

# ADULT ALLY

## TIP SHEET

The purpose of this tip sheet is to highlight the benefits and characteristics of adult allies, in addition to evidence-based considerations when engaging with youth.



### What is an adult ally?

An adult ally can be any adult with an interest in supporting youth.<sup>1,2</sup>

Adults and youth develop reciprocal relationships that are long-term and involve a personal connection, rather than just a working collaboration.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>

This collaboration requires adults to share power and move from an adult-as-mentor role to an adult-as-partner role with the youth they work with.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

The section below provides some benefits of having/being an adult ally, for allies, youth, and organizations.



### BENEFITS FOR ADULT ALLIES

- Adults are provided with first-hand knowledge of issues and topics that are important to youth;<sup>2,10</sup>
- Adults have the opportunity to change the perceptions and stereotypes they may carry about young people;<sup>10</sup>
- As adults work closely with youth, the relationship between them and the youth they work with in the community is strengthened.<sup>10</sup>



### BENEFITS FOR YOUTH

- An adult ally can provide youth with opportunities or identify ways to get more involved in issues that matter to them;<sup>10</sup>
- Mentorship opportunities – adult allies have different skills and life experiences that young people can benefit from.<sup>2,10</sup> This relationship can expand social networks and develop more positive relationships with adults.<sup>10</sup>



### BENEFITS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

- Supporting staff to act as adult allies can amplify the youth voice in governance structures. Youth are more equipped and empowered to contribute towards program/service creation, which can result in organizations ensuring that services meet the needs of the youth they serve;<sup>10</sup>
- Fostering an organizational culture that encourages adults to be allies to the youth they work with increases an organization's credibility of being committed to youth engagement;<sup>10</sup>
- By ensuring that youth have adult allies to support them, it strengthens an organization's relationship with their youth clients.<sup>10</sup>



## CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ADULT ALLY

Below are characteristics of an effective adult ally along with some tips to consider when working with young people. An effective adult ally:



Treats youth as equals

Youth and adults may have different ideas when it comes to communication, strength, and abilities. It's essential for both groups to recognize and embrace these differences.<sup>11</sup>



Is an active listener

Keep an open mind when working with youth. Actively listen when youth speak about their experiences and opinions. As an adult ally, it's important to not make assumptions or judgements, and to ask questions when unsure.<sup>11</sup>



Creates safer space for youth

A safer space isn't just about the physical space where youth gather. A safer space is "a supportive, non-threatening environment where all participants feel comfortable to express themselves, and where they may share experiences without fear of discrimination or reprisal."<sup>12</sup> Safer spaces keep youth engaged and allow them to grow and develop skills and relationships, learn, and continue to build their own knowledge.



Interrupts adultism

Adultism is based on the perspective that adults are better than young people.<sup>8,11,13</sup> Similar to other forms of oppression, adultism is portrayed through an individual's attitude and actions, as well as social norms and traditions.<sup>11</sup> Adultism will have a negative impact on the relationship between adult allies and youth.<sup>13</sup> It promotes relationships that are unequal, unauthentic, and ultimately youth don't grow in the relationship.<sup>8</sup> As an adult ally, it's important to speak up when observing attitudes or actions that may be seen as adultist, and support other adults in changing these behaviors.



Youth at the centre of decision making

Work to share power with youth, and support them in having ownership over projects and initiatives that they are part of. Avoid taking an authority figure role, instead, support youth to succeed in taking initiative in projects that matter to them.<sup>9</sup>



Co-learns with youth

Youth and adults bring different perspectives to their shared initiatives. It's valuable for adults to learn from youth as they are experts on issues that directly impact them. It's equally important that youth learn from adults, as their experience and knowledge can benefit them as well.<sup>11</sup>



Uses an anti-oppressive lens

It's critical for adult allies to use an anti-oppressive lens when supporting youth because of the various systems of oppression that may impact the youth they work with. Framing work in this view will also help with understanding the barriers youth face, and how adults can work to lessen the barriers.<sup>11</sup>

## References

- 1 Libby, M., Rosen, M., & Sedonaen, M. (2005). Building youth-adult partnerships for community change: Lessons from the youth leadership institute. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 111-120. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20037>
- 2 Pereira, N. (2007). Ready . . . set . . . engage! Building effective youth-adult partnerships for a stronger child and youth mental health system. Toronto: Children's Mental Health Ontario & Ottawa: Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health.
- 3 Deutsch, N. L., Spencer, R. (2009). Capturing the magic: Assessing the quality of youth mentoring relationships. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 121,47-70. doi: 10.1002/yd.296.
- 4 Grossman, J. B., & Rhodes, J. E. (2002). The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring relationships. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30,199-219. doi: 10.1023/A:1014680827552
- 5 Hurd, N. M. & Sellars, R. M. (2013). Black adolescents' relationships with natural mentors: Associations with academic engagement via social and emotional development. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 19, 76-85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0031095>
- 6 Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, 106,651-688.
- 7 McCreary Centre Society. (2013). Supporting you in our communities: a training manual for adult allies in Yukon. Retrieved from: <http://www.yukonwellness.ca/supportingyouthcommreport.php>
- 8 Checkoway, B. (2017). Adults as allies to young people striving for social justice. *Queensland Review*, 24(1), 93-99. doi:10.1017/qre.2017.12
- 9 Ramey, H. L., Lawford, H. L., & Vachon, W. (2017). Youth-Adult Partnerships in Work with Youth: An Overview. *Journal of Youth Development*, 12(4), 38-60. doi:10.5195/jyd.2017.520
- 10 Khanna, N. and McCart, S. (2007). Youth engagement: adult allies in action. Retrieved from: [https://www.studentscommission.ca/assets/pdf/en/publications/Adults\\_Allies\\_in\\_Action.pdf](https://www.studentscommission.ca/assets/pdf/en/publications/Adults_Allies_in_Action.pdf)
- 11 Gebhardt, A. (2014). Sexual Assault Awareness Month - strategies for becoming an adult ally. Retrieved from: [https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2014-01/saam\\_2014\\_strategies-for-becoming-an-adult-ally.pdf](https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2014-01/saam_2014_strategies-for-becoming-an-adult-ally.pdf)
- 12 Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2019). Safer space guidelines. 1-2. Retrieved from: [https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2019-03/safer\\_space\\_guidelines\\_mar\\_2019\\_eng.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2019-03/safer_space_guidelines_mar_2019_eng.pdf)
- 13 Texas Peace Project. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [http://taasa.memberlodge.org/Resources/Documents/AdultAllyManual\\_FINALversion.pdf](http://taasa.memberlodge.org/Resources/Documents/AdultAllyManual_FINALversion.pdf)

For more information, please view: Walking the talk: A toolkit for engaging young people in mental health (<http://www.yetoolkit.ca/>)