



## making the case for youth-adult partnerships

**purpose** • To explore the dynamics of making the case about youth–adult partnerships to others

**time** 60 minutes, depending on the size of the group and the number of scenarios

**group size** 10 to 40 participants

**materials** • Role-play scenarios  
• Handouts: Youth–Adult Partnerships: What Does Research Say? and Tips for Using the Research Summaries on Youth–Adult Partnerships

**prepare ahead** Make copies of the handouts and role-play scenarios.

### introduction

Tell the group that sometimes they will need to explain why youth–adult partnerships are an effective, useful, and valid way for organizations, groups, neighborhoods, clubs, or communities to partner together. This activity will introduce or reacquaint them with research findings about youth involvement and youth–adult partnerships that can be used to “make the case” for youth–adult partnerships.



### **step one**

Distribute the Youth–Adult Partnerships: What Does Research Say? handout, and give participants time to read it. Answer any questions participants have. Lead a brief discussion about the summaries using the following questions:

- What stood out for you from the research information?
- What information was new? What did you already know?
- Where do you see this information being helpful in supporting youth–adult partnerships?
- How might you use this research information to make a case for youth–adult partnerships?

### **step two**

Distribute the Tips for Using the Research Summaries on Youth–Adult Partnerships handout. Quickly review the handout, or have participants read it. Answer any questions participants may have. Solicit additional tips that have worked for participants in the past.

### **step three**

Tell participants that they are going to practice using this information through the role-play scenarios below, which involve a youth–adult team making the case—a pitch—to someone else about why youth–adult partnerships are beneficial. Participants should use research summaries and their own experiences for the role-plays.

### **step four**

Ask for volunteers to participate in the role-plays. For each role-play, at least three people are needed. Assign volunteers to a specific role-play, and distribute the role-play scenarios to the group. Role-plays will be performed for the large group.



## role-play scenarios

1. Your team has written a grant proposal to do a community project. Youth–adult partnerships are a key strategy. The team is being interviewed by the funding organization, which will make final decisions. The funders want to know more about youth–adult partnerships and why they should fund you.
2. Your team is creating youth–adult partnerships in your community, school, or youth organization. A reporter for a local television station is videotaping and interviewing the team in action. The reporter asks, “Why should youth and adults work in partnership?”
3. You want your youth organization to put young people on its Board of Directors. Your team is talking with the board chair, who says that she is just not sure that it will work. Explain the benefits of having youth board members.

**trainer note:** If you are well acquainted with the group in your workshop, you can modify and adapt the scenarios to their particular situations. The role-plays need at least three people, but more can play. Doing the role-plays with additional people can add interesting and different elements.

### reflection and discussion

Ask the volunteers in the role plays the following questions:

- What was it like to do this role-play?
- How did you feel about the roles you acted out?
- What experiences have you had that are similar?



Ask the observers the following questions:

- What was it like to watch these role-plays?
- How did you feel about the roles you saw acted out?
- What experiences have you had that are similar?
- What other things could be said or done that would make better explanations and pitches?
- What does this say about our work in youth–adult partnerships?

# Youth-Adult Partnerships: What Does Research Say?

- Over the past few years, we've been hearing a lot about the importance of promoting positive youth development, not merely preventing youth problems. We've also been hearing about civic engagement and building civil society. Youth empowerment is key to all of these activities. Young people's voices need to be heard.
- Young people need to be full partners with adults in improving our communities. This concept underlies youth–adult partnerships. To many people, the issues are clear—they can see firsthand what the benefits are. To other people, youth–adult partnerships sound like a nice idea, but they are hesitant to engage in or support them. They wonder: Do they really work? What, really, are the benefits? Is there any research that tells us that this is a good thing to do?
- Maybe people have been asking you these questions, or maybe you've been asking them yourself. Because youth–adult partnerships are new, not much research has focused on them. Fortunately, though, some research does answer these questions.
- To support the development of this training, we talked with youth and adults in different communities. We asked how research could help them conduct workshops on youth–adult partnerships and how research could be used to support their social change efforts.
- In the interviews, youth and adults said that research is often hard to locate and decipher. Many of them stated that they did not even know that research existed about youth–adult partnerships. They said it would be useful to have a summary of such research, written in “plain English,” and they wanted real-life stories from research that could illustrate the benefits.
- The following summaries are written to share the lessons with you and to help you share the lessons with others.

