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RESEARCH BRIEF

Understanding Youth: A Prerequisite for Creating Programs By/With/For Tweens and Teens

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Knowing Tweens and Teens

Public media stations are well known for their developmentally appropriate work with preschool audiences. Decades of research shape best practices for educationally meaningful shows and interactive content for young children (Fisch & Truglio, 2001; Pasnik, 2019; PBS Learning Media, n.d.). Stations understand how media can connect with young children, teach them wide-ranging skills, and encourage important co-learning with adults. This foundation is now being applied to new technologies and is informing innovative approaches to engaging young children, their families, and their educators.

Public media work with tweens and teens, by comparison, is emerging as a key, new area of focus. A growing cohort of stations has begun the work of developing a parallel experience and research base in the interest of expanding offerings for middle and high school-aged youth. Building on public media's strong track record of trustworthy, inspiring, and educationally-valuable content, the Next Gen Public Media initiative is supporting stations' efforts to launch new programs and initiatives for youth, centered on their needs and informed by recent research (Bulger et al, 2021).

“

I think that our generation is a lot more about change, and I feel like sometimes some adults don't really fully understand that.

—GIRL, 13*

“

We don't always follow trends; we come up with new ideas.

—BOY, 14*

These efforts are timely and opportune. Youth use of digital media has skyrocketed in recent years, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Rideout et al., 2022). According to the [Common Sense Census: Media Use by Teens and Tweens, 2021](#), the most common screen activities for tweens and teens are watching online videos and television, with YouTube being both the most-used and most-liked platform. Teens average eight and a half hours of screen time per day, with slightly less (five and a half hours) for 8–12-year-olds. Much of this time involves concurrent use of multiple devices (e.g., toggling between a tablet, television, and smartphone). As a recent report on Generation Z from the Pew Research Center noted, youth are “digital natives who have little or no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones” (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

In this context, public media stations are reimagining ways to engage with youth and contribute to their robust digital media use and creation. Teams are embracing inquiry and experimentation, considering ways to involve youth in design, and recognizing the important role of relationships in program development. Understanding youth—their experiences, needs, motivations, and preferences—is a key first step to building your team's capacity to engage and innovate with young people for greater impact.

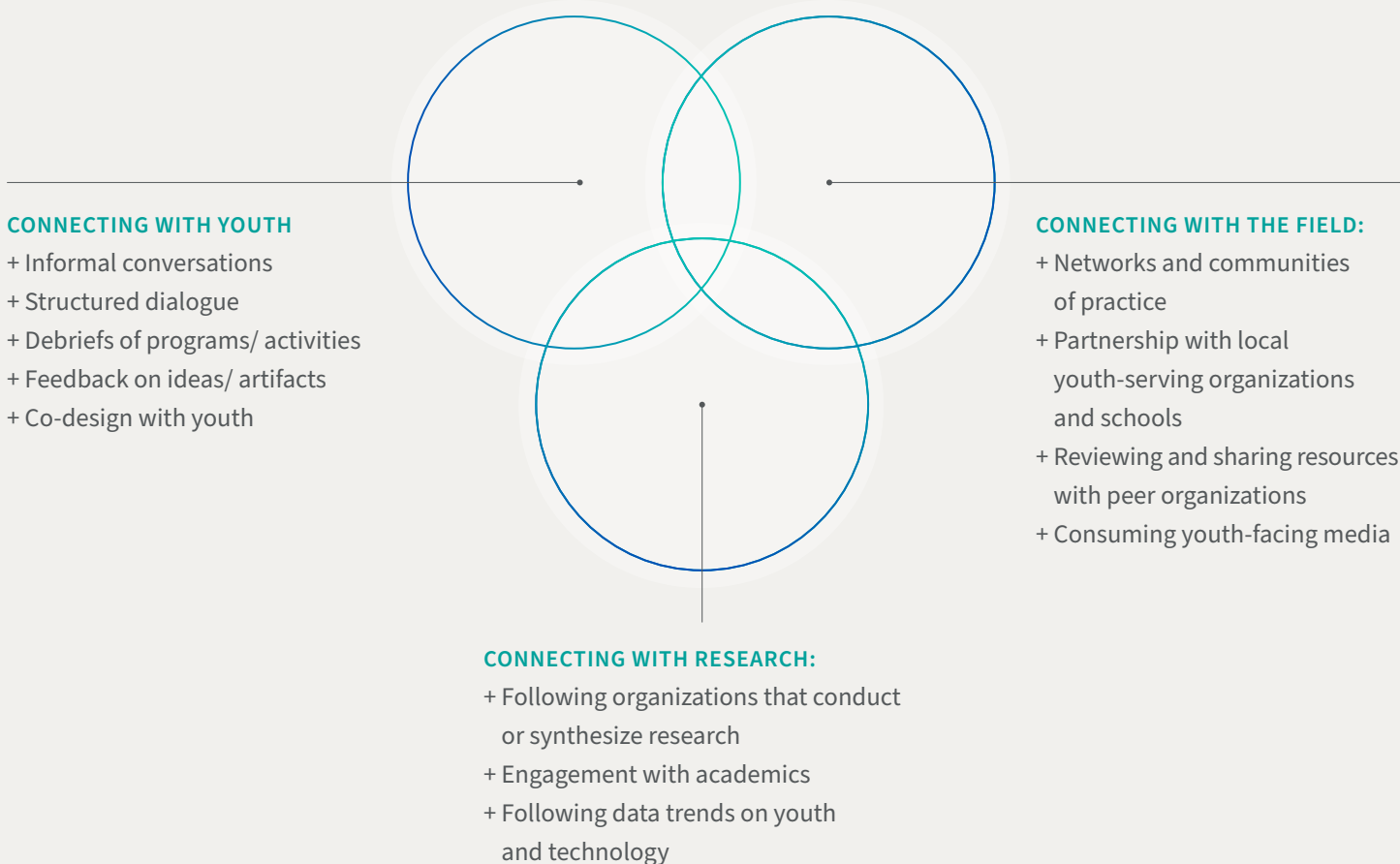
Preparing Public Media Stations for Experimentation and Innovation

