

Youth Leadership and Influence

What is Youth Leadership?

There is much debate about what leadership is and which attributes and characteristics are best suited for leaders. More recently there has been a shift away from top-down, more hierarchical conceptualizations of leadership in favor of participatory and inclusive leadership styles, which emphasize social and emotional competencies, including self-awareness, collaboration, empathy, and relationship-building and the ability to lead through authenticity and influence rather than by authority.

Youth leadership is both an internal and an external process leading to:

- (1) the ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence their opinion and behavior, and show the way by going in advance; and
- (2) the ability to analyze one's own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem to carry them out.

Leadership and Influence

While there is much debate about the nature of leadership, many assert that anyone can lead. The ability to influence is an essential leadership skill. To influence is to have an impact on the behaviors, attitudes, opinions, and choices of others.

Each person has a sphere of influence that consists of all of the relationships, contexts, and systems a person interacts with. And, every interaction offers an opportunity to influence others through words, actions, and attitudes.

Influence in peer relationships works in both directions. In some cases peer influence can lead to prosocial behaviors and attitudes, such as volunteering, empathy, and enhanced academic performance, while in other cases it can lead to risky behaviors, such as truancy, substance use, criminal activity, and bullying. Therefore, it is important for young people to be aware of the power of their influence and to receive support and coaching so their influence is used to benefit all.



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Influence and Social Media

Social media influencers (e.g. beauty bloggers, video game vloggers, toy unboxers) are extremely popular among children and youth. Influencers seem to play an important role in their lives, because children and youth spend a large part of their time watching, viewing, liking, forwarding, and commenting on influencers' content. And, youth turn to these influencers not only for entertainment, but also for information, advice, company, and comfort. Further, many youth use social media to share their views and influence peers. It is important for mature adults to help youth navigate social media platforms, ensuring they are engaging responsibly and monitoring the content they are viewing.

Youth Influence in the Bible

The Bible has numerous examples of youth who used their attitudes, words, and actions to have a significant impact on others and glorify God in the process. These youth chose to trust and obey God and their lives have continued to inspire people for generations.

- **Esther:** Esther was predicted to be around 14 years old when she became the queen of Persia. She used her position as the queen of Persia to deliver her people, the children of Israel, from the imminent danger they were in. This required great courage.
- **Mary:** Like Esther, Mary's age wasn't directly recorded in the Bible, but according to Jewish law, she must have been engaged and had Jesus between 12 and 14 years old. Even at that young age, her response to the Angel when she was told she was pregnant was, "I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me." (Luke 1:38)
- **David:** It is estimated that David was approximately 15 years old when he was anointed by Samuel and just a little older when he killed Goliath. David is known for being a man after God's own heart and this heart posture began early in life. In fact, as he went out to fight Goliath he said, "'The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.' Saul said to David, 'Go, and the LORD be with you.'" (1 Samuel 17:35)
- **Timothy:** Tradition has it that Timothy was about 16 years old when he and his mother were converted to Christianity. Presumably, this occurred during the Apostle Paul's visit to their home at Lystra. Paul had a close bond with Timothy as Paul addressed him as "my son Timothy." (1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 1:2) When Timothy was about 21 years old, he, with Silas, accompanied the Apostle Paul on his second tour through Asia Minor. From that time on, for some sixteen years, Timothy was closely identified with the Apostle in his service of the truth.

God used youth to impact people and the world! In Timothy 4:12, Paul instructs Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." It is clear that Timothy's young age did not get in the way of his ability to lead and influence others for the Lord.

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(1 Timothy 4:12)



Adult-Youth Partnerships

HART's Ladder of Youth Participation

Adults play a critical role in supporting youth development and youth leadership. HART's Ladder of Youth Participation offers a helpful framework for understanding adult-youth relationships and the types of interactions and power dynamics linked to positive growth in youth. Hart's Ladder defines 8 different types of adult-youth relationships, each depicted as a rung on a ladder.



8) Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults. This happens when projects or programs are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people while simultaneously enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth/adult partnerships.

