

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

INTRODUCTION

Youth-led programs are grounded in positive youth development (PYD); however, they are distinct from other PYD programs because they utilize a youth empowerment approach. Youth empowerment specifically develops sociopolitical awareness in young people, enhancing their skills to be community change agents (Zimmerman, 2000). Youth empowerment facilitates young people in constructing meaningful community change, with the goal of enhancing the wellbeing of all individuals. A youth empowerment approach utilizes young people as resources rather than a “collection of problems” in establishing community change (Holden, 2004). By emphasizing collective participation and contribution, young people gain skills and competencies that cultivate their own positive development, while also promoting the healthy development of others.

It is critical for adult allies to have a foundational understanding of youth empowerment in order to effectively embrace and utilize the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004), one of the two key frameworks that inform youth-led programs in Ohio. If youth-led programs throughout the state adopted a youth empowerment approach in their program and grounded their programs in the YECF, then we would have a more unified and successful prevention field in Ohio.

In this paper, adult allies will gain a better understanding of youth empowerment, providing a foundation for understanding the YECF. We will discuss what adult allies need to do to create

For more information on youth-led programs, please see the following white papers:

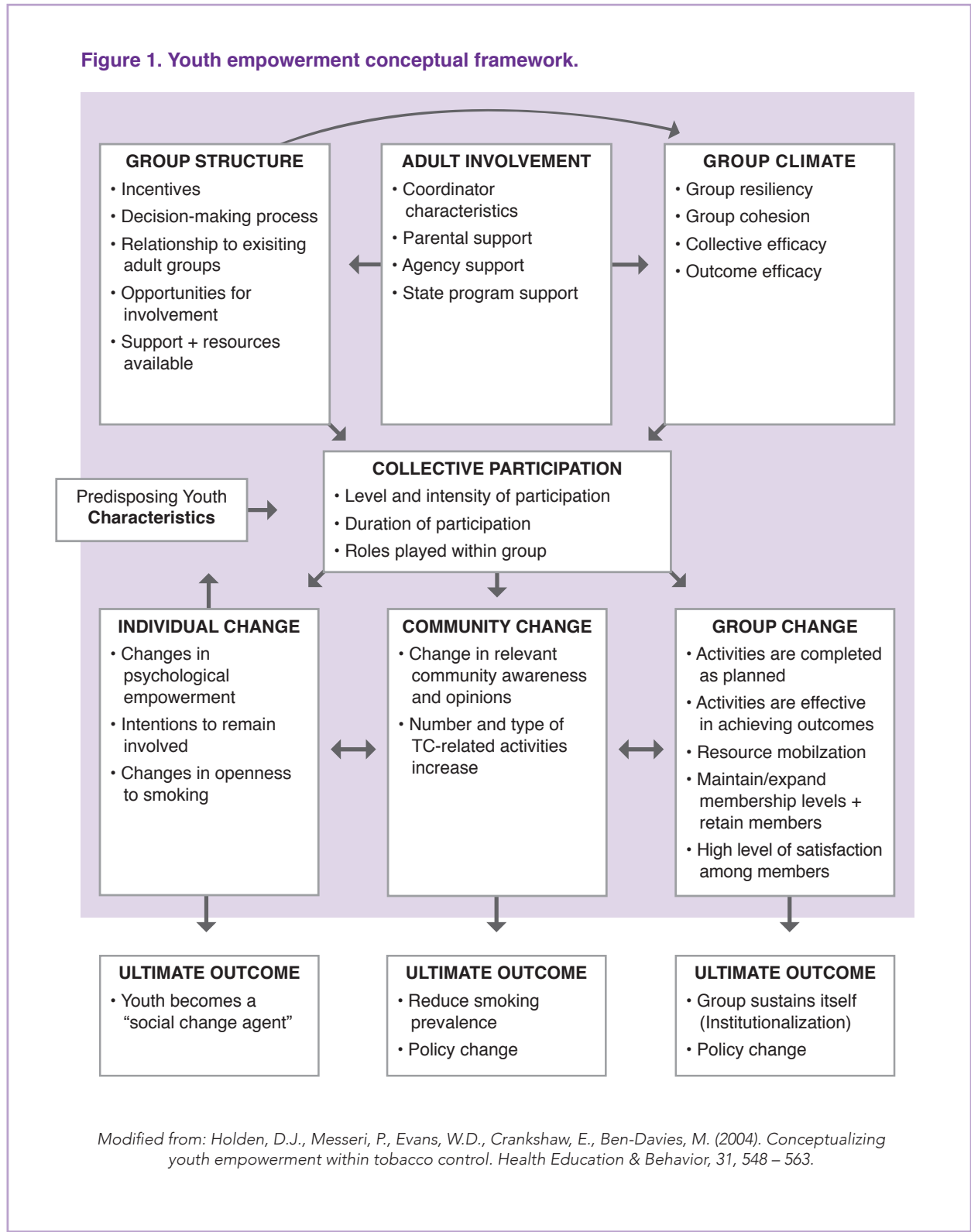
Youth-Led Programs: This paper provides an overview of the two frameworks that inform youth-led programs: the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004) and the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF; SAMHSA).

Conceptualizing Adolescence/ts: Consideration of historical views, culture and personal bias in the conceptualizing of adolescence/ts will assist adult allies to better engage, guide and empower young people.

Youth Empowerment: This paper explains youth empowerment, the core construct outlined in the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004), which adult allies use to guide young people in their community change efforts.

