



**Becoming a Better Mentor:  
Strategies to Be There for Young People**



**MENTOR**

**CHAPTER 9**

# **BUILDING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND YOUTH ACTIVISM**

*How Elder Wisdom Can Power and Resource Youth for Future Change*

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### What Does Building Critical Consciousness and Youth Activism Mean?

Many have labeled 2020 the “year of the twin pandemics” — COVID-19 and racial injustice. COVID-19 exposed both class and race divides when we learned that it was disproportionately impacting particular communities and all of the reasons why. Amid the backdrop of this pandemic, the extrajudicial murder of George Floyd further exposed the chasm between our white communities and our Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities, especially as it relates to policing. The reckoning for these crises has only just begun, and we have so much work to do, but the crux of that work is *with our young people* — and it doesn’t look like the work we were doing before. Youth work is particularly important at this moment because young people are not only the future, they are also actively engaged in change-making. In 2020, young people hit the streets to force a reckoning on race and demand justice. Young people have been recording incidents and ensuring they are made public so that we collectively bear witness. And it is young people who will build new systems that free us all.

However, young people won’t be able to do that work without elders being willing to ensure they have the language, historical knowledge, and *critical* understanding of existing systems. To be clear, there is still a need for mentoring — for adults to create and dwell in spaces where they can positively impact young people. However, even more than the need for mentoring, the events of 2020 made it clear that mentoring alone is not enough. Being present and being available to young people indeed make a difference, but if we are interested in cultivating a kind of future that is radical, free, and rooted in love and that reimagines

our existing systems, then it is even more essential that adults see themselves as builders of a *critical consciousness* that can strengthen and activate youth power. We mentors are individuals who are responsible for ensuring that youth have voice, power, and choice, and our job is to cultivate spaces where young people can tap into and build their own power.

### What Is Critical Consciousness?

**The term “critical consciousness” refers to the ability of individuals, in this case young people, to critically understand social conditions, feel empowered to change those conditions, and take action to improve the world around them. This can be about issues that are small scale and directly personal (e.g., issues in the youth’s school or community) or at a larger scale (e.g., participation in regional or national movements).**

**The development of critical consciousness is thought to unfold over several stages: reflection (thinking about current social or community issues and how historical context has shaped that reality), motivation (in which youth start thinking about what they can do to help), and action (which involves working to directly address issues of importance). Critical consciousness also involves understanding the many aspects of one’s self and how those different identities relate to their experiences of the world around them.**

**Obviously, caring adults like mentors can be instrumental to young people understanding themselves, the history that surrounds them, and their sense of agency to bring about positive change. As you read this chapter, think about how these concepts might play out in the young people you work with.**



Mentoring in this way requires a different set of skills than just showing up. It first requires that we see ourselves as elders with wisdom to offer, and then that we begin exercising the best ways to share that elder wisdom with young people to build them up and support their work. We cannot shy away from naming ourselves as elders. While western society often associates the word “elder” with “old,” in most other societies the elder is associated with wisdom and experience. In BIPOC communities, our elders are considered worthy of respect and regard because of the lives they have lived and the experiences they have had. They are seen as having something special and spiritual to offer us as we move into our future. They serve as guides and in many ways are recognized as the individuals who have helped to pave our way, who contribute to the shaping of our collective future.

After acknowledging our eldership and elder wisdom, we need to hone our listening skills, and really tune in to what young people want and need. This listening requires a level of humility. It reminds us that we are not the voice that needs to be centered and that we do not have all of the answers.

On some level, the powerful act of listening positions us as servant leaders, helping us understand what we must know in order to best serve our young people.

Finally, we must have the courage to follow young people as they lead — to see ourselves as individuals with the power to provide young people with what they need to lead us into the future. Angela Davis, a well-respected member of the ongoing civil rights movements in this country, once said that “young people should be able to see further because they are standing on our shoulders.” This quote is a reminder that young people benefit from the foundations we lay; that they can do their work because we do ours. But it also reminds us that young people can do future work — that they can not only pick up where we have left off but move us further into the future than we might have imagined ourselves.

As youth consciousness builders, we hone our skills with the intent of ensuring that youth have space and place to *freedom dream* and do their future work. We recognize that our responsibility as elders is to ensure that youth have every resource, platform, and opportunity for the learning and understanding they require to generate power, organize themselves, and make meaningful change.

