Youth-Led Collective Impact

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Disclaimer

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Let's hear from you!

- What organization do you represent and what is your role?
- If you could relive one year of your life, what age would you pick?
- What is one word to describe that year of your life that makes it stand out?

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Learning Objectives

- **Define** what authentic youth-led collective impact means and identify strategies that move beyond tokenism toward shared power and decision-making.
- **Apply** strategies to design intergenerational partnerships that share power, resources, and accountability between youth and adults.
- **Develop** shared values, metrics, and sustainability practices that embed youth leadership into long-term systems change.

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Section 1:
From Tokenism to Transformation

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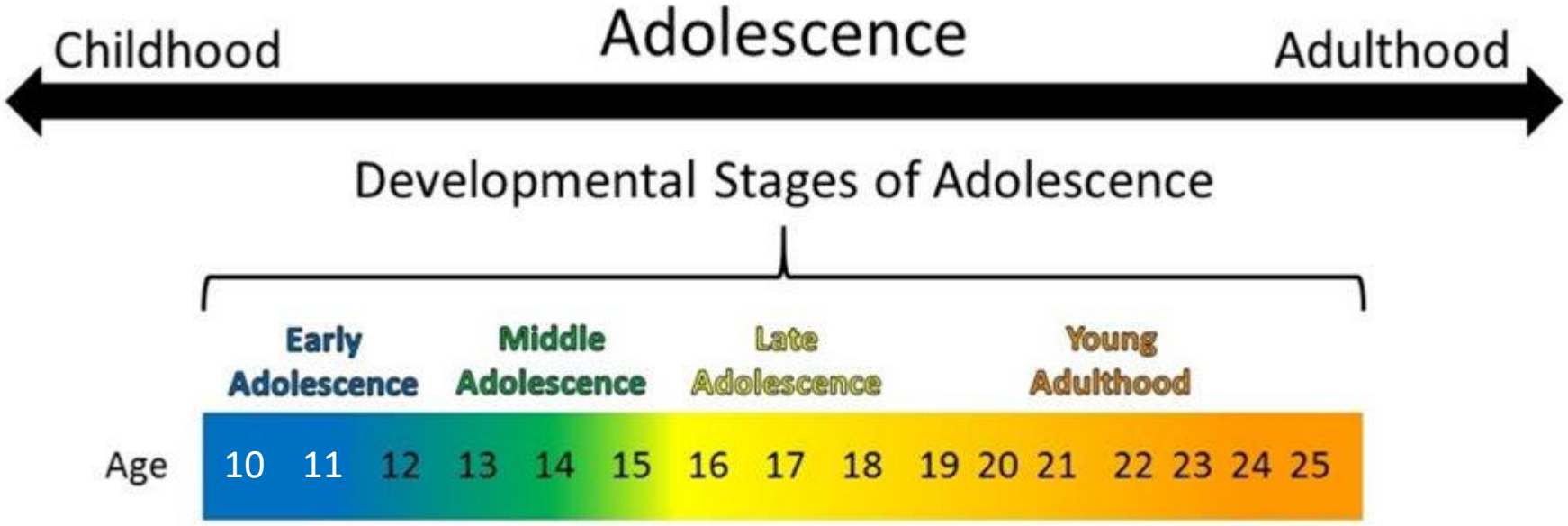
Stages of Youth Development



Source: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (2019). The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunities for All Youth.

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Stages of Youth Development

- Emotional and reward centers of the adolescent brain develop earlier, making social connection and recognition are engagement drivers.
- Risk-taking is not a problem, it is energy we can channel into purpose-driven action.
- Youth voice and choice creates space for trust, activates motivation, and strengthens protective factors.
- Engagement is about co-creation that matches youth developmentally.

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What changes or challenges are you currently facing in your community or with the young people you live or work with?

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Common Barriers of Engaging Youth

- Mistrust of institutions.
- Lack of understanding of lived experience.
- Lack of accessible resources.
- Aged out of school-based settings for transitional age youth (TAY).
- Low levels of readiness.
- Cultural disconnect.

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Common Risk Factors

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Exposure to substance use.
- Social isolation.
- Lack of belonging and connection.
- Community level stressors and trauma.
- Lack of access to culturally responsive support.
- Unmet basic needs.

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Common Protective Factors

- Strong, supportive relationships.
- Connectedness to school, community, and culture.
- Youth voice and leadership opportunities.
- Opportunities for meaningful participation.
- Healthy coping skills.

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Building With Youth Increasing Protective Factors

Social Connectedness:

Social connectedness—the sense of being supported, valued, and included in a social network—has been linked to **lower rates of substance use, improved mental health, and decreased recidivism**. Research suggests that individuals with strong social ties experience:

- **Reduced risk of substance use disorders** (Hawkins et al., 1992; Brook et al., 2010).
- **Improved mental health outcomes**, including lower rates of depression and anxiety (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010).
- **Increased engagement in prosocial behaviors**, such as employment and community involvement (Putnam, 2000).
- **Lower rates of criminal recidivism**, particularly when justice-involved individuals have positive community connections (Berg & Huebner, 2011).

