



Youth-Adult Partnerships and Positive Youth Development



**some lessons learned from
research and practice in
wisconsin**

**Shepherd Zeldin, Linda Camino,
Matthew Calvert, and Debra Ivey**

PREFACE

Youth-adult partnerships, or the process of youth and adults working together in a climate of mutual respect, is a theme of significant importance to those of us with an interest in positive youth development. Young people assert their desire for this kind of respect. Youth development practitioners recognize the value of these partnerships. Youth development researchers document the positive outcomes associated with this practice. Youth voices, practitioner experience, and careful research all confirm the need for more youth-adult partnerships in today's society. This monograph is intended to help advance that effort.

However, knowledge alone will not generate more of these respectful relationships. Careful study by itself won't create more of these partnerships. We must add a large measure of commitment to bring this effort to a boil. We must take the insights offered in this document and translate them into action. We must pledge ourselves to move from interest to implementation.

As you read this monograph, consider what you can do to act on the ideas and principles that are reported here. What steps can we each take to create productive youth-adult partnerships? How can we move youth into constructive dialogue with adults? How can we facilitate youth involvement with adult decision-makers? How can we help adults create respectful and welcoming environments for youth participation?

Youth-adult partnerships offer many valuable outcomes for our communities, but they won't happen without informed and committed advocates for the process. Zeldin, Camino, Calvert, and Ivey provide us with information. We must supply the commitment.

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Innovation Center for Youth and Community Development (www.atthetable.com)

Forum for Youth Investment (forumforyouthinvestment.org)

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Fall of 2001, there were 83 county-based conversations on youth development. On January 15, 2002, close to 300 youth and adults gathered in Madison for the Wisconsin Conversation on Youth Development. The purpose of the conference was to highlight what was learned in the county conversations, and then prioritize state and local actions that could be taken to promote youth development among young people in Wisconsin. The conference was hosted by the University of Wisconsin-Extension's 4-H Youth Development Program. Kevin Reilly, Chancellor of UW-Extension, emphasized that because Extension is the only youth organization operating in all counties, it has a special obligation to be a leader in positive youth development.

The emphasis on youth-adult partnerships was salient throughout the conference. In fact, the two highest priorities emerging from the county conversations, involving 2,099 Wisconsin residents and public officials, leading up to the statewide conference were the need to "create a culture in which youth are equal partners in decision making and governance" and to "encourage youth community

service and civic involvement." This perspective was reflected in the keynote presentations. U.S. Senator Herb Kohl spoke to "the business that youth and adults have together" in addressing community needs. Former Congressman Steve Gunderson explicated the mission of 4-H specifically when he spoke to the importance of "youth and adults working together, as full partners, in being catalysts for community change."

At the end of the conference, the conference delegates identified specific statewide action items, roles for state government, and policy opportunities for the State Legislature and Governor. The top three action items that came from the state conversation were:

1. Government at all levels can seek youth input and enhance communications between youth and their government.
2. Create volunteer opportunities with youth that help them connect and contribute to their communities.
3. Develop a variety of methods to increase public awareness of positive youth contributions.

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that characterize many successful youth/adult partnerships. The 4-H Youth Agent provided the link between an environmental coalition and young people by contacting the DNR and by recruiting 4-H members, Boy Scouts and other youth who shared interests in the project. The young people have also assisted in recruiting other youth to help with projects that could not have otherwise been accomplished within the DNR's budget. These young people are engaged in a project which contributes to both the environment and the community engagement of other youth.

- The Tobacco Free Coalition of a rural southern Wisconsin county is one of many in the state and nation formed after the "tobacco money" was distributed to states and counties. Youth are an important part of this county coalition providing ideas, feedback and

action to identified goals and activities of the group. Several aspects of this community coalition make it attractive to youth participation. First, it gives youth a chance to work with community adults to address tobacco use — the youth are involved in building a healthy community. Second, there are a wide variety of groups represented on this coalition — schools, CESA, County Department of Health, UW-Extension and law enforcement. For many youth this is their first chance to work with this range of community organizations. Finally, the Tobacco Free Coalition focuses on youth activities — Teens Against Tobacco Use groups, Drama Troupes and Smoke-free Bowling Nights. The youth are needed to be a part of these groups and to promote and organize activities with adult support.

Taken together — the county conversations, the state conference, and the subsequent priorities — it is clear that Wisconsin values and seeks to promote youth involvement in community affairs. It is also evident that Wisconsin values youth and adults working together to strengthen communities.

It is difficult, yet productive and rewarding, work to support youth-adult partnerships. UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development's work group, "Building the Capacity for Community Youth Development," has concluded that this work requires the ability to help communities: (a) create a vision for youth development, (b) assess the quality of current youth development programming, (c) facilitate youth and adult collaborations, and (d) conduct policy education with local leaders. Fortunately, 4-H Youth Development is creating a strong capacity to do this work. The work group surveyed staff and found that over 33 percent of all respondents felt as though they strongly had acquired the above requisite abilities. The challenge to 4-H Youth Development is to use this expertise to continue to strengthen statewide capacity.

PURPOSE OF MONOGRAPH

Concurrently, 4-H Youth Development has sought to bring together the best of research and the experiences of community practitioners to identify and disseminate "best practices" throughout the state and nationally. It was within this context that the current monograph on *Youth-Adult Partnerships and Positive Youth Development* was conceived. Over the past few years, Wisconsin researchers have been conducting studies on youth-adult partnership and civic engagement. Concurrently, practitioners have been experimenting with new strategies of partnership to promote positive youth development and to spark community change.

