

Wraparound Practice: Chapter 4c.3

Youth Participation in Wraparound Team Planning: Why and How

Janet Walker, Co-Director, National Wraparound Initiative, and Research Associate Professor, Portland State University School of Social Work



Human service and educational agencies and systems often convene teams to work collaboratively on plans for serving children or youth. This is particularly true for children and youth who are involved with multiple systems or who are felt to be in need of intensive intervention. Here, we focus on wraparound planning teams, but similar planning goes on in IEP (Individualized Education Plan) teams, foster care independent living program teams, transition planning teams, youth/family decision teams, and other teams that create service or treatment plans. Unfortunately, it is often true that these plans are created *for* youth, with little input or buy-in from the young people themselves.

In previous research on wraparound, we found that many adults who participated on teams were eager to involve youth in planning in a more meaningful way, but were unsure how to feasibly accomplish this goal. One difficulty they cited was that some of their colleagues were not really committed to the idea that youth should have an important role in making decisions for their care, service, education and treatment plans. These colleagues were seen as raising a range of objections, such as:

- Involving youth is not worth the time it would take;
- We know what's best for youth and we should make the decisions;
- We already do give youth the opportunity to participate in planning, but they just aren't interested;
- Our youth have emotional and behavioral difficulties—they don't know what's good for them and any-

way they can't work productively in meetings;

- Our youth have attentional problems—they really don't want to sit through long meetings;
- Our youth have cognitive delays—they don't have the skills to contribute to plans;
- Our youth have difficult lives—their feelings will be hurt if they come to meetings and we discuss what's going on, and so on.

In response, we began work on AMP. AMP—*Achieve My Plan*—is a five-year project that is developing and testing ways to increase the meaningful participation of youth in collaborative team planning meetings. The work of the AMP project is undertaken with the guidance and active partici-



pation of an advisory group that includes youth, caregivers and providers who have extensive personal experience with multiple service systems and interdisciplinary planning. Advisors have worked together with research staff to design and evaluate the products from the AMP project.

Early on in our work together, we came to the realization that changing practices related to youth participation in team planning would require developing materials that could answer two big sets of questions and doubts that people raise when thinking about youth participation. First, *Why?* Why is it worthwhile for organizations and agencies that participate in team planning for youth to change what they do, to adopt new practices that increase young people's role in team discussions and decisions? And second, *How?* What

do these organizations and agencies need to do—and what do the people who participate on teams need to do—to ensure that planning with youth is collaborative and productive rather than confrontational or (as youth fear) one more opportunity for adults to lecture young people all about the bad things they did in the past and tell the young people what they are going to have to do now.

To respond to the *Why* question, we put together a document called *Youth Participation in Collaborative Team Planning: Research Tells us we Should be Doing Better*. In the next part of this chapter, we will summarize some of what is written in that document. The document reviews published research, and presents empirical evidence that supports the idea that meaningful youth participation in team planning is practical, feasible, and worthwhile. The entire document is included as an appendix for this *Resource Guide*. We also created a video called *Youth Participation in Collaborative Team Planning: Why it Matters*. To make the video, AMP advisors interviewed one another about their experiences with team planning and youth (non)participation. The video uses clips from these interviews to show in a very immediate way how a lack of participation contributes to youth powerlessness, hopelessness, and plan failure; and how collaboration with youth has the potential for opposite outcomes. This video can be accessed at http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/AMP/pgVideo_AMP_ImportanceOfYPP.shtml.

To respond to the *How* question, we created another document called *Best Practices for Increasing Meaningful Youth Participation in Collaborative Team Planning*. This document combines insights gained from published sources with insights from our advisors and from other youth, caregivers, and providers who have provided feedback to the AMP project. (Again, the full document is included as an appendix to this *Resource Guide*.) In the later sections of this chapter, we outline these best practices that, together, describe a vision of what it takes to create plans *with* youth, so that youth will see the plans as a means to help them move towards important life goals. Some of these practices require time and resources, and many require that teams organize their work in ways that are different from usual. But this is to be expected—getting a higher level of youth participation will require an investment.

Organizations and teams that implement practices to ensure meaningful youth participation in wraparound will of course need some way of gathering data that can tell them how they are doing. The last section of this chapter focuses on strategies for evaluating youth participation and related outcomes.

Finally, the AMP project has developed an intervention that includes the best practices outlined in this chapter. Currently, we are conducting a formal evaluation to document the impact that the AMP intervention has on youth participation in planning, the quality of plans, team member satisfaction with planning, organizational attitudes about the feasibility and usefulness of youth participation in planning, and youth empowerment with respect to mental healthcare. In the near future, we will know the outcomes from that evaluation. We will also have the full range of materials available to help organizations and communities implement the AMP intervention.

