



## Youth Development Toolkit for Parent Centers

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## YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND PARENT CENTERS

Welcome to RAISE's Youth Individual Empowerment Toolkit for Parent Centers. Developed in 2021 by RAISE in collaboration with other stakeholders, this toolkit is a resource for Parent Center professionals who are engaging youth on a regular basis, have begun to develop and recognize more skills in their youth, and are looking to take the next step in supporting youth empowerment at the highest levels. This toolkit is meant to guide professionals and organizations in finding the many opportunities to incorporate programming centered in youth development. Providing meaningful participation to the youth that you serve will propel them forward in their journey of becoming empowered, self-directed, young adults.

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RAISE offers Technical Assistance (TA) to eight RSA-PTIs across the country and OSEP Parent Centers, RAISE supports youth and young adults with disabilities and their families through the transition from secondary school and into competitive employment and independent living.

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## Introduction

It is becoming increasingly apparent that incorporating youth voice and engaging them in their own development is essential in having the greatest impact on both the individual and the community<sup>1</sup>. Professionals and organizations are continuing to make strides in providing programming that works with youth, instead of around them. However, these experiences must go beyond simply bringing youth to the table. Programming must make a conscious and direct effort to provide youth development and leadership experiences. As a result, youth will enjoy the positive effects on their skills related to self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-determination<sup>2, 3</sup>. In turn we can expect to see higher student achievement, lower dropout rates, and better post-school outcomes overall<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>.

We are hoping by now that sentiment is sounding very familiar. We have introduced this idea in each toolkit of our series which was developed as a means of guiding you through the Youth Engagement Continuum<sup>1</sup>. The first toolkit, Youth Engagement Toolkit for Parent Centers, serves as an introduction to the steps beyond the intervention phase and into higher level youth engagement. The last two toolkits focus on two steps of this continuum that fall into the development phase: youth development and youth leadership. The toolkit you are reading now aims to combine these ideas and discuss frameworks that could take our youth to the next level in the continuum.

Ideally you have read through the Youth Engagement Toolkit for Parent Centers, Youth Development Toolkit, and the Youth Leadership Toolkit. You have gone through the Assessment of Youth and Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level (Y-VAL)<sup>5</sup> and recognized you are making great strides in incorporating youth voice, engaging them, and developing necessary skills. If you feel ready to review the tools in this document, that means you are recognizing that your youth can, and should, be doing even more. You have seen their growth and are looking to empower them to become the leaders you know they can be.

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<sup>1</sup>"An Emerging Model for Working with Youth," Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing. Retrieved June 26, 2020, [https://fcyo.org/uploads/resources/8141\\_Papers\\_no1\\_v4.qxd.pdf](https://fcyo.org/uploads/resources/8141_Papers_no1_v4.qxd.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Larson, R.W. (2000, January). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 170-183.

<sup>3</sup>Edelman, A., Gill, P., Comerford, K., Larson, M., & Hare, R. (2004, June). Youth development and youth leadership: A background paper. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth.

<sup>4</sup>Sagawa, S. (2003). Service as a strategy for youth development. In Lewis, A. (Ed.) *Shaping the future of American youth: Youth policy in the 21 st century*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

<sup>5</sup>Youth MOVE National & Regional Research Institute, Portland State University. (2016). *Assessment of Youth/Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level (Y-VAL)*.



## Youth Individual Empowerment

### Bringing it all together

So far, we have talked about the engagement, development, and leadership of youth that we work with. Youth engagement has been described as the strategy professionals should use to intentionally create meaningful opportunities that allow youth voice to be heard. To prepare our youth for these opportunities, we discussed the process of youth development, and more specifically, youth leadership. These processes focus on building the skills and confidence necessary to direct their own lives.

Once youth have started the process to build these skills, it is time to take it to the next level. After the Youth Development phase of the Youth Engagement Continuum comes Youth Civic Engagement. This describes experiences that will develop both skills and habits that will prepare youth to actively engage with others to shape the community around them. This is that step beyond leadership development that begins to expand their idea of themselves as they begin to see their role in the larger world around them. Our Youth Individual Empowerment Toolkit will look at components necessary in individual empowerment and how we can support youth building these skills.

