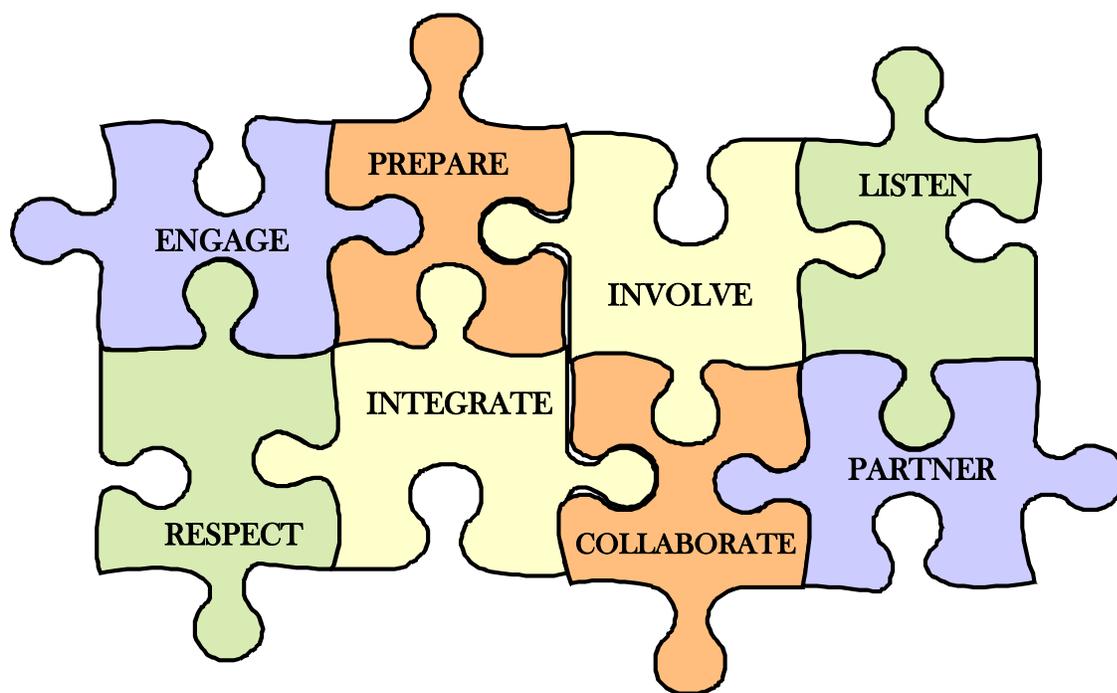


# **Working in Collaboration with Youth Partners and Young People**



**Processes and Protocols to Support Meaningful Youth and  
Adult Partnerships in Planning and Policymaking Activities**

**Office of Mental Health and  
YOUTH POWER!  
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## **Working in Collaboration with Youth Partners and Young People**

### **Introduction**

While most recognize the importance of gathering youth feedback as part of program and policy development, many are unaware of the preparation and effort necessary to successfully engage youth in the process. We have learned over the years that it is not sufficient or appropriate to invite youth to meetings or solicit feedback without preparing them ahead of time. Simply having youth “at the table” does not ensure that we are effectively gathering honest and open feedback or that we have made the youth comfortable enough to actively participate. Adults truly interested in collaborating with youth for change need to understand the steps necessary for creating effective partnerships.

Below are some recommendations for processes that can be put into place to maximize meaningful participation of youth in decision-making processes. The Office of Mental Health has designated a liaison to assist YOUTH POWER! to prepare youth to provide input and to ensure that that input guides agency policies and programs in concrete and meaningful ways. The processes outlined here are currently used by OMH and YOUTH POWER! for this purpose.

### **Adult-Youth Partnerships**

As in any collaboration, an adult-youth partnership requires that both parties be on an equal footing. Input from each partner should be accorded the same value and integrated in decision-making processes. Adults and youth who partner should commit to **mutual** respect and open communication. The expertise and perspective that each bring to the table may vary, but both provide valuable contributions toward informing policy and program development or change.

### **Serving as an Adult Ally**

While some youth may come to the table fully prepared to share their experiences and opinions, others may need the help of an “adult ally” to encourage their active participation. While the adult coordinator of a meeting has primary responsibility for serving as an “adult ally” to the youth involved, other adults may serve as allies as well. It is important for adults not to underestimate the amount of time, nurturing and support necessary to really get youth involved and to sustain their involvement over time. A good adult ally understands the value of youth feedback and works towards engaging them in decision-making processes by acknowledging youth input and validating the thoughts and feelings youth share. For example, if youth are not actively participating in a discussion, the adult ally will try to engage them by directing questions to them. The adult ally will also ensure the youth get ample “air time” and are not interrupted or spoken over. An adult ally is someone who advocates for youth voice and the importance of youth involvement at all times.

### **Engaging Peer Allies**

An important resource to recognize when supporting and developing youth partners and youth leaders is the benefit of utilizing peer allies. Peer allies are young adults or adults who have had personal experiences in the children’s and possibly adult mental health system. They can serve as mentor and support person to a youth who is involved in planning and policymaking activities. They often have a greater understanding of the perspective of young people who have been

involved in the mental health system. As a result, they are often open to youth voice and can help to bridge the gap, if needed, between youth partners and other adults.

### **Empowering Youth Partners**

The more youth that can attend a meeting, the better. It is always preferable to have at least two youth attend. Having only one youth participate can intimidate the youth or make him/her uncomfortable. Youth may be reluctant to openly share their feelings and opinions in this environment. It is the responsibility of the adult coordinator to foster an open and welcoming environment in which youth will feel empowered to participate. To facilitate such an environment, it is important not only that the youth be prepared for the meeting, but also that other adults in the meeting be prepared to work collaboratively with youth. Youth attending or participating in meetings are equal partners in the process and ought to be respected as such.

