Defining and Understanding the Benefits of Youth Engagement

Youth Engagement Matters

Communities and organizations are increasingly acknowledging the need to work with youth and young adults as partners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, authenticity, and reciprocity. Any clinic, school, national, or community program can engage young people in respectful, mutually beneficial ways. In support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention grantee community, learning generated though YESS presents an opportunity to shift current thinking about substance use prevention and early intervention. Young people have a unique part to play in substance use prevention including within Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) – a key strategy of focus among grantees. This increasingly means that roles for youth and young adults are transforming from service recipient to active participant or service partner – and even to program developer and service provider. Wherever a program falls on this continuum, there is an opportunity to enhance work with youth in a mutually beneficial way.
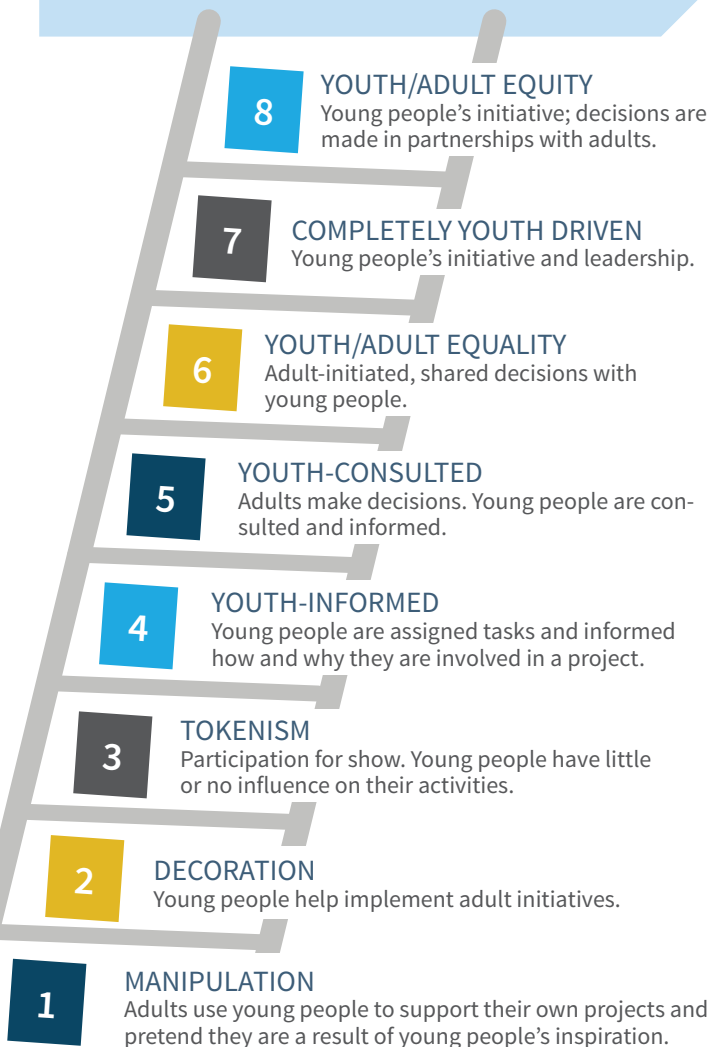
In this Brief: Both adults and youth bring valuable skills and insight to youth engagement partnerships and are exposed to a multitude of benefits on individual and organizational levels.

What is Youth Engagement?

Defining "youth engagement" in a universal and concise way is a challenge, in part because of the diverse roles and levels of involvement for young people. Some advocates and stakeholders prefer the term "youth-adult partnerships" (Y-AP) which includes "the explicit expectation that youth and adults will collaborate in all aspects of group decision making from visioning, to program planning, to evaluation and continuous improvement."[1] While Y-APs may be the ultimate goal, some organizations may not be ready to engage young people to this extent. Additionally, Y-AP goals may not align with the goals or mission of the agency. Most stakeholders recognize that depending on the project, equity between youth and adults may not always be appropriate or possible. *Authentic collaboration*, rather than the transfer of all decision-making power from adults to youth, is the ultimate goal. This spirit of collaboration is central to all levels of youth engagement.

Hart's Ladder[2] is one helpful tool for understanding the continuum of youth engagement. It is important to recognize it is not necessary or appropriate for adults to entirely recuse themselves from their professional role to facilitate youth input[3], and doing so may negatively influence efforts to develop youth leadership capacity. The desired outcome of the program or project should inform the level – or rung, in the case of *Hart's Ladder* – on which the relationship should fall. Nonetheless, manipulation, decoration, and tokenism should always be avoided.

HART'S LADDER: LEVELS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

8 YOUTH/ADULT EQUITY
Young people's initiative; decisions are made in partnerships with adults.

7 COMPLETELY YOUTH DRIVEN
Young people's initiative and leadership.

6 YOUTH/ADULT EQUALITY
Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people.

5 YOUTH-CONSULTED
Adults make decisions. Young people are consulted and informed.

4 YOUTH-INFORMED
Young people are assigned tasks and informed how and why they are involved in a project.

3 TOKENISM
Participation for show. Young people have little or no influence on their activities.

2 DECORATION
Young people help implement adult initiatives.

1 MANIPULATION
Adults use young people to support their own projects and pretend they are a result of young people's inspiration.

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By creating different levels for engagement based on youth and organizational readiness, youth are better able to move to greater levels of involvement as they become more experienced, confident, and prepared. Some organizations just embarking on youth engagement may not be able to work with youth in an intensive way because they do not yet have the resources or the staff time to dedicate. Landing lower on the ladder *"isn't a value judgment,"* according to one stakeholder, *"it's about what's appropriate."* However, all organizations can work with young people to identify ways to build readiness for improved youth engagement and eventual Y-APs.

How is Youth Engagement Valuable?

