

Dos and Don'ts of Meaningful and Inclusive Partnership with Youth

CECA Care Leaders Council 2022

The Care Leaders Council includes 16 members who represent a diverse range of lived and professional experiences with family separation and alternative care. The Council Members collaborate with each other and USAID to identify ways to inform and increase the effectiveness of programming for care reform while also further developing their own professional capabilities and network.

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Meaningful and Inclusive Partnerships

In 2022, Care Leaders Council members met to discuss the following question:

How do we, as care leavers and young leaders, define what is meaningful and inclusive engagement with youth (who lead or are part of) programs aimed at advocating for and supporting care leaver populations?

Care Leaders Council members shared examples of both good and bad partnership practices that they have experienced or observed in their work or country context, in addition to defining what makes for a good partnership between youth and organizations/funders (e.g., USAID, GiZ, international NGOs).

The following guidance was created to inform approaches to partnering with youth and with care leaver populations. The Care Leaders put together their idea of meaningful and inclusive partnership.

Meaningful and Inclusive Partnership

means...

1	Involving youth in projects that focus on them, from the beginning, to help in brainstorming ideas. Being intentional in engaging with youth to ensure they are empowered.	6	Commitment and investment in partners as well as shared roles in decision-making.
2	Valuing and creating space for diverse viewpoints and engaging the views of different people to achieve a common benefit.	7	Recognizing our power and a willingness to share that power with one another.
3	Making space for and learning from failure.	8	Engaging the views of different people who have a common interest so that together they can achieve a common benefit.
4	Sharing responsibility and holding yourself accountable to others.	9	Being intentional when developing, sharing, and understanding partner needs and objectives.
5	Taking into account youth-centered approaches. Centering those with lived experiences as your partners.	10	Building trust and promoting open communication.

For more detailed and specific guidance on best practices for establishing and maintaining partnerships with youth, please review the following Dos and Don'ts from the Care Leaders Council.

Build Trust and Promote Open Communication

Do	Don't
Develop codes of conduct that guide interactions and engagement to build trust and accountability.	Don't lower accountability standards for either party.
Have frequent meetings to update one another and communicate when things are not working.	Don't withhold meaningful communications. Don't dismiss suggestions during meetings.
Listen and value youth's ways of working. Approach the working relationship with flexibility in mind and plan conversations that take both parties into account when determining ways of working.	Don't be dismissive of youth experience and expertise. Don't focus more on a top-down model of communication when engaging youth.
Approach partnerships with empathy and professional humility.	Don't be intimidating by leading without empathy or using language heavy with jargon. Don't intimidate youth who are learning on the job.
Deal with conflict by listening to individual perspectives and concerns, taking the time for one-on-one interactions.	Don't dismiss people's opinions during conflict. Don't be biased when solving conflicts.
Consider quality collaboration, autonomy, and meaningful engagement through radical trust and honesty, respect, and alignment.	Don't tolerate dishonesty and mistrust from either party. Don't be manipulative.
Stay connected.	Don't avoid reaching out to one another. Don't ignore messages and emails from the youth.

To Acknowledge and Share Power

Do	Don't
Recognize the inherent power dynamics at play between the funder and their partner.	Don't assume that power is equally shared or that participants feel included by virtue of participation.
Recognize and create space at the decision-making table.	Don't manipulate or mislead youth by not delivering on your commitments.
Approach the partnership with cultural and professional humility, ready to listen and learn.	Don't dominate and control what the program should look like or how processes should run.
Involve members of that country from the start of the project in the preparation phase. Provide opportunities for them to shape the project direction early on.	Don't assume what works in one country or context will work in the next.
Ensure that everyone has a chance to find a solution and support equality of access and opportunity to play a part within the partnership.	Don't limit who gets to contribute to finding solutions, especially for those who live and experience these challenges every day.
Pay attention to differences in power: When one organization has more power than another, consider how to engage those with less power from the very beginning to the completion of your work together, and beyond.	Don't overlook the importance of power (including your own) within teams and partnerships, and how important it is to share power, especially with those who have less than you.
Giving children the empowerment and agency to make their own decisions about their lives.	Don't micro-manage.

For Youth-Centered Approaches

Do	Don't
Respect that youth bring their own expertise and lived experiences. Demonstrate this respect by creating inclusive ways for youth to share through attention to accessibility support, translation support, and safe and respectful spaces.	Don't assume or expect that everyone will speak English fluently. Do not link knowledge of or comfort with the English language with expertise.

For Accountability of Self and Accountability to Others

Do	Don't
Share responsibility and accountability across the partnership.	Don't cut corners in terms of shared responsibilities.
Create spaces and opportunities for personal reflection through questions such as: is this a good practice? Should this be done in this way? Would I accept this approach being used with my family or community?	Don't skip making time for personal and team reflections.
Advocate for youth by making it mandatory for them to receive payment if they are being asked about their lived experiences or ideas for programming.	Don't be extractive by asking youth to share their ideas and lived experiences without compensation or opportunities to work on the project.
View your beneficiaries as your partners. Reframe your thinking: you are working for them and to support them. For this reason, you need to also value them and their expertise, as well as create spaces for influence.	Don't forget that 'beneficiaries' are actually your partners and should be involved in your programming from the start.
Be intentional in how you approach the partnership: establish a shared agreement and mutual understanding to ensure expectations about what you will do together are clear. Check in, verify, and collaborate to reach a shared understanding.	Don't assume that expectations are understood or that there is a shared understanding or agreement about how you will approach your work together.

For Care Leaver Centered Approaches

Do	Don't
When engaging people with lived experiences, consider whether and how your work together can leave them in a better position than when you found them. Decide on the intended result of your intervention.	Don't implement interventions that may cause harm.
Place care leaver populations and care leaver organizations at the center of this work by asking them directly about the challenges they face and the solutions they recommend responding to actual needs.	Don't imagine the challenges of care leavers without asking care leavers directly.
Do consider whether your chosen partners can authentically speak to the challenges you want to address: ask more questions!	Don't partner "blindly": pay attention to how WHO you partner with informs your understanding of a situation or context, and how that informs how you respond.
Provide space and opportunities to speak and to listen. Get feedback from care leavers, implement the ideas of youth, and work with them to evaluate if their ideas work or not.	Don't dismiss feedback and new ideas immediately.
Create a safe space.	Don't allow toxicity.

To Make Space for and Learn from Failure

Do	Don't
Recognize that there will be mistakes, sometimes they might even be costly, but that is how we learn. Mistakes can also be a good way to share knowledge, build confidence and trust, and create a meaningful partnership.	Don't expect and require perfection or react harshly to mistakes.