

DEMONSTRATING RESULTS IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

DEMYSTIFYING
OUTCOMES

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acknowledgements

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introduction

When you see a young person you work with graduate from high school, deal with a complicated situation, or create an artistic masterpiece, your heart bursts with satisfaction and pride. To know “your young people” are succeeding and thriving is at the heart of all youth work; whether their achievements are in sports, music, leadership, art, health, or academics doesn't matter. We all want to see our young people build skills, develop talents, find their own voices, and excel at what they do. While the word “outcomes” can be intimidating depending on where and how it is used, identifying and measuring outcomes gets to the root of our desire to see young people excel. **Identifying outcomes** means getting really specific about what we want young people to be able to learn, feel, and accomplish with our support. **Measuring outcomes** means seeing concretely if young people are learning, feeling, and accomplishing those things.

This brief is intended to guide you through the process of identifying appropriate outcomes for your program, and, if possible, to help demystify the concept of ‘outcomes.’ Identifying and measuring your program outcomes can help you speak clearly and confidently about your program and its achievements and about your young people and their achievements. You will be able to answer your own questions about how your young people are doing as well as those from your board of directors, community, and funders. And, if you do it well, you may be able to win more resources to support your young people.

Youth development programs come in all shapes and sizes, and involve all kinds of activities, so the outcomes of youth development programs also vary widely. What these outcomes have in common is that they are based on the youth development approach and focus on young people's positive development in all areas of their lives. Statements such as “young people's self-esteem will increase” and “young people will become advocates for themselves” are typical outcomes that youth development programs claim, from basketball teams to leadership development programs. Many people who work in youth development programs also assert that young people perform better in employment or in school because of their programs. It is important for each program, when identifying and talking about these outcomes, to make sure the outcomes claimed are aligned with specific program activities, resources, and goals.

Many researchers and practitioners have attempted to group and list youth development outcomes. Several such resources are listed at the end of this brief in the **Tools and References** section. These types of tools can be very useful in your efforts to identify your own program's outcomes.

why identify and measure outcomes

- * **Concrete evidence about whether young people are benefiting from your program.** Identifying and measuring your program's outcomes can help you keep your finger on the pulse of what young people are getting from your program.
- * **Program improvement.** Clear, authentic program outcomes can help you keep your program growing and improving all the time. If you know where your program is strong and where it needs development, you will be able to target your efforts to the areas most in need of improvement while celebrating what works.
- * **Resources within your organization.** Focusing on outcomes can help organizations and programs make decisions about how best to allocate resources. In a world of budget constraints, organizations will want to funnel more money into services that are helping youth the most. Checking if you are meeting your program outcomes can help you keep the leadership aware of your program's accomplishments.
- * **Current and potential participant support.** Young people like to know that they are part of a program that is accomplishing something. Evidence that a program leads to positive outcomes may help young people decide to sign up for your program. It may also give them reason to be proud of being in your program.
- * **Community relationships.** Often your community will also be more supportive when informed of what the program is accomplishing. Parents and community members are always pleased to know about successful programs in the community. Also, the more parents know about the positive outcomes of your program, the more supportive they may be of their child's participation.
- * **Funder requests.** Possibly the number one reason that many organizations begin to look into outcomes is someone outside the organization asks about them. Often, that someone is a foundation or government agency. In today's political and funding environment, few programs can expect ongoing support unless they can demonstrate that their services are achieving the desired outcomes.

