

Partnering With Young People: Where to Begin

A working document created following the 2026 Better Future Forum and in response to participant interest in deepening authentic youth-adult partnership within their schools, networks, and institutions.

Developing and sustaining authentic youth-adult partnerships is critical to ensuring the voices of young people are included in conversations and decisions that impact their lives. Creating effective partnerships involves intentional effort, and is a way of working, not a checklist. In an authentic partnership, both young people and adults have meaningful roles, work toward common goals, and share voice, power, and responsibility. The partnership creates change with young people, not for or to them.

This document is for organizations and individuals committing to work in deeper partnership with young people. It offers broad guidance on where to begin, including areas to explore, questions, and ideas to consider. It is deliberately not exhaustive. The most authentic partnerships emerge from your context, your relationships, and your willingness to be changed by what you hear.

How do I know what's right for us?

The following are three questions to discuss as a team before committing to a direction:

- Where in our work are decisions being made about young people? Are young people involved in that process?
- What's one piece of work in the next 6 to 12 months where young people's contributions could meaningfully change the outcome?
- What would need to be true for this partnership to thrive, and what's currently in our way?

For a shared vocabulary on where your work currently sits on the spectrum of manipulation and tokenism to youth-initiated shared decision-making, [Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation](#) is a useful reference. Treat it as a reflective and diagnostic tool, not a prescriptive ladder to climb: Rung 8 is not always more appropriate than rung 6, depending on context.

How can I get started?

The list below includes five areas where partnership tends to begin. The bulleted ideas under each are starting points, chosen to be varied in shape and effort. Treat them as sparks, not prescriptions. The most powerful version of each is the one that fits your context.

1. Learn | Begin to hear what young people in your networks are saying about their lives, contexts, and futures.

- Run a focus group with young people about a question that matters in your work.
- Invite a small group to review something you're developing, like a draft, a curriculum, or a campaign.

- Hold an open listening session with young people, then share back what you heard and what you're doing about it.

Explore further: [Protocols](#) that offer structured processes to support open conversations; [Listening to Young People](#), strategies for active listening.

2. Amplify | Create platforms for young people's voices to reach the audiences who need to hear them, in your spaces and beyond.

- Feature student-authored writing, video, or audio on your platforms.
- Invite a young person to speak at an event you're hosting, or sponsor them to speak at one you're attending.
- Nominate or sponsor a young person for an award, fellowship, or global convening.

Explore further: [Examples](#) of student contributions at a global event.

3. Co-create | Bring young people into the room when you're building something, not after it's finished.

- Co-design a session, resource, or campaign with young people from the start.
- Bring a young person in as a co-facilitator or moderator at a convening.
- Pair young people and adults as collaborators on a project, with shared responsibility for the outcome.

Explore further: [Co-creating change](#), a simple guide for project partnerships between adults and students.

4. Share Power | Hand over real decisions, with real consequences, on questions where young people have a stake.

- Add young people as reviewers or selectors in your grant-making, hiring, or award processes.
- Bring young people's perspectives into strategic planning or theory of change discussions.
- Move toward participatory budgeting or grant-making on programs that affect young people.

Explore further: [Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision Making](#), UNICEF's guide on participatory practice.; [Youth-Adult Partnership in Evaluations](#), a toolkit on shared power in evaluation.

5. Build for the long term | Move from one-off engagement to structures and roles that make partnership part of how you work.

- Set up a youth advisory council to consistently contribute to your work.
- Create dedicated youth seats on your board or governance body.
- Hire or designate a staff lead, and allocate budget, for youth partnership work.

Explore further: [Designing Advisory Councils](#), ten simple steps to set up a student council.; [Being Youth-Adult Partnership Savvy](#), a primer for building organizational understanding.

A final note

These are starting points, not endpoints. Whatever you commit to, the most important commitment is the one underneath the activity: to listen, to share power, and to let young people shape what you do together. For those wanting to go deeper, please find an additional resource below:

- [Conditions that Foster Authentic Youth-Adult Partnership \(Teach For All\)](#) outlines conditions that enable authentic and sustained youth-adult partnership at the organizational level.