

TIPS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE ON GOOD YOUTH/ADULT

RELATIONSHIPS

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Critical Input from Young People

The information contained in our series of booklets was compiled as a direct result of several years of informal research, with input from more than 600 young people worldwide. Young people played an integral role in the creation and editing of these booklets.

What to Keep in Mind When Reading this Booklet

The most important idea to keep in mind while using this booklet series is that the key role of adults is to assist and support young people. Young people are inherently intelligent, cooperative and caring. When they are given space and encouragement, they will flourish. Many adults have put great effort into learning how to assist young people. These are some guidelines that have been used effectively.



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Tips from Young People on Good Youth/Adult Relationships

Being allies to young people is extremely fulfilling. We are smart to choose it. We care immensely about the young people in our lives and we want nothing more than for them to have safe, meaningful lives. We hate to watch them struggle and we want to protect them from getting hurt and prevent them from making bad decisions. Assisting young people to have their lives go well, however, is not an easy task. We get frustrated with them. We feel awkward and think they don't want us around. It can be hard to get close to them and have their situations remind us of the difficult parts of our younger years.

As allies our jobs can be overwhelming. There are things that need to get done. We must teach people how to read. A fund-raiser for a bike trip needs to get pulled off. We must get dinner on the table. Our supervisors, boards and funders have their own expectations of us. All these things understandably pull us away from the young people themselves. This dynamic, combined with our own feelings and frustrations, gets in the way of the natural process of getting close.

Why the Emphasis on Relationships?

People will make big changes in their lives when they can tell that someone cares about them. Strong, respectful relationships with adults and with each other give young people safety and confidence to transform their lives. Also, all successful programs and organizing philosophies work because of people's relationships with each other. From a local community effort to build a youth center to the international movement to end apartheid, people and relationships are behind social change. This human caring is where

deep, permanent transformation comes from. The same is true of forming relationships with young people. In any setting—an after school program, loving and respectful family relations, school clubs or church youth groups—things function well and lead to life changing experiences when they are based on caring, committed relationships.

This booklet is designed to help adults think about our relationships with young people. Not only are relationships with young people key to helping them have the lives that they want, but they can enrich our own lives. This booklet also talks about how to deal with the day-to-day stress that comes up in our work. Getting to the root of these issues and figuring out how to get really close will have a tremendous impact on our lives.

Play and laugh a lot. Young people are full of life. They love to have fun. Often we feel that we have to have serious conversations or do something educational. Play hard, laugh, be silly, enjoy each other, let go of your inhibitions about play. This is one of the quickest ways to build relationships. You may even have to push for this because young people will not expect you to want to play.

When you play, try not to let yourself fall into competitiveness. Don't wrestle or play soccer to win. Play to have some good contact. Notice the young person's skill level and challenge her at that level. Sometimes you may choose to win if it seems like it will be a good push for her. Try to be aware of what will be the best challenge.

General Insights on Relationships

Look for games and activities that bring up a lot of laughter. Laughter is particularly important. When people laugh, they feel easier, and hesitations dissolve. Laughter is a release of tension and fear. Things go easier and people feel relieved after they've had a good laugh.

Take play and laughter into your organizing with young people, also. You can get business done and have fun at the same time. Try planning games and hang-out time into meetings. Business will get done much faster if you add play time. People will stay invested and remember that they want to come back.

Learn from young people. We learn a lot from young people. Each person in the world knows things that no one else knows. If we take the time to hear what the young people around us are telling us, we will learn new things every day. Because of the stereotypes we all carry about young people, we assume that we have more information and experience, and we forget to notice how much we can learn from them.

Value young people's ideas. Young people are intelligent. Seek their input. You may have more information about certain things, but there is a difference between information and intelligence. People have varying amounts of information, but each person has her own unique perspective and experiences life in her own unique way. You might find yourself thinking "Oh, I went through that when I was her age." But you didn't. You might have gone through something similar, but you can't assume that gives you the solution to her problem. Young people have excellent opinions and thoughts about many different subjects, and they

especially know what's best for young people. For instance, in schools, they know which teachers they can learn from, they have ideas on how the school could run better. We should value what they have to say.