### **Why Supporting the Development of Critical Consciousness and Youth Activism Is Important in Mentoring Relationships**

When we think about mentoring, our imaginations are often limited to an idea of just “spending time with” or being a “connection” for a young person. While those things can be of tremendous importance, they may not be enough to fully support young people, given the context we all exist in. We all must recognize that our shared context of racism, sexism, ableism, trans-antagonism, homo-antagonism, and other “isms” not named here, create a harmful and toxic context for *all* of us. If mentoring is defined as a caring relationship focused on the consistent support and positive





development of a young person, how can any form of true mentoring be done without acknowledging what's happening around us? On some level, it's irresponsible to think that we can isolate a mentoring relationship from all of the issues and challenges in the world that surround the youth we work with and not be intentional about supporting youth as they navigate these challenges — and even change things for the better. Especially as many mentoring organizations continue to make the claim that BIPOC youth require mentoring “help” due to the oppression and marginalization they often face, it seems reckless to then ignore that oppression and marginalization during the course of our mentoring relationships. It also seems like a missed opportunity not to use mentoring itself to counteract that oppression and marginalization.

In 2017, I wrote *Critical Mentoring*, which was focused on the need to align our mentoring work with a critical examination of our context and an intention to support young people as they navigate the aforementioned “isms.” In addition to my own work on this issue, other mentoring scholars like Bernadette Sanchez (see chapter 2) and Noelle Hurd were doing the important work of highlighting what mentoring looked like among specific BIPOC populations and issuing an ongoing critique of the types of support we were offering these youth. In 2014, Dr. Sanchez authored a piece that questioned why “despite evidence that race and ethnicity play an important role in mentoring relationships, there are limited research-based guidelines in the practice field regarding how race/ethnicity should be considered. Some of the most important resources in the field, such as [MENTOR's] Elements of Effective Practice [for Mentoring], pay little attention to the role of race and ethnicity in mentoring programs.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, a lot of education, civic engagement, and philanthropic scholarship notes the importance of investing in young people, youth-led efforts, and youth power building in communities. Scholars like Rod Watts have made the case that infusing critical consciousness building and civic engagement in youth-adult partnerships is critical to youth development and social justice.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, philanthropic entities like The California Endowment (TCE) have been both investing in and studying the importance of youth-generated and youth-led movements in the fight for equity and justice. In fact, in TCE's work, four important themes were identified among the youth power-building groups they funded and studied:

- 1) development of civic skills;
- 2) a critical civic education;
- 3) capacity for civic action; and
- 4) personal growth and well-being.

What's most interesting is that the first three themes don't sound a lot like mentoring to most people, but the last theme rounds out the work and reminds us of what mentoring youth with the intention of increasing leadership capacity and youth power building really looks like. All of this work was done, very intentionally, with traditionally oppressed and marginalized youth populations that aren't typically invested in in this way. (See this chapter's Additional Reading and Resources section for a link to a document describing the TCE initiative.)

All of this scholarship points to several important ideas: that our shared context requires that we critically examine issues of race, class, gender, etc.; that mentoring alone — at least in the ways we typically imagine it — isn't enough to fully support young people or the change they want to make;

<sup>1</sup> Sánchez, B., Colón-Torres, Y., Feuer, R., Roundfield, K. E., & Berardi, L. Race, ethnicity, and culture in mentoring. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (2nd ed., pp. 145–158). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Watts, R. J., & Flanagan, C. (2007). Pushing the envelope on youth civic engagement: A developmental and liberation psychology perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(6), 779–792. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20178>



and that a more active focus on civic engagement and youth power building is what the next level of mentoring should look like. This means we must be intentional about centering young people's voices, listening to what young people want and need, and positioning ourselves to help resource those dreams.

### **What Does Building Critical Consciousness Look Like in Mentoring Relationships?**

The Youth Mentoring Action Network (YMAN), which I cofounded, has been engaging in this work of youth power building both formally and informally since 2007. Always a mentoring organization, we recognized that our mentoring relationships should be leveraged in the fight for equity and justice in the communities that we serve and that young people are — and must continue to be — a very big part of that. The lessons we learned early in our collaboration with youth are the examples I share here.

