



Youth Development Toolkit for Parent Centers

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YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND PARENT CENTERS

Welcome to RAISE's Youth Collective 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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Youth review: Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network

Funder: The National Resources for Advocacy, Independence, Self-Determination, and Employment (RAISE) Center is funded under the Rehabilitative Service Administration.



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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 voices and engaging them in their own development is essential in having the greatest impact on both the individual and the community¹. Professionals and organizations are continuing to make strides in providing programming that works *with* youth, instead of *for* youth. However, these experiences must go beyond simply bringing youth to the table. Programming must be developed with 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^{2, 3}. In turn we can expect to see higher student achievement, lower dropout rates, and better post-school outcomes overall^{2, 3, 4}.

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 Continuum¹. 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 following two toolkits focus on two steps of this continuum that fall into the development phase: youth development and youth leadership. The last two toolkits aim to combine these ideas and discuss frameworks that could take our youth to the next level. Specifically, the toolkit you are reading now addresses the highest level of youth engagement: collective leadership.

Ideally you have read through all of the other toolkits in the series. You have gone through the Assessment of Youth and Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level (Y-VAL)⁵ and recognized you are making great strides in incorporating youth voice, engaging them, and helping them in 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 even beyond your organization.

¹ "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

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

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

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

Youth Collective Empowerment

Bring it All Together and Stepping Out

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 begun to build these skills, it is time to take it to the next level. In the last toolkit we discussed individual empowerment as it relates to the Civic Engagement step of the Youth Engagement Continuum. This is where youth expand their idea of themselves as they begin to see their role in the larger world around them. As youth begin to see themselves as a part of a larger community, we can support them in taking what they have learned one step further. This is the place on the continuum where youth utilize that collective leadership and begin to organize, effecting real systemic change.

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?

Going beyond the bubble.

Youth in marginalized groups are not often afforded opportunities that support the belief that their voice has power. If you have been working through the last few toolkits, you have been putting in work to engage and support youth in their development and building their confidence. Ideally, these youth are recognizing their importance and using their voice to create change within your organization. In order for this development to reach its full potential, we must encourage this level of empowerment outside of our walls. Systemic change that moves us forward requires youth voice. As youth service professionals, we need to lift up their ability to work collectively so that they can see how impactful youth can be on their own and amongst other groups and not just within our own “bubble.”

Team Building

A major part of being able to work and think collaboratively is establishing a cohesive team built on trust and respect. This is not something that comes as a silent agreement as members join the group, but rather a deliberate action of team building. All aspects of group work should be geared towards building effective team collaboration. Each decision, activity, and product should support the group's goals. Your organization may be working with youth that have not had any experience working in teams. It is important to set a precedent for the responsibility each member has both to themselves and each other when working in teams.

Klein, Diaz Grandados, Salas et al. summarized several models into four components of team building⁶. These include the four described in the graphic below. Each component is a long-term objective when working within teams. Some of these components will be described in more detail in other sections of this toolkit.



⁶Klein C, DiazGranados D, Salas E, et al. Does Team Building Work? Small Group Research. 2009;40(2):181-222. doi:10.1177/1046496408328821

A Framework: Team Building

As mentioned above, team building is not as simple as an activity. It requires deliberate and routine care to set-up, develop, and maintain. For the purposes of this section, we will focus on a framework that helps identify opportunities to establish team building at different points in your group's development. Below are some considerations and tips in each of those steps.



Set-up

Understanding your role

- In previous toolkits we discuss ideas such as dignity of risk and becoming an adult ally. To set up your team for success, you have to make the conscious decision to commit to the idea that each individual's contribution towards team objectives is more important than any one contribution on its own.

Criteria for membership

- Take time to consider the work your group will be doing. Individuals should be added to the group if they will be able to meaningfully participate in your goals. Building a cohesive team often means being upfront about what will be required.



Develop

Keep it inclusive

- Now that you have brought members into the group, make sure it is structured in a way to have equal and meaningful participation. Keep in mind this does not mean that *all* members must be *the* leader, but rather all should have access to important responsibilities.

