

VALUE OF PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP IN YOUTH ORGANIZING EFFORTS

By Jazmyn Becker

She was at a doctor's appointment when her daughter told her, "Ma we have to go." Toya Graham rushed down to Mondawmin Mall, where a large protest was growing in response to the murder of African American man, Freddie Gray. Many felt the killing was unjust—another police murder in the black community. When Toya arrived, she saw her only son standing in the median. He had a black mask on his face and she thought he was throwing rocks at the very police force who had killed Freddie Gray just days before. With helicopters swirling and police shields everywhere, Toya grabbed her son and began whooping him in public for being at a protest she had told him not to attend. This video was caught on camera and received over 8 million views on YouTube. People from around the world commended this "Baltimore Mom of the Year" for physically disciplining her child and taking him away from the protest. Social media messages read, "Mom of the Year #ToyaGraham smacked her son after she sees him participating in violent riots in #Baltimore" (Van Susteren, 2015, May 1, 4:33 p.m.), and "Why is America celebrating the beating of a black child?" (Patton, 2015, April 29). Though initial reactions applauded her discipline, interviews later revealed that Graham was doing what she knew best to protect her son from danger. "That's my only son, and at the end of the day, I don't want him to be a Freddie Gray. But to stand up there and vandalize police officers, that's not justice" (CBS News, 2015, April 28).

When examining Graham's statement it is evident that multiple factors are at play. Though Toya Graham was upset with the way her son was acting, she also acknowledged that police have not always been protectors of African Americans. In an interview with Fox News she said, "Well, before Freddie Gray, there was always hostility towards a lot of the residents and the police officers. They are here to protect and serve us, but we are also human beings first. And a lot of times we don't get that respect from the police officers." (Graham, 2015).

As unrest grows in the United States, more youth are actively involved in organizing, to speak up and speak out for their rights. There is a delicate balance for parents in this situation. Parents might support their child's desire to advocate for their rights, but they must also consider protective factors necessary to ensure safety. Youth workers are entrusted to support youth in organizing efforts, and consider similar protective factors for overall safety and wellbeing of the youth. A violation of parental trust is detrimental to the family, the youth organization, and the youth organizing efforts at large. For youth workers to effectively support youth organizing efforts, they must build relationships with the families. This relational approach not only strengthens the developmental ties between parent and child, but can also increase the impact of youth organizing.

This paper explores the value of including parents in the youth organizing process. The term *families* is used in association with a young person or minor and their primary caregiver with whom they have a strong relational bond, and in most cases live together. It is understood however, that families can be composed in a variety of ways. The term *parent* refers to the primary caregiver of a young person and encompasses all relationships that mirror or are a reflection of a traditional parent-child relationship.

WHAT IS YOUTH ORGANIZING?

The type of engagement a youth organization offers can vary across a large range. As depicted in Figure 1, the framework of a youth organization can be broadly defined within five categories (Edwards, 2000).

Figure 1. Youth Engagement Continuum

INTERVENTION	DEVELOPMENT	COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT	SYSTEMIC CHANGE	
<p>Youth Services Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines young people as clients • Provides services to address individual problems and pathologies of young people • Programming defined around treatment and prevention 	<p>Youth Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides services and support, access to caring adults and safe spaces • Provides opportunities or growth and development of young people • Meets young people where they are • Builds young people's individual competencies • Provides age-appropriate support • Emphasizes positive self identity • Supports youth/adult partnerships 	<p>Youth Leadership</p> <p><i>Includes components of youth development approach plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds in authentic youth leadership opportunities within programming and organization • Helps young people deepen historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community issues • Builds skills and capacities of young people to be decision makers and problem solvers • Youth participate in community projects 	<p>Civic Engagement</p> <p><i>Includes components of youth development and youth leadership plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages young people in political education and awareness • Builds skills and capacity for power analysis and action around issues young people identify • Begins to help young people build collective identity of young people as social change agents • Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation 	<p>Youth Organizing</p> <p><i>Includes components of youth development and youth leadership and civic engagement plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds a membership base • Involves youth as part of core staff and governing body • Engages in direct action and mobilizing • Engages in alliances and coalitions