### What to expect

What is in this toolkit is meant to provide a framework to inform your work with youth. We encourage you to take these tools and dig deeper with those around you. Just as in our previous toolkits, we will be utilizing components of assessment as well as experience from various stakeholder groups. As you work through the toolkit, we will provide a guide for how you can be incorporating these skills in your work with youth.

*Each component will be highlighted in one section and review the following:*

- ✓ Introductory information and/or research on that component
- ✓ Guiding framework for translating into your own work with youth

### Why is this important?

#### **Preparing for action**

Youth in marginalized groups are not often afforded opportunities that support the belief that their voice has power. As professionals supporting youth, it is our responsibility to continue to engage our youth in the development process and prepare them to utilize those skills in meaningful ways. In order to do so we must take the next step and empower youth and build confidence in the skills they have been developing. Before youth can create real change in their lives and in those around them, they must begin to see the power in their own voice and build a collective identity within their communities.

## Modeling

As we talk about processes and skill-building as they relate to the youth engagement continuum, we are actually discussing ways that youth can learn and grow. The first key component we are discussing in this toolkit is therefore directly related to how our youth are learning from us. Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that, as people, we are able to learn from observation and imitation of others' behavior<sup>6</sup>. This means that the youth we work with are learning from our actions whether intentional or not. As youth service professionals, we have the opportunity to use the concept of modeling to teach and empower.

Successful modeling has four key components that originate from Bandura's research<sup>6</sup>. Teachers have been replicating and adjusting this idea for years within the classroom. For our purposes, we will focus on describing these components in ways that are relevant to empowering youth to see their potential.

Engage	Maintain	Own	Motivate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Process by which we grab the attention of the youth we work with</li><li>✓ Includes meaningful opportunities for youth to participate in</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Process of repeated and regular involvement of youth</li><li>✓ Youth begin to expect these opportunities</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Process where youth commit this type of opportunity to memory</li><li>✓ Includes youth behaving in concert with the "model"</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Process of youth recognizing outcomes of this level of involvement</li><li>✓ Likelihood of behavior is increased by this connection</li></ul>

You will notice that most of these ideas have been discussed in other toolkits. When modeling, we need to combine all four of these aspects into our everyday interactions with youth. On the next page, we will provide frameworks for applicable opportunities to do just that.

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<sup>6</sup>Bandura, A., & McClelland, D. C. (1977). Social learning theory (Vol. 1). Prentice Hall: Englewood cliffs.

## A Framework: Modeling

As mentioned above, modeling happens whether we are intending to or not. Below we list different ways (both small and big) to approach modeling the idea that youth can and should be empowered to use their voice to make change in their lives and those around them.

### Small Ways

#### Ask their opinion on:

- What topics matter to them. When and where they want to meet.
- What they would like to prioritize.

#### Lead meetings with youth in mind.

- Call out when youth voice is not being considered. Let them hear you say that the youth know best what they need.
- Be aware of your own behavior and language and how it impacts the culture of your organization.

#### Include them in the conversation.

- Don't just show up with an activity neatly packaged. Bring youth to the table every step of the way.
- Adjust the time of meetings so that they can be involved.
- Utilize technology to provide even greater access.

### Big Ways

#### Go through the process of leadership with them

- Run a meeting from start to finish. Progressively provide opportunities for youth to run aspects of the meeting themselves.
- Utilize strength-based approaches to build confidence in individuals' strengths, while supporting areas of growth. Youth may need help identifying those strengths and figuring out how those strengths can be resources.

#### Identify and appoint youth to meaningful positions.

- Avoid tokenism. Identify areas of need within your group and match someone with that skill to the position.