Engaging youth can yield mutual benefits for youth and adults and inform and strengthen programming. Youth and adults both bring expertise unique to their experiences. Through co-learning, youth engagement provides an opportunity for youth and adults to learn from one another and gain from distinct knowledge, skills, and experience of the other.[4, 5, 6] For example, adults may learn from lived experience and community knowledge of youth while young people can benefit from practical skills of adults, such as research methods, proposal writing, presentation skills, and using social and professional networks.[7] Involving youth also enhances program authenticity, relevance, and appeal; facilitates innovative practices and community involvement; and provides essential information about their experiences and needs. Youth engagement brings diversity, inclusion, and empowerment to the forefront of program outcomes.

Benefits for Youth

Some of the benefits for youth partnerships with adults include positive youth development, risk reduction, and greater social inclusion and democracy:

Positive Youth Development: Positive youth development offers a helpful framework for understanding how youth engagement benefits young people by highlighting factors that impact a young person's journey through adolescence.[8] While the accumulation of developmental assets such as new skills and knowledge is important, developing these assets across contexts (e.g., family, peer groups, school, and community) is critical for adolescents to thrive.[9,10] Youth engagement is inherently about linking an individual to various positive influences in their lives.

Young people become active participants in constructing, changing, and evolving both their immediate and broader settings, catalyzing identity development and self-esteem, agency and leadership, social and professional networks, and coping skills.[11, 12, 13, 14] Youth focus group participants expressed that they

> *"We want to know what's real and what's relevant given youth culture and substance use culture is changing so quickly. But, it's also a great developmental opportunity for youth aside from all that. We can help to channel their strengths and passions."*
>
> —Stakeholder Interview

benefited from increasing confidence, feeling empowered, hearing different perspectives, making a difference, and working with others to solve problems. They also identified numerous reasons they are motivated to take part in youth engagement activities – from a desire for self-growth and professional development to wanting to make a difference for their schools and communities. Some youth also noted a personal motivation arising from direct experience with substance use in their families.

Risk Reduction: Research shows that youth who obtain positive resources across multiple environments are less likely to exhibit negative outcomes and more likely to exhibit markers of positive development.[15, 16, 17, 18] Relationships with non-family adults in the wider community are consistently highlighted as enhancing resiliency and reducing risk.[19] All of the outcomes described above can be linked to enhancing protective factors that enable youth to effectively manage stress and situations involving a high level of risk.[20] In addition, community involvement through youth engagement has been tied to reduced substance use later in adolescence[21] and a smooth transition to adulthood years.[22, 23, 24, 25]

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CASE EXAMPLES: MENTOR FOUNDATION USA AND RECLAIMING FUTURES

MENTOR FOUNDATION USA

Mentor Foundation USA is governed by adult-defined goals and parameters, but offers youth leadership development and youth-adult partnerships (Y-AP) at the project level. This represents Hart's Ladder's **youth/adult equality** rung, where the projects are adult-initiated, but decisions are shared with young people. The Mentor Foundation USA peer-to-peer mentoring programs and youth rallies (adult initiated) are currently being implemented in the state of New York. Adult program facilitators work with schools to recruit and train youth ambassadors during a six-session afterschool program. Training topics include social media marketing strategies, advocacy, and leadership development. Once trained, the Youth Ambassadors design and implement change projects in their schools to improve morale, support their peers, and address issues important to the students. There are currently 90 active Youth Ambassadors participating in the "Living the Example" peer-to-peer program across four schools in New York. Living the Example is being piloted in partnership with George Washington University, and aims to reduce the likelihood that adolescents will engage in harmful substance use through a Substance Use Prevention and Education Program. The organization's goal is to give students the platform and tools to be change agents and allow youth to increase their own autonomy. In one school, for example, youth leveraged their project stipend to hire adult consultants, such as videographers and marketing experts, to launch a media campaign to address substance use at their school. Here, the student-initiated project leveraged the expertise of adults to meet their goals.

RECLAIMING FUTURES

Falling on the **youth-consulted** rung of Hart's ladder, the Reclaiming Futures' SBIRT initiative is initiated, led, and executed by adults, but respectfully brings in youth voice to inform adult decisions. Acknowledging that involvement in the juvenile justice system is a public health risk factor, Reclaiming Futures' SBIRT model (RF-SBIRT) seeks to build a system of care that respects youth as collaborators while addressing their own needs for support, intervention, and treatment. The screening is an opportunity to engage with youth and recognize them as decision-makers, rather than simply detect a problem or predict future risk. By attempting to understand the adolescent's strengths, assets, experiences, and emotions, this approach uses motivational interviewing techniques to contextualize behavior and guide youth towards self-initiated change. The six-step model connects youth to additional services and long-term supports as needed, emphasizing the community-level need to bolster support of youth in substance use prevention. Youth input is received in several ways. Youth reviewed the RF-SBIRT pilot manual and provided feedback, contributed to cultural adaptations of the model for use in tribal settings, and participated in data collection on SBIRT experience. As such, youth served as research participants and advisors. This innovative SBIRT approach is being implemented across ten pilot sites as part of a multi-year project in King County, WA, and funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention (SUP) Initiative.

Inclusion and Democracy: We can promote democracy and social justice by encouraging youth belonging to typically marginalized communities to voice their opinions, concerns, and needs.[26, 27] We can also empower youth to make changes in the wider community by being involved in issues that directly impact them.[28, 29] "Critical Youth Empowerment" (CYE) as an objective of youth engagement addresses the capacity of youth to address systemic structures and social values behind community issues and promotes power-sharing to best serve youth and community needs.[30]

Benefits for Adults and Programs

Youth engagement can also have a profound impact on programs and adults who lead them and yield several benefits including: authenticity, insight, innovation, motivation, and skills:

Authenticity: When youth are able to ask honest and open questions, answers bring truth and authenticity, and incorporating youth voice brings credibility to youth-serving agencies and programs. Young people are aware when messages are not honest or do not fully present the truth about risks and potential outcomes of substance use. Their experiences may not be consistent with messages they receive from adults which undercuts legitimacy. For example, youth and adults alike acknowledged the culture around adolescent substance use that normalizes the behavior and the challenges facing prevention efforts.

