

# *Research Into Action Series*

Engaging youth as leaders and partners can improve substance use prevention:  
A call to action to support youth engagement practice and research

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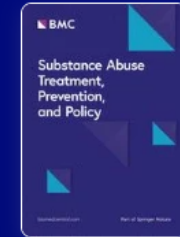
# Engaging youth as leaders and partners can improve substance use prevention: a call to action to support youth engagement practice and research

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## Abstract

### Background

As a subfield of prevention science, substance use prevention researchers and professionals are increasingly focused on translating research into practice, developing the workforce of prevention specialists, and creating a robust prevention infrastructure. One critical need for professional development among the substance use prevention workforce is training and technical assistance around how to include young people in developing, implementing, and evaluating substance use prevention programs.



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## Learning objectives for today

- Name some benefits and challenges of engaging youth as leaders and partners to improve substance use prevention
- Understand three competencies needed to support meaningful youth engagement
- Identify one next step your coalition or organization can take to increase youth voice in your work (e.g., a new skill to develop, a conversation to have, a relationship to build)

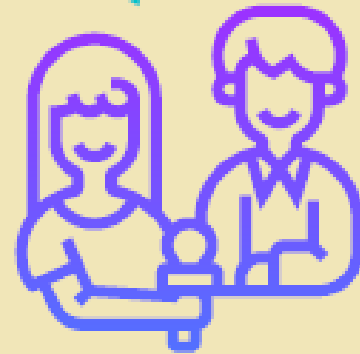
# What do I mean by youth engagement?

- “Youth” = ~ages 11 - 25
- Youth Engagement (YE) – as an *approach* to prevention research and practice
- prevention researchers and members of the workforce effectively engage **youth as leaders or partners** in planning, tailoring, implementing, and/or evaluating prevention programming
- *not* – delivering curricula or programming to youth
  - Although some programs exist!



**“I very much think that the most effective projects we’ve ever had have definitely been those community involvement, service-learning, youth-led initiatives. But they’re hard to do!”**

**—Prevention Provider in NC**



Engaging Youth to Improve Substance Misuse Prevention:  
**Information Guide Series**



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## Benefits of YE

- Increase **relevance** of prevention program/policy/practices
- Increase **reach, uptake, quality and responsiveness** of prevention aimed toward young people
- Ongoing insight/assessment/improvement as **youth culture** changes
- Provide **opportunities** to youth for skills, support, connection, contribution
- Build **youth capacity**, prevention workforce pipeline

# Four models of Youth Engagement

**Youth  
Consultant  
Models**

**Youth  
Board  
Models**

**Youth  
Partners  
Models**

**Youth-Led  
Models**





### Youth-Led Models

Prevention is youth-initiated & youth-led & adults provide support and are invited for shared decision-making.

### Youth Partner Models

Youth and adults partner in prevention efforts. Youth can serve in many roles such as researchers, evaluators, advocates, staff or implementors.

### Youth Board Models

Adults primarily decide on prevention efforts. Youth advise on various issues in an ongoing way.