Young people already have radical tendencies. They already think in terms of what's possible. As they get older, they learn to dampen those thoughts because adults and life experiences give them opposing messages. We tell them what's not possible or what has never been done and feels impossible. But we should help young people critically interrogate their world by having open and honest conversations with them, and providing them with varied perspectives. Instead of presenting them with what we think, we should present them with the possibilities and let them choose. We need to help support their natural critical thinking by reinforcing the idea that more than one thing can be true and that the world they inhabit has complicated origins and many entities attempting to claim what is really "true" about our history and current moment. I recently watched a hilarious TikTok video with a mother recording her daughter talking to another

youth about Jesus. She exclaimed confidently that Jesus was bisexual and nonbinary. Her mother, aghast, asked her where she had learned that. The youth responded, "In school," though no one had told her this directly. This was what she had inferred given the information provided. Her mother continues, "Why do you think Jesus is bisexual?" The youth answered, "Because he loves everyone." "Why is he nonbinary," asked her mother. "Because he's a man and he wears a dress," she answered. The links seemed incredibly clear to this young person, and it's in moments like these that we can foster that thinking or stop it with the way we interact with young people, the way we shame them with words or facial expressions, the way we correct what we think is wrong. A mentor, in this situation, could take offense or harshly correct this youth's thinking — but we encourage mentors to build on the clarity of observation and thought young people can bring to a wide range of topics, including those more serious than this funny example.

I continue to affirm this idea of gentle guidance: supporting and affirming young people rather than imposing our ideas about what is right and wrong onto them. The best way to explain how to do this work is to say we have to, at every opportunity, interrogate our own thoughts and behaviors and ask ourselves why we feel the need to impose those on young people and not allow them to experience and make sense of the world around them, for themselves.

So, what does this look like?

### ***It looks like becoming aware.***

We need to become aware of ourselves — who we are, what we think about young people, what we think about social issues, and the power we yield to make change. Most important, we need to become



aware of our **adultism**. Too many of us suffer from adultism and see ourselves as superior to youth. While we do have knowledge and wisdom to share, we often think we can shove that knowledge and wisdom down young people's throats. So as a mentor, make sure you think deeply about how the world you have experienced has shaped you, how it has biased you in certain ways, and what you can do to keep those biases in check, avoid that tendency toward adultism, and honor the observations of the young person you support.

Becoming aware also means developing a consciousness and intentionality about how we connect and collaborate with young people and how we share with them what we have to offer. This brings us back to the idea of an elder. The elder holds space; the elder waits for opportunities to teach; the elder knows their value and does not need to impose themselves on the younger. At YMAN, we do this by checking in on our processes and intent before connecting with youth and holding each other as staff and volunteers for the organization accountable for how we engage young people. We ask ourselves a set of questions:

- Did young people tell us they wanted or needed this?
- Were young people included in building this?
- What part of this process highlights young people's talents and capabilities?
- Are we taking up too much space with our words or ideas?

We must always do our own work before working with youth.

### ***It looks like listening.***

After the first year of running a school-based mentoring program, we took an entire session at the

end of the year to hear what young people thought about the programming. It was the best thing we could have done. Young people were open and honest and expressed their feelings about how we "did mentoring to them." Our focus on academics had been too much, and it didn't include any help identifying, calling out, and challenging the "isms" rooted in the institutions they dealt with every day. Naming is particularly important because so often what happens feels unexplained or undefined. Naming helps us pinpoint, label and correct what is happening. Our focus on fixing young people, rather than supporting them in fixing the context that surrounded them, made them feel like the problem and ignored their daily lived experiences. They wanted action and experience, not just "a bunch of talking," so they would feel better prepared to go out into the world. Not only had we done a lot wrong, but what the young people were asking for made a whole lot of sense. Listening was the best thing we could have done to understand how to move forward. Too many see listening as passive, minimal, or something to rush through so they can get to work. Listening to young people as we engage in mentoring is not only right, it is absolutely essential. It's a powerful skill and, when done correctly, it's mutually beneficial.

When we shifted our mentoring focus to centering and listening to young people, not only did we do a better job of mentoring, our programming also greatly improved. We didn't have to recruit young people anymore, they came to us, and they came because other young people found meaning in the work and brought them to us. We started building programs led by youth, and those were the most successful, because young people were actively engaged in creating their own services. At YMAN we actually hire youth to help us build out and run programs. If you are a mentor working with a young



person outside of a program, you can support youth leadership and agency by letting the young person organize your outings or decide how you will spend time together (see chapter 8 on honoring youth voice and building power).

