

Facilitator Roles

Adult facilitators are most effective when they value youth as the leaders of initiatives and remain present in some capacity. It may sound easy to step back and let youth lead but letting go and trusting youth leadership can be difficult. Adults are used to directing youth and leading projects young people carry out. Through effective youth engagement, adults must let youth lead and make mistakes, using the experience to grow. Depending on the motivations of the group and the nature of the teamwork, below are some of the roles adults can play.

Guide on the side

As a guide on the side, the adult is present to channel youth creativity and energy through the service-learning process, workshop design, or grantmaking structure. With a growth mindset and autonomy to explore options, young people are more likely to propose and seek out unconventional solutions and new ideas than adults. The adult facilitator may provide structure or guidelines or help the youth center the project on the relevant data and community resources or the needs of the stakeholders. As youth gain direction and take on more responsibility, the facilitator's guardrails move farther out. Empathetic adult guides pay attention and know when to step forward and when to step back. They spend time building trust to show youth that they are safe to explore and act. Young people can feel comfortable stretching to new territory when they know they are empowered and know what they can do with and without adult permission and supervision.

Co-facilitator or participant

In some cases, adults share power as facilitators and participants, with equal responsibility and equal role to youth in the group, project, or workshop. Because it is natural for youth to look to the adult in the group for assurance, the adult must reinforce that their voice holds no more weight than the voices of the youth. We suggest the groups develop shared community agreements to support and balance shared power.

Initiator

As an initiator, the adult may communicate a desired outcome or set some parameters, but the goal is to quickly shift ownership to the youth. The initiator strongly models agency. They must show youth that the project isn't something that happens to them but with them. The young people are expected to decide what they care about and what action to take. Adults shouldn't use young people to fulfill an agenda or tokenize them to make the organization look good. The focus is on youth practicing the world they want to create. The adult follows the passion, voice, and leadership of the youth.

Resource provider and connector

The adult facilitator can support young people's passion and purpose by connecting them to experts, tools, connections, and tips. The connecting adult may raise awareness of resources for investigating the community and its needs and assets. It can be helpful to youth to broaden their network with partners in the community, such as youth-serving organizations, educators, community leaders, and families. Resource providers can also help young people overcome barriers to participation, such as cost or transportation.