QUALITY STANDARD FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

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Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child & Youth Mental Health
Centre d'excellence de l'Ontario en santé mentale des enfants et des adolescents

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Contents

Introduction

Consistently delivering a seamless experience and strong outcomes — the care children and youth need, when they need it, how they need it — is key to helping young people in Ontario grow up with good mental health. The 2016 Annual Report of the Ontario Auditor General highlighted a range of opportunities to improve the child and youth mental health system.[1] Woven through the recommendations was a clear reminder that we must focus on the experience and needs of children, youth and families. And there is no one better to tell us what they need than children, youth and families themselves.

Evidence shows that meaningfully engaging youth and families in the child and youth mental health sector can have significant positive impacts on service experience and outcomes. With a voice and an active role in treatment planning and service delivery, Ontario's children, youth and families have their lived experience and context incorporated into their care. This leads to improved outcomes,[2] better relationships with healthcare professionals delivering care,[3] a stronger sense that needs are being met through services delivered and greater satisfaction with care.[5,6,7,8] When youth and families are engaged in their own care, they experience improved psychological well-being, behavioural functioning and

About the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health

We work to identify our sector's most pressing knowledge gaps and close them with the best available evidence. We make sure that knowledge is accessible, understandable and useful for everyone working to improve mental health outcomes for the province's children, youth and families. We coach agencies to make meaningful changes that systematically improve the quality and accessibility of child and youth mental health services in Ontario. Working closely with youth, families, service providers and decision makers, we help ensure that our sector is equipped with the information and know-how required to deliver high-quality services and to pursue continuous quality improvement.

While developed in a mental health context in Ontario, this quality standard consist of principles-based quality statements that have broader relevance. They can be applied across sectors, in different settings and other locations, to the of benefit of many more children, youth and families.

quality of life,[8,9] and services overall are more cost-effective.[9, 10,11] Through engagement, youth experience positive changes to their personal identity and efficacy; they build better critical thinking skills, teamwork and commitment to community service[12] and develop enhanced leadership skills.[13]

Youth engagement and family engagement are essential drivers of excellence across all aspects of the system.[14] Collectively, we are most efficient and effective when we work not just for children, youth and families, but with them, every step of the way.

What are quality standards?

Pursuing excellence demands that we define it. Together with youth, families, clinicians and researchers, the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre) develops quality standards that support consistent and effective child and youth mental health services across Ontario.

Quality standards are essential to a system that is accountable and constantly improving. They are also central to ensuring that Ontario children, youth and families access and receive consistent high-quality mental health services wherever they are within the province.

Quality standards consist of several quality statements, or principles, that describe what high quality looks like, based on evidence.[15] None of the statements stand alone. Rather, the statements work together to make up a cohesive quality standard. Evidence comes from many sources: the research literature, the experiences of youth and families and the perspectives of service providers.

Quality standards include best practices that describe how high-quality services can happen.[15] They also include indicators to show progress or the impact of these practices. Tools and resources are provided to guide implementation, evaluation and ongoing improvements in applying the quality standards.

Quality standards complement accreditation standards and clinical practice guidelines from professional bodies. Together, these standards and guidelines provide the way to have the best mental health outcomes for everyone involved in the child and youth mental health system.

For more information on quality standards for child and youth mental health, contact cymhstandards@cheo.on.ca.

This standard, like many quality standards, was developed in a context and from an evidence base that largely reflects a Western worldview. We recognize the importance of continually engaging with diverse voices and ever-broadening our sources of knowledge as we support the implementation of this standard and refine it over time.

About this quality standard

What is youth engagement?

In a broad sense, youth engagement is about the meaningful and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity focused outside the self. Full engagement consists of a cognitive component (involving beliefs, knowledge and thoughts), an affective component (involving feelings and emotions), and a behavioural component (involving one's behaviour), also known as "head, heart and feet," as well as spirit.[16] Youth engagement in child and youth mental health means empowering all young people as valuable partners in addressing and making decisions that affect them personally or that they believe to be important.[17] Youth engagement happens on a continuum, from youth as passive recipients of services to engaging activities that recognize youth as equal partners in their care[18] (see Figure 1).

youth: a developmental transition; a fluid notion depending on context rather than a fixed age group. Youth may be defined differently by funders, cultures, organizations, communities and self.

Youth engagement is grounded in a set of guiding principles for working with young people, to ensure that engagement is authentic and meaningful. The principles include: valuing youth as community assets,[19] committing to participatory leadership,[20] building authentic relationships, striving for health equity,[21] meeting youth where they are at,[22] using a whole community approach[21] and putting safety first.[18]

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework further grounds this standard and is at the core of youth engagement.[23, 24, 25] PYD involves creating opportunities for youth to develop positive relationships and acquire the knowledge and skills they need to make successful transitions to adulthood. PYD is a whole community approach and focuses on resilience and on building the protective factors in a young person's environment to help them overcome adversity.

There is a continuum of youth engagement practices, a concept that is visually represented in an adaptation of Hart's Ladder[26] (see Figure 1). The youth engagement traffic light, co-developed by members of the Centre's youth advisory council, uses the metaphor of a traffic light to illustrate that there are some "engagement" activities that are actually quite disengaging (and should therefore be avoided) while there are others that should be pursued with caution. Co-development and partnership appear next to the green light to show that these are the best forms of engagement and lead to the best outcomes.

Tokenism, manipulation and decoration are negative forms of engagement and are especially detrimental in youth engagement.

Why do we need this quality standard?

Much work has been done to advance youth engagement across the province such as the work of our Centre, The New Mentality and the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement. Many of Ontario's community-based child and youth mental health agencies have implemented youth engagement practices in their communities.[27]

Still, there is considerable inconsistency between individual service providers, services and agencies with how youth engagement is understood and practiced in the child and youth mental health sector. There is still work to do to ensure that children, youth and families receive the best care and outcomes no matter where in the province they seek care.

Establishing a quality standard supports consistent practices for youth engagement. It formalizes youth engagement practices and expectations for the system and validates the lived experience of youth who engage at the system level. A quality standard also serves to provide a baseline of measurement across the province where one does not exist and challenges us as a sector to continue to improve.

