

A close-up photograph of pink cherry blossoms on dark, thin branches. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, with some showing prominent stamens. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light pink and white, suggesting a bright, sunny day. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: YOUTH VOICE IN EVERY ROLE

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Today's Path

1. Perspectives on Youth Programming
2. Meaningful Roles & Opportunities
3. Challenges
4. Strategies & Resources

Youth Engagement happens when young people...

interact with adults or peers

in **opportunities and roles** that allow them to

build on their **strengths**,

take on **responsibilities of their choosing**,
and

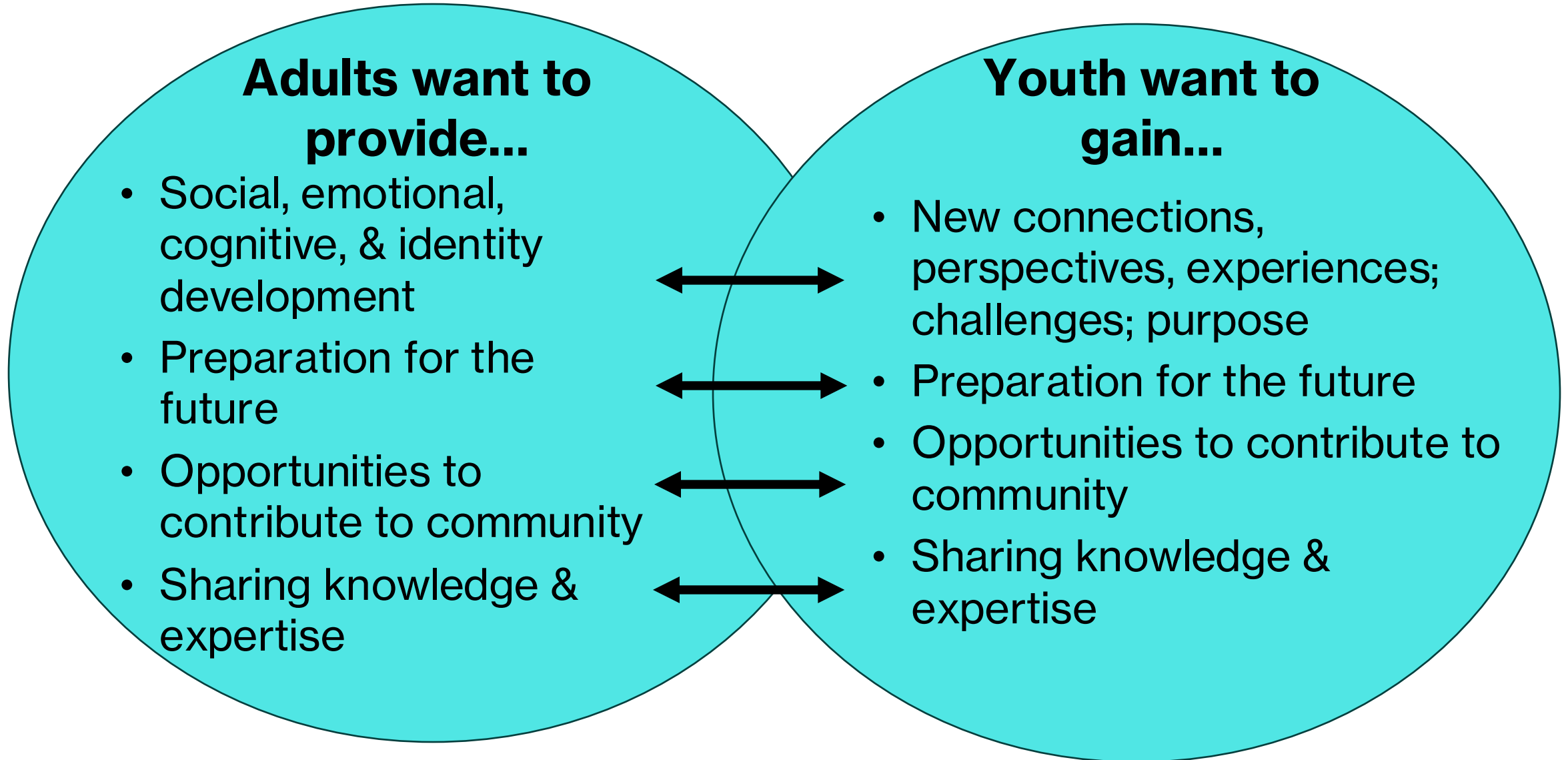
contribute to decisions that affect themselves and others.

