Maintaining community-engaged research with young people in a virtual setting

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ABSTRACT

Background. Partnering with young people to conduct research is fundamental to community mobilization. Recent restrictions on in-person interactions and engagement presented limitations for continued partnership with young people.

Objective. To present a practical strategy and lessons learned to facilitate community-engaged research with youth in a virtual setting.

Methods. Based on youth engagement tenets, the TEAM (**T**ailor the compensation package, **E**nsure meetings are accessible, **A**ccommodate personal needs, and **M**aintain the structure of in-person meetings) strategy was used to adapt the partnership to a virtual setting.

Lessons Learned. Three lessons are discussed: (1) the importance of maintaining social connectedness, (2) maximize flexibility, and (3) focus on creativity and competency building.

Conclusion. The COVID pandemic forced researchers to rethink previous engagement practices that relied heavily on in-person interactions to be sustainable. The TEAM strategy is one way to successfully adapt practices and engage young people in virtual settings.

KEYWORDS: youth engagement, youth-engaged research, virtual partnerships

Background

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a well-studied research approach driven by principles that have shown significant impacts on the health and well-being of communities.[1] As an assets-based approach to research, CBPR is rooted in trusted relationships, acknowledges and prioritizes contributions from community members, shifts power dynamics where community members are equal partners in decision making, focuses on salient solutions and explores contextual and systemic impacts of decisions.[1,2] When done correctly and truly embedded in these principles, CBPR is actions-based and promotes equity by intentionally integrating the voices and expertise of historically excluded populations, which is then used to impact policies and programs in schools, districts and communities at large.[3] This work is not exclusive to working with adults, but is useful in engaging and partnering with young people to address persistent and budding public health concerns.

CBPR with youth, referred to as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), is an innovative approach to positive youth and community development, where young people are trained to conduct systematic research focused on topics salient to their communities.[4] YPAR places youth perspectives at the core, yielding research that is high quality and aligned with youths' self-identified priorities.[5-8] Like traditional CBPR, YPAR empowers youth through critical reflection, new relationships established with other community members and researchers, and the ability to drive community change.[4,9] YPAR has been used to tackle health concerns important to youth, such as sexual health,[6,10] violence and criminal systems,[11-13] suicide,[14] and substance use prevention.[10,14] Specific to substance use prevention, work has been done with youth across racial and socioeconomic groups to create survey instruments, collect qualitative data, develop programs and advocate for policy change.[10,15] Shown to have positive impacts on

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outcomes for youth as partners and participants,[10,16] YPAR is a worthwhile commitment for

researchers even in the midst of uncertain times, such as a global pandemic.

A variety of youth engagement frameworks exist to guide YPAR projects, such as

positive youth development (PYD).[17] PYD builds on assets and core competencies which are

particularly important when working with youth from historically excluded and marginalized

communities.[17] Guided by youth leaders, one YPAR project in Canada used reflective

experiences to develop a framework, rooted in positive youth development to identify how

researchers could partner with young people in research.[18] The nine tenets of the framework

included empowerment, opportunity, learning, community, relationships, stability, achievements,

communication, and activities (see Table 1 for a description of each tenant). The first four

(empowerment, opportunity, learning and community) envelope the philosophy used to drive

youth engagement - ensuring that young people feel encouraged and have opportunities to learn

individually and as a team. The goal of the framework is that youth will establish authentic

relationships with each other and researchers, and have opportunities to highlight their

achievements and contributions.[19] When partnering with youth, the positive outcomes linked to

YPAR are most pronounced when the core tenets of youth engagement are followed.[9,20]

Intentionally integrating these tenets into YPAR work is beneficial not only for the personal

development of young people, but also leads to the greater sustainability of efforts made in their

communities.[16,20]

Partnering with young people is not without its challenges. Often, young people have

competing priorities with work, school, family, and extra-curricular activities, thereby impacting

time commitments required for engaging in community-based research.[21,22] They may also have

experiences with systemic issues related to lack of reliable transportation, unstable housing, and

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poverty.[22] Application of youth engagement principles is useful in combatting these challenges; however, implementing these principles may be more difficult in remote, virtual settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this became more evident as young people experienced increased mental health challenges and high levels of social isolation.[23-25] The immediate shifts to remote modalities negatively impacted young people, particularly those without access to digital devices and internet, safe spaces, and social support systems.[26,27] To continue conducting community-engaged research with young people during the pandemic, there was a need to expand options for engaging young people in virtual settings. This article presents a practical strategy to engage young people in research virtually and provides lessons learned for researchers seeking to optimize their partnerships with young people.