7) Young people-initiated and directed. This step is when young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth-led activism.

6) Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people. This step occurs when projects or programs are initiated by adults, but the decision-making is shared with young people. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by participatory action research.

5) Consulted and informed. This step happens when young people give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth advisory councils.

4) Assigned, but informed. This step is where young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by community youth boards.

3) Tokenism. This step occurs when young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate. This rung of the ladder reflects adultism.

2) Decoration. This step happens when young people are used to help or “bolster” a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people. This rung of the ladder reflects adultism.

1) Manipulation. This step happens when adults use young people to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by young people. This rung of the ladder reflects adultism.

This ladder emphasizes the importance of genuinely engaging children and youth in planning and decision-making, listening to their ideas and avoiding the lower rungs of the ladder where youth's views are not valued, heard, or included in decision-making.

Principles for Building Leadership Skills

Programs that are effectively operating using a positive youth development framework, working to foster developmental assets or Learner's C's, and that embody the features of quality youth programs as defined by the Search Institute have laid the foundation for leadership development. The School-Based Health Alliance offers four principles for programs working to develop leadership skills in children and youth.

- **Look for leadership potential in everyone.** All children and youth are assets and have the capacity to lead. Everyone has the ability to have a positive influence on the people and systems that they are in proximity to.
- **Youth develop into leaders when caring adults take the time to offer meaningful feedback and build self-confidence, and partner with youth around projects and other activities.** Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. This type of relationship supports positive youth development and leadership development.
- **Opportunities where youth lead projects or other activities help build leadership skills.** When youth are offered the opportunity to share their views, make decisions, plan activities and work in partnership with adults and other youth to make an impact, they develop leadership skills.
- **Youth benefit from clear guidance and training to increase their understanding of community needs and effective strategies for impact.** It is important for youth to receive guidance, training, and coaching to support them as they plan activities that will have a positive impact on the world around them. Trainings can be facilitated with in-house staff or in collaboration with an outside resource person, so youth feel confident in their knowledge and skills.

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Opportunities that Promote Leadership Development

Opportunities are activities that youth can engage in that promote both positive youth development as well as leadership skills. It is a best practice for adult leaders to intentionally offer opportunities for youth to better understand their strengths and skills, positively influence others, and practices using leadership skills, such as organizing, speaking to a group, facilitating interactions, sharing their perspective, and managing a project. This handout provides examples of opportunities to promote youth leadership skills.



1. Community Outreach: Adults can partner with youth to help them identify a need in the community, learn about the need or issue, develop a plan to address the need or help people who are struggling, implement the plan, and reflect on the process and what was learned.



2. Advisory Councils: Youth Advisory Councils (YAC) are a useful way for adult staff to receive feedback and recommendations for programming. The basic purpose of a YAC is to give youth a voice within a program or organization and opportunities to implement new ideas derived from the YAC's feedback.



3. Peer to Peer Education: Peer-to-peer education is the teaching or sharing of information, values, and behavior in educating others who may share similar social backgrounds or life experiences. In this model, young people focus on a particular issue in their school or community, educate themselves, prepare a presentation or video, and share information with their peers to increase their knowledge and understanding.



4. Research and Assessment: In order to better understand needs or issues in the community youth can conduct a research project. First, they should identify existing research and reports to understand the need. Then in partnership with adults, develop a research question and strategy for collecting information to answer the question. In some cases research involves surveying people in the community and in other cases it involves reviewing secondary data such as Census statistics or existing reports. At the end, youth should share their findings with peers and community members.



5. Service Learning: Service learning is an experiential approach to learning where a youth volunteers with an agency (usually a non-profit or social service group) to enhance their understanding of an issue and engage in reflection activities to deepen their understanding of what is being taught. Youth can partner with adults to identify the site where they will serve, identify learning goals, identify strengths and competencies they will use to serve, and reflect on the process after serving.



6. Facilitating Activities: Youth benefit from the opportunity to facilitate activities with peers. This gives them practice speaking to a group of people, facilitating interactions, sharing their thoughts and perspectives, and managing time.