It shouldn't take a lot of effort to listen, and though you can make it a formal exercise, you don't have to. If listening to youth is something you struggle with, spend some time preparing yourself to listen without interrupting, to listen without judgment, and to listen to understand, not argue or impose your own view. Remember, the goal is always to listen and to listen with intention. After we listen to young people, we then need to do what they have suggested. Tokenizing youth voices and listening to them just to say you did isn't enough. Following up on what the young people have said and actually working alongside them to implement their ideas are necessary next steps.

### ***It looks like getting out of the way.***

Too often adults center on themselves, their experiences, and their ideas when solving problems. There is definitely some value in that, but it neglects some of the freshness and innovation that youth bring to the table. One of the most important aspects of being a youth power builder is to center youth experience and action by providing young people with a platform and work alongside them as they come up with solutions for challenging problems. For example, sometimes the best thing we can do as the mentor and elder is to step aside. There is a saying that goes, "You don't need to be a voice for the voiceless, just pass the mic." This quote represents the work of getting out of the way. Every time there is an opportunity to highlight a young person, to give them an opportunity to shine, to provide a platform for them to speak, to center their experience and talent, we should do just that.

When YMAN began working on its Black Girls (EM) Power initiative, we spent a year talking to young Black women and girls about what they wanted and needed. During that year of connecting with that community, leaders emerged. When we finally sat down to organize our initiative, we made sure to recruit and pay those leaders to help us organize the programming. That is part of what youth power building looks like. For an individual mentor, it may not be about programming, but it certainly is about making sure young people are given opportunities to shine — helping your protégé get a paid internship, having them collaborate with you on some community work you might be doing, asking them to think about a community project you might want to do together, and letting them organize it. It looks like providing space for young people to lead their own work, to use their own voices, to freedom dream, to work toward liberation — to, very literally, build their own power. That does not mean that they do it without us, but rather, that sometimes the best we can do for them is to move out of their way and follow them as they lead.

This is especially important for those later stages of critical consciousness: motivation and action. Young people often can identify issues in their communities that need to be addressed, but they may not feel like they can make a difference or may have reservations about taking action. This is where you, as a mentor, can offer valuable scaffolding in the form of both emotional support that lets them know they can lead and "instrumental" support that can bring adult resources to the action they want to take. Just remember that they should be in the lead and your role is as a coconspirator helping to bring their vision to life.



### Contextual Considerations for Building Youth Power

Let's start with the biggest context: We exist in the midst of a tremendous moment. A pandemic, a racial justice awakening, climate change, and global unrest are among some of the many challenges we are collectively facing. Young people have been crying out for a radical shift — for a change in the way we address these issues. They have taken up the mantle of the unfinished civil rights movement, and they are working to ensure our planet still exists for future generations. They are vocal and bold and ready for change. And they have a lot of work to do because there are so many problems to solve! Our role as youth power builders helps to ensure that young people have all the skills and resources they need to work on these problems. Without their work, the world and all those within it, will continue to suffer. This is not to say that young people can single-handedly save us, but rather, that they play a key role in doing so, which means our roles are important too. Who raises the next generation? Who ensures they think critically? Who challenges them to think and act boldly? Who leverages their own power and resources to power and resource them? Our role as mentors is to aid in this development process and to do so in critical ways. This moment requires the bold vision of young people, the energy of young people, and the imagination of young people. What young people do not often have is institutional power, resources, and platforms to do the work of moving us all forward. That is where we come in. There are more than enough problems to solve, and young people can solve them, but the support and encouragement they need lies with elders who work to position themselves as coconspirators, not as leaders of the movement.

As a mentor, you may be wondering how this work looks different depending on the age of the mentee. Young people at every age and stage of development can be engaged as power builders. As youth grow we teach them about agency, about power, about choices. We help them make sense of the larger world around them. They have opportunities to see themselves as powerful beings, as individuals who can make a change. We can also nurture, as noted in the TikTok example earlier, their ability to notice things and perspectives that our adult brains cannot. Our job is to constantly speak life into them, to encourage their radical imaginations, to give them opportunities to practice and fail, to encourage them and love them. We can provide these supports no matter the age of the youth.

### As youth get older, they can move into deeper leadership roles.

They can bring their peers into the work and build coalitions that we adults often cannot. The last few years have been full of examples of young people building powerful movements. If you are working with older youth, you may have the opportunity to build something similarly powerful alongside them. (See chapter 8 for more examples of amazing youth leaders.)

