YOUTH EMPOWERMENT TOOLKIT



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**HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

Our goal is to create integrated communities, united in a goal for wellness in a setting too often described as “American cities…marked by age segregation, civic disengagement, social mistrust, a loss of personal and collective efficacy, and lack of collaboration across systems.” (1) We further see this reflected in our youth, where most of the health problems experienced by young males and females are associated with modifiable behavioral and environmental factors. “ Too many young males engage in health-compromising behaviors, and too few are protected by ongoing connections with health care providers and other caring adults,” note Armstong, DSW and Cohall, MD, and through their research conclude that “the potential return on strategically planned and systematically implemented interventions is substantial, especially when young people are engaged as active participants in their care.” (2)

**The purpose of this guide is to help create a higher level of continuity, consistency of quality, and longevity of youth empowerment programs at one level, and at another level to simply help guide our in clinic conversations with youth into more positive and behavior modifying discourse. This guide provides a brief background in characteristics of youth and junior youth and introduces several useful skills and tools in teaching, mentoring, and empowering youth.**

Our goal is to empower youth to transform their community environments and equip them with the tools they need to make the changes they wish to see. We will be their link to healthcare, higher education, and a greater support system. As physicians, we can work at the grassroots level to inspire and guide each individual youth you meet to discover their innate talents and capacity to lead themselves and their communities into a positive and healthy lifestyle. “Marshaling community capacity to consistently and deeply attend to development of children and adolescents is conceived less as implementing a program and more as ***awakening latent human and institutional potential to build developmental strengths*.**”(1)

**UNIT 1: RECOGNIZING THE POWERS OF YOUTH**

**⏹⏹ Who ARE THE JUNIOR YOUTH AND YOUTH?⏹⏹**

WHO, UNICEF, and UN Population Fund define “young people” as youth 10 to 24 years of age. (3) “During this transitional period, young people experience profound physical, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills, and engage in behaviors that have immediate and long-term health consequences. From an ecological perspective, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and behaviors are shaped through social interactions with peers, family members, and nonparental adults.” (3)

Junior youth is a very brief period of time (between the ages of 11 and 14), but it is vital for character and lifestyle development. In the recent past, and even now by some, this was mostly seen as a “waiting period” between childhood and adulthood, or at best, as a period of preparation for the future. **This guide is intended to help in recognizing junior youths’ reservoirs of energy and talent, their capacity to engage in diligent work, and their developing intellectual ability to analyze influencing forces on their lives.**

Junior youth still don’t make major decisions by themselves and depend on their support system (friends, peers, doctors, teachers, and family) for guidance. By the time one enters youth (ages 15-20), they are capable of individually creating goals and plans that utilize their identity and talents to fulfill a higher purpose or cause that they have deemed essential. They assume responsibility for their actions and demonstrate incredible flexibility and resilience to hardship that is unmet during any other life stage.

**⏹⏹Characteristics of Junior Youth and Youth ⏹⏹**

Effective youth empowerment requires a **NEW definition of youth** in their communities.

As described by Reischl, Zimmerman, et al, “youth violence prevention has historically focused on ameliorating risk factors and preventing violent behavior…this focus on youth risks and problem behaviors amplifies public perceptions of youth as delinquents and criminals. This perspective often results in perceiving youth as a problem and to creating programs to ameliorate problems.” (3)

This approach often neglects the positive assets and resources that youth possess, and instead **more focus needs to be placed on empowering youth and providing the space for youth to create solutions for their communities on their own.**  Reischl and Zimmerman support with **“researchers have reported that including youth in decision-making resulted in greater innovation and productivity and a stronger sense of connection to the community among both youth and adults…Individuals and communities that share power are more likely to affect community change.”** Furthermore, **“empowerment theory suggests that engaging youth in pro-social, meaningful, and community-enhancing activities that the youth themselves defines and control helps youth gain vital skills, responsibilities, and confidence necessary to become productive and healthy adults and to avoid health-compromising behaviors.”**

In effort to recognize adolescent developing assets, it may be helpful to reflect on the following *emerging capacities* of youth:

1. **Capacity for reflection.** Junior youth are developing a greater capacity to reflect on their actions in terms of personal consequences and also the effects of their individual actions on others and the greater world.

