



A FIELD GUIDE FOR PROGRAM LEADERS AND SYSTEM PLANNERS

Why Youth Peer Support Is Different

What changes when the peer, and the person they support, are young

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Not a smaller version of adult peer support

Youth peer support shares its roots with adult peer support: people using their own lived experience to help someone facing something similar. But it isn't adult peer support with younger people in the room.

Young people are still building their lives. They move through schools, families, and youth-serving systems at the same time. The peers who support them are young adults who are close to that experience themselves. This guide is for leaders starting or growing youth peer support, especially those coming from adult programs. New to peer support? Start with What Is Peer Support? at shareandsolve.app/#field-guides.

Build youth peer support for young people, not around them.



Who youth peers are

A youth peer is a young adult who uses their own experience with youth-serving systems to connect with young people going through something similar.

Lived experience	Federal guidance describes the providers of peer support for young people and families as “family members or youth with ‘lived experience’ who have personally faced the challenges of coping with serious mental health conditions.” ¹
Close in age	Youth MOVE National says that to be a “peer,” youth peer specialists “need to be close in age with the young people they work with” and draw on their own experiences with youth-serving systems. ²
Who they serve	A 2021 update of the system of care approach notes that youth peer support “serves children, youth, and young adults with mental health conditions of varying ages, typically beginning with those in late childhood or early adolescence.” ³
Credentials vary	Federal model standards note that “some states offer transitional age youth aged 18 to 30 a choice between obtaining a specialized certification for their age group or an adult mental health/substance use certification.” ⁴

Ages, titles, and credentials differ from state to state and change over time. Check your state's current requirements.

¹ CMS and SAMHSA, Joint Informational Bulletin, “Coverage of Behavioral Health Services for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Significant Mental Health Conditions,” May 7, 2013. [medicaid.gov](#)

² Youth MOVE National TA Center (a SAMHSA program), Recruiting and Retaining Youth Peer Support Specialists: Implementation Guide, version 3.0 (accessed October 1, 2026). [youthmovenational.org/youth-peer-support](#)

³ Stroul, Blau & Larson, The Evolution of the System of Care Approach for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Mental Health Conditions and Their Families, The Institute for Innovation and Implementation, University of Maryland School of Social Work, 2021.

⁴ SAMHSA, National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification, 2023 (updated 2026). [samhsa.gov](#)

Rooted in systems of care

Youth peer support grew up alongside the system of care movement, which puts young people and families at the center of decisions.

The 2010 update of the system of care philosophy lists, as its first core value, “family driven and youth guided, with the strengths and needs of the child and family determining the types and mix of services and supports provided.”¹

The 2021 update goes further. It names the value “family and youth driven” and calls for “increasing youth/young adult self-determination based on age and development,” along with youth and family “involvement in decision-making roles in system-level policies, procedures, and priorities.”²

Their goals lead	A young person's own goals set the direction, not the program's targets.
Voice grows with age	Young people take on more say over their lives as they grow. Youth peers support that growth instead of deciding for them.
Youth at the table	Young people help shape the program and the policies around it, not only their own plans.

This guide doesn't cover consent or confidentiality rules for minors, which vary by state.

¹ Stroul, Blau & Friedman, Updating the System of Care Concept and Philosophy, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, with SAMHSA, 2010.

² Stroul, Blau & Larson, The Evolution of the System of Care Approach for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Mental Health Conditions and Their Families, The Institute for Innovation and Implementation, University of Maryland School of Social Work, 2021.

Independent youth voice

A youth peer is there for the young person. That's what makes the role work, and it's what makes the role easy to pull off course.

Youth MOVE National describes youth peer specialists helping young people “identify personal goals and advocate for themselves in other settings such as workplaces, clinics, and schools.”¹

Not family peer support	Family peer support connects parents and caregivers with other parents. Youth peer support connects young people with young adults. Both matter, and they're different roles with different training and supervision.
Not the adults' messenger	When parents, schools, or providers want something different from the young person, the youth peer helps the young person say what they want. They don't take sides against the family.
Not alone with it	Independent voice doesn't mean keeping secrets. Safety concerns always go to a supervisor.