And to be clear about who this work is for: it's not just for BIPOC youth or other marginalized groups, although this critical approach may be most vital to their thriving. It's for all young people and all of us can be allies to movements and causes that





are not directly our own. But our involvement is a choice, and we hope you choose to walk alongside the young people you are mentoring, even if their passions for social change are not inherently your own.

It is our responsibility to do these things, and we do them by being supportive of young people, by engaging them in critical discussions, by never giving up on them, by always looking for ways they can use their voices and speak to issues that matter to them, and by engaging in a process of care. We want young people to harness the power they already have.

### **Tips and Final Thoughts**

Many adults mistake the idea of centering youth with the idea that adults aren't needed. Youth power building is not about rendering adults useless, it's about centering young people and positioning adults as supporters and resources rather than leaders. Elders are needed and wanted. In fact, youth need the love, support, stories, and experiences of their elders. What they often reject is the way we insert ourselves into their lives without being asked, often looking down on or judging them for their differences or for the ways they choose to live or engage in liberation work. We need to remind ourselves that young people have powerful ideas about how to build the future.

Most of what is being laid out in this chapter is really about philosophy and approach. Every young person, no matter what age, has ideas about the world. The adults around them decide how to treat them and interact with them around these ideas. Our choices as mentors to question them, encourage them, judge them, or support their processing are important and can either enhance or inhibit the steps these young people take to bring

about change in our world. At each stage of youth development there are ways that we speak to and interact with young people that can aid them in their ability to be free and to work toward a free world.

If you are interested in volunteering in a mentoring program, it's also important to think critically as you select that program — what its aims are and how you would be matched with a young person. This work requires that we look for programs with aims that are aligned with our own. That may not always be what we find, so if you want to mentor in a program, be an informed and picky consumer.

### **Some final tips for building youth critical consciousness and power:**

#### ***Be Honest***

Honesty is needed both with yourself and with the young people you work with. Be upfront about who you are and what you bring to the table. Let young people know where you stand and what kinds of experiences you have had. It's even OK to let them know you worry. But there is a difference between that and stopping them from speaking truth to power and taking bold action. Be honest with yourself too. It takes courage to acknowledge where we are, especially if where we are is not where we would like to be on our journey. That honesty pays off in a big way when it comes time to course correct or be accountable to young people.

#### ***Be Accountable***

Youth are not the only ones who should be accountable for their actions. As elders engaging in youth power building work, we must be accountable to our young people and to the communities we belong to. We have to understand that our words and our actions illustrate our values and our beliefs. To be accountable means reconciling those values



and beliefs with the people around us, especially those we are building alongside. When young people lovingly correct us, we must be accountable to them. We must accept responsibility for our failures and repair harm. In this way, we model healthy interactions and community building for our young people.

### ***Be Brave***

Most important, we must be brave. This work is not for the faint of heart. You will be challenged, you will face criticism, and nothing will change overnight. But we must move forward anyway. Too many adults talk a lot about progress and justice and liberation, but when it comes down to action, many of us lose our nerve. This kind of youth collaboration requires that we act boldly and walk in courage. Our youth need us to support them, they need us to back them, they need us to stand up for them. And that may mean going against popular opinion or “conventional wisdom.” Be brave — and follow young people anyway.

Building critical consciousness is absolutely essential not only to these young people, but to our collective future. We need elders to see themselves as such, and to channel their wisdom and make it available to young people as they build a world that is just, a world that is free, a world that is hopeful and a world that is loving. Without youth power, we may not accomplish a better future. Our job is to lift young people up — to give them our shoulders to stand on so they can see further. Young people deserve the best of us so that they can be better than us.

## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- ***Building Healthy Communities Through Youth Leadership*** One of many reports produced on the work The California Endowment is doing to invest in youth activists and in the concept of youth power building. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination by Robyn D. G. Kelley*** An important book around the ability to dream about liberation and to free ourselves enough to dream.
- ***Black Girls (EM) Power: Black Girls Self Care Workshop*** A highlight of a wellness program YMAN does with Black girls in our mentoring program. We use this to illustrate what critical mentoring looks like in action. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Black Girls (EM) Power Launch*** Another example of what this work looks like in action. Young people are featured talking about their role in the work. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***The California Endowment's Youth Power Infrastructure: An Overview of Youth-Serving Organizations and Intermediaries It Supports, by Veronica Terriquez*** A report providing examples of the infrastructure required to engage in youth power-building activities. Click [here](#) to access.