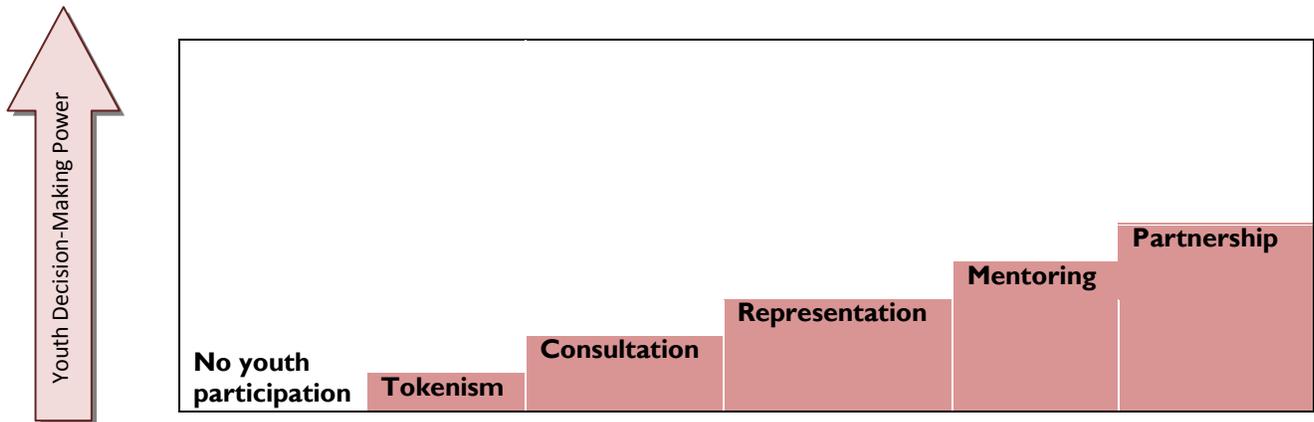


Support for Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

Adapted from *Youth-Adult Partnership Training Module Packet* by the National Network for Youth, Washington, D.C. (2003)

Power Continuum Table

The table below represents a range of ways to make decisions and divide power and decision-making responsibilities between adults and youth. The white areas represent adult power, shaded areas represent youth power.



Power Continuum Definitions	
No youth participation	unchallenged authority of adult allies; one-sided learning; “us and them” group dynamics; no youth consideration in program planning, implementation, or evaluation
Tokenism	adult allies set agenda, make decisions, use language or set meeting schedules that are inaccessible to young people; one or two young people may be included, but often without training, clear expectations, or confirmation that their suggestions will be taken
Consultation	adults will seek advice from young people, but on terms set by adults; “cherry pick” certain perspectives, primarily for the benefit of the adult-led program; little accountability that youth suggestions will be taken
Representation	a select number of young people are put forward as representatives of their peers; usually includes a committee system with varying degrees of accountability
Mentoring	adult allies provide encouragement and impart skills and values to support a young person; focus on building the capacity of the young person to eventually lead; young person is encouraged to apply practical skills, share their perspective; potential for a bi-directional mentoring relationship between the adult ally and young person
Partnership	young people and adult set the agenda together, co-create program plans, decide on issues and activities, and have joint accountability and shared responsibility; continual assessment of group dynamics and respect for partnership agreements; adult allies “take up less space” and learn to step back from asserting too much power

Note: Based on your readiness to engage youth, only your group can decide which of these approaches is right for you. Some of the best youth organizations have yet to reach a strong partnership model, but it's a model worth striving for. Regardless of which approach your team decides to apply, adult allies must be transparent about the share of power between youth and adults. The important thing is for the group to decide on the nature of the youth-adult relationship, agree on expectations, and feel respected throughout the process.

Additional Tips for Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships

- ✓ **Age and wisdom are not synonymous.** People tend to think adults know all the answers and that when youth and adults disagree, the adults are usually correct. This is an example of adultism. To have an effective youth-adult partnership, everyone must cast aside stereotypes. Instead, adult superiority is not assumed, and everyone shares the right to influence another's work, perspectives, and values.
- ✓ **Different experiences bring different strengths to the partnership.** Adults often have more institutional education or formal training than youth, while youth typically have better first-hand knowledge of and experience with the pressures affecting teens. Partnerships are stronger when adults and youth work together to identify those strengths.
- ✓ **Youth and adults must share power.** If an adult is making all the decisions, the true essence of a partnership is lacking. Even in work settings, a single person's control over a group can be authoritative, restrictive, and one-sided. Similarly, if youth are refusing to work with the adult allies, the youth might not be sticking to the original expectations of the partnership. Even though shared decision-making takes more time, it is integral to youth development and necessary for sustainability.
- ✓ **Youth members are not spokespeople for all youth.** Do not make the mistake of placing youth in a position to try to represent the voice of "all youth." In fact, it is not ethical for youth to think that they can fairly represent all teens, especially since young people's views differ just as adults' do.
- ✓ **Prepare, prepare, prepare.** Conflicts, challenges, and roadblocks are inevitable. Rather than viewing any of these as an indicator that your youth engagement process is failing, recognize that it is normal for any group of people—regardless of their ages—to encounter difficulties. Prepare back-up plans, continually assess the team's work, and pay respect to everyone's evaluation of the program.