

A note on the role of adult mentors at YCLP Events

Written by Monya Relles (they/them, aged 26, adult mentor for the Western Mass Youth Climate team) with advice from Ollie, Morgan, Sasha, Willow (youth), and Brittany (co-mentor).

What's a youth led space?

- A youth led space is a space for youth and by youth. That means, the youth (in some cases, people 18 and under) are making decisions about what they're doing, how they're doing it, and why.

What is the role of adults in a youth led space?

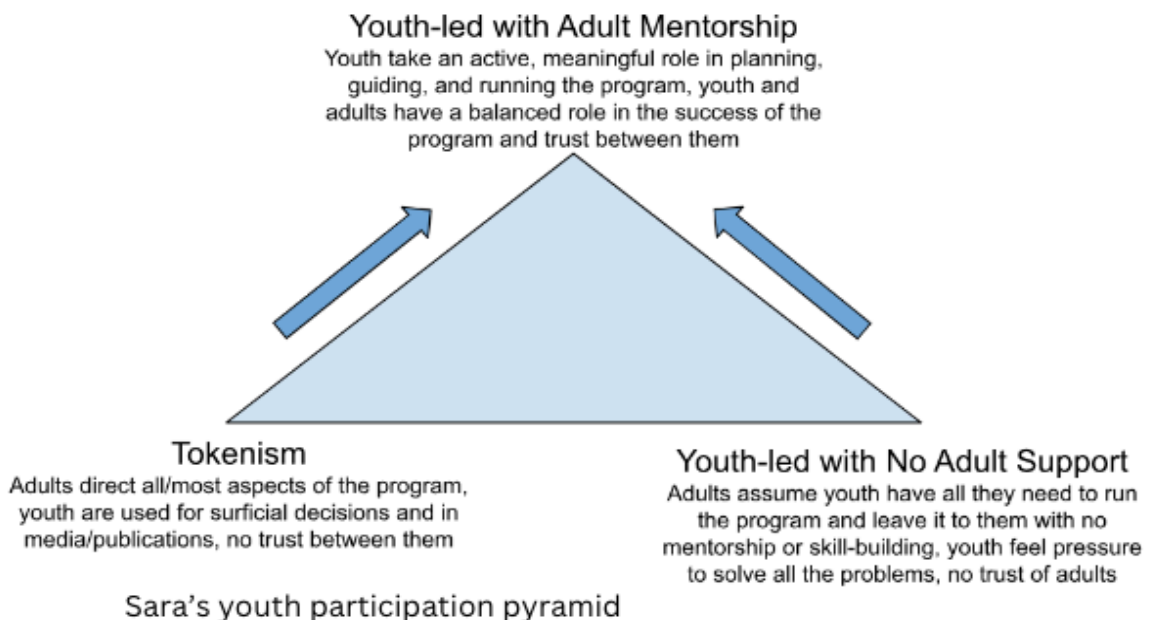
- The role of adults can be complicated in a youth led space. We can be present for legal reasons, because we have access to physical resources that the youth do not, or even because we have access to wisdom and knowledge the youth do not.
- Ultimately, our role is to support and not to steer. We can provide useful information, resources, or even occasionally solicited advice, but we should be going out of our way to let the youth do as much of the decision making as possible.
- Intergenerational spaces are beautiful, and they can mutually benefit youth and adults but as adults, it's also up to us to be able to hear when a space is exclusively for youth or when it is explicitly youth led, and to respect those boundaries.

Youth/adult power dynamics:

- Adults wield power in youth spaces, even when they don't intend to use that power. Power dynamics can be visible, invisible, intended and unintended.
- Because we have this power, it's our job to go out of our way to give agency back to youth whenever we can. **From something simple, like making sure the youth are the ones calling an opening circle, to big picture things, like making sure the youth set the agenda and goals, our first job is to get out of the way and keep checking in and differing our questions to the youth.**
- This can be a lifelong un-learning so feel free to communicate. Check in with the youth and with other adult mentors, ask for feedback, and be open to listening.
- Lead by example. Follow your team's group norms. Participate in youth activities (if invited). Be genuinely excited about their projects, model buying into the activities they organize and practice being vulnerable with them, just like you would ask them to be with you.

Adults and trial and failure:

- In my experience, one of the hardest things as an adult mentor to youth is to let them try something you think might be set up to fail. It's also one of the most important. Failure is how we learn and we owe it to our youth to let them be uncomfortable, awkward, and challenged—as long as everyone is safe.
- Sometimes, as an adult, I do have access to more information or experience about a project. I try to offer my opinions as sparingly as I can, and to make sure that whatever feedback I give is explicitly asked for by the youth. In order to make sure I give this feedback in a genuine way, I need a deep relationship built on a foundation of trust.
- I try to make it clear that if something does go wrong, I am available as a support. While I try not to offer unsolicited advice, I also want youth to know that they can ask me for help. And I can always check in if I'm unsure.
- Often, youth will begin a project and succeed in ways beyond what I can imagine—**this is one of the things that can make youth organizing so revolutionary—the youth are working with fewer preconceived notions of the possible and so they do the impossible without even knowing it.**



Questions to ask as an adult ally:

- Do you already work with youth who could be leaders? Who? If not, how could you build connections or recruit some?
- What concrete steps will you take to move toward youth empowerment?
- How can you utilize the principles of culturally responsive teaching methods to put these ideas in practice?
- When you uplift youth voices, what impact will it have on your community/organization/network?
- Who can you look to for advice navigating these power dynamics? Who are YOUR mentors? Who are your partners in this project?