

Childhood Prosperity Lab Co-Design Summary Report: Youth Engagement in Ascend Part 2

CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB CO-DESIGN SUMMARY REPORT: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ASCEND Part 2



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Executive Summary

In June 2026, Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) partnered with North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) to explore how youth can have a more meaningful role in Ascend, a prenatal to career systems building initiative. Youth identified several areas for greater involvement. Their goals led to a four-day Youth Design Sprint in July 2026 at Parker Memorial Community Center to explore four topics: digital well-being, youth advisory boards, marketing and communications, and Community Conversations. The sprint was guided by Human-Centered Design (HCD) methods to move from youth ideas to concrete recommendations, prototypes, and next steps.

Several themes and concrete recommendations emerged during the July Co-Design Sprint:

- Create opportunities for youth to take leadership roles, with adults providing support and guidance, including a Youth Advisory Board.
- Revise Ascend's marketing and communications to feel more relevant and connected to youths' everyday experiences and the North Hartford Promise Zone community.
- Make social media content more youth focused by creating opportunities for youth to collaboratively create, and be featured in, marketing and communications materials, including paid and organic social media content.

The July Youth Sprint demonstrates a shift from simply including youth in Ascend activities toward building the infrastructure where youth can help shape decisions, contribute to community engagement efforts, and help guide the future direction of the initiative.

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Next Steps & Key Recommendations:

Based on the key takeaways from all the four days. The following are the key recommendations:

Day 1 & Day 2
1. Implement a Community Conversation on growing up digital, facilitated by youth. Create a Community Conversation that is designed and led by youth, reflecting their lived experiences and priorities. On both days, youth identified the themes, questions, and flow that matter most to them, from defining interactive media to exploring its impacts on learning, relationships, and well-being. By positioning youth as facilitators during the Community Conversation, Ascend will model authentic youth leadership. During the Community Conversation, the dialogue should feel relevant, welcoming, and grounded in real youth perspectives. This approach will also strengthen intergenerational understanding, as adults will hear directly from young people about what it means to grow up in a digital world. 2. Share the findings from day 1 & day 2 with Community & Family Engagement Work Groups to help them implement future Community Conversations and Community Workshops. The insights generated across Day 1 and Day 2, including youth-identified themes, facilitation questions, marketing strategies, and event flow will serve as a guiding framework for the Community and Family Engagement Work Group to increase youth engagement related activities. Sharing these findings will help the work group design future Community Workshops and Community Conversations that are responsive to youth experiences, incorporate youth-centered communication strategies, and address digital well-being in ways that resonate across generations. This will ensure that youth voice is not only heard but actively shapes programming, outreach, and engagement across Ascend's broader ecosystem.
Day 3
1. Finalize Youth Board Advisory materials (job description, application survey, flyer and meeting agenda) with youth feedback and make recruitment more youth-friendly. Update the Youth Advisory Board materials based on the feedback shared by youth. The materials should be youth friendly (i.e clear, easy to understand, visually appealing, and highlight what youth will gain from participating, including incentives, skill-building, networking, and opportunities to shape the work of the board). Include an interview for selected participants after they submit the registration form. 2. Create a short video and social media content for the Youth Advisory Board alongside the written materials.

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Youth shared that a video may be more engaging than asking young people to read a long job description or flyer. Create a short video and social media posts that explain what Ascend Youth Advisory Board is, what youth will do, and why they should consider joining. These can also help reach more youth participants.

3. Create Space for leadership and team building activities for the Youth Advisory Board members

Youth recommended creating time and budget for meetings that include meaningful opportunities to contribute to Ascend while also making time for team/community building activities that focus on youth leadership and development. This could include innovative icebreakers, board games, occasional field trips such as fishing, kayaking or hiking. A consistent meeting schedule with activities should be established based on youth availability and preferences.

4. Create a pathway to youth leadership within the youth advisory board structure

Youth should have opportunities to take on more leadership roles as the board develops. Adults can provide structure and facilitate meetings at the beginning, while gradually creating opportunities for youth to independently facilitate discussions, lead activities, and help shape the direction of the board. Youth should be provided leadership coaching as needed.

Day 4

1. Strengthen youth involvement in Ascend's social media and communications.

Create ongoing opportunities for youth to help develop and be featured in Instagram posts, videos, flyers, and other communications materials. Youth can help identify topics, create content, participate in videos and interviews, and provide feedback before materials are shared.

2. Generate more North Hartford Community-Centered Social Media Content.

Youth emphasized that Ascend's content should feel connected to what is happening in their daily lives. They want posts that highlight local festivals and cultural events, such as the Jamaican Jerk Fest, alongside school-related content like tips, resources, and high-school preparation. They also asked for more visibility of sports, arts, and youth gatherings, reflecting the activities they care about most. Highlighting video content that captures real moments from community events rather than static announcements, making the page feel more youth-centered.

3. Design more youth-friendly flyers.

Youth emphasized that flyers should be co-designed with them to feel more relevant,

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welcoming, and accessible. They recommended using inclusive imagery that shows both older and younger youth, keeping clear event details such as the date, time, QR code, and adding a short “What is Ascend?” section so new audiences immediately understand the organization or add website details. They also said that maintaining the flyer’s colorful, visual design, while making the language more fun, creative, and youth-centered.

Introduction

Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) partnered with North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) to facilitate a Youth Co-Design Sprint that elevated youth goals, needs, and priorities, advancing priorities identified during the inaugural Youth Co-Design Session in June 2026 and outlined in *Ascend Together*¹, a sustainability and scale strategy that was collaboratively developed with key partners and community.

