Youth-Adult Partnerships
in Systems of Care

CARING FOR EVERY CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

Systems of Care

PURPOSE

The "youth guided" value built into systems of care has paved the way for youth and adults to work together to transform systems and improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. To this end, the TA Partnership has supported systems of care in developing youth-adult partnerships. This document provides an overview of youth-adult partnerships in systems of care and offers suggestions that address challenges that are common in these partnerships. This document is intended to serve as a "living document"—future updates will include resources and examples provided by system of care communities.

Those new to youth-adult partnerships and systems of care are recommended to read *Youth Involvement in Systems of Care: A Guide to Empowerment*. It offers readers an introduction to youth-adult partnerships, including an overview of the rationale for youth-adult partnerships and a discussion of the benefits for youth, adults, and organizations.

DEFINING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

As the name suggests, youth-adult partnerships exist whenever youth and adults collaborate to establish common goals or accomplish shared tasks. In systems of care, these partnerships are informed by the youth-guided value, which is based on the belief that youth can and should be empowered to play a decision-making role in their own lives as well as in systems change in their local communities, states, territories, tribes, and the nation.

> How do **YOU** define youth-adult partnerships? *Share* your definition!

These partnerships encompass a diverse range of activities. Youth and adults share power when governing systems, developing policy, evaluating programs, testing social marketing messages, and developing trainings, among other tasks. Some partnerships are short term, while others are long term. Some are formed voluntarily, while others are mandated. Youth initiate some, and adults initiate others. These partnerships are also formed between individuals and organizations. A youth-led organization, for example, may invite an adult with grant-writing expertise to help secure funding. An adult-led organization may establish a youth advisory board to get support in service planning and organizational decision-making. The scenarios are endless, and won't all be captured in this document.

Each partnership is uniquely influenced by the personalities, goals, life experiences, cultures, access to resources, skills, and world views of those involved. Partnerships between youth and adults do not require youth to act like adults; nor do they require adults to act like youth. Youth-adult partnerships in systems of care allow both youth and adults to use their strengths, life experiences, and resources to establish and advance common goals. They emphasize mutual respect and are characterized by a firm belief that it is possible for youth and adults to work together to achieve transformative results. Effective youth-adult partnerships make it possible to achieve goals that would not otherwise be accessible to either party individually.

SUCCESSFUL YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

The suggestions below are intended to support systems of care in developing and strengthening youth-adult partnerships. They are based on the TA Partnership's experiences supporting systems of care in establishing these partnerships across a diverse range of community settings. You are encouraged to reflect on how the recommendations captured here apply to your work. Technical assistance is available to support the application of these suggestions to your work.

1. Define success.

    What is your vision of a successful partnership? Developing plans, recommendations, products, and agendas is important, but it is critical to be clear about why the partnership exists and about the parameters for success.

Take the time to define terms like *youth guided and cultural and linguistic competence*, being sure to develop some ground rules for how these values will guide your relationship. Being clear about the purpose of the partnership as well as the intended goals can help you include the right people and establish a yardstick for measuring success. For instance, when collaborating to develop a plan for services to meet the needs of youth with experience in juvenile justice, it helps to ensure that youth and adults with experience with the juvenile justice system are involved in identifying needs and shaping solutions.

Be creative when establishing the parameters for success. Many youth-adult partnerships thrive when the collaboration experience is enjoyable. By establishing the importance of fun at the outset, these partnerships are more likely to be successful in the eyes of youth and adults. Both youth and adults should have a say in what it means to be successful. Identify steps you can take—such as identifying mutually accessible meeting locations and times, ensuring that everyone gets the information and support necessary to fully participate in meetings, or agreeing on the terms of decision making—that can make the experience successful in the eyes of both the youth and adults. Clarifying intentions and expectations up front can go a long way toward strengthening relationships and creating an environment that allows partnerships to thrive.

> "We must be able to articulate a clear vision of what *youth-guided* means and help organizations... determine where they currently stand and to determine where [youth-adult partnerships] can be enhanced." – Shawn Lampkins, Youth Engagement Specialist, Access Initiative

2. Be transparent and consistent.

Little things can make a big difference. Be clear about why each participating youth and adult has been engaged in the partnership and verify that the right people are involved in your initiative. It is similarly important to be transparent about why your partnership exists and what you hope to accomplish. Be sure to articulate your purpose for working together clearly and succinctly so that everyone involved can communicate it easily and accurately to others.