> *"We can shift this narrative around substance use and social dynamics for young people, but adult-led change won't work. This needs to be a cultural change and that has to be youth-led."*
>
> —*Stakeholder Interview*

> *"Messages get through more easily if we hear the un-sugar-coated version of the effects and the consequences of using drugs. It's not just talking about it, it's knowing exactly what would happen if you keep going down the path you put yourself on."*
>
> —*Youth Focus Group*

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Insight: Youth engagement reveals unique insights about traditionally adult-driven activities including research and programming. For example, research that involves youth partnerships allows young people to contribute expertise, share decision-making responsibility, and gain a sense of ownership which in turn enhances validity and rigor. Youth can inform research at various points including research question development, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and dissemination.[31] Youth insight facilitates accurate representation of the study population, reduces implicit stereotypes and biases, and ensures adult researchers hypothesize accurate outcomes and relationships between variables.

Innovation: Youth will often have more creative and effective ideas than adults and know how to reach out to other youth better than anyone else. The rapidly changing landscape and culture around youth substance use and health necessitate constant innovation. Youth input is paramount for informing adaptation or even attempting a previous approach in a new way. Social media is a useful resource to reach young people. These channels are always changing, and young people are needed to identify social media trends and drive marketing and communication strategies.

Motivation: Youth engagement promotes "adult development" when adult partners are able to move beyond their initial perceptions of youth and identify the strengths of both groups. This can lead to increased adult motivation to contribute knowledge and skills and sense of purpose and involvement within the wider community.[32] Whether government officials, academic researchers, or service providers, adult partners may become inspired to work with youth to a greater degree or feel empowered to advocate for youth as they more deeply understand issues important to young people.[33] YESS Youth Advisory Board members suggested that real buy-in occurs when adult leaders witness first-hand the powerful impact generated by working alongside youth as partners and preconceived notions and stereotypes begin to break down.

Skills: Adults have much to learn from youth. Youth focus group participants identified a number of strengths they can bring to partnerships with adults including ability to learn and apply skills quickly, connections with peers, aptitude with social media, and enthusiasm to be change-makers. Youth engagement stakeholders challenge adult leaders to let go and not be territorial of their projects.

Youth engagement benefits youth, adults, programs, and communities. As described in this brief, the benefits are varied and can have a lasting positive impact on all involved.

> *"Strategies that adults believe failed in the past may now have resonance with youth…At times youth will recommend a program or approach that adults had tried previously without much success."*
>
> —*Stakeholder Interview*

> *"Non-profit work and community mobilization can be challenging and mundane at times. Young people reinvigorate these fields. Their imagination plus their experience, combined with adult expertise, results in innovation. Youth can also often identify new issues coalitions aren't paying attention to yet."*
>
> —*Stakeholder Interview*

> *"When youth are engaged from the beginning and initiate a direction or change that adults don't like, there is a tendency to change it at the end. This must be overcome so youth ideas can be seen through. Adults might be surprised. Things change, and strategies that didn't work before may work now."*
>
> —*Stakeholder Interview*

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Planning for Youth Engagement

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Communities and organizations are increasingly acknowledging the need to work with youth and young adults as partners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, authenticity, and reciprocity. Any clinic, school, national, or community program can engage young people in respectful, mutually beneficial ways. In support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention grantee community, learning generated though YESS presents an opportunity to shift current thinking about substance use prevention and early intervention. Young people have a unique part to play in substance use prevention, including within Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) – a key strategy of focus among grantees. This increasingly means that roles for youth and young adults are transforming from service recipient to active participant or service partner and even to program developer and service provider. Wherever a program falls on this continuum, there is an opportunity to enhance work with youth in a mutually beneficial way.

In this Brief: To ensure a successful and productive partnership experience for youth and adults, it is important that organizations conduct proper planning and provide training.
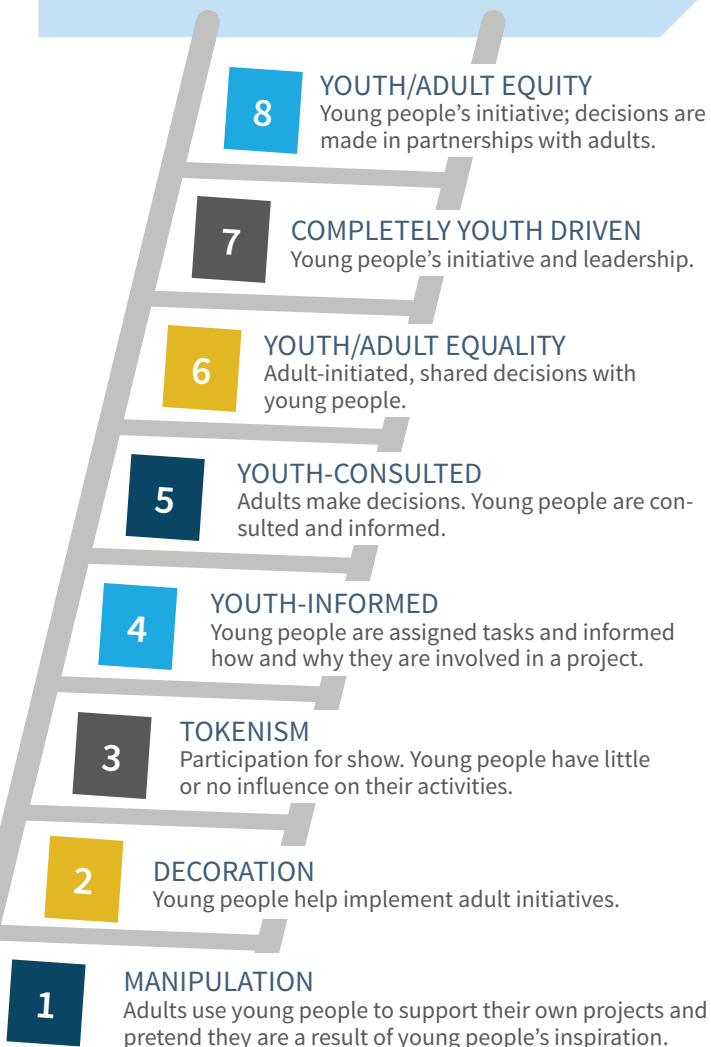
Why is Planning for Youth Engagement Important?

