meeting in a more casual environment, on couches or beanbag chairs. Hold the meeting outdoors if possible.

Be active. Most adults have a difficult time sitting through long meetings or conferences; this also is the case for young people (especially if they have just finished a school day where they were mostly sitting and listening). Think of ways to get people interacting with one another, across all ages.

Respect the youths’ opinions. If the young people in a meeting are not participating, do not single them out to ask for their opinions. If they are not speaking, there is a reason. After the meeting, bring them aside and talk to them about their silence. Listen, and make necessary changes.

Provide opportunities for feedback. Check in with the young people frequently. Schedules, interests, and group dynamics can change. Make sure these feedback sessions are honest and open.

Be patient. Even for the skilled youth worker or teacher, it takes time to adjust to youths being at the table. You will hit hurdles, but will overcome them if your organization truly desires to involve youths at all levels. Expect high and low peaks in attendance; these will often coincide with activities like prom, SAT’s, and finals. Though such attendance peaks are frustrating, the key is to be flexible, and take creative approaches to scheduling and location.
Youth Voice Resources

Youth Leadership


Youth-Adult Partnerships

Checkoway, Barry. *Adults as Allies.* Battle Creek: W.K. Kellogg Foundation.


Helpful Websites
The Freechild Project
www.freechild.org

Common Cents
www.commoncents.org

Youth on Board
www.youthonboard.org

YSA
www.ysa.org

American Youth Policy Forum
www.aypf.org

YouthBuild USA
www.youthbuild.org

YouthVoice.net
www.indiana.edu/~ythvoice

For more information on service-learning, visit NYLC at www.nylc.org, call (651) 631-3672, or write nylcinfo@nylc.org.

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