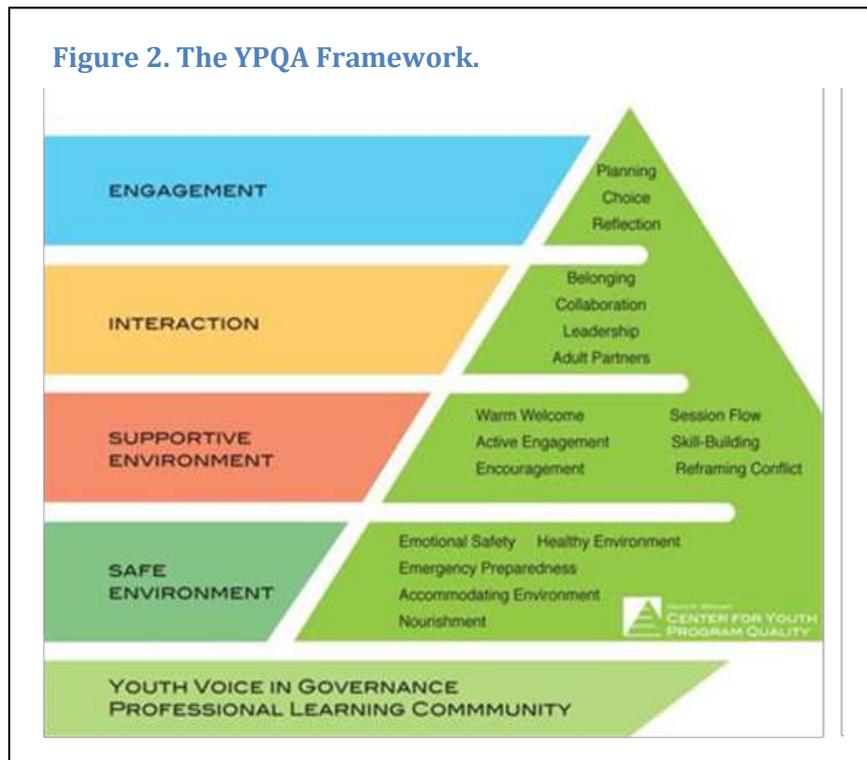
Source: *An Emerging Model for Working with Youth*. Edwards (2000).

Youth organizing is the practice of youth development partnered with strategies used by community organizers (Edwards, 2000). Youth define the community problem they want to address, and then collaborate with adults to enact change. Both youth advocacy and youth activism are categorized as youth organizing, though there are some distinct differences between the two. A youth activist is an individual that uses intentional action to bring about social change, political change, and economic justice, or

environmental wellbeing. This action is in support of, or opposition to, one side of an often-controversial argument. A youth advocate on the other hand, is one who speaks on behalf of a group often bringing the issue to light in spaces like lobbying and legislations (Grace, 2017). Both youth activists and youth advocates have overlapping roles and issues they may address, but it is important to define that both are encompassed within the framework of youth organizing.

IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH ORGANIZING TO YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

Youth development refers to the overall physical, cognitive, and emotional development of youth through adolescence and into adulthood. Youth development can also be defined as the “process all young people undergo as they build the individual assets or competencies needed to participate in adolescence and adult life” (Edwards, 2000). Positively supporting development leads to stronger outcomes in adolescence through adulthood. Youth organizations should be focused on this positive development and broadly support youth in a variety of areas during these critical years. The facets of youth organizing (i.e., youth development, youth leadership, and civic engagement), provide youth a way to engage in direct impact for the community while also building critical character skills (Edwards, 2000).