2. **Capacity for strength**. Junior youth and youth show forth incredible strength in overcoming challenges and when faced with tests and difficulties. Youth in underserved communities are faced with challenges of poverty, drug use and drug related violence, high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancies, and limited resources at unaccredited schools.

3. **Capacity for flexibility.** Junior youth and youth are renowned for their flexibility. They are as sprouting seedlings and with the proper nourishment and guidance will flourish into fruitful trees. At this point in development, they are not set in their habits, nor are they fixed down with financial and family responsibilities, so there is some more freedom in their day to day schedules to partake of various activities.

4. **Capacity to serve as agents of change**. When deprived of opportunities to build confidence in their capacity to make changes, junior youth may be inclined to maintain standards of those around them or those that they grew up in, regardless of how harmful the situation. However, when they are presented with a reliable and stable alternative, they are eager to make a change and show forth strength and flexibility in doing so. When provided with empowerment training, they will begin to refine their approach to dealing with the challenges they encounter and develop their problem solving skills. **When empowerment facilitators guide youth to take challenges in their own hands, they are showing the youth that they RESPECT them and their capacity to make change.** Setting expectations for youth will give them room to rise up and grow stronger.

5. **Junior youth and youth thrive on solidarity and bonds of friendship**

6. **Junior youth and youth have the capacity and longing for discovering their personal loftiness of purpose.** In her discussion on holistic health, Dr. Shainberg describes “purpose” as being “equated to meaning, direction, mission, or duty; it is a person's larger goal.  The source of our need for a purpose is the basic human need to relate to something outside of oneself." (3)

7. **Junior youth and youth are more likely than adults to step up and show forth selflessness in their acts of service.** Acting in selfless service can be very different from the popularized concept of “giving back” to one’s community. Often, “giving back” can imply that one gets something for themselves first. This sort of mentality tends to follow a materialistic system of trade and disregards the innate responsibility of each person to support their brothers and sisters at their own capacity, no matter what the means. Moreover, in a community where a segment of the population has been stripped from its rights time and time again throughout history, or in a community where extremes of wealth and poverty are glaringly apparently, not everyone may feel like they have received any support in the first place and thus, in the “give back” system would not be held liable. No matter what one’s economical standing in their communities, acts of selfless service one provides for their community in any capacity that they may have, guides the individual in finding “loftiness in purpose.” Youth and junior youth show more willingness to dedicate their entire capacity to serving a cause they believe in, without looking for credit or recognition. This is in part due to the luxury of being burdened by fewer gritty daily responsibilities, but also attributable to their fresh creativity, high energy, and pre-jaded outlook. **Efforts in selfless service have long lasting and continuous effects; community development wouldn’t depend simply on the merit of its people, but rather on their actions which outlive them.**

Using the social-ecological theoretical approach to youth health, as presented in Youth Empowerment Solutions for Violence Preventions, article by Reischl and Zimmerman (3) we can focus on **“interventions that explore the promise of youth as agents of change within their communities.”** WHO suggests that “expanding interventions beyond the individual level is an area in need of further development” and by “engaging youth in civic activities,” emphasize Reischl and Zimmerman, youth are “exposed to the perspectives of other community members, and they learn how to make meaningful contributions to solving community problems…**Empowering youth requires a transfer of power and control so that the youth articulate their understanding of community problems, identify the project goals, set the agenda, and direct the implementations of youth engagement programs.”**

In further exploration of the social-ecological theory of youth empowerment, we recognize that adolescents risk of engaging in risky behavior that results in poor physical health (i.e., drug use, violent behavior, unprotected sex, poor eating habits) both *affects* and is *effected by* social and mental health (i.e., healthy or abusive relationships, self worth, feelings of self efficacy, spirituality). In other words, one’s immediate environment affects his or her personality and perception of self-efficacy:

