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RESEARCH BRIEF

Models of Youth-Adult Collaboration for Public Media

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“

I feel like, I don't know if it's a misconception, but I just know there are a lot of different types of teenagers. So it's hard to just say, 'Teenagers like this.'

—BOY, AGE 17



“

I just want to say, be nice to kids and respect kids. And respect opinions and respect cultures, and respect ideas.

—BOY, AGE 15

“

In real life, adults usually treat teens like we're not smart in anything.

—GIRL, AGE 15



Among the key insights drawn from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center's [Missing Middle](#) research project was that many teens and tweens are eager to see more authentic representations of their interests, concerns, and “kids like them” in the stories they see. The youth we interviewed (ages 10–18) expressed seeing a lack of diversity in the current mainstream media landscape and a sense that much of the content that is meant to appeal to tweens and teens does not really “get” what being a teenager is like today. Few youth were active viewers or listeners of either local or national public

media programming—in part because they either were not aware of it or did not feel as though the current offerings were meant for them.

For public media, this represents an opportunity. Collaborating directly with youth not only helps to address issues of representation and relevance but also creates pathways for youth to bring valued forms of expertise and knowledge to projects that are designed to engage them and their peers. Youth-focused public media projects have the potential to give youth power and voice in a world where they often have little.

Existing research helps to make the case for public media to invest in youth participation in support of their mandate to develop programming that is both responsive to and representative of teen and tween audiences in their local communities. A growing body of literature from the field of adolescent development suggests that direct youth participation in activities such as programmatic decision-making and co-design is a highly effective way to encourage more meaningful outputs and positive developmental results for youth.¹ Within the public media context, research from successful teen- and tween-focused initiatives in Norway and Denmark has demonstrated that in-depth consultations with youth in advance of program development has been central to making the content relevant and representative of youth needs and interests.²

Youth-adult collaboration in public media can also help to encourage a range of civic and political participation. A study of youth and public media in Finland suggests that media production projects can help to promote feelings of “societal influence” which encourages online political participation as well as traditional forms of civic engagement.³ And, as a recent [UNICEF report](#) found, increased civic youth engagement depends upon equitable access to technology, digital skills, civic education, and spaces (both physical and digital) for activism. Public media initiatives are well-positioned to help create these conditions of access in their communities.



¹ Akiva, T., Cortina, K. S., & Smith, C. (2014). Involving youth in program decision-making: How common and what might it do for youth? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43, 1844–1860. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0183-y>

² Andersen, M. M., & Sundet, V. S. (2019). Producing online youth fiction in a Nordic public service context. *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 8(16), 110–125. <https://doi.org/10.18146/2213-0969.2019.jethc179>

³ Kotilainen, S. (2009). Promoting youth civic participation with media production: the case of youth voice editorial board. *Comunicar: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación*, 16(32), 181-192.

The [Next Gen Public Media](#) initiative has observed growing interest across the public media ecosystem in developing tween- and teen-focused initiatives to develop new content, modes of engagement, and community-based programs. However, the investment of time and resources to meaningfully partner with youth can be significant, and organizations without prior experience may find it difficult to know where to start. Fortunately, the public media community is not alone in facing these challenges, and there is much to be learned from recent research and tool kits in adjacent fields. Drawing on best practices for youth participation from a wide range of academic resources, nonprofit organizations, and youth-focused government initiatives, this brief will point to evidence-based models to structure youth-adult collaborations.



What do we mean when we talk about youth-adult collaboration?

Youth-adult collaboration, also referred to in academic literature as “youth-adult partnership,” can take many different forms. Researcher Shepherd Zeldin has defined youth-adult partnership as “the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work,

and (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue.”⁴ In their study of the 4-H Engaging Youth Serving Community Program (EYSC), researchers describe successful youth-adult partnerships as those that create opportunities for youth to develop their voices while building positive relationships with adults. These partnerships encourage youth to “see themselves as competent individuals who can contribute to decisions that impact their communities while helping them develop leadership skills and improve their self-esteem.”⁵

YOUTH-ADULT COLLABORATION CAN LOOK LIKE:

- + Co-producing a podcast
- + Engaging in a participatory action research project to inform a new video series
- + Partnering on a new media studio
- + Creating a youth advisory group to inform an event series focused on issues that are important to Gen Z, etc.