The lived experience of young people growing up in a digital era was consistently elevated during the inaugural Youth Co-Design Session², with youth noting their lived experience is different than the generations before them and that their use of digital tools and technology, including social media, is not well understood by the adults in their lives. This finding served as the grounding for the July 2026 Youth Co-Design Sprint and was strategically integrated throughout.

Childhood Prosperity Lab

The Lab advances social innovations that support the optimal health, development, and well-being of children, families, and communities where they live, learn, work, play, and pray. Collaboration is key to our work. The Lab partners with children, youth, families, practitioners, services providers, and other changemakers to develop and advance solutions that strengthen protective factors and drive systems change.

For the Youth Co-Design Spring, the Lab leveraged human-centered design (HCD) as a methodological framework to center youth voices, experiences, needs, and priorities throughout the design process. The Lab’s multidisciplinary team brings together expertise in family sciences, child development, public health, education, and HCD, including the 36 methods that comprise the LUMA Framework. The expertise supported a structured, participatory process designed to translate youth perspectives into actionable recommendations.

¹ Sowell, A., Anderson, A., & Rose, J. (2026). *Ascend Together co-design summary report: Part 2*. Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health.

² Anderson, A., Sawant, M., Sowell, A., & Rose, J. (2026). *Co-design summary report: Youth engagement in Ascend*. Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health.

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North Hartford Ascend

[Ascend](#) is a prenatal-to-career initiative to ensure children living in the North Hartford Promise Zone – which includes the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods – have the support they need to thrive. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhood Grant Program, Ascend brings together community residents, leaders, community-based organizations, and other cross-sector partners to identify and address community priorities and improve academic, health, and quality of life outcomes for children and families.

July Youth Sprint: Co-design Approach and Implementation

The Youth Sprint used a HCD approach to gather youth perspectives through interactive, hands-on activities. Facilitators documented participant input and identified key themes and insights across the sessions. These findings were combined into a summary report and translated into actionable recommendations to inform future Ascend activities and implementation.

July Youth Design Sprint: Dates, Logistics, and Participant Support

Dates	July 27th, 28th, 30th, 31st, 2026
Time	5:30 PM – 7:00 PM
Location	Parker Memorial Community Center, chosen because it is located in North Hartford, making it accessible for youth participants
Participants & Recruitment	Youth were recruited through a flyer shared on Ascend’s social media. The interest form collected name, age, school, and neighborhood within North Hartford. Youth under 18 completed a parental consent form. For more details, view the flyer and interest form in the appendix.
Hot Meal and Incentive Provided	A hot, nutritious meal was locally catered each day, including an appetizer, entrée, and salad. Participants were asked about allergies and food preferences in the interest form. Each youth received a \$50 gift card for participation for each day.
Presence of Family Navigators	Family Navigators were present in case youth or parents wanted to connect, ask questions, or seek support.

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Day 1

Understanding Digital Well-Being From a Youth Perspective

Background

What Does Growing Up Digital Mean?

Young people today are growing up in a world where digital technology is part of their everyday life. Social media, gaming, streaming, smartphones, artificial intelligence, and other interactive media are



not separate from young people's lives. They are part of how youth learn, communicate, build relationships, express themselves, have fun, and make sense of the world around them. John Seely Brown describes young people growing up digital as developing new ways of learning, thinking, communicating, socializing, and making meaning within digital environments³.

Growing up digital brings both opportunities and challenges. Digital spaces can provide connection, creativity, access to information, and opportunities for learning and self-expression. At the same time research and public discussion have also raised concerns about distraction, fragmented attention, sleep, physical activity, learning, and social-emotional well-being. The Co-Design Sprint was aimed not simply to be a conversation about screen time or whether young people should use technology less. The intent was to understand youths' lived experience growing up in an

increasingly digital world; understand how it influences different facets of youth development, from their perspective, like youth leadership; and create a venue for youth to share their lived experiences with others.

Centering Youth Voice in a Changing Digital World

The first day of the July Youth Design Sprint focused on understanding digital well-being through the experiences and perspectives of youth. During the June Design Sprint, youth had already identified digital well-being as an area of focus. The rationale for Day 1 was to create space for youth to define digital well-being in their own terms, rather than beginning with an adult-defined understanding of what

³ Brown, J. S. (2000). Growing up digital: How the Web changes work, education, and the ways people learn. *Change Magazine*, 32(2), 10–20.

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healthy technology use should look like. It focused on involving young people in conversations and decisions about their media routines and developing media literacy rather than relying only on restrictions or rules.

The following were the goals for Day 1:

- Explore how youth interact with and navigate interactive media in their daily lives
- Better understand how interactive media can both support and challenge young people's social, emotional, and mental well-being
- To elevate youth voice by exploring the impacts of interactive media

About the Session

A total of nine youth participated in the first co-design session of the sprint, which focused on understanding what it means to grow up digital from their perspective and lived experience. The session began with introducing North Hartford Ascend followed by a round-robin of introductions and a community connection activity, where participants reflected on two questions: "What does it mean to grow up digital?" and "How might you describe interactive media?"⁴. This discussion helped establish a shared understanding of interactive media before moving into the design activities. Facilitators then invited the Family Navigators to introduce themselves and their roles in helping youth connect with programs, services, and other community resources. Facilitators introduced the concept of interactive media as digital content that responds to user input, creating active engagement through two-way interaction. Examples discussed included social media platforms, video games, streaming platforms, artificial intelligence, and digital information-seeking tools.

