

Youth-Adult Partnerships Show Promise

Youth involvement expands from local projects to institutional levels.

While youth are increasingly included in the design and implementation of interventions targeted at them, adults in youth-serving organizations have made fewer efforts to involve youth in policy, management, and evaluation issues. Anecdotal evidence on the value of including youth perspectives in these more challenging areas is beginning to emerge.

For example, at the XIV International AIDS Conference in Barcelona, Spain, in July 2002, the Barcelona YouthForce showed how a youth-adult partnership could help affect policy, making youth a higher international priority in HIV prevention efforts. The alliance of some 150 youth and 50 adults from around the world sponsored press conferences and a satellite session, hosted networking sessions for youth, published an on-site newsletter, and led public awareness efforts with stickers and t-shirts.

"For the first time at an international HIV/AIDS conference, young people are raising their voices and demanding to be heard as key participants in the fight against HIV/AIDS," reported the official conference newsletter, AIDS2002Today, in regard to the YouthForce. And, at the closing conference plenary, in a speech reported widely around the world, former U.S. President Bill Clinton said, "The YouthForce . . . [is an example] of what we have to have more of if citizens will take ownership of this fight."

Coordinating the project were YouthNet and Advocates for Youth (adult-led groups) and the Student Global AIDS Campaign and Youth Against AIDS (youth-run projects), with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Why create youth-adult partnerships?

Increasingly, donors and nongovernmental organizations involved in HIV prevention and reproductive health issues are attempting to make young people a more prominent part of programming. Youth "should be involved from the start as full and active partners in all stages from conceptualization, design, implementation, feedback, and follow-up," advises the World Health Organization.¹

In the reproductive health and HIV/AIDS fields, information about the impact of youth-adult partnerships is limited. But literature from related fields indicates that involving young people in programs helps them form higher aspirations, gain confidence, attain resources, improve skills and knowledge, change attitudes, and develop more meaningful relationships with adults.² Such involvement can also foster resilience by giving youth opportunities to contribute to family or community.³ It can enhance their social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose.⁴ It can also help young people be more open to learning, engage in critical dialogue, exercise creativity, and take initiative.⁵





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COORDINATOR, YOUTHNET

Regarding the impact of these partnerships on adults, a U.S. study examined organizations in which youth had such decision-making roles as advisory board members, staff members, peer educators, and program planners. Interviews and focus group discussions with young people and adults from 31 organizations showed that adults began to view youth as competent individuals who contributed to the organizations rather than simply as recipients of services. The energy of youth also enhanced adults' commitment to the organizations and ability to work collaboratively.⁶

Tools for partnerships

One widely used conceptual model for youth-adult partnerships is known as the “Ladder of Participation,” developed by Roger Hart, where the bottom rung represents the lowest level of partnership, such as having a young person play a token, inconsequential role. The higher rungs represent more substantial partnerships between youth and adults.⁷ Programs can use various tools to develop partnerships further up the ladder. Substantial partnerships at the local programming level include peer education projects, youth-led clubs and sports teams, and youth-run newspapers. Little research exists on the impact of such efforts, with the exception of peer education.

Peer programs recruit and train a core group of youth to serve as role models and to provide information, referrals to services, and contraceptives to their peers. Adults provide training, supervision, and, ideally, mentoring and support.⁸ In Peru, a peer program in six cities resulted in improved knowledge and attitudes, a reduction in the proportion of sexually active males, and increased contraceptive use at most recent intercourse.⁹ A peer program in Cameroon called *Entre Nous Jeunes* resulted in improved knowledge about contraception and symptoms of sexually transmitted infection, and increased condom use.¹⁰

In a program in Nigeria and Ghana called the West African Youth Initiative, youth worked as reproductive health peer educators and in other related activities such as program planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. The proportion of sexually active youth reporting use of a modern contraceptive increased significantly in the intervention area (from 47 percent to 56 percent) during two years between baseline and follow-up data collection, compared to a slight decrease in the control area (3,500 youth surveyed). The intervention also had a marked impact on youths' reproductive health knowledge, willingness to buy contraceptives, and ability to use contraceptives. The changes were most pronounced among in-school youth, with weaker findings for those out of school.¹¹

Other studies report that peer programs tend to benefit primarily the peer educators themselves, not their peer contacts. An FHI study of 21 peer programs found that most peer educators reported changes in their own behaviors as a result of their involvement. Thirty-one percent said they were practicing safer sex, including using condoms, and 20 percent said they had reduced the number of partners.¹² While such findings are encouraging, “interventions that influence only the behaviors of small numbers of peer educators are not sufficiently cost-effective to justify carrying them out on a large scale,” reports the FOCUS on Young Adults Program.¹³