Never believe that they don't have an opinion about something. You might have to ask them to express their ideas at least ten different times and you may have to ask in ten different ways. When given information and time to think, met with the expectation that "of course they do know," young people will come up with brilliant opinions and solutions for almost any situation.

Go to their space and turf. Young people are often asked to be part of the adult world. Most of their time—in school, in youth programs, at home—is controlled by our standards. When we want to know how their day was, we expect them to come sit at the dinner table and tell us in ways that make us feel comfortable, instead of having them tell us over a game of basketball or whatever they feel comfortable with. If we can reverse the power dynamic so that we show respect and value for their world, trust will come more easily.

Go to their neighborhood. Hang out with them at their favorite pizza place. Learn about their favorite music. Make an effort to try rollerblading even if it scares you. Sit in the bathroom and help them put on make-up to get ready for a date. They will appreciate any effort on your part to get to know their culture and way of doing things. They may laugh at you, make fun of the way you dance or speak Spanish. Laugh with them. Don't take it personally. The laughter is an excellent way for them to break the barriers and get close to you.



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Speak to young people with utmost respect. Always speak to young people with complete respect. Often when we were young we were treated as if people thought we were cute or talked to us as if we were in the way. Understandably, some of this will come out when we talk to young people. Our tone of voice might get funny in ways we don't even notice. Young people will notice this. If you can show them that you respect their thinking, will listen carefully and take seriously what they have to say, it will be empowering to you and the young people around you. If you know that you've just spoken to someone in a way that you didn't mean to, don't get defensive. You don't need to pretend it didn't happen. It's okay to apologize and explain that your voice just does that sometimes.



One-on-one relationships push us to notice things about each other that we wouldn't in other situations.

Let young people be in charge. Be willing to follow their lead, even if it means playing games you don't like to play or going to movies you don't want to see. Let them have a say in when you meet and what you're going to do. Find things that they can teach you. Resist the urge to guide the direction you want them to go. If they see that you are willing to give them power in the relationship, they will see you as more of the peer that you are and open up to you more about their lives.

Allow young people to feel discouraged. We care a lot about young people. We want them to be successful, know how good and smart they are and be happy. It would be wonderful if we could fix everything for them, if we could make the people they fight with at school disappear or have them stop hanging out with that friend who we know is going to get them into hard situations. But we can't. They must figure things out for themselves.

If we can listen to young people's discouragement and not get fooled by it, they will be able to move through it and come to the solutions that make the most sense for them. Be confident that they will find solutions while at the same time leaving them room to feel without talking them out of the feelings. Sometimes it can be helpful to exaggerate the discouragement by saying, "You're right, nothing will ever change." This usually allows them to laugh and to see how unreal the discouragement is. Another way is to let them talk it out and tell you how hopeless they feel. We all need a place to talk about how frustrated we are with the world without having someone try to convince us that everything is going to be fine.

Appreciate young people. Simple appreciations make a huge difference. Often our attention goes to the problems in our lives or the things that we're not good at doing. Specifically and sincerely notice the things that you love about the young people around you and let them know. We often think caring and appreciative things about people from a distance. Risk the embarrassment and let the appreciations out. We are all dying for people to notice our wonderful human qualities. We all truly have so many.



You should never expect young people to be your unconditional listeners or to handle information that may be hard on them.

Be open about you. There are lots of different degrees to which you can share about yourself and your life. Each day you could share something good that happened the day before or you could sincerely ask a young person's advice on a difficult situation in your life. Be open about the places where you struggle. You should never expect young people to be your unconditional listeners or to handle information that may be hard on them. At the same time, do push yourself to take their thinking seriously and notice how much they have to offer you personally.

We often feel like our relationships with young people need to be one way. It helps to build their trust and commitment to you if they can feel like they matter in your life. Young people have a lot to offer you.



Crisis situations are an opportunity to build real trust and closeness.

Build one-on-one relationships. Often we work with young people in groups, or, if we are parents, we could have more than one child. One-on-one relationships push us to notice things about each other that we wouldn't in other situations. This individual time can be one afternoon a week or whatever time you can find. This one-on-one time can take many forms. It can be a listening appointment.¹ This is uninterrupted time set aside to listen to a young person and assist her to think through a specific issue or situation. It can also be play time, like playing a game of basketball or going to a movie or out for ice cream. It can also just be helping someone with homework or walking him home. Any way that you can figure out will make a difference.