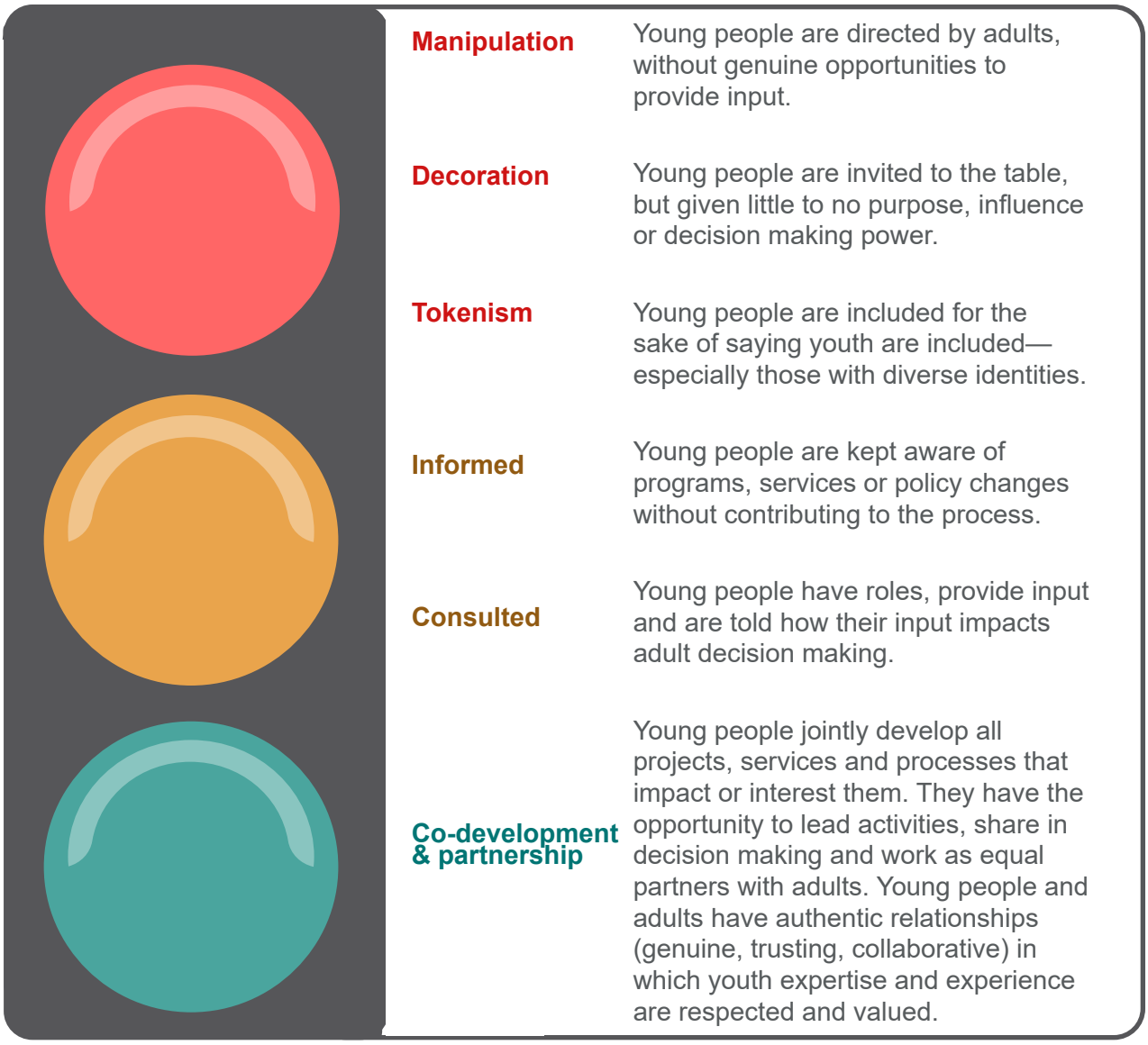


Figure 1: Youth engagement traffic light, co-developed by members of the Centre's youth advisory council and inspired by Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation.[26]

What is the scope of this standard?

Youth engagement can occur along a continuum and across three levels.[28] Youth engagement at the level of personal care and health decisions is focused on the relationship between youth and health care professionals and improving health outcomes for children, youth and families. Engagement within an organization is focused on improving programs and services or improving organizational policies and governance. Engagement at the system level is focused on improvements beyond a single organization.

The quality statements in this standard describe youth engagement at the system level (that is, beyond the delivery of care or improving programs) and at the highest level of the continuum (youth-adult partnerships). This quality standard is relevant to efforts that improve services involving many organizations in a community and efforts that improve the transition or coordination of services across different agencies or sectors.

Partners in youth engagement at the system level include (but are not limited to) other youth, families, service providers, child and youth mental health leaders, cross-sectoral representatives from other areas (such as education, justice, social services, etc.), communities, community organizations and many others. This quality standard describes critical aspects of engagement and goes hand-in-hand with the quality standard for family engagement.

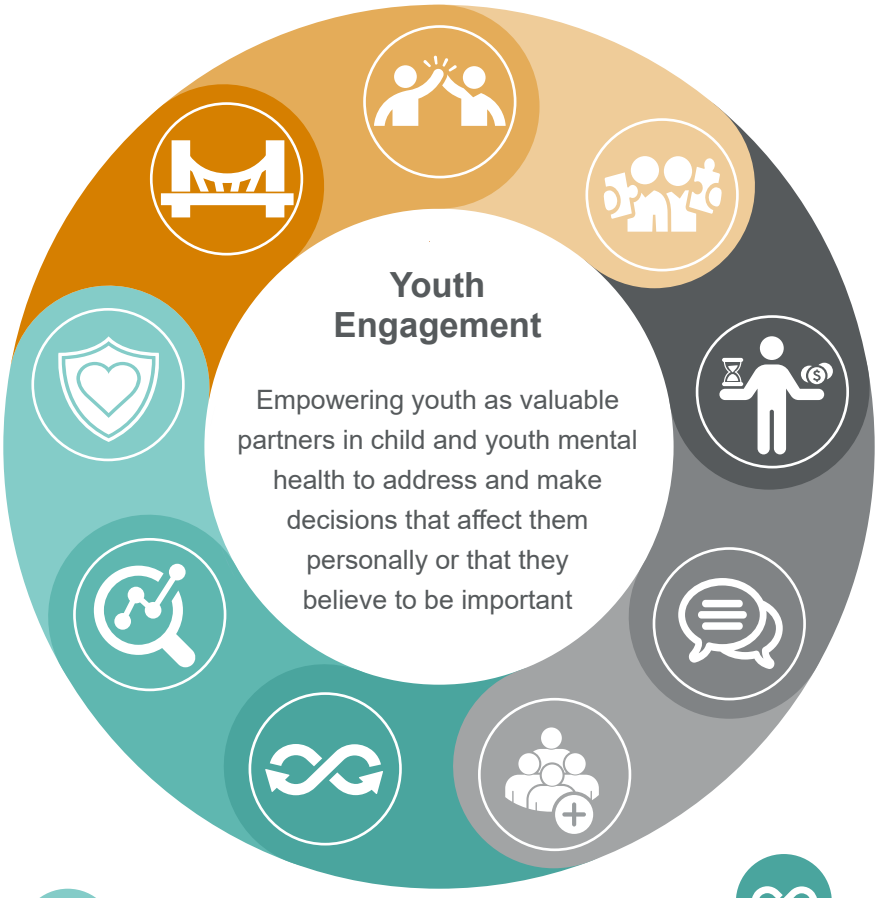
How was this standard developed?

The Centre co-developed this quality standard for youth engagement with an advisory group (see Appendix A) following a validated process (see Appendix B).[15] We reviewed the literature for existing standards or guidelines on youth engagement at the system level. We then identified the key areas depicting youth engagement at the high end of the continuum and drafted quality statements. We consulted a diverse group of stakeholders across Ontario through surveys and focus groups to gather feedback and revise the quality statements.

