

Involving Young People in Coalitions

by Wendy Krom

A graphic consisting of two overlapping rectangular boxes. The top box is white with a black border and contains the text "Coalition Building Tips". The bottom box is a slightly larger white rectangle with a black border, partially overlapping the top one from the bottom-left corner.

There's no magical answer to the question, "How do you meaningfully involve young people in coalitions?". However, it's important to remember that the principles of coalition building are the same for all people. And the three most important principles, as we know, are: 1. Relationships, 2. Relationships, and 3. Relationships! Or as some would say, Food, Folks, and Fun. But here are some other Tips to think about:

- Be an ally.** Be sure young people are involved in decision making at all levels of your coalition. Young people's perspectives are critical to any program or project which intends to serve youth. Be sure that young people are general members, and not just token representatives. Help them to develop skills to participate equally with adults in decision making.
- Start with where the youth are.** If some young people come to your coalition meeting and say, "We're sick of getting kicked off the park benches just because of our age and the way we dress," don't say, "Well, that's really sad, but we've got funding for teen pregnancy prevention this year. Can you come to our meeting and talk with us about teen sexuality?" Deal first with their feelings.
- Keep it simple.** Being able to experience small successes early on in youth organizing is important. Youth feel more empowered and more connected to the group if they are involved in planning and completing a project.
- Encourage expression.** In meetings, be sure that the young people have an opportunity to express their ideas. One way to do this is to go around the room and ask each person, youth or adult, to give an idea or opinion about the topic being discussed. Some may say they don't know or don't have an opinion; but don't underestimate young people. Have high expectations, and they will be met.
- Ask them to plan.** Another way to be sure young people are heard at your meetings is to ask them to help plan the agenda. They may even ask for a special time during the meeting for only young people to speak about what's on their mind. If so, be sure adults just listen!
- Develop leadership.** Help youth develop leadership skills by providing opportunities for them to lead. It's important that young people get involved in leadership positions not only in youth groups, but on all committees of your organization. Why not have a young person chair the finance or even planning committee?
- Listen.** Active listening is an extremely important skill to develop and use. Provide support and technical assistance when appropriate. Training is available for adults on how to listen to young people and on how to be an effective ally to youth. Also, provide training for your full coalition (young people and adults) on how to develop youth-adult partnerships. To help in this, see the resources on the next page.

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For more tips, please turn over

Pitfalls for Adults in Working with Youth in Coalitions

The best-intended and skilled adults are still prone to make mistakes in involving youth in coalitions and other activities. Here is a list of common pitfalls. It might be helpful for adults to scan this list periodically in order to stay aware.

- Being over-controlling and scared
- Being condescending
- Giving insignificant or peripheral tasks
- Talking too much; being boring
- Being critical or scolding
- Giving too little guidance, leaving the young people too much on their own
- Giving out too much rhetoric about youth empowerment; getting people hyped up about power
- Setting up confrontations and adversarial relationships with people in power
- Not wanting to be bothered with extra hassle
- Not making it a priority; too busy
- Being irresponsible; not treating young people with same care as adult group; being late; no follow through
- Not really listening and taking youth seriously; always talking people out of their opinions as in "I know best and I'll teach you..." attitude
- Teaching the politics of self interest rather than caring about the whole
- Being afraid to teach values or teaching negative values
- Teaching dishonesty; "You've got to lie in order to deal with unfair bureaucrats or oppressive policies or racism"
- Not holding to the highest standards of incorrupt behavior; not being a role model the young people can admire
- Feeling powerless; therefore not carrying youth involvement to its logical level of impact on the larger community
- Failing to realize that young people might feel used, and not acting to prevent it
- Not using good group process
- Not confronting issues of abuse of power or other acting out soon enough; letting things slide and just get worse
- Allowing committees to get isolated from rest of young people and not supported by staff
- Empowering young people and disempowering staff, ending up with staff resenting the youth

These "pitfalls" are adapted from the YouthBuild Policy Committee Handbook, published by YouthBuild USA. An affiliated organization, Youth on Board, also encourages young people's voices in nonprofit groups. In addition, Youth on Board publishes a manual (\$12.00) on involving young people on boards of directors. *For further information, contact both YouthBuild USA and Youth on Board at 58 Day Street, PO Box 440322, Somerville, MA 02144, 617-623-9900.*

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