Source: David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

It is important that a youth organization’s inherent structure and practice facilitate an environment that aligns with the needs of the youth engaged in the program. By including the opportunity for youth to organize, programs can meet the needs of the youth. This is also evident when examining the cohesion between the efforts of organizing and the outcomes in the Youth Program Quality (YPQA) framework. This widely used framework addresses how a youth worker could work towards program quality. The YPQA framework (as depicted in Figure 2) summates that creating a safe and supportive environment, where

youth can interact, engage, and take safe risks, helps to foster positive youth development (Smith, 2005). Youth organizing parallels the YPQA framework: in youth organizing youth have a high level of voice and advocacy, and safe, supportive environment from adult peers is required in order for youth organizing to be effective.

The end goal for youth workers is to help young people be successful and engaged in their community. The YPQA framework also models this level of engagement by giving young people the opportunity to plan, have choices, and reflect on the choices they have made. Youth organizing aligns perfectly with goals of engagement, as leading and organizing a youth-led movement requires planning, making key choices, and reflecting on how those choices expand or lessen the impact of the movement.

Youth organizing should be important to youth organizations because it provides an often-ignored group of our community the opportunity to lead autonomously with their own ideas and voice. Supporting this large population segment in youth organizing efforts leads to the betterment of the entire community. For example, in July of 2016, four African American teenagers led a massive sit-in protest in Chicago. Through the social media platform, Twitter, these young women called for a protest against police brutality and gun violence. The event drew more than 1,000 protesters, with more than 200 of whom identified as teenagers (Chang, 2016). The protest shut down the Magnificent Mile and drew national attention. When asked how 17-year-old activist Eva Lewis prepared for the rally she responded, “They [her peers] hadn’t organized a real protest, a big thing, before. I hadn’t organized one either, except I’d been behind the scenes for some of the Chicago Public Schools protests that have happened this year, helping with press releases, inclusivity, stuff like that. So I offered to help” (Chang, 2016). Though there were many influences on Eva Lewis’s journey to activism, she notes in her bio that she was a member of an African American Girl Scout Troop for ten years; some of the empowerment and knowledge Lewis had to lead the sit-in may be attributed to this youth organization. Youth organizing was a crucial launch point to Lewis’s personal and professional passions, and now in addition to running a nonprofit, she writes for *Teen Vogue* on topics encompassing social justice and equality (Chicago Foundation for Women, 2017). As Lewis says best, “It was so overwhelming initially. We thought it would be big because of all the people on social media, but it hadn’t resonated. Because we’re like, small—we’re 16 and 17—it just hadn’t resonated that we could do something like that. And then we did” (Chang, 2016, para 17).

Youth organizations should be providing the space for young people to be involved in organizing. There are certain skills and areas of expertise to explore in youth organizing, which equip them to lead with their own voice in the activist arena. They also need support from adults when it comes to navigating the current environment, due to the adultist structure of the systems in power. In the Youth for Black Lives Chicago sit-in, the entire movement was organized and promoted by teens but did require partnership with police and permit issuance, requiring adult support. “We did it with no adult help. Someone from BYP100 [Black Youth Project 100] contacted us the day before and asked if we wanted help—they told us about lawyers and [provided] the medics [for the day of], but that’s it. We were able to advocate with the police, we worked together with them. There was one officer, Officer Ryan, I think? He was really nice and understanding, and wanted to make sure we had control of everything” (Chang, 2016, para 16). The adults in this situation could have denied Lewis and her peers navigational support and could have made the protest even more challenging. Instead, the adult-youth partnership created a space in which youth could share their voice and an important message without additional upheaval. Supporting youth is what youth organizations are created to do. Youth organizing provides an organic way in which to support the youth while developing key skills.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN YOUTH ORGANIZING

Many youth worker advocates agree that supporting adult-youth partnerships in youth organizations is key to success. However, some may argue that involving parents will stifle the efforts of youth-led action and advocacy. In truth, when disseminating what parents provide developmentally in relationships, it is found that their actions actually strengthen a youth's ability to excel in youth organizing efforts.

There are many studies done within both the school and after-school setting that conclude that family engagement can improve program outcomes, retention, and community, but few look at this engagement in relation to youth organizing. In order to investigate the outcomes of family involvement and youth organizing, it is necessary to explore the importance of the parent-child relationship. Though not all youth have the same relationship with their families, the family dynamic has an extraordinary impact on an individual's overall development, autonomy, and much more. The interactions between parent and child cannot be ignored if a youth worker's goal is to support the whole child.

