



Meaningful Youth Engagement: Strengthening Prevention of Substance Use Disorders

Addiction often starts early – [90% of those suffering from addiction started smoking, drinking or using other drugs before age 18](#). Effective prevention strategies need to focus on young people, and must include them in the design and implementation. They are experts of their own experience and can be invaluable in identifying and addressing problems in their communities. Their voices can and should be part of policy development and advocacy in areas directly affecting them. Coalitions and organizations that engage young people in a meaningful way see programs succeed and policies advance.

For example, [The SPOT](#) (Supporting Positive Opportunities with Teens) in St. Louis, MO, is a comprehensive health center focused on providing young people medical and mental health care, substance use disorders counseling and leadership training. The center engaged young people from the beginning, including them in program design and interviewing job applicants. The SPOT expected to serve 500 youth in its first year but reached 600 in the first quarter and now serve 3,200 young people a year.

What is meaningful youth engagement?

Meaningful youth engagement is an intentional partnership between youth and an organization where young people are involved in all parts of a campaign or program from agenda setting and decision-making to implementation and evaluation. This can only happen by creating an environment where their voices can be heard without stigma or judgement. Meaningful youth engagement should integrate the experiences and ideas of young people into program design while also building on their skills and strengths. In an ideal situation, young people, organizations and communities can all benefit.

What makes engagement meaningful?

- **Roles and responsibilities** – Young people should have a concrete understanding of expectations. It's important to assign roles or jobs with clear duties, for example, social media manager, note taker or fundraising assistant.
- **Ownership** – The [CADCA National Youth Leadership Initiative](#)'s motto is "Youth Led; Adult Guided". When young people feel ownership of their program, they are more likely to remain

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engaged, provide valuable insight and develop more leadership skills. They should be involved not only in implementing a policy but in identifying the problems to be addressed.

“Working with youth requires me and my team to stay nimble, sharp and think past straight lines and red tape.” Veronica Whycoff Urquilla, Program Manager, Family Aid Boston

- **Capacity building** – In addition to encouraging leadership and empowerment, it is important to include opportunities to build young people’s understanding and skills in organization, facilitation, planning and problem solving. [Advocates for Youth](#) hosts a three-day retreat for young people working on a variety of social justice issues to build these skills.
- **Various pathways to participation** – Young people come to the table with a wide array of skills and personalities. While some are born vocal leaders, those who are not may prefer other ways to contribute. [Photovoice](#) is a program designed by health promotion professionals that enables people of all ages to use images to document how an issue affects them and their communities. Other pathways include writing. For example, a writer may not always voice his or her ideas but can turn a brainstorm into a well-worded letter to the editor.
- **Diversity** – While diversity is important, beware of tokenism. Diversity includes more than race; disabilities, language, sexual orientation and gender identity should also be considered in recruiting young people to participate.

What are some types of meaningful youth engagement?

Depending on the needs and capacity of your organization or coalition, youth engagement can occur in many ways.

- **Projects** – These are specific initiatives created to involve youth. This can include community service, educational theater or peer education, among others. In Austin, TX, the teens of the [Changing Lives Youth Theatre Ensemble](#) develop a performance that addresses the issues they are experiencing. They then go to local schools and use this piece to engage other young people and look for solutions. Another example is [Parent Action on Drugs](#) in Toronto, Canada, which created a peer education program with youth input that is based on the belief that young people listen to other young people.
- **Input and Consultation** – Young people can provide insight, advice and opinions on a policy issue or program development through a youth advisory committee. Often these advisory groups work with state or local government. For example, in Washington, DC, the [Youth Advisory Committee \(YAC\)](#) meets weekly to provide input to the state superintendent on city policies that affect adolescent health. In Georgia, the [GUIDE Youth Advisory Board](#) has worked with policymakers for over 10 years.
- **Shared Leadership** – Organizations with a strong commitment to youth engagement may recruit young people to sit on [boards of directors](#). Specific strategies to make this a success include preparing the other board members as well as training and support for the youth members.

Tips to recruit and retain youth

- **Partner with people or organizations that are already working with youth.** These organizations will be able to provide invaluable insight on program development and usually have a pool of young people from which you can recruit.
- **Meet youth where they are.** Sometimes this means literally. Hold meetings in locations that are accessible by public transportation or close to schools. Libraries are often a good central (and free) location. School schedules ebb and flow more than many others; finals, breaks, holidays and graduation season may require some flexibility. This is another place where youth should have input.
- **Remember, you may be dealing with minors.** You may need to consider permission slips, photo releases and/or curfews. Be ready to communicate with parents and guardians about what you are expecting from their family member. Also, confidentiality protocols may need to be different than those for adults.
- **Incentivize.** Some programs have the resources to provide stipends or transportation allowances. If not, providing community service hours, letters of recommendation or gift cards may be other ideas. This professionalizes the youth involvement and lets them know their time is valued.
- **Make it fun.** Use icebreakers as ways for the group to bond and get to know each other. (These are especially helpful when led by youth!) Find out what their talents, interests and goals are and try to incorporate them into your program. Propose actions or activities but allow the group members to make it their own.

“My friends, my family and those I have not even met yet continue to remind me of how lucky I am to do the work I do - and that is the most rewarding part of all.” Vix, member Young Women of Color Leadership Council, Advocates for Youth

Additional resources

- [Advocates for Youth](#)
- [Youth Power](#)
- [Youth.gov](#)
- [Act for Youth](#)

Authored by Aryka Chapman
State Advocacy Manager