



Listen to the Youth

“Adults often try to say they know what is best for youth and what youth need—when in reality, they are only going off the feeling they have about what youth need.”

**17-year-old
Portola, CA**

Adults frequently feel they know and understand young people and their lives. However, a young person’s experiences can be complex, subtle, and/or difficult to articulate. This tool is designed to create an environment in which adults work to understand youth and apply their understandings to strengthening the program.

Young people have a great deal to teach us about their communities, their experiences, and their needs. Listening directly to youth can be very powerful as a means of educating and motivating staff to identify areas in which changes can be made to better serve youth, and to facilitate those changes directly. This is particularly critical when the communities that staff come from or grew up in are different from the communities of program participants. The gap in staff knowledge or understanding of young people’s lives can be dramatically bridged, simply by listening.

Choose one or more of the formats below to allow space for the young people in your program to speak about their lives. Once you have chosen your preferred formats, your only job is to listen to what the youth are telling you, even if you have a different perspective from theirs. We suggest you take notes on what the young people have to say, either during or after you talk with them. All staff should be encouraged to participate in one or more of the activities below. A facilitator who guides this process should set aside time so that participants can share with other staff what they learned from listening to the youth.

Focus Groups

This activity will involve a structured, facilitated conversation with a small group of youth around a few key questions. Be sure to include participants who are not customarily the most vocal in the program. When assembling the group, also be sure there is sufficient representation in terms of ethnic background, neighborhood, gender, etc. The following prompt questions can help structure your conversation; for younger children, it may help to simplify these questions or explain what you mean by terms like “diversity” or “support.” You may also add your own questions.

- ☞ Where do you live? What is your neighborhood like?
- ☞ Tell me about the diversity in your school or neighborhood. How do different people and groups get along?
- ☞ Where do you and/or your friends find support when you need it?
- ☞ What’s different between the way adults see the world and the way you and other youth do?

One on One

Staff members can also identify or create opportunities to talk in depth with individual youth about their experiences and perceptions of program and neighborhood diversity. This format is informal, but can be very powerful. The following prompt questions can help structure your conversation; again it may be helpful to simplify these questions for younger children. You may also add your own questions.

- ☞ What are some of the groups or communities you feel a part of? What do they mean to you?
- ☞ Where do you live? What’s your neighborhood like?
- ☞ Tell me about the diversity in your school or neighborhood. How do different people and groups get along?
- ☞ Where do you and/or your friends find support when you need it?
- ☞ What’s different between the way adults see the world and the way you and other youth do?

Youth-Led Community Walks

In this activity, you will have a young person lead you on a walk through his or her neighborhood. Alternately, this activity may include a small group of staff and a small group of young people. In getting a first-hand tour, you will learn about the different things your youth may encounter on a daily basis in their neighborhoods (e.g. preferred routes when walking to school, areas where they meet up with friends or classmates, or places they consider dangerous or safe). These experiences may be either negative or positive; it is important to get as complete a picture as possible rather than focusing on one or the other. The following prompt questions can help structure your tour; you may also add your own questions.

- ☞ Tell me about your neighborhood.
- ☞ What are the positive things you encounter on your daily walk? What are the challenges?
- ☞ Who are the different groups that live in this neighborhood? How do they get along?
- ☞ Where do you and/or your friends feel safe? Unsafe?
- ☞ What's different between the way adults see and know your community or neighborhood and the way you and other youth do?

Youth Community Maps

This activity can either be done on its own or in conjunction with the Youth-Led Community Walk. If you choose to do it in conjunction with the Youth-Led Community Walk, complete this activity after the walk. Youth will refer to their experiences during the walk while working on their community maps. You will need large construction paper and markers. Have one young person or a small group of young people in your program draw a picture of their neighborhood or community. The following prompt questions can help structure the community maps; you may also add your own questions.

- ☞ What types of buildings are around? What condition are they in?
- ☞ What stores or businesses do you see?
- ☞ What types of restaurants or places to eat do you see in your area?
- ☞ How do people get around in your neighborhood?
- ☞ What are the areas where you and your friends tend to spend a lot of time?
- ☞ Where do you feel most safe and supported? Are there places you feel unsafe or unwelcome?
- ☞ Are there parks or open areas for people to hang out?

- 👁️ What kinds of people do you see walking down the street? What kinds of conversations do you hear?
- 👁️ How do the different groups that live in the neighborhood get along?

Once the participants have completed their community maps, ask them to present to the rest of the group and say what they appreciate about their community or neighborhood, as well as anything they would like to change about their community or neighborhood. Thank everyone for participating in the activity and sharing.

After you've completed your conversations, interviews, walks, focus groups, and/or maps, be sure to write down both what you heard and your thoughts about what the youth discussed with you, to reflect on and share back with program staff at a later time.