YOUTH MEDIA FRAMEWORK

Guidance for media outlets on how to represent young people with a humanistic, asset-based lens

Young people are powerful change agents, but they are often dehumanized in the media. All too often, we see narratives that unfairly characterize young people as inherently violent, antisocial, problematic, ill-equipped, and incomplete.

It's time for that change. We need narratives that show how young people are thriving contributors to their communities—narratives that demonstrate their diversity of experiences and that celebrate and encourage young people.

Before you write an article, produce a video, or create content about young people and their communities, ask yourself the following questions:

1 **Are young people's voices represented in the creation of the content and the final material?**
Young people should be actively and adequately engaged by interviewing them, capturing their reactions, or co-creating the content with them. Additionally, if you and/or your media outlet is going to write an article or produce video content about young people, young people's voices and perspectives should be adequately represented. "Nothing about them without them."

2 **Do the words seek to fix, blame, shame, or change young people?** OR do they seek to address the oppressive systems that impact young people and their communities? Words that put the onus on young people—and not the system—are never good.

3 **Are the words and images racialized or steeped in colonialist perspectives?**
When words or images are racialized, they perpetuate the lie of a hierarchical classification of human beings based on race, which places white people at the top of society and Black people at the bottom.

> A colonialist perspective is one defined by the belief that "other" people, cultures, and societies that fall outside of the dominant Euro- and Americentric paradigm are inherently inferior and weak. An example is the phrase "at-risk." When you say the phrase, does a picture of a particular young person or group of young people come to mind? If so, have dialogue, do research, and re-evaluate your individual and organizational biases and use words and images that challenge these systemically rooted stereotypes.

4 **Do the phrases objectify young people or name the conditions they are experiencing?** Distinguish between calling them a name and describing what they are experiencing.

> *Example:* "Marginalized youth" vs. "youth who have experienced marginalization"

5 **How am I framing the words or images? What is the context and culture I am perpetuating with this representation?** Words or images should call attention to the conditions that young people are being subjected to rather than further the assumption that conditions imposed by oppression are their natural state. Example: Calling a young person "disenfranchised" is not their natural condition. However, "disenfranchisement" is something that many colonized (people of color around the world) young people experience. For example: In El Salvador, youth in rural areas experience violence differently than youth in urban areas, or as in Guatemala it is different when we talk about indigenous youth.

6 **Do the words or images dehumanize young people and their community?**
Words or images that take away agency, self-determination, and personal power are never good to use. We have all been socialized to make assumptions about "other" human beings, especially those who fall outside of the dominant power group. It is necessary to recognize your assumptions and how they show up in your depictions of youth and their communities. It is unfortunately accepted to present youth as guilty or stigmatize them; it is less common to present youth as powerful and capable. What is the societal benefit of presenting young people as thriving contributors to society?

Words have the power to change how media consumers (including policymakers and other key decision makers) view and interact. While this often goes unaddressed, young people have long known the impacts of being depicted as inherently violent, lazy, problematic, ill-equipped, and incomplete.
At a time when media plays such a pronounced role in our lives, it is especially necessary to think deeply about the consequences of negative and biased representation.

Example:

❌ **Deficit-based narrative:**

Oldtown High School students have a truancy and lateness problem. Students in these schools are regularly late for school or do not come at all, causing them to miss critical instruction time and disrupting their educations. Starting this month, students who miss more than five days of school in a month without an excuse or who are late seven times will have to make up this time in weekend school, which they will be charged $15 per day to attend. "Classroom time is absolutely necessary for teenagers to learn about punctuality, participation, and respect for other people's time. These are lessons they need to become productive adults in the working world," says Oldtown High School principal Stephen Sea.

✅ **Asset-based narrative:**

In Oldtown, getting to school can be tough. To arrive at school by the time the first bell rings at 7:15 a.m., Oldtown High School junior Carmela Esperanza must wake up no later than 5:30 a.m. to be sure she gets on the bus at 6:30am. Carmela has missed five days of school this month and has been unable to obtain excuse notes: She did not see a doctor when she was home sick with a cold and she missed the bus twice. "Both of my parents are driving to work by the time I wake up, so I didn't have a choice [but to miss school]," said Carmela. As a result, she will have to attend weekend school, which costs $15 a day, starting this month. This new policy leaves students like Carmela in a predicament if they work part-time on the weekends or simply lack the funds to pay for the program. Carmela remarked, "I wish they [school administrators] wouldn't punish us for missing school and help us not miss school in the first place instead."

Words and images have the power to change how youth leaders, funders, and community members view and interact with young people at the most basic level. Just changing words and images without changing how the story is framed is unacceptable (for example, if the story still shows one group as the natural savior and another as inherently violent or needy). Remember, transformation is necessary on all levels.

Youth are not

- At-Risk
- Juvenile Delinquents
- Dysfunctional
- Violent
- Thugs
- Illegal
- Troubled
- Underrepresented
- A minority
- Disenfranchised
- Dropouts
- Apathetic
- Reckless
- Wayward

The information found in this guide comes out of the *We Are Not At-Risk* global campaign.

For more information please visit
afsc.org/notatrisk

**American Friends
Service Committee**