

Youth and Adult Partnerships

To bring about sustainable change in the child welfare system, young people and adults need to work together as partners. Both youth and adults have much to offer in this partnership.

Young people bring:

Their personal experience in the foster care system

Their knowledge of what works in foster care and what they know doesn't work.

Their knowledge of what works with youth.

Adults bring:

Their knowledge of how the system works

Their own personal experiences

Their access to people, places, and resources that can make change happen

YOUTH AND
ADULTS
WORKING IN
PARTNERSHIPS

For youth and adult partnerships to succeed, it is important for youth and adults to have an understanding of what it means to work as partners. There are many benefits to developing and sustaining such partnerships, but there are also some challenges. Understanding possible pitfalls can help us think about and plan ahead of time so that we are able to overcome these barriers and focus on accomplishing our goals. Our aim is to create meaningful working relationships, avoid pitfalls, and sustain the youth and adult partnership.



What are some of the pitfalls that we may encounter?

Developing and sustaining youth and adult partnerships is no easy task and it's not something that happens overnight. These partnerships can be challenging for a number of reasons.

First, most young people and adults are not used to developing working relationships that are characterized by shared power, shared accountability, and shared decisionmaking. Adults may have never had the opportunity to work in partnership with youth. Youth may not have ever experienced real partnership with adults. Both youth and adults might not understand why such a partnership is so important and both may feel uncomfortable with this kind of relationship because it is so new and different. Both, may be wary of working with the other because they believe that their thoughts and opinions will not be heard.

Second, the child welfare system is not designed to support the development of youth and adult partnerships. In the child welfare system, adults are charged with the responsibility of making decisions FOR youth to ensure their safety and protection. As a result, young people involved with this system do not usually have opportunities to work in partnership with adults. Before you and your organization decide to

move forward with the development of youth and adult partnerships, it is helpful to assess your own personal level of readiness as well as that of your organization.

Finally, the phenomenon of “adultism” can undermine our efforts to develop and sustain partnerships.

What is “adultism”?

“Adultism” is an adult practice of forming certain beliefs about young people and practicing certain behaviors toward them because of societal views, usually negative, that are based on their age. “Adultism” happens when this prejudice is combined with the ability of adults to exert control over the lives of young people.

When adults practice “adultism,” young people are viewed as objects instead of resources. The end result is that young people become disempowered and disenfranchised.

When adults practice “adultism,” it is often unknowingly and unintentionally. They exercise “adultism” at home with their children, in schools, in communities, and at child welfare agencies. Adults exercise a great deal of power over young people. This reality is magnified for young people in foster care.

When “adultism” happens, we see the following behaviors from adults. In response to these interactions with adults, there is a corresponding set of behaviors that young people exhibit. As a result of these interactions and reactions, the cycle of “adultism” continues.

Adapted from the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, Advancing Youth Development, Washington, DC

Some of the ways in which adults carry out "adultism" are:

Stereotyping youth

Failing to ask youths' opinion

Failing to listen
to youth

Failing to include youth in decision-making

(Especially decisions that directly affect them)

Failing to support youth development

Treating youth as objects

Not giving youth responsibility

Failing to meaningfully involve youth

Underestimating youth solely because of their age

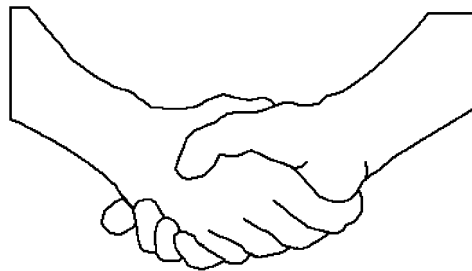
Not valuing youth as resources

Dysfunctional Rescuing occurs when adults do things for young people because they assume they can't do them for themselves. In response, young people attempt to "beat the system" by manipulating others through guilt, anger, pretending to be uninformed, or being "invisible." As a result, young people are set up to fail and lose out on opportunities to take on challenges, experience success, learn, and develop.

The Strategy to Break the Cycle of Dysfunctional Rescuing is Functional Helping

By *functionally helping*, adults can provide guidance and support to young people as they take on new challenges. This support must be individually tailored to the strengths and needs of the young person. What might be supportive for one young person may be dysfunctional rescuing for another.

Blaming the Victim occurs when adults blame the problems of a young person on the youth without giving any consideration to their life experiences. Young people learn to blame the system because they are accustomed to being blamed for things that have happened in their lives. Typically, they will not take responsibility for their actions. As a result, young people do not get the support they need and lose motivation to participate.



Adapted from the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, Advancing Youth Development, Washington, DC

The Strategy to Break the Cycle of Blaming is Taking Responsibility.

Young people need to be encouraged and given opportunities to take responsibility for their actions and choices. Adults need to model this behavior by avoiding the use of blame-focused language. Instead, adults and young people should think about desired outcomes and identify strategies to accomplish youth's goals.

Adults often avoid contact with young people because they are uncomfortable with interacting with youth and are not interested in learning about youth culture. Young people avoid contact with adults because they are not used to interacting with them and don't trust them. The result is programs and services for youth are based on adults' *perception* of youth needs. Young people become alienated from adults and come to believe that adults have little to offer them.

The Strategy to Break the Cycle of Avoiding Contact is Making Contact.

Young people and adults need to spend time with each other. Often, adults think that this relationship building happens automatically while meeting to talk about a youth's goals, case plans, etc. It's important to schedule time away from the office (if possible) that is not tied to the completion of paperwork so that both youth and adults have the opportunity to learn about and get to know one another.