Quality Statements

The quality standard for youth engagement in child and youth mental health system planning is comprised of nine quality statements. None of these statements stand alone; they intersect and work together to form high-quality youth engagement. Those implementing the standard will need to pay active attention to all areas to ensure strong and sustainable youth engagement practices.

Each statement will be explained in greater detail in the following pages, including what it means for youth, for agencies and for system decision makers. Read on to learn more about the background and rationale of each statement area and the best practices identified through existing literature and stakeholder consultation.



Accessibility
Youth and partners work together to identify and address barriers to participation in youth engagement practices.

Authentic relationships
Youth and partners share genuine, trusting and collaborative relationships in which youth expertise and experience are respected and valued.

Co-development
Youth jointly develop all projects, services and processes that impact or interest them.

Commitment
All partners are committed to youth engagement and those in system leadership roles are accountable for embedding this commitment in system planning and improvement efforts.

Communication
Communication between all partners is timely, clear, respectful and accessible.

Diversity & inclusion
Youth engagement practices are inclusive; the diversity of engaged youth is valued and representative of the community served.

Ongoing learning
Youth and partners understand the principles of youth engagement and seek opportunities to continually increase their knowledge and skills relating to youth engagement practices and other relevant areas.

Research & evaluation
Youth and partners jointly research, evaluate and make ongoing quality improvements to youth engagement practices and other relevant projects and processes.

Safer Spaces
Youth and partners co-create and regularly check in to establish an environment in which everyone feels comfortable, embraced and able to speak freely.

Accessibility

Youth and partners work together to identify and address barriers to participation in youth engagement practices.

What this means for…

Youth

You can expect agencies and system decision makers to provide many engagement opportunities in places, formats and environments that you are able to reach, understand and use (i.e. that are accessible to you).

Agencies

You actively work to identify and eliminate common barriers related to access and create an environment that enables equitable access to engagement opportunities.

System decision makers

You identify and address barriers from the outset of all initiatives, incorporating accessibility into the design of all products, services and environments impacting youth engagement practices.

Background and rationale

The highest level of youth engagement involves addressing barriers to participation and creating opportunities for diverse youth to be able to engage effectively. Young people want to engage in activities that give them leadership and decision-making opportunities and build their sense of competence and empowerment. For successful youth engagement, system decision makers need to create opportunities for genuine partnership, which

means meeting youth where they are and actively working to create an environment that ensures equitable access.[29]

Common barriers that prevent equitable access to engagement opportunities include geography, income-level, ability, timing and language.[30,31,32] Some barriers could be specifically related to relationships between youth and adults, such as sense of trust, transparency and overcoming adult and youth stereotypes.[30,33] There is an inherent and implied power imbalance between youth and adults that can be a barrier to partnership. This might include the perception that agendas are created and driven by adults and the potential for intimidation.[30,34] Other barriers may be related to the group structure or infrastructure, such as not having enough funding to ensure equal opportunities, staff and youth turnover, the complexity of the issues and inadequate youth representation.[30,34,35,36]

Accessibility intersects with diversity and inclusion. Those who already experience stigma and marginalization may experience additional barriers to engagement. It is important to recognize this and work with young people to actively explore ways to overcome those barriers. While the research literature is currently limited, some literature suggests that adult allies, increased cultural sensitivity and other approaches can incentivize engagement and ensure greater accessibility for diverse youth.[33,37]

Best practices

- System partners work to understand, monitor and address the different types of barriers that prevent meaningful youth engagement.

Practical examples:

- Work with young people to identify the barriers that exist for them. Consider hosting focus groups, consultations and/or one-on-one conversations.

- What would support their engagement within your organization or community? What might be getting in the way?

- Work with young people to identify what people/ voices/perspectives might be missing from important conversations. Discuss which voices might be missing from your engagement activities.
  - Does the group of currently engaged youth represent your community?
  - How can you reach or amplify perspectives of youth whose perspectives haven't always been heard?

Best practices

- There are mechanisms to monitor and reduce barriers to youth engagement processes.

Practical examples:

- Work with young people to co-create solutions that address and reduce identified barriers.
  - At the beginning of the engagement opportunity, outline resources and accommodations that are available to young people in a document that can be updated and disseminated with ease.
  - Communicate which resources and accommodations are available to young people, so the onus is not on the youth to ask for them.
  - Consider the different types of accommodations you might need when bringing together a group of young people during activities (e.g. documents offered in various languages and reading levels, a room set-up that promotes accessibility).
  - Consider using a decision support tool to identify how a program, policy or similar initiative will impact population groups in different ways (such as Ontario's Health Equity Impact Assessment tool).

- Plan meetings that accommodate young people's schedules (e.g. outside of school hours).
- Provide transportation or cover the cost of transportation (e.g. provide bus tickets, taxi chits).
- Hold check-in meetings regularly to ensure there are opportunities to address barriers that might not have been apparent at the beginning of a project.
- Consider using an evaluation tool to evaluate your partnership with youth.

Definitions

accessibility: the design of products, devices, services or environments for people of differing needs (for example, newcomers with limited English or those with a disability).[38]

barrier: a circumstance or obstacle that separates people from other people, places or things. Barriers come in many forms — including attitudes, policies and programs, as well as physical, social, communication or transportation obstacles — and may even be unintentional.[38]

competence: an individual's capacity and demonstrated ability to understand and appropriately and effectively do the tasks they could reasonably be expected to do based on their education and training.[39]

empowerment: the process of enhancing the capacities or abilities of individuals to influence or make informed choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.[40]

equitable: fair; not unduly benefiting or hindering any particular person(s) or group(s). Note: Not the same thing as equal, as in even or balanced. For example, equitable access may mean providing additional resources or supports for youth with certain barriers so they can access engagement opportunities as easily as youth who do not face those same barriers.[42]

Authentic relationships

Youth and partners share genuine, trusting and collaborative relationships in which youth expertise and experience are respected and valued.

What this means for…

Youth

You are treated as an equal partner in engagement initiatives. Your expertise is valued, and you have a voice in decisions that impact you. You understand how decisions are being made and how your expertise is being used to guide them.

Agencies

You treat and value youth as equals partners. You formally define roles together and follow them, ensuring your organization's decision making processes are transparent.

System decision makers

You collaborate with youth when developing policies that impact them. You value their expertise and include their perspective. You are transparent, ensuring youth understand how decisions are being made and how their expertise is being integrated.