Although there are genuine opportunities for youth at all decision-making levels, an organization must carefully identify goals, objectives, and readiness to successfully support youth. It is important to recognize youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships naturally require a degree of experimentation and even conflict before a mutually beneficial system is in place.[1,2,3] This experimentation phase is time-consuming, as youth and adults test out methods of collaboration, communication, and shared decision-making. Even resolving the time, place, and processes of meetings can be critical to ensuring youth feel confident and empowered to share their opinions, lead presentations, or advocate for a course of action.[4] Nonetheless, steps may be taken during the planning and preparation stage that reduce the learning curve and enhance the youth engagement experience for adults and young people.

Identify the Appropriate Level of Engagement

Youth engagement looks different across programs and settings. The type and scope of youth engagement depends on unique needs, goals, interests, and skills of the involved youth and adults and objectives of the program or organization. Both adults and youth will likely differ on levels of expertise, comfort with decision-making, interest in different roles, skills around specific tasks, or availability to engage. Some organizations are not ready to embark on intensive youth leadership activities, but

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all are ready for youth engagement. Typologies, such as Hart's Ladder, frame youth engagement in the form of a hierarchy or continuum and are helpful to conceptualize levels of engagement.[5] The Hart's Ladder framework spans levels such as "Youth/Adult Equity" and "Completely Youth Driven" through "Youth-Informed" and – when not done well – "Tokenism" or "Decoration."[6] However, simply doing more engagement activities does not guarantee quality experiences for youth and adults. Instead, organizations are encouraged to prioritize reciprocity, respect, shared control, and decision-making wherever they fall on the continuum of youth engagement options.

If the resources, buy-in, or structures for ongoing engagement are not yet in place, it may be prudent for an agency to begin by soliciting youth input and ensuring youth are properly supported in this process. Or, agencies can begin by working with existing youth organizations or boards in their community; these groups can also help organizations to expand their youth capacity. Youth recovery organizations, for example, are often prepared and willing to offer their feedback on community initiatives.

Establish Leadership Buy-in

Integrating youth into existing organizational frameworks might face resistance.[7] When decision-makers are not interested in youth input, participation will fizzle. If youth engagement is to develop and be sustainable at an organizational level, buy-in from leadership is a pre-requisite. As one member of the YESS Youth Advisory Board noted, *"Everyone needs to be on board [with] allowing youth engagement to come in and understanding the sacrifices and work that it takes."* However, there are concrete ways to appeal to the unique needs of adult leadership and foster buy-in. Training and education on benefits and predictable challenges of youth engagement is an important tool. If leadership is going to endorse an authentic role for youth on a program (or across programs), the case for youth engagement as positive, rewarding, and impactful for adults as well as youth needs to be made. Demonstrating how outcomes improve when youth are granted opportunities to be leaders, innovators, and change makers can inspire adult partners and create buy-in. Adult researchers and practitioners are often motivated by new scholarship and data-driven outcomes. The quality of information gathered and outcomes measured improves when youth become involved and engaged.

Plan for the Youth-Adult Partnership

Adults and youth recognize the need to establish clear expectations to facilitate success. When planning for a youth-adult partnership, consider how best to approach issues such as fostering shared decision-making, promoting transparency, collaborating, and maintaining openness and flexibility.

Shared Decision-making: Fostering shared decision-making can be one of the most challenging aspects of youth engagement. However, it helps to be clear about expectations for youth and adult contributions early on, even delineating exactly how decision-making will be shared at each step.[8] Finding a middle ground between autonomy and guidance that acknowledges

"Even when there is dedicated staff, if there is no ear for change, youth recommendations and contributions won't matter."

—Stakeholder Interview

"Make sure to be fair and give youth parameters. Set up the context, so they know what can and cannot be done. This will avoid setting up plans that will fail."

—Stakeholder Interview

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distinct skillsets, needs, and goals, while respecting the multifaceted lives and responsibilities of both adults and youth is essential, but difficult.[9, 10] On the one hand, adults may seek to grant youth complete autonomy. However, withholding guidance may impede youth development if youth struggle to succeed without adult input. On the other hand, an inequitable and hierarchical relationship undermines potential benefits of a youth-adult partnership and renders power differentials highly visible.[11] For an ideal balance, avoid asking youth to do "busy work" or adults to hold back. Instead, elicit the unique skills and interests of all involved in the partnership.

Transparency: Adults should be honest at the outset about what is possible and define parameters. For example: Are there budgetary restrictions? Pre-established objectives or outcomes set by a funder? An approval process that needs to be followed? Acknowledging such constraints as soon as realistic will reduce unnecessary disappointment and conflict. If an idea is not implemented or changed, it should be communicated to the youth with proper explanation.

