

Involving Youth in Research

This document raises issues and gives suggestions about involving youth in research. Shared from Youth Empowering Strategies (YES!): <http://www.youthempoweringstrategies.org/>

Other resources about engaging youth in research:

- Community Action Model (CAM) (www.sfdph.org/dph/comupg/oprograms/CHPP/CAM/): resource for helping youth develop tools and ways of thinking necessary for effective participation in CBPR. The model has been used to teach dozens of youth critical thinking and research skills for understanding the root causes of problems, identifying contributing factors, gathering data, evaluating action-oriented change strategies, and proposing policy solutions.
- An academic review of youth in CBPR: https://webcentral.uc.edu/eprof/media/attachment/eprofmediafile_1921.pdf
- Involving youth as researchers in School-Based Health Centers: <http://www.publichealthreports.org/issueopen.cfm?articleID=2114>
- Example of Digital Animation/Social Media to Reach Youth: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Briana-and-Damon-Violence-Prevention/140386882682185>
- Engaging Youth in CBPR Using the Creative Arts: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2862642/>

Introduction

Youth are vulnerable for a plethora of health and behavioral issues. Youth ages 12-24 are confronted with violence at one of its highest levels to date, teen pregnancy, and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), childhood obesity, etc. These health issues can also result in depression, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness.

There is a need for research to be conducted to better understand these issues and how to address them. **Engaging youth and incorporating their unique expertise into the research process is important when addressing issues related to their health.** Using a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to research on and youth can be effective and engaging. By using CBPR, community organizations can collaborate with academic institutions to address the community's priorities and gain expertise from both the community level and the academic level. It may provide a more complete and informed view of youth health issues to better serve the needs of the community.

Using a CBPR approach also ensures that the research conducted benefits the community. Community and academics are equal in all levels in the research and information can be given to the greater community as the process occurs. Community organizations can guide the research and tailor it to their own community priorities. This is important because each community is unique and has their own set of norms, behaviors, and history.

Youth can give adults insight to a world that they are no longer a part of. Youth experience their world in different way than that of an adult. Youths experience change and experiment continuously, from what they wear to what they listen to. In order to keep up with the change, youth must be involved in CBPR. Youth have creative ways of processing different perspectives. Youth bring to the table a different expertise. They have specific insight on how health issues are affecting them.

Where to Start

It is important to have youth engaged from the inception of research. If an organization is fortunate to have youth attending their programs, begin to ask them what are key issues for youth. If your organization does not have youth or a small presence, utilize your current members. Ask your current youth to invite friends that would be good at giving input. While having a large group is great, for

youth at a larger scale, retention can become an issue. Therefore, a small group of dedicated youth can work just as well.

It is imperative from the start to **ask what are the most important topics to them**. As adults, we often times forget that youth have a voice and one that wants to be heard. If youth cannot narrow down specific topics, it is handy to have articles or statistics about youth--if possible, statistics pertaining to their demographics. Youth can also be engaged initially by conducting a needs assessment or questionnaire with people in the community.

This process can be used as a learning tool. Begin to **explain to youth what research is**. Have a session on what research is and how it is used. Some youth may have heard of the word, but never understood its full meaning. Also go further and explain what CBPR is and how it differs from traditional research. Make sure the youth have a pen and paper available to write down questions, if they have any so that they are addressed. Youth may not understand completely the first time around, but the more involved they are the easier the ideas will become.

An organization will also want to develop a community board for their project. If this board is already present, the **board should consider having a youth representative**. If the board is not formed, then including a youth as one of the member will help include the youth perspective. It is important that this youth is not completely active in the research to insure that the guidance is objective. The board should also be reflective of the population of the community and the research is trying to affect. This could include other youth service providers, organizations aimed at specific health issues, or institutions in the community.

Organizing the Research and How Youth Fit

Once you have developed the research topic and question, it is key to begin thinking about how to organize the research. It is even more critical to begin thinking about how youth fit in this organization. Even in an organizations research process, **training** is needed to help staff and others involved understand the principles and processes involved. Therefore, youth should receive the same amount of training given in an age appropriate way. This may take a little more creative thinking, but can be just as effective. This can include going on a field trip to other communities with youth engaged in research, brainstorming ideas, and watching documentaries and having open discussion. When adults and youth work closely together, it can result in greater success and transparency.

