

Lesson 2: The Adult Leader and Other Adult Allies

When young people work to create community change, they usually do so with support and encouragement from others. Some adults work with the group in various roles – such as bringing people together or providing support to the groups' efforts. We call these people adult allies. An adult ally is someone who stands up for or reaches out to youth. An adult ally can also be someone who joins with others to support their strategy for change.

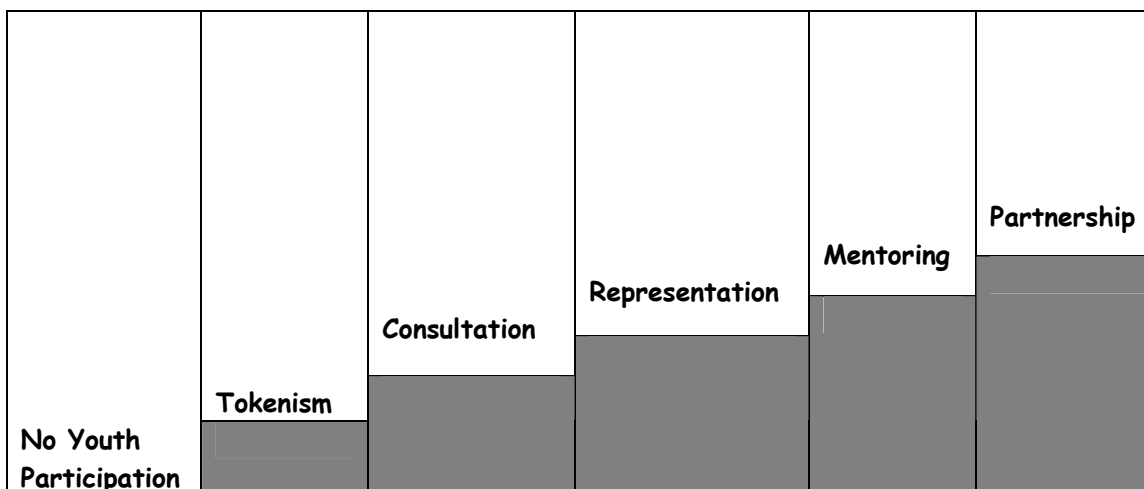
Often, an adult leader works closely with the group, and serves as their primary ally. As an ally, the adult leader helps the group access resources for activities, deal with bureaucracies and overcome obstacles. The adult leader also plays a key role in assisting youth to develop leadership skills so they can participate fully in the groups' efforts. Adult allies are important role models as well.

Adult allies operate from the assumption that youth can create important, lasting change, and they are comfortable working in real partnership with youth. In community organizing with youth, adult allies support teens in voicing ***their own*** ideas and making their own decisions. This means that adults have to be willing to share power with youth and relinquish control over how things get done.

The California Center for Civic Participation uses a continuum for sharing power between adults and youth. Groups that foster strong leaders usually work from high levels of youth participation. Groups that function using tokenism and consultation usually do not provide meaningful opportunities for the youth themselves and are usually unable to build and sustain youth participation. It may take time and practice to figure out the level at which your group is working, and the steps you need to take to get to true partnership between adults and youth, but it is well worth the effort.



Continuum of Youth-Adult Power Sharing¹



White area represents adult power; shaded area represents youth power

No Youth Participation:

Unchallenged authority of adults.

Tokenism:

Adults set agenda and make decisions. One or two young people may be included, but often without training and without a promise that their suggestions will be taken.

Consultation:

Adults seek advice from young people, but on terms set by the adults.

Representation:

A select number of young people are put forward as representing their peers, usually via a committee system and with varying degrees of accountability.

Mentoring:

Adults provide encouragement and impart skills/values to help a young person achieve success.

Partnership:

Young people and adults set agenda together, decide on issues and activities, and have joint accountability and shared responsibility.

Other adults can also provide considerable support for your work.