Background and rationale

Meaningful youth engagement is demonstrated through authentic, collaborative and respectful relationships[41] in which youth are empowered "as valuable partners in addressing and making decisions about issues that affect them personally or that they believe to be important."[17] There are a number of ways to engage youth at the organizational or system level, including youth advisory

Adults and youth must recognize the source of their power and work hard to equalize any power imbalances whenever possible and communicate clearly when they cannot.

boards, positions for young people on governance boards, partnerships between youth-led groups and other stakeholders to drive policy change and employing young people as youth leaders and ongoing advisors in youth-serving organizations.[13,43,44,45,46,47,48]

Youth also benefit from supportive adult relationships. Adults need to take the lead and be available to young people when they need to debrief their experiences or ideas.[49,50] Both adults and youth must also recognize the source of their power and work hard to equalize any power imbalances whenever possible and communicate clearly where they cannot.[51]

Emerging research suggests that involving youth in organizational decision making can result in positive outcomes for youth[52,53,54] and organizations.[41] The literature also shows that partnerships with youth are more successful when youth have choices and options to be involved, roles and expectations are clearly set out, all partners have the time and are prepared to engage, the practice of collective mentoring or ongoing learning is observed and the environment reinforces these practices.[55]

Best practices

- Youth and partners build and maintain mutually beneficial trust-based relationships that are evident in their interactions. All partners acknowledge differences in power and position and strive to challenge the processes and habits that uphold these differences.

Practical examples:

- Identify adult allies to mentor, coach and support youth to engage in formal and informal roles within the organization or community/system work. Consider offering a specific workshop or training, on allyship for the adults identified, so that they are all working with the same core principles as allies. Here are some evidence-based tips and considerations for adult allies.

- Offer to meet with young people separately before bringing them together in larger meetings.

Create space for both formal and informal check-ins (e.g. before or after meetings).

- Work with young people to ensure they feel prepared and supported to participate.
- Create space for both formal and informal check-ins (e.g. before or after meetings). Here are some tips for hosting events with young people and family members.

Best practices

- Partners make a concerted effort to ensure all decision making processes are transparent to young people.

Practical examples:

- Be transparent about the type of engagement (i.e. co-develop, consult, inform) being considered for specific activities and how those decisions are being made.
- Be clear on expectations for how and when youth will end their engagement role in the organization or community, or transition through their roles and responsibilities.
- Develop a plan that outlines opportunities for mentoring youth.

Definitions

decision-making: process of collecting information, establishing selection criteria, developing possible alternatives or options and evaluating the most appropriate option based on selection criteria.[56]

partnership: collaborative relationship between two or more people. People or organizations in a partnership collaborate to advance their mutual interests. This involves sharing individual skills and resources, while working together towards a common goal.[57]

Co-development

Youth jointly develop all activities and processes that impact or interest them.

What this means for…

Youth

Your expertise is valued, and you have the opportunity to co-develop where you wish alongside other partners, from projects and services to evaluations and system priorities.

Agencies

You regard youth as experts and provide opportunities and openings for them to partner where they wish to, ensuring that the co-development approach is woven into all work, and especially youth engagement processes.

System decision makers

You model co-development, partnering with youth in the shared development of policies, system-level priorities and funding and research decisions.

Background and rationale

Youth should be regarded as experts in informing decisions from the outset, co-developing a shared understanding of the problems, priorities and possibilities.

Meaningful youth engagement is built on the premise of "nothing about us without us."[58] Youth should be active leaders in all initiatives and regarded as experts in informing decisions from the beginning, co-developing a shared understanding of problems, priorities and possibilities. The process of co-development enables youth and partners to reflect on their experiences, define a common purpose, share in decision making, work together

to identify improvement priorities, implement changes and jointly reflect on achievements with a collective sense of accountability.[59]

Youth can and should be involved in co-developing, implementing and evaluating improvements of specific mental health programs and services.[60,61] At the organizational level, youth can help determine whether the existing programs meet their needs and identify possible improvements. At the system level, youth can help define and offer advice on how to address policy changes, propose the introduction of new policies, provide input on funding decisions and implement new standards.[60,61]

The level of engagement in the process of co-development may look and feel different depending on the setting and other factors.[60] It is essential to work with youth to match the right approach to the right situation at the right time.

Best practices

- Youth share in decision making around potential changes and improvements to program delivery and system-level policy development.

Practical examples:

- Work with young people to identify areas and topics of interest to them and identify opportunities that align with these interests.
    - Encourage young people to build on interests that relate to governance or policymaking. Create opportunities to attend meetings where decisions are being made, without requiring them to take on a specific role (give them a chance to try out opportunities).
    - Create and identify specific positions in decision-making structures for youth (e.g. representatives on boards of directors).

Best practices

- Youth have a mechanism for identifying system-level issues and priorities and addressing them in collaboration with partners.

Practical examples:

- Create roles and opportunities for young people to be a part of key decisions and co-developers.
  - Be transparent about decision-making processes from the beginning. Ensure that young people are aware of how decisions are being made and ensure they are part of decision-making processes.
  - Embed youth voice within governance structures (e.g. members of working groups, advisory councils, the board of directors, steering committees).
  - Support young people to be a part of the staff hiring process (e.g. participating on a hiring committee, co-developing interview questions where appropriate).
  - Work with young people in strategic planning (e.g. co-developing performance indicators specific to youth engagement).
  - Co-develop evaluation plans, surveys and other evaluation tools.

Definitions

co-development: process of working collaboratively on a shared purpose; joint decision making; a commitment to action and collective accountability among all stakeholders.[62]

Commitment

All partners are committed to youth engagement and those in system leadership roles are accountable for embedding this commitment in system planning and improvement efforts.

What this means for…

Youth

You see that youth engagement is supported, especially by those in leadership positions, and you feel that your engagement is valued. You feel encouraged to engage at all levels.

Agencies

Youth engagement principles are built into organizational policies, processes and activities. Leaders exemplify their commitment in strategy and resource allocation.

System decision makers

You treat youth engagement as essential, not optional. You plan and allocate funds in a way that ensures youth voice is integrated into the mental health system.

Background and rationale

Practicing meaningful engagement may mean a substantial shift in the mindset and processes of an organization or community. Youth must know their involvement is valued and that their contributions are taken seriously and acted upon.[51]

This requires dedication and hard work as well as commitment to the vision of youth engagement and preparation to fully integrate the principles of youth engagement within an organization or community. Research studies show that the process of commitment

Those committed to youth engagement create an enabling environment by investing resources, embedding engagement practices...and otherwise encouraging a culture that fosters youth engagement.

needs to go through three stages. The first is an awareness that engagement is desirable, followed by securing the resources and skills to enable engagement to be successful and, ultimately, the development of operating procedures to maintain the new ways of working.[63]

Embedding processes for youth engagement throughout an organization and having leaders at all levels demonstrating support for youth engagement signals a strong commitment and helps make it an enduring practice.[64,65] Those committed to youth engagement create an enabling environment by investing resources, embedding engagement practices in policies and processes and otherwise encouraging a culture that fosters youth engagement.

In such an environment, youth are provided with a continuum of supports throughout the term of their engagement, including supports that might help develop young people's personal and professional capacity.[51]

Best practices

- Organizations and system level partners demonstrate commitment by ensuring targeted resources are available and provided to support and sustain youth engagement practices.