Collaboration: In some contexts, it is ideal for a dedicated adult advisor to work with a youth advisory or governing group if only for the purpose of working through programmatic ideas that are feasible and measurable. These staff can be young, perhaps former youth advisory board members, and translate ideas for older staff. Thinking through solutions that respect the time of all parties, such as virtual meetings and online discussion posts for collaboration, is one part of appropriately working alongside youth.

Openness and Flexibility: Youth need a safe space to begin with broad creative ideas – no matter how unfeasible – to generate their best thinking. The YESS Youth Advisory Board emphasized that a general attitude of flexibility is important – the extent to which youth will contribute and/or lead depends on the group and the context, and there should be space to mutually agree on more or less work based on realistic levels of commitment.

Train Adults and Youth

Ongoing training, possibly from a third-party, is essential for both youth and adult partners. Priority training topics include sustaining effective youth-adult partnerships, cross-generational communication, disclosure and personal storytelling, adultism and tokenism, facilitation skills, and resolving conflicts.[12, 13] However, it can be difficult to identify freely available and complete training packages. It is possible to gather components from external trainings and individualize training based on what is needed in the community or context. Please see Additional Resources for helpful training and assessment tools.

Youth engagement benefits youth, adults, programs, and communities. As described in this brief, with proper planning and readiness, the experience can have a lasting positive impact on all involved.

"Create a space where young people feel safe to explore and experiment with ideas together, and reiterate that if something fails, it's okay. If they don't get the outcomes they hoped, reassure them that the adults still have their back."

—Stakeholder Interview

"Ask the youth to help decide what's most important in terms of trade-offs. Guide them to get there themselves by having them critically analyze the idea."

—Stakeholder Interview

"Training with both youth and adults helps to avoid power struggles and teach both parties how to partner."

—Stakeholder Interview

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The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation recognizes that SBIRT for adolescents has historically been developed, implemented, and informed by adult perspectives. In an effort to bring youth and young adult voices to the Strategic Initiative and transform how we think about substance use prevention and early intervention, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is partnering with the Center for Social Innovation (C4) to explore current status and potential opportunities for youth engagement with grantees. Youth Engagement Strategies and Support (YESS) leverages the learning of pioneers in youth engagement and explores how these lessons can be applied to adolescent substance use prevention and early intervention. Please refer to additional briefs on Defining and Understanding the Benefits of Youth Engagement, Recruiting Youth and Sustaining Engagement, and Bringing Youth Voice to SBIRT for more insight from the YESS project.

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Recruiting Youth and Sustaining Engagement

Youth Engagement Matters

Communities and organizations are increasingly acknowledging the need to work with youth and young adults as partners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, authenticity, and reciprocity. Any clinic, school, national, or community program can engage young people in respectful, mutually beneficial ways. In support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention grantee community, learning generated though YESS presents an opportunity to shift current thinking about substance use prevention and early intervention. Young people have a unique part to play in substance use prevention, including within Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) – a key strategy of focus among grantees. This increasingly means that roles for youth and young adults are transforming from service recipient to active participant or service partner and even to program developer and service provider. Wherever a program falls on this continuum, there is an opportunity to enhance work with youth in a mutually beneficial way.

In this Brief: Recruiting youth and creating opportunities that sustain interest and engagement is key for youth-serving organizations.

Recruitment Strategies

It is common for organizations to ask where and how best to recruit youth. Commonly cited challenges include identifying interested young people, engaging with minors due to parental consent requirements, and scheduling around school and extra-curricular activities. Targeting existing activities or groups (e.g., community youth advisory boards, nominees from sub-grantees, or participants in positive youth development activities) as a pre-screened pool of youth is a helpful starting point and allows access to a much larger network of potential youth partners. Social media and youth-led messaging also has immense potential to involve a broader network of youth. Youth-led communications will speak directly to peers more effectively than adults. Youth are adept at navigating popular social media channels. Video and other multimedia, as well as targeted messaging, can

be youth-friendly strategies to engage and recruit. Making connections to youth-serving organizations will also help to reach youth. Keep in mind the importance of reaching youth beyond those already actively engaged. Once the recruitment mechanisms have been established, there are several considerations to keep in mind to foster meaningful and sustainable youth engagement.

Ensure Diversity and Inclusion: Young People are Not Homogeneous

Youth that are recruited to represent a wider community of adolescents or young adults should be truly representative, diverse in multiple ways, and connected to their communities. Culturally competent strategies for youth engagement will depend on the specific cultural landscape where the program or initiative is taking place. However, sample strategies include: leveraging social networks of youth to recruit members from similar backgrounds, inviting youth to share their own lived experience, or granting youth partners opportunities to select preferred gender pronouns. Agencies already working with youth might consider creating a youth advisory council or board and conducting focus groups about how to be more culturally competent. It is important for younger and inexperienced youth to get the chance to lead, rather than only hearing from those who have been consistently and actively engaged before.[1] Therefore, it is essential to respect that youth are diverse, coming from different levels of maturity and engagement, and to tailor opportunities so they are accessible to all.

> *"Find young people who have trouble connecting. Young people have a lot of demands on them that limit their opportunity for ongoing engagement. Engage young people who don't have another outlet. It's not just the 'stars.'"*
>
> *—Stakeholder Interview*

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Avoid Tokenism

Tokenism occurs when participation is "for show" or when young people have little or no influence. Tokenism can take on many forms, from operational approaches to stereotyping – even among well-intentioned agencies. For example, youth may be identified for extremely narrow roles, such as presenting at a conference, without having meaningfully contributed to the presentation or the program being shared.

Some youth have experienced tokenism when cast as a symbol or representative of all youth or as an example of someone who has defied stereotypes of their racial or ethnic group. Alternatively, youth may feel pressured to embody a stereotype or manufacture particular experiences (including risk behavior) to meet the expectations of adult partners. To avoid tokenism, create spaces where youth are able to advocate for themselves, express their whole identities and honest perspectives, and be trusted to rise to high expectations – rather than underestimating their potential.