## what can be done to ensure successful youth-adult partnerships?

- Research says that although youth–adult partnerships are exciting, they are often not easy. Both youth and adults have had few opportunities to work together as partners. Often, they are not sure how to proceed. Fortunately, research gives us some lessons and guidelines.
- Adults should not expect young people to automatically excel in tasks in which they have not had much experience.
- Many studies tell us that high expectations from adults help young people learn and achieve. For example, children have been shown to learn best when teachers combine warmth with challenging standards;<sup>1</sup> unrealistic expectations, however, set youth up for failure.<sup>2</sup> Like adults, youth must gain basic knowledge and skills to be effective partners in organizational or community work. It is better for youth to advance through a variety of experiences than to be thrown right away into the highest level of responsibility.<sup>3</sup>
- Adults and youth should realize that they both can benefit by developing skills to help them do community work together.
- Skills related directly to youth–adult partnerships and community work include communication, teamwork, and project management. Adults also need to learn how to coach youth—that is, to empower youth while guiding them and holding them accountable.
- Real-Life Story: In one rural community, a team of youth and adults agreed to organize a community-service event. Wanting to avoid a situation in which adults were the bosses and youth the workers, adults shied away from coaching youth on tasks of project management. Many youth, not knowing exactly what to do, did not follow through on tasks. At the last minute, adults rushed in to save the day. Youth were embarrassed with their performance and angry with adults’ criticism. They questioned why adults did not offer guidance up front. <sup>4</sup>

- Adults need to feel empowered before they are willing and able to partner with youth.
- Many adults want to work with youth as partners, but they don't know exactly how to do that. Some adults fear that sharing power with youth will take power away from them. Sometimes adults have not learned all the skills of community work. Both adults and youth can benefit from training.
- Real-Life Story: An adult and a young person from the Hampton (Virginia) Coalition for Youth shared their experiences: "If the adults feel excluded, not empowered, or not well-prepared, then they will resist anyone else coming on board who may be better prepared, more empowered, or more included."<sup>5</sup>

## creative ways need to be found to bring youth and adults together.

- In both rural and urban communities today, everyone is busy. Adults have job, family, and volunteer commitments. Young people have commitments to school, sports, jobs, family, and volunteer activities.
- Real-Life Story: Adults in one community in California became increasingly irritated with poor youth attendance at evening meetings, and said so. A couple of young people reminded them of the long bus rides the youth faced going to and from school and the school and home responsibilities of the youth. Adults then started to realize that they needed to meet youth halfway. They started making the long drive to the high school for afternoon meetings.
- Experiences have to be meaningful for both youth and adults.
- Real-Life Story: One adult on a Board of Directors that involves both youth and adults said it this way: "If you can get folks to sit at the table with a group of committed young people, transformation will occur. Interactions have to be ongoing and must deal with real issues. If the issues are not real from the perspective of the adults, not only the youth, the adults won't sit at the table."<sup>7</sup>