“I think that because if you’re doing something for youth, then you should ask youth because, **hello, we're youth**, like we know what the other youth are gonna wanna see. And it's like feedback from youth, even though adults really don't take it, but feedback from youth could really help a lot and like, make stuff so much bigger and so much more popular if they just take that advice that we're giving them. Like they could do so much more, I'm sure. And have so much more support by youth **because they're listening to us.**”

- ACT for Youth focus group participant

LISTEN TO YOUTH!

Youth and adults have many overlapping expectations for youth programming!





ASK YOUTH!

Setting the State for Youth to Engage

1. Belonging: Creating a Supportive Community
2. Developmental Relationships
3. Meaningful Roles and Opportunities



Belonging

“What catches your eye about it? Basically, look, the fact that they actually got stuff for youth...[In the Center] kids could just come and like watch TV or like play games, make jewelry. Like the fact that **they actually got stuff for kids and not just shutting people out.**”

“My coach definitely **made it feel like, like opening.** Like you, it's okay to make mistakes, it's okay to mess up and you could just fix it. **And then it was welcoming for everybody else.**”

Developmental Relationships

“When somebody knows that you're capable of doing something and they push you and they make sure that you're on top of everything and basically just keeping you on track. And that helps a lot because some people, especially myself, I don't be on track all the time, so **having somebody that knows and sees when I'm not on track or when something's bothering me or stuff like that and having somebody that cares is, is what is helpful.**”

MEANINGFUL ROLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

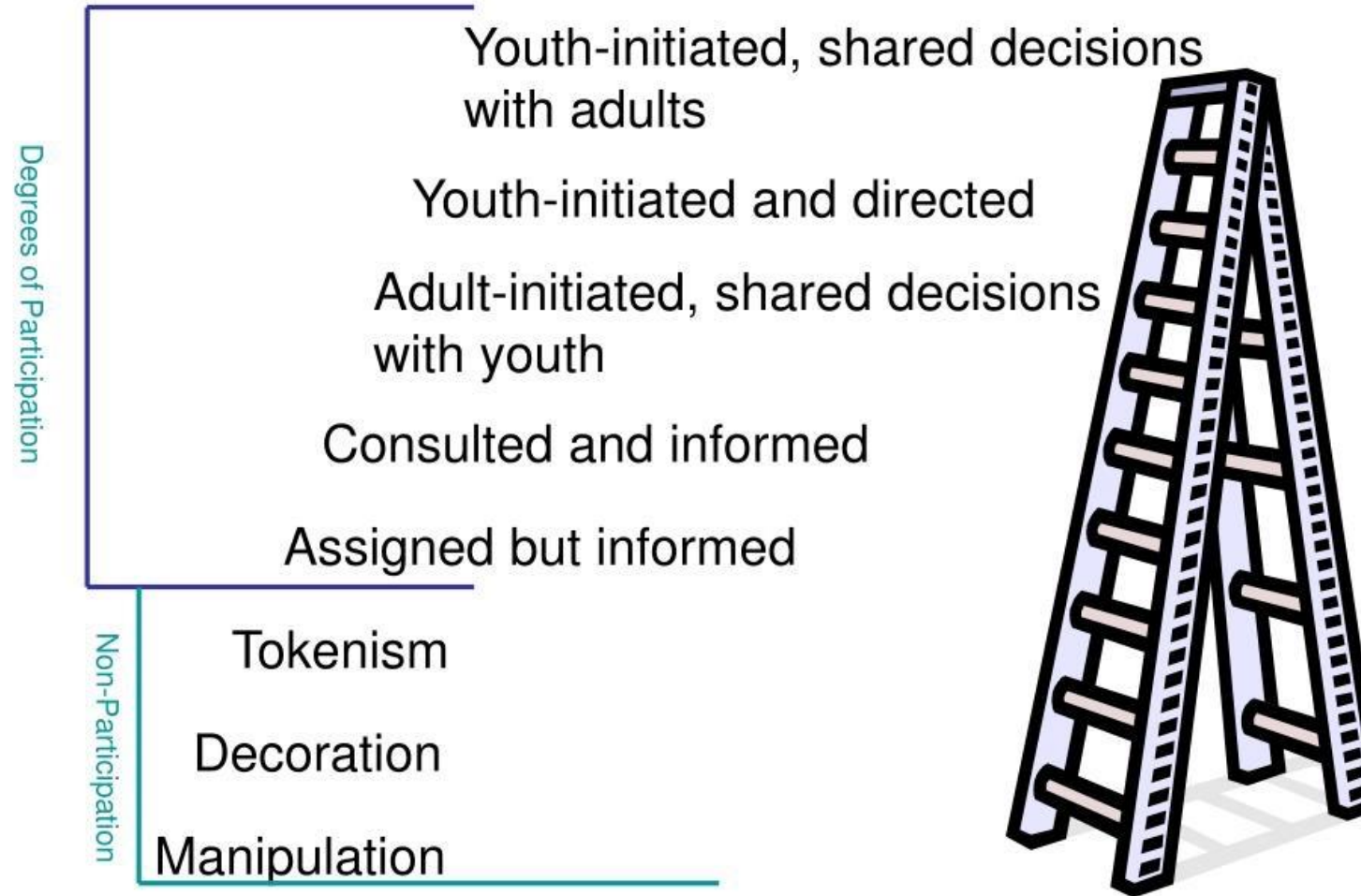
“Youth should be involved in almost everything that affects them, but it should be in partnership with adults.”