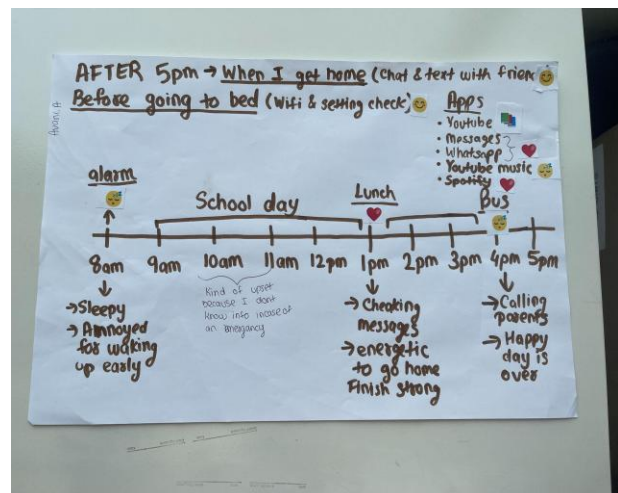
Key Takeaways From the Session:

Activity 1

For the first activity, facilitators asked youth to map their day and how they use interactive media through the day.

The following were the key findings from the activity:

1. Technology is part of everyday routine. Youth described technology as part of their everyday life, rather than a separate activity. Youth use digital devices and other forms of interactive media throughout the day for:



⁴ Interactive media refers to digital platforms and technologies that allow users to actively participate, respond, create, or interact with content rather than simply consume it.

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- Waking up (phone alarms) and getting their day started
- Completing their schoolwork and during free time in school
- Communicating and connecting with friends and family
- Entertainment after school to listen to music, watch television, stream content online and partake in gaming

Technology is showing up for youth at home, school, on transportation, and in recreational spaces. Some of the youth noted that parental controls were limiting their usage of social media, noting that their caregivers have access to their social media accounts, like TikTok and Instagram, until they reach 13-14 years-old.

2. Mobile phones are primarily used for connecting with friends and family. Youth most frequently described using their phones to:

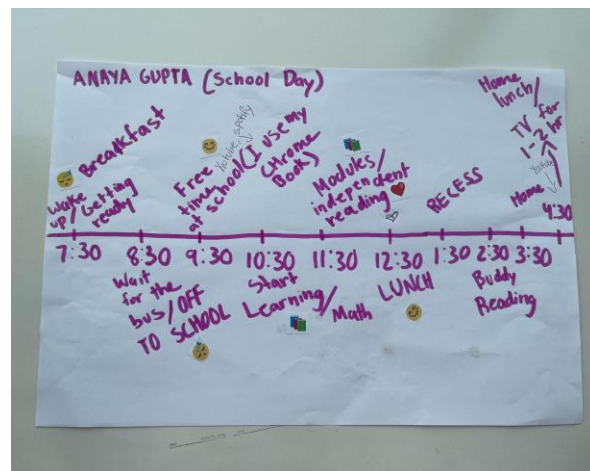
- Stay connected with friends through WhatsApp and text messaging
- Call parents or siblings to give them an update of their whereabouts and coordinate daily activities
- Check the time for their next activities, tasks etc. throughout the day

Communication remains one of the primary reasons youth engage with digital technology in a fast-paced world.

3. Social media usage increases after school.

Youth indicated that social media use increases once the school day ends. Common platforms included:

- YouTube
- Instagram
- TikTok
- Spotify
- WhatsApp



The bus ride home and the hours after school were the highest reported levels of digital engagement. One participant specifically noted, "I mostly use my phone on the bus," while others shared that they used technology well into the evening and morning—as early as 3:00am to create content and scroll. At home, youth reported using interactive media for entertainment and leisure purposes to watch TV, play online games, etc. One participant described spending the evening creating content on social media while talking with friends online.

4. Use of digital technology as a learning tool in school. During school hours, youth reported limited personal social media use. Technology in school was primarily used for:

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- Chromebook-based learning
- Independent reading
- Conducting research on Google for school projects
- AI-supported assignments
- Recreational music during free periods.

Several youth explicitly stated they did not use personal social media during class.

Activity 2

Youth were then asked to add an emoji icon to their Experience Diagrams to document how they feel about their technology use they tracked across the day. The following are the common emotions felt by the youth through the day.

The following were the key takeaways:

Patterns of Interactive Media Use and Emotions		
Time/Activity	Level of Interactive Digital Media Use	Common Emotions
Morning (Home)	Low	Sleepy, tired, annoyed
School	Low	Stress during emergencies; happiness during free periods
After School (Bus Ride Home)	Moderate to High	Happy, energetic
At Home: Talking with Friends and Family	Moderate	Happy, connected
At Home: Gaming and Leisure Activities	High	Love, enjoyment, happiness

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Activity 3

For the next activity, youth were arranged into breakout groups and were asked about the impact of different types of interactive media.

The following are the key themes that emerged:

Impact of Interactive Media	
Theme	What Youth Shared
Learning and Personal Growth	Interactive media supports learning, problem-solving, creativity, and skill development. Youth reported using media for generating new ideas and completing homework for school projects.
Connection and Belonging	Technology helps youth communicate, build friendships, and connect with diverse communities. A youth said “When I come back from school I use WhatsApp to talk with friends.”
Online Safety	Cyberbullying, scams, influencing behaviors, misinformation, and inappropriate content were major concerns for youth. A handful of youth advocated for parental control on social media for safety and for policies that enforce age limits.
Artificial Intelligence	Youth see AI as useful but have ethical concerns about misinformation, cheating, and reduced critical thinking skills. A youth shared “I feel like AI doesn’t let us think,” and another youth shared “some kids use AI to cheat on exams.”
Importance of Digital Well-Being	Participants recognized the importance of balancing technology use with offline relationships and healthy habits. A younger participant said “I feel if I’m constantly using the screen my eyesight will become poor,” and another youth noted “Sometimes I like spending time in my backyard more.”
Youth-Centric Solutions	Rather than rejecting technology, youth proposed practical solutions that focused on education, online safety, responsible AI, and age-appropriate protections and parental control.