In this monograph, we summarize this research and highlight practices that are being used by Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development. By focusing on youth-adult partnership — a common principle and core element of all 4-H Youth Development community activity — we hope to disseminate research findings and practice implications that are applicable to all who work for or with 4-H Youth Development in an effort to promote the well-being of young people and communities. We further hope that these materials can be used to support funding proposals, help youth development professionals plan

and improve programs, and lend a fresh perspective to newsletters and other local outreach and communications efforts.

The research reviews in this monograph are not exhaustive. We are happy to make the full research reports available on request (see reference list at the end of the report). And, certainly, there are far more examples of “best practices” than can be included here.

In brief, this monograph provides an overview of contemporary issues on youth-adult partnership. We have tried to write this monograph in a way that can spark discussion on these issues among all community residents, regardless of their role or occupation. It is through such discussion that youth and adults will be able to effectively work together to strengthen their communities.

use diversity positively to make community action relevant and innovative. The importance of attending to diversity is further highlighted by cross-cultural differences. Camino and Zeldin found, for example, that among white youth workers, the tendency was to catalyze action and to achieve some results quickly as part of the youth leadership component. The logic was that early achievements would best lead to development of leadership skills, which, in turn would spark further achievements. African American and Latino youth workers, on the other hand, often believe that the essential first step is to explore elements of historical racism and oppression. In youth leadership groups, these workers emphasized the intertwining nature of racism and identity, and how the dynamics affect individuals and communities. The logic was to uncover these elements, and discern their relationships before progressing to action steps.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The intention is to promote community contexts for youth development. There are several leverage points for achieving success.

- Extension staff will continue to be in the forefront of leading broad-based community coalitions around the theme of CYD. CYD should not supplant the 4-H club model, but can broaden and enrich supports and opportunities for youth, especially in the teen years.
- Extension staff can help local coalitions develop a vocabulary, philosophical approach, and research basis for CYD. Extension agents have access to research-based knowledge, as well as knowledge about CYD practice nationally. Agents and educators can serve as connectors to bring this knowledge to community volunteers and other stakeholders through public presentations, newsletters and local news highlights of activities.
- Extension staff can also facilitate training in CYD topics and skills. Because CYD includes adults, not only youth, training and curricula will also need to include concerns and issues also related to adult volunteers.

EXAMPLES AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- In one rapidly growing Wisconsin county, junior and senior high school youth are partnering with DNR and UWEX to update a wetlands resource management plan, which includes opportunities for service projects for youth and other community groups. The young people helped to identify wetlands restoration projects that would be interesting to themselves and other youth groups. The service projects have involved youth and adults working together on the construction of structures such as viewing platforms, providing opportunities for active work and sharing of skills

NEW ROLES FOR YOUTH WORKERS AND EXTENSION EDUCATORS

Three areas are critical for engaging youth-adult partnerships for community work. First, the ability to foster and support youth and adult leadership is crucial. Leadership does not develop naturally among youth or adults. Creation of intentional contexts and training are needed. Youth respond well to having choice and voice in their leadership development. Best practice for youth leadership development also includes experiential opportunities and training in the skills of facilitating meetings, planning projects, preparing press releases, and giving oral presentations. CYD also requires adult leadership. Because a great deal of CYD action involves volunteers, it is important to recognize that most adult volunteers also need leadership development.

The second critical area for youth workers is the ability to foster and support youth-adult partnerships. Community work will be implemented most of the time by teams of youth and adult volunteers. Many of the skills required for youth workers and educators to facilitate such partnerships go beyond traditional “service” or “mentoring” paradigms. For most adults and youth the shifts

“Encourage experiences that provide dialogue and problem solving with other cultures.”
--Dunn County Conversation

in perspective require overcoming deep societal stereotypes. The work includes helping youth and adults find a balance between values of respect and equality, on the one hand, and the realities of age and experiential differences, on the other hand.

Locating such a balance is not easy. But it provides a foundation for youth-adult partnerships that can endure. Ultimately, it is critical for youth and adults to work together on purposes that matter to them both.

Third is the ability to seek out and build on the strengths of diverse groups of people. Every community has groups of people or segments of populations that differ from one another. The type of diversity will vary by community and situation, be it race, ethnicity, class, culture, age and so on, but the underlying dynamic is “wholeness encompassing diversity.” It is crucial to CYD to be able to include and involve a diverse range of individuals, and to know how to build on their strengths.

Best practices include:

- (1) recognition of various dimensions of diversity and a belief that they are fundamental components of identity, among both individuals and groups;
- (2) ability to assist others in overcoming “isms,” and
- (3) ability to

1 HISTORY OF YOUTH - ADULT ISOLATION AND PARTNERSHIP

OVERVIEW

There have been significant demographic, social and economic shifts over the past century. These shifts, in turn, have had significant effects on youth and youth organizations. Reflecting on the history of the social role of young people in the United States, and of the organizations that have served them, provides perspective on current youth development policies and practices. Specifically:

- a) Over the past one hundred years, youth socialization has shifted away from families and workplaces toward schools and youth programs. Now young people interact more with peers than adults.
- b) Youth programs were largely developed to protect young people, particularly adolescents, from adult society. But this also contributed to youth-adult isolation.
- c) Today’s youth organizations are trying to respond to this history. They are creating new strategies for youth and adults to work together to strengthen their communities.
- d) There is an emerging trend away from youth-adult isolation toward partnership. This trend is supported by research on adolescent and community development.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

CHANGES IN THE SOCIALIZATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Over the last 150 years, the United States has transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial and then a service-oriented economy. In the 19th century, most parents worked on farms or near the home, and young people were trained on the job or through apprenticeships. This changed rapidly around the turn of the 20th century as men and then women moved from the household into more distant employment. In 1810, 87 percent of men were involved in agricultural employment. By 1900, this proportion fell to 42 percent and by 1980 to 3 percent. The number of adolescents who worked alongside family members and neighbors declined proportionally.

