

How to be a Youth Advocate and Ally



Consider owning what it really means to be an ally and advocate.

If this is how you identify yourself, know that this is not an easy job.

Stand up, even when it is uncomfortable:

Recognize that being a bit uncomfortable can be part of this role, and taking risks is part of the job.

Recognize this it is a never-ending process:

Being an ally and advocate is verb not a noun; you are always considering ways you can better listen to and amplify young people's voices so that you can keep their voice at the center of decision-making. Assumptions are not good enough, and you can't rest on your laurels.

Carve out time and presence:

If you are working directly with youth and cannot stay engaged enough to sit and listen to young people, you are not being an ally.

Listen to understand not to validate your own conclusions.

Keep youth at the heart of your decision making even when it is hard. When engaging directly with youth, acknowledge that while you feel emotions, the conversation is not about you. When working on behalf of youth acknowledge when pressures are pulling you in different directions. Dig deep to ground yourself in what it means to keep youth at the center.

Engage, support and challenge youth. Do not try to fix them. They are not broken. The systems around them may be broken; they are not.

Self-reflect. Catch yourself when you are falling into negative thought patterns about youth.

- **Generalizations-** "Youth these days."
- **Impose your expectations** "You need to," or expressing your disappointment.
- **Living through youth.**
- **Comparisons** to other children or what it was like when you were growing up.
- **Check your ego.** Young people will make mistakes. This is not about you. Process your feelings, express your feelings, and stay in relationship with them, letting them know that they are more than their actions and a wrong decision does not define them for the rest of their life. (The more invested you are, the harder this is.)

Transfer the benefits of your privilege to young people. Many of you are in positions where you can change things and where your voices are heard. Use your voice and power wisely on behalf of young people.

Amplify the voices, concerns, thoughts, and ideas of young people, both in face-to-face conversations and online.

Actively counteract stereotypes of youth and help shift the narrative. Celebrate their successes. Share positive news stories.