#### Develop and provide templates for processes.

- Meeting agendas
- Planning groups
- Budgets

## Showcasing Impact

As you begin to model empowered youth voices and continue to include them in leadership processes, it will be important to showcase that what they are doing is making a difference. When thinking back to how modeling can impact learning, a crucial step is motivation. As individuals, we have all experienced disappointment when we perceive that our hard work did not yield any obvious outcomes. In order to capitalize on the skill-building done throughout the youth development process, we need to draw the connection between their involvement and results.

One way to do so is by your own follow-through. Successful adult allies champion the value of youth voice within their organizations. As their champion, it is your responsibility to ensure that youth involvement is occurring from start to finish.

### Opportunity

- ✓ Relevant task is presented to youth

### Decision

- ✓ Youth participate in task



### Outcome

- ✓ Explanation of where input was used



Regardless of the outcome, it is important to relay the message that failure does not end the mission. In order to build confidence, it is imperative that youth recognize that getting the result you wanted is not the only factor in a positive outcome. The only way to do this is to include them in the entirety of the process. When youth get to see how their input was considered, actively participate in the process, and assist in analyzing results, they can begin to place value on their role within the organization.



## A Framework: Showcasing Impact

As you begin to incorporate youth more and more into your organization, the way you showcase their impact will look different. While the ultimate goal is youth engagement at the highest level, it is important to create buy-in from youth by explicitly stating where their voice has had an impact. Below we list different areas to look for within your organization that can provide youth with the proof they need to stay motivated.

### Short-term



#### **Suggestions were relayed in another meeting**

- Give details! Where and with whom was the information shared? Let them know how this information will be used.



#### **Trainings built with their perspective in mind**

- Any training about or for youth must include their input. Once it is developed, check back in with them to make sure it is true to their perspective.
- After you provide a training, let them know about the response!



#### **Ask for input more routinely**

- Youth should begin to expect this approach. Consistent and repetitive involvement will increase future motivation.



#### **Make the connections**

- Be intentional in pointing out where the input made a difference. This could be an impact on one individual or an entire community.

### Long-term



#### **Policy changes**

- Systems often work from the top down. Make sure the policies within your organization are representative of the needs and perspectives of the youth you support.



#### **Program Development**

- This includes programming for youth and by youth. Let them see that their suggestions will be impacting youth on an even bigger scale than within their own group.



#### **Additional diverse membership**

- Increasing the number of diverse youth will enhance everyone's experience.
- Peer mentoring and learning will bolster confidence and begin to develop a collective identity.



#### **Increased responsibilities**

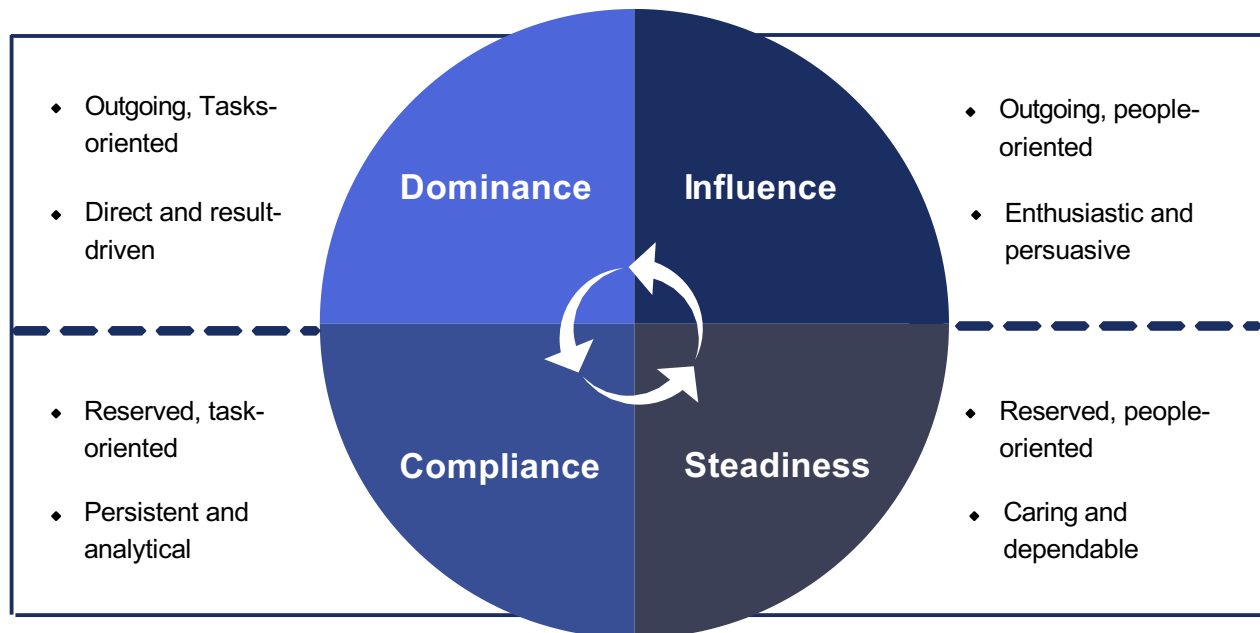
- Have youth join in on trainings they have helped shape with their voice and suggestions. Provide realistic growth opportunities and set them up for success.
- Have them run a meeting or parts of it. Let them keep everyone on track, take notes, or lead a discussion.