When we get busy, the first things to go are individual relationships. If you think back to your child-

¹ For more information on listening appointments, refer to *Listening to Young People*.

hood, probably the people who made the biggest impression on your life took a special investment in you in some way. This is a crucial part of being allies.

Be consistent and committed. Make a commitment to spend some type of quality time with a young person or a group of young people for a specific period of time. Keep to the commitment. Make the times that you plan to get together a priority in your life. When you get busy, dates with young people will feel like the easiest thing in your schedule to cancel. Don't. Make meeting times as regular as possible so there won't be confusion about when you're getting together. Young people have a lot of inconsistency in their lives and it will mean a lot to them if you follow through.



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Be persistent. Sometimes you will arrange a time to do something and have a commitment with a young person and she will not come through. It's difficult not to take that personally, but it truly doesn't have much to do with you. You may feel like they don't care or don't think your time is important. That's not true. They may forget that they care. Young people are constantly told that their lives and struggles aren't important, and soon they start to believe it and act it out. This leads to the self-fulfilling prophecy. The young person begins to think "I'm not respected or taken seriously, so I won't take myself seriously or respect myself." For instance, when a young person breaks up with his girlfriend at age fifteen, he might get told "That's okay, dear. You'll find true love someday." His hurt is just as legitimate as that of an adult who gets a divorce. The message, though, is that as you get older your love and hurts get more real.

When they don't show up or call, keep trying and letting them know that you want them, that they're important, that it makes a difference to you that you get to know them and that you want to know about their lives. This will take some practice. Eventually you will get good at communicating this to them and they will start to believe you. Keep plugging away. It takes time. Enjoy the learning process!

Intervene. Don't be afraid to intervene in people's lives—which goes for parents, youth workers and teachers alike. Sometimes respect will mean not withdrawing from a person. If you see a young person being harmful to herself or to other people or in need of some positive direction, step in and be a real force in her life. If you discover that a young person in your life has a problem with drugs or is in an abusive relationship, get involved. Don't let a bad situation continue for the sake of not being controlling, or because we feel shy or feel we don't know what to do, or maybe that it will go away.

Crisis situations are opportunities to strengthen relationships. If someone is having a personal crisis, such as a death in the family, coming out about sexual identity, being kicked out of the house, you have an excellent opening to let him know that you care and to have a positive impact on his life. Give him a place to talk about how he's feeling and help him think for himself about what steps he needs to take in the situation. Boundaries that might have separated you before will be weakened. Crisis situations are an opportunity to build real trust and closeness. We get used to people getting through tough situations on

their own. We get timid and don't want to impose. Impose. Assume you are wanted and needed. People need each other. You can have an impact on a young person's life in a very real way. There is nothing more naturally satisfying than really being there for another human being.

Working class or poor young people. Class distinctions and stereotypes, on top of adultism (the oppression of young people),² gives young people an extra message that their thinking is not valuable. When working class young people are around majority middle class people, they may get quiet and feel uncomfortable about the way they talk or think. We are trained to think that accent and grammar reflect intelligence. This confuses all of us regardless of our class background. Delight in all the different ways people speak. There is no correct or better way. If their idioms are different than yours, try out some of theirs. If you can do this in a respectful way it will make them laugh and feel easier.

Encourage them to share their thinking. It works best if you can ask detailed and specific questions. Ask, "Have you ever had someone say to you, 'It's just a stage' or, 'You'll see when you grow up?'" These questions will get people thinking and talking more easily than "Have you ever been discriminated against?"³ Get excited about their ideas. They know better than any other group of young people that the system is a mess, and with some support they often get very excited about changing it.

² For more information on adultism, refer to the booklet *Get the Word Out!*
³ For more ideas for questions, refer to the booklet *Get the Word Out!*

Things To Keep In Mind About Specific Groups

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*Encourage
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Young men. Boys lose human contact and closeness very early. They are supposed to grow up and be strong men. People are often scared of them and believe the rough exterior. The bigger they get, the more isolated they seem to become. They're expected to be strong enough to figure things out for themselves. Young men then begin to believe this and act like they don't want or need anything from anyone. It's important that we find ways to hang in there with them. They do need us, though they're probably not going to tell us this. Try telling jokes and get them laughing. Lightly push them around. Look them straight in the eye and smile. Say "I know you care. You can't fool me." Reach for the person inside. They are loving, sincere individuals. We simply need to believe that and keep experimenting with ways to leave them room to show it.

