

Tips for Working with Teens as Partners

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When asked the benefit of involving teenagers in program planning and delivery, adults often respond that the teens gain valuable skills from the experience, or that it provides a meaningful way for youth to be involved in their community. Adults perceive youth leadership as primarily benefiting young people. Yet research tells us that youth-adult partnerships (bringing together the strengths of young people and adults in shared work projects) benefit organizations and adults as well, creating stronger, more vibrant programs. When youth are viewed not simply as recipients of service but as resources with unique gifts to share, their talents, energy and enthusiasm are unleashed, improving programs and communities.

Here are some hints for recruiting and working with teenagers.

Recruiting Teenagers:

- **Prepare a job description.** Teens need to know the specifics about their commitment. Outline the expectations, time commitment, and benefits (e.g. skills gained, service hours granted) of the position. Be honest and professional.
- **Recruit teens where they are.** Select appropriate places to advertise the position such as schools that require service learning, Key Clubs, and volunteer fairs. Make connections with adults who can direct teenagers to your program.
- **Speak to what motivates teens.** Working with friends, independence and authority, authentic work experience, feeling valued...all these motivate young people to volunteer their time. Make sure your teen positions contain these elements.
- **Promptly follow recruitment with training** Perhaps more than their adult counterparts, teens quickly find new activities to fill their time. Don't expect to recruit teens one month and train them two months later. Likely they will have found other things to do.
- **Mobilize teens in recruitment efforts.** Teens are the best source to bring their peers to your program. Explore their ideas for recruitment then ask them to post position announcements, talk to their friends, and spread the word.



Coaching Teenagers:

- **Build a relationship.** Get to know the teens you're working with and allow them to know you. Phone calls to check in, notes of appreciation, and genuine interest in their lives helps insure success and solidifies their commitment.
- **Provide quality training.** Teens are most effective when they are empowered as leaders, not just serving in support roles for adults. This requires good training including clear expectations, materials and skill development to do the job.
- **Help teens to organize.** Organizational skills vary among individuals, but teens generally have less experience in pulling things together. Adults should regularly check with the teens to assure plans are in place and explore with teens any problems they may not foresee. Adults bring experience teens haven't yet acquired.



- **Recognize and support their limitations.** Teens do not have the same access to resources as adults. School schedules, transportation, and money for materials—all these things need to be considered when enlisting their involvement.
- **Have high expectations.** Believe in them and know they can produce. Communicate this belief through your words and behavior. Be patient as they learn, but don't be afraid to give guidance to help them improve.
- **Affirm and recognize.** For teens as well as adults, a little praise goes a long way. Give feedback on their work, encourage them, acknowledge their strengths, and celebrate their success, both formally and informally. But don't over praise. It can sound patronizing if out of proportion to the teen's work.

With the appropriate planning, training and attention, teenagers are incredibly valuable assets to most any program. Tapping into their energy, ideas, and time involves effort, but they can be a powerful part of program leadership when trained and supported in their role.