



# Opportunities for Teens to Engage as Learners, Leaders, Team Members, and Workers

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*“Active youth involvement with people and programs is important for promoting healthy adolescent development. This includes activities at school, at home, or in the community, such as school clubs, sports, music, visual and performing arts, or out-of-school time programs, volunteer or paid jobs, and activities at places of worship. Adolescents also benefit from opportunities to shape programs and activities, which can improve the programs, provide valuable leadership skills and build confidence.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Adolescent Health: Think, Act, Grow<sup>®</sup> (TAG) Research Reviews highlight research, evaluation reports, and other publications that inform the field about key issues in, and effective practices for, fostering improved health, reducing risky behavior, and improving engagement and healthy development in young people. This Research Review focuses on the importance of Opportunities for Teens to Engage as Learners, Leaders, Team Members, and Workers for healthy adolescent development, one of TAG’s Five Essentials for Healthy Adolescence.*

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## **An evidence-based practitioner’s model for adolescent leadership development.<sup>2</sup>**

While adult leadership development research has expanded over the past 15 years and now includes perspectives from leadership, education, and human development experts, little is known about adolescent leadership development. The author proposes a model for youth leadership education based on adolescent development and leadership research in an effort to provide practitioners (e.g., school educators) with a guide to aid their creation and implementation of high school leadership programs. Three focus areas were selected to make the model relevant to secondary school educators: 1) student leader development areas that school level educators can affect; 2) domains not generally addressed such as required high school graduate competency outcomes; and 3) leadership development specific to adolescence. Given the importance of leadership development in adolescence, this model can help educators develop leadership opportunities for all students in school settings during the critical adolescent years. [Read more](#)

## **Civic minded: Programs for youths focus on community.<sup>3</sup>**

Youth have demonstrated a desire to make civic contributions and would like to be involved in decision making at the community level. The authors, recognizing this trend, looked at the Youth Leadership for Development Initiative (YLDI) to identify core youth development practices. Based on YLDI research, they found several benchmarks for supporting youth leadership development programs at the community level: supportive relationships with other youth and adults, and opportunities to take on decision making and leadership roles, engage actively and holistically in civic life, do work that will have lasting value in their communities, apply their leadership skills in real-world settings on issues they care about, and build alliances with like-minded youth and adults. [Read more](#)

## **Connection between adolescent's exposure to community violence and future civic engagement behaviors during their young adulthood.<sup>4</sup>**

Exposure to violence during adolescence may decrease an individual's subsequent civic engagement in adulthood. The study included a sample of 10,298 individuals who were exposed to violence in the community during adolescence but were not exposed to violence in young adulthood. The authors found that that long-term effect of exposure to violence in the community decreased the likelihood of adolescents' involvement with community services when they become young adults. The results persisted after controlling for the influence of individual demographic characteristics, family socioeconomic background, and the protective effects associated with having a good relationship with the primary caregiver. [Read more](#)

## **Developing a paradigm model of youth leadership development and community engagement: A grounded theory.<sup>5</sup>**

Previous youth leadership development studies have used a variety of theoretical frameworks to examine youth leadership development. The study sought to construct a grounded theory to describe the process of how youth leaders develop through community engagement. The authors specifically wanted to understand: 1) what conditions caused the youth to engage in their community, 2) the strategies used by the youth and the adults when working together, 3) the conditions that helped or hindered those strategies, and 4) the resulting outcomes. A paradigm model was developed to describe how community engagement influences the development of youth leaders. The authors found that individual connections (between youth adults), common sentiments, and being asked to engage were identified as the most salient causal conditions for youth to engage in their community. [Read more](#)

## **Does it matter if students experience school as a place of community?<sup>6</sup>**

In the United States, school-aged children spend more time at school than anywhere else outside the home. This brief looked at whether or not schools served as a place of community and student engagement and the relationship between school connectedness and engagement to a sense of community and belonging.

