

WISCONSIN YOUTH FUTURES

Technical Report #7

Keeping Kids Involved In Youth Futures



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It's often said that the hardest part of any effort or project is getting started. But in actuality, the real challenge comes from keeping the level of motivation high once a project is off the ground. This is certainly the case when it comes to ensuring that youth who are part of local Youth Futures Committees stay interested and motivated.

Katherine Wilehaen once remarked, "The best advice to give the young is, find out what you like doing best and get someone to pay you for doing it." Obviously, we're not about to suggest that you pay kids for staying involved in Youth Futures. But we do suggest that you think about motivation in terms of the costs and benefits of being involved.

First, consider the "costs." Time is a big issue for most kids these days. Kids have calendars that are every bit as jam packed as are ours. And like most of us, youth often have a hard time setting priorities and managing schedules. Being a student is comparable to having a full time job, and according to UWEX TAP data worrying about grades is a major source of stress in a teenager's life. Each of the youth who are members of a local Youth Futures Committee needs to find time for their studies. But their schedules are filled with other priorities as well: sports; extra-curricular school events and activities; band or music lessons; Sunday school or religious education classes and enrichment experiences; community youth groups such as 4-H, Scouts, or FFA, not to mention the fact that most kids want—and need—some time just for socializing with friends. In addition, many kids have part time jobs where work schedules are arranged to suit an employer's needs. And don't forget that each youthful member of your committee is also a member of a family where there are chores, tasks, rules and expectations that must be attended to.

For youth to be productive and dependable members of Youth Futures they need to devote a sizable portion of their time to committee meetings, activities, and projects. And for kids and adults alike, the decision to spend time on something depends on whether or not it seems worth it. Kids need to feel they're getting something out of their involvement in Youth Futures. Otherwise there are just too many other things for them to be doing with their time.

Here's where Katherine Wilehaen's advice comes in handy. If we can provide kids with opportunities to do the kinds of things they enjoy doing, chances are they'll want to stay involved. Here are a few suggestions for doing that:

1. Build on their strengths

Kids need to feel that others notice and appreciate their talents and abilities. If they are continually denied opportunities to play a meaningful role in Youth Futures efforts, kids will quickly lose interest—especially if they're left on the sidelines playing passive, or "token" roles.

In addition to their youthful perspective on today's issues, kids bring a vitality and enthusiasm to a group—provided it can really listen and take advantage of those strengths. One reason this doesn't happen more often is because adults and youth have different frames of reference when it comes to discussing "what works" and what doesn't. Adult values, tastes, experiences, attitudes and ideas aren't the same as kids'. That's why it can be challenging to work together on joint planning and decision-making efforts. Since the Youth Futures Program is concerned with the needs of kids, adults must be prepared to pay close attention to what kids are really thinking, feeling, experiencing and suggesting.

Kids whose ideas are taken seriously are much more likely to stay involved in Youth Futures. In order for youth to follow through with what they're capable of doing, they've got to be given a chance to demonstrate they can do it.

2. Make meetings worth their while to attend

Even the most articulate kids will tell you that being a part of an adult committee can be an intimidating experience. Kids are often reluctant to speak up--and even when asked for their opinion they feel they have to be careful of what they say for fear it will be the wrong thing.

That's why a lot depends on what is done to create a supportive and inclusive climate in which meetings will be taking place. Adults need to look for opportunities to help youth feel comfortable and at ease. One way to do this is by developing informal adult/youth "partnerships." Consider asking each adult to "adopt" a youth member in order to pay a little extra attention to him or her. This might include phoning ahead of time to arrange for transportation to and from the meeting. (This is an excellent way to get better acquainted and develop cross generational friendships.) Adult partners can also make it a point to include youth in discussions and conversation at the meeting, as well as to follow up and stay in touch afterwards.

And keep in mind that youth tend to tune out of lengthy meetings—especially when there's a lot of long-winded discussion involving formal terminology and jargon. "It's sooooo BORRRRRRRRINGGG!" is probably one of the major reasons kids don't like coming to meetings where there will be a lot of adults. The best way to prevent this is to invite kids to help plan the meeting. But that means being willing to go along with their suggestions for putting a little fun and sparkle into it.

3. Set them up for some immediate successes

Much of what Youth Futures is all about has to do with long term issues, implications and results. And yet for the youthful members of your committee it's very important that something happen soon. Kids tend to be action-oriented. So they are more likely to want to stay involved in the program if they see there's going to be some immediate pay-offs for them and their friends and schoolmates. That means you need to make sure they can get involved right away in making plans for some short-term projects that will have highly visible results. This may be easier than it sounds, because kids usually love to come up with ideas for things they can do if given a chance. They'll probably end up with quite an impressive list of activities, but in case they need a little help getting the brainstorming process started, here are some suggestions:

- paint a mural on an unused wall
- do a fund-raiser
- put together a brochure, or newsletter
- organize a talent show
- have a party

The important part will be providing them with encouragement, support and access to resources for following through on their ideas. Keep in mind that even though youth need to be given an opportunity to plan and implement these kinds of projects, they may well need to depend on adults for some guidance and feedback along the way. Expecting kids to automatically be able to handle all the elements of something they've never done before often amounts to setting them up for failure. Adults need to be willing to play a supportive role. That means being there in the background to help kids think through the logistics and organizational details that will be necessary to "put wheels under" their great ideas.

4. Help them learn from their disappointments

It's difficult when things don't work out the way they were supposed to work out. Failure can be deadly for teenagers who often have fragile self images and tend to take things personally. On the other hand, mistakes can provide people with opportunities for gaining new insights and information about things. The trick is being able to look at "failure" from a constructive point of view, and that's not always easy. Perhaps one of the most important things adults can do for kids who feel they've failed at something is to help them put things into perspective. Taking a look at what went wrong and why is a great way to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills.

5. Celebrate and recognize:

One of the best ways to keep any group motivated is to affirm its accomplishments. Taking the time to recognize people for the contributions they're making, as well as to celebrate group successes should be an on-going priority. Kids need to know they're appreciated. Looking for opportunities to recognize the things they've done for Youth Futures lets them know you're glad they're a part of things. It's also a good way to encourage them to stay involved.

Don't overlook the importance of telling kids they're great—but keep in mind they need to hear specifics. So tell them when you see them doing or saying something that catches your eye or captures your attention. As important as it is to provide kids with positive verbal feedback about their contributions, there are other things you can do as well to recognize the efforts they are putting into Youth Futures. In addition to awards and certificates, consider the following:

- Make it a priority to celebrate successes—even if they are modest ones. Consider bringing along treats, balloons, banners and crepe paper to a meeting when there is cause for celebration.
- Have a special pot-luck dinner midway through a project to recognize everyone's contributions.
- Find out if it's possible for kids to get partial school credit for their involvement in Youth Futures
- Make sure kids are recognized for their Youth Futures involvement when their schools hand out other community service and extracurricular awards at the end of the year.

- Consider having a special "Youth Futures" tee shirt designed and presented to kids on the committee.
- When arranging for news media coverage for "Youth Futures" activities and projects, look for opportunities to get kids in the spotlight.

Finally, remember that when it comes to keeping kids involved in "Youth Futures", the ultimate motivation has to come from within. If kids are excited about Youth Futures and feel it's giving them an opportunity to be a part of something they value, chances are they'll want to find a way to stay involved.

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