Schools largely filled the void for young people. High school graduation rates grew rapidly – from about 8 percent in 1900 to 51 percent in 1940 and about 76 percent today – as families and apprenticeships no longer offered the training needed in an

industrial economy. Schools also expanded into new areas – from organizing team sports to providing breakfast and lunch. One consequence of these changes is that young people spend much of their time in school in after-school leisure time situations that are age-segregated – and contain relatively few adults – rather than in family or workplace settings with people of many ages.

A HISTORY OF PROTECTION

Youth policy outside of schools has long reflected notions of protection – with a double meaning of protection *of* and *from* children (Meucci, 1997) – and prescribed isolation of youth from the larger community. Child labor laws, compulsory school attendance laws and juvenile court systems were enacted to protect children from the dangers of the streets and poor working conditions, but they also removed young people from adult settings. Youth programs which started in the early 20th century were designed to contain youthful energy in peer group discovery and educational activities, which, while often positive, also limited youth involvement in community decision-making or action.

Social policy has also responded to fear of adolescents. Protective policies for

youth have frequently been combined with deterrence and punishment designed to protect society against delinquent youth. The consequence of these policies has been a further distancing of youth and adults from each other. Adolescents have been a consistent source of social worry.

This isolation of youth has positive and negative consequences. Many young people are offered a protective scaffold as they develop in adolescence free of adult exploitation and other social dangers. Youth culture has also become a powerful and creative force, but one which has largely been limited to material culture. However, adolescents as a class have not been given roles as contributing and prosocial members of society. Without these roles, most adolescents do not have the opportunities for choice, participation and practice, under conditions of adult guidance, that allow them to become involved in collaborative community or workplace activities.

TRENDS TOWARD YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP

Youth programs have recognized the negative consequences of fear-based youth policy and have responded with strategies of positive youth development. Led by community-based organizations, youth policy may be shifting towards a renewed emphasis on age integration. Many youth organizations now

NEW ROLES FOR YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

There are three new roles for youth organizations to take on to do community-level work. First, defining and describing youth and community development for multiple stakeholders is fundamental. Years of prior experience with concepts and approaches emphasizing youth problems and community deficits can make it difficult for individuals and organizations to create a common language for asset-based community approaches. For example, terms such “youth-adult partnerships,” “community visioning,” and “asset mapping” are new to many people and need to be explained.

Second, identifying and mobilizing untapped and unacknowledged community resources is important. “Asset mapping” has become the catch phrase for identifying and mobilizing internal resources at the community level. In the last decade, several models have been developed.

However, residents are frequently unaccustomed to viewing youth as full-fledged community members. Far more common is the view that youth represent potential future resources. Consequently, youth are not expected to be strong civic contributors to the work. The unfortunate result is that youth can often be left out of

the conceptualization and planning phases. Many youth have knowledge of resources that adults overlook. It is important to engage youth at all stages of a project or program.

Third, organizing broad-based support is essential. Working in partnerships is not new for most youth-serving organizations. What is new is the necessity to foster and sustain a long-term life for community coalitions. When coalitions are built to address a specific problem – as they historically have been – they often crumble when members feel adequate responses have been achieved, or when the problem is perceived to be so overwhelming that members quickly “burn out.”

The technique for achieving sustainable coalitions is to ground their structure in broad community support and membership, and to orient them toward a positive vision of the future. In terms of CYD, it becomes necessary to engage stakeholders in a vision for all youth, not only those at high risk, and for the hopes and dreams of residents, not only for amelioration of community problems.

6 PROMOTING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH COMMUNITY COALITIONS

OVERVIEW

Linda Camino and Shepherd Zeldin’s 2002 article on promoting community youth development (CYD) through coalitions describes what it takes for youth-serving organizations and youth development workers and educators to make CYD a reality. The article is based on ten years of research and evaluation with youth development projects across the country, many of them occurring in collaboration with Cooperative Extension. The article reports:

- a) There is overlap between youth development and community development.
- b) Community-level work demands new roles and competencies for youth-serving organizations.
- c) Community-level work demands new roles and competencies for Youth Workers and Extension staff.

“Involve youth in all aspects of our community from gathering information to making decisions.”
--Washington County Conversation

RESEARCH FINDINGS

OVERLAP BETWEEN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A major premise of CYD is that overlap exists between youth and community development. Promoting the positive development of young people also promotes a healthy community, as good youth development tends to be steered not by the work of a single organization, but by community coalitions. Camino and Zeldin reviewed 50 lists of written values and principles issued by youth-serving organizations, community building initiatives and community coalitions for youth development. Three themes were common to youth development and community building: (1) Building on assets is as important as are identifying and addressing needs; (2) A range of residents should be engaged, not only organizational staff; and (3) Partnerships are needed for capacity building and systemic change.

conceptualize adolescents as self-directed learners and critical thinkers who are able to make positive contributions to society and the environment. These organizations often include young people in the highest levels of governance, where they are involved in establishing vision and priorities. Youth-adult partnerships – distinguished from other youth development relationships by their shared power between youth and adults – are now widely recognized as a strong youth development practice and have received increasing support from philanthropy and policy.

This framework of positive youth development and youth-adult partnership has broad social appeal at a time when fear and protection-based youth policy seems inadequate. Schools and youth organizations are beginning to recognize that youth-adult partnerships offer positive routes to youth development that have been foreclosed by social and economic change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Youth organizations and schools play larger roles in the development of young people than they did in other eras. These programs could consider the opportunities they provide for youth development – social, civic, service – in addition to their narrower missions of education and recreation. While all organizations cannot be all things, they

can develop partnership strategies with families and other organizations to ensure that the young people in their care have support systems for healthy development.

