Elevating Youth Voice for Transformational Impact in Child Welfare

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"Every kid is one caring adult away from being a success story."
-Josh Shipp

Welcome

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Workshop Overview

This interactive workshop empowers child welfare, education, and mental health professionals to elevate youth voice through intentional strategies, enhanced self-awareness to recognize blind spots and barriers, and practical tools for authentic youth engagement. Grounded in evidence-based practices, it offers a framework to ensure young people are meaningfully included in shaping child welfare's future.

Introductions & Icebreaker
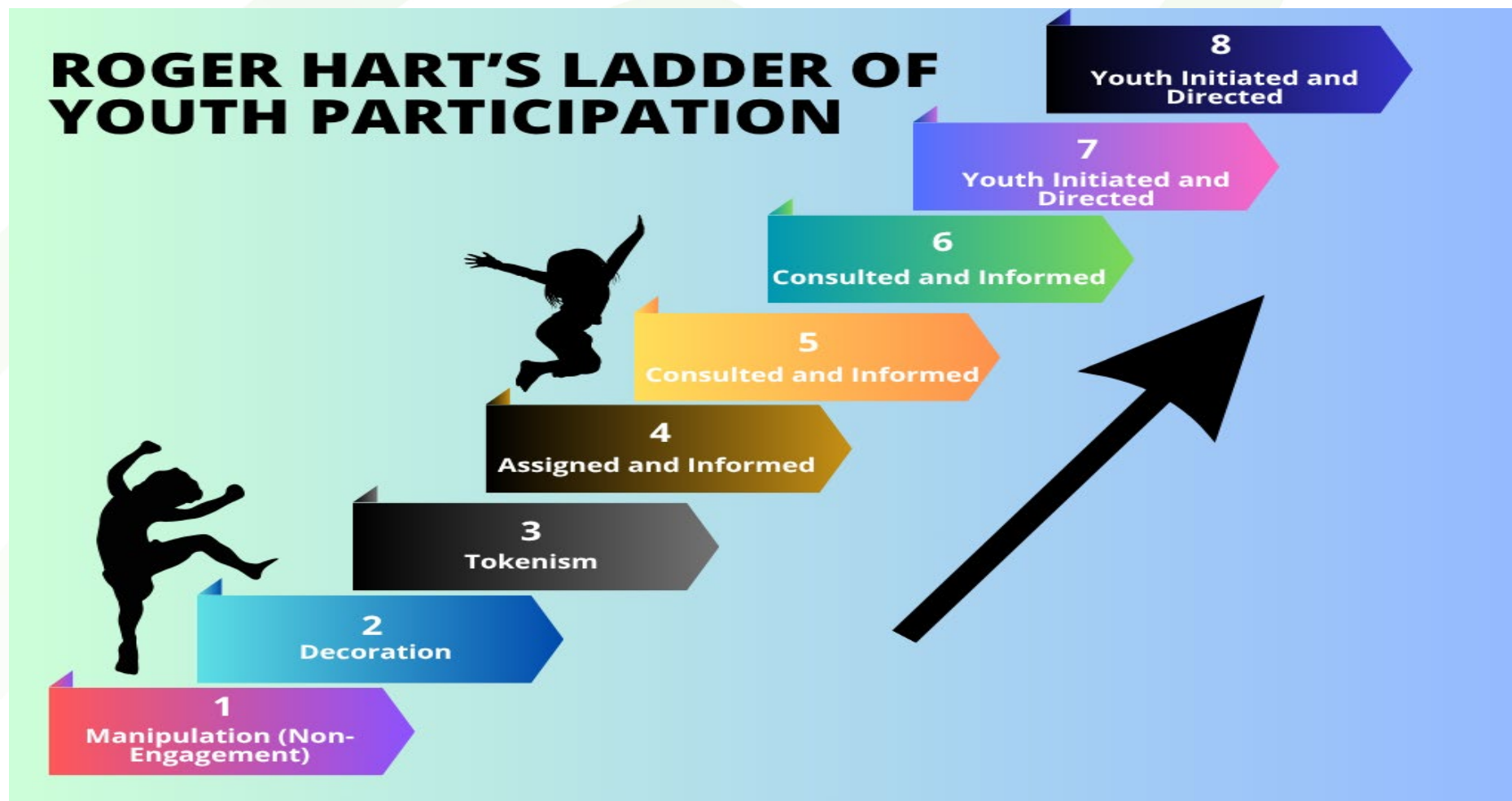
Authentic Youth Engagement

Authentic Youth Engagement (AYE)

