What is this research about?
Youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) involve youth and adults working together to improve the systems that affect them.

While research on the effects of Y-APs in community mental health promotion is limited, research in other areas demonstrates positive benefits for youth.

Brock University researchers examined The New Mentality pilot program to explore what makes these relationships tick, and identify the potential benefit of Y-APs in child and youth community mental health promotion.

What did the researchers do?
Using focus groups, interviews, observation, and surveys, the researchers explored the challenges and benefits of the program; the relationships among program participants; and the perceived role of youth in children’s mental health system and future program directions.

What did the researchers find?
Nineteen youth ages 13 to 25 years, five adult allies (adults partnered with youth), seven executive directors at partner agencies, and nine program staff and steering committee members participated in focus groups and individual interviews. Twenty-four youth completed an online, follow-up survey.

The most important relationship in the program was between the adult allies and youth leaders. Some good qualities for an adult ally were patience, flexibility, enthusiasm, problem solving and project management skills, trust in the youth’s abilities, and willingness to step back and share responsibility.

A barrier to success was that adult allies didn’t always have the resources, time, organizational commitment, and skills to dedicate to the youth’s needs. To mitigate

What you need to know:
Youth-adult partnerships are a promising avenue for engaging youth in child and youth community mental health promotion. Their success seems to hinge on adults and organizations providing structure and guidance to youth, without commandeering activities and events. Organizations should strive to create a culture of equality between youth and adults, clarify expectations and commitment at the start of the project, and engage youth early on.
this, it was important for adult allies and the organization’s staff and leaders to agree upon and be ready to use the Y-AP model (i.e., whether it is a shared partnership or youth-led). This could be achieved by communicating about expectations and support required by the model.

Youth engagement outside of a client–service-provider relationship was unexpectedly challenging. Many of the partnerships were located in child and youth mental health services, and findings indicate that a cultural shift would require adult allies and the organization to invest in new or different practices; in other words, rethinking how the two groups could exist in a collaborative and equal space.

There appeared to be a number of benefits for youth participants, who showed improvements in skills and learning, and increased interest in mental health and ability to help others. Survey results show youth’s Y-AP experience was characterized by developing positive and supportive relationships with peers and adults, lots of opportunity to be heard, and positive psychological engagement.

Finally, findings regarding program structure indicate the need for having clear program goals and expectations, while keeping it flexible.

How can you use this research?
This study reinforces and extends the research on Y-APs and contributes to our understanding of this model in child and youth mental health promotion. It may be helpful for service providers and organizations looking to successfully engage with youth.

Limitations and next steps
The value of this study is limited because it looked at only one example of a Y-AP program and did not evaluate the outcomes of youth who participated in the program. More research needs to be conducted using a similar theoretical framework.

About the researchers
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This Research Snapshot is based on their article, “The New Mentality: Youth-adult partnerships in community mental health promotion,” which was published in Children and Youth Services Review, 2015. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.01.006.

Keywords
Youth-adult partnerships, youth engagement, youth participation, mental health promotion

This Research Snapshot is based on an article that has been critically appraised for quality and susceptibility to bias.

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