As public media stakeholders consider pursuing various forms of youth-adult collaboration, it is important to reflect on the kinds of work that will be done with youth participants. In the field of youth activism, scholar Ben Kirshner offers facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work as a framework to describe the varying degrees of adult involvement and approaches to supporting youth agency and skill development in youth-focused projects.⁶ Kirshner describes facilitation as a form of guided participation in which adults generally seek to be “neutral facilitators of a youth-led process,” providing resources and routines to help scaffold activities that

⁴ Zeldin S., Christens, B. D., & Powers, J. L. (2013). The psychology and practice of youth-adult partnership: bridging generations for youth development and community change. *Am J Community Psychol*. 2013 Jun; 51(3-4):385-97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9558-y>

⁵ Peterson, D., Baker, B., Leatherman, J., Newman, M., & Miske, S. (2013). Engaging youth, serving community: Social change lessons from a 4-H rural youth development program. Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2013-7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2198046>

⁶ Kirshner, B. (2008). Guided participation in three youth activism organizations: Facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 17 (1), 60-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508400701793190>

are otherwise managed by youth input and leadership. With apprenticeship, adults provide support through coaching and feedback and youth carry out projects with the guidance of adults. In joint work, the adult takes on the role of a senior colleague who is working alongside the youth participant to make decisions and implement projects together.

While some questions about how to best structure youth-adult collaborative work present challenges that are specific to public media (such as decisions to emphasize local vs. national relevance), stations can look to existing best practices and approaches from a range of other fields for guidance. For instance, the Berkman Klein Center's report, [Youth Participation in a Digital World](#), offers examples and considerations for organizations that are interested in integrating and elevating youth voice through digital media. Featuring results from a global survey of 1,138 young people, ages 10–25, the report suggests that youth especially value initiatives that teach them specific skills, offer forms of long-term engagement and mentoring, feature equal partnership with adults, and support diverse interests and contexts.

Public media stakeholders do not need to “reinvent the wheel” on program design. Partnering with community-based organizations that focus on youth development, and especially organizations that have youth-led initiatives, can help build bridges to expertise and networks of youth participants. These kinds of groups have a wealth of knowledge to share and can help public media stakeholders identify opportunities to increase their relevance and demonstrate a commitment to youth engagement. Some examples of youth-led and young-adult-led groups (sometimes referred to as “near peers”) that have advised major national and international organizations include [Student Voice](#) (educational equity), [YR Media](#) (journalism and arts), [Active Minds](#) (mental health), and the [Sunrise Movement](#) (climate justice).

Public media stakeholders do not need to “reinvent the wheel” on program design.

Approaches to Youth-Adult Collaboration

Public media organizations may structure their collaboration with youth in different ways. Some may start with considering how to center youth voice. As their capacity grows, they may consider ways to collaborate directly with youth. Some organizations may ultimately decide to launch youth-led initiatives, where young people are creators and producers themselves. The level of youth agency and empowerment will depend upon the resources (including time) that are available. As researcher Alicia Blum-Ross notes in her study of youth media production programs, the potential for youth empowerment in these settings is often constrained by “structural imperatives such as funding, timing, facilitator style, or potential audience.”⁷

Below are some effective structures for engaging youth, along with specific examples that illustrate ways that organizations have integrated these models into their program design. Some organizations may choose to integrate multiple approaches that reinforce one another.

⁷ Blum-Ross, A. (2015). Filmmakers/educators/facilitators? Understanding the role of adult intermediaries in youth media production in the UK and the USA. *Journal of Children and Media*, 9 (3), 308–324. ISSN 1748-2798. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1058280>



Youth Advisory Groups and Leadership Councils

Perhaps the most common and least resource-intensive form of youth-adult collaboration is a youth advisory group that provides consultation for adult work. Youth leadership councils, by comparison, let youth participants take on leadership and governance activities within the project or organization.

The [Stanford University John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities](#) offers a wide range of resources on youth leadership models with lessons that are broadly applicable to the service goals of public media programs. For example, a case study of the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative describes a community-wide effort to address the lack of arts programming in East Palo Alto, CA, through the development of an arts center. The process was centered around youth leaders who were trained as researchers, advocates, and organizers who “conducted site visits to other arts centers to inform the design of the arts center, engaged with adults in an iterative process of conceptualizing a mission and vision for the arts center, and executed events to increase the visibility of and buy-in for the Initiative.”⁸

[The National Youth Leadership Council](#) (NYLC) is supported by its own youth advisory council with the mission to “exemplify servant-leadership while advising NYLC programs through shared decision-making to transform communities and create positive social change in the world.” The council, which consists of high-school aged students and young adult mentors, helps to advise the organization on its programming and center youth voice in its work.