Parents, other family members, teachers and friends can also be allies to the youth in your group. They can provide important support for the youth and the groups' efforts. In many projects, parents can provide transportation, organize

¹ California Center for Civic Participation based on resources developed by the Academy for Educational Development, the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, and the National Network for Youth.

snacks, attend events and offer encouragement. Adults who support the groups' goals may participate in the youths' meetings with policymakers or testify at hearings to support the youths' position. Some adults will understand youth development and may be right in step with your group. For other adults, this philosophy and way of working with youth may be new. In these cases, the adult leader may need to educate the adults, and model behavior, so that they are working within your framework of youth-adult partnership and mutual respect. The adult leader may also need to advocate for the youth in order to support their full participation in a project.

Below are some suggestions for roles that adults and youth commonly assume in effective youth-adult partnerships. You can use these to start dialogue in your group about roles and responsibilities of group members. This will help to make sure there are clear expectations and a shared understanding about how everyone contributes to the group's success.

Roles of the Adult Leader or other Allies...	Roles of the Youth...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Helps secure a safe space, funds, and supplies ■ Shares real decision-making with the youth ■ Helps youth give voice to their concerns and act on them ■ Networks with community resources ■ Helps bring parents and other allies into the process ■ Gives encouragement ■ Works patiently against powerful long-standing prejudices ■ Creates opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Contribute their time, energy, and intelligence toward creative solutions ■ Maintain commitment to the group ■ Use their strengths to support each other ■ Build respect and trust ■ Take responsibility for ownership of the group ■ Assume leadership roles – try out ideas and test yourself to develop new skills ■ Work patiently against powerful long-standing prejudices

There are many resources for being allies to young people. Tips for Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships follow this section, and other resources are listed in the Tools section.

Tools – Lesson 2



Our Role As Allies To Young People

excerpted from *Listening to Young People*. Ordering information at <http://www.youthonboard.org>.

The job. The job of adults with young people is not to give them perfect childhoods, not to make sure they never get hurt or are protected from everything and happy all the time. That is really not our job. Our fears make us think that's the job. Our fears make us long for perfection. It does not exist. It is not part of reality and it is not part of the job of allies to provide this myth for the young people in our lives.

A better picture of our job is that we try to give young people perspective on how inherently smart and powerful they are; try to protect them from things they cannot handle yet—things that would do permanent damage, things they do not understand well; and to provide the resources to feel the difficult feelings and clarify their own thinking and opinions as they gain independence. [Modified from *The Job of Parents*, by Tim Jackins, Rational Island Publishers, Seattle, WA]

Professionalism keeps us separate. All of us (particularly men) are scared that we have some horrible trait that will hurt a young person some day. When we hear horror stories in the news about child molesters, etc., we start doubting each other's intentions. This separation is counterproductive. If we can't support and depend on each other, our work suffers. It also keeps us separate from young people. We are told we should keep a professional distance. What is a professional distance? Young people are our friends and they are real parts of our lives.

We do want to protect young people from adults acting out hurtful behaviors at them when as young people they do not have enough power to respond. We do not have to limit our relationships with them; but do be thoughtful. Notice what level of closeness people feel comfortable with. Don't go beyond that. At the same time, don't hold back. Have fun and enjoy the young people in your life. Safe touching is extremely healthy and it is important for young people to have role models of this. There is a big difference between "good" touching and "bad" touching. Educate yourself and young people about how to handle hurtful situations. Let them know that they have a right to say no. Be smart, but don't let this hold you back. We all need each other.

Involve parents. Get to know parents, answer their questions. Invite them to events. Like them. Tell them what a wonderful and important job they are doing. If parents don't feel safe about what their sons and daughters are involved in, they won't allow them to participate. If you're inviting a young person out to the movies or to a women's support group, you need to make sure that the parents understand all the details. Let the young person know that you are going to be talking to her parents. Reassure her that you are not checking up on her or

breaking any confidentiality, but that this will insure that your relationship will work better and be longer lasting.

Appreciate parents. Parents work extremely hard. We often fall into blaming parents for young people's difficulties. Sincerely appreciate them. Notice everything they do well, how hard they work and how much they care. Parents are wonderful and we should notice and communicate that to them. In situations where you know of a parent who is harming a young person in some way, remember to reach out to the parents as a person while you work to stop the harmful behavior.