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Activity 4

For the last activity, facilitators asked youth to take the role of an adult and profile what they believe adults assume of youth and social media. Youth independently wrote down phrases of what they thought reflect what an adult might assume about youth and interactive media on poster paper.

The following were the key takeaways for the activity:

Myths About Social Media That Youth Disagree With

Mental Health and Behavior:

Social media...

- It is addictive.
- Manipulates people.
- It is bad for your mindset.
- Makes people compare themselves to others.
- Inspires people to make bad decisions.
- Is used for the wrong intentions.

Learning and Personal Development

Social Media..

- Creates distraction.
- Limits personal growth.
- Prevents people from doing other activities.
- Limits people from going outside.

Online Safety

Social Media...

- Leads to cyberbullying.
- Leads to stalking and scams.
- Exposes people to others with harmful intentions.

Parents and Family

- Social media creates the need for parental control.
- Adults spend less time on social media.

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Myths About Social Media That Youth Agreed With

Social Media...

- Creates uncertainty.
- Creates dependence.
- Social media creates more opportunities for bullying.
- Can be addictive.
- Can negatively affect mindset/mental Health
- Helps connect people who might not otherwise interact.
- Creates the need for parental guidance and involvement (Moderately Agree).

This helped us understand that youth agreed with many of the commonly held assumptions around interactive media. Youth expressed the strongest agreement with statements related to addiction, cyberbullying, online safety, misinformation, distraction from learning, and the impact of social media on mental well-being. These findings suggest that youth recognize many of the challenges associated with interactive media.

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Day 2

Co-creating a Youth-led Community Conversation on “Growing-up Digital”

Background

The focus of Day 2 shifted from exploring “What does it mean to grow up digital?” to engaging the broader community in that conversation. Building on insights from Day 1, youth worked together to co-design an intergenerational Community Conversation focused on the opportunities, challenges, and experiences of growing up in a digital world. This reflects a broader vision of youth engagement in which young people move beyond being consumers of information to becoming active creators, contributors, and leaders in conversations that affect their lives and communities.



This approach reflected an interest expressed by youth during the June Youth Design Sprint to take on visible leadership roles at Ascend community events, rather than simply participating in conversations about digital life. The co-design session created an opportunity for youth to shape not only *what* the community would discuss, but also *how* the conversation would take place.

The following were the goals for day 2:

- To plan the level set and format of an intergenerational Community Conversation about growing up in a digital age.
- To generate guiding questions for the facilitation guide for the Community Conversation.
- Prototype and test the Community Conversation design to refine the experience before implementation.

About the Session

A total of nine youth participated in Day 2 of the Design Sprint. During the June Design Sprint, youth identified growing up digital as a priority topic and expressed interest in helping design and facilitate a Community Conversation on the subject. Building on that feedback, Day 2 focused on co-creating the Growing Up Digital Community Conversation with youth.

Facilitators explained that Community Conversations are gatherings where community members come together to discuss important topics that matter to the community, learn more about programs and services available, and share connections.

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Following the introduction, participants were divided into two small groups of four and five youth to begin the co-design activities. Working in smaller groups created space for discussion and allowed every participant to contribute ideas as they designed the Community Conversation together.

Key Takeaways from the Session:

Activity 1

For the first activity, facilitators asked youth participants to generate as many ideas as possible on topic, format, and marketing strategy for the Community Conversation.

The following were the key takeaways from the session:

1. Youth identified topics that should be included in the Community Conversation:

Youth felt that the Community Conversation should begin by creating a shared understanding of what it means to grow up in a digital world before actually discussing its impacts. Their responses indicate that they want the conversation to move beyond screen time and explore how interactive media influences learning, social connections and relationships, well-being, and access to opportunities.

Key takeaways included:

- **Defining interactive media and what it means to grow up digital.** A youth noted that people across age groups and professions have a different perception and understanding of social media. It will be important to understand different perspectives.
- **Better understand the role of technology in everyday life,** including the devices youth use and how they interact with them. For instance a youth said that they would like to learn more how to use social media optimally. Another youth noted “I would like to learn how to make and edit videos for social media.”
- **The impact of interactive media on social, emotional, and physical well-being.** Youth wanted to better understand how their use of digital media may affect their mood, stress, sleep, physical activity, and overall well-being.
- **How interactive media influences social connections, communication, and relationships.** Most of the youth said that they used social media to stay in touch with their friends.



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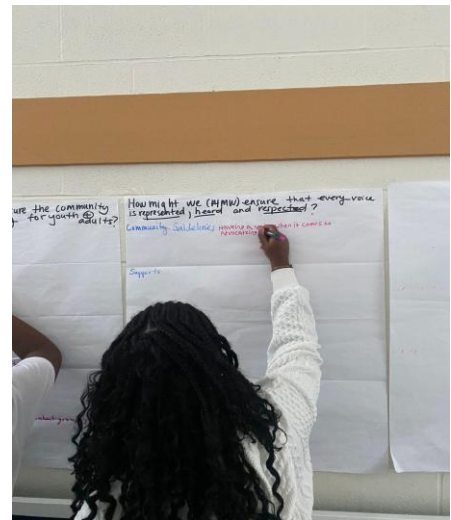
- **Address barriers to digital access** and how they affect youth experiences. A youth said “not everyone has tablets or the internet to access online material all the time.”