tips on identifying appropriate outcomes

- * **Identifying outcomes takes time and group work.** For outcomes to be really meaningful, they should be developed jointly with the staff of your program. This type of group work takes time, but there are clear benefits. When everyone knows and buys into your program outcomes, program planning and review can be much easier and staff will be more willing to collect and use data around outcomes.
- * **Make sure you can connect each outcome to youth experiences.** Double check that your program directly provides the supports and opportunities for young people to attain the outcomes you identify for your program. You don't want to be held responsible for outcomes that your program is not intentionally designed to address.
- * **Focus on “outcomes” not “outputs.”** Often the kinds of information needed to manage a program, like how many meetings were held, are only a step toward your outcomes for young people. To develop your outcomes, focus on the results of your program for youth (outcomes), not on the process or activities the young people go through to attain those results (outputs).
- * **Prioritize your outcomes.** We all want our programs to do so many things for the young people we work with. The list can get very long. It is better to measure a few outcomes well than to try to measure many outcomes poorly.
- * **Don't reinvent the wheel.** There are many written materials available to help you develop your outcomes. Some were developed by researchers, others by practitioners. Don't be intimidated if the first one you pick up seems confusing and technical—since outcome measurement has long sat in the domain of researchers, lots of the information available on outcomes is written in a technical style. Look for tools that are right for you.
- * **Don't be confused by terminology.** There are many words used around choosing and measuring outcomes, including “performance measures,” “program impacts,” “benchmarks,” “indicators,” etc. These are often used interchangeably and differently by different people. At the end of this guide, there is a glossary of basic terms, but always ask others to clarify what they mean when they start using outcome terminology.
- * **Use youth development research.** It is often possible to connect the outcomes of your program with youth development research, deepening the proven importance of what your program does. The more you know about the research the easier it will be to make the connections. See the Tools and References section for some sources.

identifying outcomes for your program

STEP 1: Identify what you want your program to accomplish with young people.

A good way to start is to identify your program goals. Based on these goals, state more specifically what you want young people to ultimately gain from your program. These will be your long-term outcomes.

Simply stated, outcomes are those things that you want your program to accomplish with young people. They should reflect your program's goals.

Tip: It is often powerful to include where you expect young people to be when your program ends.

Example

To illustrate, let's follow the steps one program took to develop their outcomes. The example in the box below will follow each step. It features Emerging Leaders,¹ a program in a community-based organization which aims to develop young community leaders. In our example, Emerging Leaders' staff are under pressure from funders and their board of directors to produce a final report showing that the program has really helped young people. Luckily, the staff identified program outcomes last summer while planning for the program year. Their process is detailed below.

EXAMPLE: Step 1

Staff at Emerging Leaders state the program goal and try to come up with what they want for young people who complete their program. They came up with the following:

Goal: To develop young community leaders

Outcomes:

- * Youth have excellent leadership skills, including listening, communication, group work and conflict resolution.
- * Youth have the confidence to lead others.
- * Youth have stronger peer and adult relationships.
- * Youth are leaders in the community, school, and other organizations.

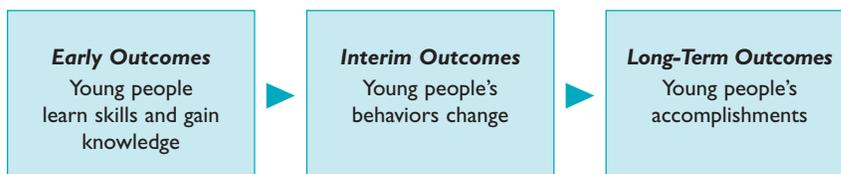
¹ The example is fictional for illustrative purposes but based on experiences of actual youth development programs.

STEP 2: Clarify your outcomes.

Once you have stated your long-term outcomes, you can be more specific about the stages or processes young people go through to get there. Often, these stages or processes are divided into the categories *early outcomes*, *interim outcomes*, and *long-term outcomes*. An easy way to think about developing these outcomes is this:²

- * *Early outcomes* are about what young people **learn** as a result of your program.
- * *Interim outcomes* are about how young people's **behavior changes**.
- * *Long-term outcomes* are about what young people **accomplish** and how young people have changed.

Represented graphically, it would look like this:



Tip: Make sure you are focusing on the result of your program for young people (outcomes), not the process young people go through, such as how many meetings they attended (outputs).

EXAMPLE: Step 2

Emerging Leaders' staff work backward from their long-term outcomes, using the definitions of early and interim outcomes to help guide them.

Early Outcomes: What Youth Learn

- * Youth learn listening and communication skills, and understand different communication styles.
- * Youth learn group work and conflict-resolution skills.
- * Youth understand group dynamics.

