



## **Engaging Youth in Data Discussions: A Conversation Guide**

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### **Why Engage Youth in Data Discussions?**

Data surround us all and the call for data to drive decisions and demonstrate accountability provides a unique opportunity to engage youth in data-driven problem-solving processes for relevant, root cause solution generation. Young people spend an increasing amount of time filling out surveys for a myriad of purposes, including public health surveillance, grant program requirements, and program planning purposes. Often young people never see the results of the survey and this likely impacts their investment in the quality of the information they provide. Not discussing the data that is about them and their peers or engaging them in the problem-solving process that these data ignite, is a missed opportunity. Engaging youth in data discovery processes can be beneficial for youth involved, adults involved, and the program or community being studied. The following include just a few of the benefits:<sup>1</sup>

- Youth – gain postsecondary skills to analyze data and reflect deeply on their lives and communities
- Adults – gain insider perspective on the stories and connections behind the data that can foster a fresh or more multifaceted perspective
- Programs/Communities – gain youth-driven conclusions and recommendations for addressing concerns and scaling bright spots; this relevancy increases impact

### **Do Young People Even Care About Data?**

Youth want to know facts, especially facts that are about them. Youth feel that they are labelled and even criminalized as drug abusers and addicts in the media and in our culture broadly. Youth want to discuss this data because the facts contradict the negative light that surrounds them. For instance, high school culture paints a picture of everyone using substances; yet, the data clearly show that is just a common myth. Youth need this reality check so that during critical decisions, they can remember that the actual number of teens using is drastically lower than what they perceive or are being told. Correcting these misperceptions lowers the power of peer pressure, which can decrease youth experimentation and misuse. Additionally, youth are well aware of their peers' usage well before adults get involved. The majority of the time they are responsible for addressing and assisting their peers with these issues. However, they may lack knowledge about the issue and skills to support them. They want to know the protective and risk factors that lead to misuse, so they can better help their friends.

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<sup>1</sup> Flores, K. S. (2008). Youth participatory evaluation: Strategies for engaging young people. New York: Jossey-Bass



Finally, regardless of the situation, facts simply elevate any conversation. Whenever people aim to have conversations with youth regarding drug usage, the tendency is to use vague statements like “drugs are bad,” “drugs will ruin your life” or “drugs hurt your family.” However, these statements lack factual conviction. In school, youth are taught to use evidence to demonstrate credibility. The emotional appeal backed up by factual evidence allows for a deeper and more lasting understanding. Using numbers broadens the scope, highlights the reality and brings the issue closer to home.

### **How to Start the Conversation**

In Colorado, a number of data sources exist for the state, the largest and most well known being the [Healthy Kids Colorado Survey](#). The process outlined below can be utilized for any set, including your own local, program or school data. This guide will focus on [The Rise Above Colorado Youth Survey](#) (RACYS), which is a newer set of data that focuses on substance misuse and behavioral health exclusively and is now available for community’s use. Rise Above Colorado created six fact sheets as a launching point for rich conversations: an overview, alcohol, marijuana, prescription pain relievers, prescription stimulants and meth. The time, setting and purpose (e.g. information, awareness, action planning) for the conversation will determine the way in which you present the data. Rise Above offers a model utilizing the overall findings and a second focusing on marijuana. Feel free to adapt as needed or contact Amy ([amy@riseaboveco.org](mailto:amy@riseaboveco.org)) for technical assistance on presenting data about other substances.

### **Step 1: Present the Data with the Intention of Youth Reflecting on Their Perceptions**

A number of engaging presentation strategies exist. Rise Above Colorado often employs [polleverywhere](#) to engage participants in anonymously sharing their thoughts on the topics at hand. This powerpoint presentation was designed to engage a variety of stakeholders in the RACYS marijuana findings by first asking for participants’ perceptions and then presenting and discussing the data and what it might mean. Correcting misperceptions and discussing why those misperceptions exist is an effective strategy for prevention based on social norming theory.<sup>2</sup>

### **Step 2: Small Group Discussions to Reflect More Deeply on the Data**

Break the group into small groups of 4-6 youth and pass out the fact sheet along with the following discussion questions. Adjust the questions as needed. The goal is to encourage deep thinking, sharing and analysis on the data and the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Perkins, H. & Berkowitz, A. (1986). Perceiving the community norms of alcohol use among students: some research implications for campus alcohol education programming. *International Journal of the Addictions*, (9-10): 961-76.



1. What surprised you the most?
2. Where was your biggest gap in reality vs. perception?
3. Why do you think these misperceptions exist? What were you basing your original perception on?
4. How might these misperceptions be influencing youth attitudes or behavior? How could we begin to shift them closer to reality?
5. What bright spots or strengths did you see when looking at the data?
6. What concerns do you have for yourself, your friends, family or community when examining these data?
7. Looking specifically at the risk and protective factor statements, how does their relationship to usage reflect your personal experience or that of close friends and family? Do these seem like some of the contributing factors to use or non-use from your experience? How do you see them play out?
8. Of these risk and protective factor statements, which do you believe has the most potential for making positive change in your community?