**"…A personality can never be isolated from the complex of interpersonal relations in which the person lives and has his being"** (4)

In turn, one’s personality and perception of self-efficacy affect decisions made about his or her environment:

**“Perceived self-efficacy expectations are hypothesized as a major determinant of individuals' choice of activities, the environment in which they are undertaken, how much effort they will expend, and how long they will persist in dealing with stressful situations.”** (5)

**“We cannot segregate true human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and in itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.”** (6)

Therefore, youth empowerment doctors are encouraged to provide the information as an important *piece of the whole* picture of healthy living. Doctors working with adolescents can present their specific information in the context of the rest. For example, topics of HIV prevention can be presented in the context of physical health, self-respect and respect for others, and as always, empowerment in making decisions and building awareness in their communities.

“**Adolescent health is often understood as the absence of symptom, pathology, or health-compromising behavior. This incomplete view of well-being, of course, mimics the “medical model” approach to health. The emerging field of youth development places particular emphasis on expanding the concept of health to include the kind of skills, behaviors, and competencies needed to succeed in employment, education, and civic life. A common mantra in youth development circles is that “problem-free is not fully prepared.”** (1)

**Summary**

This unit’s goal is to help clinicians gather thoughts on youth, their strengths and potentialities, and the importance of your trained participation in guiding and empowering youth. It is important to realize that we are not the only ones with this mission and we can act as catalysts for an organic cycle of growth of populations of astute, positive, and active youth. Our purpose is to empower youth to become youth empowerment facilitators and educators in their own communities.

**UNIT2: GUIDING EMPOWERED YOUTH**

This unit can be used to help guide the youth and junior youth in channeling their powers into acts of community service and effective means of communicating what they learn in your group or clinic discussion in their communities. The youth will become the leaders.

**⏹⏹THE INTERPLAY OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION⏹⏹**

The doctor is not only present to provide facts and information, but also to guide discussion and provide opportunities for the youth to share what they have learned and serve in their communities via whatever means accessible to them.

***Action breeds steadfastness.*** Encouraging youth to step into ACTION and share what they’ve learned is not only for the purpose of distributing information, but also because the more involved the youth get in serving their communities and sharing what they have learned with their families and neighbors, the more likely they are to follow their own advice and have a higher sense of self-efficacy. Through the process of creating methods to educate and serve, youth will define their personal values and consolidate their own goals.

"Being connected with oneself means acting congruently with one's feelings and values."(9)

“[The] Self-efficacy Theory has been integrated into the encompassing theory of self-regulations, where goals are set and efforts made to achieve these through reducing discrepancies between one's goals and current situation.” (10)

**⏹⏹Effective Doctors and Empowerment Facilitators Allow Room for Growth though Motivational Interviewing⏹⏹**

***“During this time of transition, one is ever seeking answers to questions…This is the age during which a new consciousness rapidly develops.”*** (11)

The junior youth period marks intertwined physical and emotional changes, and although a junior youth may feel excited about gaining new powers and responsibilities, with those also come feelings of awkwardness and anxiety. This wide range of feelings is likely to generate certain contradictory behaviors so that at one time, a student might seem shy, while at others sociable or a student may express the desire to be left alone, but at the same time welcome attention. It is through working out these feelings and finding a balance for himself that the junior youth will begin to recognize his strengths, gains a greater awareness of his own identity, and develops effective personal coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, during this period of development, their ability to observe their surroundings broadens to a wider scope and deepens in terms of understanding details. As a result, they become more questioning of what they have been previously taught in comparison to what they begin to realize. In their observations they will become aware of contradictions. As an initial response to these newly discovered contradictions, youth become less willing to blindly accept facts or rules and thus have a higher propensity towards wanting to make a change. They are noticing things they want to see change, while their patterns of thought and behavior are not absolutely fixed yet. This is when with proper guidance and given opportunities, the junior youth can become positive agents of change. If, however, they are not given the chance to have their voices heard or guided in serving their communities, they might be inclined to accept the world’s inequities and injustices as the norm and fall into a jaded or passive lifestyle.