Youth-adult partnerships thrive when trust is present. Honoring your word strengthens youth-adult partnerships and establishes trust. There are also times when deviation from agreements is necessary; it is important to be transparent when this must happen. With openness and honesty, youth and adults can develop trust within their partnership, which can make a world of difference in maintaining strong working relationships.

3. Create mutually beneficial partnerships.

Whether your focus is on creating or sustaining youth-adult partnerships, the alliance must allow both youth and adults to "win." Resistance in the form of push-back and apathy are common indicators that your partnership is not mutually rewarding. Sometimes one party (often the adults) needs to invest time earning the trust of the other party (often the youth) before real collaboration can occur. Establishing conditions for trust to take root—such as physical and emotional safe space, reliability, clarity, and consistency—can significantly boost the success of youth-adult partnerships.

If you are struggling with youth-adult partnerships in your community, examine your partnerships for opportunities to create true win-win. When barriers are discovered, do your best to uproot them. For example, sometimes the basis for partnership is weak (e.g., an adult-led organization invites youth to the table despite not being ready to engage youth). It is important to get beneath the surface and form partnerships based on more than membership in the broad categories of "youth" and "adult." Join forces based on shared interests, experiences, and goals. Include appropriate incentives to boost participation and minimize barriers

Share your tips!

How do you create win-win in your partnerships? Email *rreid@air.org* with your tips.

to participation. Be creative—money is only one way to incentivize participation and is not always the best choice. Explore ways you can use appreciation, acknowledgement, leadership and growth opportunities, follow-through on agreements, and other incentives to support your partnerships. Take the time to remove barriers—such as meetings in inconvenient locations or at bad times, or a lack of meaningful projects—to participation.

4. Always learn.

It may be cliché to say "learn from your mistakes," but it's true. Systems change work is tough and mistakes are bound to happen. Mistakes always provide an opportunity to learn and grow. A willingness to learn from the "good" and the "bad" of your experience can only support your growth and future success. When you are able to learn from your successes and your mistakes, you can celebrate progress, even when the progress seems to be slow. A great way to do this is to develop regular milestones for checking in on what has and has not worked in your partnership. You may choose to check in after every meeting, or perhaps weekly. Try not to allow too much time to pass between the completion of an activity and a check-in to assess what did and did not work. Communicate the feedback and lessons learned to all partners, and discuss ways to use them to support your growth.

It also helps to share your experiences and learn from others who are experienced in developing youth-adult partnerships. Seek out diverse opportunities to learn and improve your effectiveness at forming youth-adult partnerships. Take advantage of youth-adult partnership materials available online. Attend conferences. Share learning experiences with others committed to forming and strengthening youth-adult partnerships. Use these opportunities to build skills that support effective partnerships. As you do this, remember that everyone on both sides of the partnership has something to learn.

5. Draw on your strengths.

Most systems of care have a diverse mix of experiences with youth-adult partnerships, formal and informal. Take the time to identify your community's experience in this area. Include examples of projects "big" and "small," short term and long term, across diverse organizations. Document the lessons learned in those partnerships, being sure to capture perspectives on successes and challenges from youth as well as adults whenever possible. An example is provided below.

> "Youth and adults partner best when expectations and functions are clear and they are using their knowledge and skills." – Jayme Voss, Youth Engagement Specialist, Circle of Hope

System of Care Area of Focus	Description of youth-adult partnership	Points of contact	Lessons learned
Governing body (EXAMPLE)	10 members, including 2 youth with voting rights. Adults include parents and system of care community partners, split evenly.	• Mark (X5123) • Yolanda (*yolanda@email.com*)	Training youth and adults to work together in leadrship roles is critical. Otherwise, you end up starting over again and again!
CLC committee (EXAMPLE)	3 youth with LBGTQI2-S experience on committee to develop recommendations for culturally competent services for LGBTQI2-S. Committee was in place for 6 months and developed policy recommendations which were submitted to the governing body in March 2010.	• Julius (321-654-0987, *julius@email.com*) • Michele (456-789-0123, *michele@email.com*)	Working together to establish the goal of the committee made a BIG difference! Also, meeting at times and locations that worked well for youth and adults helped.

CONCLUSION

Youth and adults can work together to meet common goals in systems of care. Though these partnerships are common, many can be strengthened by emphasizing clarity of purpose along with transparency, a willingness to learn from every experience as well as from others, and drawing on strengths that already exist in the community.

Share your tips!

Do you have experience forming youth-adult partnerships in systems of care? If so, we want to hear from you! Share your tips and lessons learned with Reyhan Reid at rreid@ air.org. Some of your submissions will be shared in future TA Partnership publications!

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