

Improving Youth Employability Outcomes: The Role of Parents

What role can parents in Jordan play in supporting their sons and daughters in getting jobs and pursuing productive career paths? How can youth-serving organizations best engage parents in helping underserved youth realize their full potential? Such questions are being actively addressed through *Youth for the Future* (Y4F), a program of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and carried out in partnership with the government of Jordan.

Y4F was launched in 2009 to support youth at-risk in realizing productive and rewarding roles in society, while helping Jordanian society maximize the energy, talent, and enthusiasm of today's young generation. Central to its mission is working with community-based organizations (CBOs) and other youth-serving entities to support underserved youth in finding paths to employment and launching their careers.

The majority of young people served through the program have dropped out of school; many having lost hope in their ability to achieve a positive future. To help these youth successfully transition into the world of work, Y4F offers comprehensive support, including life skills training, mentoring, career guidance, internships, and job placement assistance. Equally critical to Y4F's approach is engaging diverse segments of society—e.g., government agencies, companies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and parents—in addressing youth needs.

Through Y4F, young people are offered a wealth of information about the possibilities before them; and they do not make their decisions alone. Parents play a key role in determining whether their children can participate in the program, and their understanding and support of their child's career path, the skills they require, and employment options can be a decisive factor in a young person's commitment to a training program or a new job.

To better understand the role of parents in the youth employment equation, Y4F commissioned a study in 2012. More than 130 parents, youth, and representatives from CBOs and public sector entities (e.g., Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Labor, Higher Council of Youth, Vocational Training Corporation) were surveyed for the study. Based on this research, Y4F found that lack of effective communication and understanding among low-income parents of the needs of youth at-risk—and what it takes to succeed in today's labor market—pose significant barriers to their son's and daughter's ability to overcome obstacles and maximize opportunities.

The good news is there is much that can be done to educate and empower parents to play a more active role in ensuring the success of their adolescent and young adult offspring. As a result of its study findings—and the development of a comprehensive parent engagement training model—Y4F has equipped more than 2,000 parents with the tools to better support their children's career paths, with many more parents poised to benefit through the scaling up of the program at the national level.

Assessing Parental Understanding of Youth Needs

The importance of parent engagement became increasingly clear as Y4F began implementing its activities in disadvantaged communities across the Kingdom in 2009-2011. Increasingly, its implementing partners—a network of local CBOs—found that

without the support and approval of parents, youth were less likely to enroll in the program. Parents often rejected opportunities for their offspring to receive training and job placement assistance in specific trades (e.g., hospitality). Similarly, fathers in particular were resistant to allow their daughters to participate in program activities. Overall, parents' limited knowledge of the training requirements of youth and the demands of the marketplace made it less likely that they would endorse the program's activities.

The Y4F study set out to gauge parents' understanding and knowledge of youth "at-risk," their role as parents, and the level of awareness and training needed to equip mothers and fathers to provide relevant support to their youth in navigating their path to a productive adulthood.

Among the study's findings was that parents are often unable to play a more supportive role with their offspring due to lack of understanding of the issues and challenges their youth face and the various factors that impact youth development. Another area of concern raised was parents' level of knowledge of opportunities available to youth, with 97 percent of parent respondents saying they would benefit from greater awareness of the employment and entrepreneurial options open to youth. Fathers and mothers were also found to lack understanding of labor market needs, work opportunities offered by various sectors, and training opportunities available through youth programs.

Percentage of Parents Who Say They Would Benefit from Greater Awareness of Youth Employment Options

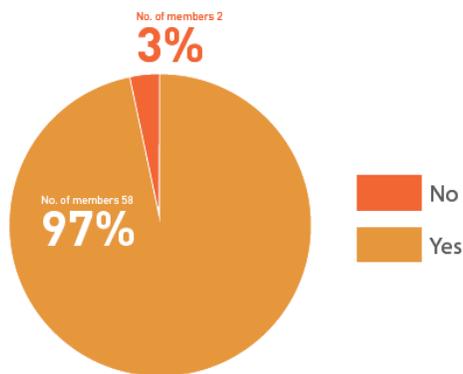


Figure 16). Graph depicting the results of parent responses to paragraph 16)

Nearly all those youth surveyed said their parents were supportive of their needs; yet at the same time they wanted their parents to know more about the training, employment, and educational opportunities available to youth. Nearly half of participating youth advocated that parents have access to courses and activities focused on youths' psychological and emotional needs.

Another significant challenge to positive youth development to emerge from the study is the lack of effective and open communication between parents and their children when it comes to constructive discussion of the future. The issue of communication was not so much that there was none, but rather that conversation did not focus on issues related to young people's education, work opportunities, and future prospects.