Doctors as empowerment facilitators must be astutely aware to avoid treating youth in such ways that will prolong childhood when assisting them to take advantage of their surfacing interests, talents, and social awareness. Children need firm boundaries and specific regulations as they seek to test their limitations; they crave your guidance. Junior youth and youth, however, need more room to explore their options within a bigger picture of guidance that the youth and facilitator have painted together. **The facilitator can avoid providing too many strict regulations on how to do things by allowing the youth to use their creativity to design their own ways of meeting a group set goal, for example, through the process of motivational interviewing**. Under such conditions, the youth will feel a greater sense of ownership and responsibility to the projects they participate it.

Same goes in terms of behavioral guidance. A suggestion is to avoid focusing on details of the youth’s behavior in the way that one needs to with children. We can allow the youth to figure of the details for themselves in the context of a bigger picture of expectations and goals. In situations where the youth requires specific refinement in behavior, the doctor or facilitator can take time with him or her to discuss the consequences of their behavior instead of just reprimanding them.

**⏹⏹**CONFRONTING PRECONCEPTIONS ABOUT JUNIOR YOUTH**⏹⏹**

**“Adults play a vital role in youth engagement and youth empowerment. Youth are keenly aware of stereotypes adults have of them, and negative stereotypes can lead to isolation of the community. Adults to engage with youth and act as allies for them, recognize that they are valuable assets to the community, help them navigate the adult world, respect their thoughts and ideas, and provide encouragement are key to fostering youth empowerment.” (3)**

Preconception #1: Youth and Junior Youth are in a period of CRISIS.

We often hear people speak of junior youth going through “an identity crisis,” not being able to control their emotions, having poor relationships with their parents, lashing out in response to authority, and having warped perceptions of reality. The general public is not merely at fault for this. The majority of the psychosocial research on teens and pre-teens confirms these generalizations by being carried out under the premise of an emphasis on self, personal gratification, and biological change. Furthermore, a lot of the research focuses on narrow scopes of youth (based on class, race, gender identity, etc), rather than focusing on elements that are universal to all junior youth. These elements are their energy, flexibility, and a “pre-jaded” realization of hypocrisy paired with a desire to see change. Of course, all the research is valuable in understanding certain challenges youth are faced with in particular populations which must be addressed. A number of epidemiological studies have shown that with respect to depression, anxiety, hopelessness, suicide, and alcohol abuse, the rates are increasing dramatically amongst young people. However, when limited to this scope, being a pre-teen gets labeled as a temporary condition that must be endured.

Peter Benson’s research widens analysis of adolescent behavior in the context of society in community to incorporate a greater focus on youth empowerment to make the changes they wish to see. **He measures health and thriving as “prosocial behavior, leadership, and affirmation of diversity”** (1) as opposed to the majority of research which concentrates on mechanisms to help youth cope with society and adjust to the norms with mostly materialistic assessments of achievements.

**Benson’s study on adolescent advancement looks at 40 specific elements of healthy youth development, which he calls “developmental assets,” such as positive peer influence, high expectations, family boundaries, time spent at home, achievement motivation, bonding to school, honesty, and cultural competence.** In his analyses, Benson has shown that “**the developmental assets contributed a significant amount over and above the influence of demographic variables, accounting for 16-35 percent of the variance explained in the reduction of each individual risk behavior**.” In other words, regardless of to what demographics the adolescents belong, those that thrive the most are those with significant developmental assets. Furthermore, “regression analyses show that the developmental asset framework is a also powerful prediction of thriving measures taken one at a time of in combination. Across each of six racial or ethnic groups, developmental assets explained 47-54 percent of the variance in a composite thriving index over and above demographic variables.” (1)

Confronting the Preconception: Pre-teen is not another word for insane.

