

# HOLDING SPACE FOR VULNERABLE SHARING

This practice brief is part of a series highlighting pedagogical strategies that supported youth social and emotional well-being during the summer of 2020. These approaches acknowledged both their present realities as youth coped with the pandemic, and their future lives as they prepared to pursue professional opportunities.

It draws on a larger study and report, **Youth Empowerment Summer: Crisis Response and Lessons for the Future of Collective Action and Work-based Learning**, which analyzed and documented the efforts of a New York City-based coalition of advocates, educators, community leaders, and youth activists. The YES coalition organized in 2020 following the onset of Covid-19 to create conditions that provided the city's most vulnerable youth with robust work-based learning experiences during a period of uncertainty, precarity, and unprecedented need.

Find the full report on the YES coalition and other practice briefs at [www.yes2020.nyc](http://www.yes2020.nyc)

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## HOLDING SPACE FOR VULNERABLE SHARING WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Many programs in our study recognized a need to provide safe spaces where youth could openly talk about, make sense of, and directly process the pandemic as well as the racial injustice that were at the heart of their experiences in the summer of 2020.

Yet, creating a safe space in a remote work-based learning program was not straightforward or simple for those without counselors or social workers on staff. Programs had to thoughtfully use pedagogical strategies to create a space in which youth could connect to adults in ways that made them feel heard, cared for, respected, and ultimately safe enough to open up and share their private emotions and struggles.

Three pedagogical strategies that programs used to hold space for vulnerable sharing are featured here:

- + **connect youth with adults they identify with**
- + **gently push youth outside their comfort zones**
- + **allow youth to creatively express themselves in ways they are comfortable with**

### YOUTH

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“ *It felt good talking about [the pandemic] 'cause once you keep talking about it, you understand more about the situation and you accept the situation, what you can do to change it. It felt good talking to people who understood what's going on, what's happening, and it relieved some of the stress that I was having.* ”

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

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“ *We are in a global pandemic, we are experiencing waves of social injustice, and the reaction towards that in real time, and these are things and topics that impact us and impact our youth, specifically.* ”

### QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

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- What steps is your program taking to help youth:
- + Connect with adults they identify with?
  - + Step outside their comfort zones?
  - + Creatively express themselves?

## HOLDING SPACE FOR VULNERABLE SHARING CONNECT YOUTH WITH ADULTS THEY IDENTIFY WITH

### What did we see?

Empathy Unbound intentionally provided the Black female youth that they served with many opportunities to connect to women of color. Structured opportunities for these connections happened at a three-day feminist conference, through ongoing mentorship from local college students and alums, through a series of guest speakers, and through weekly interactions with the program directors themselves.

As one example, during a question and answer session with a doctor who specialized in women's health and women's care, the youth unmuted their mics and asked questions such as "How do you show empathy to patients when something is wrong?" and "As young women, what should we do to take care of ourselves?" As the vulnerable sharing continued, youth asked increasingly personal questions around issues of reproductive health.

By connecting youth to young adults and to adults who reflect their intersectional identities, youth were able to have open and honest conversations about personal issues. Another organization, STAR Youth Services, took a similar approach to supporting youth by bringing together "facilitator staff who are from our community, are alums of SYEP, are alums of our programs, are bilingual. And so, providing a diverse set of staff created a sense of community and safety" which allowed for frequent conversations where youth opened up "about feelings of depression or family stress."

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

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“When I was their age, the high school students, I didn't really see people that looked like me, and ... outside of my mom and aunties, I wasn't able to identify with another woman of color or a Black woman that was successful. And to be in this safe environment where they can talk, we can talk about our culture, we can talk about what does it mean to be a woman of color in a workplace?”

### YOUTH

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“The one that really caught my eye was when we had that feminist three-day program, and we was talking about a lot of things that Black successful women do. And their experiences and their steps on how they got to where they was. It wasn't always like it was all good, they sometimes talked about the bad things that happened to them, the challenges that they went through to get to where they are now. And it kind of related to me because we do go through the same things that they went through, and it showed how they pushed through their challenges.”

