



JIM CASEY

YOUTH

OPPORTUNITIES
INITIATIVE

Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships

Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships

Engaging adolescents in planning and decisionmaking regarding their own lives—and the larger community—reaps critical benefits throughout the process of transitioning to adulthood. Emerging knowledge in the field of neuroscience tells us that during adolescence and young adulthood the brain is undergoing extensive remodeling and that experience plays a critical role in how the brain matures. The concept is one of “use it or lose it” as synapses that see little use wither away and those that are used become stronger. Young people who have opportunities to be fully engaged with adults and “practice” adult skills such as reasoning, decisionmaking, and self-regulation are thus strengthening the parts of the brain responsible for those functions.

Young people in foster care have often been removed from natural opportunities for decisionmaking, community engagement, and leadership and they experience a sense of powerlessness and isolation. The intentional creation of leadership and community

All young people should have opportunities to be engaged in directing their own lives and to help shape their communities.

engagement opportunities is therefore particularly important for this group of young people.

The engagement of young people succeeds best when it is authentic and when it is supported by youth-adult partnerships. What makes engagement “authentic”? What is a true partnership? How do agencies that serve young people in foster care achieve authentic engagement of young people through youth-adult partnerships?

Why focus on being authentic?

While it is often claimed that young people are being engaged, not all engagement of young people is authentic. Engagement loses authenticity when adults are conflicted about questions of power and control. In his spectrum of adult attitudes, William Lofquist categorizes work with young people as fitting into one of three categories (see Figure 1). The attitudes adults hold about young people influence the ability of youth-adult partnerships to be effective

“I feel adults don’t care and that they disregard any knowledge I have.”

—Samantha Amann, 20

and of youth engagement to be authentic. Young people can also hold stereotypes about adults that impact youth-adult partnerships. It is therefore critical to address the attitudes and beliefs that each partner holds about the other.

Over the past twenty years, the youth development field has struggled to engage young people in meaningful ways. Well-intentioned attempts to create decisionmaking positions for young people (placing them on boards of directors or charging them with leadership of community projects) have often failed because young people and adults were not adequately prepared to work together in a new arrangement: youth-adult partnership.