## how do young people benefit?

- When young people have opportunities to contribute to community and be involved in positive relationships with adults, they can boost their self-competence and improve their life skills.
- Research says that when youth are involved in positive social relationships with peers and a variety of adults (parents, teachers, and others), they are more likely to have good self-esteem, think and act in socially responsible ways, and have good problem-solving skills.<sup>8,9</sup>
- Real-Life Story: A youth member of an ambulance crew spoke of his community experiential learning with other youth and adults, “In school, you learn chemistry and biology and stuff and then forget it as soon as the test is over. Here you’ve got to remember because somebody’s life depends on it.”<sup>10</sup>
- Skills like these can be developed in service-learning programs. Service-learning is not just community service. It is much more. In service-learning, youth partner with adults and take the lead in responding to community needs. The service projects are combined with “classroom” study, either in a school or in a youth organization. The critical piece that links everything together is reflection—reflection sessions that are honest and open and in which youth and adults communicate equally and build relationships, respect, and understanding. Research studies say that these relationships help youth develop emotional intelligence, communication skills, and acceptance of people who are different from themselves.<sup>11,12,13</sup>
- Research also tells us that participation in AmeriCorps programs helps older youth and young adults increase skills. AmeriCorps members (who are usually between ages 18 and 22) frequently work in partnership with adults. A survey of 310 AmeriCorps programs found that 76 percent of members showed significant increases in communication, interpersonal, problem-solving, and understanding-of-organizations skills.<sup>14</sup>
- Real-Life Story: Speaking of his experience partnering with adults at the city planning department in Hampton, Virginia, one youth noted, “It helped me realize how much potential I have. It brightened my perspective on life and exposed me to groups, organizations, and people I wouldn’t have had contact with otherwise. . . . I have increased my vocabulary, improved my writing skills, learned how to conduct research, and I can interact better with a variety of different people. . . . I have a totally different outlook on my community.”<sup>15</sup>
- Youth receive caring support from a number of adults in their lives, not just parents.

## young people need several types of caring from adults:

- Caring as nurturing: consistent support, comfort, and attention to basic needs
- Caring as healing and treatment: identification and help with problems and unhealthy circumstances
- Caring as empowerment: helping young people gain a sense of independence, control, and mastery as well as helping them understand and analyze the communities and environments in which they live
- Caring as development: clear expectations and resources to help young people develop in all areas of their lives—jobs, school, relationships, community, and health.
- Research tells us that caring is a “protective factor” for children and youth. Caring helps all humans develop social competence, identity, confidence, and a sense of purpose and future.<sup>16,17</sup>

## how do adults benefit?

- Adults can change negative attitudes and stereotypes about youth.
- By partnering with youth, adults often begin to see young people as responsible and legitimate contributors to activities. In two studies, for example, adults reported more positive attitudes about youth after they witnessed youth volunteering in community service projects.<sup>18,19</sup> One of the studies involved 1,000 young people engaged in service learning; 82 percent of the organizations in which the youth carried out their service reported that community members developed more positive attitudes toward youth as a result of their work.<sup>20</sup>
- Real-Life Story: One adult said after his first experience in working with youth as partners, “Once you get to know the youth—not just their problems, but who they are as a person, and what their circumstances are—you begin to see them in a whole other light.”<sup>21</sup>
- Adults can get re-energized and enthusiastic about their own work when they partner with young people.

- Real-Life Story: A high school principal said that teachers liked their jobs better when they started sharing responsibilities with students. Students and teachers worked together on teaching and classroom management. The young people fully participated in decision making, planning, and carrying out activities. The principal said that as a result, teachers were much more excited about teaching and about the school and came to see the students as “colleagues and partners rather than people to control.”<sup>22</sup>
- Adults can improve their communication, teamwork, and coaching skills.
- Adults can have a hard time letting their guard down in order to communicate openly with youth. After being involved in youth–adult partnerships, however, adults involved in one study found that they started talking more easily with young people—and in a give-and-take way.
- Real-Life Story: One adult said, “You’ve got to get into their [young people’s] lives . . . spend time just talking with youth. . . . It’s a back and forth thing; you’ve got to tell them something about you that lets them know who you are, too.”<sup>23</sup>
- In more than 50 communities across the country, both adults and youth got better at working in teams when they were involved in youth–adult partnerships. The partnerships had flexible roles for youth and adults, allowing different talents and needs, rather than age, to dictate what roles youth and adults each took.<sup>24,25</sup>
- In these same communities, adults got better at their coaching skills, too. Coaching is hard for many adults; it is not only leading sports teams. Coaching means empowering young people and allowing them to be self-directed. At the same time, adults who act as coaches have to make experiences structured enough and set expectations high enough so that young people will stretch and learn. Youth–adult partnerships have been found to help adults successfully perform those tasks.<sup>26</sup>

## how do organizations and communities benefit?

- Communities are strengthened when all members, youth included, are actively involved.
- Since the 1980s, communities across the country have benefited from youth action. Youth involved in youth conservation corps and service-learning programs have tutored children, organized community clean-ups, run food banks, repaired buildings, built homes, planted and harvested community gardens, and contributed to countless other community improvements.<sup>27</sup>

