Best Practices for Increasing Meaningful

Youth Participation

In Collaborative Team Planning

ACHIEVE MY PLAN

AMPlifying Youth Voice in Planning

AMP!

Acknowledgments

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Human service and educational agencies and systems often convene teams to work collaboratively on plans for serving children or youth. This is particularly true for children and youth who are involved with multiple systems or who are felt to be in need of intensive intervention. These kinds of planning teams include IEP (Individualized Education Plan) teams, wraparound teams, foster care Independent Living Program teams, transition planning teams, youth/family decision teams, and other teams that create service or treatment plans. Unfortunately, it is often true that these plans are created *for* youth, with little input or buy-in from the young people themselves.

In previous research on team planning, we found that adults who participated on teams were eager to involve youth in planning in a more meaningful way, but were unsure how to feasibly accomplish this goal. In response, we began work on AMP. AMP—Achieve My Plan—is a five-year project that is developing and testing ways to increase the meaningful participation of youth in collaborative team planning meetings. Here, we share some of what we have learned about how to create plans with youth, so that youth will see the plans as a means to help them move towards important life goals.

These best practices are based on a combination of research findings and input from AMP advisors and other youth and adults who are part of planning teams around the nation. Some of these practices require time and resources, and many require that teams organize their work in ways that are different than usual. But this is to be expected—getting a higher level of youth participation than you are used to will require you to invest in making some changes.

Organizational Support for Participation

Promote an organizational culture that sees youth participation as valuable and feasible. Agency staff are more likely to support youth participation if they see that it is a priority within the agency, and if the agency provides resources—like time and training—so that staff can gain the skills they need to carry out activities that encourage youth participation. Staff, families, and youth themselves will be more open to youth participation if they are given information that demonstrates increasing youth participation is both desirable and possible.

Ensure youth are present when decisions that impact the plan are made: "Nothing about me without me." Youth won't be participating meaningfully in the planning process unless they are present when decisions are made, and their input is invited. The agency and the team should be clear about their commitment to youth participation in decision-making and the process for making decisions. Make a record of the decisions. Don't change these decisions later or make "real" decisions outside the team meeting. Invite youth to participate in the entire meeting, and don't make decisions or share important information when youth are absent.

Before the Meeting: Help the Youth Prepare

In consultation with the youth, formulate an agenda before the meeting. A young person will be more comfortable and willing to participate if he can trust that the team will not become a public discussion of uncomfortable topics. The youth should have a chance to review agenda items before the meeting. If there are topics that he feels should not be discussed in front of the whole team, work with him to figure out how to manage sensitive topics outside of the team setting.

Provide adequate preparation so that youth have a real opportunity to think about what and how they want to contribute to the topics on the agenda. Youth are likely to draw a blank or feel put on the spot when asked to spontaneously contribute to a discussion in a room full of adults. Youth should have an opportunity to prep for the meeting with a "coach" who reviews the meeting structure and the items on the agenda. This can be done individually, or with youth in groups. During this prep session, the youth is supported to decide what points she wants to make about each topic on the agenda and how she will communicate these points. She should also be coached to think about times during the meeting when she may need some kind of support, and who would be the best person to offer that support.

Make sure that the youth has the opportunity to formulate goals that will be part of the plan. It's essential for young people to learn about setting and reaching their own goals—after all, this is what becoming more mature is all about. What's more, a young person is more likely to feel ownership and buy-in for the plan when it includes activities and goals that she finds personally meaningful. Part of prepping for initial planning meetings should include an opportunity for the youth to be coached through a process of thinking about her goals for the future, and how activities consistent with those goals can become part of the team plan.

Help the youth plan to contribute to the meeting in whatever manner feels comfortable to him. With preparation, many youth will feel comfortable talking to the team during the meeting. Some youth prefer to use notes; some prefer to read prepared comments. Some youth may prefer to have someone else speak for them. Some youth feel comfortable talking during parts of the meeting (for instance, welcoming everyone and doing introductions); however, the youth may want more support to talk when it comes to commenting on topics others bring up during the meeting. Even youth who are usually shy may feel comfortable speaking in the meeting if they know that there is a back-up plan in place in case this becomes too difficult. (For example, if the youth gets too anxious to speak, the support person can speak from the youth's notes.)

Help the youth think about things he might do during the meeting to help stay calm and/or focused. Youth will be able to participate more effectively in the meeting if they feel comfortable using strategies to manage their attention, emotions and/or behavior. A youth may prefer to stand or walk around during part of the meeting. Another may be able to pay more attention if he is doodling or chewing gum. Another youth may need to take a cigarette break mid-way through the meeting. Help the youth identify strategies that will work for him and support the youth for using those strategies during the meeting.

Work with the youth to figure out who can support her during the meeting and prepare that "support person" for his role. Encourage the participation of one or more "support people" recognized by the youth. A support person is someone that, in the youth's eyes...

...can be trusted,

...believes in the youth's capacities to make decisions and set goals,

...understands what meetings are and can interact well with others in a meeting, and

...can help the youth communicate productively during the meeting.

A support person will likely need orientation prior to the meeting so that he can understand his role. He should also have the opportunity to be "prepped" together with the youth prior to the meeting so he knows how and when the youth might need support and how to offer support in the team context.

During the Meeting: Create a Safe Environment

Ensure that the team environment feels safe for the youth. Young people report that, during team meetings, they are often ignored, lectured at, and/or harshly criticized. To help the meeting feel safe, the team should agree to a set of ground rules, and the facilitator should be able to control the meeting in a way that ensures that people follow the rules. Ground rules should include the following:

1. All team members treat each other respectfully, the youth no less than others. This means that people in the meeting …

…talk directly to the youth, not about the youth as if she is not there.