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Young women. Young women, on the other hand, are expected to need help. People often worry about them and think that they can't take care of themselves. Even the strongest young women believe on some level that their survival is dependent on what other people think about them.

Notice when they get quiet. When young men and young women are together, young men quickly become the center of attention. In formal groups, try to encourage everyone to say something, even if it's just a few words about their day.

Try noticing or even recording a group interaction sometime and study the male/female dynamics. In informal settings, notice who isn't talking and try to bring them into the conversation. If you can help young women in this way they will quickly take advantage of the opportunity and begin to play a more active role. They have a lot to say. Often they just need an encouraging jump start.

Be aware of unintentional stereotyping of young people. Often we see a group of teens hanging out on a corner and we assume we know exactly what they are like and what they are talking about. We assume young black men are _____, and Asian women are _____, that all young people are heterosexual, that all white young people are _____. We can fill in the blanks in our own ways. Yes, specific groups of young people have certain qualities in common, but the assumptions about these common qualities only serve to keep us separate from the individuals we are getting to know. Remember that each young person is an individual, unique in every way. Watch people and notice how they handle different situations. Ask them what they believe in. Go after them as people.

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It would make a huge difference in the world if all adults remembered to put young people as a priority in their lives.

Our Role As Allies To Young People

The job. The job of adults with young people is not to give them perfect childhoods, not to make sure they never get hurt or are protected from everything and happy all the time. That is really not our job. Our fears make us think that's the job. Our fears make us long for perfection. It does not exist. It is not part of reality and it is not part of the job of allies to provide this myth for the young people in our lives.

A better picture of our job is that we try to give young people perspective on how inherently smart and powerful they are; try to protect them from things they cannot handle yet—things that would do permanent damage, things they do not understand well; and to provide the resources to feel the difficult feelings and clarify their own thinking and opinions as they gain independence.⁴

Professionalism keeps us separate. All of us (particularly men) are scared that we have some horrible trait that will hurt a young person some day. When we hear horror stories in the news about child molesters, etc., we start doubting each other's intentions. This separation is counterproductive. If we can't support and depend on each other, our work suffers. It also keeps us separate from young people. We are told we should keep a professional distance. What is a professional distance? Young people are our friends and they are real parts of our lives.

We do want to protect young people from adults acting out hurtful behaviors at them when as young people they do not have enough power to respond. We do not have to limit our relationships with them, but do be thoughtful. Notice what level of closeness

⁴ Modified from *The Job of Parents*, by Tim Jackins, Rational Island Publishers, Seattle, WA.

people feel comfortable with. Don't go beyond that. At the same time, don't hold back. Have fun and enjoy the young people in your life. Safe touching is extremely healthy and it is important for young people to have models of this. There is a big difference between "good" touching and "bad" touching. Educate yourself and young people about how to handle hurtful situations. Let them know that they have a right to say no. Be smart, but don't let this hold you back. We all need each other.

Involve parents. Get to know parents, answer their questions. Invite them to events. Like them. Tell them what a wonderful and important job they are doing. If parents don't feel safe about what their sons and daughters are involved in, they won't allow them to participate. If you're inviting a young person out to the movies or to a women's support group, you need to make sure that the parents understand all the details. Let the young person know that you are going to be talking to her parents. Reassure her that you are not checking up on her or breaking any confidentiality, but that this will insure that your relationship will work better and be longer lasting.

Appreciate parents. Parents work extremely hard. We often fall into blaming parents for young people's difficulties. Sincerely appreciate them. Notice everything they do well, how hard they work and how much they care. Parents are wonderful and we should notice and communicate that to them. In situations where you know of a parent who is harming a young person in some way, remember to reach out to the parent as a person while you work to stop the harmful behavior.



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Train other allies. There are many people who love young people a lot and would be excellent allies. Many of them simply haven't yet made a decision to do the work. Invite them in. Set up opportunities for them to participate in your programs. Encourage them to build relationships with young people. Appreciate every effort they make.