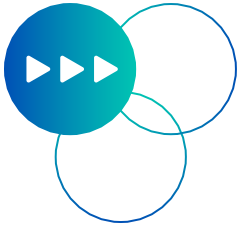
Scholars who investigate the intersection between organizational culture and innovation have identified key qualities that prime institutions for experimentation and change. These can be helpful to public media stations as they embark on serving new audiences with new media.

Learning organizations, defined by David Garvin (1993) as those “skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights,” are prepared for experimentation and innovation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). As a project of the Carnegie Foundation for the

Advancement of Teaching found, educational organizations that meet the needs of diverse youth do so through continuous learning and reflection and share key dispositions (e.g., welcoming uncertainty) and practices (e.g., centering users and being empathetic to their needs) (Dixon & Palmer, 2020).

Of course, learning and reflection can be sparked from many sources of information. To help public media stations consider a breadth of sources, this research brief focuses on three intersecting approaches: connecting with youth, connecting with the field, and connecting with research. Given the ever-evolving technologies that youth use and the ways that technology and media have shifted young people’s experiences, this three-dimensional approach will support stations to be primed for new, responsive approaches to working by/with/for youth.

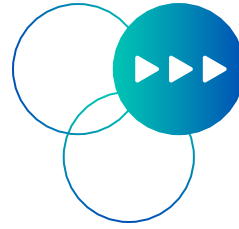




Connecting with Youth

The age span during middle- and high-school years is broad, developmentally speaking. On top of that, Gen Z is the most ethnically and racially diverse

American generation yet (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). As you work to develop initiatives by/with/for tweens and teens, authentic connections with youth will inform your understanding of young people's needs and motivations. Relationships are an essential component and key driver of youth engagement work and a key preliminary step to defining audience needs and shaping a responsive approach.



Connecting with the Field

Stations embracing a learning mindset about youth engagement can also focus on ways to learn from a network of peer stations, producers, and organizations

serving youth. This may include participating in groups such as the [National Educational Telecommunications Association](#) (NETA) and other media-focused communities of practice.

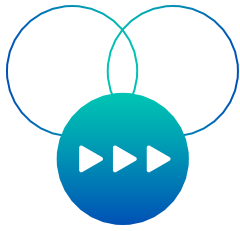
Building partnerships with local community-based organizations (e.g., after school programs, libraries, maker spaces) and schools can accelerate your understanding of youth needs and support the development of responsive approaches, as these organizations often have deep and specific expertise in youth programming. Among the many useful resources for connecting with such organizations is [Youth Engaged for Change](#), a project of the federal government meant to connect youth to local opportunities. It provides a database of organizations and opportunities in your area.