The Why of Meaningful Youth Participation

Youth Participation in Collaborative Team Planning: Research Tells us we Should be Doing Better reviews published research as a means to providing answers to a series of questions or doubts that people may have regarding the usefulness and feasibility of youth participation. Here, we review the main questions and answers. Please see the full document for more detailed answers and research citations.

Aren't young people already involved in their education, care, and treatment planning? The best available research indicates that few students participate meaningfully in creating their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). It also appears that youth with emotional or behavioral disorders do not usually participate meaningfully in creating their own care, treatment, or service plans. Professionals who participate in this kind of planning are also dissatisfied with the level of youth participation.

Participating meaningfully in planning means that young people have to take part in making decisions and setting and monitoring goals. Can youth who have significant mental health, learning, and/or cognitive difficulties really be expect-

ed to master the skills needed to do this? Children and youth of all ages and with a variety of disabilities and challenges have successfully learned the necessary skills and participated in planning.

Why is it so important to include young people in planning for their education, treatment or care? What's to be gained? There are a lot of potential benefits to increasing youth participation in planning. First of all, when people feel they are doing something because they want to, they tend to be happier and more engaged, and do a better job, than when they don't feel they have a choice. Second, learning to make plans and achieve goals is an important part of growing up for any young person. People who are confident that they can solve problems in their lives and reach the goals they set for themselves experience many positive outcomes—including positive emotional and behavioral outcomes. Developing these feelings of “self-efficacy” would seem particularly important for youth who face high levels of challenge in life. However, it appears that children with disabilities and children who are involved with the child welfare or mental health systems have far fewer opportunities than their peers to experience self-efficacy. In addition to all these reasons, perhaps the most important reason for including youth meaningfully in planning is because it's the right thing to do.

The How of Meaningful Youth Participation

The *how* of promoting meaningful youth participation in wraparound team planning has several distinct aspects. First, the organization(s) that take the lead in convening wraparound teams need to build an organizational culture that prioritizes and values youth voice in team discussions and decisions. Additionally, the organization needs to define and build capacity for new ways of working directly with youth. These include practices for preparing youth for participation, running meetings that encourage youth participation, and holding teams accountable for carrying out collaborative decisions.

Organizational Culture

Agency staff are more likely to support youth participation if they see that it is a priority within

the agency, and if the agency provides resources—like time and training—so that staff can gain the skills they need to carry out activities that encourage youth participation. Staff, families, and youth themselves will be more open to youth participation if they are exposed to information—like the AMP video and other publications—that demonstrates that increasing youth participation is both desirable and possible. The agency should be clear about its commitment to youth participation in decision making by affirming that:

- once decisions are made (with youth participation), the decisions should not be changed later without further youth participation;
- youth should be invited to participate in their entire wraparound meetings; and
- important information should not be shared when youth are absent.

Preparation for the Meeting

One of the things that our youth advisors were clearest about that a team meeting should not have surprises. Many of the youth had had bad experiences with meetings when they felt blindsided by topics that were to be discussed. Or they were told they would have input into a decisions and then (surprise!), the actual decision was made without consideration of their what they thought or what they wanted. Because of experiences such as these—and also because of a natural anxiety about sitting in a room with a group of adults who have power over their lives—youth are likely to anticipate a meeting with distrust, anxiety, or even anger. If, however, a young person knows what will happen in the meeting, he or she can feel more of a sense of security that there will be no unpleasant surprises. Additionally, knowing what is going to happen at the meeting means that the young person can prepare his or her thoughts and ideas in advance. Thus, an organization that promotes meaningful youth participation helps make sure that a young person knows what is going to happen during a meeting, and further ensures that the young person has adequate support to prepare for the meeting. Specifically, such an organization ensures that...

- *In consultation with the youth, an agenda is formulated before the meeting.*
- *Adequate preparation is provided so that a young person has an opportunity to be supported through a process of thinking about what and how he or she wants to contribute to the topics on the agenda.*
- *Preparation includes an opportunity for the youth to formulate goals that will be part of the plan.*
- *Preparation also includes helping the youth plan to contribute to the meeting in whatever manner feels comfortable to him or her.*
- *The youth is supported in planning specific strategies he or she might use during the meeting to help stay calm and/or focused.*
- *Someone helps the youth figure out who can support him or her during the meeting and prepare that “support person” for this role.*

Running a Meeting that Feels Safe for Participation

Young people report that, during team meetings, they are often ignored, lectured at, and/or harshly criticized. To help the meeting feel safe, the team should agree to a set of ground rules, and the facilitator should be able to control the meeting in a way that ensures that people follow the rules. Ground rules should include the following:

- *All team members treat each other respectfully, the youth no less than others.*
- *Remain strengths-based and solution-focused.*
- *During the meeting, stick to the agenda that the youth has helped create.*
- *Make sure that everyone can understand what is going on.*
- *Speak in ways that don’t alienate or hurt the youth.*
- *Be clear about exactly who is doing what to follow up on decisions made in the meeting.*

During the meeting, team members must act and interact in ways that ensure that the youth will have real influence in discussion and decision making. Thus, the team should purposefully structure discussion in ways that provide multiple opportunities for the youth to express his or her ideas or offer comments, even if he/she doesn't want to say a lot at any one time.