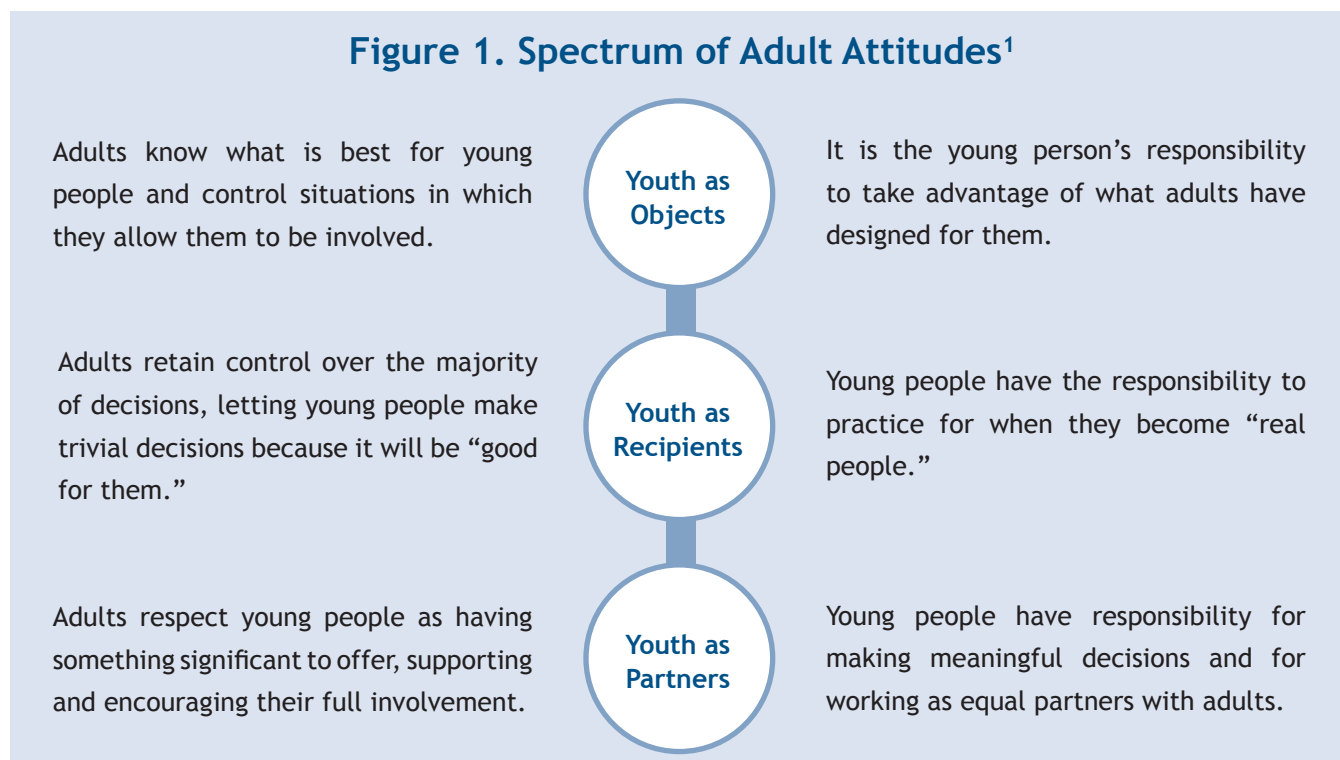
The struggle in authentically engaging young people lies largely in the fact that it is challenging work to adequately prepare adults and young people to work

together as equal partners. At times, this work with young people may mean spending a considerable amount of time preparing young people before meetings, offering respectful support during meetings, and debriefing with them after a meeting has ended. Adults need to explain to young people before the meeting why they are going to be there, why they are needed, what their role is, and how the process will unfold. Everyone will need to understand that it takes time to achieve true, meaningful youth-adult partnerships—time to feel comfortable with one another, to agree on areas of importance, and to come to decisions that are agreed on by both the young person and the adult. A common language must also be developed so that everyone can understand what is being discussed as work progresses. While this can seem onerous, the benefits make each investment worthwhile.

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1 Lofquist, 1989

Figure 1. Spectrum of Adult Attitudes¹



What is authentic youth engagement?

Youth engagement has been defined as “young people who are actively and authentically involved, motivated, and excited about an issue, process, event or program.”² But what does authentic youth engagement actually look like? Authentic youth engagement can best be described by focusing on the experiences of young people when they are engaged:

- They are respected, valued, and trusted and they feel appreciated, safe, and comfortable.
- They feel they are working in an environment that facilitates their engagement, and they are involved in a meaningful way as teachers as well as students.
- Their voices are being heard and treated as worthwhile.
- They are given the opportunity to be involved and make decisions, gain leadership skills, and see their ideas realized.
- They are able to participate in the social aspects of their involvement.
- They see change and progress happening as a result of their contributions.
- They are in a space where they have ownership and control in decisionmaking processes.³

Authentic youth engagement with youth in foster care

For adolescents in foster care, authentic engagement occurs at two levels. First, young people become partners in the development of their own case planning, including planning for permanent family relationships. They also participate in transition

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2 Hoffman & Staniforth, 2007.

3 Adapted from Hoffman & Staniforth, 2007

“Thinking youth don’t have anything valuable to offer is a very shallow way of thinking, because there are many youth who have tons to say about the foster care community and ways to improve it. Just giving them that chance to come out and say what they want to say will just change everything.”

