

Meeting Youth Where They're At what's that mean?

By JT (Jerry) Fest

We've all heard the term. Perhaps we've even used it to explain how we work. And, particularly when applied to runaway and street-dependent youth, we all know how important it is. But can you answer this question; what's it *mean*? If you're meeting youth where they're at, *what are you doing*?

Certainly, in the literal sense of the phrase, meeting youth where they're at can refer to the location of our interactions with young people. Streetwork/outreach programs often explain their work as "meeting youth where they're at" in terms of actually going out and engaging with youth where they "hang." Even with non-street youth populations, "meeting youth where they're at" often refers to engaging with youth in their *environment*. But the phrase is more often than not used in reference to *skills* and *techniques* as opposed to locations -- but we reference those skills and techniques only vaguely, at best. The following is intended to help you think about what *actions* the phrase actually refers to, and to give you a perspective on what you're *doing* when you're meeting youth where they're at.

It means anticipating certain unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors, based on a youth's beliefs, values, and/or circumstances

It does *not* mean judging, punishing, or excluding youth based on unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors

From a professional perspective, a good place to start is to remember *why* you're meeting youth *at all*. If a young person has strong family ties, a solid support system, and is navigating life in socially and developmentally appropriate ways ... you're probably not going to encounter them as a mentor, advocate, or helping adult. The young people you meet are going to be coming from a history of coping with difficulties and challenges, and many of them will have developed coping skills without the guidance of healthy adults or peers. In other words, these young people are likely to be demonstrating behaviors that most adults find unpleasant and challenging. If you are going to be a significant and influential person in their life, some of these coping skills are going to be directed at *you* as a means of creating personal safety ... at least until trust is established. Don't be surprised when you see unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors ... and don't blame the young person when you do see them. Instead, anticipate that, since you have chosen to involve yourself in this youth's life at this stage of their development, these are the types of behaviors you're going to experience and have to contend with. If your response is to judge them, punish them, or exclude them because they are demonstrating behaviors that you *should have* anticipated, you're not meeting youth where they're at.

It means responding to unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors in ways that are beneficial to youth

It does *not* mean condoning or rewarding unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors

Having anticipated that you will be witnessing and experiencing unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors, you should be prepared with a response. When a youth is all up in your face, or failing to follow through, or engaging in illegal or high risk behavior, it is not the time to try to figure out how you want to respond. In fact, if you wait until then you are very unlikely to respond at all ... you are much more likely to *react*, and your reaction will probably be human and emotional rather than professional and beneficial. Particularly if you anticipate, and therefore to a degree *accept*, certain behaviors, without a professional response you run the risk of appearing to *condone* or *reward* these behaviors ... which is *not* the same as anticipating and accepting and is not beneficial to young people. The mark of a professional is to teach yourself to *respond* rather than to *react*, and to respond in ways that are beneficial without judging, punishing, or excluding or, at the other end of the spectrum, condoning or rewarding. If you are *reacting* rather than *responding*, you are not meeting youth where they're at.

It means having an *intention* of influencing youth to move beyond where they're at

It does *not* mean being content with a youth remaining in an unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behavioral pattern

So you've trained yourself to respond rather than react. That's a good start, but what is the purpose of your response? Anticipating and accepting behaviors may be meeting youth where they're at, but if you aren't influencing change you may also be *keeping* youth where they're at. Remember, if you're meeting youth as a mentor, advocate, or helping adult, where "they're at" is probably not healthy and what they need from you is guidance and change. That requires an *intention* to influence youth to move beyond where they're at to a *better* place. If you are using your anticipation and acceptance of behaviors simply to establish trust and interact, but you are not using your *responses* to intentionally influence change, then yes, you're meeting youth where they're at ... but you're not *helping*.