- Positive youth development strategies, and particularly those that facilitate shared power between youth and adults, are an important method for reducing the negative effects of youth-adult isolation. The presence of caring adults provides a protective scaffold for youth development as young people take the risk of engaging in important social functions.
- Taking a historical view illuminates not only the importance of large-scale social change, but also the significance of the way in which adolescents are perceived. Youth organizations have a role in responding to social changes, but also have a potential role in helping to shape the perceptions of young people. If youth action and youth culture can be included in community life, adolescents have the potential to change their communities and at the same time to change the way adolescents see themselves and are seen by others.

EXAMPLES AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- Beliefs that adolescents require protection from community issues are still common, and vary from place to place. One Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development Agent spent hours planning and preparing for a teen survey on issues, attitudes and behaviors. Shortly before the survey was to be given, school board members and local ministers began a media campaign to prevent the survey-

ing. Comments like “If we ask the youth these questions, the youth will be more curious and want to experiment” and “These are topics for parents to discuss with their children” were common. In contrast, in three neighboring counties, 5700 youth in 19 school districts participated in a 2001 Teen Survey with few concerns raised.

- For years a Rural Youth Safety Fair had operated with adult presenters sharing safety information annually with 350 fifth graders. In 2001 the 4-H Youth Development Agent suggested working with one of the FFA’s in the county to have youth presenters. She coordinated this with the local FFA and their advisor to have twenty FFA members present two different sessions at the 2001 Safety Fair. These sessions were highly rated by youth and adults. This arrange-

ment will continue in 2002.

- Juvenile justice systems have traditionally worked with young people using a protection and punishment model, but are participating in the trend toward positive youth development strategies. For example, UW-Extension staff in many Wisconsin counties have joined Juvenile Courts in prevention coalitions that have created Teen Courts. Teen Court allows young people to fulfill court-ordered community service time by adopting court roles – including prosecutor, defense counsel and jury – in the cases of other young people accused of crimes. Young people report that they are motivated by the opportunity to participate in authentic and significant decisions and develop new skills and attitudes as they fulfill new social roles.

leader of a policy initiative and youth regularly attend and participate in WRC Board meetings. One project WRC is currently involved in has middle school youth teaching adults in their community how to use technology.

- 4-H club officers and leaders and UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development Agents have the opportunity to create youth-adult partnerships which can benefit the youth, the leader and the community club they both work with. Two 4-H leaders in a southeast Wisconsin county have worked with two 4-Hers on a variety of activities and have seen the benefits of youth involvement in

decision-making. When asked how the young people have benefited from these experiences, the adult leaders commented: “it built his confidence and verbal skills,” “she gained self-confidence and leadership skills,” and “she had an opportunity to apply what she has learned and to test her ideas.” The club leaders report that they provided support, offered the youth opportunities, and encouraged them to try new things. A 4-H’er echoes these comments and says she now “has more confidence in teaching sessions where adults are participants.”

process. To prepare younger members for leadership roles, organizations provide support for youth to advance through a variety of decision-making opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- There is no substitute for the direct experience of youth-adult partnership. Young people rarely play significant organizational or community decision-making roles. As a result, few adults have the opportunity to develop working partnerships with them. Extension staff, volunteers and others can be catalysts for giving adults and youth these experiences. They can create opportunities and supports for implementing youth involvement and youth adult partnership. The only way to overcome adults' lack of experience in working jointly with young people is to provide roles for young people in large numbers of committees and organizations that will give adults those experiences.
- Extension staff can build stronger supports for involving young people in significant decision-making. To build on the strengths that young people bring to decision-making roles, they might, for example, be involved in setting organizational vision and mission and ensuring that the implementation of activities remains consistent with that vision. Staff who work with youth also can provide the organizational supports that help young people make an impact on organizational life. They can provide opportuni-

"Offer a wise range of opportunities for you to take leadership roles in communities and devise strategies to assist youth in these roles."
 --Green County Conversation

ties for young people to get to know their adult partners in settings other than formal meetings.

- One difficulty of maintaining youth involvement in decision-making is that young people outgrow their roles and move on. Staff can ensure that youth involvement in decision-making is sustainable over time by providing opportunities for new and diverse young people to develop the skills and relationships to become involved in organizational governance themselves.

EXAMPLES AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- Two school districts in Southwest Wisconsin have taken advantage of the state law that permits local school boards to include a youth on their board. Although these youth are not eligible to vote, the adult members of these boards provide a place for these youth by including them on the agenda (the young people report just as school principals do) and by letting them express their thoughts prior to voting on issues. This is a win-win situation for the adults, the youth and their communities.
- Wisconsin Rural Challenge is a group dedicated to improving education in rural communities. One of the objectives of this group is "to create a statewide network of youth who contribute to rural communities." And this group practices what they preach! A youth from Northern Wisconsin set up and maintains the WRC web site. He also demonstrated the site at a Board of Directors meeting seeking their input and suggestions. A youth is the co-

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POSITIVE ADULT ATTITUDES TOWARD YOUTH

OVERVIEW

Shepherd Zeldin (2002) recently published two articles that relate adults' experiences to positive adult beliefs about adolescents' motivation and competency to participate in community affairs. His research found that:

- Adults who feel a part of strong communities tend to have more positive views of young people.
- Adults who engage in civic activities such as volunteering are more likely to support youth development policies.
- These results applied even to adults who had little personal contact with children. This suggests that active communities provide indirect as well as direct support for youth development.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

IMPLICATIONS OF NEGATIVE ADULT ATTITUDES TOWARD YOUTH

Adults in the United States tend to perceive adolescence as a time of storm and stress characterized by risky behavior, peer conformity and

"Educate youth and adults on working together and utilizing each group's talents."
 --Iowa County Conversation

conflicts with adults. When adults across the United States were asked what phrase first comes to their minds about teens, over two-thirds of adults used negative adjectives such as "rude," "irresponsible" and "wild" (Farkas, 1997).

