

# Tips and Ideas about Assisting Young People

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## Things to remember about your relationship with young people

### 1. Build close peer relationships

Young people will stay involved in a project or support group because of each other and because of you and who you are. Personal relationships are a key. Make the relationships real in your life, not just a place to be a helper. The dance of objectivity is not as helpful with young people as it is with adults.

### 2. Be consistent

Stay in there, no matter what. "Don't give up" is an important rule. Young people need persistent people in their lives. You may feel awkward, but always remember that young people want the connection. Consistency is the most important thing. Making a commitment to a young person or a group for a period of time and following through is the best way to be allowed inside the young people culture. By doing this, you will battle all their feelings of hopelessness about change that they are currently growing up with and dealing with each day. Be aware that your hopelessness will block the connection.

### 3. Be comfortable showing yourself

When asked, share your experiences, your struggles and your successes in life. Talk about very specific areas of your own life without using young people to work out your own suffering. Use your life or someone else's story as a metaphor for them to gain skills and competency, without at the same time expecting them to live the way you would live.

### 4. Always speak to young people with complete respect

Our society has a level of repression that conveys to young people that their thoughts, ideas, and concerns are not very important. Be aware of your tone. Is this the way that you would speak to an adult in your life? Do you speak to young people differently? Is there a perjurious nature about your talk? Do you assume that they cannot make decisions? Show them that you can respect their thinking and listen carefully with as much absolute delight as possible. Taking young people seriously for what they say will empower both you and the young people around you. This particular interface is probably the most important thing in your relationship with young people.

### 5. Don't assume that you will always be right

Sadly and with absolute contradiction, you do not always know better. Our experience in this life is often the excuse we use to oppress young people. You may

have more information that would be valuable to young people when called upon, but young people truly do know what is best for them in many situations, especially in their struggles with other teens. There is an innate knowing that grows within all people and there is a difference between experience and intelligence. Don't talk too much. If you are working in a setting with young people, get feedback from them. Ask them to give you some feedback about how you approach them. This will be an amazing growth experience for you.

6. Allow young people to experience their discouragement

Give young people room to express their doubts. Listen to them with absolute delight. Often our struggle in working with young people is that we want them to feel successful. When we hear discouragement from them, we try telling them how to be more successful. This experience allows us to be dominant over them and holds them back from feeling the experience of life.

7. Give up control without giving up your best thinking

Take charge of the situation by making things go well; organizing yourself, the meeting and the structure. At the same time, be willing to let go, don't take over, and let the decision-making of the teens be the most important thing that you achieve.

It is also important that you not withdraw from young people. If you see a young person being harmful to her/himself or to other people and they are in need of some positive direction, definitely step in, firmly, quietly, and openly. Be a real force in his/her life. All of us need people to step in at different times in our lives to be helpful and give directions when we can't think clearly.

8. Encourage young people empowerment

Encourage young people to take power in every situation. We can help them do this by supplying them with confidence, affirmation, and "cheerleading". While assisting teens in difficult situations, maintain an air of confidence that a young person can follow. Don't set up for failure. Help young people match themselves to pieces of the project or situation that they are ready for. This will give them a small growing edge. Young people will tend to take larger risks and get stuck. Be ready to help them. You will generally see some people taking huge risks and others being too scared to take any risks at all. Gently push them to act on their strength.

9. Be aware of stereotyping of young people

Not all young people are the same. Be careful of dismissing young people's thoughts because they don't sound intelligent or grammatically proper. The way that young people verbalize does not necessarily represent their intelligence or their ability to sort out what it is that they need.

## Things you can do to assist young people

### 1. Go to their space and their turf

Young people are most often asked to be a part of the adult world. You can empower and build a coalition with young people if the work can be done in their space where they feel comfortable. Allowing young people to create the space that makes them feel most comfortable is also a way to help build the relationship. You will find that this is especially important when there are class and race differences. Safety, which is usually a reflection of the environment, needs to be built thoughtfully and carefully.

### 2. In meetings, ask young people to speak first

Never believe that young people don't know. This is where your tenacity and persistence will pay off. You may have to ask them to express their ideas at least ten times. You may have to do it in ten different ways, but it is important that you not take over the air space. You will find that they have thoughts on almost any situation if given enough information, time to think about it, and the feeling that you really want to know. Be aware that when they tell you they don't know or don't have an opinion, this is usually a reaction to the oppression they have experienced as children and later as teenagers that their opinions are not very valuable. Please persist.

### 3. Crisis situations are an opportunity for you

If you have figured out how to get close and can help someone through a crisis situation by maintaining their integrity, creating an era of safety, and being committed to them, trust will automatically follow.

### 4. Assist young people in relying on each other

Take young people seriously and encourage them to take each other seriously and be a true leader of the young people's movement. Their ability to interface with the world will depend on them taking the leadership. It is your responsibility to gently interrupt competition and put downs between races and gender, especially among young men. Be aware of the society's ability to tell young people that they are not full human beings and that their thinking is not valuable. Because of their frustration they tend to internalize messages of not being worthy and take them out on each other as an effort to discharge their anger. Ask young people to give specific positive and growth producing feedback information to one another, including you. You will learn most from them. They will learn most from each other.