Connecting with local schools and nonprofits can also support work to center the needs of youth from communities that have historically been underserved by public media. By partnering with trusted community-based providers (and learning from their expertise working with youth), stations can facilitate authentic connection and community-building with youth. A strong example of such partnerships within public media is outlined in WHYY's [Public Media Stations and Youth Voices: A Toolkit for Launching Youth Media Programs](#), which details how the station has leveraged schools—particularly those based in communities that are less well covered by public media reporting—as program hubs for its youth reporting initiative. (For a more extensive discussion of different models of youth-adult collaboration see our first [research brief](#) in this series.)

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE LEARNING ABOUT TWEENS AND TEENS

As you build capacity for meaningfully engaging youth, start out by thinking about those you wish to serve. Who are they? What are their interests and assets? What aspects of their identity are important to understand? Next, consider:

- + What do youth in your target audience find important and engaging? What sorts of experiences do they seek? What are their core values and views?
- + What activities support their learning and enable agency? How do your goals appropriately reflect their age and development?
- + What drives tech and digital media engagement with this audience? What trends are meaningful and why? What platforms and affordances (such as chat or video) do they prefer and why?
- + In what ways are tweens' and teens' interests and needs served by existing programs and offerings? Where are there gaps that your station might fill? What supports and structures would you need to provide?



Connecting with Research

Creating processes for keeping abreast of research is also a hallmark of learning organizations and a key dimension of understanding

youth needs. While doing so can be time-consuming, the benefits are worth the effort: organizations that connect their practice to research are better primed to grow, adapt, and innovate (Todorova & Durisin, 2007; Zahra & George, 2002).

Following the work of research-into-practice groups, such as the [Joan Ganz Cooney Center](#), the [Digital Wellness Lab](#), the [Center for Scholars & Storytellers](#), and the [Connected Learning Alliance](#), can be one way to stay abreast of recent research. Building relationships with academics—in fields such as sociology, education, psychology, or communications—whose work centers on youth development, out-of-school time learning, career readiness, or media and technology can also support your connection to research.

“

The stuff that we're looking at is constantly changing. The funny videos and pictures we're looking at online are constantly changing and going out of date.

—BOY, 14*

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING MINDSETS AND PRACTICES

- + **Start with relationship-building.** Technology has fundamentally changed what tweens and teens experience, and one way to innovate is to invite them to be partners in design. Research suggests that trusting relationships and thoughtful structures promote equitable youth-adult collaboration (Druin, 2002; Yip et al., 2017).
- + **Embrace a cycle of learning.** As you come to understand tweens and teens and build relationships with them, you will gain insights into new or different approaches. Quick, low-stakes experiments can then reveal insights and understanding. The more you try, the more you will understand what works.
- + **Create processes for reflection.** To make the most of your experimentation, create processes for debriefing and learning from what you try out. Involve youth where and when possible.
- + **Start small and set yourself up for success.** Going through a cycle of identifying needs, trying out an idea, deepening your thinking, and refining your approach does not have to require extensive research or data collection. Be realistic about your resources and consider what simple-to-collect information would move your work forward.



Applying Your Learning: Designing By/With/For Youth

As your understanding about youth deepens, you will be ready to imagine new and innovative programs and media to meet their needs. Keep in mind that this process of exploration is not linear. Instead, it is iterative, with new insights gained as you experiment and gather feedback. Giving youth a seat at the table as you create new offerings and programs will help you to center youth perspectives and needs. At the simplest level, this could look like inviting youth to provide feedback on early-stage ideas. As capacity grows, your station might consider how to engage in more extensive co-design with youth.

TIP

Consider having something for youth to react to—a mocked-up flier advertising a new program, a storyboard showing your idea, a pilot episode, another station's approach—to help generate feedback and ideas.

Design thinking is an iterative approach to generating new solutions. It involves understanding others' experiences, coming up with ideas based on those insights, inviting feedback, and then strengthening the idea (before implementation) through iteration and testing. Some stations have already incorporated this approach into program development and could consider extending these practices to youth audiences.

This approach is especially useful for thinking more expansively and creatively about the possibilities for youth programs and offerings. Incorporating youth feedback in the development phase can lead to more relevant and engaging offerings. Both [Stanford University's d.school](#) and [IDEO](#) have resources and toolkits for doing design thinking work. Many experts have also begun to consider how to include people

who have not traditionally been included in the design process. *Design for Belonging* by Susie Wise, part of a series of designer guides created by Stanford's d.school, is one such resource (2022).