In the first article (Zeldin, 2002) adults in Wisconsin were surveyed. While most had somewhat positive attitudes toward youth, few agreed strongly that adolescents had pro-social characteristics. (See figures 1 & 2).

The lack of adult confidence in youth contributes to the isolation of young people from non-familial adults. Low expectations of young people reduce the likelihood that they will be included in settings of community decision-making and other challenging opportunities which are likely to support healthy development.

The same sample of Wisconsin adults was asked whether they trusted young people to take positions of responsibility. The results are organized in this table by the percentage of respondents answering "great deal" or

Figure 1: Wisconsin Adults Confidence in Youth

Degree of Confidence in Teens To:	Great Deal	Some	A Little	Not At All
Speak to groups of young people about the dangers of drugs and alcohol	29.6%	46.0%	19.4%	5.0%
Mentor other youth in the community	26.3%	53.9%	16.5%	3.3%
Represent your community in front of the city council	21.7%	47.2%	23.9%	7.2%
Serve as a voting member of a community association	15.7%	52.9%	24.9%	6.5%
Organize a volunteer drive for a local homeless shelter	26.3%	47.6%	21.1%	5.0%
Manage and oversee a fundraiser to support the community	19.9%	40.2%	32.7%	7.2%

“some.” The adults clearly support young people performing community service roles more strongly than community leadership and formal representation roles.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ADULT ATTITUDES TOWARD YOUTH

If young people are to increase their participation in community life, it will help if adults believe they are motivated and competent to do so. These adult beliefs vary widely, though, and little was known about

the factors that influence adult attitudes toward young people. In the second article Zeldin & Topitzes (2002) surveyed residents of Wisconsin and Washington, D.C., to obtain a diverse sample. Respondents were asked about their feelings about their neighborhood, their involvement in community activities, and their belief in the ability of young people to take important leadership roles.

This research found that adults who have a positive sense of community – who feel an emotional attachment to the people

sense of mastery, and new appreciation of the contributions of young people is a stronger sense of connection. The adults and youth build the shared values and collaborative experiences that are essential to individuals feeling a sense of community in organizations.

IMPACTS OF YOUTH ON ORGANIZATIONS

In organizations that involve youth in significant decision-making roles, young people often play a role in clarifying the mission of an organization, board, or committee. Youth frequently work to ensure that tasks and decisions are consistent with the core goals of the group. Young people are especially valuable in helping organizations connect and respond to issues of youth in the community. Organizations with successful youth involvement strategies find that they are more successful in outreach efforts. They also experience improved fundraising as a result of youth involvement, both by having young people make direct appeals and by using their record of youth involvement to appeal to funders who support this approach to youth and community development.

As organizations gain experience with involving young people in decision-making, they

often expand youth involvement until it becomes an expectation in nearly every organizational role. Organizations also often examine their representation of other groups as well, as they appreciate the value of youth representation.

SUPPORTS THAT HELP YOUTH HAVE AN IMPACT

In organizations that successfully initiate and sustain youth involvement, adult leaders and board members start the process by advocating for including young people in decision-making roles. In many cases, a single individual leads the effort to bring young people on board and give others the experience of youth-adult partnership. Other organizations have organized groups of young people who provide pressure and support for increasing youth participation in governance.

Once young people are involved in decision-making roles, organizations achieve greater impact when they provide adults and young people a variety of experiences of working together and building

relationships. Also, organizations are generally most successful when they involve older youth in governance positions early on in the organizational change

“Encourage input from youth -- listen and respect their voices, opinions, and wisdom.”
--Taylor County Conversation

5 IMPACTS OF INVOLVING YOUTH IN DECISION-MAKING

OVERVIEW

The report *Youth in Decision Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations*, conducted by Shepherd Zeldin, Annette Kusgen-McDaniel, Dimitri Topitzes and Matt Calvert in 2000, examined a national sample of organizations that involved young people in significant decision-making roles. Most of the young people were aged 16 to 21, but some were as young as 12. The findings focus on three areas:

- a) The effects that young people can have on adults when involved in partnership.
- b) The effects that young people can have on organizations when given governance positions.
- c) The supports that organizations and adults need to provide to create governance roles for youth that have positive effects.

“Include youth in decision making for community and youth programs.”
--Dodge County Conversation

RESEARCH FINDINGS

IMPACTS OF YOUTH ON ADULTS

Adults who work in partnership with youth as joint members of boards, committees, or staff teams witness their competence and begin to perceive them as critical to organizational improvement. Adults who work directly with young people in a common cause experience the greatest impact and often report that they are impressed with the cognitive and social competence of their youth partners. The adults also feel less isolated from young people, which leads them to feel more effective and competent in their work with youth.

The adults who have had these experiences with young people often feel greater commitment to the organization and its mission. In part, the passion and energy of the young people is infectious. Also, adults feel more accountable to the young people and tend to increase their commitment to match that of the youth members of the group. The net effect of adult engagement,

Figure 2: Beliefs of Wisconsin Adults

Beliefs about Adolescents	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teenagers in this community are friendly to their neighbors	16.9%	62.0%	15.4%	5.7%
Teenagers in this community are interested in helping to improve the community	10.7%	57.8%	23.9%	7.6%
Teenagers in this community have a good work ethic	13.6%	46.9%	24.3%	15.2%
Teenagers in this community treat others with respect	11.4%	56.0%	21.9%	10.7%

in their neighborhood and feel that their communities have “communitas” or shared spirit – also have more positive views of young people and their capabilities. Adults of every race and economic group who have an emotional connection to community – who feel comfortable with their neighbors and feel that they can accomplish things as a community – have more positive feelings about young people. This is also true for adults who do not have children. When people feel safe in their communities, they are likely to have positive feelings about young people.