2. Youth recommended marketing strategies for the Community Conversation.

Youth recommendations indicate that marketing should be youth-centered, visually engaging, and multiple communication channels online and offline should be used to reach both young people and adults.

Key takeaways included:

- **Promote the event** through Instagram and other social media platforms.
- **Create visually appealing flyers** with interactive and youth-friendly messaging that can be shared at youth centric community spaces and schools.
- **Incorporate AI-generated graphics** and family-centered visuals into promotional materials.
- Engage youth ambassadors to help promote the event.
- **Use email and in-person outreach** methods to reach a broader audience.
- **Develop messaging that is fun**, welcoming and encourages community participation.



3. Youth identified ways to help ensure every voice is heard and respected during the Community Conversation.

Youth responses indicate the importance of establishing respectful community norms, providing multiple ways for participants to contribute, and creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue across generations to ensure every voice is heard.

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Key takeaways included:

- **Establish community guidelines/norms** that promote respect and create a safe space.
- **Use youth and adult breakout groups** to encourage participation.
- **Incorporate interactive activities**, like voting, to engage all participants.
- **Provide translation and communication support** as needed to the participants.
- **Involve trusted adults and youth leaders** to support discussion and collaboration.

Activity 2

For the next activities, facilitators asked youth to generate questions that will guide the conversations with participants during the Community Conversation

The following were the key questions generated by the youth:

Facilitation Questions for Community Conversation
Our Digital Lives ● How do you use the internet? ● What do you do online? ● How is technology a part of your daily life? ● What are your views on media and technology? Technology & Well-Being ● How does social media affect your thoughts and feelings? ● How can we use the media to help each other? ● What are your experiences and perspectives on youth engaging more with people and less with the media? The AI Conversation ● What are the positives and negatives of Artificial Intelligence? ● How can we support each other safely using Artificial Intelligence?

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Growing Up Digital

- What kind of media did you grow up with?
- What are your thoughts on parental controls?
- If you had a child/have a child, what would be the right age you would give them a device?
- How has media and technology changed over the generations, and what has been the impact?

Navigating the Internet

- What good internet sources do you use to get information?

Looking Ahead

- What do you hope for the future of technology and how it impacts our health?

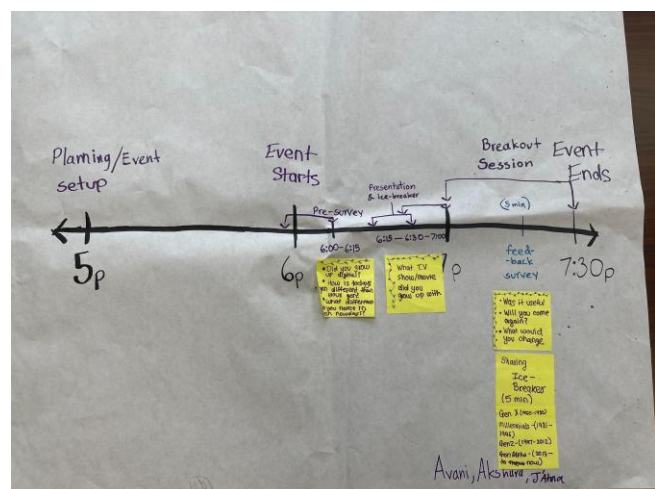
These questions reflect that youth are interested in discussing interactive media beyond screen time use and the negative impact of social media. Rather, they want to engage in broader conversations around the positive and optimal usage of social media, online safety, and what it means to use technology responsibly.

Activity 3

For the last activity, facilitators asked participants to prototype and test the Community Conversation design to refine the experience before implementation.

Key takeaways from Group 1:

- Volunteers arrive at 5:00 PM to allow time to set up the room, arrange tables and chairs, and prepare materials.
- Food vendors, family navigators and people providing tech support arrive at 5:30 PM
- At 5:45 PM presenters go through the assigned event roles and responsibilities so everyone gets a chance to rehearse their part before participants arrive.
- At 6:00 PM youth welcome participants and open the conversation to encourage an open and inclusive dialogue.



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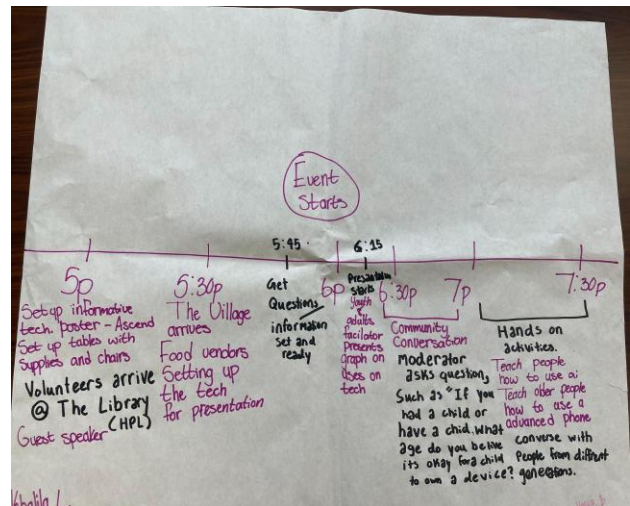
- Around 7:00 PM hands-on activities and interactive games should begin to keep participants engaged and encourage participation across generations.