AYE refers to the meaningful and intentional inclusion of young people in decision-making processes, where they have real influence and their perspectives are valued and acted upon—not just token involvement.
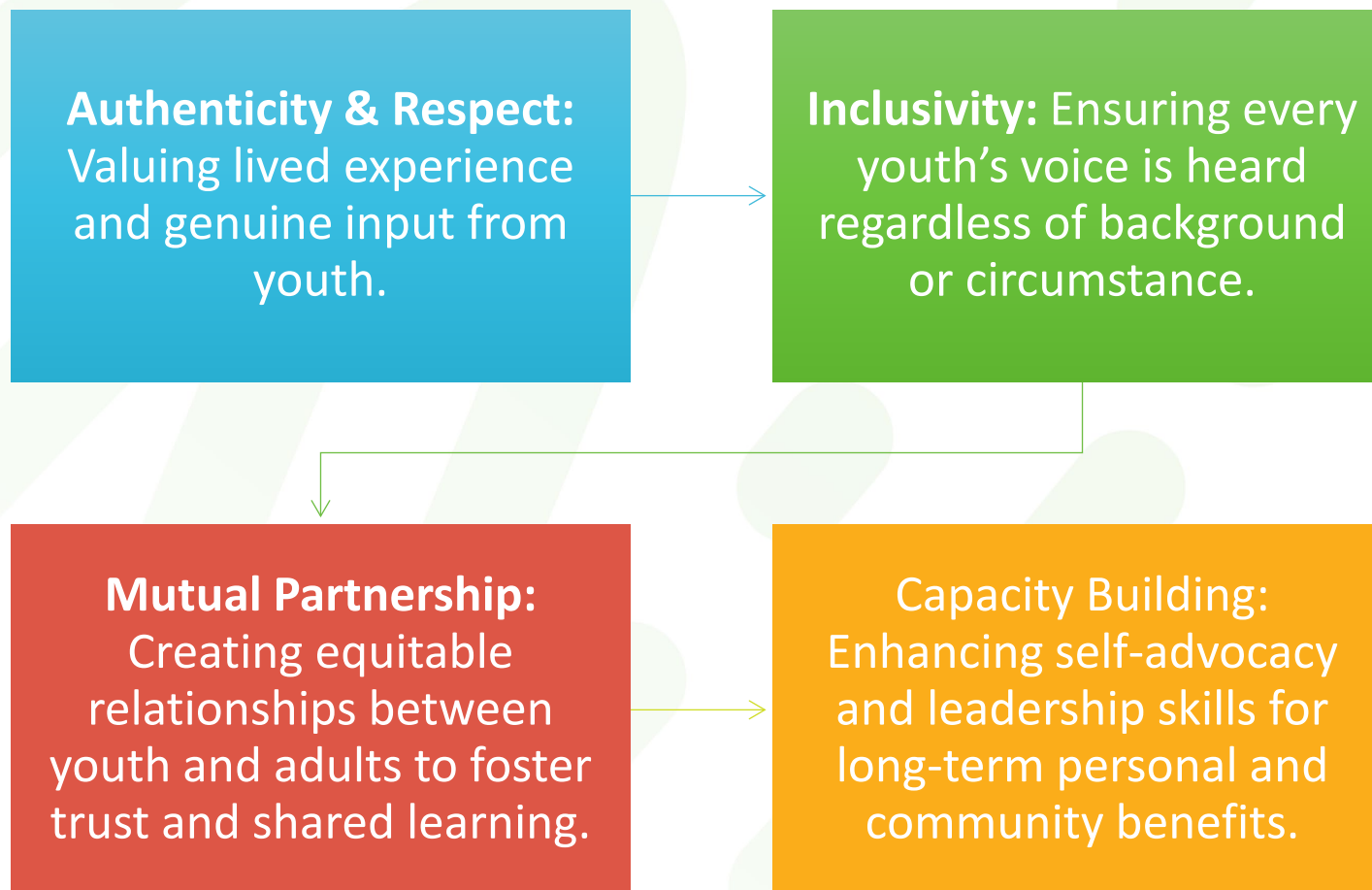
Authentic Youth Partnerships emphasizes creating opportunities for youth to collaborate as equal partners in shaping policies, programs, and practices that affect their lives.

Roth & Brooks-Gunn (2016); Checkoway & Richards-Schuster (2003).

Conceptualizing Youth Engagement

AYE Core Principles:

Authenticity & Respect: Valuing lived experience and genuine input from youth.

Inclusivity: Ensuring every youth's voice is heard regardless of background or circumstance.

Mutual Partnership: Creating equitable relationships between youth and adults to foster trust and shared learning.

Capacity Building: Enhancing self-advocacy and leadership skills for long-term personal and community benefits.

Identifying Blind Spots, Barriers: Tangible Strategies

Blind Spots to Youth Engagement

Adultism

- Not valuing lived experience and genuine input from foster youth.