> *"I've encountered this a couple of times, mostly because I'm African-American, and most people don't see us as focused or actively involved in the community, so [my involvement] is surprising to people...it feels like they're gloating about me because I am defying the stereotype.."*
>
> *—Youth Focus Group*

— CASE EXAMPLE: COMMUNITY CATALYST —

Community Catalyst, a grantee of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention (SUP) Initiative, engages youth using a multi-faced approach. The organization works with state and local advocacy groups, providing technical assistance and subgranting funds to support partners in achieving their policy advocacy goals. Community Catalyst encourages awardees to include youth in meaningful roles in their projects. Youth advocacy, where young people are encouraged to share their experiences and expertise to improve legislation and practices around issues directly impacting their lives, is a common method. Community Catalyst's cautions against inadvertently tokenizing young people when asking youth to tell their stories. They advise that youth be "*taken care of, but not taken advantage of*" when involved in advocacy. A balance of autonomy and guidance is key.

To prepare youth to tell their stories in an effective way, Community Catalyst advises:

1. **Meet youth where they are.** Allow youth to express themselves according to their interests, skills, and comfort levels. For example, some youth may want opportunities to share their story in person, at schools or in front of legislators, while others may feel more comfortable working with alternative formats, such as a blog, PhotoVoice, or podcast where they may be able to protect their anonymity or avoid follow-up questions.

2. **Remove logistical barriers to participation.** Hold meetings in locations that are accessible by public transportation or close to schools. Libraries are often a good central (and free) location. School schedules ebb and flow more than many others; finals, breaks, holidays and graduation season may require some flexibility.

3. **Facilitate ample training so youth feel prepared.** This could be a formal training session on substance use disorders and how to tell their stories effectively, allowing time to practice, and creating an environment that feels supportive so they can be vulnerable sharing personal experiences.

4. **Incentivize the experience.** Whether through school credit, professional development opportunities, or monetary stipends, organizations should value the effort and time youth expend.

5. **Prepare for the experience.** Consider bringing youth to the space where they will be sharing and practicing their talk. It will reduce anxiety.

6. **Train adults.** Prepare the adult audience for the event. Send guidelines for the questions they may or may not ask based on what the young person is comfortable with and advise if posting pictures or identifying information on social media is acceptable.

7. **Assess your goals:** The amount of preparation that goes into youth advocacy is significant, so it is important to be strategic when identifying events and formats for spreading a message or campaign. Balance costs and benefits considering the limited free time available to many young people.

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Foster and Sustain Meaningful Engagement

Below are several themes and strategies that help initiate and maintain engagement of young people, including finding personal motivation and a sense of ownership, financial and other types of incentives, and building relationships:

Why: Many youth identify their motivation for engagement as personal, direct experience with substance use among families or friends. Engaging with youth on an issue of personal and community importance[2] with relevance to the work of adult partners ensures that both parties share compatible levels of motivation and investment in the process and outcomes.[3] One suggestion is to begin with a question such as, "Why are you here?" Helping young people identify "why" will help clarify goals and enhance resulting commitment and engagement level.

Ownership: "Pride of ownership" has a motivating effect – the more you can put young people in the driver's seat, the more commitment they will bring. Part of this ownership comes with holding youth to high expectations. Youth will rise to expectations set for them, and low expectations will result in low engagement and buy-in. Adults should provide youth support as well as autonomy by allowing them to come up with ideas and then coming together to plan how to move forward.

Financial incentives: Stipends, transportation reimbursement, and food at meetings can all help to initiate and maintain early commitments from young people. Financial incentives can be given in a stepwise way based on level of experience and role. For example, perhaps focus group participants or board members are not provided stipends, but targeted project work or other activities warrant payment. Building these incentives into program budgets at the outset will ensure they are available when needed.

Other incentives: Social connectedness, professional development, and a sense of ownership are as, or more, meaningful than financial incentives. To maintain engagement, it can be helpful to start small and if it goes well, young people will recruit others and stay engaged. Working with young people to develop something tangible – something they and external stakeholders can see – becomes an incentive in and of itself. Further, fostering social and enjoyable connections among peers and to the work facilitates a self-sustaining level of engagement. In addition, all successes and achievements should be recognized along the way.

Establish relationships: Offering staff time to support youth, provide ongoing outreach, and thoughtfully maintain engagement is key. Youth engagement will not sustain itself on its own – it needs to be actively cultivated. Staff build relationships with youth, maintain engagement, listen and respond to recommendations, communicate with decision-makers, facilitate recruitment and outreach, and conduct evaluation. In school settings, a dedicated staff liaison will be able to build relationships, evaluate meaningful engagement, and communicate with decision-makers. Foster an environment of learning that is challenging yet structured and support-

> *"If adults gave teens the steering wheel or had them lead a conversation or project, it would establish trust and increase engagement."*
>
> —Youth Focus Group

> *"Incentives may start with money, but as they see the impact of their work and the connections they've made, the incentive becomes something else. Seeing real change is motivating."*
>
> —Stakeholder Interview

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ive. A feeling of community and mutual relationships of respect and value can help.[4] Establishing a clear timeline of engagement and providing regular feedback so youth feel incentivized to reach set project milestones are also important.[5]

Commit resources: Beyond staff time, financial resources are necessary to facilitate successful youth engagement. Financial resources pay for the necessary staff time, as well as incentives and stipends that encourage youth to show up. Yet, it is important to intentionally allot the necessary resources during planning. When youth engagement is not an explicit goal of funded work, carving out time and resources is not feasible. Time is another critical resource for success. Ample time is needed to plan and implement a project that engages with youth at several stages and elicits their input in shared decision-making. Having sufficient time available for youth is also imperative to developing strong and trusting relationships.[6, 7, 8, 9]

Create Roles for Youth

Engaging youth in a step-wise approach yields significant value for youth engagement, as does respecting the range of skills, commitment, and expertise of young people. Below are several potential roles for youth, depending on interests, skills, goals, and needs. Some may be "outside the box" compared to traditional thinking. Regardless of the specific title or responsibilities, the YESS Youth Advisory Board recommends that role creation and development be a youth-led endeavor, based on youth interests and perceived skill and confidence level. In this way, roles are not so much assigned as mutually agreed upon with opportunities to grow and change as the partnership gains momentum.

