



Incorporating Strategies for Engaging Young People

A Guide for Grantees of the Office of Adolescent Health and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families

This tip sheet was developed to provide guidance to OAH and ACYF grantees as they further develop their programs. It can assist grantees in considering the importance of youth engagement, assessing their own strategies and developing additional measures for youth engagement.

What is youth engagement?

Youth engagement is a process for keeping youth meaningfully involved in a program and actively engaged in their own development. Youth engagement strategies offer opportunities for young people to take leadership roles and be responsible while partnering with caring adults who respect and value them and are willing to share power with them. The philosophy of youth engagement is best summarized by the slogan, “nothing about us without us.”

Why is youth engagement important?

Scientific literature¹ tells us that enhancing protective factors for youth (such as adolescents’ belief that the adults in their community centers, clinics and schools care about them as individuals) can improve adolescent health more than merely addressing specific health risks. Meaningful engagement is related to productive adulthood. In addition, on-the-ground experience tells us that keeping young people engaged and interested in the program is crucial in retention and future recruitment efforts.

What are the elements of youth engagement?

Three elements are essential for effective youth engagement: establishing a youth-friendly environment, building a sense of belonging and nurturing a sense of self-efficacy. Let’s look at ways that all three elements can be put into place.

Establishing a youth-friendly environment is a very basic first step. It requires communicating through “channels” that young people typically use—not only in-person and telephone conversations, but also perhaps text messages, Twitter, Facebook, e-mail and games on the Web. It requires scheduling events, arranging transportation and providing incentives that meet youth expectations. Also, structuring adult meetings at your agency in ways that allow youth to participate and speak first is an excellent way to make meetings youth-friendly environments.

Building a sense of belonging can be promoted by designating places and spaces at the intervention site where youth names are visible, such as mailboxes and “honor rolls.” A sense of belonging can be achieved by assigning youth responsibilities related to your programming that will enhance the program environment and link them to their community. Also, clearly communicating expectations orally and in

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved July 18, 2011, from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/connectedness.pdf>

writing—such as by posting ground rules or requiring youth to sign a contract—is an essential element of building a sense of belonging.

Nurturing a sense of self-efficacy can be achieved in a variety of ways. Gradually increase youth tasks and responsibilities over time and provide assistance when necessary to make sure that they experience success in carrying out their responsibilities. Make time for reflection sessions that help youth analyze how they have contributed to the success of the program, as well as what could be improved and how. Finally, celebrate the successes experienced by your program or the adolescents in your program, both at the intervention level and at the level of engagement with you and your agency.

How can we incorporate youth engagement strategies?

Using the three basic elements of youth engagement as a guide (environment, belonging and self-efficacy), think about what you are already doing to meaningfully engage young people in your program. How does your agency know whether youth engagement is happening? How can you strengthen your existing efforts? How does your agency know what kinds of youth engagement will work best for your program?

An agency's ongoing and honest self-assessment of youth engagement success is essential. The assessment may involve reviewing agency protocols on how to involve and retain youth. It may be helpful to poll co-workers to see what strategies they use to keep youth engaged and to interview or survey youth who participate in your programs. Of course, involving young people in the assessment process is important!

Will youth engagement strategies compromise fidelity?

Fidelity to the program model is critical to success, so ensure that proposed youth engagement strategies will not compromise program fidelity. It might be helpful to think in terms of a clear dividing line between the *intervention* components and the *youth engagement* strategies. Consider these questions: (1) What are your intervention's "core components"? (2) What are the strategies you use (or plan to use) to engage youth and sustain their involvement? (3) Do any of your strategies compromise the core components of the intervention? If no, proceed as planned; if yes, change the strategy!

What are some examples of successful youth engagement techniques from the field?

One example comes from Kim Nolte of the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (G-CAPP), whose program provided young people transportation to and from the program and incentives while they were there. Says Kim, "We had a van pick up the young people from their school; we fed them snacks, held the program and then drove them back to their homes."

Another example, from a different kind of program setting, comes from Mary Jo Podgurski of Pennsylvania's Washington Hospital Teen Outreach. She says, "A strength of our program is peer education. We've trained young people to serve as educational mentors to other teens since 1995. I always say that a message from an adult is a whisper; when that same message is given by a young person, it is a shout! Our teens also perform educational dramas as the Real Talk Performers."

A third example, from a school-based program, comes from Andrea DeSantis of the Office of Youth Engagement in the District of Columbia Public Schools. She advises, "Start by asking youth what their personal goals are, even for the short run. Then show them how your program advances those goals. We led a PhotoVoice project for middle school students, and we sustained their active interest by tying the project to their class art portfolios or their applications to D.C.'s public arts high school. How did we figure out this connection? We asked them!"

Where can we learn more about youth engagement?

Many publications and websites can provide you with research findings and additional recommendations on youth engagement. A few are listed below:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/connectedness.pdf>
- Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement. (2009). *What Is Youth Engagement?* Toronto, Canada: Public Health Agency of Canada. http://www.engagementcentre.ca/order/index_e.htm
- Scheve, J. A., Perkins, D. F., Mincemoyer, C. C., & Welsh, J. A. (2006). *Say Y.E.S. to Youth: Youth Engagement Strategies*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University. <http://cyfar.cas.psu.edu/PDFs/yesbookweb.pdf>
- Yonezawa, S., Jones, M., & Joselowksy, F. (2009). *Youth Engagement in High Schools: Developing a Multidimensional, Critical Approach to Improving Engagement for All Students*. New York, NY, and La Jolla, CA: Academy for Educational Development and UCSD-CREATE. http://www.aed.org/Publications/upload/YEHS_FINAL-TO-PRINT.pdf

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