## Empower their Passion

In order to take a step beyond motivation and towards action, youth need to discover and acknowledge their passion within this space. While the work they will be a part of may not directly relate to their vocational goals, it is important to identify what areas fuel their purpose of being involved. As youth begin to build skills, they should also be recognizing their strengths and values. Many organizations and leadership development initiatives recognize a Competing Values Framework when working towards maximum effectiveness<sup>7</sup>. This framework suggests that effective organizations utilize tools and techniques for each of the four value quadrants: collaborate, create, control, and compete<sup>8</sup>.

This framework highlights the importance of diverse skills and strengths in teams and within organizations. Part of the individual empowerment process is to recognize that their strengths can be of value to the organization. Much like this framework, we should be encouraging the youth that we work with to identify and participate within their style. When we recognize the value in each of these styles, we help youth to be empowered to not only see themselves as a valuable member, but how the collective strength of those around them can drive change.

While there are many models of working style out there, one example utilizes psychologist William Marston's DISC theory which presents into four unique styles<sup>9</sup>:



<sup>7</sup> Quinn, R. E., & Rohrbaugh, J. (1983). A spatial model of effectiveness criteria: Towards a competing values approach to organizational analysis. *Management science*, 29(3), 363-377.

<sup>8</sup> Cameron, K. (2009). An introduction to the competing values framework. *Organizational culture white paper*. Haworth.

<sup>9</sup> Marston, W. M. (1928). *Emotions of normal people*. Harcourt, Brace.



## A Framework: Empower their Passion

We all have needs within our groups or organizations that could fit into one of the four areas described above. As you get to know your youth, work with them to identify and capitalize on their strengths. Youth leadership does not need to mean being at the head of the table. Each role is a necessary function, so empower youth to find their perfect fit.

Below we have used the four styles as a framework to identify areas utilize a youth's passion within your work.

# D

- ♦ Lead a discussion
- ♦ Facilitate a training
- ♦ Be a spokesperson for the group
- ♦ Identify objectives

# I

- ♦ Attend networking events
- ♦ Run social media
- ♦ Design branding
- ♦ Establish team building exercises

# S

- ♦ Maintain the mission
- ♦ Support new members
- ♦ Point-person for collaborations
- ♦ Event organization

# C

- ♦ Collect data on outcomes
- ♦ Keep track of meeting timelines
- ♦ Historian or secretarial roles
- ♦ Budgeting

## Increase Awareness and Knowledge

There are many iterations of the idea that “knowledge is power.” As a society, we have placed a high level of importance on learning. In a previous toolkit, we briefly discussed expanding our idea of traditional intelligence and recognizing that people can possess knowledge in a variety of ways. As such, this component of individual empowerment needs to be considered in a more global context. Increasing knowledge on a topic should not be the only goal. Youth need to have comprehensive knowledge and awareness not just of themselves but of the people and systems they are in.