Beyond this, it is also important for the team to structure decision making in ways that support collaboration. Collaboration (with youth or with anyone else) is supported when people are able to keep an open mind and explore different perspectives and different options fully before making decisions about what to do. Thus, collaborative teams do not make decisions about solutions until they have had a chance to think carefully about what the goal, problem, or need really is. Furthermore, a collaborative and creative team will consider several different strategies to solve a problem or meet a need before selecting an option to pursue.

Holding Each Other Accountable

Finally, team members earn each other's trust—and accomplish their work—by following through on the action steps they commit to during planning. Seeing people follow through on their commitments to the plan is particularly important for young people who have been heavily involved with service systems. Often, these young people have experience with being let down by providers. Youth who have had input into decisions for a plan may be particularly skeptical, thinking it entirely possible that providers will be unmotivated to follow through on decisions that reflect a young person's priorities rather than their own.

Thus it is important for team members to hold each other accountable for carrying out the action steps that they commit to during planning. In order for this to happen, these commitments must be made clear during planning and they must be recorded. The team must also have a process for checking in later on to see whether or not team members have actually followed through.

How Are We Doing?

While a philosophical commitment to increasing youth participation in team planning is a first

step, organizations and teams will not really know how well they are putting this philosophy into practice unless they gather some data. One straightforward way of doing this is through basic checklists that assess whether or not the steps, strategies, or structures that are intended to support youth participation were actually employed. Suppose, for example, an organization has agreed that a staff member will work through a series of activities with a youth before his or her first team meeting to prepare him or her for participation.



When these activities have been completed, the young person and the staff member can fill out a checklist together, affirming that each step in the preparation has been completed. When this basic fidelity checklist is completed, the staff member and the young person sign it, and the organization retains the checklist for its records. Similar checklists can be used to assess whether appropriate steps and structures to support participation have occurred during the meeting itself, and whether appropriate steps are taken to ensure accountability.

In addition to these kinds of process checklists, it is helpful for organizations to measure whether or not the processes and steps they are implementing are actually increasing youths' perceptions of participation and empowerment in their mental healthcare. There are various strategies for doing so. One is to collect simple post-meeting surveys that ask team members to rate the planning process in terms of its success in achieving youth participation. Organizations can also benefit by using valid, reliable measures for assessing par-

ticipation and empowerment. The Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health has created and tested measures designed precisely for this purpose.

- The *Youth Participation in Planning scale* (YPP) assesses youth perceptions of whether interdisciplinary teams that create service, care, or treatment plans support meaningful youth participation in the planning process. The YPP has 16 items on three subscales: preparation for planning, plan and process, and accountability.
- The *Youth Empowerment Scale—Mental Health* (YES/MH). Is designed to assess young people’s perceptions of capacity and confidence with respect to managing their own mental health conditions, working with providers to optimize services and supports, and using their experience and knowledge to help peers and improve service systems.

More information about these measures can be found at www.rtc.pdx.edu, or by contacting rtcpubs@pdx.edu.

Conclusion

Agencies, organizations, or teams that are serious and ethical about promoting youth participation in planning must start with a systematic and intentional plan about the specific organizational strategies and practices that they will adopt. As they undertake this work, they should do so with the full participation of youth who are representative of those who will be participating on teams. In this way, the organization can select specific strategies that are appropriate for supporting the youth that are served.

Author

Janet Walker is Research Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Portland State University and co-Director of the Research and Training Center on Pathways to Positive Futures. Her current research focuses on 1) exploring how individuals and organizations acquire capacity to implement and sustain high quality practice in human service settings, 2) describing key implementation factors

that affect the ability of organizations and individuals to provide high quality services and treatment, and 3) developing and evaluating interventions to increase the extent to which youth with emotional or mental health difficulties are meaningfully involved in care and treatment planning. Together with Dr. Eric Bruns, Dr. Walker co-directs the National Wraparound Initiative.

The information in this chapter is based on documents created by staff and advisors of the AMP (Achieve My Plan) project at the Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon:

AMP ADVISORS

Bradley Belka	Angel Moore
Stephanie Boyer	Brandy Sweeney
Loretta Cone	Nathan Tanner
Kayla Griffin	Sonja Tanner
Mollie Janssen	Jackie Trussel
Jan Lacy	Kenny Veres
Lynda Lowe	

AMP STAFF

Janet Walker	Barbara Friesen
Rujuta Gaonkar	Beckie Child
Laurie Powers	Ariel Holman

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