EXAMPLE (BASED ON REAL EXPERIENCES, DETAILS CHANGED)

A 16-year-old has a serious medical condition that makes a full school day impossible, so he stays home. The school blames his mother for “enabling” him, though she's the one who understands what he's going through. His youth peer starts by just being there, sometimes playing video games with him, until he trusts them. Then the peer helps him and his family find a school with flexible, hybrid attendance, where he can attend when he's able and isn't punished when he can't.

¹ Youth MOVE National TA Center (a SAMHSA program), Recruiting and Retaining Youth Peer Support Specialists: Implementation Guide, version 3.0 (accessed October 1, 2026). youthmovenational.org/youth-peer-support

Spaces young people lead

Youth voice needs room to grow. Strong programs make space where young people lead.

A 2016 national report says youth voice on advisory councils, for state decision-making bodies and for agencies that hire and provide youth peer support, “should ideally be standard practice.”¹

Youth-only time	Groups, councils, or meet-ups where young people talk without adults in the room. They're planned and supervised, with a clear plan for safety concerns.
Youth-led, not just youth-attended	Young people set the agenda and run the meeting. Adults help with logistics and follow-through.
A way into the work	Councils, groups, and events build skills and confidence. Some young people become the next youth peers. Others move into advocacy and policy, which is peer work in another form. Councils are where both meet to share what they're seeing and advocate together.
Shared spaces on youth terms	When young people and adults meet together, young people get time to prepare, support to speak, and a real answer afterward.

This page reflects practice guidance. We didn't find research that measures the effect of youth-only spaces on their own.

Learn more: Youth MOVE National is a youth-led, chapter-based organization. Find out about its chapters at youthmovenational.org.

¹ Center for Health Care Strategies and Youth M.O.V.E. National, Providing Youth and Young Adult Peer Support through Medicaid, August 2016. chcs.org

The systems young people move through

Young people often deal with several systems at once, and many are moving from youth systems and services to adult systems.

Youth MOVE National notes that youth peer specialists work with young people who are “usually system impacted (e.g., child welfare/foster care, mental/behavioral health, juvenile justice).”¹ Many are also moving from youth systems and services to adult systems, a handoff that is often a major gap. A youth peer who knows both sides can help them through it, so they don't fall through.

School	Attendance, support plans, changing schools, and finishing school.
Child welfare and foster care	Placements, caseworkers, and aging out of care.
Youth and adult services	Moving from youth systems and services to adult systems, where the rules, people, and expectations change.
Becoming an adult	Work, housing, money, and managing their own health care for the first time.

Systems change. Youth peers need current, local information and someone to ask when they don't know.

¹ Youth MOVE National TA Center (a SAMHSA program), Recruiting and Retaining Youth Peer Support Specialists: Implementation Guide, version 3.0 (accessed October 1, 2026). youthmovenational.org/youth-peer-support

What youth-specific training covers

Youth peer training often starts from adult peer curricula. That's a starting point, not the finish line.

A 2016 national report found: “Current approaches to curriculum development, training, and credentialing for YPS involve the adaptation of adult peer curriculums.” It added that “some states are developing specific YPS curriculums to meet the developmental needs of their staff.”¹ Adult peer training is a good base. Youth peers need more on top of it.

Sharing safely	What to share from their own story, when, and why. Peers rarely share details. They share enough to show the young person they've been there, which makes room for trust and vulnerability to grow.
Staying well	Life keeps happening to youth peers too. They're still growing and figuring things out. Training helps them notice when stress or the work stirs things up, and know what to do and who to call.
Today's systems	Youth peers need to know how child and adult systems work now, not how they worked when the peer went through them.
The rest of the staff	Youth peers have a heart to serve and will fill gaps to do it. Holding boundaries is part of the peer's job, but many fear that saying no will cost them. When everyone on staff knows what the role is, and what it isn't, peers can hold those lines with confidence.

Learn more: Youth MOVE National offers Peer Connect, a youth peer support training. See youthmovenational.org/youth-peer-support.