Practical examples:

- Communicate leadership commitment to youth engagement and the measures put in place to work toward meeting the standard (e.g. in the form of an email, staff meeting or a commitment document).
- Allocate resources for engagement work (e.g. budget line items in each project, staff time for youth engagement work).
- Compensate young people for their time and contributions (e.g. honoraria, gift cards) and work with young people to identify what incentives are meaningful to them.

- Build a core team that includes organizational or system-level decision makers, service providers and young people to plan, implement and oversee youth engagement collaboratively. Here's more information on developing core teams and implementation teams.
- Ensure the people involved in engagement work have a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities (e.g. terms of reference). Roles and responsibilities should be revisited regularly.

Practical examples:

- There are explicit policies and procedures in place for recruiting youth and adult allies.
    - Work with young people to co-develop a guiding document (such as a bill of rights, commitment charter, vision statement) that outlines:
    - The principles and vision to guide youth engagement in the organization or community.
- The expectations and responsibilities of staff and partners.
- Ensure recruitment policies and procedures (i.e. recruitment plan or strategy) are regularly reviewed and updated to support the recruitment and retention of youth participants, and the natural evolution of youth engagement, where ageing-out or moving on to other opportunities is a normal part of the process.
- Create a recruitment plan or strategy to support a change in adult allies. Here are some evidence-based tips and considerations for adult allies.

Definitions

commitment: willingness to persist in a course of action; a sense of obligation to stay the course; the state or quality of being dedicated to a cause, activity, etc.[66]

resources: the supply of money, materials, staff, physical facilities, attributes, capabilities and other available assets that can be used to support processes and activities.[92]

Communication

Communication between all partners is timely, transparent, respectful and accessible.

What this means for…

Youth

You are asked about your communication preferences and are able to communicate in your preferred format and style. Partners listen to what you have to say and communicate with you often.

Agencies

You ask about communication preferences and work to accommodate different formats and styles. You practice active listening and ensure clarity in your own communication.

System decision makers

You communicate regularly and consistently. You make sure that information is presented in a way that everyone can understand. You follow best practices for communication in all you do, and you have mechanisms in place to ensure two-way or multi-way communication.

Background and rationale

Good communication is central to meaningful youth engagement practice. Good communication is not merely about providing information; rather, it is a multi- way process that requires all parties to be effective listeners.[67] Accordingly, using active listening skills is critical to support the development of rapport, respect and trust.[67]

Working in partnership with youth also requires a keen awareness of the ways and places in which people of different age groups communicate. Though face-to-face interactions are effective, digital platforms and social media are changing the way youth engage with others and express themselves.[35] Being aware of these differences and adapting to them can help organizations and system decision- makers reach out to youth, improve communication and keep youth engaged.[51] There are many benefits to using social media: it offers highly interactive platforms, the ability to share information quickly and unparalleled connectivity with youth.

Regardless of the method, communication should start early and occur often throughout the engagement process. It should be deliberate, planned and clear, with a particular effort to give explanations and avoid jargon.[68]

Best practices

- Multiple accessible methods are used to communicate with young people and among all partners.

Practical examples:

- Support young people to engage in conversations fully.
    - Have adult allies connect with young people before meetings and activities to ensure that young people feel equipped and have the information they need to participate in the way they feel most comfortable (e.g. options of having their adult ally in the room, providing feedback through written format, passing when called upon).
    - Use plain language when communicating; limit the use of jargon and acronyms.
    - Ask young people how they want to receive and provide information (i.e. modes and formats).

Communication should start early and occur often. It should be deliberate, planned and clear.

- Co-develop a communication plan with young people that includes formal and informal modes of communication, stakeholders involved, timing of communication, etc.
- Co-develop organizational newsletters with young people.
- Co-develop a social media strategy with young people.
- Be transparent about the level of engagement that young people can expect (e.g. co-development, consult or inform).
- Raise awareness of engagement opportunities among young people.
    - Provide young people with examples of what engagement opportunities could look like and work with them to explore how they might want to get involved in organizational and system-level work.
    - Work with young people to think about fun and creative ways to promote engagement opportunities on social media.

Definitions

active listening: paying close attention to a conversational partner's words, repeating back key ideas and phrases from time to time to confirm one's understanding of what the person has said. Demonstrates respect for — though not necessarily agreement with — the other person's feelings and views.[69]

communication: the exchange of thoughts, messages or information between people or among a group of people, using spoken languages, body language, tone of voice and gestures. Effective communication occurs when there is a shared understanding; in other words, the message that is received and understood is the same message that was sent.[70]

Diversity and inclusion

Youth engagement practices are inclusive; the diversity of engaged youth is valued and representative of the communities served.

What this means for…

Youth

Your unique qualities, abilities and identities are embraced and valued in all engagement processes. Partners work to reduce or remove any obstacles affecting your engagement.

Agencies

You strive to meaningfully engage diverse youth. You acknowledge and work to address barriers to engagement by building strong organizational policies and practices that support diversity and inclusion.

System decision makers

You lead the way by championing diversity and inclusion, addressing barriers to youth engagement and making a concerted effort to engage diverse youth in creating policies, ensuring their contributions are valued and recognized. This is particularly important when working with marginalized and underrepresented populations.

Background and rationale

Social determinants of health and other factors can influence a person's ability to access appropriate services or engagement opportunities within the child and youth mental health system. Meaningful youth engagement processes consider the social, cultural and political

barriers[21] that may block access or hamper opportunity and strive to address them.[32] Partners also need to be aware of their own history, experiences and worldviews, and recognize how these might influence the way they engage and develop relationships with youth.[71]

Meaningful youth engagement has many benefits for youth, such as increasing their sense of community and overall resilience.[72] The benefits of youth engagement increase significantly when those engaged represent the diversity of the community served — and therefore, those likely to benefit from the engagement process — because it ensures the most accurate representation of the range of youth experiences and perspectives in that community.[51]

Individual youth cannot be expected to represent the unique views of the broader youth population, so it is important for partners to make deliberate efforts to engage diverse youth. Leadership and governance bodies must also be representative and support staff and stakeholders to understand and recognize diversity and strive for equity.[73] To be successful, diversity initiatives should use an anti-oppressive approach to practice (AOP)[74,75] and there must be adequate resources, well-trained staff and accountability mechanisms in place.[73]

Best practices

- All partners adopt an anti-oppressive practice (AOP) lens and actively use this approach to ensure diverse and inclusive processes.

Practical examples:

- Provide AOP information, training and resources to staff, youth and volunteers. The training could include:
  - Defining anti-oppression within the context of work and the community.
  - Examples of oppressive and anti-oppressive practices.

- Sources of power and how power imbalances can be addressed.
- How to develop AOP policies and how the organization will respond if they are not upheld.

Best practices

- There are strategies in place to engage youth with diverse perspectives, skills and abilities, as well as different socio-demographic characteristics.

Practical examples:

- Work with young people to understand who is living and accessing services within the community.
  - Review your organization's or community's population health data.
  - Identify voices and perspectives that are missing from current conversations.
  - Consult (formally and informally) with youth in the community to better understand their needs and challenges.
- Work with young people to find ways to reach out to those made vulnerable by the system, and work with existing local community groups and associations.
- Co-develop a recruitment policy with young people that addresses and monitors diversity and inclusion.