### 5. Expect to make lots of phone calls and personal contact

Because young people are so often told in this society that they are not important, we as adults will need to make lots of phone calls to personally remind them that meetings are important and that we want them to come. They may not call back. Again, this society is persistent in telling them they are not worthy. Keep calling.

Assume that you are wanted. Remember, it is the harshness of the oppression of not being worthy that you are up against, not the young people themselves.

6. Involve their parents

Primarily their parents will not allow them to attend or participate in things you are involved with if they don't feel that it is safe. I encourage you to get to know the parents, answer their questions, and invite them to events and think of them well. Most parents find it most confusing to manage this life stage development of their child.

7. Provide food, transportation and advocacy

In working with young people, it is important to provide food, transportation and advocacy for money and resources.

8. Encourage involvement on committees

In an effort to encourage empowerment among young people, we need to encourage their involvement in organization. Young people should be a central part of any organization whose mission is specifically to assist them. Make sure that young people are general members to committees and boards, not occasional representatives. It is important that we not give token representation, but at least two, if not more, young people representatives.

9. Get young people's input

Ask young people what they think should be done in all situations. Be very careful and resist the temptation to sway the group in the direction that you think it should go. I find this extremely difficult because of our belief system that we have more information than young people do and because of the pressures from adult organizations to respond in certain ways. Our role is to negotiate goals and to help facilitate the events that will reflect those goals, while giving young people incredible latitude to accomplish them within a certain framework. One of the ways that we can be clear from the beginning is to insist that young people be represented at every meeting where they are being discussed. If a group of young people is making a presentation, it is important that you meet with them ahead of time and get them to share their ideas about the topic. Please remind them how important their thinking is and encourage them to speak during the meeting.

10. Assist young people in starting their own organizations

It is important that you back up young people on every idea and insist them to follow through. Your major role may be to help them get the resources they need. Expect them to try everything. You can expect with every young person you meet that they want to have a bold life and take on leadership. This is not something for just a few. This is a belief about all young people. Expect that their thinking is excellent.

### 11. Organize strategies for meetings and groups

In this situation ask one or two young people (I often use two) to help lead the meeting. Bring them in ahead of time, brainstorm the goals, plan an agenda, and decide who will run each part of the agenda. Make initial invitations either by phone or in person. Don't just leave a message. Mail or give people a reminder so that they can have the information in writing. Do remind young people by way of phone calls a day before the event. Their world, because of the oppression, is isolated in a 48 hour context. I want to remind you that personal contacts are most successful.

### 12. Plan concrete projects

Young people and people in general always feel most empowered and most invested in groups that are involved in concrete projects.

### 13. Get adult support

As an adult you need to get support for yourself. There are several issues that you can share among your adult support system that will be very important: What was your life like when you were a young person? Be in touch with all the times you were told that you couldn't do something or were stifled or punished for speaking out. Talk about the times that you loved being a young person and the things that you love about being with young people. Share about burn out or frustrations in your current situation working with young people. Share in the delight of your successes.

### 14. Play and laugh a lot

Young people are full of fun. They love to play. Make meetings as fun and as lively as possible. Make sure that you are creating fun events. These are very important in terms of bonding activities among the young people and adults themselves. The stronger the personal relationships, the stronger the movement or organization. Schedule hangout time also. In our efforts to play and laugh a lot with young people, they ask us to relax around them, to be open-minded, to treat them with equal respect and mutuality.

### 15. Make mistakes

Consider the process of being with young people as an experiment or work in progress. Be delighted in your mistakes, thereby giving young people permission to also make mistakes, which is part of their evolution of becoming adults. The more active you are with young people, the more likely you are to make mistakes. If you don't know, ask them. In your effort to get to know young people, trust that you already know how to make situations work and that you can just figure out the rest by listening to your intuition. Be willing to be the first one to take the risk to say you are sorry, to be uncool, or to show that you care. Try not to cover up your mistakes. Choose as often as possible to be less defensive. In doing this, the mistakes can be diffused and not become a block between you and the relationship with young people.

## 16. Little things are important

Continue to remind yourself that it is the little things that are important and they are happening. You don't have to see dramatic change. The process is within the relationship with young people and not necessarily their change in behavior. Appreciate yourself for continuing to be committed as an ally to young people.

Remember, the best time to act as an ally is right now. Show that you care very much and that you can play an important role in helping their lives go well. Don't wait until you feel comfortable. Assume that you know enough and that you are ready right now. Become great allies. Help them organize today. Young people are the present and together we are all the future. Enjoy? Involvement with young people is fun, they are eager to participate. They can inspire you and all of us. They are filled with hope and they remind us how important it is to play, to listen closely to people, and to be tight friends. They push us to treat each other with complete respect. This work with teenagers will push your limits and your own values. The more you do this work with teens, the more you are truly yourself.

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