Leadership frameworks often point to knowledge as a basis of an individual’s ability to lead. In order to interact and direct their lives, youth must obtain the knowledge necessary to do so. One framework suggests that adequately preparing leaders involves acquiring knowledge across four different types, which we have described below<sup>10</sup>. Building knowledge in these four areas can help to not only inform and empower but allow youth to apply both their direct and experiential learning. Recognizing their place in any organization or system will not come unless we work to increase their awareness and knowledge with these areas in mind.

Declarative	Procedural	Contextual	Somatic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Fact-based information</li><li>✓ Usually related to one domain</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Combines facts to action</li><li>✓ Often dependent on level of declarative knowledge</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Knowledge that is related to an individual's context</li><li>✓ Identify and use relevant knowledge to their situation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Combines sensory information around them for perspective</li><li>✓ Interpretation of themselves within their environment</li></ul>

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<sup>10</sup>Bakken, R., & Dobbs, J. (2016). The Relevance of Four Types of Knowledge for Leader Preparation in Radically Different Settings: Reflections on Data from a Case Study in Qatar and Teaching at a United States Military Academy. *Creighton Journal of Interdisciplinary Leadership*, 2(2), 17-23.

## A Framework: Increase Awareness and Knowledge

As we mentioned above, it is important to remember that gaining awareness and knowledge can occur in many different ways. Similarly, we should be open to the ways in which youth will demonstrate that they have increased their knowledge and awareness. As with many things we have discussed, this should be a lifelong process. As youth support professionals, our goal should be to intentionally create environments that set the expectation of learning.

### Where to Start

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#### Our other toolkits!



#### Parallel learning

- Bring youth into routine meetings. Being a part of these meetings will also inform youth about how your organization operates.



#### Intentional teaching moments

- Take the time to explain the background of what you are working on. Giving context can increase their confidence in knowing what to do next.



#### Learn about how we got to where we are

- Describe the history. Having a conversation about the disability rights movement and their context in history today will empower them to forge their own paths.

### Where to Go

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#### Shared experiences

- In order to become aware of our place in a larger community, we must hear from others.
- Have members of the organization share their experiences and discuss how they may be similar or different from the youth's own.



#### Community involvement

- Take the idea of shared experiences beyond the group. Have youth directly engage with their community and discover what other individual's experiences are.
- Encourage youth to join other boards and organizations that align with their passions.