Train other allies. There are many people who love young people a lot and would be excellent allies. Many of them simply haven't yet made a decision to do the work. Invite them in. Set up opportunities for them to participate in your programs. Encourage them to build relationships with young people. Appreciate every effort they make.

You know a lot about young people that you could share with other adults. It would make a huge difference in the world if all adults remembered to put young people as a priority in their lives. Think about what would be missing from your life if it did not include young people. Bring other adults into your world. Share your love for this work.

Back each other. Young people are to be taken seriously, and so are youth workers and parents. There is no work in the world that is more valuable than the work that we are doing. People deserve to get paid well and get lots of assistance with this work. This means that we are going to need to get together as allies to young people and organize for respect, recognition, better pay and benefits, and better resources. This will take many different forms: organizing youth worker alliances, setting up support systems, sharing skills and resources, going public and changing legislation.

Make mistakes. Consider this an experiment in progress. Delight in your mistakes. You will make them. The more active you are, the more mistakes you will make. Trust that you've done well already, that you know many things about how to make the situation work and that you will figure out the rest as you go. Be willing to be the first one to take risks, to be uncool, and to show that you care. Don't try to cover up mistakes. Admit them, explain them if necessary, apologize and move on. "Oops, I think I just said that pretty disrespectfully. Sorry, I'm just having a hard day. It has nothing to do with you." The less defensive you can be, the quicker the mistakes diffuse.

How to support each other as allies. We often put ourselves and our growth on the back burner. It's extremely useful to get support for ourselves because: (1) Our group will grow much faster if we don't feel stuck or burned out. (2) We ask young people to take good care of themselves, unite and work together as a

group. Why not model that ourselves? (3) You are important. This will help you enjoy your work on a different level.

Get together with other adults and take turns talking and listening about the following:

- Share what your life was like when you were younger.
- Remember all the things you loved about being a young person and how smart you were.
- All the times that you were told “you can’t,” that you were stifled or punished for speaking out.
- Share about burn-out and all of your frustrations with your current situation.
- Share and delight in each other’s successes. Notice what a wonderful difference you are making in these young people’s lives.

Format: We often talk over each other and no one gets heard. Try this: One person talks while the other person listens with real, aware, delighted attention for a set amount of time. Then switch. It is more effective if people take turns talking in pairs or in small groups. [Use the listening guidelines described in the booklets *Listening to Young People* and *Leading a Youth Worker Resource Group*.]

Appreciate yourself. You have done well. Notice the ways that you have been and continue to be a committed ally to young people. It’s tempting to put our attention on the things that we haven’t figured out yet or the ways that we could be better. Each day we need to stop and notice the things that we’ve accomplished. Of course, things aren’t exactly the way you want them to be. This is no reason to blame yourself. Each one of us fights hard every day—we’re doing the best we can at each moment. Structure appreciation into your day. Meet with co-workers or friends at the beginning or end of each day and each share something you did well that day. The extra attention helps. Risk being nice to yourself and appreciating yourself and other people for the work we do. It’s much more fun. Know that important things are happening. The results of this work are hard to measure. Take a leap of faith and assume you are wonderful.

Remember that you’re making a difference. Think back on your childhood or teen years to the adults who made a difference in your life: the Girl Scout leader who took you on hiking trips and helped you take your body seriously, or a neighbor who would take you bowling, teach you how to cook or play soccer with you. Do you think she knew the positive effect she was having on your life? Probably not. Like you, she probably tried her best and hoped that she was having some influence on how you felt about yourself. The same is true of your work. Although the young people may not be able to tell you that you are making a difference, you are. This work is very hard to measure. Any effort you make is

extremely valuable. Know that important things are happening even if you can't see them.

The best time for action is now. We care very much about young people and we can play an important role in helping their lives go well. We can't wait until we feel comfortable. Assume you know enough and are ready now. Become great friends with young people and help them organize today. Young people are the present, and together we are all the future.

Enjoy! Young people are fun. They inspire us. They are full of hope. They remind us how important it is to play, to listen closely to people, to be tight friends. They push us to treat each other with complete respect. Follow their lead. Bring other adults along. Enjoy yourself.