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Building With Youth Increasing Protective Factors

Sense of Belonging:

A sense of belonging—the feeling of being an integral part of a group or community—helps mitigate stress, reduces trauma responses, and fosters self-efficacy.

Research highlights that:

- A strong sense of belonging **reduces loneliness and social isolation**, both of which are linked to poor health outcomes and increased substance use (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).
- Feeling valued within a group **enhances motivation for behavior change and treatment retention** in recovery settings (Jason et al., 2016).
- Youth and adults with a strong sense of belonging **report greater emotional regulation and resilience** in the face of challenges (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

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Tokenism

"An artificial appearance achieved by including a limited number of people in the minority group in effective positions because of their characteristics, such as gender, race, religion, age, and others, that are accepted as a disadvantage or seen as different from the dominant group."

– Rosabeth Kanter

Examples of Tokenism…

- **Optics over intentional impact.**
- **Unpaid and underpaid labor.**
- **Lack of mentorship.**
- **Leadership titles without opportunity.**
- **Asking individuals to share their trauma or stories.**

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Authentic Relationship

"Authentic youth engagement means seeing young people as resources to be developed, not problems to be solved."

— Karen Pittman, Forum for Youth Investment

Examples of Authentic Relationship…

- **Co-creating decisions and strategies with youth rather than for them.**
- **Act on youth and community input.**
- **Affirm their impact.**
- **Invest in their growth.**
- **Compensate equitably.**
- **Build intergenerational mentorship.**
- **Foster safety and belonging.**
- **Youth as full collaborators and community experts, not "future leaders", *leaders now.***

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Section 2: Building Intergenerational Partnerships

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**Reflecting on that year you would relive,
who was an influence, support, or leader for you in that year?
What qualities did they have?**

Youth as Rightsholders

» Stakeholders

- Stakeholders are individuals or organizations with the **power to influence decisions, control resources, or impact program implementation**.
- They may be funders, decision-makers, policy leaders, or institutional partners. Their involvement is essential for scaling, sustaining, and aligning prevention efforts with systems and policies

» Rightsholders

- Rightsholders are individuals and communities who are **directly impacted by the issues being addressed**, especially those with lived experience, those inappropriately served, marginalized, or those disproportionately affected by substance use and the social drivers of health.
- They hold the **right to shape the solutions that affect their lives**, and their engagement must go beyond consultation to authentic co-leadership.

» Emphasis on relationship-first prevention.

» Authentic engagement improves outcomes and ensures prevention strategies reflect community needs and strengths.

» Interactive mapping as an accountability tool and measure of success.

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Sharing Power and Resources with Youth

How Power Shows Up:

- Decision-making is limited.
- Systems control agenda, data, language, etc.
- Expertise is defined by credentials instead of lived experience.
- Participation depends on resources that aren't accessible to everyone.

Building Shared Power:

- Accessible language, translate, simplify, and talk through data.
- Engaging youth early and continuously.
- Honor lived experience.
- Reflect the community in who leads and represents the work.
- Remove participation barriers.

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Creating Safe and Trustworthy Spaces

Encouraging Open Conversations: Welcoming different viewpoints.

Psychological Security: Making sure people feel comfortable sharing.

Cultural Awareness: Recognizing the diverse backgrounds of participants.

Building Inclusivity: Ensuring all community members feel seen, valued, and affirmed.

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Intergenerational Partnerships:

Why Adults and Youth Leading Together Matters

- Youth bring lived experience, creativity, and energy.
- Adults bring resources, institutional knowledge, and mentorship.
- Collaboration strengthens decision-making, program relevance, and sustainability.
- Shared leadership builds trust, belonging, and accountability.

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Section 3: Sustaining Youth-Led Collective Impact

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What aspects of being part of a community or organization make you feel most valued, and how do they influence your continued involvement?

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Sustainability Practices

- Building feedback loops.
- Create youth-led evaluation frameworks.
- Sustainable compensation and leadership pathways.
- Governance models that reflect youth participation.
- Linking to broader system and policy impact.

Protecting and Sustaining Safe Spaces Rooted in Healing

C- Culture

- The values and norms that connect us to a shared identity and community.

A- Agency

- The individual and collective power to act, create, and change, personal conditions, and external systems.

R- Relationships

- The capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others.

M- Meaning

- The profound discovery of who we are, why we are, and what purpose we were born to serve.

A- Aspirations

- The capacity to imagine, set, and accomplish goals for the personal and collective livelihood and advancement.

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Healing spaces begin and end with youth-led collective impact.

"Building a space that allows us to be our full selves requires that the space be committed to allowing people to enter into the space with all of their identities affirmed, seen, and supported."

-Michelle Cassandra Jones Skill in Action

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Thank You!

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