

AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Content is from Engaging Youth in Community Decision Making toolkit

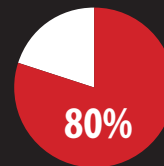
Youth Engagement empowers young people to have a voice in decisions that affect them. Getting youth to participate in activities and decisions that adults ultimately control is not true engagement. **Authentic Youth Engagement** requires that young people have actual authority and responsibility, as well as opportunities to develop the skills needed to make sound decisions. For programs, systems, community collaborations, and policymakers, it means working as partners with youth, instead of making decisions for them or only providing services to them. **Young people become agents of change instead of targets to be changed.**

True Youth Engagement requires a fundamental shift. Young people must have an authentic voice in the design, development and day-to-day functions of activities. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this shift from adult-directed to youth-owned.

“**Adultism**” is a harmful and pervasive pattern of adult behaviors and attitudes toward children and young people. It is based on adult’s beliefs that they are better, more advanced, and more highly developed than children and youth. A 1997 survey found that the majority of U.S. adults believed the next generation would make the country worst. The effect of this mindset on youth was evident in other surveys during the same period, which showed that:



**3 OUT OF 4 OF AMERICA’S YOUTH BELIEVED
ADULTS DID NOT VALUE THEIR IDEAS AND OPINIONS**



**MORE THAN 80% OF YOUTH BELIEVED THEMSELVES
TO BE UNFAIRLY AND NEGATIVELY STEREOTYPED.**

What adults can do: The path to authentic youth engagement is not easy. Believing in the capacities of young people is not enough. Adultism, other prejudices, and myths about young people must be overcome. Empowering youth to make decisions and take actions that will change their communities is a fundamental change for adults, organizations and decision makers.

Ironically, without the help of adults, genuine youth engagement cannot happen. As adults, we must not even attempt to partner with young people unless we are willing to give control to them. We must share our power, knowledge, and resources. We must be willing to listen when it’s difficult to hear what they have to say. Recognizing that we all learn by making mistakes, we must be willing to let them falter without withdrawing our support or trust. We must give them credit along with responsibility. We must allow them to use the resources that we have worked to develop.