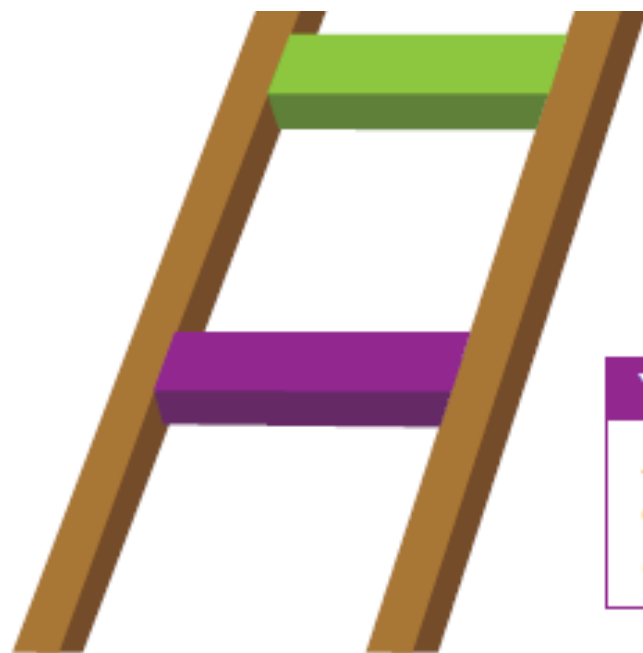
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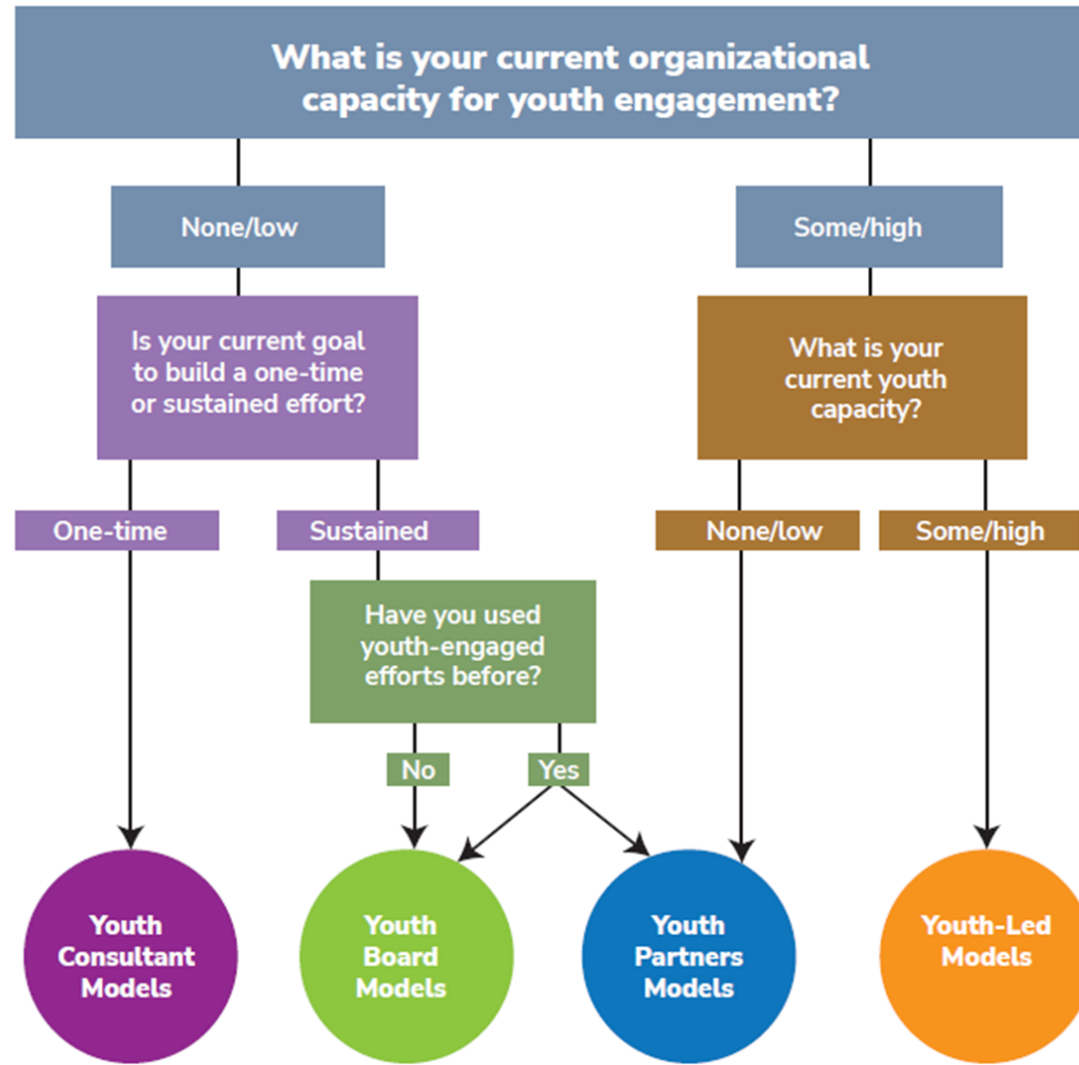
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# Decision tree tool



## Common issues that arise with YE

- Power-sharing is hard!
- Youth are in a transient stage of life
- Logistical barriers – transportation, time, funds
- Finding the “right” youth
- Sustaining commitment and motivation
- Funding constraints
- Training (for both org staff and youth)

## Three key competencies needed

- 1) Understand **adolescent development** across key domains (e.g., physical, emotional, social, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, civic, identity) and the core elements of **youth-adult partnerships** (authentic decision making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, community connectedness)
- 2) **Apply this understanding** of adolescent development and youth-adult partnerships to the design of youth/adult meetings, materials, and programs that serve young people
- 3) Implement key **relational practices** (e.g., support youth to make decisions, engage in reciprocal communication, work jointly, share power) that enable authentic collaboration between youth and adults



# Adolescent Development and Youth-Adult Partnerships

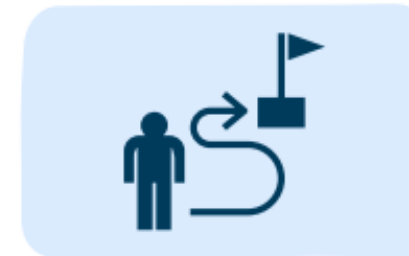
## KEY DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF ADOLESCENCE



**Safe and satisfying ways to explore the world and take healthy risks to test out new ideas and experiences**



**Real-world scenarios in which to build decision-making and emotional regulation skills**



**Avenues to develop a sense of meaning and purpose by contributing to peers, families, and communities**



**Positive ways to earn respect and social status among peers and adults**



**Experiences that help define personal values, goals, and a positive sense of identity**



**Warmth and support from parents and other caring adults**

# Applying this knowledge to work engaging youth

## 7 Adultist Practices

DISSERTATION  
FINDINGS FROM THE  
BRIDGE PROJECT



### POLICING

Adult stops youth from having certain conversations, restricts how they move within the space, limits times when they can use the restroom, and sees tangential discussions as off topic or openly discourages conversation or sharing of likes and dislikes.