A majority of parents responded that while they do communicate with their children regularly; it is usually when dealing with a problem or challenge. While parents talk to youth when they encounter particular problems – e.g., dropping out of school, or looking for a job – such conversations are a response, rather than a long-term discussion on the young person’s career and life trajectory. Main topics of conversation among parents and children were identified as largely moral, educational, behavioral, or religious in nature, with parents conversing with their children about future educational, work, and training opportunities to a lesser extent. According to those youth surveyed, only seven percent of the time they spend communicating with parents is devoted to such issues.

Those Y4F partners surveyed also underscored lack of parent awareness of youth needs and opportunities. Partners cited the difference in levels of education and cultural knowledge between parents and their children’s generation as factors that contribute to youth problems in target communities. They emphasized the need to engage parents in their children’s activities, learning about the stages of youth development, and being open minded to youth perspectives and opinions. To address these needs, partners recommended that CBO staff and that of government agencies and private companies working with youth seek training and take courses on how to work and engage with parents.

Parent Engagement: Y4F’s Response

Based on the results of the study and its own experience in designing and delivering programs and services for underserved youth, Y4F set out to develop a comprehensive approach to empowering parents to better support youth needs.

A critical first step was producing a *Parent Engagement Toolkit* for CBOs and other youth practitioners to use in implementing parent workshops. Based on a highly-interactive instructional model, the 70-page toolkit includes content that can be flexibly delivered through standalone sessions or via a two-day workshop. Sessions focus on enhancing parents’ knowledge of the physical, psychological, social, and emotional development of young people; youth culture; youth needs; enhanced communication techniques; volunteerism; and life skills development.

Y4F Parent Engagement Manual



Significant attention is placed in the toolkit on exploring existing stereotypes about youth and helping parents to relate to and empathize with the challenges young people face. In one exercise, parents are asked to revisit the cultural assumptions commonly held about disadvantaged youth—e.g., that they are troublesome and have no desire to contribute. Participants are then asked if they agree with these assumptions and to identify youth qualities that are being overlooked by society at large. The trainer then invites parents to discuss their own misperceptions about youth and whether they feel a responsibility to challenge youth’s view of themselves.

In another activity, parents are given an illustration of a cactus fruit and asked to identify things they should not be doing with their children (e.g., not listening, yelling) as reflected in the thorns of the cactus. Conversely, they are also asked to identify the positive ways in which they can and do support their children.

Subsequent lessons focus on how parents can more effectively communicate with their children, how they can encourage independent behavior among youth (e.g., through volunteerism activities), and the importance of developing key life skills, among other topics. A unifying theme throughout is reinforcing an asset-driven view of youth in which emphasis is placed on honoring young people’s talents and perspectives, while providing constructive and relevant guidance.

To date, more than 40 youth program practitioners and MoSD representatives have been trained to deliver parent engagement activities under the Y4F model. During the program’s pilot phase from March 2012 through July 2013, nearly 2,000 parents attended parent engagement workshops hosted by 14 CBOs and other Y4F partners. These CBOs often collaborated with other organizations to incorporate issues related to the law, human rights, and conflict resolution into their workshop agendas. Parents were also invited to visit job sites and classrooms to gain a better understanding of youth training and workplace opportunities.

Feedback collected from both parents and youth in the aftermath of the workshops demonstrated overwhelmingly positive results. “My mother never listened to me,” shared a young man in Zarqa whose mother participated in a workshop delivered by the Khawla bint Al Azwar Association, a Y4F partner. “Whatever I did would never satisfy her. Now, she has started to sit with me and ask me what I’m up to. She encouraged me to join the retail training. Now, she’s supporting me.

Results to Date

- 42 Youth program practitioners trained
- 14 CBOs/Y4F partners host workshops
- 2,000 Parents complete training

Said a father who participated in the program through the That Al-Nitaqain Association in the Jordan Valley: “The courses represent an opportunity to benefit from new scientific ideas that contribute to solving problems faced by children.” Added a mother who took part in the program in Zarqa, “I benefited from the training by learning how to deal with my sons calmly and discussing their affairs without any pressure or intolerance, but through positive encouragement and understanding.”

Initial assessments of the program found activities to be effective in bridging the gap between parents and their youth, particularly when it comes to enhancing communication and supporting young people’s planning for the future. Among those lessons learned through the pilot phase is the importance of scheduling trainings at

times (e.g., the evenings) that are convenient for parents who work and encouraging the active participation of both mothers and fathers given the different roles they play in their children's lives. While mothers were more apt to attend training sessions, fathers tend to be the key decision-makers with respect to their children's futures, particularly in the case of daughters. More attention needs to be focused on how to persuade fathers to take part in parent engagement trainings.

