

Wraparound Practice: Chapter 4c.1

Youth Engagement, Empowerment, and Participation in Wraparound

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Everyone benefits when young people are actively engaged in the decisions that directly affect their lives! Youth, families, adults, organizations, policymakers, and communities as a whole benefit when young people have a voice that is listened to, respected, and utilized.

Engaging youth in decision making is essential to their overall development. This is true for all youth, even youth with behavioral and emotional issues. All youth are developing; all youth have strengths; all youth have needs; all youth can contribute to their communities; all youth are valued. Youth are agents of their own development (Pittman, 1998). They should be involved in every decision that will have an effect on their lives. This does not mean that young people shouldn't have caring and positive adults standing in roles of support available to them at all times.

Involving youth in service planning and decision making would seem to be a no-brainer for practitioners that serve children and adolescents. However, many struggle with understanding that the right to self-determination should be afforded to all families and to youth based on their level of maturity.

It is important to remember that children and youth grow into adults and that, as they mature, the foundation for adulthood is being built. Youth must be allowed opportunities to develop. For young people with severe behavioral and emotional challenges that foundation is built while he or she is also experiencing ongoing crisis, feelings of mistrust, wanting to be "normal," and the typical stressors of most all youth experience during transition from childhood to adulthood. It is important to leave a positive impression

and to be supportive of youth. Efforts to do so will be remembered and have a direct affect on a human life.

Treatment Planning

Being the only young person in a wraparound team meeting may be intimidating. It is the responsibility of the adults involved to remain youth-guided, remembering that the young person is ultimately responsible for obtaining his/her goals. Team members must remain strengths-based throughout the entire engagement process. Meetings could be counterproductive if the youth feel as if everyone is against them. Remember to focus on the positive behaviors and address negative behaviors in a functional, non-degrading way.

Authentic involvement in treatment planning helps youth take personal responsibility for their treatment. Because young people are actively engaged and “own” their plans, the chances of successful outcomes in treatment are significantly improved.

Youth as Leaders

With strong adult and system support, a young person is able to develop new skills and knowledge that will allow him or her to participate in system building and to be of support to peers. In this manner, young people are able to reframe their personal identities from an “SED/ problem kid” to a leader contributes positively in the community. Youth develop confidence and their involvement strengthens their sense of pride, identity, and self-esteem.

Adults who work with youth often have to work hard to overcome ingrained habits of adultism. Adultism is the assumption that adults are better (or more competent) than youth and should therefore act on behalf of young people without their agreement because youth lack life experience and are inferior. Adults should listen to and partner with young people by supporting them, not controlling them. Comments such as “You’re all kids to me,” and referring to youth projects or

activities in ways that make them seem inferior to those of adults fosters the undervaluing of youth.

Case in Point:

While in a regional governance board meeting a project director was asked about upcoming youth group activities. The project director responded, very happy that the person had asked, and said: “Well, they’re having a little retreat this weekend.” The youth coordinator took this as an offense--he and the youth group had worked extremely hard on planning the retreat and the project director chopped all of their efforts down to a “little retreat.” Not only did the project director not acknowledge their hard work but she separated the youth group from the rest of the team by saying “..they’re having....” Youth should be engaged as equal partners. Their contributions should be valued.

A Win-Win

When youth are engaged, involved, and actively participating in wraparound, there are benefits for the young people and for the community. What is more, the philosophy of wraparound states the importance of youth voice. There should be no question in anyone’s mind about the importance of making this ideal of youth empowerment come to life.

Author

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