Methods

Better Together (BT) is a multiphase research project designed to prevent early substance use among Black youth affected by parental drug use in Baltimore, Maryland through partnerships with public libraries. The collaborative BT team consisted of three young adult (YA) partners affected by parental drug use, three graduate students, a staff person, a library consultant, and a faculty member. Table 2 provides characteristics of the BT team, including demographic information, years in Baltimore, and responsibilities.

In Phase 1 (formative research) of the project, the current YA partners were initially recruited and interviewed as participants to share their experiences as a Black youth affected by parental drug use in Baltimore, and to discuss the needs, assets, and challenges for this population. At the end of each interview, all interviewees were asked if they would be willing to serve as partners on the research team for future phases of the project; five of fifteen YAs stated that they would be interested. To ensure that the deliverable of the project reflected the needs and

perspectives of youth affected by parental drug use, the university partners found it necessary to invite all interested YAs to contribute and collaborate on the next phases of the project. Of the five YAs contacted, three committed to the team and transitioned from participant to partner at the start of Phase 2.

Building on the formative research, Phase 2 was a YPAR project focused on intervention mapping and development of a substance use prevention program for Black youth affected by parental drug use in Baltimore. Intervention Mapping (IM) is a planning approach with community partners that uses theory, evidence, and an ecological approach to assess and intervene on health problems.[28,29] With six steps, IM moves partnerships from problem identification to problem solving or mitigation. IM has been widely used to develop interventions and implementation strategies globally.[30] At the onset of Phase 2, all YAs signed a partnership agreement outlining the project (i.e., responsibilities and payment) and overall logistics, and were trained alongside other research team members on CBPR, basic research terminology, and IM. All partners were given university badges with access into the building, illustrating their role as active, long-term partners on the project. Furthermore, a collaborative, balanced team dynamic was emphasized by the use of first names, shared decision-making and credit on all deliverables, including manuscripts, conference presentations, and the team website. The university Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted administrative approval, viewing Phase 2 not as human-subjects research but rather a planning phase of the larger project. YAs were viewed as partners because no personal data was collected in this phase of the project.

The collaborative team worked together over a period of 10 months (November 2019-August 2020), which overlapped with the early months of the COVID-19 social distancing mandates in the U.S. To sustain the partnership, we coined a strategy called TEAM to engage

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our YAs in a virtual setting: **T**ailor the compensation package, **E**nsure meetings are accessible, **A**ccommodate personal needs, **M**aintain the structure of in-person meetings. Each area is aligned with a set of youth engagement tenets, summarized in Figure 1 and described in detail below.
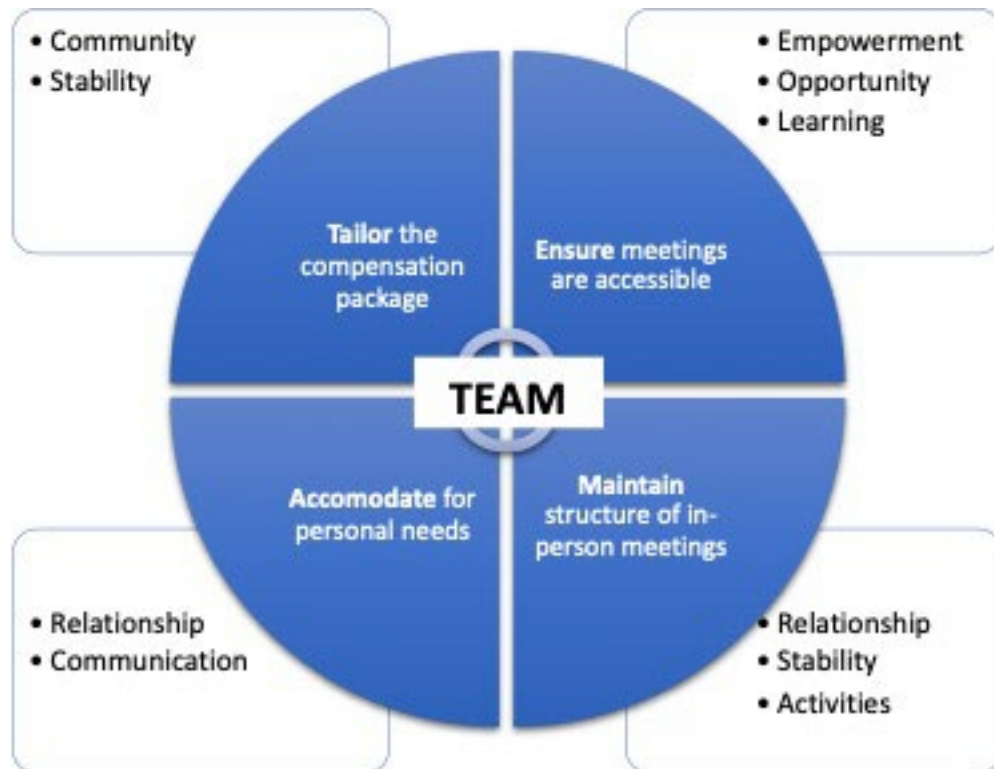