Add in socialization

- Create moments for non-work-related time. Build in extra time before meetings to check in with group members. Becoming invested in each other's lives will help the team dynamic.
- Utilize more traditional team building activities. Make it a routine to do a silly icebreaker or establish meet-ups from time to time.



Maintain

Long-term strategies

- Integrate the four components listed above: goal setting, interpersonal relationships, role clarification, and problem solving.
- Use this toolkit to find ways to work together to set goals and problem solve, build relationships amongst themselves and their community members, blend individual skills for collective progress, and evolve as a unit towards their mission.

Collective Thinking

The ability to brainstorm, problem-solve, and reflect by oneself is difficult enough. It often requires deep thought and lots of patience. As an individual, you need to consider your goals, how you will achieve them and what resources you have to do so. To think in these ways as a collective group adds another layer of complication. As a group, you need to consider the collective goals, resources, and backgrounds of individual members. Although it is difficult, this is a necessary skill to learn in order to be a part of effective group change.

Even though our previous toolkits have focused on building individual confidence and skills, it is easy to fall back into a more apprehensive mindset when being asked to work in a group. The term “groupthink” describes this phenomenon where there is a tendency to arrive at poor decisions without much debate due to pressures to achieve consensus and avoid disagreements⁷. Part of being able to accomplish collective thinking is being able to avoid this ~~folly~~ groupthink. Just as youth need to build skills in being able to achieve this level of thinking, we need to teach them how to identify when they may be falling into a groupthink mindset.

Scenarios to recognize and avoid in any group setting⁸:

Rationalization

- Moments when members of the group are rationalizing decisions as opposed to thinking critically and providing reasons.

Complacency

- Decisions are determined to be correct simply because there is no opposition.

Peer Pressure

- Group members may pressure any individual that expresses an opposing idea.

Moral High Ground

- Group intentions to do good overshadow critical thinking and fail to recognize when a different idea may be better.

Censorship

- Hesitancy to speak up when the rest of the group is in agreeance due to a fear that they may be wrong.

⁷ “groupthink”. *Oxford Reference*. Retrieved 14 Mar. 2021, from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095909991>.

⁸ Janis, I. L. (2008). Groupthink. *IEEE Engineering Management Review*, 36(1), 36.

A Framework: Collective Thinking

The ability to think collectively within a group in order to accomplish goals requires practice and specific strategies. Many of these strategies actively work against a groupthink phenomenon by creating space to check our assumptions and freely encourage diverse ideas. Below, we describe tips and tricks for how to brainstorm and use reflection in groups.

Group Brainstorming

Just as with individuals, there are many different ways to brainstorm. Depending on the group, you may want to try different techniques that are more visual, verbal, tactile, or digital. Here are some examples:

- **Round-Robin** – take turns expressing ideas without discussion in between.
- **Brain-writing or Brain-mapping** – Instead of shouting ideas in a group, encourage members to write down or draw as many ideas as possible, then post them to a centralized location before discussing collectively.
- **Online Brainstorming** – using many of the shareable, cloud-based systems, you can set up online documents for groups to add to as they have ideas.

Preparation

This step is all about the environment. Make sure you not only have all of the physical tools you need, but you have also set the stage for judgement-free collaboration.

STEP
01



STEP
02

Clear Understanding

Make sure that the task or problem is very clearly defined, and objectives are well-outlined. Build in time for group members to ask questions about the goals of their time together.

Guided Discussion

Using one or more of the group brainstorming techniques above, help the group work through different ideas. Be sure to spend most of your energy making sure all ideas are heard, discussed, and explored.

STEP
03



Group Reflections

These are questions the group can ask themselves as ways to process their decision-making as well as what work they have accomplished.

- What are our goals for this project?
- Are there any other ways we can get this work accomplished?
- Why do we think this is the best way to solve this problem?
- Did we think of this from all perspectives?
- Does anyone have any other ideas?
- How will this decision impact other people?
- What can we do if this does not solve our problem?
- Did I do everything I could to help the group?
- Did we use everyone's skills effectively?