It means having clear, objective, and consistent consequences and allowing youth to make choices

It does *not* mean protecting youth from the clear, objective, and consistent consequences of their choices

If you're meeting youth where they're at, and responding to behaviors in ways intended to move youth to a new place, it means that you are sometimes going to be setting limits -- particularly when working within the structure of an agency or program. Young people need consistency and clarity and, if we are going to enable them to make decisions, they need the knowledge of what decision they are making in order to make informed choices. Part of the skill involved in professionally responding is defining clear, objective, and consistent consequences -- positive or negative -- to a youth's choices, and ensuring that the young person is aware of these consequences *in advance* of encountering them. If you are responding situationally or reactively, or alternatively, failing to follow through with consequences or protecting youth from the consequences of their choices, you are not really meeting youth where they're at ... because where they are at is a place where *clarity* and *consistency* are structures that they desperately need.

It means always making youth feel welcome and communicating that we are eager and honored to serve them

It does *not* mean always providing what youth are asking for

Regardless of their behaviors, which you anticipate may be unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging -- and therefore *frustrating* -- you always create an environment of acceptance and service. You demonstrate through *your* behavior and communication that you value them and want to be a resource for them. This is easy to do if you bear in mind that you don't have to be in this young person's life at all ... this is a choice that you've made. If you are unable to interact with them in a welcoming and honoring manner, maybe you should reconsider your choice. That said, being a resource for them does not mean that you will always provide what they are asking for. Remember, just because you anticipate and accept unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors does not mean that you support or condone them, nor are you willing to set a young person up by offering them an opportunity for which they are not ready or provide them with something that is not beneficial to them. To do so means that you are not meeting youth where they're at ... you are asking them to meet you where you want them to be, or supporting them in ways that may be harmful.

It Means always giving youth the information required to meet their needs

It does *not* mean always meeting youth's needs

We sometimes confuse *providing* with *helping*. When we do that we can easily fall into the trap of *enabling*. A youth may come to you with a lot of requests, and these requests may be based on some very clear and present needs -- but they don't need a vending machine; they need to learn how to survive *without* us. The greatest disservice you can provide to a young person is to act as though you are the solution to the problems they are facing, because you will not always be there for them. Ultimately, if they don't become their own solution they are facing a difficult and possibly shortened life. When meeting youth where they're at, you should always ensure that young people have access to what they need to know, learn, or do in order to get their needs met ... but that does *not* mean knowing, learning, or doing it *for* them.

It means giving youth as many chances and opportunities as they need to succeed

It does *not* mean modifying chances and opportunities to accommodate youth's unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors

One of the biggest barriers we have to meeting youth where they're at is our own bias toward success. While there's nothing wrong with being successful, it's the end, not the means. We don't grow and learn from success, we grow and learn from failure, and learning from our failures is the path to success. A young person may need to fail over and over again before they learn how to succeed, so if we penalize them for not succeeding fast enough, or limit their ability to try and try again, we're simply making it harder if not impossible for them to eventually be successful. On the other hand, we aren't doing them any favors by "lowering the bar." If we realize that failure is not a problem, then lowering the bar isn't necessary ... because success means nothing without the growth and learning that leads to success. Meeting youth where they're at means realizing that they may fail ... and that's OK because they'll succeed when they've grown and learned. We don't need to lower the bar and we're certainly not going to give up on them.

Above all, meeting youth where they're at means always ... *always* ... treating youth with respect and dignity -- whether you are meeting or denying their requests -- and your treatment of them is *not* dependent on their treatment of *you* (remember, you *anticipate* that they will engage in unhelpful, offensive, or self-sabotaging behaviors). Respecting them includes respecting their choices; but you do not have to support or condone all the choices they make and you should not protect them from the consequences of their choices, positive or negative. It also presupposes that you are *communicating* in ways that are *clear* and *consistent*, and that the options you offer are achievable and developmentally appropriate.

If these behaviors characterize how you interact with young people, congratulations -- you are meeting youth where they're at.



For information contact: jtfest@in4y.com
[the InterNetwork for Youth](#)

building a community of support for runaway and street-dependent youth

Join me on [Facebook](#)