¹ Center for Health Care Strategies and Youth M.O.V.E. National, Providing Youth and Young Adult Peer Support through Medicaid, August 2016. chcs.org

Supervision and boundaries

Youth peers need supervisors who understand the youth peer role, and support from other peers.

A 2016 national report says youth peer providers “require safe and respectful supervision in two forms”: internal supervision “to monitor and support the day-to-day service delivery of peer support,” and external supervision “from a peer with lived experience and peer support experience.”¹ Youth MOVE National adds that supervisors “require a unique skill set that is pivotal to a productive relationship with supervisees.”²

Close in age	The closeness that builds trust can blur lines: social media, shared friends, the same school or neighborhood. Plan for it together.
Their own lives	Youth peers are young adults with their own lives in motion: school, work, family, housing. When a peer is struggling, don't take away responsibility to help. It can feel like punishment for being honest. Ask what they need, and follow up, even if they don't know yet. That follow-up builds trust.
Safety first	Any safety concern goes to a supervisor right away, every time. No peer carries it alone. Peers and young people both know the lines below, which are open any time.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org. 24/7, free, and confidential.
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741. 24/7, free, and confidential.
Emergency	Call 911 if someone is in immediate danger.

Checked on each service's official website on October 19, 2026.

¹ Center for Health Care Strategies and Youth M.O.V.E. National, Providing Youth and Young Adult Peer Support through Medicaid, August 2016. chcs.org

² Youth MOVE National TA Center (a SAMHSA program), Recruiting and Retaining Youth Peer Support Specialists: Implementation Guide, version 3.0 (accessed October 1, 2026). youthmovenational.org/youth-peer-support

What good looks like

A youth peer program built for young people has these in place.

Youth-led from the start	Young people help design the program, inform hiring, and review how it's going, from the beginning, not after it's built.
A clear role	Everyone on staff knows what youth peers do, and what they don't.
Two kinds of supervision	Day-to-day supervision, plus support from an experienced peer.
Clear contact hours	Contact happens during set hours, through channels the organization provides and supervisors can oversee.
Training built for the role	Youth-specific content on sharing safely, staying well, and today's systems.
A path forward	From day one, youth peers get a clear, honest picture of what peer support really is, and they can see where it leads: more responsibility, training others, supervising, advocacy and policy, or program leadership.
A culture that values lived experience	Lived experience is treated as expertise. Youth peers are part of the team, not an add-on.

Questions to ask

Questions to take to your leadership team, your youth advisors, and your partners.

- ☐ Did young people help design this program, and do they help run it?
- ☐ Do our youth peers have experience with the systems the young people we serve are in?
- ☐ Is our training built for the youth role, or borrowed whole from adult peer training?
- ☐ Does every youth peer get both day-to-day supervision and support from an experienced peer?
- ☐ Does the rest of our staff understand what youth peers do?
- ☐ Do young people have spaces they lead?
- ☐ When a young person and the adults around them disagree, who helps the young person speak?
- ☐ Is there a path for youth peers to grow in their careers?

LEARN MORE FROM YOUTH MOVE NATIONAL

Youth MOVE National shares youth peer support resources, including an implementation guide for recruiting and retaining youth peer specialists, readiness questionnaires for organizations and applicants, and a youth peer code of ethics. Find them at youthmovenational.org/youth-peer-support.



Building or growing a youth peer program? Blueprints, step-by-step toolkits for program leaders, are at shareandsolve.app/#blueprints.

ABOUT

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge help organizations run their own youth peer support programs. They don't replace your peer supporters, your training, or your program. They give the work you already do a safe, supervised home.

Share+Solve

Where peers and young people connect: messaging, check-ins, goals, and meet-ups, with a one-tap 988 call button on the home screen.

Peer Bridge

Where supervisors see the whole program: caseloads, check-ins, escalations, and program-level reporting.

Private conversations between peers and young people stay between them. Your organization controls its program data, and deletion requests are handled through the platform.

Built by John Dellick, MBA, a nationally recognized peer support professional with nearly a decade in youth peer support and behavioral health.



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