



Wellstream

The Canadian Centre for Innovation in Child & Youth
Mental Health & Substance Use

How to Engage Youth in Policy Decision Making: A Synopsis of the Evidence and Key Recommendations



Background

Youth engagement is the meaningful participation and sustainable involvement of young people in decisions that affect their lives and their broader community, including involvement in policy decision making. It is recognized internationally as a best practice. Aligned with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which articulates young peoples' right to be heard, the UN World Programme of Action for Youth declared the full social and political engagement of youth, including participation in economic, social and political decision making, as one of its priority calls for action.¹ This call highlights youths' ability to develop solutions to the social issues they face and supports initiatives that strengthen their

capacity to do so. Youth engagement in policy decision making is receiving attention across sectors and there is broad agreement that including youth in processes to inform policy can yield positive results.²⁻⁴ However, youth engagement requires careful planning to mitigate risks, including tokenism and related harms, and the potential for increasing inequities owing to a lack of diversity among those involved. To best position for success, development and implementation of a youth engagement strategy should leverage best practices evidence and involve organizational reflection and preparation prior to youth participation.

Youth Engagement Strategies⁵

- Youth Advisory
- Youth-led projects
- Involvement at leadership decision making tables
- Mentorship



Youth engagement is the meaningful participation and sustainable involvement of young people in decisions that affect their lives and their broader community.⁶

“

...a lot of youth, myself included, kind of feel like nothing I say really matters cause it's all adults in charge. But actually realizing that we can change things...was very empowering

Agenda Gap Participant

”

Planning for Meaningful Engagement

	ENGAGEMENT TYPE	WHAT THIS MEANS	EXAMPLE	POSSIBLE EFFECTS ON YOUTH
 STOP!	Manipulation	Young people are directed by adults, without genuine opportunities to provide input.	A young person is given a script to speak on behalf of an organization but is not supported to understand the issue at hand.	DISENGAGEMENT AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES Young people may feel: • anxious • uninformed • belittled • pressured • drained • frustrated • unheard • purposeless
	Decoration	A young person is invited to the table, but given little to no purpose, influence or decision-making power.	A young person is asked to join a team of adults, but not given space or tools to contribute meaningfully. The adults may occasionally ask for the youth's ideas but do all the actual planning and implementation themselves.	
	Tokenism	A young person is included for the sake of saying youth are included—especially those with diverse identities.	A young person with a diverse identity (e.g. a queer youth or indigenous youth) is asked to sit on an advisory committee and is expected, by default, to speak for all young people that share their identity.	
 PROCEED WITH CARE	Informed	Young people are kept aware of programs, services or policy changes without contributing to the process.	Young people receive information about changes via newsletters, presentations or emails.	POSITIVE OR NEUTRAL Depending on how they're engaged, young people may feel heard and valued, or only selectively heard and under-used.
	Consulted	Young people have roles, provide input and are told how their input impacts adult decision-making.	Adult staff write a document and send to young person to review and make suggestions for changes. Adults provide feedback on how and why young people's suggestions were or weren't used.	
 GO!	Co-development & Partnership	Young people jointly develop all projects, services and processes that impact or interest them. They have the opportunity to lead activities, share in decision-making and work as equal partners with adults. Young people and adults have authentic relationships (genuine, trusting, collaborative) in which youth expertise and experience is respected and valued.	Adults support young people to co-facilitate meetings or events or to co-create a safe, inclusive and accessible space Multiple young people sit on a board, providing advice, direction and input on strategic plans, policies and programs alongside adults.	POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT Young people may experience: • increased abilities • sense of purpose • confidence • empowerment • sense of belonging • motivation to contribute meaningfully

Adapted from The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child & Youth Mental Health, *Youth Engagement Traffic Light*.⁷

Benefits of Youth Engagement

Benefits of youth engagement in policy and other decision making are well documented and span all socioecological levels.^{[8-19](#)}

- Enhances sense of commitment to youth and community goals
- Heightens job satisfaction
- Increases workplace health
- Improves intergenerational relationships
- Increases connection to community

- Builds protective factors
- Develops life and citizenship skills
- Enhances knowledge and competence
- Lowers rates of substance use, violence and risky sexual behaviours
- Provides a venue to exercise youth rights
- Increases educational achievement and completion
- Promotes sense of school safety

- Improves understanding of youth needs in their communities
- Enhances program and policy applicability, implementation, and results
- Strengthens utilization and expands reach
- Expands knowledge, skills and creative resources for planning and decision making

- Increases decision making and solution relevancy
- Enhances sociopolitical engagement
- Promotes equity

[Meaningful Youth Engagement] requires careful planning to mitigate potential risks, including tokenism and related harms, and the exacerbation of inequities through the privileging of youth with individual social advantage or capacities for engagement.



Implications for Policy and Practice

To realize the full benefits of youth engagement, organizations must employ best practices at each socioecological level.²⁰ Organizational buy-in for youth engagement is key for achieving the broad benefits associated with these practices :²¹⁻³²

INDIVIDUAL

- Support meaningful youth engagement by identifying and addressing barriers (e.g., transportation, food, honorarium, location)
- Work towards equitable engagement by creating opportunities for youth who have historically been excluded
- Build skills and knowledge among participating youth and adults by providing orientation and training

GROUP

- Appropriately resource (time, training, space, facilitation) youth engagement efforts to enable caring developmental relationships
- Create safe spaces using a trauma and violence-informed approach
- Utilize a strengths-based orientation that facilitates co-learning
- Anticipate diverse styles of communication and recognize that they do not imply disrespect or disinterest
- Establish clear, collective goals
- Define roles and responsibilities for both youth and adults
- Recognize and challenge stereotyping or negative assumptions about youth

SETTING

- Share power to ensure there are opportunities for authentic and meaningful contributions
- Support and protect the youth engagement process within larger organizational structures

ORGANIZATION/SYSTEM

- Adopt language that positions youth as assets
- Communicate the youth engagement process as critical for growth and change
- Provide youth and adults with opportunities for capacity building and advancement (e.g., create new roles for youth engagement and support)

“ One of the [other adult allies] in that group said something about how 'youth are the experts and they need to be heard first and foremost and then the rest of us [adults]...should just try our best to make their ideas come to life'...it was just very shocking in the best way possible

Agenda Gap Participant

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HOW TO CITE THIS DOCUMENT

Akinnawonu T., Bidoyan S., Mancuso R., Martens H., Mooney S., Quickstad J., Scarrett S., McGuinness L., Shaffer B., Kruz T., Wandolo J., Jenkins E. (2023). *How to Engage Youth in Policy Decision Making: A Synopsis of the Evidence and Key Recommendations*. Vancouver: Wellstream: The Canadian Centre for Innovation in Child & Youth Mental Health & Substance Use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to all of the Agenda Gap youth collaborators, whose wisdom has informed and strengthened our understanding of meaningful youth engagement.