Figure 1. Linking TEAM Strategy to Tenets of Youth Engagement

A Practical Strategy for Working Virtually with Young People: TEAM

Tailor the compensation package. Prior to COVID-19, we provided participants with rideshare services to and from meeting locations to reduce transportation barriers and ensure timeliness. Additionally, we provided food at every meeting, oftentimes with additional provisions to take home, which was supported by our funder. YA partners were also compensated $30 per meeting via reloadable debit cards. However, due to mandated closures, suspension of in-person meetings, and social distancing policies, neither rideshare services nor

food were practical. In response, we redistributed the transportation and refreshment funds to our YA partners. Doing this allowed us to tailor the compensation package by increasing the monetary compensation from $30 to $50 for each meeting for all three YA partners. In connection to youth engagement, these are examples of how to maintain stability given that YA partners became dependent on the weekly meals provided at meetings. Previous research report youth affected by parental drug use to be more likely to experience food insecurity and housing instability,[31-33] thus signaling the importance of this change.[34] The additional funds ensured that the need was still met without disrupting what university partners had committed to as incentives for joining the research team.

   Ensure meetings are accessible. Accessibility specific to youth engagement is important when considering how to divert challenges inherent to retention. Prior to COVID-19, we met in the evenings at the university to ensure that everyone felt safe and did not have to miss work or school to participate. Consistent with research demonstrating that Black families were least likely to have reliable access to devices and internet,[35] our YA partners did not have access to electronic devices that would enable them to actively engage in virtual team meetings. To ensure meeting accessibility, we provided resources to continue working together virtually and adjusted the meeting time from evening to mid-day to accommodate the schedules of both YA and university partners. All YA partners were offered an iPad to participate in research meetings and for personal use outside of the project, with the intention to ensure the learning process and access to opportunities were smooth. All YA partners had access to internet, but were also offered free WiFi through public library hotspots.

   Accommodate personal needs. Our YA partners experienced childcare, housing instability, employment constraints, and family conflict challenges. Before COVID-19, YA

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partners were invited to bring their children to meetings to reduce barriers to participation related to childcare. In addition, regular check-ins at the beginning of the meetings were facilitated to develop solutions for other personal challenges. While childcare was not a viable option during COVID-19, we remained attuned to personal issues by scheduling one-on-one meetings with the PI about their concerns, challenges, and hopes (personal and professional); self-evaluations were a product of these one-on-one meetings. During meetings we emphasized compassion and prioritized flexibility, understanding that partners would need to tend to their children/families or handle personal issues. This was key to fostering strong, authentic relationships and open communication between YA and university partners.

   Maintain the structure of in-person meetings. The collaborative study team met virtually on a weekly basis to discuss each step of the IM process – using existing literature, expert consultations, and previous research by university partners as a guide to develop program objectives, and to brainstorm activities and materials for the BT intervention. Meetings throughout the duration of the project were discussion-based, working meetings, including a group check-in/icebreaker, review of meeting objectives, and development or review of materials in smaller groups followed by larger group discussion/decision-making. This structure was maintained virtually by using ZOOM breakout rooms. Whereas in person, the team would brainstorm using large poster papers with sticky notes; in the breakout rooms, one member screen-shared while both used a virtual whiteboard (i.e. Miro) or track changes on documents to capture ideas and feedback. Partners were encouraged to use the chat feature to send private messages or to share comments with the larger group if they did not want to speak aloud or wanted to maintain privacy. However, none of the partners expressed issues of privacy and often

used the chat as a means of convenience when multiple people were speaking or to control for background noise.