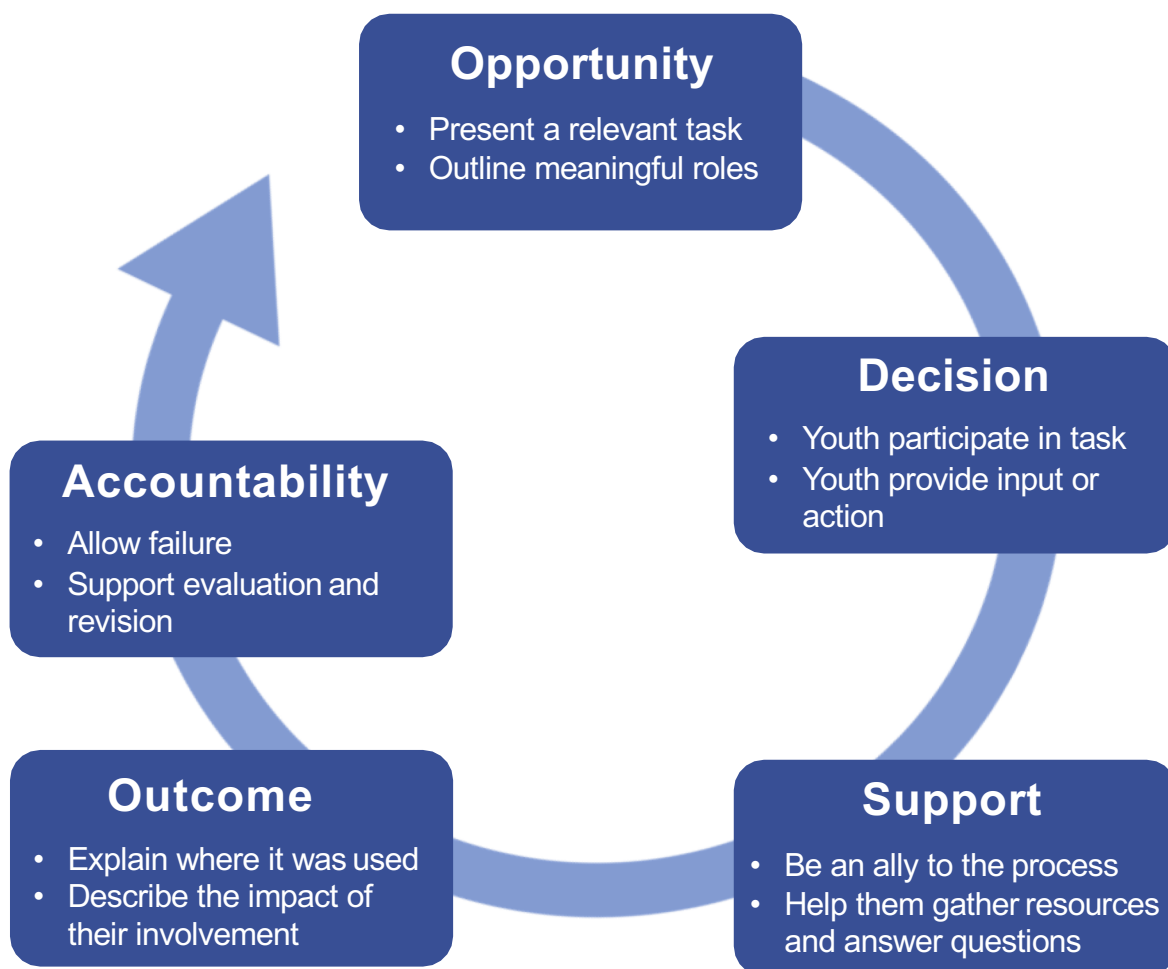
#### Practice

- One of the best ways to learn is by doing something yourself. Let youth facilitate meetings, provide trainings, or run an event.
- Process how it went with them. Ask what worked and what did not work. Help them engage in this process of learning so they can do even better next time.

## Set them up for Action

The last component in Individual Empowerment is to increase the youth's capacity to act on their own. Scaffolding opportunities for them to practice and continue to build skills will increase their confidence. Doing so requires some level of youth-adult partnership. Community psychologists have defined this as “the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue<sup>11</sup>.