Youth Participatory Research

Youth participatory research projects typically center around an inquiry that is designed in collaboration with young people who are affected by the issue being studied. The range of methods in this practice is vast and can include traditional qualitative and quantitative methods such as focus groups, surveys, or mixed methods approaches such as citizen science and user-centered design. In the *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, Lisa M. Vaughn describes participatory research as an approach that seeks to engage participants in each step of the research process and “includes tools, tasks and structured activities that are used to facilitate participation, shared decision-making and mutual learning.”⁹ Within the field of public health, Emily J. Ozer describes youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a method in which youth are trained as researchers and positioned as experts of their own experience who “generate valid knowledge about the conditions they seek to change while working to shift power structures and change inequitable systems, policies, and practices.”¹⁰

The VOICES project in Sarasota, FL, was one such effort to empower and engage middle school youth in community decision-making efforts. The project, which was organized and led by a youth-adult partnership team, was designed to “identify gaps in out-of-school time activities, barriers to participation in existing programs, and specific needs of youth” that could be addressed through systemic changes.¹¹

⁸ Henderson, J., Biscocho, F., & Gerstein, A. (2016). Community youth engagement in East Palo Alto: A study of the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative. *John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities*. <https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/community-youth-engagement-east-palo-alto-study-youth-arts-and-music-center-initiative>

⁹ Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory research methods—Choice points in the research process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 1 (1). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244>

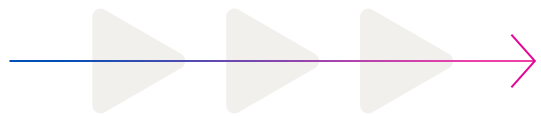
¹⁰ Ozer, E. J., Abraczinskas, M., Duarte, C., Mathur, R., Ballard, P. J., Gibbs, L., Olivas, E. T., Bewa, M. J., & Afifi, R. (2020). Youth participatory approaches and health equity: *Conceptualization and integrative review*. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 66 (3-4), 267–278. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12451>

¹¹ Alfonso, M. L. (2008). Participatory research and community youth development: VOICES in Sarasota County, Florida. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 1(1, article 7). <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol1/iss1/7>

A group of eighth-graders received research training that included modules about ethics, question development, focus group guide development, focus group moderation, qualitative data analysis, and survey development. Results from a mixed-methods study, including 24 focus groups with sixth- to eighth-grade students (n=144), were ultimately presented at a community meeting at the school board of Sarasota County. A number of recommendations from the youth researchers were later adopted in the community.

[YPAR Hub](#), a website created by the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Peer Resources, serves as a repository of youth participatory action research projects and associated curricular materials. The site includes a range of examples of YPAR projects in action that can serve as sources of inspiration and learning. Lesson plans offer practitioners practical guidance for getting started, including exercises to help define the issues to be studied, methods of inquiry, and ways to translate findings into action and impact.

Co-design approaches are distinguished by the goal of having youth and adults work alongside one another as equal partners in the process of developing a tangible or actionable resource that is beneficial to both groups.



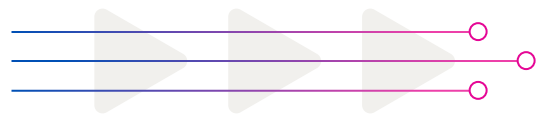
Youth Co-Design

Youth co-design projects often involve working with youth to come up with some kind of product, service, or intervention (a new technology, media product, curriculum, after school program, etc.). Often considered a subfield of participatory design and adjacent to participatory research, co-design approaches are distinguished by the goal of having youth and adults work alongside one another as equal partners in the process of developing a tangible or actionable resource that is beneficial to both groups.

While equal partnership may be the ideal, it can be challenging to achieve in practice. In their literature review, “The Meaning of ‘Participation’ in Co-Design with Children and Youth: Relationships, Roles, and Interactions,” researcher Leanne Bowler and her colleagues examine a range of co-design studies and note that “including children in the design process does not inevitably lead to equality.”¹² Instead, the intergenerational nature and differing levels of expertise between youth and adults in many co-design projects requires a conscious approach to inherent inequities in power distribution and a commitment to transparency about how roles and decision-making may vary at different stages in the project.

[KidsTeam at the University of Washington](#) works with children, ages 7–11, as design partners engaged in the process of designing new technologies. Not just simply “testers” or “informants,” youth are considered equal stakeholders and part of a long-term partnership with adult KidsTeam members.