Youth should be seen *and* heard.

Definition:

By **meaningful roles** and **opportunities**, we mean that young people choose to engage in activities that meet them “where they are.”

Ladder of Youth Participation



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*

https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf

MEANINGFUL ROLES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



Participation

Activities that support shared goals

- Low-level commitment
- More opportunities to be involved, less responsibility
- Appropriate for youth who may be:
 - new to programming,
 - have limited time,
 - are not deeply invested in the program

Youth Voice and Consultation

Youth as experts

- Fewer youth
- More responsibility
- Influence on programming & policy
- Appropriate for youth involved longer term & looking for greater opportunities for impact

Shared Leadership

Youth work in partnership with adults to make decisions

- Authentic youth voice and partnership in policy & practice
- Fewer youth
- High level of responsibility
- Higher level of skill
- Comprehensive understanding of organization's mission & goals
- Mature youth who can commit

Activity: Meaningful Roles & Opportunities for Youth



Profile/Scenario #1: Alex

- 14 y.o. Freshman in one of your HS-based TOP clubs
- Doesn't know a lot of people in the school and would like to make new friends
- Lives in a quiet suburb, walking distance from the school where your program is located
- Interests/Passion: Likes meeting new people, loves drawing & designing things on Canva, and is passionate about decorating
- Has lots of time after-school

How might this young person engage meaningfully?





Possible Roles for Alex

- Peer educator or greeter at youth conference
- Create a flyer to recruit new club members
- Help decorate the program's office

Profile/Scenario #2: Sophomore Health Class (Group)



- You're doing an EBP on comprehensive sex ed for a 10th grade health class @ an urban HS
- The program consists of ten 45-min. sessions, with the possibility of working with them again for your Component 2 program
- Some kids are excited to be in your class, some anxious, some seem really disengaged
- A few students in your group are newcomers to the U.S., but some have learned English relatively quickly.

How might the different young people in class engage meaningfully? What roles could you possibly have for them? What strategies would you use?

Possible Roles for 10 Grade Health Class Students

- Youth Focus Group / Advisory Group
- Assign tasks to individual youth (e.g. Scribe, Translator, Classroom helper, Time-keeper, DJ)
- Digital Media Consultants or Social Media Designers/Managers





Profile/Scenario #3: JC

- 17 y.o. Senior who's looking for things to put on their college application
- Highly influential & good critical thinker
- Lives in a rural area, but has a car
- Interests/Passions: Passionate about public speaking, social justice & politics
- Doesn't have a tremendous amount of free time, but can be available once per week

How might this young person engage meaningfully?

Possible Roles for JC

- Member of Board of Directors
- Member of Hiring Committee for new staff
- Member of Planning Team for new office space



CHALLENGES & STRATEGIES

Challenges



Power sharing, shared decision making is difficult



Adultism, biases, & negative Interactions



Logistical & organizational barriers

Shared Power

“I think [successful youth engagement] is helping them to realize that **they have a voice**, helping them to realize that they have an opinion, and helping them to realize that **their actions can help to influence** things that are happening around them.”

