

Playbook: Coalitions

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While parents and educators can influence youth every day, coalitions unite diverse partners – such as community leaders, health providers, law enforcement, faith groups, businesses, and youth themselves – into a consistent network of care, creating a broader environment in which trust, safety, and opportunity flourish. This collective presence ensures that young people see not only individual adults, but entire communities committed to their growth, belonging, and future. Coalitions, by aligning resources and amplifying supportive and protective messaging, can serve as trusted adults at a systems level. Coalitions also serve a critical role by strengthening coalition members' competencies and their organizations' infrastructures to support youth and activate their agency. One of the ways coalitions can do this is by modeling support and agency in action through the youth's participation in the work of the coalition itself.

Create the environment.

1. Create safe, welcoming, and youth-centered spaces at coalition and community events.

- Co-create youth-led spaces (e.g., wellness zones) to show trust and partnership, with adults supporting behind the scenes.
- Design spaces that allow both extroverted and introverted youth to engage comfortably and demonstrate to youth that adults anticipated their needs. Post engaging messages (e.g., What values are important to you?) and have youth serve in expert roles that suit their interests and skills (e.g., more introverted youth may want to take on managing a social media account while more extroverted youth may want to attend outreach and fundraising events on behalf of the coalition).
- Affirm youth as valued contributors and leaders by creating a youth coalition/prevention club. Invite youth leaders to attend adult coalition meetings once a month, held at times and in locations (physical and/or virtual) that allow youth to participate.
- Communicate the coalition's acceptance of and belief in youth as valued and contributing members and community leaders whose voices and ideas are important. Be intentional about giving them space to contribute during meetings and ask for their input in deliberations. Don't single them out by always calling on youth first or last. Frequently ask them, "What do you think?" Limit use of their language/terms unless the relationship with them allows it.
- Model inclusion by uplifting voices from underrepresented groups.
- Onboard youth intentionally with mentorship, goal-sharing, and ongoing support.
- Provide space for youth to reflect on coalition work and share challenges and successes, and how coalition members can be sources of support.
- Offer letters of support and advocacy when youth need adult allies.

2. Ensure consistent language and positive messaging about youth across schools, health agencies, businesses, and media.

- Launch a "language matters" pledge to encourage strengths-based terms ("resilient youth") and share a community guide to unify messaging.
- Partner with local media to train journalists on positive, inclusive youth coverage that avoids stereotypes and includes youth voices.

3. Publicly recognize and celebrate youth contributions and achievements.

- Host a "youth impact festival" to showcase peer mentoring groups, cultural or advocacy initiatives, or other community projects with adults attending as supporters.
- Recognize youth contributions through awards, leadership roles, and public acknowledgment.
- Involve youth in key coalition tasks like event planning or data work.
- Create a visible legacy by displaying youth achievements in coalition spaces.

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Have conversations.

1. Host youth-led forums and listening sessions where adults hear directly from youth.

- Launch a “youth cabinet session” where young people present policy recommendations directly to city officials.
- Hold a listening session on mental health including breakout groups led by youth facilitators. Adults rotate between groups and practice listening without interrupting. At the end, the youth compile themes into a report which the coalition then transforms into action items.

2. Integrate a health-promoting relationship (HPR) philosophy into the coalition’s approach to working with youth.

- Train coalition members on health-promoting relationships: definition of a health-promoting relationship, facilitators of connection, micro-skills for trusted adults, abilities for youth, and how to share information about HPR.
- Discuss a new facilitator of connection and micro-skill at each coalition meeting.
- After each coalition-youth event, invite honest feedback from the youth for adult members: Examples – *Were we fully present? Were we nonjudgmental? In what ways did we help to cultivate the belief that you matter? How can we improve?*

3. Facilitate intergenerational conversations and community events that strengthen relationships and mutual understanding.

- Host a shared community service or civic action project such as a United Way Day of Caring.
- Hold a heritage or cultural exchange event to hand down stories and highlight a community’s history across generations.
- As a coalition icebreaker, hold an intergenerational “day in my shoes” discussion.

Promote growth.

1. Mobilize and align the community.

- Use coalition influence to align resources and policies that support youth.
- Invite youth and members to share sources of strength (e.g., spirituality) and engage partners like faith-based groups.
- Host youth-led discussions to explore ways members can enhance youth engagement; form a “youth first” advisory group.
- Promote shared measures of connection and thriving across sectors through collaborative planning and assessment.



Potential Discussion with Youth Coalition

1. Which facilitators of connection are most important to us as a youth coalition?
2. Which ones are we doing well at?
3. Which ones need work?
4. What ideas might you have to enhance our ability to connect with one another and others?
5. Where are some of the natural opportunities to practice connecting meaningfully with others in our work?

Authenticity, Care, Empathy, Full Presence, Honesty, Humility, Kindness, Love, Nonjudgment, Nurturance, Patience, Respect, Self-Acceptance, Self-Alignment, Self-Awareness, Vulnerability