

Working with Youth Programs

By Felicia Roberson

Leadership is a quality that all youth possess. When youth leaders begin to emerge within a life skills program, youth advisory board, youth advocacy group, or any other youth program, what do you do with them?

How does the prevention practitioner implement a Youth Prevention Program (YPP) that develops, involves, and motivates youth while staying focused on achieving program outcomes?

The following tips were gathered from research and YPP professionals around the state of Illinois.

Establish a Safe Environment. Remember youth have never done this before. You must build a rapport with them, so don't rush the process.

- Establish project expectations and boundaries.
- Set clear group rules, with the youths' input.
- Show respect for each other during and after the program.
- Allow youth to determine agenda items with adult guidance.
- Be PATIENT!

Define Roles. The adult is there to provide SUPPORT and ADVICE. Think of situations and decisions that may need an adult's input (e.g. financial, logistical, training, emotional, etc.).

- Present all the possible options to assist youth with making a decision.
- Allow the youth to make the final decisions.
- Explain the responsibilities involved with their decisions.
- Hold youth accountable.
- Provide follow-up as needed.
- Have FUN!

Increase Confidence. In youth leadership programs, the youth are the experts; they just don't know it. Empowerment is the key to opening the doors of our future.

- Encourage them to share their ideas.
- Validate their opinions.
- Give meaningful work.



- Be prepared to lend a hand when they have to make hard decisions.
- Creativity is OK!

Acknowledge Individuality. All youth are not the same! One individual should not be expected to speak for the whole group.

- Assure each person's opinion is his or her own.
- Encourage all to share.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Keep an OPEN MIND!

Communicate. Comments made by youth are just as important as any adult's comments. Respect for each other's opinions is very important and allows the group to bond and form a unified way of thinking, in and outside the group.

- Gain clarity when unsure.
- Don't interrupt.

- Wait for the individual to finish his or her idea.
- Respect opinions without disapproval or criticism.
- LISTEN actively!

Be Inclusive. Youth should be involved in all stages of their development as youth leaders. By participating in all aspects, youth will experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to the group. Youth could be involved in recruiting, planning, presenting, and evaluating, just to name a few.

Insight from the Field

“Peer-to-peer engagement and role modeling is a great benefit of youth-led programs. It is also important for the youth to feel supported and respected by the adult staff in their program.”

Grant E. Vitale, Manager of Education and Prevention Programs for Alternatives, Inc.

“You need a lot of energy to work with youth. Remember to have fun, but know your limits.”

Missy Godfrey, Prevention Specialist for YMCA Network

“Be flexible . . . be very flexible. Even the best laid plans CHANGE.”

Maggie Osborne, Prevention Coordinator for Omni Youth Services

“Make them part of the solution!”

Nikki Hale, Prevention Manager for Youth Outreach Services

- Build their assets.
- Ensure participation is meaningful for youth.
- Ask for opinions.
- ACTIVE involvement is important!

Educate. Youth will play a variety of roles within the group. They may sometimes be facilitators, summarizers, clarifiers, etc. So when opportunities arise, teach youth about group dynamics and anything they may need to be successful leaders.

- Encourage youth to practice the various roles they

may play within a group.

- Provide guidance to youth as they function in various roles.
- Point out the roles that people usually take on in group settings.
- Have youth practice accepting constructive feedback from their peers and adults.
- Have youth train other youth.
- Involve youth in identifying topics.
- PRACTICE! PRACTICE! PRACTICE!

Involve Others. Outside stakeholders should be involved in the youth group’s learning experience by participating in various phases of the project. Besides bringing a different perspective to the project, stakeholders will help the youth learn how to deal with various members of the community. The stakeholders could:

- Assist with project management.
- Connect the project to local political contacts.

- Pursue funding opportunities.
- Assist with evaluation of the project.
- Act as MENTORS for the youth!

Reward. Graduation ceremonies or public announcements are a great way to show the youths’ successes.

- Provide certificates of merit, school credits or work experiences.
- Acknowledge achievements in your local paper.
- Pay them only if there is a job to be done . . . money should not be used as an incentive.
- Treat youth to a pizza party.
- Show that you are PROUD of them!

Additional Reading

The following resources were compiled to assist you with further reading regarding working with youth programs.

Tips for Working with Youth as Partners

<http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/ogle/downloads/2085.pdf>

Tips for Working with Youth

www.advocatesforyouth.org/publication/transitions/transitions1401_9.htm

Tips for Working with Youth in Community Development Projects

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hbbp/alcohol-otherdrugs

Youth Development Programs, the Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA)

www.highscope.org/EducationalPrograms/Adolescent/YouthPQA/mainpage.htm

Chapter 1: The Technical Assistance Process: Involving Appropriate People in the Technical Assistance Process
www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/juris_tap_report/ch1.04.html

Chapter 1: The Technical Assistance Process: Using Technical Assistance

www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/juris_tap_report/ch1.07.html

References

Gibbs, J.C., G.B. Potter, and A.P. Goldstein. 1995. The EQUIP Program: Teaching Youth to Think and Act Responsibly through a Peer-Helping Approach. Illinois: Research Press.

Powell, S.R. 1993. “The Power of Positive Peer Influence: Leadership Training for Today’s Teens.” Haworth Press vol. 8, no. 1.

Varenhorst, B.B. 2003. An Asset Builder’s Guide to Training Peer Helpers: Fifteen Sessions on Communication, Assertiveness, and Decision-Making Skills. Minnesota: Search Institute.

Roberson is a Professional Development Resource Specialist for Prevention First.