## HOLDING SPACE FOR VULNERABLE SHARING GENTLY PUSH YOUTH OUTSIDE THEIR COMFORT ZONES

### What did we see?

To gently push youth outside their comfort zones and to take risks, directors of Empathy Unbound modelled, encouraged, and acknowledged moments of vulnerable sharing.

Program directors modeled vulnerable sharing by creating a video that laid open and bare to youth their own private emotions and personality quirks around facilitating Zoom calls. Additionally, during ice breakers such as “if you really knew me, you’d know...,” they shared their inner lives and personality traits.

As youth participated in these ice breakers, they were able to “practice sharing in a low-stakes situation, where there’s not really a right or wrong answer,” as a director put it. Building on this practice, program directors encouraged and coached youth to reach out to program guest speakers with questions of personal interest to them.

In the moments when youth stepped outside their comfort zones and took risks to genuinely connect with one another and the adults they were meeting, program directors worked to publicly affirm, celebrate, and acknowledge them. These acknowledgements occurred in the moment (“When she asked the questions, mad, happy emojis and high-fives went her way”) and in a weekly newsletter section titled “Shine a Light On” that “gives a shout out to the SYEP interns who have gone above and beyond the call of duty.” As one director described this practice, “We acknowledge the students when they show up. We acknowledge them if they’re struggling, but they still show up.”

### YOUTH

“ My comfort level was at a zero to one. I just didn’t want to talk to nobody. I was like a clam... But as I kept on talking to them and they started really pushing me to talk, I just became more and more confident, and it reached to a level nine to ten between that. So I was able to be more comfortable with them and talk about personal experiences and things that I wasn’t really comfortable in sharing. I was able to share it with them because they made me have that comfortable ability to share with them.

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ When we had guest speakers, some of the young ladies... Just coaching them through the Zoom chat... I would drop her a note and say, ‘I know you got a question.’ And she would say, ‘No, I don’t.’ I’m like, ‘Yes, you do.’ And she was like, ‘Well, what should I ask?’ ‘Well, what do you want to ask?’ And so, being able to have that dialogue and then to gently push them and know that you’re in a safe place.

## HOLDING SPACE FOR VULNERABLE SHARING ALLOW YOUTH TO CREATIVELY EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN WAYS THEY ARE COMFORTABLE WITH

### What did we see?

In the program Empathy Unbound, youth launched their virtual public presentation of their final project with a moment of vulnerable sharing. They played a series of original TikToks that they had each made to convey the stressors of their everyday lives during remote learning. The play-acted scenes in the short TikTok videos, complete with voice-overs, images, and emojis, showed youth struggling to manage distractions, frantically rushing to charge devices, and restlessly oversleeping for Zoom meetings.

These videos conveyed youths' feelings of anxiety, frustration, and, in some cases, depression. Program youth took it upon themselves to create, edit, and include these videos in their final project presentation. These videos speak to the importance of allowing youth to communicate their emotional lives and personal struggles in a way that they are already familiar and comfortable with.

Similarly, STAR Youth Services reported how youth creatively expressed their experiences of the impact of the pandemic and social issues: "One participant created a video, expressing the dire ways in which Covid-19 has affected his family and urging people to take the virus seriously. Another participant developed a poem that was posted on the group's website, which expressed a powerful and insightful perspective on different social issues." The program reflected that, "This kind of vulnerability developed in the groups cultivated many sophisticated conversations and a supportive space for participants to feel heard and recognized."

### YOUTH

“When I do TikToks, I feel more goofy. I just feel like I can just show my whole self. So me doing that... it made me bring out my true self. ... People probably thought that I was just quiet or I'm just chill, but I'm actually really goofy and quirky.

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“[Youth's presentation of the TikTok videos] speaks to the power of creating space, because we didn't ask them to share that. That's just something that they all wanted to express. It's a testament to the practice of being human with them, and then letting them know that we're gonna hold the space for it.