Definitions

anti-oppressive practice (AOP): approach that encourages diversity, prioritizes the needs and strengths of marginalized groups and works to transform structures that create inequalities.[75]

culture: shared experiences of people, including their language, values, customs, beliefs, worldviews, ways of knowing, and ways of communicating. Culturally significant factors encompass, but are not limited to race/ethnicity, religion, social class, language, disability, sexual orientation, age and gender.[76]

cultural barriers: obstacles, inconveniences and difficulties resulting from differences or misunderstanding of customs and cultural practices, including obligations towards family and notions of community, safety and gender.[32]

diversity: a broad term that refers to the variety of differences among people, often within the context of culture, education, organizations or workplaces.[77]

equity: fairness; creating equal access and opportunities; achieved by removing barriers that prevent access to mental health care or engagement opportunities, particularly barriers related to gender, race, sexual orientation, income, education and many other identities.[78]

inclusion: striving for equity and maintaining a culture where difference within the collective is embraced, respected, accepted and valued;[79] the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of participation for those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity.[77]

political barriers: legislative and institutional policies that may prevent access, opportunities, funding or other support for youth participation in organizational decision making.[32]

social barriers: constraints or inequalities imposed — because of socially constructed hierarchies of social status (based on differences including gender, ethnicity, race, religion, health, socioeconomic status, etc.) — that prevent an individual from accessing resources or opportunities or otherwise advancing their own interests.[32]

Ongoing learning

Youth and partners understand the principles of youth engagement and seek opportunities to continually increase their knowledge and skills relating to youth engagement practices and other relevant areas.

What this means for…

Youth

You are given a range of opportunities (during times and in places and ways that make sense for you) to acquire the tools, knowledge and skills to be able to engage and partner effectively at the agency or system level.

Agencies

You see youth as an asset and ensure your organization creates ongoing learning opportunities for both staff and the youth you partner with to build their knowledge and skills.

System decision makers

You make sure all partners, including youth, know what skills and knowledge are needed to engage at the system level and you work towards building the necessary preparation into system-level processes.

Background and rationale

Excellent youth engagement includes learning and reflecting about one's own engagement, about other partners' perspectives and experiences, about the issue(s)

at hand and about where and how improvements could be made.[60]

All partners need to understand the principles and philosophy of youth engagement, have opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills and feel encouraged to do so.[61] Organizations must build capacity and ensure that staff, youth and other engagement partners are prepared and supported to successfully work together. This means putting in place policies, procedures and other structures to ensure that youth and partners have the tools and resources needed for successful youth engagement.[35]

Individual aptitude, competencies, motivations, interests and needs vary greatly among youth. Organizations must create a range of engagement options and support youth as they acquire the skills required to participate in governance structures. This includes strengthening and expanding training opportunities. Training and learning opportunities for youth may focus on specific competencies (such as program evaluation), specific content areas (such as the province's mental health priorities) or general skillsets (such as public speaking).[61]

Youth-adult partnerships are also extremely valuable to ongoing learning and skill development in young people.[80] Research has shown that strong, supportive relationships are important when youth are involved in collaborative work, especially as the work becomes more complex.[81,82,83] To effectively support and facilitate effective youth engagement, partnering adults need to learn how to balance young peoples' need for autonomy and voice while providing enough guidance and emotional support.[84,85] Their training may cover topics such as positive youth development and interacting with youth on a multi-generational project team.[61]

Organizations must build capacity and ensure that staff, youth and other engagement partners are prepared and supported to successfully work together.

Best practices

- All partners are well-prepared to participate in all activities and processes, including decision making. Namely, they are aware of, and knowledgeable about, youth engagement policies and practices and other relevant topics.

Practical examples:

- Work with young people to identify their skills and knowledge needs and provide opportunities to increase their capacity (in youth engagement or other areas that your organization can support). Examples of this could include mentoring, shadowing, workshops, etc.
- Consider embracing youth-led activities when providing training to youth (e.g. include young people as co-facilitators).
- Ensure young people and adult partners or staff are aware of, and have access to, learning materials on youth engagement.
- Provide joint training for staff and youth on the inclusion of youth voice, collaboration with young people, positive youth development and youth empowerment.
- Set realistic timelines that allow the development of new skills while ensuring young people can see the project through to completion.

How can young people prepare and how can adults support them?

For more information, consult our quality statement on authentic relationships:

- Create space for formal and informal meetings (e.g. before or after meetings).
- Work with young people to make sure they feel supported and ready to participate.

Definitions

learning opportunities: coaching, training or other learning events supporting the pursuit of knowledge and skills to achieve a goal; building on strengths among individuals, organizations and communities.[62]

youth-adult partnership: an intentional relationship between young people and adults that relies on adults acknowledging and empowering the ability, perspectives, ideas and knowledge of young people throughout the relationship.[87]

Research and evaluation

Youth and partners jointly research, evaluate and make ongoing quality improvements to youth engagement practices and other relevant projects and processes.

What this means for…

Youth

You have the opportunity to develop relevant skills as an active partner in developing and carrying out research and evaluation activities. You feel empowered as an equal with a unique voice to contribute to improve processes in the child and youth mental health system and youth engagement itself.

Agencies

You have normalized co-evaluation in your practices and processes. You seek opportunities for youth to be engaged in research and evaluation activities and provide mentoring to help develop relevant skills.

System decision makers

You regularly and frequently engage young people, working jointly to develop and carry out system-level research, evaluation and improvement efforts.

Background and rationale

The highest level of youth engagement involves youth as active partners in developing and carrying out all activities, including research and evaluation. This includes ongoing evaluation of youth engagement processes in general and their own engagement experience.

Engaging youth in research and evaluation has benefits for youth, agencies and the child and youth mental health system. Young people who share their experiences and expertise improve their ability to ask the right questions, use the best language, communicate intent, ensure youth-friendly evaluation tools are used and collect accurate information to help inform decision making.[72,88,89] This results in decisions that are more useful and more effective for all stakeholders.

More importantly, involving youth in research and evaluation can equalize power imbalances between youth and adults, contribute to positive youth development, promote the growth of youth governance and build youth-community relationships.[41,72,88,90] When other partners act as mentors and allies, youth can practice and develop research and evaluation skills, including creating logic models, collecting and analyzing data, thinking critically, writing reports and lending their unique perspectives to the overall research and evaluation processes.

Best practices

- Youth are provided with training opportunities on research and evaluation processes and methods.

Practical examples:

- Provide training and ongoing learning opportunities on research and evaluation strategies to staff and young people. Look for youth-specific program and evaluation supports such as those provided by YouthREX.

Involving youth in research and evaluation contributes to positive youth development, promotes the growth of youth governance and builds youth-community relationships.