Ambassadors: Youth may serve as "ambassadors" for a program or initiative, which could include actively leading educational and outreach campaigns, promoting the initiative and recruiting other youth, engaging with community stakeholders and partner organizations, and training peers.

Researchers: Youth – once trained – can take on tasks in community-based research projects, particularly on issues that directly affect them, including interviewing peers, developing surveys, conducting data collection and analysis, and presenting findings in reports and at conferences.

Trainers: Youth can contribute to developing training curricula to prepare adult-led organizations to engage other youth and be employed as trainers. By working with young people as trainers, not only is the organization able to ensure the youth's perspective and expertise will come through, but the young person also has access to a unique professional development and leadership opportunity. Adults can ask questions of the young person to gain their insights in a way that would be impossible when the training is delivered by adults. Youth can develop public speaking skills, learn about their strengths as trainers or educators, and build experience.

Consultants: Similarly, some organizations work with youth as consultants. This model helps to leverage a young person's unique interests and comfort level, allows flexibility with their time, and helps youth develop specific

> *"Ending on a high note with youth will encourage them to come back – whether it is bringing them to a conference, recognizing them for their work in front of other professionals, or rewarding them with more responsibility."*
>
> —*Youth Advisory Board*

> *"Engaging with (our youth hire) as a partner really keeps me on my toes. I feel very committed to living up to her expectations. They believe us and trust us as partners. As a result, I'm doubly committed to making our mission work."*
>
> —*Stakeholder Interview*

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areas of expertise. For example, a busy young person who has expertise in social media outreach to youth and is trained in adult consultation can be called upon as needed for community-based consultation. In this way, the young person can continue to engage in the program, develop a new skill set, provide a service in the community, and fit the work manageably into their schedule. Depending on the specific scenario, youth can either be engaged in an ongoing manner, in a specific role on a Youth Advisory Council, or on an ad hoc basis as needs arise.

Staff Members: As organizations build relationships with young people, many have begun employing those that demonstrate passion, availability, and skills in more formalized roles including as regular staff and interns. These more formalized roles help create organizational change as youth contribute across tasks and departments; foster professional development opportunities for youth; and establish ongoing dialogue among youth and adults. Some organizations hire youth for the specific purpose of leading and supporting their youth engagement efforts. In one example, a Youth Leadership team is comprised of a Youth Advisory Board, a young adult who began as a youth advisory board member and now serves in a full-time capacity, and an adult counterpart to advise, guide, and support.

Fellows: Fellowships establish a structure that is flexible to the needs and interests of youth and the organization and can help offer a more formal incentive for college or professional applications. Like consultants, fellows are able to more easily manage expectations and workload while maintaining a more formal role among organizational leadership and staff.

Youth engagement benefits youth, adults, programs, and communities. As described in this brief, the roles and opportunities for youth are varied. Using best practices for recruiting youth and sustaining engagement will ensure a positive experience for all involved.

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Bringing Youth Voice to SBIRT

Youth Engagement Matters

Communities and organizations are increasingly acknowledging the need to work with youth and young adults as partners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, authenticity, and reciprocity. This process generally requires clinical guidance and delivery that is adult-led. Many systems may not have mechanisms in place to invite youth input. In support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention grantee community, learning generated though YESS presents an opportunity to shift current thinking about substance use prevention and early intervention. Young people have a unique part to play in substance use prevention, including within Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) – a key strategy of focus among grantees. This increasingly means that roles for youth and young adults are transforming from service recipient to active participant or service partner and even to program developer and service provider. Wherever a program falls on this continuum, there is an opportunity to enhance work with youth in a mutually beneficial way.

In this Brief: Engaging youth to inform the design and implementation of adolescent SBIRT is essential to ensure effectiveness.

Why Engage Youth in SBIRT Planning?

Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) is a process of care that follows a logical flow from screening to responding to risk and referring youth to treatment or other supports as needed. This process generally requires adult clinical guidance and delivery. Further, traditionally structured settings may resist youth-directed change. As a result, there can be an "all or nothing" reaction to youth involvement and partnership.

Because of these factors, it can be challenging to imagine how youth could influence or become integrated within SBIRT practice. However, adolescents and young adults know what is effective when it comes to the messaging, approach, and objectives of substance use prevention or early intervention efforts targeted at their age groups. Providers can benefit from youth input to inform service delivery and elicit better outcomes for young people through collaborative care.

Starting Points: Engaging Youth in SBIRT Planning

Understandably, in states, regions, or districts where SBIRT is a mandated and/or funded initiative, resources to engage youth in development and implementation may be more available than in other areas. Still, there are opportunities for youth to be engaged in determining the scope, design, and delivery of services. At a minimum, youth can provide input about their own healthcare experiences. Some clinical settings already facilitate provider and youth feedback through their independent youth councils. Youth Advisory Boards could assess and support SBIRT practice in a given region or community, or youth could provide input into materials such as brief intervention tools and screeners, and contribute to SBIRT training. The following questions, when explored with youth, may help spark ideas for broader youth input and guidance:

- What potential is there for engaging youth in screening?
- Can we practice the screening tool with youth?
- What screening tool resonates most with our youth population?
- Who will youth best respond to when being screened?
- Where are youth most comfortable answering the screening questions?
- What about brief interventions? What do youth want and need?
- What about referrals? What do youth want and need?

