

# Evidence Brief

## Five Strategies to Increase a Sense of Belonging Among Youth & Challenges and Strategies for Engaging Rural Youth

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "sense of belonging," "sense of community," "youth," "rural youth," "youth programs," "best practices," and "strategies."

### Key Messages

1. Researchers and authors writing on the topic of belonging frequently argue that **a sense of belonging is a catalyst for healthier, safer, and more cohesive communities** (Community Foundations of Canada, 2016; Cross & Lauzon, 2015). People who feel a sense of belonging to their communities are more likely to have better mental health, have a more positive sense of self, participate in community activities, and take on leadership roles (Community Foundations of Canada, 2016; Cross & Lauzon, 2015; Evans, 2007). Youth programs have a particularly important role to play in helping to create a sense of belonging among youth, as they support peer-to-peer interactions and have the capacity to connect youth to other community resources and events (Cross & Lauzon, 2015). When youth feel that they are participating in – and are connected to – their communities, their sense of belonging will increase.
2. Much of the research on the topic of community and belonging suggests that **people are more likely to feel drawn to groups in which they have a sense of power or influence** (Evans, 2007; Corriero & Walker, 2004). Unfortunately, many youth find themselves in contexts where they have little to no power or influence (Evans, 2007). This is among the top reasons that youth often feel they do not belong in their communities (Kitchen et al., 2012; Corriero & Walker, 2004; Christie & Lauzon, 2014). One of the most commonly cited ways to increase young people's sense of belonging and community is **meaningful youth engagement**.

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health defines **youth engagement** as "a whole community approach to mental health care and an active and

ongoing process that embeds youth voice at all levels. It is a set of practices that offer youth opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with adults, learn skills, work on issues they're passionate about, and contribute to social change” (2016; see Definition section of online toolkit). Youth engagement has multiple levels, ranging from *manipulation* – in which adults give youth direction on what to do without informing youth why they are doing it – to *youth-adult partnerships* – in which there is equal decision-making power and influence, with youth and adults working together towards a common goal (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

When youth are meaningfully engaged, they are consulted about issues that will affect them, and they feel their voices are heard, both of which are critical to a sense of belonging (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

## Summary of Evidence

Here are **five strategies** to increase a sense of belonging among youth:

### **1. Create space for youth voice, and opportunities to integrate direction from young people.**

This is a key component of meaningful youth engagement. Youth need to know that their opinions are valid and taken seriously. Often, young people’s opinions are noted, but no actions are taken to incorporate these opinions in the planning and development of programs (YouthREX, 2018; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Evans, 2007). If you seek out youth perspectives, you need to incorporate these perspectives (YouthREX, 2018). If it is not possible to do so, you need to let youth know about these limitations so that young people don’t feel as though they are being ignored (YouthREX, 2018).

### **2. Foster positive relationships.**

Positive youth-adult relationships within both youth programs and the wider community are key to fostering a sense of belonging among young people (Evans, 2007; Cross & Lauzon, 2015). Youth workers need to develop genuine and trusting relationships with youth in order for young people to feel comfortable attending programs. Youth workers and other adult allies need to be fully committed to deeply caring for and respecting youth, and should find a balance between holding youth accountable and being mindful of the difficult circumstances with which they may be dealing (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

### **3. Create safe spaces for youth to hang out.**

When youth congregate in public spaces, they can be made to feel as though they are not welcome, or that their age confers a ‘bad reputation’ (Leyshon, 2011; Evans, 2007; Christie & Lauzon, 2014). Youth need spaces where they can hang out with other youth and feel comfortable fully expressing

themselves, without fear of being excluded or mocked. A good way to minimize these fears is to constantly interrupt hurtful and inappropriate comments. Spaces that are inclusive of youth should strive to offer hours dedicated for use by youth only (Maxwell, 2015).

#### **4. Create opportunities for youth to engage in sports.**

Sports is one of the most commonly cited ways to help foster a sense of belonging among youth (Community Foundations of Canada, 2016; Corriero & Walker, 2004). Being part of a team creates a sense of belonging, so youth programs should consider incorporating a sports element.

#### **5. Collaborate with other community organizations.**

Partnering with other community organizations, such as schools and local organizations, is also key to creating a sense of belonging for youth (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Community Foundations of Canada, 2016; Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, 2014). These partnerships, when they are about moving towards a common goal, will help youth feel they are actively participating in and contributing to the wider community (Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, 2014; Cross & Lauzon, 2015).

### **Rural Youth**

Rural areas are frequently conceptualized as being particularly close-knit communities; however, in fact, they may not offer this perceived sense of belonging. Although the strategies outlined above are relevant for engaging and creating a sense of belonging among both urban and rural youth, we acknowledge that youth living in rural areas have their own unique realities and challenges, many of which contribute to feelings of isolation and marginalization. In order to foster a sense of belonging among rural youth, these challenges need to be addressed. Below, we identify **three key challenges and suggested strategies** to minimize these challenges.

#### **a) Geographic Distance**

Long distances between homes and service providers in rural areas can result in experiences of isolation and marginalization (Leyshon, 2011; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016). Youth may not own or have access to vehicles, and public transport in rural areas can be sparse (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

##### **Suggested Strategies:**

- Whenever possible, move activities closer to where youth live or spend time (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).
- Consider reaching out to drivers in the community who transport others to see if these services may be extended to youth (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).
- Consider costs of transportation and whether this can be built into the budget of your

program (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

### **b) Small and Dispersed Populations**

Rural areas have small and dispersed populations, which can make social interactions more challenging, and youth feel excluded from the community (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016). Youth may be hesitant to attend programs in communities where they are known, depending on their needs, because of concerns about outing themselves (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

#### **Suggested Strategies:**

- Be mindful of privacy concerns and how you will navigate these concerns before engaging youth (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).
- Create opportunities for youth to interact with one another. Programs that involve fun activities, or even just time to relax and hang out, give youth a chance to connect with peers in their communities.

### **c) Limited Facilities**

Youth living in rural areas pointed out that there are not always enough facilities to provide services for young people. Similarly, youth living in rural areas often feel that there are not enough places for them to gather and hang out, resulting in feelings of marginalization and disconnectedness (Leyshon, 2011; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Community Foundations of Canada, 2016; Corriero & Walker, 2004).

#### **Suggested Strategies:**

- Collaborate with schools and other local organizations to inquire about available spaces that can be used for youth programs.
- Consider using technology to connect with youth who are living in remote or difficult-to-access areas (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).

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