In brief, adult involvement in community activities, such as volunteering, leads to a sense of shared spirit with other

community members. This shared spirit results in the belief that young people can contribute effectively to their community. This finding lends support to the idea that volunteering leads people to reflect upon their community and define their interests more globally. They are likely to feel connected to the members of their community – including adolescents – and are thus less likely to stereotype them negatively.

ADULT SUPPORT FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Feelings of community connectedness appear to counteract prevailing societal stereotypes and negative categorical beliefs

about young people. Adults with more positive views of young people are likely to frame social problems in a way which supports positive youth development activities – community service, after-school youth programming, and education – rather than advocating policies designed to control and contain young people.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Adult beliefs about young people are more complicated and subject to change than public rhetoric might suggest. Researchers and youth development professionals can work to inform policy makers about the full spectrum of adolescent qualities, and to highlight that many adults support the idea that young people are valued and instrumental community members.
- Opportunities for both youth and adults to contribute to their communities through volunteer work are likely to build the connections that support youth development. Relationships and beliefs are self-reinforcing and reciprocal. Program organizers have an important role in getting them started.
- To create a better youth development environment, Extension can focus not only on the youth in the community, but on the adults. This research indicates that providing indirect supports to community – those activities that encourage spirit of community and engagement in community activities – will create supports for positive beliefs about youth. It may also contribute to support for youth development policies.

- This research clearly supports efforts to link community development and youth development. Youth need supportive relationships, community infrastructure, and adults who are willing to give them a chance to learn and succeed. The basic elements of community – emotional connection, long-term relationships, and shared spirit – are essential to sustaining youth development.

EXAMPLES AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- The state volunteer orientation guide is largely devoted to helping new and existing volunteers consider ways to bring young people into leadership roles in 4-H clubs. The training gets volunteers started with the idea that young people need more than basic safety to thrive. Most staff report in an evaluation of the program that youth are highly capable of fulfilling many roles, but that volunteers' beliefs ranged broadly. While most volunteers support the concept of youth involvement in a variety of roles, they often are reluctant to undertake the work for fear that it will take much more time than doing it themselves.
- As part of the planning for Wisconsin's 4-H Works! promotional campaign, 4-H leaders were asked a series of questions. Following are some of the responses identifying how 4-H has made a difference in attitudes toward youth for the leaders:
 - “Having my children involved in 4-H has helped me deal with some of the difficult teen behaviors/years.”
 - “As a camp counselor, you work with youth and are a role model for youth. You care about teaching them the right values.”

A survey was recently conducted by Merry Klemme, 4-H Youth Development Agent in Manitowoc County. She asked the Wisconsin 4-H agents for their comments on what makes these associations work. Meeting developmental needs by providing fun activities and time to socialize were two of the top recommendations. Another key factor in the success of these groups was letting youth have ownership of the group – letting youth control, plan and police the plans and activities with adult oversight. Independence from adult leaders, adults who encourage involvement, and effective youth/adult partnerships were also identified as key components of effective youth associations.

- A regional Leadership Team, which is comprised of youth representatives from 13 counties, provides another means for meeting the needs of youth. The team meets a couple of times each year with the three adult advisors to identify common issues throughout the district and work together to develop programs/educational materials to address these issues. One agent felt that the educational programs were more engaging as a result of the youth involvement. The regional Leadership Team provides older 4-H members leadership opportunities through the work of the team. In addition, the meetings include fun activities, some structure, team-building opportunities, high expectations and an opportunity for young people to extend friendships they have made in other 4-H settings.

- What do Dairy and Livestock Judging Teams and Dairy and Horse Quiz Bowl Teams have to do with meeting the developmental needs of youth? Interestingly, participation on judging teams like these provide youth opportunities to meet several of the developmental needs that teens bring to their social environments. By working with others in a team setting, the youth have shared goals and an opportunity to work with younger members in a mentoring role. In preparing to be a judge, the youth learn practical knowledge and skills in action-oriented, hands-on experiences. The judging team coach is also a key player providing the adult support and relationship that the teens need.
- In a southern Wisconsin county, an evaluation of the Teen Court and Building Communities Together youth philanthropy program, showed the power of achieving a goodness of fit through youth voice and decision-making. Youth stressed that it was important that they were able to perform tasks and pursue activities that interested them. Youth were enthusiastic about being given choices. Youth also said that adult guidance was an important factor in successful completion of these tasks and taking on decision-making roles. When this fit was achieved, the young people experienced positive outcomes ranging from increased competence and confidence to improvements in their own identity and self-image.

organizational functioning and improvement. Also, adults reported making better decisions themselves, and with more confidence, as a result of working in partnership with youth in decision-making roles.

The impact that youth exerted on organizations was similarly multi-faceted. Principles of youth participation became more embedded within the organizational culture, organizations became more familiar with the needs of youth participation, and organizational culture changed to place a greater value on inclusivity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Youth workers and Extension Educators can improve the fit that adolescents experience in their programs by focusing on skills support and relationship building. Giving young people the preparation and practice needed to work with youth and adult team members is an important support for youth-adult partnership. Time invested in relationship building is also likely to be beneficial for both youth and adults.
- Creating a good fit between adolescents and program environments can be challenging, due to hidden or undiscussed assumptions made about youth, age, and capability levels. In such environments, youth and adults are likely to tussle with the ideal of equality. Opportunities for reflection and dialogue can help uncover such assumptions, and create the basis for strong relationships.