Researchers found that many family engagement efforts are often focused on getting families to support the youth organizations and “overlook the one thing about which parents care deeply and that can powerfully benefit their children's development: relationships in the home” (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2015, p. 3). In 2015 a Search Institute study surveyed over 1000 parent-child relationships, and concluded that the quality of this relationship was 10 times more powerful than demographics (race, family composition, and family income) in predicting whether a young person would develop critical character strengths needed for school and adult life (Pekel et al., 2015). Five essential actions were identified from the perspective of youth, which aid in the overall healthy development and wellbeing of the young person in relationships:

1. **Express care:** Show that you like me and want the best for me.
2. **Challenge Growth:** Insist that I try to continuously improve.
3. **Provide Support:** Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.
4. **Share Power:** Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.
5. **Expand Possibility:** Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

(Pekel et al., 2015)

When reviewing these facets of developmental relationships, it is evident that they are complementary to the YPQA framework. Families and youth workers have similar action items that improve relationships and the positive development for youth. Developmental relationships are the cornerstone to youth success and support youth organizing efforts, and families are often the best at fostering them over an enduring period. Youth workers and families have mutually reinforcing actions they can take to support youth, and youth organizing provides the means by which to do it. Figure 3 depicts an alignment or balance between the YPQA domains and the five essential actions identified in the Search Institute study.

By collaborating more with families, we are supporting our youth because this relationship is so powerful and dynamic to the overall wellbeing of the child. Youth workers can make a difference, but if they want to make a lasting impact, they have to expand their thinking beyond one-hour programming sessions, and analyze the relationships and structures that affect a young person's overall development. One interesting finding from the Search Institute study was that parents are taking the actions needed to form these strong developmental relationships. However, as shown in Figure 4, the actions of *sharing power* and *expanding possibility* are evident less frequently in the parent-child relationship (Pekel et al., 2015). This makes sense in regards to sharing power, because often the parent-child relationship is hierarchical and does not prioritize sharing equitable space and power.

Figure 3. Domains of the YPQA framework align with Search Institute’s five essential actions.

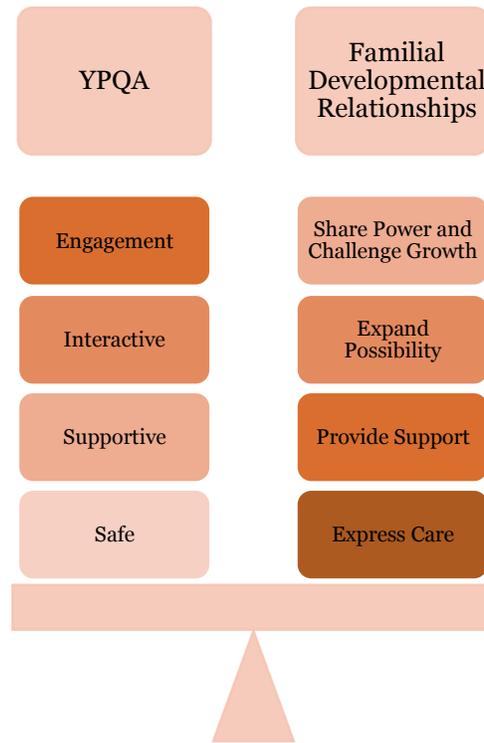
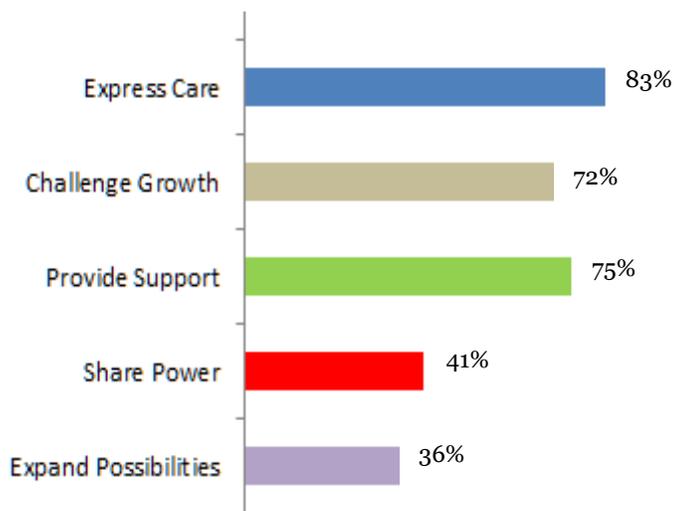