—TaCandie Richmond, 19

planning that addresses goals for education, employment, health care, and housing. At this level of engagement, young people fully understand their rights and responsibilities and are full partners in making decisions that affect their lives. A key component of the planning process is their leadership in developing both permanency and transition plans in partnership with a wide array of adults from their own natural networks of relationships as well as various public and private systems. Young people actively lead the process of making decisions on issues that affect them in order to support their successful transition to adulthood and a healthy, productive adult life.

“The normative expectation for partnerships between youth and adults has been rerouted from an assumption that adults are responsible for ‘fixing’ youth’s problems to that of lending a helping hand—or even stepping aside—so that youth themselves take responsibility for personal, peer, and community life. Traditional efforts permitting youth involvement in activities that improve themselves and their communities have morphed into initiatives that encourage youth to think boldly and make significant changes in the world in which they live.”

—Search Institute, 2005

“Not only should there be support financially but guidance and advice to both the youth and the professional. They both should be considered as experts and their opinions valued.”

—Octavia Fugerson, 20

Second, young people become actively engaged in their community in areas that are of interest to them, such as faith-based groups, extracurricular school activities, local clubs, sports, causes, and politics. Young people who want to improve the foster care system also have opportunities to advise and influence child welfare practice and policy. For many adolescents who have experienced foster care, it is very important to help other young people who will “come behind them.” Opportunities to positively influence the foster care experiences of others is a very meaningful way for them to get involved and to give back.

The proof of authenticity in youth engagement is demonstrated by young people’s perceptions about these processes (see box below).

Young People’s Definitions of Youth Engagement

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Fellows define youth engagement as:

- “Playing an active role, voicing needs”
- “Being involved and having a say”
- “Way to get connected to resources and communities”
- “Needed, understood, trust”
- “Listened to, opinions valued”
- “Having a voice, power to make a change”
- “Sharing expertise, influence”
- “Letting us tell you the tools we need”

Qualities of an authentic youth-adult partnership

In an authentic youth-adult partnership, both partners have equal opportunities to utilize skills, make decisions, and independently carry out tasks to reach shared goals. Each acknowledges learning from the other. Optimally, a balance is created—among young people interacting with peers, adults interacting with other adults, and, importantly, young people and adults working together to reach common goals.⁴

The quality of mutuality distinguishes youth-adult partnerships from parent-child, student-teacher, and mentoring relationships.⁵ Mutuality is very different from relationships in which adults take leadership roles and young people are assigned inferior roles, or programs in which youth make all of the decisions while the adults sit back and watch. Neither partner’s views are treated as subordinate to the other’s. Youth-adult partnerships instead build on the strengths of each group, and the program or activity is stronger than one devised and delivered individually by either group.⁶

Why youth-adult partnerships are critical

Youth-adult partnerships have proven to be one of the most effective ways to engage both young people and adults in meaningful activities that contribute to positive youth development. In authentic partnerships, young people are able to practice skills that they will need throughout their lifetime, strengthening the parts of the brain responsible for

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4 Jones & Perkins, 2006.

5 Camino, 2000.

6 Zeldin, et al., 2001.

those skills. Young people who are involved in positive, meaningful, respectful relationships with adults show improved skills and competencies and they are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors. Research indicates that young people who are involved in positive social relationships and activities with adults develop stronger communication skills and leadership experience. They gain increased status and stature in the community, which leads to greater self-esteem.

In addition to producing positive effects for young people, these partnerships are beneficial for adults as well. When partnering with young people, adults build skills and simultaneously strengthen the organizations to which they belong.⁷

From a programmatic perspective, programs that involve young people in design, implementation, and evaluation tend to be more relevant and effective. Programs developed in partnership display more awareness of the unique characteristics of the target group and are more likely to speak to that population. Youth-adult partnerships frequently result in:

- fresh, new ideas;
- new perspectives on decisionmaking, including more relevant and meaningful information about the needs and interests of young people;
- open and honest responses about existing programs or services;
- additional human resources due to the sharing of responsibilities between young people and adults;
- greater willingness of young people to accept the services and messages of the program; and
- greater credibility for the program or organization among young people and advocates.⁸

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7 Univ. of California 4H Youth Development Program, 2011.
8 Bird, n.d.; Klindera & Menderweld, 2001.