While the authors note that they believe that school community captures the essence of these relationships because members of a community feel that they belong, that they matter to each other, and that their needs will be met through their interactions, they also found that a significant portion of school-aged students do not feel that they belong, are safe, matter to others, and their needs will be met at school. The authors recommend that as schools evaluate current practices, they can improve school-wide and classroom practices to help every child experience a true sense of community that enhances their academic, behavioral, social, and emotional well-being. [Read more](#)

## **Engagement in school and community civic activities among rural adolescents.<sup>7</sup>**

Involvement in civic and community activities has been shown to be a core part of positive youth development. The study examined the civic activities of rural adolescents from small schools (school, community, and religious activity involvement) and compared youth involved in civic activities with those who are not in terms of psychological well-being, problem behavior, academic engagement, and perceptions of parents. The current study included 679 eighth and ninth graders from 13 small schools in rural areas of the Midwestern United States. Adolescents who participated in religious youth groups reported more extracurricular activities, less

problem behavior, higher grades and motivation, and more support from parents and friends than adolescents who did not participate in such groups. Similarly, adolescents who were involved in school- and community-based civic activities reported more religiosity, academic engagement, and positive perceptions of parents and peers than uninvolved youth. The results highlight the importance of civic activity engagement and its association with positive youth development. [Read more](#)

## **Harnessing health information to foster disadvantaged teens' community engagement, leadership skills, and career plans: A qualitative evaluation of the Teen Health Leadership Program.<sup>8</sup>**

The Teen Health Leadership Program (THLP) is a pilot program that engages at-risk high school students in health information advocacy and outreach, and focuses specifically on increasing teens' 1) health information literacy, 2) leadership skills and community engagement, and 3) interest in careers in health care and biomedicine. The target population included high school students in a low-income, primarily minority community near Charleston, South Carolina. Using semi-structured interviews, the authors found that the program had a positive impact on the participants' health information competency, leadership skills, academic orientation, and interest in health careers. The study suggests that health information can provide a powerful context for increasing disadvantaged students' community engagement, leadership skills, and academic success. [Read more](#)

## **Thirty-year trends in U.S. adolescents' civic engagement: A story of changing participation and educational differences.<sup>9</sup>**

Using data from Monitoring the Future, a study that has surveyed a nationally representative sample of high school seniors each year since 1976, the authors examined trends in high school seniors' current and anticipated civic participation and beliefs over a 30-year period. The study looked at trends in conventional, alternative, and community service participation and found that in the last 15 years high school seniors, on average, have been less likely to endorse alternative political engagement activities, their support for conventional political engagement remained considerably lower than in the previous 15 years, and yet they were increasingly likely to volunteer in their communities. In addition, youth who planned to graduate from a four-year college were more civically inclined than their peers with a two-year college degree or no college plans. [Read more](#)

## **Youth as engaged citizens and community change advocates through the Lexington Youth Leadership Academy.<sup>10</sup>**

The Lexington Youth Leadership Academy (LYLA) is a leadership development and community change program for high school-aged youth. The goal of the program is to develop teens into effective leaders through participation in community change and instilling the importance of communal decision making among participants. LYLA is a community-based program and activities take place after school, on weekends, and during summer months. Youth in this program are called Ambassadors and are required to complete a minimum of six trainings per year that focus on development of leadership skills, reduction of prejudice, improved self-concept, and civic responsibility. Preliminary findings of the LYLA suggest that the program had a positive impact on the youth who participated, and was welcomed by adults in the community, schools, and local organizations, but little is known about the long-term impact and whether it is more effective than other youth leadership programs such as peer mentoring within schools. [Read more](#)

## Youth development and leadership in programs.<sup>11</sup>

The authors of this article state that administrators and policymakers should use the concepts of youth development and youth leadership in developing and administering programs that serve all youth and activities and in programs specifically geared toward youth with disabilities. They recommend that youth development programs strive to provide supports, services, and opportunities that help youth, including youth with disabilities, achieve positive outcomes in five specific areas: working, learning, thriving, connecting, and leading. The authors suggest that all youth have multiple opportunities to observe, practice, and develop leadership skills; experience progressive roles of leadership ranging from leading a small group to planning an event; receive education on the values and history of the organization; and learn to assess their own strengths and set goals for personal development. [Read more](#)

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- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health. (April, 2016). *Adolescent Health: Think, Act, Grow*® 2016 playbook. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
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- <sup>9</sup> Syvertsen, A., Wray-Lake, L., Flanagan, C., Osgood, W., & Briddell, L. (2011). Thirty-year trends in U.S. adolescents' civic engagement: A story of changing participation and educational differences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(3), 586-594. doi:10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00706.x.
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