Figure 4 Developmental Relationships in Families

Percentages of the parenting adults surveyed whose responses yielded a score of 75% or higher (proposed as an optimal level) for the five essential actions in developmental relationships



Source: Pekel et al. (2015)

Youth organizing can serve as the bridge between youth organizations and families within these two facets. Within the youth organizing framework, sharing power is innate because it cannot be a youth-led movement if youth do not have a voice and the ability to share in the decision making. Giving parents the safe and supportive space to interact with and support their children within a youth organizing model helps create a place where youth can share power with their parents. In addition, youth organizing expands a new world of opportunities for youth and families because they are able to support their children in their passions and hopes. Once youth organizations realize that families are partners in organizing efforts, they will be even more impactful, with a strong foundation for youth to share power and expand leadership opportunities.

CASE STUDY: POWER OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Families have been the cornerstone of many young activist efforts, and can help or hinder young people's efforts to make radical change. Parents are credited for engaging and expanding the possibilities for their children by supporting organizing efforts that took place the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Several people were involved in the Civil Rights Movement at a young age and with the support of parents or adults in their life. President Freeman Hrabowski of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County joined the Civil Rights Movement at just 12 years of age, marching in the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963. He was jailed for five days with other young children and experienced harassment from white men, who spat in his face. While in prison, Dr. King came to visit and told him, "What you do this day will have an impact on children yet unborn" ("Freeman A Hrabowski III," 2017, "Early life and education," para 2). This support from an adult had a profound impact on Hrabowski.

Because of his start in youth organizing, Hrabowski made fighting for African American rights his life mission. He has written books, taught, and now leads a university that champions for black students. Reflecting on the moment with Dr. King, Hrabowski says, "I'll never forget that. I didn't even understand it, but I knew it was powerful, very powerful" (Youth in the Civil Rights Movement, n.d.). One must not forget that in order for Hrabowski to be a part of the Birmingham Children's Crusade, he first had to get parental support. Though little is written about this interaction, one source mentions that Hrabowski had to convince his parents to let him join the march with his friends. His parents were both schoolteachers at some point, to which a social justice influence in the home may be attributed. He also comes from a generational line which fought for freedom; he is the third "Freeman" in his family line, the first being his grandfather, who was born a free man ("Freeman A Hrabowski III," 2017). It is clear that without parental support, Hrabowski's impact as both a young person and on future generations would have been very different, if his parents had not supported his youth organizing efforts in the 1960s.

Parents' political involvement, their ability to provide access and resources surrounding political activity, and their educational attainment all can have an impact on the child at a very young age. For example, one survey found that if a young person's parent had protested the Vietnam War, the youth was more likely to protest the Gulf War in 1991 (Donnelly, 2006). Parents' experience in activism can be an asset to youth organizations and provide even greater awareness and grounding for young people involved in such movements. As stated in Parental Influences on Youth Activism, "Parents also shape the type and depth in which their youth involve themselves in organizing efforts. Parents encourage their youth to join certain organizations, hold certain political values, and model how to engage in this rhetoric. Though young people don't always mimic their family values, often the influence from decades of rearing as well as influence during very influential times during development, result in some level of affect"(Donnelly, 2006).