Interim Outcomes: Behavior Change

- * Youth actively listen to others.
- * Youth communicate better with adults, peers and others.
- * Young people identify and act on group needs when leading groups.

² Adapted from the Innovation Center's *Reflect and Improve Toolkit*, 2005, listed in Tools and References below.

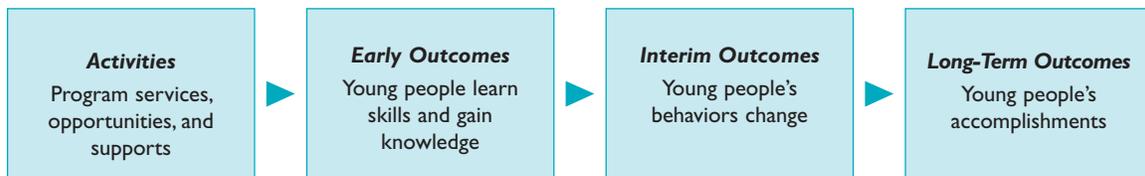
STEP 3: Make sure the outcomes you choose are a direct result of your program activities.

Outcomes should stem directly from the services, supports, and opportunities your program provides. You should be able to identify which activities in your program lead to which outcomes.

This is a very important step. Your program will be judged as a success if you meet your outcomes and as a failure if you do not meet your outcomes. If you choose outcomes that are not directly related to the activities young people participate in, your program could be deemed a failure when it is actually very helpful to young people.

In detailing your activities, think about how your activities are directly related to what young people learn, how their behavior changes, and what they are able to accomplish in the long term.

Represented graphically, it would look like this:



EXAMPLE: Step 3

Emerging Leaders' staff now identifies the program's services, supports, and opportunities that allow young people to reach the program's intended outcomes

Activities:

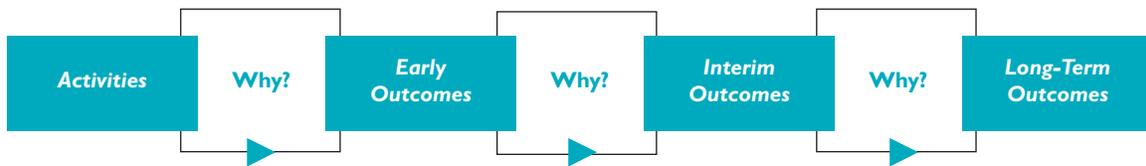
- * Workshops on listening and communication skills, group work and conflict resolution.
- * Opportunity to lead peer groups or groups of younger youth in doing community projects.
- * One-on-one support to use newly learned skills and strategies while leading a group.

STEP 4: Clearly identify how each step leads to the next.

As outlined in steps 1–3, activities lead to early outcomes, which lead to interim outcomes, which lead to long-term outcomes.

It is important to be explicit about why each of these steps leads to the next one. Even though it often seems like common sense, stating the reasons allows everyone who looks at your outcomes to understand the connections between them.

Graphically, every arrow you draw represents a causal relationship. You are asserting that one thing leads to the next.



EXAMPLE: Step 4

Emerging Leaders' staff identify how program activities lead to program outcomes.

Activities lead to Early Outcomes because: Young people learn skills and gain knowledge from a combination of receiving information, opportunity to practice and support from adults

Early Outcomes lead to Interim Outcomes because: Through practicing new skills with support from adults, young people are able to put what they have learned into action.

Interim Outcomes lead to Long-Term Outcomes because: Young people become confident leaders when given the opportunity and support to successfully master and use leadership skills.

STEP 5: Connect your outcomes with the research.

Finally, you will want to have answers to the hard questions about the ultimate impact of your long-term outcomes. Using self-confidence as an example: How does self-confidence help young people do better in life? What is the connection between self-confidence and a better job? You may ask these questions yourself or hear from others who are looking for "hard" or quantifiable outcomes, such as academic improvement. The best response is to rely on the research already done. Youth development research connects positive developmental experiences with better life outcomes. Youth workforce studies show that soft skills, such as conflict resolution and team-work, can help position young people higher in the labor market. (For research reports on youth development and the youth workforce, see the respective section in **Tools and References**).