Prevention and Promotion: As prevention and promotion are the fundamental approaches utilized by youth-led programs, it is important for adult allies to understand what each is and how they relate to each other.

Figure 1. Youth empowerment conceptual framework.



an empowering group setting and then explain what an empowered young person looks like. Throughout this paper, there is an understanding that the empowerment process will look different for different people, organizations, and settings (Holden, 2004).

THE ROLE OF ADULT ALLIES

When we hear the term “youth-led,” we may infer that the program embraces the idea of a youth-driven, adult-guided approach. Indeed, the involvement of adults is key to the success of a youth-led program. The Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF) highlights the critical role of adult allies. As indicated by this framework, adult allies must intentionally focus on creating empowering settings in which their young people can engage. The characteristics of effective adult allies include general respect of youth, active listening, being open-minded to ideas and approaches, and being relatable by the youth. As indicated in the YECF, support from not only the adult coordinator but parents and the supporting agency are important as well.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

GROUP EMPOWERMENT

Adult allies are responsible for creating an empowering group setting. The YECF indicates two key group processes adult allies need to consider in order to create an empowering group setting: group structure and group climate.

Group Structure. Core to the group structure is establishing effective means for youth participation. The National Commission on Resources for Youth defines youth participation as “involving youth in responsible, challenging action, that meets genuine needs, with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequence extend to others,” (1975, p. 25). Youth must be actively involved in the decision-making processes and given the opportunity to have a voice. In an empowering group setting, everyone is able to contribute their ideas and are actively involved in the conversation. Discussions and deliberations should be the basis from which decisions are made. Importantly, empowering group settings rely on the contributions of each members and seek to find a meaningful role for each member based on their skills, interests and abilities (Collura, 2016).

Group Climate. When utilizing a youth empowerment approach it is important to keep in mind the importance of group climate, the emotional atmosphere and tone created by the group. The four key attributes of an empowering group climate are: group resiliency, group cohesion, collective efficacy, and outcome efficacy (Holden et al., 2004).

Group resiliency is the group's ability to overcome obstacles and to persevere during adverse situations. The group's capacity to cooperate in the completion of a common objective or goal is reflective of the group cohesion. Cohesive groups get along well and members demonstrate respect for each other. In order to accomplish community change, youth must work with others and need to believe in the value of working together. This is referred to as collective efficacy, meaning the group's belief that by working together they can create community change. A group's belief that their actions in the community will lead to explicit outcomes is the outcome efficacy. In short, it is their confidence that their collective actions will positively influence adults and youth in their communities.

INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT

Young people become empowered through ongoing engagement in an empowering group setting. But what does an empowered young person look like? It is necessary for adult allies to understand individual empowerment so they can explicitly identify the knowledge, skills and attitudes they seek to build in their young people. Research identifies three components of an empowered youth: emotional empowerment, cognitive empowerment, and behavioral empowerment.

Emotional empowerment pertains to a young person's belief in their ability to influence social and political systems (Zimmerman, 2000). Well-developed organizing and public speaking skills, as well as a willingness to actively participate in decision-making processes are hallmarks of emotionally empowered youth.

Cognitively empowered youth are critically aware of how to change systems (Zimmerman, 2000; Collura, 2016). First, they have a deep understanding of the problems in their community and the knowledge of what resources are available and how to utilize them in order to create community change must be readily available. In addition, awareness of effective prevention strategies must be in their base of knowledge. Cognitively empowered youth are also critically aware of the environment in which they are operating and they think strategically about what strategies are most effective to use within that environment. They have to also be aware of their community's level of readiness and have an understanding of potential setbacks.

Finally, behavioral empowerment refers to the participation of youth in their community settings; it is sometimes understood as civic engagement (Zimmerman, 2000; Collura, 2016). Behaviorally empowered youth may demonstrate a variety of actions, such as actively participating in voluntary organizations, engaging in social and political discussions, or signing petitions in their local communities.

YOUTH-LED PROGRAMS AND EMPOWERMENT

In conclusion, if the following statements describe your youth-led program you may well be on your way to successfully implementing a youth empowerment approach:

- The youth-led program is actively grounded in the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF)
- Adult ally has foundational knowledge of the youth empowerment and is actively seeking to create an empowering group setting and intentionally develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes indicative of empowered youth
- Youth are involved in the entire prevention process and work together to address an identified issue in their community
- Youth have a voice in planning, decision-making, implementing and evaluating processes
- Youth hear directly from their peers about strategies and techniques to address relevant community issues
- Involves adults in a guiding capacity
- Utilizes proven effective prevention strategies
- Focuses on building the positive attributes young people need in order to be successful
- Focusing on youths' strengths to ensure that all youth grow up to become contributing adults

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Ohio University's Voinovich School and Leadership and Public Affairs and Drug-Free Action Alliance collaborated with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addition Services (OhioMHAS) to host a series of training and technical assistance (T/TA) activities for adult allies of youth-led programs. This series of white papers was developed by adult allies to support their peers who work with young people to use local data and evidence-based prevention strategies to create meaningful change within Ohio's communities. Dr. Jessica Collura, Ms. Aimee Collins, Dr. Holly Raffle and Mr. Zach Gheen of the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs supported Ohio's adult allies as they developed the white paper series. Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Grant# 1700315 provided funding for the Youth-Led Training and Technical Assistance Project.