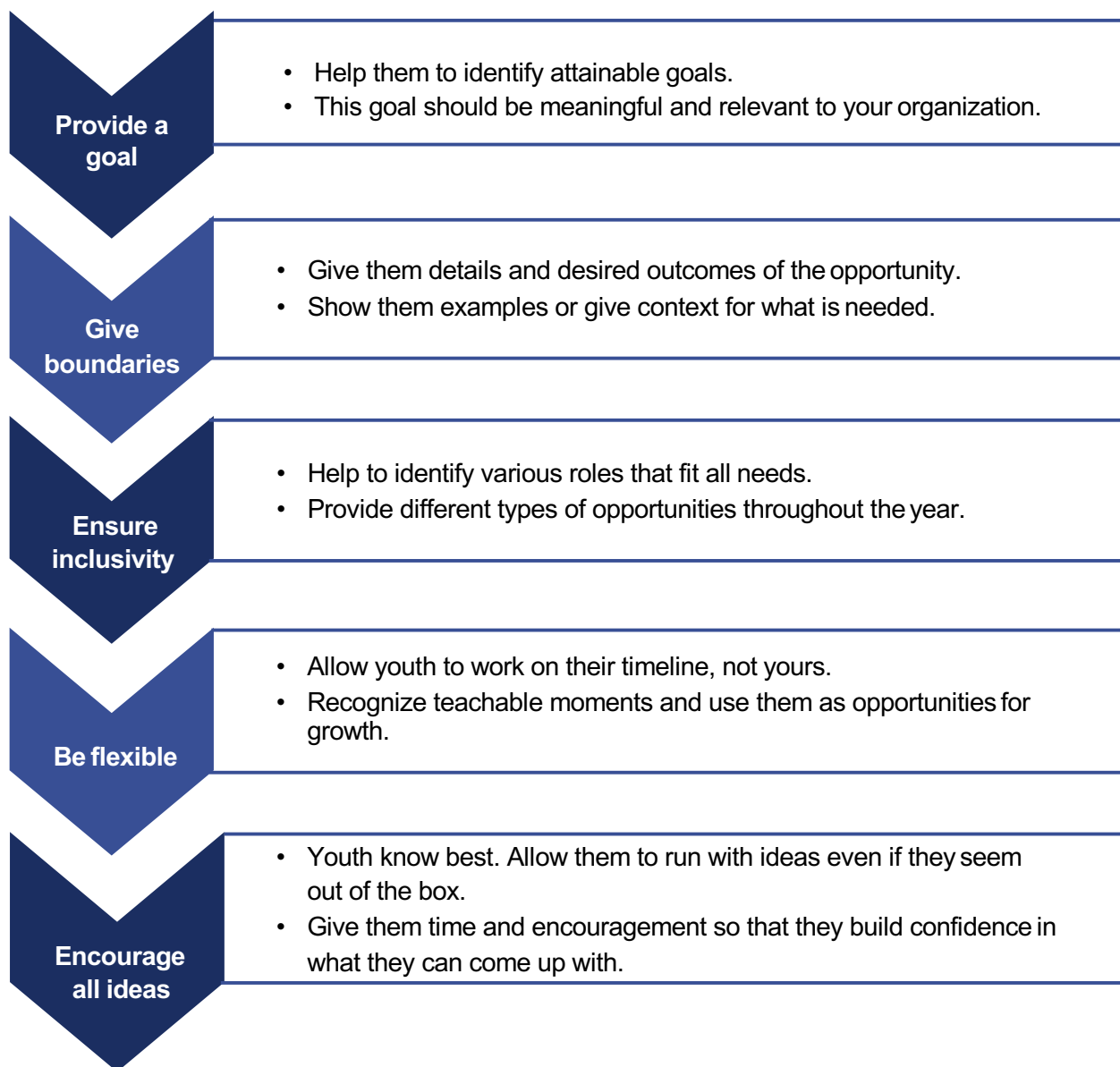
As we mentioned above when discussing how to provide proof that what they are doing is meaningful, following through on our support is paramount to their success. Setting youth up to act is not just about the opportunity in front of them right now, but all of the other opportunities they may get in the future. To truly engage in that level of learning, our process of follow-through must include two additional steps: support and accountability.



<sup>11</sup>Zeldin, S., Christens, B. D., & Powers, J. L. (2013). The psychology and practice of youth-adult partnership: Bridging generations for youth development and community change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(3-4), 385-397.

## A Framework: Setting up for Action

Again, this process works best if we adjust our mindset and think of ourselves as allies. In order to support youth while keeping them in the driver's seat, we should be adhering to a framework that provides some structure, with plenty of room to grow. The Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network calls this the "Sandbox," meaning that there are clear boundaries and structure, but tons of room to make their own impact in ways that work best for them. Successful adult allies will provide opportunities in a context described below.



Creating this type of structure within your group will increase the youth's capacity to act more and more independently. It is important to remember that our goal is to build applicable skills so that the youth we support are able to take what they have learned, and effect change beyond your organization.