Tokenism

- Youth are included just for appearance, not real input.

Lack of Access

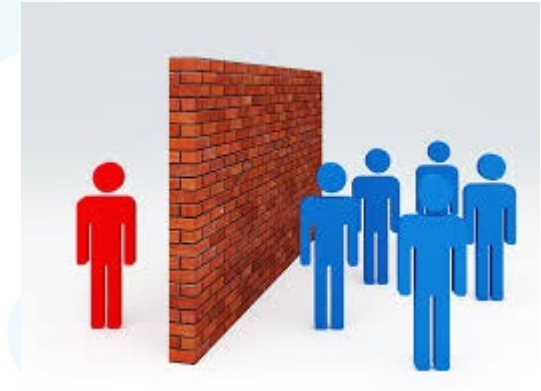- Limited opportunities for youth in decision-making spaces.

Stereotyping

- Youth being dismissed as "too young" or "inexperienced".

Barriers to Youth Engagement

- **Caseworker caseload and workload**

- **Casework turnover**

- **Frequent placement changes and mobility**

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021); EPIC (2020); Casey Family Programs (2023);

Blind Spot & Barrier Audit

- Evaluate current practices in cultural responsiveness and youth engagement.

- Identify potential blind spots and practical barriers within your organizations/agencies.

- Put your responses in the menti.com app.

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Large Group Debrief

- Let's discuss your insights to include major themes, tangible strategies, and successful approaches that may have emerged.

Authentic Youth Engagement in Action

Authentic Youth Engagement: Build A Trusting Relationship

1. RESPECT THEIR VOICE

2. CONSISTENCY BUILDS TRUST

3. CREATE SAFE SPACES

4. EMPOWER, DON'T CONTROL

5. BE VULNERABLE AND GENUINE

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Authentic Youth Engagement: Ask Questions

Authentic Youth Engagement: Be Real, Be Transparent, and BE Present

Authentic Youth Engagement: Practice Cultural Humility

Authentic Youth Engagement: Take a Trauma-Informed Approach

- Understand the impact of trauma on the child development and work to minimize it effects without causing additional trauma.

- Past trauma can cause youth to be initially resistant in building relationships, developing trust requires a significant time investment from the caseworker.

- Resistance is derived from trauma and caseworkers must help youth to work through potential barriers and provide consistent, responsive support for youth.

Elevating Youth Voice in Supervision

Tips to Support Caseworkers in Elevating Youth Voice

Model youth-centered practice during supervision

- Offer feedback on youth engagement based on observation of team meetings or home visits

- Incorporate youth voice in permanency goals

- Use role play during supervision-practice asking hard questions

- Create a culture of accountability – "Did the youth have a say in this decision?"

- Use reflection prompts for team meetings or huddles

- Review case file audits to see if documentation reflects youth voice

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Intentional Strategies Of Youth Engagement

Strategies for Elevating Youth Voice

- Promote Normalcy

- Support youth's interest

- Celebrate small and large accomplishments

- Swap "worker visits" with "connection activities"

- Partner with other supportive adults

- Encourage youth to invite who they want present at meetings

- Provide varied options for engagement

- Connect Youth with peer supports systems

- Emphasize the importance of youth advocacy while youth are still in the system

Tools & Techniques for Fostering Youth Engagement

Digital Engagement Platforms:

Tools such as video conferencing, collaborative workspaces (e.g., Slack and Google Workspace), and social media channels enable consistent and flexible engagement among youth and adult partners.

Mentorship & Project-Based Learning:

Leadership boot camps, mentorship programs, and hands-on projects equip foster youth with essential advocacy, communication, and management skills.

Digital Storytelling:

Encourages youth to document and share their experiences, building community and amplifying their voices through accessible online formats.

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Benefits of Youth Engagement

Benefits of Youth Engagement

Empowering Voices: Actively involving foster youth in decision-making (e.g., case planning and policy advocacy) builds self-esteem and a sense of agency.

Enhancing Outcomes: Real youth leadership drives improved behavioral, social, and developmental outcomes by fostering critical skills like communication, problem-solving, and advocacy

Policy & Program Benefits: Incorporating youth input leads to more effective, responsive policies and services that reflect the actual needs and experiences of foster youth.

Salazar et al. (2021) ; Findings summarized in youth engagement guidelines by The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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Applying Youth Engagement Strategies in Realistic Situations

Instructions:

Group Discussion: In small groups, read the assigned case scenario and discuss strategies for engaging the youth in a meaningful and authentic way.

Reporting Out: Each group will share their approach to youth engagement, highlighting specific strategies that promote voice, connection, and collaboration.

Wrap Up, Reflection, and Next Steps

Let's Reflect...

- Significant Takeaways

- Strategies

- Action Steps

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