

IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH VOICE

Topic

In this video Brianna Gower, Director of the Young Leaders and Advocates Network, highlights the importance of involving youth in systems change initiatives, especially when those systems are intended to support young people. Youth are capable of actively participating in discussions and activities to promote systems change, but their voices are often missing from the discussion when changes are being considered. Stakeholders who are involved in change efforts may embrace the idea of involving youth voice, but often lack the policies and practices necessary to allow consistent and meaningful engagement from young people.

Relevance of Topic to System-Involved Youth

Linking youth voice to action increases young people's self-efficacy (confidence in their ability to succeed), helps them build deeper community connections, and develop skills that translate into all areas of life. Involving youth in the process of systems change allows young people the opportunity to name barriers facing themselves, their families and communities, and to take action to address those barriers. Creating safe spaces for youth voice and meaningfully involving young people empowers them and makes them feel like they belong, they are valued, and that their contributions matter.

Relevance to Youth with Disabilities

Research shows that youth development and leadership opportunities are important and necessary components for young people with disabilities to thrive and successfully transition into adulthood. This includes:

- Formal and informal mentoring experiences
- Connections with adults and peers with and without disabilities
- Opportunities to develop self-determination, leadership, and self-advocacy skills
- Accessible programs and environments to engage in youth development and leadership
- Training on disability-related rights and responsibilities, policies, history, and culture

Recommendations for Systems Change

- Gain an understanding of the Positive Youth Development framework to explore strategies to build positive outcomes, opportunities for meaningful engagement, and core competencies for involving young people.
- Explore systemic barriers to youth voice and involvement and work with peers to address them.
- Implement strategies to prevent adultism and create partnerships with young people.
- Ensure that activities and resources are accessible to young people by scheduling events for when young people are available, creating materials that are youth-friendly and in plain language, defining key terms and acronyms, addressing transportation/access barriers, and providing disability-related accommodations.
- Ask questions. If you are not sure what is important to young people in your community, how they can and want to be involved, or what helps and what harms, work with peer leaders to begin these conversations with young people.



Learn More

[Young Leaders and Advocates Network \(YLAN\)](#), [Email YLAN](#)

[Act for Youth Center of Excellence. “Positive Youth Development 101.”](#)

[Blakeslee, J. \(2018\). Assessing the Meaningful Inclusion of Youth Voice in Policy and Practice: State of the Science. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University.](#)

[Freechild Institute for Youth and Social Change. “Intro to Youth Voice.”](#)

[Linda Sprague Martinez, Katie Richards-Schuster, Samantha Teixeira, Astraea Augsberger, The Power of Prevention and Youth Voice: A Strategy for Social Work to Ensure Youths’ Healthy Development, Social Work, Volume 63, Issue 2, April 2018, Pages 135–143](#)

[Masselli, B., & Bergan, J. \(2018\). The Role of Youth-Run Organizations in Improving Services and Systems for Youth and Young Adults: A Commentary on the State of the Science. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University](#)

[Marlene Matarese, Lorrin McGinnis, Martha Mora \(2005\). “Youth Involvement in Systems of Care: A Guide to Empowerment”. Washington, D.C., Technical Assistance Partnership.](#)

[National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability. “Guideposts for Success.”](#)

Presenter Information

Brianna Gower is the Director of the Young Leaders and Advocates Network, a member of the Western New York Independent Living, Inc. Family of Agencies, where she is dedicated to empowering and supporting young people across the state. Prior to launching the Young Leaders and Advocates Network, Brianna served as the Director of YOUTH POWER!, through which she oversaw the network’s projects, initiatives, and technical assistance efforts. Throughout her career, Brianna has gained valuable expertise providing technical assistance, leading projects, and organizing youth voice in advocacy. To learn more about Brianna and her work go to the [YLAN Network website](#)