"Adulthood" can manifest itself in our work and relationships with young people. It's important to remember that adults are not engaging in this behavior to be hurtful or malicious! In fact, many adults engage

in "adulthood" behaviors because they think that they are doing what's best for a young person; they believe that they have the youth's best interests in mind. The cycle is perpetuated by youth reactions to the behavior and attitudes of adults.

The most powerful strategy for breaking the cycle of "adulthood" is engaging in youth and adult partnerships.

What else can be done to combat "adulthood" and set the stage for successful youth and adult partnerships?

First, as an adult partner, you can become more culturally aware. Learn about how youth and adults are different, but also what they have in common. Ask questions that will give you insight into the unique culture of young people – their hobbies, fashion, food they like to eat, music they listen to, etc. Take the time to listen to youth's music and be aware of what young people watch on television – talk about what you both see, hear, and think about the world!

Second, be sensitive to youth culture. Communicate respect, interest, and engagement when you are interacting with young people. Think about how your own beliefs and values impact your relationships with young people. Be flexible, nonjudgmental, and LISTEN to what young people have to say.

Finally, think about how adult partners can move toward becoming culturally competent in their relationships and work with young people. Understand that the idea is you never "get there" because there's always something more to learn! Develop the skills needed for working with young people and celebrate the ways in which you are different from each other.

Adapted from the Association for the Advancement of Health Education's Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity: Guidelines for Health Educators and the National Network for Youth's cultural competency training materials.

What can be done to combat “adulthood”?

Just as there are many ways in which “adulthood” is practiced, there are ways in which it can be combated:

Open your minds to and help to create positive change!

View and **respect youth and adults** in the same manner with equal status.

Remember that **youth as well as adults are resources**. Value their opinion, decisionmaking abilities, work and their experiences. Both youth and adults should be relied upon for guidance, wisdom and support.

Listen to and consider what young people have to say.

Youth and adults should be actively involved in the **decisionmaking** process.

Both youth and adults should have **equal** power, responsibility, and meaningful involvement.

Youth and adults should **actively participate** in the planning, development, organization, and execution of all projects and processes.

Have **high expectations** for youth and adults. Both youth and adults should be held accountable.

Communicate honestly! Share your true thoughts - frustrations and joys. Give, receive, and discuss constructive feedback in a truthful and positive way.



Some helpful suggestions to adult partners for communicating effectively with youth partners:

- ✓ Treat young people as partners rather than as clients.
- ✓ Understand that you must be willing to share power and accountability with your partners.
- ✓ Be flexible and willing to meet in the evenings or on weekends to accommodate the schedules of young people.
- ✓ Give young people opportunities to interview adults with whom they will be expected to work.
- ✓ Relate to young people in the context of their strengths and talents – recognize that youth have much to contribute to the world and provide them with ample opportunities to make change happen.
- ✓ Interact with young people in a way that demonstrates respect and mutual regard.
- ✓ Create safe places for youth and model appropriate sharing by letting young people get to know you.
- ✓ Communicate respect, both verbally and nonverbally. Don't talk down to young people because this can make them feel inferior, causing them to be standoffish and uncooperative.
- ✓ Give youth space in which to develop ideas and their identities. Try not to make comments about clothing styles or language, since this might make them feel as if you don't understand them or don't want to.
- ✓ Let them know you take an interest in their lives without being overzealous; be sincere and genuine in your approach.
- ✓ Be empowering when it comes to talking about planning their future. This means things such as schooling, placements, and family involvement. Give them an opportunity to tell you their ideas for the future.

Here's a great list of suggestions for youth communicating with adults:



- ✓ Give adults a chance – be open to developing new and different relationships with adults.
- ✓ Ask questions.
- ✓ Be willing to share your thoughts and opinions about what works and what doesn't.
- ✓ Communicate respectfully.
- ✓ Use proper English, not slang.
- ✓ Recognize that it's okay to disagree.
- ✓ Look neat and clean.
- ✓ Educate others about the benefits of and barriers to working in partnership with youth and adults.
- ✓ Share your success stories and the lessons that you've learned.
- ✓ Recognize that your adult partners are trying to act in your best interest



"Express your thoughts in a constructive way. Not yelling, swearing, or screaming. Learn how to talk about your feelings and do so, it will help staff to know what's going on in your head. Understand that although staff may not always act like it, they really do have your best interest in mind."

Danielle Pouliot, Former Foster Youth

What are the benefits of youth and adult partnerships?



The world will be a better place! Effective youth and adult partnerships in the foster care system will bring about needed and sustainable changes in the system.



You will find solutions! Since they have a personal stake in the results of the organization's efforts, young people in your partnership can help focus the organization's mission.



You will think and act more constructively! Services and programs designed with the strengths and needs of young people in mind are more relevant to the young people that they serve.



You will promote diversity! Young people and adults are personally and professionally enriched by the relationships that they develop with each other.



Prepare to be amazed! Adults will have the opportunity to experience the competence of youth first hand.



You will take up challenges! Youth have the chance to present themselves as legitimate, crucial contributors.



You'll be part of the team! Young people have concrete opportunities to create a common vision with adults.



You will reap rewards! Youth will see their efforts materialize as they accomplish their goals.



You will see your dynamic partnership bring about change and encourage youth and adult partners to think about the world in new and different ways.

"To borrow from the cliché "talk is cheap," it is now time to put our ideas and words into action. We must remain committed to finding resolutions to common issues and difficulties that youth experience in the child welfare system. We must increase current levels of collaboration with all stakeholders, including caregivers, caseworkers, key departmental executives, and other members of the child welfare community."



April Curtis, Former Foster Youth



The Child Welfare League of America is the nation's oldest and largest membership-based child welfare organization. We are committed to engaging people everywhere in promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families, and protecting every child from harm.

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