### **Scheduling Meetings**

To ensure participation of youth in meetings, it is essential to take youths' schedules into consideration. Youth are often involved in school or employment during the day and are unable to participate in meetings or conference calls during regular business hours. It is important to find out when youth are available and schedule meetings accordingly. To maximize the number of youth who will participate in the meeting or call, ample notice must be provided. Keep in mind that youth coordinators may need time to coordinate the schedules of several or a group of youth. Sufficient time should also be provided for youth to review relevant materials prior to the meeting or to participate in other activities designed to prepare them for the meeting. To assure youth attend, adults should use many forms of communication including, email, phone calls, texts, etc.

### **Providing Information**

Adults responsible for hosting meetings that will include youth should prepare materials to share with youth before the meeting. These materials should include an agenda, materials that will be discussed at the meeting and any relevant background materials that may help the youth to orient themselves to the topic being discussed. It is sometimes necessary for the youth partner or adult coordinating the meeting to customize materials so that they are easy to understand and youth-friendly. Fact sheets or a summary document that clearly outlines the issues to be discussed may greatly enhance youth participation in a meeting when shared and reviewed with youth prior to the meeting. These briefings may include principals, mission statements, definitions and acronyms, history, who will be attending the meeting, and so forth. It is also helpful to identify a contact person (preferably a peer ally or youth partner) whom a youth can call if they have questions about the meeting or materials.

As youth respond well to multiple forms of media, adults may want to consider using power point presentations, visual representations of any relevant processes or programs, or other visual mediums. In addition, if there are youth who speak English as a second language and/or have learning or cognitive delays, accommodations should be made for translating materials or making them more developmentally appropriate for the individual youth involved. It is also important to keep things at a easy reading level. To check the reading level of your document in Microsoft word you can do the following:

- Set it up (you will just need to do this once):

- Select ‘Tools’ at the top of your screen.
  - Then select ‘Options’ at the very bottom of that list.
  - Then select ‘Spelling and Grammar’ (on the top of that screen; usually over to the right).
  - Then select ‘Show Readability Statistics’ (at the very bottom of that list).
  - Now it is set!
- Use it:
    - Complete your document
    - Then select ‘Tools’
    - Then select ‘Spelling and Grammar.’ (After checking the spelling and grammar, the program will show the Readability Statistics window at the very end.)
    - Your document is ready if the “Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level” is 8.0 or less. It is best to keep it lower than 8.0.

### **Conducting a Pre-Meeting or Conference Call**

Once the youth have received the materials for a meeting, the coordinating adult and youth partner should plan on connecting with the youth either through an in-person meeting, if possible, or a conference call to review the materials, as well as to discuss the meeting format, who will be in attendance, and what the meeting conveners would like to know from the youth. This pre-meeting provides an opportunity for the youth to know what is being asked of them and to become acclimated to the issues which will be discussed.

### **Facilitating Transportation**

One of the major barriers to youth involvement is transportation. Youth often have difficulty attending meetings because they cannot get there. To ensure youth can attend in-person meetings or regional gatherings, it is crucial that transportation be provided, paid for or arranged for by the adult coordinator and/or youth partner. If the meeting is a conference call or Go-to-Meeting (web-based meetings), it is important to ensure that youth have access to the appropriate equipment in a quiet area. This is particularly important for youth in residential settings. Accessing these communication tools may require that the youth be transported to another location such as a library or provider agency.

### **Providing Stipends**

While participating in meetings and having input into policies and programs that may affect state or local child-serving systems is a wonderful opportunity for youth, it is important to acknowledge the value of the time they spend in these activities. Because of this, it is always appropriate, and indeed preferable, to provide youth with stipends for their expertise and time committed to participating in decision-making processes. These stipends can be cash, gift certificates or other items of value that are appropriate for young people. Most youth prefer cash stipends, but, if not possible, donations, certificates, or tangible items from local merchants are also appropriate compensations for their time. Many youth are in school or other programs that recognize community service; therefore additional ways to recognize their contribution can include items that document their service, e.g., letters of thanks, certificates of appreciation, awards for ongoing participation or a letter of recommendation.

### **Closing the Feedback Loop**

A key component of effectively partnering with youth is sharing with them the results of the committee and the impact of their guidance. It is helpful for youth to see the results of their work and understand the value of their feedback. Acknowledging youth for their contributions is also an important aspect of partnership. This can be accomplished in many ways, such as: giving them credit for their ideas, identifying them as a member of the committee in all minutes and documents, including their name in any papers or publications, using their ideas to develop concrete recommendations for change (including those that adults may not be in agreement or comfortable with).

### **Utilizing Youth as Leaders**

Sometimes the same youth will attend multiple meetings on various topics or serve as an ongoing member to one committee. It is important for those youth to be recognized as leaders and partners in the process. Adults should make sure youth not only have opportunities to participate in meetings, but also have opportunities to present, lead, and coordinate meetings or other events. Elevating youth to the status of chairperson, co-presenter or coordinator helps to acknowledge their skills and contributions, while also fostering their ongoing personal and professional development.

### **Conclusion**

Youth voice is critical to ensuring policies and programs are relevant and address youth needs and preferences. Adults interested in soliciting youth voice must understand what is necessary to effectively engage youth in the process. Successfully partnering with youth and gathering relevant and honest feedback is a process that should be undertaken in a thoughtful manner. Youth require engagement, preparation, understanding, respect, encouragement and validation in order to actively participate in a change process. It is the responsibility of adults to take the time to engage youth in the process and effectively collaborate with them to ensure a successful and fruitful partnership.