The above takeaways suggest that youth should play a visible leadership role in convening the Community Conversation

Key takeaways from Group 2:

- Planning and event setup begins at 5:00 PM.
- The event officially starts at 6:00 PM.
- Pre-survey on intergenerational social media usage runs from 6:00 to 6:15 PM.
- Community Conversation takes place from 6:15 to 7:00 PM as an open-ended dialogue.
- Session ends at 7:25 PM, followed by participants completing a feedback form.

The above takeaways show us that youth want to focus on the importance of clear roles, thoughtful setup, and structured flow of the event, while also highlighting the need for engaging activities and meaningful dialogue. The insights also highlight that youth want to play a role in leadership in convening and guiding the Community Conversation.



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DAY-3

Co-creating an Ascend Youth Advisory Board

Background

What Is a Youth Advisory Board?



A Youth Advisory Board is a structured group of young people who work alongside adults, organizations, and systems to bring youth perspectives into decision-making, program development, and systems change. Rather than asking young people to simply react to decisions that adults have already made, a Youth Advisory Board involves youth in shaping those decisions from the start.

For Ascend, a Youth Advisory Board will serve as a standing structure for youth partnership, and will help shape how Ascend understands youth needs, develops strategies, communicates with young people, and strengthens the prenatal-to-career system – guided by the Lab's key activities.

Why Did Ascend Choose a Co-design Approach to Create a Youth Advisory Board?

The co-design approach shifts the relationship between youth and adults. Instead of adults saying, "Here is the board we created for you," co-design asks, "What should this board be, and how can we build it together?".

This was reinforced during Ascend's June Youth Design Sprint, where youth identified the need and interest to co-create and lead a Youth Advisory Board as one of the ways they wanted to be more meaningfully involved in Ascend. Ascend used the July Design Sprint to bring youth back into the process and begin operationalizing their recommendation together.

Through co-design, youth had an opportunity to explore key characteristics such as:

- What should the purpose of the Youth Advisory Board be?
- What should youth members be responsible for?
- What decisions should youth have influence over?
- How should meetings be structured?
- What communication norms would make the space feel respectful and inclusive?
- What leadership opportunities should youth have?

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- What support, mentorship, and resources do youth need?
- How can Ascend ensure that youth participation results in meaningful action?

The following was the goal of the session:

- Co-create Youth Advisory Board materials: Advisory Board job description, application survey, recruitment flyer, and meeting agenda.

About the Session

A total of seven youth participants joined us for Day 3 of the Design Sprint. Facilitators explained the purpose of a Youth Advisory Board, emphasizing that during the June Design Sprint, youth shared that they would want a formal space to shape decisions, elevate their voices, and guide community priorities. Because of that feedback, the facilitators shared that the session would focus on co-creating the recruiting materials for the Youth Advisory Board together, defining its purpose, structure, and the kinds of roles and responsibilities youth want to hold within it. A set of mock materials, including job description, application survey, and mock meeting agenda, were developed to elicit youth feedback.

Key Takeaways From the Session:

Facilitators asked youth to review and provide feedback on a mock Youth Advisory Board job description, application survey, flyer for recruitment, and meeting agenda format. Participants were asked to write their responses on sticky notes, followed by a round robin of discussion.

1. Youth Advisory Board Job Description

The following were the key takeaways:

- **Youth valued the clarity and benefits of the opportunity.** Participants liked that the job description clearly explained the role, qualifications, and benefits – including \$50 per session, food, transportation support, hands-on work experience and skill-building opportunities.
- **Youth recommended keeping the *Introduction* and *About Us* section short, clear, and easy to understand**, while adding more information about the age range and geographic/school priorities.
- **Youth also suggested creating a short video version of the job description** that could be shared through social media. A youth added “not everyone likes to read long descriptions.”



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- **Make the visual design more engaging.** Youth wanted more pictures, a more interesting first page, and visuals that show the type of work youth will be doing in the role itself. They also suggested changing the header to make it more appealing.
- **Strengthen the recruitment approach.** Youth questioned how the job description would reach young people and whether the current content would motivate youth to apply. This suggests the recruitment materials should highlight why the opportunity would be valuable and appealing to youth.
- **Keep the opportunity open to youth input beyond formal board membership.** Youth expressed interest in having ways to contribute ideas even if they are not among the 10 selected board members, such as continuing to facilitate co-design sessions.
- **Youth suggested adding that the Youth Advisory Board will also include co-design opportunities,** where youth would have a role in shaping the sessions and work of the board.

2. Youth Advisory Board Application survey

The following were the key takeaways:

- **Make the application more visually engaging and youth-friendly.** Youth suggested adding photos, color, and a clearer description of the Youth Advisory Board to make the application more appealing.
- **Highlight key information.** Youth recommended highlighting the age range (14–18), incentives, expectations, and benefits of participating in the Youth Advisory Board.
- **Make the application more accessible.** Youth suggested offering different ways for applicants to demonstrate their learning styles, skills, and abilities, recognizing that written responses may not work for everyone. They also recommended including more inclusive gender options.
- **Learn more about the applicants beyond written responses.** Youth suggested adding more questions about extracurricular activities, interests, interpersonal skills, clubs and sports.
- **Consider a two-step selection process.** Youth recommended using the registration form as an initial step, followed by an interview to learn more about applicants and assess their interests and fit. The following were the questions youth suggested should be asked in the interview:
 - What extracurricular activities are you engaged in?
 - What do you hope to get out of this? What are your interests? What are your interpersonal skills?
 - What clubs/sports interest you during the school year?

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- How do you engage in class projects?
- **Consider additional ways to understand applicants' interest and intent.** Suggestions included requesting a letter of recommendation from a teacher and using a pre/post survey to understand students' interests and experiences.
- **Be intentional about recruitment and scheduling.** Youth recommended learning students' school schedules through the application process to avoid meeting conflicts and promoting the opportunity directly through teachers and in-class presentations rather than relying only on flyers.

