

Evidence Brief

Practices for Engaging & Empowering Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched the YouthREX Library for Youth Work and Google Scholar using the following key terms: “youth-led,” “leadership,” “programs,” and “engagement.”

Summary of Evidence: Six Promising Practices to Engage and Empower Youth to Lead Programming and Build a Youth-Led Program

1. Acknowledge youth’s strengths, skills, and lived experience.

Recognize that young people are experts about their own communities and focus on issues that matter to them. This approach can help organizations identify community needs while promoting meaningful, long-term engagement. Ideally, programmers should respect the knowledge that youth bring to the table, while also providing the support they need to build leadership capacity (Glass, 2018). Be mindful of young people’s diverse strengths and offer mentorship opportunities to ensure they feel comfortable in their new roles.

2. Meet youth “where they are” – and provide support and accommodation.

Wheeler and Edlebeck note that “true respect in engaging young people as leaders ... often means meeting people where they are” (2006, p. 95). In order to promote empowerment, organizations should ensure that youth have the tools they need to be full, informed participants. Consider barriers youth may face and offer support to address these challenges – for instance, make meetings youth-friendly by being mindful of transportation needs, time, language, and working styles. Recognize that youth may have many competing demands on their time and commit to being flexible and open-minded. If possible, consider using an ‘open doors’ approach: “be flexible and open-minded to respectfully accommodate youth’s unique, diverse needs and wants” (Iwasaki, 2015, p. 14).

3. Create a safe space where all young people have room to participate in multiple ways.

Research shows that a non-judgmental and inclusive environment is key to fostering youth engagement and leadership. Make space for a diversity of perspectives – consider ethnic, racial, and socio-economic differences, as well as lived experience and academic performance (Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health [PJCSH], 2013). Acknowledge that youth have

different motivations for getting involved – for example, an honorarium, community service requirements or a desire to make a difference. Create different avenues for participation to make use of young people’s unique talents.

4. Engage young people early on.

Young people are often brought in after the initial stages of program planning and development. In order to embody the values of ‘youth-led’ programming, organizations should involve youth early on in the process. This model facilitates meaningful engagement and builds a sense of ownership, which in turn reinforces young people’s commitment to the program (YouthREX, 2018). Make young people equal partners by working together to set program goals and create strategy (PJCSH, 2013). If conducting preliminary research, consider using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach.

5. Establish shared objectives, values, and principles.

Make time to find out what motivated young people to join the program, and what they are hoping to achieve and how (PJCSH, 2013). At the outset, organizations should bring stakeholders together to establish shared objectives, values, and principles. It is important to ‘check assumptions’ and ensure mutual understanding. What does a ‘youth-led’ program look like? What are the roles of adults in a youth-led initiative? Organizations should ensure that roles, responsibilities, and ‘ground rules’ are clearly defined at the start of the program (Larson, Walker & Pearce, 2005).

6. Define adult roles and level of input.

Research shows that youth development programs are more effective when adults play an active role – for example, by serving as mentors and facilitators, or providing structure (Larson, Walker & Pearce, 2005). Remember that youth-led initiatives can also benefit from adult input. Bring stakeholders together at the outset to define adult roles and level of engagement (see #5). Create an open-minded environment that fosters *mutual learning*.

Organizations should ensure that adults receive proper training, keeping in mind that well-meaning non-participation can be perceived as disinterested, uncaring, and unsupportive (PJCSH, 2013). For example, consider the use of ‘balancing techniques’: posing guided questions and providing structure when needed (Larson, Walker & Pearce, 2005). Ideally, adults should create a ‘channel of engagement’ by challenging youth as well as offering guidance and support when needed (Pearce & Larson, 2006).

Summary of Evidence: Three Good Practices to Engage Youth in New Programs

1. Engage young people in ways that work for them.

Research shows that the most effective programs are relevant to young people's interests and include developmentally appropriate activities (Deschenes et al., 2010; Strobel et al., 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006). Matching program attributes to youth needs is a key recruitment practice. Consider developing programs with specific cohorts in mind – for preteens, offer a high level of autonomy in the design of the project; to attract older youth, be conscious of future-oriented goals. Pearce and Larson (2006) suggest that when programs effectively 'trigger' youth's interest, participants come to identify with the program's cause and shared goals become personally meaningful.

2. Recognize and address barriers to participation.

Organizations should consider the challenges that youth with intersecting identities may face, and provide support to addressing challenges that arise – for example, provide food, transportation, flexible meeting times, stipends, etc. (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016). Remember that this project is not the only interest or commitment youth have; match the level and intensity of their responsibilities in your project with their life circumstances (Council of Europe, 2008; mindyourmind, n.d.).

3. Use youth-friendly outreach methods.

When conducting program outreach, choose youth-friendly communication methods and reach out to youth where they hang out. Since youth tend to value "people, not programs," peers and staff are often the most effective recruiters (Strobel et al., 2008; Deschenes et al., 2010). Consider using 'shoulder-tapping' and word-of-mouth recruitment methods, especially if you are interested in reaching youth who are less likely to participate (PJCSH, 2013).

Organizations should consider employing young people's 'insider' perspectives to produce youth-led marketing strategies. A good example of a creative outreach strategy is the Youth Action Crew (YAC) project, an initiative in which participants created and disseminated free neighbourhood maps of youth development programs and informal places (Saito, 2006).

References

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