



YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Youth leadership development is a powerful catalyst for personal growth, community engagement, and long-term social impact. When young people are given opportunities to lead, they develop critical life skills such as communication, decision-making, and problem-solving that prepare them for future careers and empower them to make meaningful contributions in the present.

Youth bring fresh perspectives, creativity, and energy to the table, and when supported by caring adults, they become confident change-makers in their schools, communities, and beyond. This toolkit is designed to help organizations and mentors cultivate youth leadership by providing practical strategies, activities, and resources that center on youth, build confidence, and promote inclusive, equity-driven leadership.

Why Is Youth Leadership Development Important?

To work in partnership with adults, youth need to develop or sharpen their leadership skills. Leadership training can help youth manage their time, work as a team, set goals, facilitate meetings, and make impactful presentations. Developing a youth's leadership skills is also a great way to promote life skills learning.

 To fully participate with adults, youth need to be informed about the problem, challenge, or issue. They must understand the adult jargon used to describe our work. This levels the playing field for all involved.¹



How Do We Prepare for Youth Leadership Development?

As with all aspects of youth engagement, planning and preparing for youth leadership development are crucial. Organizations and adults who work with youth should understand the Positive Youth Development philosophy. It is also important to clearly define the group's purpose, recruit and train youth and adults, and develop a framework for sustainability. The YPRC can help with training and technical assistance in youth leadership development.

➔ Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a research-based approach or philosophy that guides communities in the way they organize supports and opportunities so that young people can realize their potential. PYD is not about a single program and it's not about getting youth to change. It's a way of setting the stage for young people to thrive — and it often requires adults to change.²

What are some Youth Leadership Development Challenges?

Some common challenges that can arise in Youth Leadership Development are:¹



Organizations or adults often do not think young people are capable of demonstrating leadership



Youth leadership development requires time and resources



Goals and roles are not clearly defined



Youth leaders move on - sustainability and succession planning are not well developed

Youth and Adult Partnerships: Working Together for Good

Young people and adults can collaborate to create change and solve real issues. These partnerships are successful when everyone involved has equal opportunities to contribute, make decisions, use their skills and abilities, and learn from each other. These expectations and considerations must be set at the beginning and developed with input from the youth and the adults involved. Coaching and training are key to achieving a cohesive working relationship. Youth and adults must also overcome any stereotypes they have of each other.¹



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement helps develop life skills, provides opportunities to use those skills, and offers leadership experiences for young people. In working relationships with adults, youth need to be given a variety of opportunities and meaningful roles to create change in their environments.

➔ Youth are valuable participants in the planning and implementation of programs that affect them. Don't forget - they are the subject matter experts on what it's like to be a young person in today's world.

Key Elements of Youth Engagement

Respect and Inclusion — Valuing young people's perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

Shared Decision-Making — Involving youth in planning, problem-solving, and leadership.

Empowerment — Providing opportunities for youth to build skills, take initiative, and lead projects.

Supportive Relationships — Fostering trust and mentorship between youth and adults.

Sense of Belonging — Creating environments where youth feel accepted, safe, and connected.



Cultural Consideration

Culture plays a vital role in youth engagement. In youth development, culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors that shape how young people see the world, express themselves, and interact with others. It influences their identity, decision-making, communication styles, and sense of belonging. Recognizing and respecting cultural differences is essential for creating inclusive, supportive environments where youth from all backgrounds feel seen, valued, and empowered to thrive.³

Culture is the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts and depends on the human capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.

-American Anthropological Association



Including Youth in Meetings and Events

Youth should be involved in designing, and implementing programs, policies, and practices that affect their lives. Youth can participate in event planning committees, serve as subject matter experts on youth panels, present in workshops, and facilitate discussions at conferences or meetings. Identifying and highlighting youth strengths is a great way involve them in meaningful ways. Conducting surveys, designing forms, or developing websites are some things that can tap into a young person's skill set and make their involvement beneficial for all involved.

Preparation Before Events

Preparing youth for their involvement in events will set them up for success and avoid confusion about their role. Meeting with young people before any meeting or event they've been asked to participate in is essential. Describe the event's purpose and ensure that youth understand their role and the power of their voice. If youth are not told they have a voice, they may not know they have the right to use it. Failing to empower young people to use their voice and the importance of their participation is equal to not bringing them to the event at all.

 Youth aged 12 are not on the same developmental or cognitive level as youth aged 17; therefore, it is vital to engage youth in meetings and events that are developmentally appropriate for their age.¹

During the Meeting or Event¹

-  **Provide expectations to the entire group, including youth**
Youth will be more inclined to participate if they know what is expected of them, and adults will be more receptive to their input if they understand the youth role in the meeting.
-  **Make sure youth know it's ok and expected for them to speak up**
Their expertise is the most important thing that can come from the meeting.
-  **Youth may need a little prompting**
Just because they do not immediately volunteer information does not mean they have nothing to say. Youth may be intimidated, so encouraging their input with prompts can help their experience.
-  **Stop and check-in with youth**
Asking for a young person's understanding of discussions can help ensure that they grasp what is happening in the meeting and any questions they have are addressed. Youth can also reiterate information in more youth-friendly terms to ensure that all youth involved understand.
-  **Ask youth directly their thoughts or opinions**
When brainstorming or discussing new topics, ask youth questions like "What do you think?" "What are your ideas?" or "Would this idea work with you and your peers?"

 Address young people appropriately. Avoid referring to adolescents as children or kids. Instead, always refer to them as youth, young people, or young adults.

Youth as Co-Facilitators

Youth can be skilled co-facilitators in addition to a valuable resource for input. There are many reasons for providing opportunities for youth to be co-facilitators at your meetings or events:

- Youth are more familiar with youth culture and vocabulary.
- Youth are more likely to share their thoughts and ideas if they relate better to their peers.
- Having youth leaders in the room can create a safe environment for other youth participants.
- Co-facilitation with youth shows adults that you are modeling a youth engagement model in practice.
- Seeing youth participating as equals with adults can inspire other young people to take on leadership roles.

After a Meeting or Event

- Always have a debrief session with the youth participants.
- Give youth constructive feedback from their participation and create an action plan for next steps.
- Ask youth what they need to help them feel better prepared for the next meeting or event.

Source:

1. <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Youth-Leadership-Toolkit.pdf>
2. <https://actforyouth.org/pyd/>
3. <https://americananthro.org/>





Website

prevention.org/yprc



Phone

800.252.8951



E-mail

yprc@prevention.org



YPRC

YOUTH
PREVENTION
RESOURCE CENTER