Blending Individual Skills

In the previous toolkit, we discussed a framework for identifying and empowering individual passion. This idea puts emphasis on the fact that each individual brings their own strengths and talents to a group, and that the diversity of those strengths is what makes groups even more effective. While youth must first develop a deeper understanding of their own working style, they also need to develop an understanding of how that style can fit within a larger group. Learning how to communicate your strengths and identify your role within a team is an incredibly useful tool when looking to join groups outside of your organization.

The first step in this process is to understand group development and dynamics. While group dynamics refer to the attitude and behavior patterns of a group, the development of a group describes different stages and processes that members typically go through. Both the dynamics and development affect how a group is formed and how they function. Learning about these processes can help you facilitate the effective blending of individual skills. Teaching youth about these processes will help them apply the same discovery to their involvement with other groups.

While many theories of group development exist, one describes a typical group life cycle from start to finish. The middle stages are particularly relevant to individuals finding their role within the larger group. Below is a graphic that describes this sequence⁹.

Forming

- Group members initially come together to decide on and define a common purpose

Storming

- Group members communicate more directly to learn about one another

Norming

- Rules, processes, and roles begin to establish

Performing

- Group members utilize their roles to fulfill their purpose

Adjourning

- Group members may leave the group

⁹Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63(6), 384–399.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022100>

A Framework: Blending Individual Skills

As individuals work through the stages described above, they will begin to identify their place within the group. This is a very dynamic process in that there are many roles that can come into play. At times, roles can be fluid and develop or adjust depending on the needs of the group. Below are key points in that process and what you can do as the adult ally to facilitate group development and blending their skills.

During the storming stage:

- Work with youth to communicate skills and interests with the entire group.
- Encourage members to work through differences, acknowledging that this is a normal part of group development.
- Support inclusive processes that fit all styles. Help the group to see the many strategies they can use to complete tasks and solve problems.



During the norming stage:

- Support diversifying roles within the group. This can be a critical time when roles develop.
- Think of various positive roles people could fill¹⁰:
 - **Initiator** – Suggests new ideas
 - **Elaborator** – Provides examples and builds upon other ideas
 - **Coordinator** – Brings everything together
 - **Evaluator** – Thinks of potential problems and provides feedback
 - **Recorder** – keeps track of information
- As they begin to develop naturally, help the group to explicitly recognize rules and structure that the group abides by. This may include administrative tasks, communication, and general interaction.

During the performing stage:

- Reinforce roles developed in the norming stage. If there is overlap in roles, support ways to rotate responsibilities.
- Normalize the evaluation process. Help the group identify things that worked and did not work and how they could be utilizing each other's skills in ways that are more effective.
- Circle back to earlier stages if necessary. Continue to create opportunities for members to learn more about one another.



¹⁰Simon, David, et al. Communication for Business Professionals, ECampusOntario, 3 Apr. 2018, ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/commbusprofcdn/.

Building Community

Community engagement is recognized as having a large impact on youth development¹¹. In our Youth Leadership toolkit, we discussed the importance of building a sense of community and the role this plays on youth involvement in community action. As youth begin to work collectively, it is important that groups begin to build relationships with the community around them. Doing so not only benefits the youth themselves, but our society as a whole¹¹.

Inclusivity and Diversity

- Democracy with all perspectives
- Enables collective work towards a common good

Social Justice

- Address challenges faced by contemporary society
- Re-engagement of youth/adult relationships

Globalization

- Systems increasingly more interrelated and complex
- Build capacity at a young age to effectively navigate systems

It is critical that youth begin to establish relationships in the broader community as they work together to create change. As adults and youth support professionals, we can provide these opportunities to grow and expand their networks. In any grassroots organization, fostering public relationships can enhance their capacity for social change¹². Establishing such relationships increases youth's ability to develop a shared self-interest and work towards common goals.

¹¹Christens, B. D., & Zeldin, S. (2011). Community engagement. Encyclopedia of adolescence. New York: Springer.

¹²Christens, B. D. (2010). Public relationship building in grassroots community organizing: Relational intervention for individual and systems change. Journal of Community Psychology, 38(7), 886-900.

