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Youth Engagement in Policy, Research, and Practice

Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook

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About This Toolkit

This toolkit is intended for researchers, policymakers, direct service providers, and technical assistance providers interested in working with and engaging young people in a meaningful way that is mutually beneficial.

In this toolkit, you will learn

- Various methods of youth engagement

- The benefits of youth engagement

- Various tools for youth engagement

- Questions to ask yourself before, during, and after youth engagement

- If youth engagement is the right fit for your project

Youth Engagement

Youth engagement is building a relationship between young people and adults through intentional, inclusive, and mutually beneficial interactions. Youth engagement involves leveraging the experiences, perspectives, and general sentiments that people ages 10 to 29 (depending on the circumstance or project) have on a topic. Youth engagement can be operationalized in various ways. This resource shares some ideas and considerations that will help you strategically and safely incorporate young people into a project or initiative. The tool includes a snapshot of the benefits of youth engagement; Urban's models for youth engagement, practitioners' methods and tools; questions to ask yourself before, during, and after engaging young people; and a youth engagement project evaluation worksheet.

Methods of Youth Engagement

Youth participation in events (private or public) is a beneficial approach to diversifying a group and can play a major role in the evaluation of that event. Planning how to create an inclusive space that feels welcoming and interesting to a variety of individuals and, most importantly, avoids tokenizing youth participants is essential. The following are ways to help young people feel respected and comfortable participating:

- Ensure enough young people are involved that no one feels tokenized or uncomfortable.

- Help young people prepare.

- Allow young people to record their comments in advance if their preference is for a video to be shared instead of participating in real time (especially if their participation involves sharing a personal story that may be difficult or traumatic).

- Have a breakout group with only young people so they have a safe space for a discussion without adults or a discussion in which the youth participants are in the majority.

- For large events that have many sessions or take place over several days, provide a dedicated room for youth participants so they have a safe space.

- Allow young people to decide how they want to be involved during the planning phases and during the event itself.

The Benefits of Youth Engagement

- Promotes inclusivity—in research, policies, programs, and services

- Broadens and amplifies your reach into the community

- Builds capacity and capabilities for the next generation

- Enhances effectiveness and leads to more nuanced findings and next steps

- Increases credibility

- Improves validity of efforts focused on young people (rather than simply asking adults to participate on their behalf)

- Broadens social networks

- Provides young people with many benefits, including professional development, mentoring, positive social networks, and an opportunity to "be the change" for their community.

- Appeals to funders and potential partners

Youth-centered program and policy design is based on human-centered design principles and approaches. People's needs and priorities (in this case, young people's needs and priorities) are put first in developing or adapting services, programs, and policies. This process can engage young people in designing and creating a program or solutions with others based on a thorough understanding of their own needs and preferences. This approach prioritizes transparency and breaking down hierarchies in developing solutions that empower young people to be part of sustained community initiatives.

Youth participation in surveys can inform survey question development and implementation processes, and young people can serve as field locators, pilot surveys, and help analyze data and disseminate results.

Youth participatory action research is a method whereby young people empower themselves as coresearchers, building their strengths and capabilities to solve community problems, rather than just naming them. This requires that young people be engaged in all aspects of the research process, from forming research questions to disseminating the findings.

Youth participatory evaluation engages young people in the evaluation of programs, services, and organizations designed to serve them. Young people are responsible for shaping the evaluation process by posing questions, establishing evaluative criteria, and making recommendations for change.

Questions to Ask Yourself before, during, and after Youth Engagement

The best way to prepare for youth engagement is to ask the right questions of yourself and of the core group that will be involved in the work.

Before Youth Engagement

1. What is the unique purpose of involving young people in this project?

2. Who must buy in to the plan to engage young people in this project?

3. Which young people would participate in the project, and how are they being thoughtfully and equitably chosen?

4. What are the institutional review board guidelines that must be followed to ensure young people are protected?

Tools for Youth Engagement

- **Data Walks** are forums where a project team shares project findings or information with community members to receive their input. Data Walks not only share pertinent information with young people but also empower them to make substantial, long-lasting changes through their sustained connection to the community. Young people can demonstrate their expertise and build relationships with community leaders and people in positions of decisionmaking power who are not typically available to them. In Urban's PASS project, young people were the lead presenters at each Data Walk station and connected with service providers, local government officials, and leadership within the housing authority. They have not only shaped the content of the PASS program but informed larger policy and program responses in their communities.

- **Youth community advisory boards** are made up of community-based young people who were selected to give their perspectives as advisers and decisionmakers to the project team. Youth community advisory boards mirror adult versions, providing a link between the project team and the community to ensure local priorities and concerns are reflected in the project's goals and processes. This increases the quality and application of the project by building trust in partnerships between the team and stakeholder groups and enables young people in the study to communicate local knowledge, cultural attributes, and research context.