- Extension can promote the principle that creating a good fit between adolescents and program environments yields benefits not only for youth, but also for adults and programs. As youth develop in such contexts, they exert positive influence, and create a reciprocal effect cycle as the context is strengthened for further youth participation.

EXAMPLES AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- Linda Kustka's experience in working to combine the state youth leader and adult leader councils provides both an example of success and a cautionary tale. She twice proposed to join the existing separate councils to build upon successful youth-adult partnership models on local councils, to enrich the experience of both adults and young people, and to improve the conversations and decisions. Both times she gained approval of the adult group only to have the youth group refuse. The young people enjoyed the social connections and existing dynamic of their group and were concerned that adults would make it less fun. The young people felt that they were doing important work, and were also meeting their own needs to connect to peers from around the state. One lesson Linda takes from the experience is that young people have more of a need to take the time to build social relationships than do adults. This is much easier for youth-adult partnerships at the local level where relationships can develop outside of a group that might only meet a few times per year.
- Several Wisconsin counties have 4-H groups for older youth. These might be an Ambassadors group, a Junior Leaders Association or an Older 4-H Youth group.

"People involved with 4-H are active, positive members of communities."

"4-H Leaders are more responsible due to their roles as project/club/county leaders."

- During the State 4-H Conversation, a young person related an example of how organizations would not accept youth work because young people were seen as irresponsible. She had tried to volunteer as a mentor for a younger child, but was told that because of previous negative experiences with irresponsible young people, the agency would only accept volunteers over age 18. She was committed to making a contribution and found an opportunity through her church to support children in a struggling family. The organization which perceived this young person as a contributing member of the community benefited from her work and the one which relied on stereotypes did not.

- Youth are typically asked by adults to identify their own needs, but in one county the tables were turned. As part of a youth philanthropy initiative, the young people went out to the community and asked adult community members what *they* thought was most needed by the community. Further, the young people informed the adults that they were willing to give small grants to the adults (if they worked in partnership with the youth) to address these needs. The adults reported feeling valued by the youth. This role reversal led the adults to see youth as "community problem solvers" rather than "community problems."
- During a Wisconsin county's conversation on youth development, two adults commented, "Why talk about youth? They don't care," and "What can youth do in our community?" UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development Agents have a powerful role to play in these scenarios. They can be catalysts to educate adults in communities about youth and the contributions they can make to organizations.

3 YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

OVERVIEW

Linda Camino (2000) published two articles on the nature and utility of youth-adult partnerships (Y/APs) in 60 diverse communities across the country. The articles also reviewed previous research about youth participation in community building. The research found that:

- a) Y/APs embody a set of principles and values used to orient the relationship and to guide behavior.
- b) Y/APs consist of a set of skills and competencies through which the behaviors are focused.
- c) Y/APs are also a method to implement and achieve collective action.
- d) Larger community contexts affect the nature of Y/APs and their implementation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

EMPHASIS ON VALUES OF EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCES

Both youth and adults set out with the idea to work *with*, rather than *for*, youth. Youth and adults entered the work

placing emphasis on equality, respect, and willingness to listen and learn from each other.

But, youth and adults in the communities learned that being equal does not mean being the same. The mistake in not taking differences into account, in being “age blind,” is a denial that youth have different experience levels than do adults.

Youth need adult guidance.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Y/APs don’t happen naturally. They require practice. Both youth and adults need to develop skills in communication, teamwork, and coaching.

In all the communities, adults had more difficulty letting their guard down in communicating with youth than did youth with adults. When effective communication was achieved, the result was mutual insight and a deepening of respect.

Learning how to work in teams was important. The most successful Y/APs had flexible roles for both youth and adults and high tolerance for differences. In several communities, youth took on leadership roles

boards of directors. Successful programs that provide a good fit are able to take advantage of young people’s energy and enthusiasm, and adolescents’ commitment to – and ability to make – instrumental, action-oriented decisions. The programs also gave adolescents opportunities to explore future roles for themselves by assuming greater amounts of responsibility over time.

Further, a good developmental fit is achieved when young people and adults work together in groups with shared goals that also provide opportunities for interpersonal relationship-building. The shared goals offer a collective purpose to strive for, and the relationships offer youth opportunities to learn from the guidance and modeling of adults.

DEVELOPMENTAL FIT, ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS, AND YOUTH OUTCOMES

Research on youth leadership programs gives us insight into the experiences and conditions within programs that provide a good developmental fit for adolescents:

- 1) Decision-making roles are perceived as highly relevant to young people when they are action-oriented. The idea of “being on a mission,” and the ability to see how their

decisions make a difference sustains participation of high school students, often for more than a year.

- 2) Decision-making authority facilitates sense of membership, confidence and competence. When youth leadership programs allow young people to experiment in various decision-making roles such as leader, implementor and team member, a good developmental fit is likely to be created.
- 3) Leadership and decision-making is understood to carry responsibilities for others. The research shows that youth place a great deal of value on “modeling for the next generation.” Young leaders gain a feeling of empowerment when they supervise and mentor younger youth and children.
- 4) Young people value the practical knowledge and skills – from writing a press release to facilitating work teams – that they gain from their leadership experiences.

POSITIVE ADOLESCENT EFFECTS ON OTHERS

When young people work with adults in environments that provide a goodness of fit, youth are able to positively impact adults – both personally and professionally. In a study conducted by Zeldin et al. (2000) in settings across the county, adults were frequently surprised at the scope of the

impact. Adults witnessed the motivation and competence of youth. As a result, they were able to increase their perceptions of youth as critical to

“Create a safe place for youth to hang out.”