"For sites seeking to implement SBIRT that already have well developed youth programs, engaging youth in this initiative is a piece of cake. SBIRT is one of many programs that youth can work on. For newer school-based health centers, or those that have not involved youth, this initiative has been a wake-up call...Facilitating connections to sites that have done it already has really helped."

—Stakeholder Interview

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Case Example: School-Based Health Alliance

The School-Based Health Alliance coordinates a Youth Advisory Council to oversee its work. The Council works with adult-partners from the national organization and state-based grantees on promoting youth-informed health advocacy and services. Each member of the Council has a role and area of expertise based on their skills and interests. For example, there are roles specific to: Community Outreach, Blogging, Social Media, and the SBIRT and Youth Safety Net Project initiatives. Based on their roles, members of the Youth Advisory Council are consultants for the School-Based Health Alliance and advise the national and state grantees. All youth on the council are available to offer guidance to grantee communities and facilitate cross-site learning and technical assistance, including youth-informed SBIRT implementation. The School-Based Health Alliance is looking to further embed the consulting role of the Youth Advisory Council across projects organization-wide.
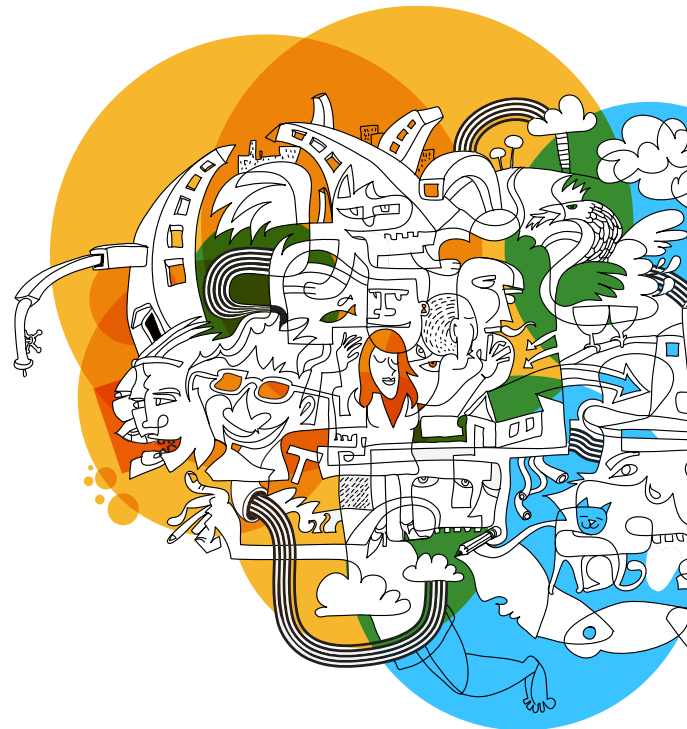
Supporting Peer-to-Peer Roles

Agencies that are ready to integrate young people into more formal roles might consider having young adults serve as young peer providers (young adults with lived experience of substance use recovery).

Peer-to-peer outreach can take many forms, including within an SBIRT framework. Young people can be involved in administering screening, answering questions and coordinating communication with parents and providers, and guiding adolescents to engage in treatment or recovery supports together with clinical staff. Adolescents may hesitate to discuss substance use with adults if they are not sure who to trust. Young peers can help to initiate open conversations and share relatable experiences that may lead youth to be more open about risky behaviors and concerns. In some cases, young peers can be trained to deliver brief interventions with oversight from clinically trained adults. Young peers are able to establish rapport quickly with adolescents, can use basic Motivational Interviewing skills to discuss topics related to risk and protective factors, and potentially foster self-directed behavior change.

Future research will further explore the role of young peers in youth substance use screening and early intervention and seek to understand how peers can add capacity and complementary skills to multidisciplinary healthcare and school-based teams.

> "Look for places of potential input before implementation, such as survey development. Are the researchers asking the right questions? For example, current research is looking at clinical outcomes. Would youth identify alternate outcomes, such as knowing how to find friends, developing social connectedness, or finding community resources?"
>
> —Stakeholder Interview

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Case Example: Kaiser Permanente, Arts Integrated Resources, Colorado

Colorado's Arts Integrated Resources (AIR) department, a community benefit program of Kaiser Permanente, promotes greater community health through educational theatre, dynamic youth engagement products, and hands-on, experiential learning for all ages. The AIR's youth advisory council – the Community Health Action Team – holds four-hour youth-led workshops (YouthCHAT) to guide healthcare providers towards youth friendly spaces and practices.

Within the training, youth address a number of topics with healthcare providers including how to talk with youth, how to leverage non-verbal cures to make a young person more comfortable and heard, and how to make their clinics and offices more welcoming. As a part of the training, youth have assessed and revised the HEADSS assessment tool[1], currently used in clinics for risky youth behavior. Youth input has made the assessment more conversational and includes bridge language to open up dialogue. The trainings also provide a unique opportunity for healthcare providers to have a direct and open dialogue about how youth perceive and experience care. Youth role play scenarios with clinicians and provide direct feedback on their approach.

"Having youth speak to other youth about drug prevention is super important. They are also on the receiving end, so they can really understand, listen, and be present."

—Youth Focus Group

"It is important that youth are leading the conversation. Youth will listen to their peers. It is more effective for spreading the message of substance use prevention and raising awareness."

—Youth Focus Group

Youth engagement benefits youth, adults, programs, and communities. As described in this brief, youth can support the design and implementation of screening and intervention approaches such as SBIRT. Although involving youth might require a culture shift in traditional settings, finding innovative ways to elevate youth voice is essential to improving service outcomes for young people.

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