…do not assume or assert that they know why the youth said or did something. No one knows for sure what's in another person's mind.

…speak to the group one at a time, and avoid side conversations or distractions like answering phones during the meeting.

…treat everyone's ideas and contributions respectfully.

2. Remain strengths-based and solution-focused. Youth feel that adults often spend too much time stuck thinking about the past, particularly about problems the youth might have had or bad "incidents." Avoid telling long stories about the youth. Do not take this as an opportunity to lecture the youth about how she should act. Do not get into arguments with the youth about what she "really" did or why she "really" did it. This is unproductive and alienating. Instead, focus on strengths, problem solving, and building opportunities that help the youth act in ways that the whole team can support. Communicate that you believe the youth can set new directions for herself and that you want to help.

3. During the meeting, stick to the agenda that the youth has helped create. There should be no last-minute additions to the agenda; off-topic discussion that arises during the meeting should be tabled for later discussion. Team members can make a list of these items and be sure that, by the end of the meeting, they have worked out a strategy for addressing them.

4. Make sure that everyone can understand what is going on. Invite everyone on the team to ask questions if they don't understand something or if unfamiliar terminology or acronyms come

up during discussion. Be supportive when people ask for this kind of clarification.

5. Learn how to talk in ways that don't alienate or hurt the youth. Professionals often say that they don't want to include youth in important decisions because hearing certain truths will hurt the youth's feelings. Professionals may feel uncomfortable or even cruel using labels or speaking about the results of tests or assessments in front of a youth. But rather than using this as an excuse to exclude the youth, use it as an opportunity to reflect on why "helping" feels so cruel that it has to be done when youth are not around. It is possible to speak the truth and to get business done without being cruel. Explain that discussion of diagnoses and problems are often required by the system in order to get services, but the most important purpose of the team is to recognize the youth's strengths and support her in moving toward a positive future.

During the Meeting: Ensure the Youth is Part of the Team

Structure discussion in ways that provide multiple opportunities for the youth to express his ideas or offer comments, even if he doesn't want to say a lot at any one time. Make space for the youth to contribute to discussions, and check in with him from time to time. A youth may not want to say a lot each time, but will feel more included anyway.

Ensure that what the youth says matters and has an impact on discussions and decisions. While this does not mean that the youth should solely dictate the plan, it does mean that people on the team should be willing to truly listen to what the youth has to say and incorporate the youth's interests into the plan. Of course, helping the youth formulate goals for the plan and prepare to speak to topics on the agenda are important ways to help ensure that he or she will have an impact.

Beyond this, it is also important to structure decision-making in ways that support collaboration. Some key ways to do this are:

1. Don't decide the solution before you have a chance to think about what the goal, "problem," or need really is. Sometimes a goal, problem, or need is defined so narrowly that there is no room to collaborate in creating a solution or strategy. A team member may say that the problem is that the youth needs anger management classes. If the team accepts this as the real problem, then there is only one (predetermined) way to solve it: with anger management classes. In this way, the person that defines the problem gets to define the solution as well. There is no chance for the youth—or anyone else—to have meaningful input. While this example is a bit of a caricature, this type of situation occurs frequently in group settings. A more collaborative (and often more effective) way to think about a problem is to work as a group to think about deeper needs. What purpose would anger management classes serve? In general, a problem or need should be defined in such a way that a variety of strategies could be used to solve it. Then you can…

2. Consider several different strategies to solve a problem or meet a need before picking one to use. If only one strategy is considered, it is often not a very creative strategy, and usually it is the "pet" strategy of someone with a higher level of power at the meeting. Everyone in a group

or team is empowered when the team considers options before making decisions, but this is particularly true for youth, who haven't had a whole professional career to think about some of these things.

Ensure that the youth's strengths, assets, talents, and achievements are a focus of the meeting and a part of the plan. Youth report that what they do well is rarely discussed in meetings. They also feel that what they accomplish from week to week or month to month is consistently overshadowed during meetings by talk about problems and deficits. Goals and activities that are written into plans usually focus on remedies for problems rather than on developing skills, talents, and assets. A strengths focus helps to counteract these tendencies by engaging youth and other team members in recognizing, reinforcing, and building on a youth's positive actions and capacities. Maintaining a strengths focus is not something that naturally happens in most team meetings, so meetings should be structured and facilitated in ways that support it.

Specific portions of the meeting and steps in the planning process should be explicitly structured to bring in a strengths focus. For example, every meeting can begin with a group discussion of what's going well. Initial steps in planning should include some form of strengths inventory or list, and this list should be used when the team is deciding how best to reach goals or meet needs. The strengths list or inventory should appear in formal team documentation and can be reviewed or added to at a specific point during each meeting.

Be sure that everyone, including the youth, understands the decisions made and the next steps after the meeting. At the end of the meeting or before shifting from one agenda item to the next, review any decisions made and follow-up responsibilities and deadlines. Write this information down and give the plan to each participant, including the youth. When a youth has offered to take on a follow-up task, be sure to ask if he needs any support to do it. Help the youth think through what accomplishing the task will require and offer support ideas.

Measuring Participation and Empowerment

It is important to gather some sort of data or feedback from youth to assess whether they feel involved in planning and confident about their ability to make decisions about services. The AMP project has created and validated two measures for exactly this purpose. One assesses youth participation in team planning, and the other assesses youth empowerment. Both measures are youth-friendly and brief. The two together can be completed by most youth in 5 to 8 minutes. The youth participation measure assesses whether or not the team environment is one that encourages meaningful youth participation in the planning process. The empowerment measure assesses the extent to which a youth feels confident in managing his or her condition, interacting with service providers, and helping change service systems.

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