5. Are community standards, boundaries, and expectations established in the context of preparing young people to take part in the project?

6. How are systems of shared governance being embedded from the start to ensure young people are not only participants but also leaders?

7. What inclusive and intentional approach will be used to obtain consent from young people and their parents?

8. Is the project leveraging the experiences of other community groups or research projects that have sought to involve young people in their work?

9. Can you compensate community-based organizations or other partners to help coordinate the on-the-ground logistics of working with young people?

10. How will you compensate young people in a way that is most beneficial to them—through an internship, research experience, money, or academic credit?

11. Can you provide something beyond or besides compensation?

During Youth Engagement

1. Is team building among young people and adults being emphasized to address boundaries and hierarchies?

2. Is sufficient time being invested outside of meetings to develop relationships with youth participants and to help them contextualize, understand, and advance the work they are doing within the project?

3. Does the project have a sustainability plan for youth engagement after the project ends?

4. Are governance activities being carried out in a way that ensures young people are not only participants but also decisionmakers?

5. Can the young people be involved in any final presentations, advocacy, or dissemination activities?

After Youth Engagement

1. What are the project's plans for conducting a reflection activity with the young people (e.g., a feedback survey, focus group, or suggestions box)?

2. What partnerships have been developed within the project, and how can those partnerships continue? If you or your organization does not plan to stay involved in the community long term, could another entity support sustainability?

Tools for Youth Engagement

- **Photo Voice** is a visual research method that puts cameras in the hands of young people, enabling them to document and explore aspects of a topic that manifest in their community. Residents then come together to discuss the community's strengths and/or challenges depicted in the images. This allows young people to define the topic and give priority to their concerns.

- **Social media** is a powerful way to "meet young people where they are" and a common tool in youth engagement work. It works best when young people are already connected in some way (e.g., by program, school, or neighborhood). Social media is a great way to share information, open topics for discussion, and cull new ideas, without having to convene a group in-person at a set location and time. Also, young people's social media accounts are less likely to change than their phone numbers and home addresses, making social media a great way to stay in touch.

Additional Resources

- **Best Practices for Increasing Meaningful Youth Participation in Collaborative Team Planning**
  Janet Walker, Rujuta Gaonkar, Laurie Powers, Barbara Friesen, Beckie Child, Ariel Holman, Bradley Belka, and colleagues
  https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbAMPYouthParticipation.pdf

- **Strengthening Communities through Youth Participation**
  Shepherd Zeldin, Julie Petrokubi, Jessica Collura, Linda Camino, and Jennifer Skolaski
  http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/19326/2/Strengthen.pdf

- **Community Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond**
  Martha Fedorowicz
  https://www.urban.org/research/publication/community-engagement-during-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond

- **The Guide to Remote Community Engagement**
  What Works Cities and Bloomberg Cities
  https://medium.com/the-guide-to-remote-community-engagement

- **Youth-Centred Design Toolkit**
  One Youth Canada
  https://www.ycdtoolkit.com

- **Research Involving Children**
  University of Pittsburgh, Human Research Protection Office
  https://www.irb.pitt.edu/content/research-involving-children

Is Youth Engagement a Right Fit?

OUTCOMES

What are your project outcomes?

TOOLS/OPPORTUNITIES	CONSIDERATIONS	SUSTAINABILITY
▪ Youth community advisory board ▪ Civic action and service learning ▪ Surveys ▪ Health impact assessment ▪ Research evaluation ▪ Cultural organizing ▪ Education data collection ▪ Youth development programming ▪ Institutional decisionmaking ▪ Media creation ▪ Community need assessments ▪ Strategic planning ▪ Event attendance or participation ▪ Internships	▪ **Adult support** should show young people respect and equality and be clear and inclusive. ▪ **An intentionally youth-friendly environment** removes barriers to youth engagement (e.g., convenient meeting locations and times). ▪ **Proper communication** is making the work accessible to young people and avoiding technical jargon. ▪ **Opportunities to complete meaningful tasks** avoid tokenizing young people. ▪ **Opportunities to learn and use new skills** foster youth development.	▪ If a project spans a long period, **be cognizant of participant "age-out."** ▪ **Cross-organization involvement** from schools or nonprofits can enhance project outreach. ▪ **Having young people first express interest** in the project helps ensure continued interest. ▪ **Alumni programs** are tools to provide a pathway for continued project involvement and leadership building.

OUTCOMES

How can your project include youth voices given the above considerations and your intended or required outcomes?

Acknowledgments

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