Key Lessons Learned

- More attention needs to be placed on engaging fathers.
- Workshops need to be scheduled at times (e.g., evenings) when working parents can participate.
- The timing and content of workshops need to be flexible to meet the needs of implementing organizations and parents.

Effective Communication: The Art of Active Listening

Below are tips, excerpted from Y4F's *Parent Engagement Toolkit*, on active listening aimed at strengthening communication between parents and youth:

- **Focus on the young person** – Avoid projecting one's feelings and ideas onto a young person.
 - **Be ready to listen** – Be open to hearing a young person's point of view rather than becoming defensive.
 - **Be aware of a young person's circumstances** – Keep in mind the perspectives and experiences of young people.
- **Maintain eye contact** – Look at a young person in the eye while he/she is speaking to you.
- **Avoid interrupting** – Wait until your son/daughter has finished before responding.
- **Pay attention** – Try not to do other things (e.g., housework, watching TV, paperwork) while a young person is talking to you.
- **Ask questions** – Clarify what speaker has said through asking follow up questions.
- **Paraphrase** – Repeat in your own words what a young person has communicated when statements are confusing. Follow up with "Did I get this right?"
- **Encourage** – Create an opportunity for a young person to say more about a given topic to reinforce your interest.
- **Honor silence** – Pause for a brief moment, if needed, to give a young person the chance to find the words to express their real feelings. Stay relaxed and pay attention.

Going to Scale

Y4F places a premium on testing and refining program approaches at the local level that can then be scaled up nationally through collaboration with a host of partners, including the Ministries of Labor and Social Development and the Higher Council of Youth. In this way, Y4F seeks to influence larger systems with proven practices.

Y4F is currently expanding the impact of its parent engagement approach at several levels. In order to ensure that a critical mass of CBOs has access to its parents training

model and toolkit, Y4F has been building the capacity of the Ministry of Social Development so it can continue to serve as a key champion for more structured programs for parent engagement among nationally-registered CBOs working with youth and children. In addition, the parent's engagement approach and materials have been shared with the Youth Leadership Center at the Higher Council of Youth. The center plans, in turn, to build the capacity of local staff at youth centers throughout the Kingdom to implement the program. Finally, in partnership with the King Abdullah II Fund for Development, the Ma'an Development Corporation, and major Ma'an civil society and government leaders, the Y4F parent engagement approach is being integrated into a series of youth empowerment interventions to support positive youth development and employability in the Southern region.

Success Story: A Mother and Daughter Re-Write Their Life's Story

Growing up in a family of 11 siblings and married after high school, Huda Mustafa didn't get the chance to continue her education after passing the *Tawjihi*, or high-school completion exam. Financial and social challenges stood in the way of her dream of attaining a higher education. Now 44 and the mother of 6, she holds on tightly to the desire to further educate herself.

When her daughter Haya finished the *Tawjihi* and was unable to pursue further education, the cycle started to repeat itself; yet Huda was determined to improve her daughter's professional prospects and outlook on life. When she found out about the vocational training offered by *Youth for the Future* (Y4F), Huda saw it as an opportunity to overcome the challenges Haya faced. "I didn't get the chance to pursue my education, but when I heard about the training, I wanted my daughter to be able to explore her potential and develop her talents," she says.

With the encouragement of her parents, Haya enrolled in program activities through Y4F's partner, the Khreibet Al Souq Association in East Amman, that included technical, life skills, IT, and English instruction. The program had a major impact, not only on Haya's employment opportunities, but on her personality. According to Huda, the program strengthened her daughter's personality and self-confidence, helping her to become more comfortable with expressing her opinions and interacting with people.

Huda, too, benefited from the parents' engagement sessions offered by Y4F. The sessions educate parents on the physical and psychological changes that teenagers experience and provide them with the tools to become better parents.

"Before the sessions," says Huda, "my understanding of a mother's role was to feed, clothe, and tend to the physical needs of my children. We expected our children to obey us without question. We never gave them the chance to express their opinions or discuss our decisions."

After the sessions, Huda and her husband changed their relationship with their children. "We now discuss issues as they come up as a family," she says. "Decisions are no longer enforced but are open for discussion with our kids, even with our two little girls."

Never having the chance to fulfill her own dream to finish her education, Huda feels that the parents' engagement sessions offered her an alternative education, building her self-confidence, and enabling her to be a better and more accessible parent. Now, whenever

she gets the chance to participate in awareness or educational workshops, lectures, or community meetings, she seizes the opportunity.