“Youth-adult partnerships can level the whole playing field, because we don’t have all the answers. We give it a fancy title but we forget that it’s about committed relationships, built on trust, uncompromising honesty, and love. These relationships with youth provide adults expert input and validation that improves our practices and our policies while establishing a sense of mutuality and respect.”
—Marty Zanghi, Maine Youth Opportunities Initiative

How to best support youth-adult partnerships

Three conditions help agencies that serve young people in foster care create effective youth-adult partnerships: adults must be willing to share their power and responsibility with young people; young people need to be willing to take on responsibility; and both need skills to work together respectfully and successfully.⁹

Child welfare and other agencies that serve young people can achieve authentic engagement of

9 Texas Network of Youth Services, 2002.

What Young People Say About Youth-Adult Partnerships

“Youth-adult partnerships ... are youth and adults coming together in a positive, mutually respectful environment with the recognition that each group contributes unique strengths to the relationship. The end result would not have been possible without collaboration from the two unique groups.”

— University of California 4H Youth Development Program

“My experience working with adults in my state to change foster care has been both challenging and effective. I’ve learned to be patient, to listen, and to help them help us.”

—Eddy Vanderkwaak, 20

young people in foster care through youth-adult partnerships by:

- Identifying and offering training to help young people and adults partner effectively.
- Selecting young people and adults who are willing and able to engage in the mutuality of the process that youth-adult partnerships require.
- Giving opportunities for young people and adults to explore what each brings to the table, encouraging open communication concerning mutual expectations.
- Emphasizing the mutuality of relationships: young people and adults should be seen as providing unique and valuable contributions to the partnership.
- Ensuring that adults and young people work together to determine roles, plan activities, set deadlines, create guidelines, and divide tasks.
- Providing adequate resources that include financial support for young people when their

“The concept of partnering *with* youth most likely represents a fundamental shift in our relationships with young people. No longer are they the clients we work ‘at’—they become full and active participants in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of services. They are full partners that bring fresh perspectives, energy, and talents to the table.”

—Texas Network of Youth Services, 2002

participation is not a part of their work or school responsibilities, and offering child care for parents.

- Counting young people’s and adults’ votes equally, if voting is used for decision making.
- Allowing young people to make significant program and community decisions.
- Holding meetings when young people are out of school and starting and ending meetings on time.
- Allocating resources to young people, including adults offering transportation to meetings.
- Offering young people and adults the opportunity to regularly reflect on their work.
- Providing individuals who do not necessarily value youth-adult partnerships with opportunities to see the benefits of these partnerships, thereby supporting a cultural shift in which all adults and young people see the value and importance of partnering for change.¹⁰

To make youth-adult partnerships truly work, agencies utilizing these partnerships need to prepare and support both young people and adults.¹¹

Adults can be helped to:

- **Expect no more and no less from a young person.** Adults should expect from young people what they would expect from an adult partner: responsibility, skills, and participation.
- **Respect young people’s time and responsibilities.** Conversely, adults should not excuse all indiscretions on the basis of youth.
- **Treat young people as individuals.** Adults can assure young people that they are interested

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10 Adapted from Russell, Polen, & Tepper, 2009.

11 Bird, n.d.

in their personal opinions and that they do not expect them to speak for all young people. Adults can recognize that young partners bring individual skills, interests, and perspectives to the shared work. And, as with adults, tasks that appeal to some young people will not appeal to others.

