

Tips and Tricks for Working with Youth as Partners

Don't expect more from the youths than you would from another adult. In much the same way that minorities feel they have to be better than their white counterparts to get the same rewards, young people do too. When a young person shows up 15 minutes late for a meeting, an adult will think, "Ah, what a slacker. Irresponsible kid." When a fellow adult shows up 15 minutes late, the same person will think, "That's understandable. They've got deadlines and pressures and schedules." So do young people.

Make sure that you don't hold the young person to a stricter standard than the adults. No, they may not hold down full-time jobs, but they have other commitments and pressures and schedules that cry for their attention. And they will agonize more over their performance than an adult. In dealing with any new relationship, there is a caution or tentativeness. You both watch closely for signs that this might not work out. Don't exaggerate this tendency and expect the youth's performance to exceed that of adults.

Conversely, don't excuse all indiscretions just because you are dealing with a youth. Some of the survey respondents commented that they couldn't find fault with youth. When asked to recount the dumbest thing a youth has ever said to you, one respondent claims, "I realize I am much more gracious with young people than adults. I can't think of something I would classify as dumb from a youth, but I can think of several from adults." Sometime adults tend not to expect enough from young people.

Treat youths as individuals; don't make one youth represent all youths. Young people will put enough pressure on themselves. They understand that adults may carry negative images of young people and may generalize from the behavior of a few. Don't add to it by making them feel that they must speak for or represent all youths. You wouldn't do that to another adult. Assure the young people that you are interested in their individual opinions and don't expect them to embody an entire population.

Be careful about interrupting. Kids get discouraged easily. Let them finish their ideas. For the partnership to work, young people must feel that they are valued and respected by adults. In many of their outside relationships, this respect is lacking and they are inherently wary of adults. When interrupted by an adult, they will tend to stop talking (sometimes permanently). To prevent this and create an environment that fosters equal participation, adults need to be hyper-sensitive about interrupting a young person, and young people need to be encouraged to persevere with their point despite adult interruptions. Both parties need to respect others in their right to voice opinions without criticism or censure.

Remember that your role in a partnership is not to parent. While being a parent may be the most important role that any adult can play, the purpose of youth/adult partnerships is to give young people a different way to relate to adults.

Don't move too fast. Remember that this is all new for the young people. Don't move too fast without explaining the reasons for actions taken. Rushing through meetings can be a sign that adults are still trying to control the actions of the group.