¹² Bowler, L., Wang, K., Lopatovska, I., & Rosin, M. (2021). The meaning of “participation” in co-design with children and youth: Relationships, roles, and interactions [Paper]. *84th Annual Meeting of the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T)*, Salt Lake City, UT (hybrid-virtual).



Youth Media Production and Co-Production

In existence in various forms since the earliest days of television, youth media production has clear relevance to a wide array of public media impact goals. These projects have radically transformed with the proliferation of digital media tools like high-quality cameras, smartphones, editing software, and networked distribution platforms. Designed with the public media community in mind, the recently published [Public Media Stations and Youth Voices](#) tool kit produced by WHYH provides a trove of resources and best practices for those getting started developing a youth media program.

[Youth FX](#), a program of the Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, provides training and engagement opportunities in digital media production technologies for youth of color in historically underserved communities in Albany, NY. On their website, the organization describes its process as one in which participants work with experienced filmmakers and artists to learn various aspects of digital video production in order to create documentary and short fiction film projects that “reflect their understanding and vision of the world around them as well as their imagined futures.”

Learning Labs, Studio Models, and Youth-Driven Spaces

Learning labs and studio models typically provide a combination of physical space, access to peers, knowledgeable and supportive mentors, and some combination of digital media and traditional tools. They emphasize the creation of interest-driven learning opportunities where youth can follow their passions and often involve a collaboration with schools, libraries, science centers, museums, and other community organizations.¹³

Similar in programming and resources, but distinct in governance, youth-driven spaces (YDS) are broadly defined by Michigan State University’s Program of Outreach and Evaluation as a “positive youth development environment where youth partner with adults to meaningfully engage in decision-making throughout the organization’s governance and programming activities.”¹⁴ As a form of empowered, place-based, youth-adult partnership, YDS prioritize tapping into teens’ intrinsic motivation and interests, supporting their developmental needs, and fostering genuine partnerships between youth participants and adult facilitators.

The [Neutral Zone](#) in Ann Arbor, MI, was founded by teens to provide a venue for social, cultural, educational, recreational, and creative opportunities for high school-aged students. The center provides an afterschool drop-in space, hosts weekend concerts and special events, and is home to over 20 afterschool programs in visual and media arts, music performance and technology, literary arts, community leadership, and education. In partnership with the Michigan State University’s Community Evaluation and Research Collaborative, the group created a rubric for youth-serving organizations to use in designing and assessing approaches to youth-adult partnership.¹⁵







¹³ See *Learning labs in libraries and museums: Transformative spaces for teens*. (2014). Association of Science-Technology Centers, Urban Libraries Council. https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/learninglabsreport_0.pdf

¹⁴ See Michigan State University’s Program of Outreach and Engagement evaluation reports on youth-driven spaces: <https://cerc.msu.edu/yds/about>

¹⁵ Wu, H.-C., Weiss, J., Kornbluh, M., & Roddy, L. (2014). Youth-adult partnership rubric. Michigan State University. https://cerc.msu.edu/upload/documents/Youth-Adult%20Partnership_v1.0.pdf

Considerations for getting started

In addition to the examples and resources mentioned above, the following questions can help you consider which approaches to youth-adult collaboration are suited to your station, given your priorities, current staff experience, and resources:

-  What goals would you like to pursue through youth-adult collaboration?
 -  What are the ages of youth you want to collaborate with, and how might that affect your program design?
 -  Will your project take place over a short period of time (i.e., a youth media challenge), or will it be part of a sustained program within your organization?
 -  What community-based organizations in your area (e.g., afterschool programs, libraries, maker spaces) are already doing youth-focused work, and how might you learn from and/or partner with them?
 -  How might you design programs that reach and include youth who would otherwise not have access to media and technology resources?
 -  What kinds of networks and organizational partnerships might you need in order to support youth-adult collaboration?
-

Public media stations are uniquely positioned to create programming that resonates with and reflects young people's lived experiences. While designing opportunities for youth-adult collaboration may require new commitments of time and expertise, these efforts can help to sustain a bridge of trust with the teen and tween audience that carries public media's deep investments in early childhood through to young adulthood and beyond.

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Joan Ganz Cooney Center

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit research and innovation lab that focuses on the challenges of fostering smarter, stronger, and kinder children in a rapidly changing media landscape. We conduct original research on emerging learning technologies and collaborate with educators and media producers to put this research into action. We also aim to inform the national conversation on media and education by working with policymakers and investors. For more information, visit www.joanganzcooneycenter.org.



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