- Practitioner focus group participant

Challenges to Shared Power & Decision Making

Adults often make decisions without input from youth

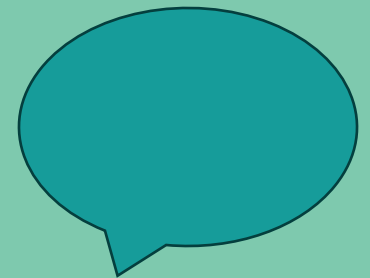
(Price & Been, 2018)

Youth often feel reluctant to take on decision-making
power (Ramey et al., 2017)

Collaboration and shared decision making are hard!

“I think it's important to let young people speak their truth and to come in their truthful form...I think the most important thing that **we create a space** where young people are able to present **what they are** so that we can really help them **VERSUS** them presenting **what they want us to see** because they're worried about how we're gonna judge them.”

- Practitioner Focus Group Participant



Adultism, Biases, & Negative Interactions

- Adults often rely on other adults – not youth (Heffernan et al., 2017)
- Youth representation rarely at all levels (Canas et al., 2019)
- Resistance to paying youth for their involvement (Canas et al., 2019)
- Adults reluctance to share power (Ramey et al., 2017)
- Lack of trust, respect, and confidence in youth
- Unexamined biases (Fields & Shaffer, 2022)
- Negative interactions with adults may be push youth to leave programs (Lewis et al., 2022)



“One thing that we have to do in order to run successful programming is really look at logistics...Is the room good for you? Logistically, are the students able to come to you?... And then is the program equitable to those folks who don't have transportation?”

- Practitioner Focus Group Participant

Logistical & Organizational Barriers



Location



Time



Funding
Restrictions



Changing
Needs



Strategies & Resources

Strategies

Assess, reflect, & plan

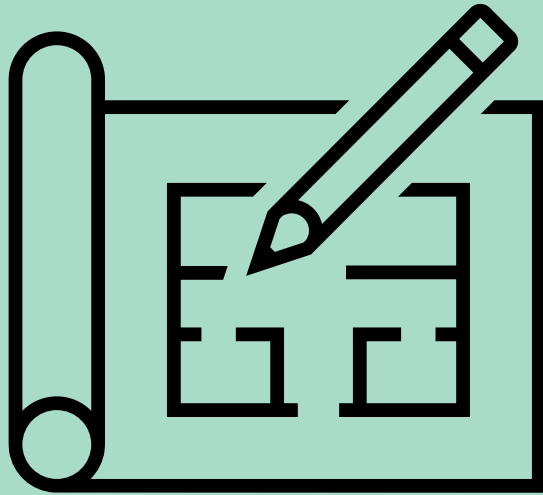
Prepare adults

Prepare youth

Address logistics

Listen to youth

Advocate for what you need



Assess, Reflect, & Plan

Tools:

New York State Network for
Youth Success

Youth Organizational Equity
Assessment Toolkit (4-H)

Involve youth in every aspect!

Prepare Adults

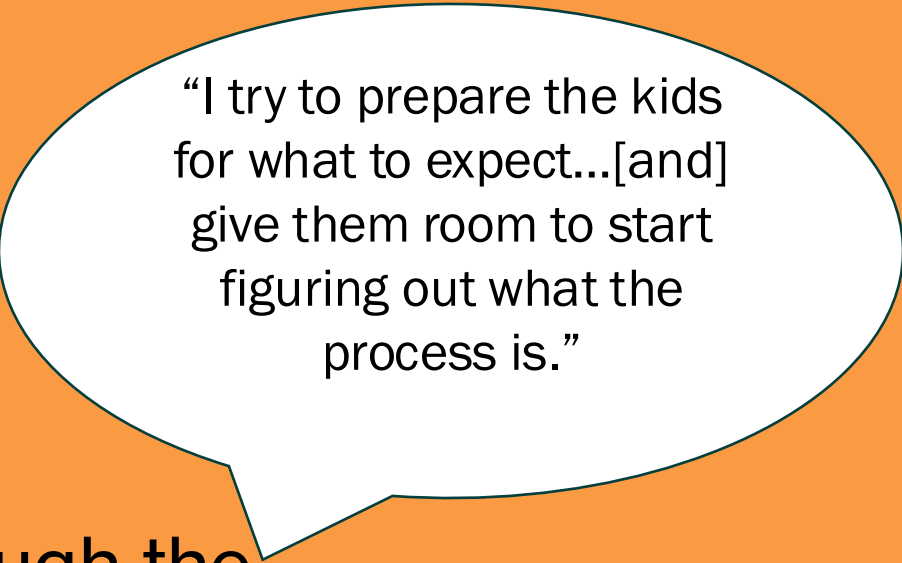
- Training for new staff
 - PYD 101 online training
Free, online training developed by ACT for Youth
 - Facilitating Programs for Youth
Free curriculum especially appropriate for those new to working with youth
- Addressing Bias and Creating Inclusive Environments
 - Inclusiveness: Building Stronger Connections
 - Collection of resources
 - Thriving with an Equity Lens