Note: This brief has dealt primarily with youth outcomes. It is also possible to discuss and report on organizational outcomes. For example, "increase youth voice in decision making" is an organizational outcome. Then you would think of the early and intermediate steps needed to get there: What would staff have to learn? How would staff behavior or program structure and features have to change? And finally, how would you connect your activities to these outcomes?

EXAMPLE: Step 5

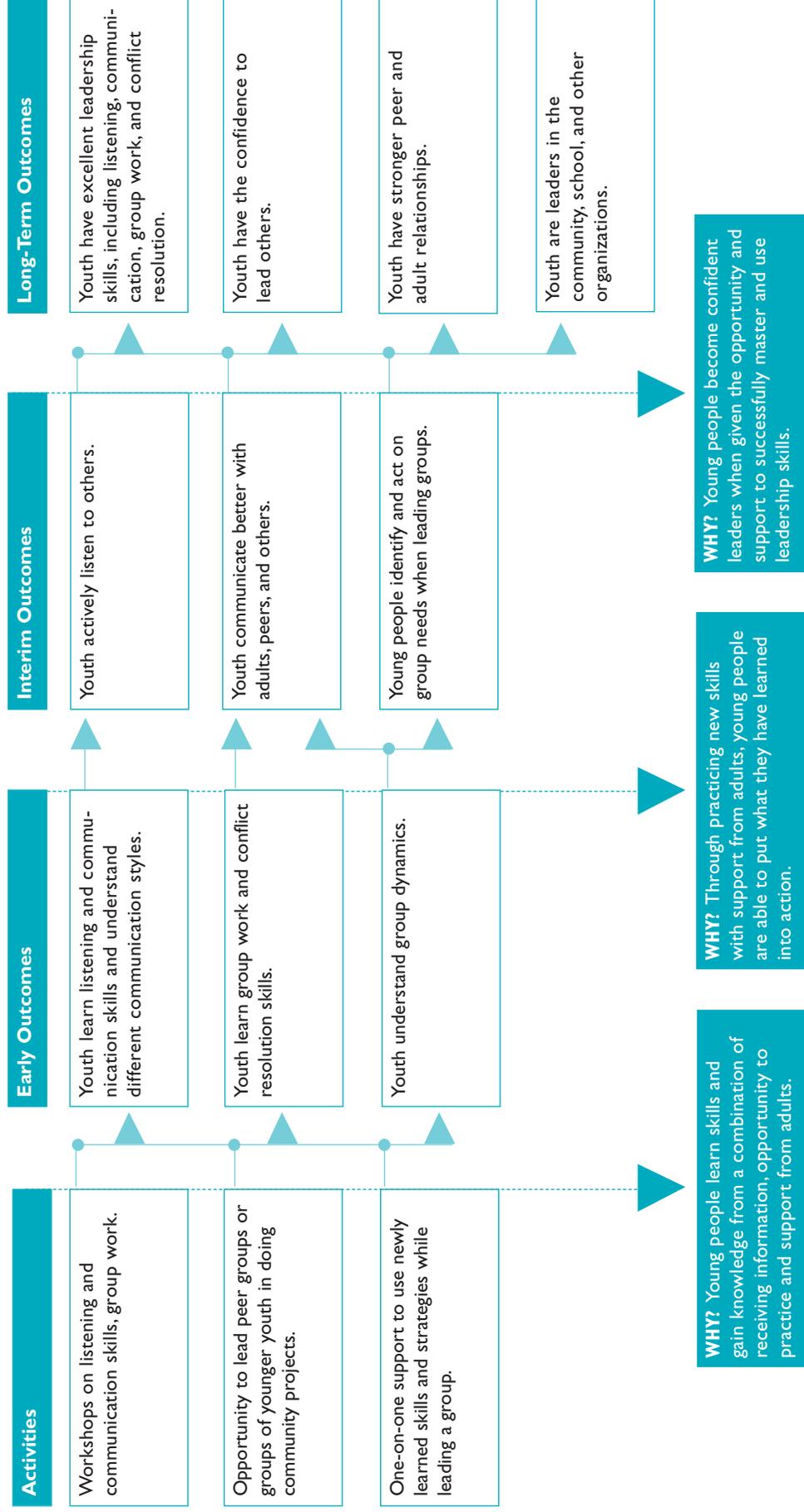
Emerging Leaders' staff connect their outcomes with research.