A Framework: Building Community

Youth often face stereotypes that they are not mature or knowledgeable enough to effectively create systems change. As mentioned above, developing public relationships in a broader community helps to combat this stereotype by allowing youth to learn from the community around them. Doing so increases their awareness and capacity for community change. In order to begin building these relationships, youth have to increase their social capital. The MyWays Student Success Series indicates five types of social capital that can increase youth networks¹³. Ensuring that youth have opportunities to interact with individuals who hold these roles will increase their capacity for community building and establishing relationships that foster respect and social change.



Caring Friends and Adults

- ✓ These are individuals closest to the youth.
- ✓ Establishes perspective and influences their responses to new relationships.
- ✓ Building stronger close relationships supports the youth's capacity to step beyond the inner circle and establish broader networks.



Near-Peers and Role Models

- ✓ These are individuals connected to youth through direct or indirect means.
- ✓ Provides a direct representation to learn from and model themselves after.
- ✓ Increases youth capacity to accelerate individual and group growth.



Mentors and Coaches

- ✓ These are individuals that directly support youth in either a formal or informal capacity.
- ✓ Establishes youth-adult relationships that are resourceful.
- ✓ Strengthening these relationships helps youth begin to navigate various barriers and challenges.



Networks and Weak Ties

- ✓ These are individuals outside of the “bonded relationships” or otherwise in loosely connected groups.
- ✓ Forces a network orientation that allows for help-seeking.
- ✓ Establishing these relationships can expand the resources of marginalized groups.



Resources and Connectors

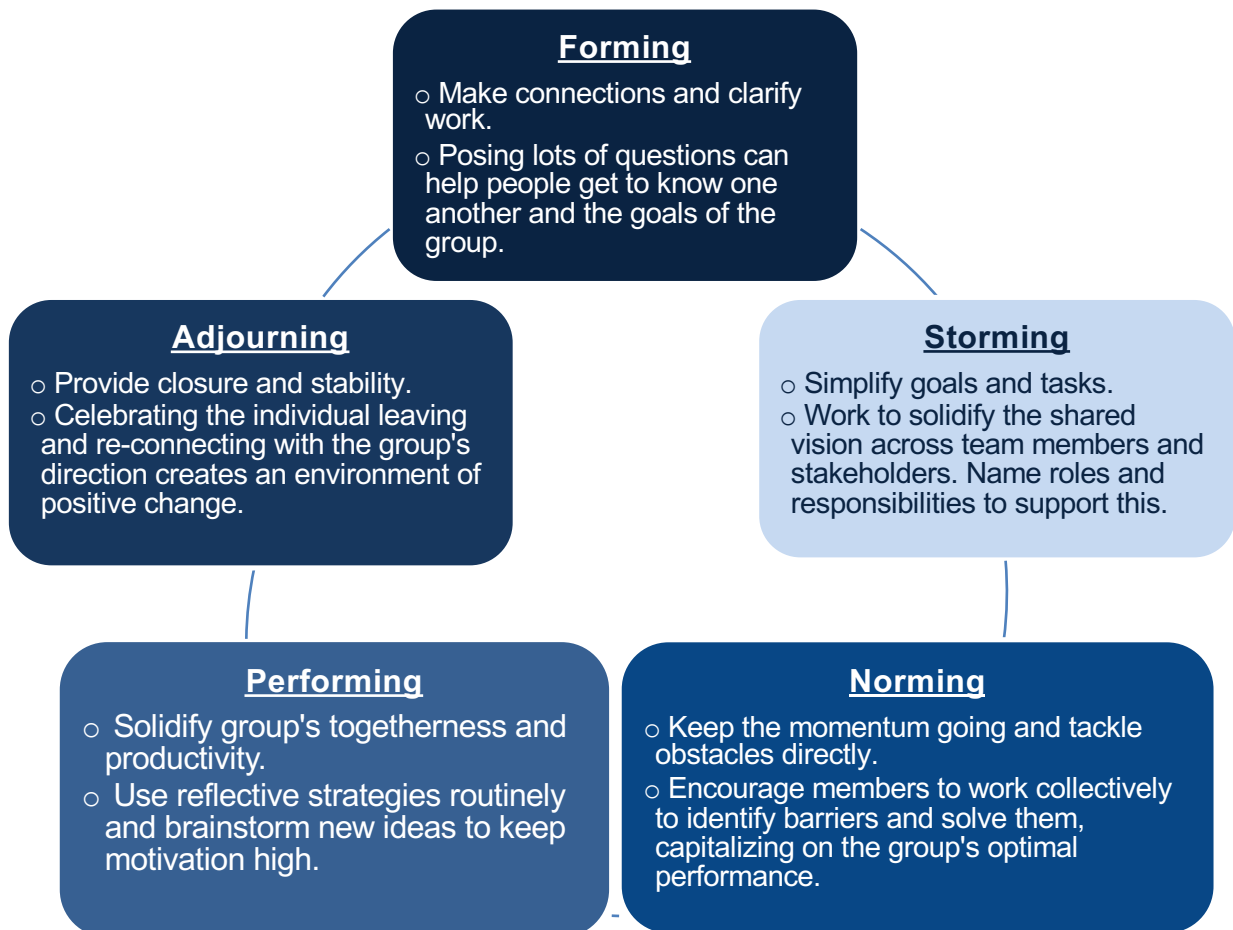
- ✓ These are individuals that can connect youth to resources within their own social networks.
- ✓ Creates an understanding of the social balance of reciprocity.
- ✓ Establishing these relationships help to empower youth to learn and advance towards their goals.