Prepare Youth

Strategies (Lewis et al.):

- Orientation
- Mentoring from youth who have been through the program before
- Intentional personal connection with youth and family
- Communication tools, such as handbooks
- Specific person identified to answer questions



“I try to prepare the kids for what to expect...[and] give them room to start figuring out what the process is.”

Address Logistics

Location
Transportation
Pay

How to Pay Young People:
Considerations for Equity & Effectiveness

Involve Youth!



Listen to Youth

1. Survey

[Tips on Writing Surveys for Youth](#)

[Want to Know What Young People Are Thinking? Here's How to Survey Them](#)

2. Focus group or listening session

[Listen Up! Youth Listening Session Toolkit](#)

[Search Institute: Focus Group Guide](#)

3. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

[YPAR Hub](#)

4. Youth-Adult partnership

[Youth-Centred Design Toolkit](#)

[Youth-Adult Partnership and Advisory Councils: Resources](#)

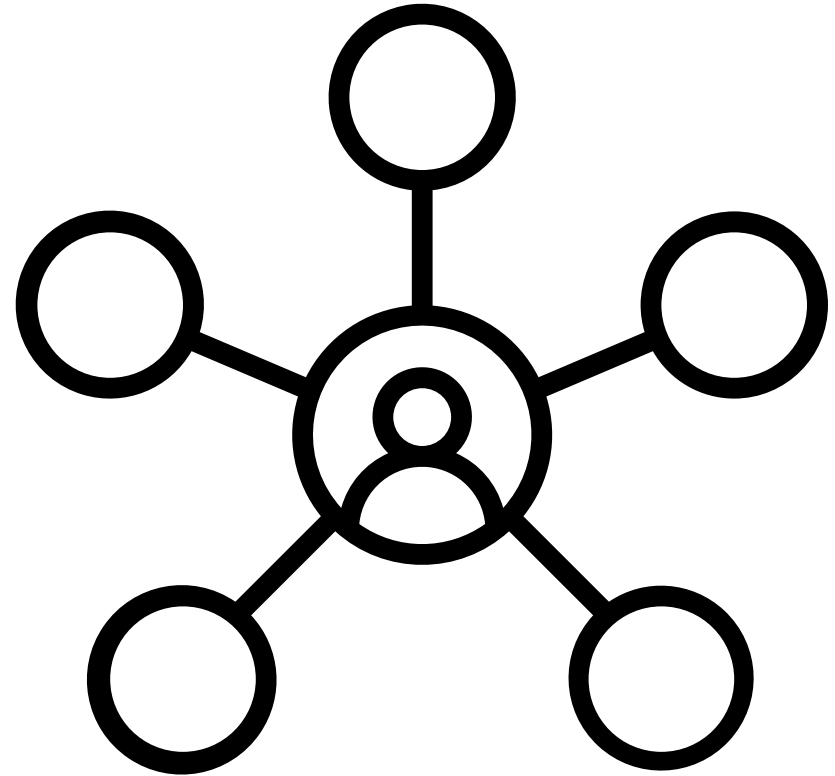


Advocate for What You Need

Communicate goals, challenges,
& needs

Train your organization or
community partners

PYD 101 training manual



Meaningful Youth Engagement: Youth Voice in Every Role

- Youth and adults have similar goals
- Meaningful roles & opportunities help set the stage for youth engagement
- Meaningful roles look different for each youth
- Challenges to youth engagement can be addressed by
 - Assessing, reflecting, & planning,
 - Preparing adults and youth,
 - Addressing logistical challenges,
 - Advocating for your needs, and

Listening to Youth!

ACT for Youth (Free!) Resources for PYD professionals:

- [Positive Youth Development \(PYD\) 101](#) (curriculum)
- [PYD 101 Online Courses](#)
- [PYD Network Webinar Series](#)
- [Creating Inclusive Program Environments for Youth with Different Abilities](#) (curriculum)

www.actforyouth.org



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Thank You!

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