Researchers focused on technology innovation have been investigating how designers can move from engaging young people as end users in adult-driven work to making them partners in co-design (Druin, 2002). Building on Allison Druin's seminal work, researcher Jason Yip and his team have developed [KidsTeam](#) at the University of Washington to study effective co-design with kids. Working with children and then studying the processes of their work, they have identified four key components of effective co-design: relationship-building, facilitation, design-by-doing, and elaboration (Yip et al., 2017; Yip et al., 2019). Co-design

FOUR COMPONENTS OF CO-DESIGN

Unbalanced



Unbalanced partnership when adults are socially far from children

Unbalanced partnership when adults only facilitate the session

Unbalanced partnership when adults only observe children designing

Unbalanced partnership when children only talk to adults (vice-versa)

Balanced



Balanced partnership when adult-child establish closer relationships

Balanced partnership when adult-child facilitate together

Balanced partnership when adult-child design closely together

Balanced partnership when adult-child design elaborate ideas together



[Adapted from Yip et al., 2017; Yip et al., 2019]

works best when these qualities are in balance, though it is common to have moments of imbalance (such as a time when an adult is doing more of the work). Planning, thoughtfully scaffolded structures, and reflection are instrumental to achieving more balanced collaboration and equitable adult-youth partnerships.

Yip and colleagues have applied this framework to youth engagement in libraries, which can provide helpful direction to public media station work. As this research points out, public media stations, like library staff, may need to learn new skills and approaches when engaging in participatory co-design with youth (Yip et al., 2019).

Co-design has been shown to be an effective strategy for generating new, responsive approaches and experiences for youth. Even more promising is research showing that involvement in co-design projects has an empowering effect on youth of color (Coenraad et al., 2019).

Additional Resources

Consuming Media By/With/For Youth

Another way to deepen your understanding of tween and teen culture is to follow channels created by/with/for tweens and teens. Some examples include:

- + [Above The Noise](#). A production of KQED, a show for teens informed by a youth advisory board.
- + [Student Reporting Labs](#). A national initiative of the PBS NewsHour that connects youth to media mentors and supports their story reporting.
- + [This Teenage Life](#). A podcast created by teens about their ideas, stories, and perspectives.
- + [Youth Collective](#). A project of WNET that convenes a youth advisory group, holds an annual youth summit, and partners with organizations to create media by/with/for youth.
- + [Youth Reporting Institute](#). A program of the University of North Carolina and WUNC, a community-centered platform for youth interaction and storytelling.
- + [YR Media](#). A media, technology, and music training center and platform, formerly known as Youth Radio and based in Oakland, CA, that supports emerging BIPOC content creators, publishing on [YouTube](#).

Data Trends and Insights

Following organizations that specialize in gathering and disseminating data can help you stay abreast of emerging trends and questions. They regularly release reports that you may find helpful in your work understanding youth from a range of perspectives, including Gen Z culture, media use and technology trends, wellness, and civic engagement:

- + [The Pew Research Center](#). An organization conducting and publishing a wide range of research on teens and youth and providing free access to survey instruments and data sets.
- + [Youth and Media Project](#). An interdisciplinary initiative of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University providing research, curricula, and practitioner resources focused on youth (ages 12–18) and their use of digital technology.
- + [Common Sense Media](#). A nonprofit with a dedicated research arm conducting an annual census on tweens and teens as well as reports on issues such as media use and privacy.
- + [National Center for Education Statistics](#). A clearinghouse of data from the Federal Department of Education tracks trends in education, including demographic information and educational attainment outcomes.

Journalism sources occasionally conduct polling on youth. A 2021 [Washington Post-Ipsos poll](#), for instance, covered issues such as youth attitudes on college, COVID-19, and the future. And the [AP-NORC Center](#) at the University of Chicago has a dedicated series of studies focused on younger generations.



Conclusion

Whether a station is integrating tween and teen perspectives into content that is being developed for intergenerational audiences or targeted directly at middle and high schoolers, understanding national and local trends among youth will translate into more relevant offerings. Public media is well known for supporting a wide range of educational efforts in local communities. Embracing a learning organization mindset for Next Gen projects will help to extend the impact of that work and strengthen the ability of stations to be responsive to local needs.

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Joan Ganz Cooney Center

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit research and innovation lab that focuses on the challenges of fostering smarter, stronger, and kinder children in a rapidly changing media landscape.

We conduct original research on emerging learning technologies and collaborate with educators and media producers to put this research into action. We also aim to inform the national conversation on media and education by working with policymakers and investors. For more information, visit www.joanganzcooneycenter.org.

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