The activities that youth engage in must also be challenging and interesting. This can be accomplished in the very beginning when discussing the research agenda. However, it can fall between the cracks when organizing the research. Youth have to feel empowered to invest in the project. They have to be involved in the decision making process and not that they are there just for the presence. Youth need to understand their role and how that role affects the overall research.

Adults in the organizations also have to **respect the differences that youth bring**. Adults should encourage creativity and open dialogue. **This allows the youth to develop skills not only for the research project, but for life**. Organizations and staff members prior to the research project, should have a clear sense of the depth they intend the youth to have. If as an organization you intend on conducting research on youth, then it gives the study more credibility to have the youth involved on all levels. If you are conducting research on adults in the community, it may be important to have youth on hand to discuss what factors contributed to these health disparities.

Tasks given to youth should also come with clear guidelines, expectations, and deadlines. All of these stipulations should be realistic and take into consideration that these tasks are in addition to all of the other responsibilities places on youth. Youth should also feel comfortable discussing concerns of tasks or deadlines. A timeline or calendar is a good way of keeping youth on task. This should be

something to refer to quickly and on their own. It is also important to remember that youth have other issues of their own that coincide with the project, it is best to do a check in with youth so they can discuss issues that are affecting them. This can help build relationships between the adult and youth.

Research Questions, Goals and Objectives

Having a research question that fits the topic discussed in the beginning is vital. The question should not be too broad or too narrow. Youth should be able to list all the questions they feel would make sense. Adults, using their knowledge and expertise, should not dismiss the questions listed by youth but rather help youth work through all the possible options. Once a question is decided on, **both youth and adults should evaluate the question to see if the question is researchable, able to be quantified or shaped by qualitative data, and if the question is of importance to the community.**

Once a research question is designed, the youth and adults should create goals aimed at answering the question. The goals must be realistic and consider the youth involved. If the question at hand is about childhood obesity, then it is a lofty goal to make all youth lose 20 pounds. It is very difficult to make youth change their eating habits and can be even more difficult to make youth lose weight. Youth should help plan the goals using their own expertise. Adults should add their own knowledge to help create goals.

It is necessary for youth to understand the difference between goals and objectives. Organizations can help this process by using their goals and objectives to differentiate the two. This only adds to the training development for youth. Youth should understand that objectives are steps to get to the goal. They should be measurable and specific. Taking the example above, an objective for a childhood obesity project could be seeing an increase of exercise from zero times a week to two times a week. Again, the youth should be involved in the development of objectives to make sure the objectives are also realistic.

Developing Youth and Adult Relationships

Youth will want to work with adults who they can trust, help, and make them feel important in the process. Once this is achieved, most youth aim to excel because they do not want to disappoint. Youth, especially in adolescence, are trying to figure their place in the world and how they fit in the research agenda. It is important that adults keep youth abreast of everything that happens. Many youth do not check their email often so other sources like texting should be utilized. Also social media can be used so that youth know what is going on.

Adults should also aim to **make the process fun.** While research can be tedious and time consuming, it can also be exciting and interesting. Adults should meet with youth to discuss not only the research, but have a time where they discuss or engage in other activity separate from the research. This creates an environment where youth want to actively participate in.

Once more, make it a priority to involve youth in every step. Talking with them as opposed to talking down at them gives youth autonomy that they may not receive anywhere else. While adults and youth have differences, it is important for adults to promote the similarities as well. Talking about these similarities gives youth the opportunity to feel like a valuable partnership can be formed.

During the Research Process

During the research process, adults and youth should be at a place where they feel comfortable with each other. Be sure to meet routinely and have an agenda in place. If youth do not have a clear agenda of topics they will be discussing, they may lose focus and attention. Involve youth in any changes or challenges in the research. Youth may provide solutions or advise for the challenges presented.

Youth should also be present for the community board meetings to get input from outside individuals who are closest to the research project. This exposes youth to other expertise and recommendations from others. Youth will also begin to learn how to network with people.

At the End

When the research is concluding, youth should be clear of what the end steps are. If data has been collected, it is the job of the adults to work with the youth to analyze what the data says about the research. Youth should be able to ask questions and give input of what items worked and which did not. An evaluation should also be conducted with the youth to see how the research affected their lives. This could be done in the form of a focus group or a questionnaire. This further builds relationships and gives the potential for other research collaborations.