- A study of 112 communities, mostly in the Midwest, showed that the healthiest communities were those in which youth engaged in structured and purposeful activities with adults who were not their parents.<sup>28</sup>
- Young people serving their communities alongside adults is part of traditional Native American culture. The National Indian Youth Leadership Project has operated for many years in many tribal communities across the country; the project helps build community through the efforts of young people. Some accomplishments include rebuilding a 250-year-old adobe church, repairing trails and Anasazi ruins at El Morro National Monument, and replanting peach trees in Canyon de Chelly.<sup>29</sup>

## involving youth in decision-making partnerships with adults can help organizations raise money.

- Real-Life Story: The Board of Directors at one organization wanted to put youth on the board but was afraid that doing so might alarm funders. Much to their surprise, however, people at the organization discovered that some foundations were more willing to donate money if youth were on the board.<sup>30</sup>
- Organizations that have youth on staff and on their Boards of Directors become more connected and responsive to youth in the community. They are able to reach out to and better serve young people in the community.
- Real-Life Story: In 1996, the city planning department in Hampton, Virginia, hired two high school students to work as part-time city planners. The youth recommended that the city develop a Youth Commission that would have the same power as other city planning commissions. Their idea was adopted, and the city now has a Youth Commission of 20 young people. In one decision, the Youth Commission determined that the city bicycle ordinance should be changed so that people could ride bikes on the side walk until the city developed more bike paths. The city council adopted their recommendation.<sup>31</sup>
- Organizations that involve youth in responsible positions see the benefits and then want to involve more youth in responsible roles.
- Youth as Resources (YAR), a national nonprofit, supports youth involvement in communities by giving small grants to young people who design and carry out projects that address social problems in their communities. Young people and adults work as partners on all levels of the program. Evaluation research on YAR showed that after the agencies saw the benefits of youth involvement, they were committed to providing more responsible roles for youth in their organizations.<sup>32</sup>

**Sources : Youth—Adult Partnerships: What Does Research Say?**

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# Tips for Using the Research Summaries on Youth-Adult Partnerships

You can use the research summaries on youth–adult partnerships in many ways. Some suggestions:

- Use them in writing grant proposals to raise money.
- Use them as talking points for speeches and public presentations in your community. Use the research to recruit support and resources for community projects involving youth and adults.
- Use them in letter-writing campaigns about youth and community policy to local officials.
- Use them in newsletters to get the word out.
- Use them to make handouts for people who want more information about youth–adult partnerships.
- Send them to people who will be in a workshop to help them prepare.
- Use them as a focus for discussion groups.
- Other ways in which you can use the summaries:
- Invite speakers to address your group. Contact people at local civic organizations, youth-serving organizations, or local colleges or universities, or invite political leaders. Ask them to address points in the summary or to present other research, information, or experiences that expand it.

- Contact your local Cooperative Extension Service office, library, or civic and youth organizations to see what other research and information can help you find out about youth–adult partnerships. Often, research and information will not be categorized under “youth–adult partnerships.” Instead, it can appear under phrases such as the following:
  - Youth leadership
  - Service learning
  - Youth service
  - Community service
  - AmeriCorps
  - Youth conservation corps
  - Civic education
  - Youth participation in community.
- If you are looking specifically for research, it often can be found under “evaluation” or “program evaluation.”
- The following Web sites contain research information:
  - At the Table: <http://www.att.org>
  - Corporation for National Service: <http://www.cns.gov>
  - CYD Journal: <http://www.cydjournal.org>
  - Do Something: <http://www.dosomething.org>
  - Innovation Center: <http://www.theinnovationcenter.org>
  - Search Institute: <http://www.search-institute.org>

### other resources:

- Youth Today, a monthly newspaper that has regular reviews of research as well as feature articles. To order, call 202/785–0764 or go to <http://www.youthtoday.org>
- American Youth Policy Forum issues reports and research summaries about different aspects of youth issues. For more information, call 202/775–9731 or go to <http://www.aypf.org>.

Many of these resources include articles, reports, and summaries that are written for people who are not researchers.