***“It is not simply a time in which youth have to be contained until they are ready to render service… If we treat youth with the proper degree of respect and provide them with the proper tools, they will be ready today to play their role in the development of healthy community life.”*** (11)

Our responsibility is to guide the junior youth discover their inherent high energy, flexibility, and optimism and help them find opportunities to direct their efforts towards making positive changes in their communities.This is not merely a time of preparation for the future, but rather the time to explore talents, strengths, and set habits which will carry on to adulthood.

***“To define the fruitful years of youth exclusively as a stage of preparation would be to overlook the creative energies which are available to youth in such abundance.”*** (11)

If we encounter situations when the actions of junior youth are undesirable, we must get out of the habit of attributing the behavior to the fact that they are “just junior youth,” as though the undesired behavior is a condition of every youth. Rather, we should look for the cause in the youth’s social environment. It may not always be the case that their behavior is a reaction to something obvious in their surroundings, but being astutely aware that it could be is critical. The behavior could be their reaction to a realization of a glaring contradiction between standards they were taught in the past verses reality, or it could be attributed to the youth following in the footsteps of someone else’s habits, not realizing there are other lifestyle options. We should also be aware that a junior youth can act out in response to an adult who is unwilling to recognize that they are doing certain things in efforts to break away from childhood, and instead of guiding the youth by positive encouragement, they reprimand him or her.

Preconception #2: Youth are fragile and susceptible to a degrading society.

It can be overwhelming to consider the marked presence of abuse, neglect, extremes in wealth and poverty, alienation, and degrading family structure in a number of our communities. Our youth live amid drug related violence, family incarceration, increasing prevalence of STDs…and the list can go on, to the point where we may feel like we don’t know where to start in ameliorating these societal ills and may even lose hope that there is a solution to such perfuse problems. And this is when adults can turn to youth for inspiration in resilience and confident optimism.

***“Adolescence is a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution, for youth can offer its loyalties and energies both to the conservation of that which continues to feel true and to the revolutionary correction of that which has lost its regenerative significance.”***(12)

***“In adolescence we are in many ways like empty but organic receptacles, fully formed though still growing, waiting to be filled. And like receptacles we are capable at that stage of life of receiving with all our being, becoming one with what is within us.”*** (12)

***“It is [the] intensity of perceptions, together with integrity of being… that can make of human society a living, thriving, truly loving, joyously full and exuberant organism, rather than a cold, mechanical, empty theoretical concept…That is the magic of transformation and that is the potential of adolescence.”*** (13)

Confronting the Preconception: Youth are resilient.

Focusing on the negative aspects of our communities and trying to counter them head on can be discouraging. It may also cause us to develop an overprotective attitude towards our youth, which can be stifling in their exploration of their capacities.

Rather, we must practice focusing on our youths’ strengths and guide them in using their talents proactively (rather than reactively) in their communities.

We must oppose our tendencies to think of junior youth and youth as fragile creatures; in fact, underestimating youth capacity can be perceived as disrespect and lack of trust.

Summary: From the exercises and discussions of this section, we can recognize the importance of being wise in our articulation of our conception of adolescence.

**⏹⏹DEVELOPING THE DOCTOR’S AND EMPOWERMENT FACILITATOR’S ATTITUDE AND SKILLS⏹⏹**

In Armstrong B, Cohall A article, Health promotion with adolescent and young adult males: an empowerment approach,(2) three approaches to empowering youth are described:

1. Short-Term Counseling approach, which embraces the spirit of the helper becoming a “significant other” through “empathy, nonjudgmental acceptance, and warmth.” In this practice, the helper highlights their commonalities with the youth, give “contingent praise for behaviors congruent with goals,” conveys concern and willingness to help, validates, empathizes, and focuses on positive assets and strengths of the youth. This approach embraces an attitude of “thinking with instead of for or about the young person.” (2)

2. Motivational Interviewing, which focuses on resolving ambivalence through collaborative conversation and eliciting the youths own motivation and commitment to change.