3. Youth Advisory Board Flyer

The following were the key takeaways:

- **Youth liked the existing color scheme but wanted a more visually engaging design.** They suggested making the flyer more colorful, keeping the text large and bold, and moving the text higher on the page to improve readability.
- **Use photos that accurately represent the experience.** Youth felt the current photos did not resonate and recommended using photos that directly show what youth will do as part of the board. They also suggested creating flyers with different photos to appeal to a wider range of youth.
- **Consider a collage-style design.** A collage format was suggested as a way to make the flyer feel more dynamic and youth-centered.
- **Clearly highlight benefits and incentives.** Highlight what the youth will gain from being part of the Advisory Board e.g. leadership experience, \$50 gift card, meals, etc.
- **Consider adding a Youth Advisory Board logo** to establish a recognizable identity within Ascend, but consult youth on what the logo might be.



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- **Use multiple strategies to distribute the flyer.** Youth suggested placing flyers on classroom bulletin boards and having someone visit classrooms or camps to present the opportunity directly.

4. Youth Advisory Board Meeting Agenda

Facilitators asked youth to review a mock Agenda. **The following were the key takeaways:**

- **Youth recommended co-creating community guidelines, norms, commitments, and participation rules** rather than having adults establish these expectations.
- **Youth support a gradual transition to youth-led facilitation.** They suggested that adults initially facilitate meetings, with facilitation responsibilities gradually transitioning to youth or older youth as members gain experience and confidence.
- **Meetings should include fun and interactive activities.** Youth suggested incorporating board games, laser tag, and fun icebreakers, along with team-building activities such as field trips, fishing, and kayaking to help members build relationships.
- **Youth expressed interest in meeting regularly.** Suggested meeting structures included twice a month or, during an initial period, meeting more frequently, such as twice a week for a short period followed by a break.



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Day 4

Co-creation of Ascend Marketing and Communication Materials

Background

Ascend uses both organic social media strategies and paid ads to share updates about its work, highlight activities happening across the community, and connect families to resources, programs, and opportunities offered by Ascend and its partners.

The idea of involving youth in Ascend's marketing and communications efforts has come up in several conversations. During the 2026 March Service Provider Meeting, providers shared that youth should have more opportunities to be involved in Ascend's social media, marketing, and communications to ensure it reaches them with authenticity and interest. Youth also shared a similar sentiment during the 2026 June Youth Design Sprint, expressing that they would like to have a role in shaping Ascend's marketing and communications.



Building on this feedback, Day 4 of the July Sprint focused on getting youth's input and involving them

directly in creating Ascend's communications.

The following were the goals for the session:

- Understand what is working well on Ascend's Instagram Page
- Co-create flyers for Ascend Community Conversation
- Co-design a 30 day social media plan for Ascend's Instagram

About the Session

A total of 6 youths participated in Day 4 of the Sprint. Ascend's Marketing and Communications Specialist then joined the session and provided an overview of Ascend's current social media strategy and presented Ascend's Instagram Page.

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Key Takeaways From the Session:

Activity 1

Facilitators showed youth participants Ascend's Instagram page and asked them to use sticky notes to share what they liked about the page, opportunities for improvement, and any challenges they experienced when engaging with the content.

The following were the key takeaways:

- **Keep the community-focused content.** Youth liked seeing community members, their families, community events, and their ideas featured on Ascend's Instagram. They also liked posts that share information about programs, resources, and community events.
- **Keep the page visually engaging.** Youth particularly noted the use of bold captions and posts that are easy to share with friends.
- **Make videos more interactive.** Youth felt some videos move too quickly and suggested slowing them down, adding more information, and using transitions and sound effects to make them more interesting.
- **Share more information about incentives and upcoming events.** Youth suggested highlighting incentives, sponsorship opportunities, and upcoming events, including having a general event schedule available on the page.
- **Make content accessible to more youth.** Youth pointed out that not everyone has a phone, tablet, or reliable internet access. They suggested using other platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, while also having flyers or printed information available.
- **Give youth a bigger role in creating content.** Youth expressed interest in helping create flyers, videos, and other social media content, with guidance from Ascend staff.

Activity 2

Facilitators then showed participants flyers from past Community Conversations and asked them to identify what was working well and share opportunities for improvement.

The following were the takeaways from the session:

- **Youth liked the colorful and visual design.** They liked the use of pictures, colors, and the bold headings, especially when the event name, date, and time were easy to see.

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- **Keep the important event details clear.**
Youth liked having the date, time, QR code, and bullet points explaining what the session is about.
- **Use more inclusive photos.** Youth felt the flyer should include both younger and older youth rather than only young children in the pictures.
- **Provide more information about Ascend.**
Youth wanted a little more information about what Ascend is and what it does, so people who are seeing the flyer for the first time have more context.
- **Keep making the flyers accessible.** Youth liked that the flyer was translated and suggested directing people to the Ascend website for more information.



The following were the flyers created by youth:



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Activity 3

Facilitators asked participants to create a 30-day social media content plan for Ascend.