Anecdotal evidence suggests that youth-led clubs, sports teams, and newspapers can be effective in reaching youth and in achieving changes in youth and adults involved. The Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) in a slum area of Nairobi, Kenya, offers reproductive health education while operating football teams, garbage collection, and other community projects. “Founded on principles that were carefully formulated by the youth themselves, the office uses the skills of [youth] members to carry out management duties and utilizes

a bottom-up structure for decision-making,” explains a report on MYSA, which summarizes its successes in athletics, environmental improvement, health, and education. “One of the keys to MYSA’s success is that it treats the skills and ideas of youth as its strongest resource.”¹⁴ A youth-run newspaper in Kenya called *Straight Talk* also shows how a youth-led editorial board can respond to questions from youth with a candor and connection that makes the paper widely popular in school clubs throughout the country. Adult partners work with these projects, allowing youth to make decisions and providing assistance where needed.

Youth involvement at the management level has begun to move beyond local projects such as those in Kenya to a broader institutional level. The International Planned Parenthood Federation now has a substantial number of youth on its board of directors, for example. A growing number of organizations working globally, such as YouthNet and Advocates for Youth, have made a commitment to having young people on their permanent staff and linking interns in a two-way mentoring program. Groups such as the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children are also incorporating youth into evaluations of projects. “The full participation of young people in our program has definitely enhanced the quality and relevance of our work,” says Hally Mahler, youth participation coordinator for YouthNet.

Involving youth in reproductive health and HIV programs can assist the programs themselves, increasing credibility, visibility, and publicity, according to several studies.¹⁵ Also, youth can be visible ambassadors for programs and organizations, making presentations before national legislative bodies and working with policy-makers, as in the case of the Barcelona YouthForce.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

Organizational Capacity

- Establish clear goals, expectations, and responsibilities for youth and adults.
- Ensure commitment to youth-adult partnerships from all levels of organization.
- Provide support for youth through mentorship and skills-building opportunities.
- Ensure that mentors have time, energy, and resources to supervise youth adequately.
- Ensure flexible meeting times for youth and provide free food or transportation if necessary.
- Monitor needs of youth and adults regularly.

Attitude Shift

- Address misconceptions and biases that youth and adults have about each other.
- Be open to changing attitudes and building skills in working with youth and adults.
- Be aware of different styles of communication.
- Value the skills and experiences of both youth and adults.
- Use training to diminish stereotypes and facilitate collaboration.

Selection, Recruitment, and Retention of Youth

- Recognize differences among youth (i.e., age, gender, education, ethnicity) and how these issues affect one’s contribution.
- Clarify which types of youth are needed and how they will be involved.
- Make an effort to include youth in special circumstances (i.e., younger youth, those living with HIV/AIDS).
- Support youth in balancing school, work, and family commitments.
- Recognize that youth “age out” and develop an ongoing system for recruiting younger participants as well as roles for older youth as allies.

Level of Participation

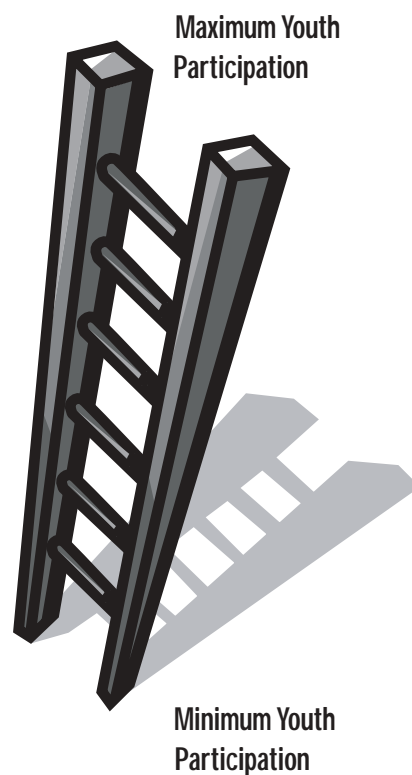
- Assess the current level of youth participation in the organization.
- Determine ways that youth can be involved meaningfully and integrally.
- Ensure that youth are involved in all stages and levels of an organization.
- Avoid tokenism.
- Ensure that youth have ownership and influence in decision-making.

Adapted from Norman J. Building effective youth-adult partnerships. *Transitions* 2001;14(1):10-12; and Senderowitz J. *Involving Youth in Reproductive Health Projects*. Washington, DC: FOCUS on Young Adults, 1998.

As youth-adult partnerships gain more attention and support, more rigorous research and conceptual models will evolve. YouthNet is developing several tools to assist organizations in building such partnerships, including a youth involvement institutional assessment tool and a curriculum on training staff in youth-adult partnerships. For guidance on thinking about youth-adult models, see "Elements of Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships" (in box).

— Smita Sonti and William Finger

Ladder of Participation



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