Best practices

- Youth are co-developers and co-evaluators of research and evaluation processes (e.g. design, implementation, analysis, dissemination and mobilization)

Practical examples:

- Inform young people about the activities and responsibilities involved in the overall process of research and evaluation and, together, find places and ways for them to get involved.
- Work with young people to co-develop surveys and facilitate focus groups, as well as co-interpret and co-present findings to service providers and other young people.
- Set realistic timelines that allow the development of new skills while ensuring young people can see the project through to completion. .

Definitions

evaluation: systematic collection and analysis of information to understand whether a project, service or process is doing what it was intended to do and how well (or not) it is doing so.[90]

quality improvement: systematic approach to making changes that lead to better patient [client] outcomes and stronger health system performance. This approach involves the application of Quality Improvement (QI) science, which provides a robust structure, tools and processes to assess and accelerate efforts for the testing, implementation and spread of QI practices.[60]

research: process of creating new knowledge or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This includes synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes.[91]

Safer spaces

Youth and partners co-create and regularly check-in to establish and maintain an environment in which everyone feels comfortable, embraced and able to speak freely.

What this means for…

Youth

Your safety is a priority in all engagement processes. You co-create and maintain a welcoming environment and safer space for all partners.

Agencies

The safety of young people and staff members is a priority in all engagement processes. This is supported by relevant policies and procedures. All staff, especially leadership, work to ensure safer spaces.

System decision makers

You model safer spaces in youth engagement processes, set system-wide expectations for what safer spaces look like and hold the sector responsible for meeting these.

Background and rationale

A welcoming environment that provides physical and psychological safety is essential for meaningful youth engagement. Safety is especially important when sharing personal experiences and generally enhances young people's ability to learn and participate freely.[92]

When it comes to safety, it is important to distinguish between a "place" and a "space." The place is the physical location, and the space is created by those who interact within it.[51] A safe space is about the behaviours and interactions that create an open and accepting environment. It is a space where everyone feels respected and valued. In a safer space, people can

A safe space is about the behaviours and interactions that create an open and accepting environment... where everyone feels respected and valued.

express themselves honestly and authentically,[92] and they can contribute actively without fear of being judged on account of their social identities such as religion, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.[93]

Adults have a responsibility to their youth partners and must take every precaution to minimize the risk of harm, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their participation.[92] Creating safer spaces for youth engagement also requires a collaborative approach between youth and partners. Together, they build an understanding of the value of engagement, minimize risks and make sure spaces for engagement are youth-friendly.[51,68,92]

This might include identifying the core values they want to define the space, setting group norms and expectations and putting in place a mutually agreed upon anti-discrimination policy and process to resolve conflicts. Other tips include adopting a trauma-informed lens, offering clinical support, holding programming in safe environments and making sure that all partners — including youth — are well-informed about the policies and procedures surrounding workplace safety, discrimination and harassment.[35,51,92]

Best practices

- Youth collaborate in efforts to ensure safer spaces, including minimizing risks and ensuring an accepting environment where all can feel valued and respected.

Practical examples:

- Co-develop policies and resources with young people relating to a physically and psychologically safer space, such as establishing anti-discriminatory policies and a conflict resolution process.
- Collaboratively identify core values, norms and expectations for the team working on any initiative, and establish steps to take when these values, norms and expectations are not met.

Best practices

- There are mechanisms in place to ensure a physically and psychologically safe environment, including designated clinical and emotional support.

Practical examples:

- Introduce yourself using your pronouns. Talk about the safe use of pronouns and encourage ongoing dialogue.
- Identify adult allies to mentor, coach and support young people to engage in formal and informal roles. Consider offering a specific workshop on ally-ship and/or trauma-informed care for these adults, so that they are all working with the same core principles.
- Identify the need for clinical support and engagement activities, and ensure this support is available and accessible for young people when needed.

Definitions

discrimination: unfair treatment due to a person's identity, which includes race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability including mental disorders.[94]

harassment: any inappropriate conduct, comment, action or gesture by a person that adversely affects another person's psychological or physical well-being and that the person knows or ought reasonably to know would cause someone to be humiliated; behavior that intimidates or that constitutes a threat to the health of others.[95]

physical safety: the absence of harm or injury that may be caused by a physical object or practices that include a physical object.[96]

psychological safety: the absence of harm and/or threat of harm to mental well-being.[96]

safe space: a secure physical environment that is also free of personal, social and psychological harm; an environment in which everyone is encouraged to authentically express their views and explore their knowledge, behaviour and attitudes without feeling defensive.[93]

trauma-informed approach: an approach that understands the widespread impact of trauma, recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in partners and actively seeks to avoid re-traumatization by embedding key trauma principles into organizational culture and all relevant policies, procedures and practices.[97]

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Appendices

Appendix A: Youth engagement advisory group

- Caralyn Quan, Program Manager, The New Mentality
- Christine Brook, Program Director, Children's Mental Health of Leeds and Grenville
- Gagandeep Virdi, Youth
- Karen Ingebrigtson, CEO, Firefly
- Linda Rose-Krasnor, Professor, Brock University
- Muna Mohamed, Youth
- Natasha McBrearty, Associate Executive Director, Crossroads Children's Mental Health Centre

Centre staff acknowledgements

- Brooke Eboule, Communications Specialist
- Cameron Jette, Youth Advisor
- Chrissi Galanakis, Senior Data Analyst
- Evangeline Danseco, Performance Measurement Coach
- Huma Muhammadi, Research Assistant
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- Julie Breau, Quality Improvement Specialist
- Kamill Santafe, Youth Advisor
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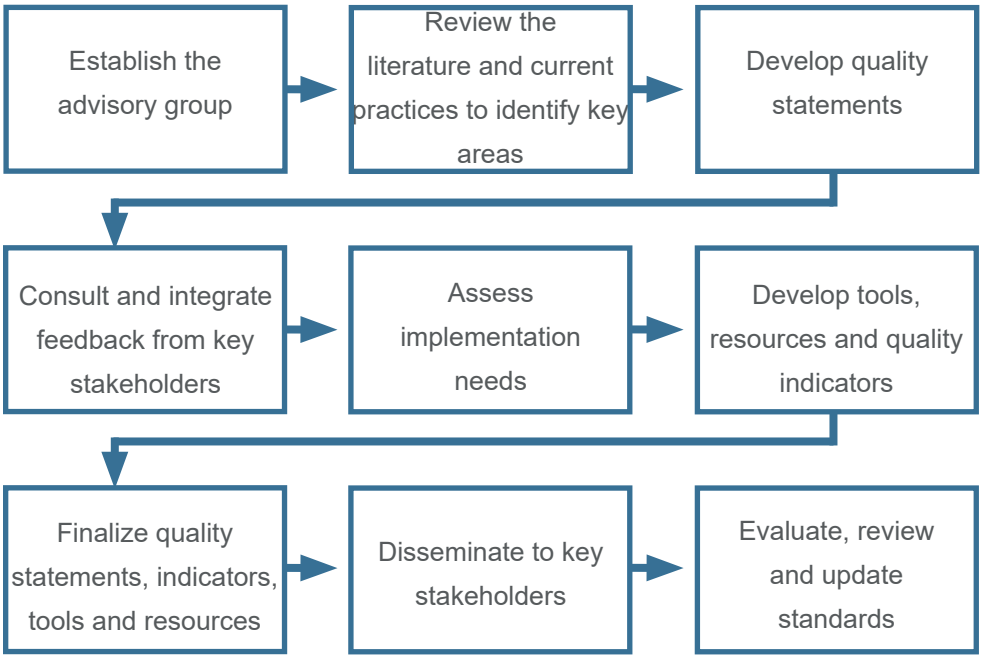
- MaryAnn Notarianni, Director, Special Projects and Operations
- Melissa Edwards, Research Coordinator
- Shruti Patel, Program Associate
- Tracey MacLaurin, Project Coordinator

Appendix B: Standard development process

To develop this quality standard, the Centre adapted the process from Health Quality Ontario's Quality Standards process and methods guide.[15] The major steps are outlined below.