The following are the key takeaways:



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1	2	3 SOCIAL EVENTS	4	5	6 YOUTH SPORTS & GAMES
7	8	9 SEASONAL EVENTS	10	11 COMMUNITY TALKS	12	13
14	15	16 YOUTH VIDEOS & INTERVIEWS	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24 TIPS & RESOURCES	25	26	27 COMMUNITY EVENT HIGHLIGHT
28	29	30	31			

Legend:

- SOCIAL EVENTS
- SEASONAL EVENTS
- YOUTH SPORTS & GAMES
- COMMUNITY TALKS
- YOUTH VIDEOS & INTERVIEWS
- TIPS & RESOURCES
- COMMUNITY EVENT HIGHLIGHT

- **Youth wanted the social media calendar to highlight events happening in the community.** Ideas included the Jamaican Jerk Fest, basketball games, back-to-school events, community talks, and other local events.
- **Youth wanted more content featuring young people from the community.** They suggested YouTube videos with youth, community interviews, and videos from community events as ways to make the content more relatable.
- **Align content with the seasons/community milestones:** Since it was the back-to-school season going that was a major theme appearing on almost everyone's calendar. Youth suggested highlighting Ascend's five schools, sharing back-to-school tips, and creating content focused on high school preparation.
- **Youth suggested using video to capture community events.** For example, they recommended creating a video from the Jamaican Jerk Fest rather than only posting about the event.

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- **Youth envisioned a mix of content rather than only program announcements.** The calendar included events, interviews, tips, videos, and general posts, suggesting that Ascend's social media should have a mix of informative, community-focused, and youth-centered content.

Participant Feedback

Participant feedback was collected at the end of each session throughout the four-day Youth Co-Design Sprint to understand participants' experiences and perspectives. In total, 27 feedback responses were collected across the four sessions. Participants were asked to reflect on the usefulness of the HCD approach, engagement and interactivity, opportunities for participation, sense of community, and opportunities to refine new ideas.

The following was the feedback across all four sessions:

- 67% strongly agreed that the Human-Centered Design approach was useful in supporting their participation and idea development.
- 74% strongly agreed that the sessions were engaging and interactive.
- 81% strongly agreed that there were opportunities for participation.
- 70% strongly agreed that the sessions created a sense of community.
- 78% strongly agreed that the sessions provided opportunities to refine and develop new ideas

The feedback indicates a consistently positive experience, with most of the responses strongly agreeing across the five dimensions. The results highlight that youth valued the interactive, participatory, and collaborative nature of the co-design process and felt supported in contributing their ideas.

Quotes from the session:

- "The food was great and I loved the discussion."
- "The space was spacious and the environment was nice and quiet."
- "Very nice, friendly and engaging."
- "The facilitators are friendly and helpful. I enjoy speaking and sharing."
- "I liked it. I made new friends and felt like my voice was heard."
- "I liked today's program because we got to organize a session."
- "I very much liked this meeting, everyone spoke and was interested, gave amazing ideas and enjoyed themselves."
- "I enjoyed it because it helps me use my brain."
- "It was nice, and I felt involved."

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STAY CONNECTED

- **Email:** childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org
- **Facebook:** Connecticut Children's Community Child Health
- **LinkedIn:** Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health
- **Advancing Kids Blog**

Appendix

The following were the HCD methods used by the facilitators on day 1:

HCD Method	Definition	Purpose
Experience Diagramming	A person's journey is mapped through a set of circumstances or tasks over a period of time (Luma, 2012).	The activity helped to reflect on and understand how technology intersects with daily routines, emotions, relationships, and social connections.
Rose Thorn Bud	A method to understand the positive, negative, and future impact of interactive media on youth health and well-being.	This method helped youth understand the positive and negative impacts of social media on their lives and the potential impact of social media on the lives of the youth.
Persona Profiling	An informed summary of the mindset, needs and goals typically held by stakeholders.	Youth took the role of an adult and helped profile what they believed adults assume of interactive media. This helped facilitators understand the mindset of sound interactive media.

The following were the HCD methods used by the facilitators on day 2:

HCD Method	Definition	Purpose
Creative Matrix	A format for sparking new ideas at the	This method helped many new

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	intersections of distinct categories.	ideas on what an intergenerational Community Conversation on “Growing-up Digital” should look like.
Statement Starters	An approach to phrasing problem statements that invites broad exploration.	This method helped generate questions that would be raised in the Community Conversation.
Experience Diagramming	A way of mapping a person’s journey through a set of circumstances or tasks.	Helped facilitators test run the Community Conversation and improve the model if required.

The following were the HCD methods used by the facilitators on day 3:

HCD Method	Definition	Purpose
Rose Thorn Bud	A method to understand the positive, negative, and future impact of interactive media on youth health and well-being.	Helped generate feedback on the job description of the Youth Advisory Board, application survey and flyer of the youth advisory board.
Think Out Loud Testing	A testing format where people narrate their experience while performing a given task.	Helped generate feedback on the application survey and flyer and the first meeting agenda for the Youth Advisory Board.

The following were the HCD methods used by the facilitators on day 4:

HCD Method	Definition	Purpose
Rose Thorn Bud	A method to understand the positive, negative, and future impact of interactive media on youth health and well-being.	Helped understand what features youth likes of Ascend’s Instagram page and also helped identify opportunities for improvement.
Rough & Ready Prototyping	A rapidly built model of a new idea that approximates its appearance and behavior.	In real time helped youth co-create reels, flyers for future Community Conversation and a

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		30 day social media plan for Ascend's Instagram page.
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Flyer from the July Design Sprint



YOUTH VOICE IN ACTION

- Share your ideas and help create solutions that matter to young people
- Use your voice to shape programs and opportunities in North Hartford
- Join conversations about youth health and well-being

\$50 GIFT CARDS & FREE FOOD FOR PARTICIPANTS!

PARKER MEMORIAL COMMUNITY CENTER
5-6:30 PM
JULY 27, 28, 30, 31

SCAN TO REGISTER