--Manitowoc County Conversation

4 GOODNESS OF FIT: MEETING THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF YOUTH THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

OVERVIEW

Shepherd Zeldin, Linda Camino and Matthew Calvert published a policy report, "Youth Participation in Community Decision-Making: implications for Policy and Practice" (2002). The report outlined ways in which practitioners can provide appropriate developmental settings for adolescents, based on research and on best practices.

Among the findings:

- a) Adolescents need, and are developmentally ready for, greater autonomy and control than younger children. When environments are congruent with these needs, then a person-environment fit is created. Working democratically with adults, and having decision-making authority provides a good fit for adolescents.
- b) This goodness of fit contributes directly to positive youth outcomes by enhancing the motivation and learning of young people, while meeting adolescent needs for greater autonomy and control.

**"Establish neighborhood-based youth centers premised on a heavy dose of youth control and decision-making."
--Kenosha County Conversation**

- c) In organizations and contexts that provide a good fit for adolescents, young people are able positively to impact adults and the organizations.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE-ENVIRONMENT FIT

Research demonstrates that adolescents' motivation and competency development are affected by how their environments match their developmental needs and capabilities. For example, adolescents need and are ready to exercise autonomy and control. Environments that provide such opportunities enhance young people's motivation and performance.

Community-based organizations are frequently able to provide these types of "good-fit" developmental contexts for youth. This research report focuses especially on research conducted in organizations that involve young people in positions with decision-making authority, such as sitting on

and introduced creative ways to problem-solve in meetings.

Developing skills in coaching — providing legitimate opportunities for youth to take on meaningful roles in the partnership, while also holding them accountable — was hard for adults. Although many adults benefited from learning certain skills from young people, such as those related to computer technology, the role of coach fell more often to adults because of their greater experience and access to institutional power.

COMMUNITY-LEVEL BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO Y/APs

Because Y/APs represent a new way of working with youth, the youth and adults who maintained a stance of openness, willingness to change, and willingness to make mistakes with one another experienced the most satisfaction. On the other hand, stances such as "This is the way adults have always worked with youth in this community" tended to constrain vision, limit the potential of partnerships, and reinforced business as usual.

As a result, youth and adults were prone to fall into established and familiar roles. These included notions of "youth should be seen and not heard at

**"Create opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles in local projects and events."
--LaCrosse County Conversation**

meetings," "adults are the leaders," "youth must wait their turn," and so on. In communities with this stance, both youth and adults lost interest in projects, and dropped out from participation over the long-term.

Community history and power structures also set the stage. In most of the rural communities, adults described the small population as being "close-knit." They saw it as an asset. Smallness, however, was an obstacle for many youth. Said one, "There are adults who don't like each other, have feuds for generations, and then take it out on the kids."

Most adults in these initiatives had little prior institutional power within their communities. Many were reluctant to share the limelight with youth because this was the first time they themselves were able to come out front and center.

A community history of oppression can obscure recognition of young people as current participants, rather than as future community resources. Although communities experiencing forms of racial and economic oppression were often comprised of more than 50 percent children and youth, adults held views that youth should be community participants when they grew up. Adult

leaders and volunteers struggling with coming to grips with a past rife with racism or economic exploitation, and pressures to abandon cultural traditions often had difficulty in engaging youth as partners. They learned, however, that involving youth contributed to renewing or clarifying vision.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Y/APs are exciting, powerful, and help build community. But they are not easy. Practitioners and community facilitators, such as Extension Educators, need to be aware of these dimensions of Y/APs, in order to help foster Y/APs.
- Both youth and adults need consistent support and training as they engage in and promote Y/APs. Adults in this study were for the most part volunteers and novices at community work, just as youth were. Training topics include the philosophy of Y/APs, sharing of power between youth and adults, logistics of teamwork, leadership, community organizing, and goal attainment.
- Researchers and evaluators could broaden their samples from school and clinical to community frames. Researchers and evaluators would also benefit from broadening the range of methods used in evaluation. Surveys are not the only or even the most appropriate methodology to understand the complexities of Y/APs. Researchers can capture

“Create a Youth-Adult Advisory Council. Set up activities that require input from both groups...Provide opportunities for youth task forces in every city.”
--Milwaukee County Conversation

dynamics through qualitative ethnographic approaches, which can be used for continuous community improvement.

EXAMPLES AND LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- A Community Coalition was seeking to identify safe places in the community for young people to hang out and have developmental opportunities. As part of that effort, youth and adults offered a workshop on “positive youth development.” The training was going OK, but not great. Then, the young presenters began talking about what “all this theory” means in the “real world of kids.” Suddenly, the information became more “real” for the adult participants. The County Agent reports that a few of the participants said that the teaching by youth “inspired them to go back and make changes in their organizations and clubs.”
- The experience of one small community illustrates the dynamics and potential of mapping initiatives. The community began the process with high enthusiasm, with both youth and adults regularly attending meetings. For a long while, the voices of the youth were drowned out by concerned adults who had resided in the community for years, and who therefore thought they could best identify the entire range of community resources. Yet, over time it became clear that young people had knowledge of many resources that adults overlooked. Those resources included several youth-serving organizations that had not been “sitting at the table” at the outset.

- Wanting to involve youth in a youth-adult partnership is easy – actually involving youth in a group is not as easy. In one county, groups that want to involve youth are looking at new strategies to increase opportunities for youth involvement: 1) meeting times have changed to Sunday evenings or

different times of the day to accommodate youth schedules; 2) youth reports are included on agendas to give them a voice; 3) questions are directed to youth and they are given an opportunity to talk; and 4) efforts are made to inform and encourage youth about opportunities for participation.