Appendix C: Glossary

accessibility: the design of products, devices, services or environments for people of differing needs (for example, newcomers with limited English or those with a disability).

accessible: activities (including communication and processes), products (such as devices) and environments that are designed to be easy to understand, use, participate or access, especially for people who face physical, social, cultural or political barriers.

active listening: paying close attention to a conversational partner's words, repeating back key ideas and phrases from time to time to confirm one's understanding of what the person has said. Demonstrates respect for — though not necessarily agreement with — the other person's feelings and views.

adult ally: a trusted adult that supports, advocates for and works collaboratively with youth; one who provides non-judgmental guidance, structure and safety for youth.

anti-oppressive practice (aop): approach that encourages diversity, prioritizes the needs and strengths of marginalized groups and works to transform structures that create inequalities.

authentic relationships: relationships built on respect and trust that involve an equal power balance between youth and adults who work as a collective to achieve common goals.

barrier: a circumstance or obstacle that separates people from other people, places or things. Barriers come in many forms — including attitudes, policies and programs, as well as physical, social, communication or transportation obstacles — and may even be unintentional.

co-development: process of working collaboratively on a shared purpose; joint decision making; a commitment to action and collective accountability among all stakeholders.

commitment: willingness to persist in a course of action, often owing to a sense of obligation to stay the course; the state or quality of being dedicated to a cause, activity, etc.

communication: the exchange of thoughts, messages or information between people or among a group of people, using spoken languages, body language, tone of voice and gestures. Effective communication occurs when there is a shared understanding; in other words, the message that is received and understood is the same message that was sent.

competence: an individual's capacity and demonstrated ability to understand and appropriately and effectively do the tasks they could reasonably be expected to do based on their education and training.

cultural barriers: obstacles, inconveniences and difficulties resulting from differences or misunderstanding of customs and cultural practices, including obligations toward family and notions of community, safety and gender.

culture: shared experiences of people, including their language, values, customs, beliefs, worldviews, ways of knowing, and ways of communicating. Culturally significant factors encompass, but are not limited to race/ethnicity, religion, social class, language, disability, sexual orientation, age and gender.

decision-making: process of collecting information, establishing selection criteria, developing possible alternatives or options and evaluating the most appropriate option based on selection criteria.

discrimination: unfair treatment due to a person's identity, which includes race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability including mental disorders.

diversity: a broad term that refers to the variety of differences among people, often within the context of culture, education, organizations or workplaces.

empowerment: the process of enhancing the capacities or abilities of individuals to influence or make informed choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.

equitable: fair; not unduly benefiting or hindering any particular person(s) or group(s). Note: Not the same thing as equal, as in even or balanced.

equity: fairness; creating equal access and opportunities; achieved by removing barriers that prevent access to mental health care or engagement opportunities, particularly barriers related to gender, race, sexual orientation, income, education and many other identities.

evaluation: systematic collection and analysis of information to understand whether a project, service or process is doing what it was intended to do and how well (or not) it is doing so.

evidence-informed: practices and decision making processes that 1) recognize clinical and practitioner knowledge and expertise and the lived experience of children, youth and families as evidence, alongside academic or research evidence and 2) systematically search, select, appraise and use all the best available evidence to deliver measurable benefits.

harassment: any inappropriate conduct, comment, action or gesture by a person that adversely affects another person's psychological or physical well-being and that the person knows or ought reasonably to know would cause someone to be humiliated; behaviour that intimidates or that constitutes a threat to the health of others.

inclusion: striving for equity and maintaining a culture where difference within the collective is embraced, respected, accepted and valued; the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of participation for those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity.

learning opportunities: coaching, training or other learning events supporting the pursuit of knowledge and skills to achieve a goal; building on strengths among individuals, organizations and communities.

partnership: collaborative relationship between two or more people. People or organizations in a partnership collaborate to advance their mutual interests. A partnership involves sharing individual skills and resources, while working together towards a common goal.

physical safety: the absence of harm or injury that may be caused by a physical object or practices that include a physical object.

political barriers: legislative and institutional policies that may prevent access, opportunities, funding or other support for youth participation in organizational decision making.

positive youth development (PYD): a strength-based approach focused on supporting youth to thrive in adolescence and successfully transition to adulthood. Positive youth development initiatives include elements such as social connection, living skills, social inclusion, health and physical literacy, citizenship and contribution, academic success and employability, etc.

psychological safety: the absence of harm and/or threat of harm to mental well- being.

quality improvement: systematic approach to making changes that lead to better patient [client] outcomes and stronger health system performance. This approach involves the application of quality improvements (QI) science, which provides a robust structure, tools and processes to assess and accelerate efforts for the testing, implementation and spread of QI practices.

research: process of creating new knowledge or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This includes synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes.

resources: the supply of money, materials, staff, physical facilities, attributes, capabilities and other available assets that can be used to support processes and activities.

safeer space: a secure physical environment that is also free of personal, social and psychological harm; an environment in which everyone is encouraged to authentically express their views and explore their knowledge, behaviour, and attitudes without feeling defensive.

social barriers: constraints or inequalities imposed — because of socially constructed hierarchies of social status

(based on differences including gender, ethnicity, race, religion, health, socioeconomic status, etc.) — that prevent an individual from accessing resources or opportunities or otherwise advancing their own interests.

social determinants of health: the social, political, economic and environmental factors that can affect an individual's or group's health and well-being.

tokenism: the practice of making only a symbolic effort; trivial engagement of underrepresented groups.

trauma-informed approach: an approach that understands the widespread impact of trauma, recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in partners and actively seeks to avoid re-traumatization by embedding key trauma principles into organizational culture and all relevant policies, procedures and practices.

youth: a period of developmental transition; a fluid notion depending on context rather than a fixed age group. Youth may be defined differently by funders, organizations, cultures, communities and self.

youth-adult partnership: an intentional relationship between young people and adults that relies on adults acknowledging and empowering the ability, perspectives, ideas and knowledge of young people throughout the relationship.

youth engagement: empowering youth as valuable partners in child and youth mental health to address and make decisions that affect them personally or that they believe to be important.

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