We continued to assign task leads to both university and YA partners based on their interests. YA partners led the initial design of all activities for the sessions. Then, university partners developed initial drafts and revisions of the content for each session, which were discussed, reviewed at least twice, and finalized by each YA partner. Throughout the development process, library partners were also consulted about space and feasibility of activities in a library setting. A shared decision-making process based on unanimous consensus was used to determine the final content, activities, and materials. Table 3 provides a sample agenda and the prompts used to maintain engagement among all partners. In all the meetings, the group's contributions, concerns, and decisions were recorded in notes and saved to a cloud-based folder accessible to the entire team. The continued practice of opening meetings with an ice breaker, celebrating milestones and accomplishments remained constant, strengthening relationships within the team and reinforcing the collaborative, balanced dynamic.

Lessons Learned

In using the TEAM strategy, several lessons emerged regarding our partnership with young people in a virtual setting. Three main lessons learned were: (1) maintain social connections by increasing frequency of contacts, (2) maximize flexibility within the partnership, and (3) focus on creativity and competency building. These lessons build on and link to specific tenets of youth engagement, including relationship, stability, learning, and empowerment.

Maintain social connections by increasing frequency of contacts. Youth engagement and well-led YPAR work are rooted in relationship building and strong connections.[36] Although

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virtual settings can allow for easier social connections, this phenomenon may not naturally extend to research partnerships. The negative effects of social isolation, ZOOM burnout, and limited in-person interactions on young people's mental health have been well documented.[37-39] Our partners expressed valuing the in-person environment because it required them to be present, focused, and engaged in a meaningful way. However, in the virtual setting, there were several distractions including interruptions from family or household responsibilities, or a disconnection from the work. These challenges are not unique to working with youth, as a study examining three virtual CBPR projects found partners to be disconnected due to a lack of face-to-face interaction, which hindered relationship formation, cohesion, and trust.[40] The authors suggest alleviating these concerns by implementing activities that foster group identity (i.e., ice-breakers, pulse checks, mental breaks, celebration of milestones and accomplishments) and seeking creative opportunities for dialogue and engagement.

To combat challenges of disconnection, we increased the frequency of individual, informal check-ins from once a week to multiple times a week outside of regular meeting times via phone calls, emails, and text messages. These check-ins were not solely focused on the project, but extended to conversations about opportunities or resources pertinent to personal or professional goals. Based on their interests, YA partners were introduced to other researchers and invited to professional development opportunities/forums. For example, to promote empowerment we invited partners to participate in dissemination efforts such as presenting at webinars, guest appearing on podcasts, and designing materials for conferences. This allowed the YA and university partners to connect more frequently, in addition to learning new skills related to research implementation and translation in the height of the pandemic.

Maximize flexibility within the partnership. The shift from working in-person to virtually magnified the need for flexibility in our approach, deadlines, and expectations. Simple adjustments that demonstrated compassion, such as encouraging partners to step away, mute or turn off cameras when needed, were the type of flexibility that yielded a successful partnership. Furthermore, it required the university partners to work with their administrators and funders to communicate the rationale for changes as they were being made, and to stress the importance of adjusting for our partners. As a result, incentives were altered to match the needs of the YAs. Prior to discussing with the funder and finance team at the university, the faculty PI calculated the costs of in-person meetings and determined the cost per person. Given that the proposed changes did not change the overall budget but rather a reallocation of funds, it was well-received by the funders. It was important for the faculty PI not to view the transition to virtual interactions as a financial "savings", but rather as an opportunity to exemplify the principles of community-based work. The willingness to be flexible signaled to partners their value on the team, which led to continued participation and empowerment.