Parents can also hinder youth organizing efforts and, as guardians, may limit their child's involvement. For example, during the 1964 Freedom School recruitment a study was done on the number of "no-shows" to see what was inhibiting young people from attending. Freedom Schools were the massive effort to support voter registration for African Americans during the 1960s. Parental opposition was the number one reason why young people did not show, accounting for 25% of absent registrants (Donnelly, 2006). Imagine how Freedom Schools may have ignited, if those parents were instead seen as viable stakeholders in the recruitment and involvement in the movement. Obviously, there were additional factors at play during the Civil Rights Movement, including racism, classism, and parenting approaches, but it is clear that historical context continually shows that when the family is a part of the organizing process, engagement in organizing efforts are often expanded.

PARTNERSHIP IN YOUTH ORGANIZING

Too few families are asked to be active partners in youth organizing efforts. This can result in negative outcomes including miscommunication and sometimes removal of youth from the organization. Youth organizing is where parents and youth workers can build developmental relationships with youth and share a diversity of thought to enrich the process.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARENT IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT TO THE YOUTH ORGANIZATION

In community organizing, one would never say that certain community members were more important than others, because it is known that collective impact and diversity of thought is what provides a foundation for the movement. The most effective grassroots movements engage people of varying background and age (Sherrod, 2006). If a youth organization has a poor relationship with the family, it will not be able to support the youth in the best means possible. Parents just like any human being, have different ways in which they like to engage and interact with the youth worker. Accepting the relationship they want with the youth program as well as with the youth needs to be understood. Building a relationship with the parent also models to the youth the importance of sharing power and expanding possibilities. This reinforces actionable steps youth need to take in relationships as well.

SUCCESSFUL YOUTH ADVOCACY REQUIRES ADULT PARTNERSHIP IN SPECIFIC WAYS

Sherrod (2006) noted that youth organizing efforts are most successful when adults foster motivation, build capacity, and create learning opportunities. It is not that youth cannot perform these roles themselves, but when operating in an adultist system, access as minors is often limited. When adults are able to use their networks and access to support youth in these roles it can lead to greater success. The youth worker does not have to do this work alone! Parents have key skills and abilities within this arena as well. By collaborating, it increases social capital and access, expanding possibilities for the youth involved.

THE YOUTH MUST BE AT THE CENTER OF THE WORK

Young people are amazing individuals with a unique lens on how to solve the issues in present day society. Valuing their input, ability to strategize and take on roles will create an environment where youth can exhibit that they oftentimes have much higher competencies in areas than their adult peers. However, youth workers should not be asking and working in partnership alone. Parents should be involved in these varying processes so that they too can dismantle adultism while supporting and keeping youth safe. Asking the youth to identify their needs in order for them to fulfill their goals and intended outcomes helps to unpack how and where the parent–youth worker relationship fits within the youth organizing framework. In an interview following the Youth for Black Lives Chicago Sit-In, Eva Lewis observed, "I'm 17 years old.

Although I have a lot of ideas, and I'm an activist, I'm aware constantly that I'm a minor, and that I don't want to put myself in a dangerous situation" (Chang, 2016, para. 8).

CONCLUSIONS

Youth organizing is a dynamic way to contribute to the positive development of youth while making a positive impact on the community. Parents care about their child as well as the community, and often have limited touchpoints with youth organizations. Youth organizing provides the essential connection needed between youth organization and parent. Families have generational influence on the youth that are changing this world. If the parent–youth worker relationship is ignored the chasm hinders community impact. As youth activist Eva Lewis said, “Oh yeah. I learned everything I know from them [my parents]. And my grandfather, too—he just passed away. He was the first person to teach me that my gender didn't matter, that I shouldn't be ashamed of my gender at all. He empowered me. He taught me about the system young, about racism. [My family] taught me that I should never think I am less than, I just have to work harder to be recognized for my work” (Chang, 2016, para. 10). Valuing the parent–youth worker relationship creates an environment that fosters developmental relationships for all involved. When young people like Toya Graham's son feel the need to “do something” in response to this world's issues, there should be a welcome and open space that both mother and son can go to, to make change together. With the current unrest in the 21st century, the next large civil rights movement may be upon us soon. Youth will be taking a stand for what they believe is right. Youth organizations must value the youth worker–parent relationship to ensure this effort is expanded and continually keeps the youth at the center of the work.

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