



The Secret Sauce:

A Recipe for Authentic, Honest, and Trusting Relationships With Youth

This document was updated by the National Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement in 2025.

The Secret Sauce includes the basic ingredients for authentic youth engagement at the practice, peer, and system-change levels. Use this tip sheet to help you think critically about effective strategies for engaging youth.

Basic Ingredients

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| ▷ Be reliable: Follow through on what you say you will do. | ▷ Be aware of the power differential and intentionally share power. |
| ▷ Be consistent and patient: Offer multiple opportunities to engage. | ▷ Use reflective listening. |
| ▷ Be respectful, authentic, and honest in interactions with youth. | ▷ Choose an environment in which they feel comfortable and safe. |
| ▷ Be transparent in decision-making and motivation. | ▷ Be vulnerable with each other. |
| ▷ Give youth choice in all things, including decisions, planning, and sharing their story. | ▷ Lean into self-awareness, work through your own issues, and thoughtfully share your own story. |
| ▷ Create opportunities for youth to: | ▷ Advocate on their behalf. |
| ○ Explore their talents and interests | ▷ Be mindful that words carry connotations that can either support or disempower. |
| ○ Make decisions, take risks, and make mistakes | ▷ Use terms that signal respect and reinforce worth and personal dignity: |
| ○ Learn from successes and mistakes | ○ Youth instead of foster youth, client, or consumer |
| ▷ Treat youth as experts on their lives. | ○ Parent instead of birth parent |
| ▷ Encourage constant two-way communication, collaboration, and mutual feedback. | ○ Family instead of case |
| ▷ Let youth guide the conversation. | |
| ▷ Be curious about the youth's interests, experiences, and hopes for the future. | |

Ingredients for Engaging Youth in System-Level Change Work and Peer Support-Programs

In addition to the basic Secret Sauce ingredients, these extra ingredients are essential for and system-change levels of engagement:work.

Extra Ingredients

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| ▷ Show appreciation for youth expertise and time by providing stipends. | ▷ Remove barriers to participation: |
| ▷ Engage them in projects that suit their skills and interests. | ○ Schedule meetings and activities around school and work. |
| ▷ Recognize them as equal partners in achieving practice and system change. | ○ Provide concrete support (transportation, child care, and accommodations). |
| ▷ Cocreate a vision for how the work should be done. | ▷ Help youth understand strategic sharing of their lived experience. |
| ▷ Set youth up for success with preparation, training, and support. | ▷ Ensure the safety of a young person. |
| | ▷ Support their professional development through debriefings, performance evaluations, and ongoing training. |

Considerations for Critical Thinking

Providing positive experiences, supportive relationships, and safe environments for adolescents to take risks and learn from their mistakes can lead to better health, social, and educational outcomes. Consider the items below to help you think critically about the elements of authentic youth engagement and how they can be employed in your practice:



Considerations for You



Considerations for Your Agency

What could you borrow from the stories that could enhance the relationship?

Think about your own adolescence ...

How can your agency or organization create more opportunities for youth to engage in positive experiences and take risks in safe, supportive environments?

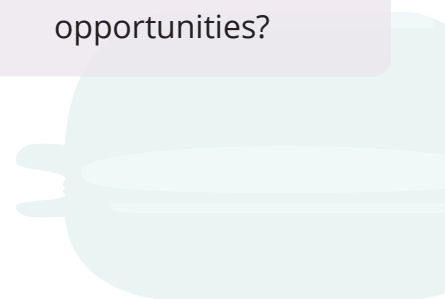
Consider your professional relationships with adolescents ...

Did you have a supportive relationship with an adult or peer that you trusted?

What helped to create that trust? What characteristics made them a supportive adult?

What youth-serving community organizations could you partner with to expand opportunities?

How does your agency or organization benefit from creating such opportunities?



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