Focus on creativity and competency building. Despite the limited in-person interactions, the virtual setting created a unique learning opportunity for the entire team. We identified key competencies that the YA and university partners could develop to align with the goals of the project. Those competencies included understanding theoretical frameworks for behavior change, designing culturally relevant and appropriate activities, and training community assets such as librarians. To support virtual adaptations, we incorporated creative tools and programs such as Miro to maintain engagement and motivate the entire team to think creatively. The flexibility ingrained into the **TEAM** strategy allowed for all partners to shift and seize the opportunity to design a virtual version of the BT intervention, which otherwise would not have

been considered. Toward the end of the partnership, the university partners initiated the idea of writing a manuscript to document this collaborative process. The entire team conceptualized the manuscript together and the university partners drafted an outline of the process. All members of the team were listed as co-authors and met frequently to offer inputs, edits, and approval of final drafts of the manuscript.

Conclusion

Partnering with young people in community-engaged research is both necessary and beneficial, particularly when considering the needs of the most vulnerable youth such as those affected by parental drug use. It is imperative to engage their expertise in research and programs intended for them, because such engagement leads to sustained positive change and impact on their well-being.[14,41,42] As a long-term commitment, it advances efforts that are deemed acceptable, feasible and sustainable by the target population.[1] While the pandemic presents challenges in maintaining youth-adult partnerships virtually, it has created new ways to engage and collaborate with young people. *TEAM* is a simple, yet effective strategy to sustain collaborative partnerships with young people in a virtual setting. Relying on the basic principles of youth engagement, the *TEAM* strategy ensures access to new learning opportunities, social connectedness, and flexibility. The shift to a virtual format allowed for a rethinking of what partnerships can and should resemble, inciting the notion that physical lockdowns do not equate to a 'locked'-state of opportunities.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1. Nine Tenets of Youth Engagement Framework [6]

Tenet	Definition
Empowerment	Enable youth to recognize their abilities and potential by helping them develop the confidence to implement positive changes
Opportunity	Chances and outlets (planned or spontaneous) that help facilitate action towards a particular goal or achievement
Learning	Actively providing youth with a variety of meaningful experiences and fostering interactions with a diverse group of people
Community	A collective group of people that get together to create and maintain a supportive and reliable network
Relationships	A sense of connection, bond, and trust which are co-created and co-operated
Stability	Establishing a sense of consistency and reliability with room for positive change and flexibility
Achievements	Accomplish a goal and/or overcome a challenge that requires hard work and perseverance
Communication	Means of connection that involves expressing one's thoughts, feelings, experiences, goals, values/beliefs, dreams/desires, hardships, losses, etc.
Activities	Means of keeping one's time occupied in a productive, meaningful way

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Table 2. Description of BT Project Team

Characteristic	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Partner Type/Role	University, Project Coordinator	University, Research Asst.	University, Research Asst.	University, Research Asst.	Community, Young Adult	Community, Young Adult	Community, Young Adult	University, Faculty PI	Community, Library Consultant
Age Group, years	30-34	18-24	30-34	30-34	18-24	18-24	18-24	35-39	35-39
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female
Race	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black
Years in Baltimore	4-5	2	3-4	3-4	>10	>10	>10	>10	>10
Responsibilities	• Track project deadlines and tasks • Conceptualize and design activities for BT program • Draft and document BT program activities	• Take notes during meeting • Serve as the point person for YA partners	• Conceptualize and design activities for BT program • Draft and document BT program activities		• Conceptualize and design activities for BT program • Provide feedback and edits on all materials			• Oversee entire project • Lead weekly meetings and trainings • Meet individually with all team members	• Provide feedback on BT program • Serve as a liaison to public library system

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Table 3. Sample Virtual Meeting Agenda

Icebreaker	*Rotate each week of who leads icebreaker*
Reminder of Group Agreements *"How We Roll"*	- Show up… - On time - Ready to participate - Be honest - Respect each other - Keep this a safe space that's … - Private - Judgement-free - Label-free - Ask questions
Updates/Reminders	*Mention if relevant*
Breakout Activity *Review session*	*In pairs, read and review the session. Talk through these questions:* - Does what is written help us meet the objectives of the session? - What do you like? Dislike? - What, if anything, is unclear? - How well did the pieces fit together (organization & flow)? - What other activities might be good for this session? - What, if anything, else would we need for this session to go well (materials)? - Would the session work well for all genders? - How much time do you think each of the activities need? - What should the session title be?
Group Discussion & Decision Making	*Each pair reports out on their feedback, and as a team discuss and make decisions on next steps.*
Wrap-Up/Celebrate Accomplishments	*Final reminders/announcements and next steps*

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