Emerging Leaders' staff are familiar with youth development research. They are also familiar with youth workforce development studies. In speaking with visitors and funders, staff are able to make connections between the outcomes they developed and the research. For example, they know that:

- ❖ Trusting and caring relationships, opportunities to contribute, and engaging activities are all important in the healthy development of young people.
- ❖ Young people who experience these are less likely to engage in risk-taking behavior and more likely to make it to productive adulthood.
- ❖ Employers are looking for young employees who have excellent communication, group work and conflict resolution skills. Therefore, Emerging Leaders' young people are "good catches" in the job market.

example

Emerging Leaders' Graphic Representation of Outcomes OR Theory of Change



The diagram above is a simple theory of change, a graphic representation of how you believe change happens starting with your activities straight through to your long-term outcomes. This can be a useful tool internally, for planning and measuring outcomes, and externally, as it often helps funders better understand your program.

glossary of terms

- * **Outcomes:** Those things that your program accomplishes. In programs serving young people, outcomes are those things your program accomplishes with young people.
- * **Impacts:** The difference between your program outcomes and what would have happened if the program didn't exist. "Impacts" are often used interchangeably with "outcomes" although it has a substantially different meaning. Impact is a much more rigorous standard for judging program effectiveness.
- * **Early Outcomes** (also called initial outcomes): The knowledge and skills participants get from your program.
- * **Interim Outcomes** (also called intermediate outcomes): Behavior changes as a result of your program.
- * **Long-Term Outcomes:** What participants accomplish or how they change as a result of the program.
- * **"Hard" Outcomes:** Outcomes that are quantifiable, including things you can count or calculate such as number of job placements or average increase in grades.
- * **"Soft" Outcomes:** Outcomes that are based on subjective qualities, including personal experiences or self image. These types of outcomes are usually measured by talking to people and using surveys. For example, an increase in a participant's self-confidence might be measured by surveys or focus groups.
- * **Theory of Change:** A graphic representation of how you believe change happens starting with your activities straight through to your long-term outcomes.

tools and references

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FUND FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

The Fund for the City of New York was established by the Ford Foundation in 1968 with the mandate to improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers. For over three decades, in partnership with government agencies, nonprofit institutions, and foundations, the Fund has developed and helped to implement innovations in policy, programs, practices, and technology in order to advance the functioning of government and nonprofit organizations in New York City and beyond.

The Fund seeks out, adapts, applies, and assesses ways to enable government and nonprofit agencies to achieve excellence through its core programs—bridge loans, grants, incubation, management and technology assistance—and through four strategic initiatives: the Center on Municipal Government Performance, the Youth Development Institute, the Center for Internet Innovation/E Community Connect and the Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Solutions.

The Youth Development Institute seeks to build the capacity of communities to support the development of young people and help them to transition to adulthood successfully. YDI provides technical assistance, disseminates information, develops policy and conducts research to strengthen the quality and increase the availability of positive developmental opportunities for young people. It works with communities, government, funders, and the institutions that serve youth—schools, community organizations and collaborations among institutions. YDI also enhances the craft of youth work by developing programs and systems to support the professional growth of those who work with youth.

It is our vision that all young people will experience close relationships with caring adults, high expectations, engaging activities, opportunities to make a difference in their world, and continuity of support in every setting where they live, work, and study. The adults who are in their lives will understand and seek to provide these experiences. The research-based, Youth Development approach demonstrates that these are the types of experiences that promote the successful development of young people. This vision for young people constitutes the foundation of the Youth Development Institute and its programs and has shaped the work of YDI since it was established in 1991.

For more information about the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute, visit www.fcny.org.