### LECTURING

Adult tells youth what to do. Adult asks questions with obvious yes/no answer. Adult overwhelmingly directs conversation. Adult punctuates each youth's response with their own voice.



### DISENGAGING

Not following up when youth shares something difficult; Making a lack of group knowledge the youth's problem or ignoring their questions; calling work boring, saying "we gotta get through this" or incentivizing only with external motivators.



### OBVIOUS SEPARATION OF YOUTH/ADULTS

Adults talk with other adults during breaks. Adults sit only with adults. Adults remove themselves from activities.



### INCOMPLETE INSTRUCTION

Adults do not describe an activity well and youth express confusion. Adults do not connect content with previous session. Adult assume youth know why they are doing an activity and what they will gain from it.



### EXCLUDING YOUTH

Excluding youth who show up late by not explaining the activity or not welcoming to group. Only choosing extraverts to talk/lead.



### NEGATIVE COMMENTS

Adult responds to youth in a terse, negative or pejorative way.

# Key relational practices

## WORKING WITH YOUTH

### PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT GENUINE YOUTH-ADULT COLLABORATION

Findings from research on youth participatory action research at the Bridge Project



#### FACILITATE WITH INTENTION

- Outline session activities
- Provide clear guidance on activity steps
- Connect content from previous sessions to current session
- Debrief activities in a way that allows youth to understand how the skills they've learned might be useful in the future



#### LET YOUTH LEAD



Voting or day-to-day decisions



Project level decisions



#### ACKNOWLEDGE POWER

- Apologize when you make mistakes
- Be aware of non-verbal communication
- Discuss different identities of youth and adults and how power may be associated with those identities
- If you make a decision without youth, explain and justify.



#### WORK TOGETHER

Work, play, participate, problem-solve, and clean together.



#### LEARN TO LET GO

##### Let Go of:

- Rigid behavioral expectations
- Desire to control dialogue
- Punitive discipline

##### Embrace:

- Curiosity
- Relationships
- Authenticity
- Fun/Silliness



#### ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE

- Ask open-ended questions
- Moderate don't punctuate
- Allow for silence



#### CELEBRATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Honor birthdays and other special events
- Recognize productive behavior
- Acknowledge unique contributions of youth
- Celebrate completion of activity not just project

# More tools and resources

- **SAMHSA YE guidance**

[store.samhsa.gov/product/The-Substance-Abuse-and-Mental-Health-Services-Administration-s-SAMHSA-Youth-Engagement-Guidance/SMA16-4985](https://store.samhsa.gov/product/The-Substance-Abuse-and-Mental-Health-Services-Administration-s-SAMHSA-Youth-Engagement-Guidance/SMA16-4985)

- **UCLA Report and guides**

<https://developingadolescent.semel.ucla.edu/topics/item/youth-engagement-in-research-and-evaluation>

## YPAR hub

<https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/home>

## Hub for Justice-Centered Youth Engagement and UpRISE movement

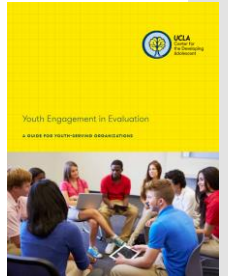
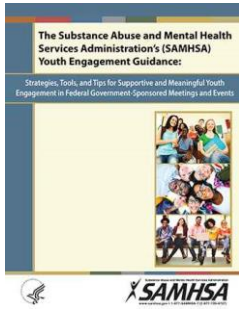
<http://upriseyouthmovement.org/adult-trainings/>

## CADCA Rural Youth Engagement

[https://www.cadca.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/rural\\_youth\\_engagement\\_toolkit-1.pdf](https://www.cadca.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/rural_youth_engagement_toolkit-1.pdf)

## PTTC – Youth Engagement Workshop Series (May 8 & 15)

<https://pttcnetwork.org/news/youth-engagement-workshop-series/>



RURAL YOUTH  
ENGAGEMENT  
TOOLKIT

This session  
invites you to  
consider:

- How could our prevention work benefit from the perspectives of youth?
- Where in our existing workflow can we include or amplify the voices of youth?
- What is one next step I/our coalition can take to further our partnerships with youth?



Thank you!

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**Let's  
Have an  
Awesome  
Time  
Doing  
Science**