

Increasing Youth Involvement Practical Considerations

Clarify purpose of youth involvement

Assess and build on young people's interests; involve them from the beginning in the development of goals and purpose for the group/initiative. Link goals to real community change and improvement – youth involvement needs to matter.

Plan and do at the same time

Integrate planning and action. Avoid prolonged periods of planning and just talking. Young people in particular need to do hands-on activities to maintain their interest.

Aim for creating youth adult partnerships

These partnerships will challenge the roles and power that characterize typical youth adult relationships. Start out by selecting young people and adults who are motivated and interested in working together. Try to recruit fairly even numbers of youth and adults. Develop mechanisms to ensure ongoing recruitment of young people.

Work to overcome preconceptions

Both, young people and adults need to address their biases and preconceptions about each other. Practicing communication skills will be essential – communication needs to be open, positive and respectful. Adults in particular have to be willing to listen and see youth for who they are.

Orientation and ongoing support

Young people and adults need to be prepared for their work together. Clarify expectations, roles, responsibilities, and boundaries. It is critical to support young people on an ongoing basis. One effective strategy is to assign a mentor/coach or designate one staff person as support person.

Make meetings interactive

Strategies such as small group discussions and brainstorming sessions ensure everyone has a voice. Teambuilding activities strengthen personal relationships and commitment to the group/initiative. Finally, do not forget to have fun!

Give young people meaningful roles

Allow young people to take on leadership positions such as presenters, facilitators or chair/co-chairs of committees. Support them by offering skill building opportunities as needed and recognize their accomplishments. Increasing their involvement in governance and decision-making will foster their full participation and will demonstrate to adults the power of youth involvement.

Respect young people's needs

Remember that young people face different challenges and needs than adults. It is important to adapt to school schedules, transportation needs and lack of resources (finances, computers, etc). Generally, it will be helpful for adults to learn about adolescent development and developmental needs to sensitize them to adolescent behaviors they might otherwise take “too personal”.

Encourage youth to network with their peers

Young people’s impact and effectiveness grow when they have the chance to discuss their work, learn new skills, and support one another. This kind of networking is re-energizing and gives youth a broader perspective on governance. Visiting and/or learning about successful youth adult partnerships can be another effective strategy.

Opportunity for reflection

Offer young people and/or the partnership the opportunity to regularly reflect on their work.

Allocate resources and allow time

Institutionalize young people’s involvement

Amendments to local ordinances, statutes and/or organizational policies can give young people a permanent role in local decision-making and leadership. These steps bolster young people’s confidence that other young people will follow in their footsteps and that the adult commitment to youth involvement is “real”.