- **Take time to explain.** Many young people may, for the first time, be assuming a role of authority, and they may lack the knowledge to be effective partners at first. Adults can ask for questions, give reasons for actions taken, and allow young people time to process information. Rushing through meetings may signal a desire to control the group's actions.
- **Plan for young people's involvement.** Adults should schedule meetings at times when young people can attend and hold them in an accessible location. Young people can be invited to participate in projects or on committees whose activities are structured to help them feel welcome and able to move forward.
- **Recognize internal and external barriers to youth-adult partnerships.** Adults need to be comfortable with the abilities, skills, and knowledge that they bring and use these assets to address barriers to authentic partnerships.

Young people can be helped to:

- **Demonstrate their capabilities.** Young people can be helped to identify the strengths, interests, and commitments they bring to the partnership and may need support to communicate these to adults. This communication can provide adults with an understanding of all that young people bring to the work, which can help adults more comfortably share responsibility and authority.

Key Elements of Authentic Youth Engagement

Relevance: Engage the youth around relevant issues that affect their individual/collective life conditions.

Accessibility: Demonstrate accessibility that is inclusive, engaging a broad cross-section of youth, including marginalized youth.

Consistency: Become an organization that champions the inclusion of youth as routine practice.

Authenticity: Include authentic and formalized youth participation in program development, implementation, and evaluation. A high level of meaningful youth participation has clear roles, shared decisionmaking, a diversity of roles, youth empowerment, and/or increased personal agency for youth.

Hands-On, Action Learning: Offer projects that emphasize experiential learning and include action projects that have a range of structured and informal learning opportunities for youth to contribute.

Local Projects: Have a local community focus for youth action projects. Face-to-face, frequent participation is easier, and results and recognition are more readily visible.

Scope: Include an evolving capacity for youth to participate and an increased range of opportunities.

Recognition and Respect: Honestly and openly respect youth opinions, allow them air time and space in discussions, and recognize their contributions, including celebrating project milestones.

Source: Hoffman & Staniforth, 2007

- **Accept feedback.** Adults can help young people see how they use constructive critique, a process that will also involve critiquing young people’s ideas. And adults can help young people understand that the constructive criticism process is not an indication of disrespect or dismissal.
- **Utilize opportunities.** Young people need additional support both in and outside of meetings and events to be able to understand when an opportunity to contribute is available and to feel comfortable taking it. In order for young people to become comfortable taking such opportunities, adults must give their time, patience, and understanding.

Both young people and adults can be helped to:

- **Check assumptions and stereotypes.** Young people and adults are likely to bring biases about one another to the work. Adults may view young people very positively or, alternatively, as undependable and disinterested. Young people may see adults as reliable problem solvers or as overly controlling. Many adults are afraid of young people, and many young people are intimidated by adults. Young people and adults need help to recognize their partners as individuals with strengths and room to grow.
- **Practice good communication.** Adults may tend to interrupt, which can discourage young people from participating. Adults may need help allowing young people to finish their ideas, and young people may need support to persevere despite interruptions. Young people need to know that using different language and communication styles than adults does not make their contributions less worthwhile.

ABOUT JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative’s mission is to ensure that the young people who leave foster care are able to make successful transitions to adulthood. In an effort to improve the systems that support them, the Initiative promotes the strategies of: youth voice, community partnerships, research and evaluation, public will and policy, and the creation of a range of opportunities for young people. It works in partnership with communities and states across the country to integrate these strategies into the core work of state child welfare agencies and other strategic allies.

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Summary

Authentic engagement of young people in foster care through youth-adult partnerships is essential to positive youth development. As research on the adolescent brain tells us, young people who have opportunities to be fully engaged with adults and “practice” their adult skills are strengthening the parts of the brain responsible for those functions. Therefore authentic youth engagement is not only an effective approach; it is also a neurological imperative. Child welfare and other agencies that serve young people can promote these outcomes by implementing the key elements of effective youth engagement (see page 7).

Related Publications

This and other issue briefs draw from a research base and set of recommendations described more fully in *The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care*. For copies of these and other resources from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, visit www.jimcaseyyouth.org.

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