You know a lot about young people that you could share with other adults. It would make a huge difference in the world if all adults remembered to put young people as a priority in their lives. Think about what would be missing from your life if it did not include young people. Bring other adults into your world. Share your love for this work.

Back each other. Young people are to be taken seriously, and so are youth workers and parents. There is no work in the world that is more valuable than the work that we are doing. People deserve to get paid well and get lots of assistance with this work. This means that we are going to need to get together as allies to young people and organize for respect, recognition, better pay and benefits, and better resources. This will take many different forms: organizing youth worker alliances, setting up support systems, sharing skills and resources, going public and changing legislation.

Make mistakes. Consider this an experiment in progress. Delight in your mistakes. You will make them. The more active you are, the more mistakes you will make. Trust that you've done well already, that you know many things about how to make the situation work and that you will figure out the rest as you go. Be willing to be the first one to take risks, to be uncool, and to show that you care. Don't try to cover up mistakes. Admit them, explain them if necessary, apologize and move on. "Oops, I think I just said that pretty disrespectfully. Sorry, I'm just having a hard day. It has nothing to do with you." The less defensive you can be, the quicker the mistakes diffuse.

How to support each other as allies. We often put ourselves and our growth on the back burner. It's extremely useful to get support for ourselves because: (1) Our group will grow much faster if we don't feel stuck or burned out. (2) We ask young people to take good care of themselves, unite and work together as a group. Why not model that ourselves? (3) You are important. This will help you enjoy your work on a different level.

Get together with other adults and take turns talking and listening about the following:

- Share what your life was like when you were younger.
- Remember all the things you loved about being a young person and how smart you were.
- All the times that you were told "you can't," that you were stifled or punished for speaking out.



We care very much about young people and we can play an important role in helping their lives go well.



This means that we are going to need to get together as allies to young people and organize for respect, recognition, better pay and benefits, and better resources.

- Share about burn-out and all of your frustrations with your current situation.

- Share and delight in each other's successes. Notice what a wonderful difference you are making in these young people's lives.

Format: We often talk over each other and no one gets heard. Try this: One person talks while the other person listens with real, aware, delighted attention for a set amount of time. Then switch. It is more effective if people take turns talking in pairs or in small groups.⁵

Appreciate yourself. You have done well. Notice the ways that you have been and continue to be a committed ally to young people. It's tempting to put our attention on the things that we haven't figured out yet or the ways that we could be better. Each day we need to stop and notice the things that we've accomplished. Of course things aren't exactly the way you want them to be. This is no reason to blame yourself. Each one of us fights hard every day—we're doing the best that we can at each moment. Structure appreciation into your day. Meet with co-workers or friends at the beginning or end of each day and each share something you did well that day. The extra attention helps. Risk being nice to yourself and appreciating yourself and other people for the work we do. It's much more fun. Know that important things are happening. The results of this work are hard to measure. Take a leap of faith and assume you are wonderful.

⁵ Use the listening guidelines described in the booklets *Listening to Young People* and *Leading a Youth Worker Resource Group*.

Remember that you're making a difference.

Think back on your childhood or teen years to the adults who made a difference in your life: the Girl Scout leader who took you on hiking trips and helped you take your body seriously, or a neighbor who would take you bowling, teach you how to cook or play soccer with you. Do you think she knew the positive effect she was having on your life? Probably not. Like you, she probably tried her best and hoped that she was having some influence on how you felt about yourself. The same is true of your work. Although the young people may not be able to tell you that you are making a difference, you are. This work is very hard to measure. Any effort you make is extremely valuable. Know that important things are happening even if you can't see them.

The best time for action is now. We care very much about young people and we can play an important role in helping their lives go well. We can't wait until we feel comfortable. Assume you know enough and are ready now. Become great friends with young people and help them organize today. Young people are the present, and together we are all the future.

Enjoy! Young people are fun. They inspire us. They are full of hope. They remind us how important it is to play, to listen closely to people, to be tight friends. They push us to treat each other with complete respect. Follow their lead. Bring other adults along. Enjoy yourself.



Each one of us fights hard every day—we're doing the best that we can at each moment.



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