¹³Lash, D. and Belfiore, G. (2017). *5 Essentials in Building Social Capital* (Report 4). Educause.
https://s3.amazonaws.com/nglc/resource-files/MyWays_04Essentials.pdf.

Group Evolution

All groups go through various stages which include members joining and members leaving. Due to changes in group dynamics, as well as changes in the community around them, it is important that youth learn how to work through group evolution. Whether these changes are big or small, it is crucial that group members learn how to evaluate themselves, each other, and the group's mission. Doing so can help to maintain motivation and increase productivity. In a previous section, we listed Tuckman's five stages of group development and how they relate to individual growth and blending of skills. These stages make up a much more dynamic cycle that we will now use to discuss group evolution.

Helping group members identify and navigate through these stages as they occur will help keep the momentum of a group. It is important to recognize that these do not occur in a linear fashion. Groups have changes in membership that require you to address the forming and adjourning stage. Organizations may pivot priorities and throw groups right back into the storming stage. At times, groups may be addressing many of these stages at the same time. Below we take a look at these stages again and identify some tips for navigating through them¹⁴.



¹⁴Ferguson, B. (2019, May 3). The Agile Guide to Winning at Team Development [Web log post]. Retrieved 2021, from <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/teamwork/navigate-tuckman-stages-of-team-development>.

A Framework: Group Evolution

Underlying all of these stages is the planning that drives the group forward. Strategic planning at the group level provides clear direction for members to be productive and successful. While there are many different models and methods to complete this process, they each contain key elements that need to be addressed. A common non-profit model for strategic planning is called Real-Time Strategic Planning. Below we will categorize the steps of this model into four questions your group should be asking during the strategic planning process and provide tips for how to translate this to a small group.



Think about:

- Who the individuals are that make up the group.
- What the group does and how you do it. This may include answering this for your role in the larger organization.

Identify:

- What makes your group unique and the best fit for what you do.
 - How the group is currently sustained.
-

Think about:

- The group's history including past members and activities.
- What the community and environment around the group is.

Identify:

- Any competitors or potential collaborators for what you do.
 - What has and has not worked for the group in the past.
-

Think about:

- Current trends and initiatives in the organization and field.
- Big picture ideas and dreams of the group.

Identify:

- Realistic goals based on these dreams.
 - Any potential barriers your group may face and how you will overcome them.
-

Think about:

- What current resources are available to you and what resources might you need.
- How you will evaluate your progress and success.

Identify:

- Sustainability measures including funding and membership growth.
 - Step by step strategies for achieving your goals.
-

As groups evolve and continue to encounter new situations, we encourage you to revisit these questions as well as the strategies discussed in our toolkits.

¹⁵La Piana, D. (2018). The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution: Facilitator's Guide [PDF]. *Fieldstone Alliance*. https://www.lapiana.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Nonprofit_Strategy_Revolution_Facilitators_Guide.pdf.