3. Social Works Strength Based perspective works in the spirit of shifting away from a deficits-based approach to creating behavioral change, and reframes problems as challenges and opportunities for growth.

Another resource for guidance and samples in approaching positive conversations with youth: see table 2 in Armstrong B, Cohall A .Health promotion with adolescent and young adult males: an empowerment approach. Adolesc Med State Art Rev. 2011 Dec;22(3):544-80, xii. (attached)

And finally, it is imperative for the facilitator to demonstrate their commitment to the junior youth’s well-being and education without a trace of paternalism, self-righteousness, or authoritarian control.

**Developing a habit of positive encouragement rather than chastisement.**

Facilitators should always try to see adolescents as they want to see themselves. Treat them as agents of change.

**Self-efficacy is an important determinant in understanding one of the major influencing factors affecting an individual's capacity to perform.** (15)

**Creating a joyful environment.**

***“Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find out sphere of usefulness.”*** (16)

**Creating an atmosphere of trust,**

When youth feel like their thoughts are important and that they will be accepted by you and the rest of the group, they will ask more questions and your group will benefit from more meaningful and memorable discussion.

You will earn trust by showing them through your actions and mannerisms that you respect them and hold their opinions in high value.

*Confirm that you are there for THEM, and that they have every right to take advantage of that by asking as many questions as they have and being active participants.*

**⏹⏹A FEW ONLINE RESOURCES FOR PROVIDERS WHO WANT TO START YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS OR IMPLEMENT EMPOWERMENT TOOLS IN CLINIC⏹⏹**

* THE NATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING CLEARING HOUSE
  + <http://www.servicelearning.org/toolkits>
  + A Practical Guide to Starting and Sustaining High-Quality Community Based Programs <http://www.servicelearning.org/library/resource/8543>
    - ABSTRACT: “This guide is a first effort to apply the 2008 quality standards for service-learning in a practical guide for community-based organizations. It provides practitioners of community-based service-learning with tips, tools, and techniques they need to start making a positive difference in many people's lives by providing high-quality opportunities for youth to serve and learn. It addresses questions such as, "What is service-learning?", "What is effective?", "How do I do it?" and "What other tools are available?" Worksheets that support all phases of service-learning are also provided.”
  + Youth Engagement Zones
    - “The Youth Engagement Zone (YEZ) program is designed to improve student engagement, including student attendance and behavior, and student achievement, graduation rates and college-going rates by:
      * Engaging youth as positive contributors through service-learning to demonstrate the relevance of academic coursework and the value of civic engagement to their educational and personal development; and
      * Connecting with citizens from diverse communities, backgrounds and perspectives to provide expanded opportunities to serve; and
      * Building enduring capacity within communities to become more effective at using service as a solution to address pressing challenges.”
    - NSLC-Produced Resources
      * [Dropout Prevention and Service-Learning](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/dropout_prevention)
      * [Building Effective Partnerships in Service-Learning](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/tribal_facts/partnerships)
      * [Benefits of Community-Based Service-Learning](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/benefits_cbosl)
      * [Impacts of Service-Learning on Participating K-12 Students](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/impacts)
* Center for Youth Engagement
  + <http://centerforyouthengagement.org/>
  + “The Center for Youth Engagement offers a wide range of comprehensive services to public, private, and nonprofit organizations seeking to provide quality developmental opportunities for young people in low-income communities. The Center for Youth Engagement can provide support or direct management of your program or service from concept to evaluation.”
* ACT FOR YOUTH
  + <http://www.actforyouth.net/>
  + Resource for assistance with promoting civic engagement for positive youth development.
* THE SEARCH INSTITUTE
  + <http://www.search-institute.org/developmental-assets>
  + Resources and training services for youth empowerment programs.
  + Discovering developmental assets: based on research in youth development and resiliency.

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