

Best Practices for Meaningfully Engaging Youth in Online Learning



EVIDENCE BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes best practices for the meaningful engagement of youth and their parents/caregivers in online learning programs.

The shift to virtual learning and programming – accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic – has required youth workers, educators, and other practitioners to pivot to effectively engage young people online. This shift is accompanied by the increase in both availability of online tools and comfort with digital platforms, supporting more dynamic and engaging programming opportunities. The development of best practices in online youth engagement is progressively supported by research and evaluation, emphasizing that meaningful engagement is vital for program success.

THREE KEY MESSAGES

01. Youth and parent/caregiver engagement supports higher-quality learning in online programming.

Youth engagement in educational programming is essential for creating sustained program impact.^{1,2,3} Research consistently demonstrates that when youth are actively involved and invested in program content, their motivation, retention, and critical thinking improve.^{4,5,3} This principle holds particularly true in online learning environments, where engagement can be more challenging to maintain.^{1,6} Furthermore, parent/caregiver support with learning has demonstrated benefits for youth learning, especially when parents/caregivers are invested in their child's academic achievement.⁷ Youth and parent/caregiver engagement entails sustaining interest and interaction with program materials while offering meaningful

opportunities for influence in decision-making to ensure programming is relevant and shaped by youth and their parents/caregivers' lived experiences.

02. Opportunities for youth influence in program curriculum and design are important.

If program content is not engaging or relevant to their lives, youth may not see the value in completing it, which can make it easy to disengage.^{8,9,10,3,11} The best way to ensure program content and delivery match youth's interests is to provide meaningful opportunities for their input. This could include engaging youth in program or curriculum design, self-directed or peer learning spaces,^{12,10} creating alumni or peer mentoring opportunities,¹⁰ or youth-led evaluation.^{13,14} Open communication with youth and their parents/caregivers should be prioritized to best meet youth needs.

03. Creative and accessible program delivery and the use of online tools can facilitate greater engagement.

Youth engagement in online programs is influenced by both participant factors, such as motivation and online access, and facilitator factors, including content design and the level of guidance provided.^{14,2} Programs must be interactive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible to diverse learners. Program facilitators should thoughtfully structure synchronous and asynchronous learning, incorporate creative and interactive online tools, and remain flexible to accommodate youth interests, online access, and cultures. By integrating *cultural humility*, programs can honour the diverse backgrounds and interests of youth, fostering inclusive and effective learning environments. Ultimately, these considerations help build equitable and impactful online learning programs that resonate with youth and their families.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FIVE BEST PRACTICES

01. Bridge the digital divide and ensure accessibility.

While online programming can reduce traditional barriers, such as cost, location, or transportation, barriers to equitable access still exist. These disparities are sometimes called the *digital divide*, which refers to the widening gaps in access to internet and communications technology that disproportionately affect rural, Indigenous, and low-income households.¹⁵ For example, slow internet speeds and limited bandwidth can hinder smooth participation in online activities, creating frustrating user experiences.^{16,17} Furthermore, the type of

internet-enabled device – whether a mobile phone, tablet, or computer – can shape the accessibility and effectiveness of online programming. Mobile phones, while widely available, may not support all platform functionalities, leading to a diminished user experience.¹⁶ Parents or caregivers supporting their children to access online programming may also struggle to navigate the digital technology.¹⁸

When the experience of using the online platform is frustrating, it will be harder to keep youth engaged. Addressing these challenges requires thoughtful program design. Ensuring mobile-friendly platforms, optimizing for low-bandwidth use, and offering technical support to both youth and parents/caregivers are key strategies to reduce frustration and foster equitable access.^{19,16} By prioritizing these considerations, programs can help mitigate digital barriers and support meaningful participation for all youth.

02. Involve youth and caregivers in planning, feedback, and evaluation.

When youth see themselves reflected in curriculum and find connections to their lived experiences, they are more likely to stay involved.¹⁰ To achieve this, programs should engage youth early and consistently in decision-making around content and delivery, and provide leadership and skill-building opportunities, fostering a sense of ownership and motivation.^{8,6,9,10,17} Tailored and flexible programming to meet individual youth needs is crucial for maintaining meaningful participation. This can involve checking in regularly with youth to understand their preferences, as well as collaborating with parents/caregivers, who can offer valuable insights.^{9,17}

Some programs directly target parents/ caregivers as the facilitators of youth engagement in educational programming. These programs align with evidence showing that parental/caregiver involvement enhances children's academic achievement and supports improved learning outcomes.⁷ To best engage youth and parents/caregivers, program facilitators must mitigate barriers to communication, such as building relationships to foster trust and offering multiple ways to get in touch.^{19,10} Using a strengths-based perspective when working with youth and their parents/caregivers is critical, especially for equity-seeking groups, as is providing opportunities for engagement that fit within families' cultural and economic contexts.²⁰ By incorporating this feedback, programs create responsive, personalized experiences that ensure all participants receive the necessary support to complete programming.

Youth-engaged evaluation also provides an opportunity for youth and their parents/ caregivers to offer meaningful information on what aspects of the program were effective and which were not.^{9,10} This feedback helps program facilitators continuously adapt and refine the programs, ensuring ongoing improvements, sustained engagement, and higher completion rates.

03. Create content with cultural humility and creativity.

Like in-person programming, online programming should consider accessibility and cultural humility.^{8,19,21} Think 'outside of the box' when designing activities and deliver content in dynamic and fun ways.³

Cultural humility involves acknowledging the complexities of others' cultural identities and engaging in continual learning, with an emphasis on mutual respect and power-sharing in interactions.²² For youth workers and educators, cultural humility entails being open and interested in youth's cultures and adapting programs to meet their interests. When program content reflects youth experiences and aligns with their realities, they are more likely to stay actively involved.^{8,19,21}

Program developers should also account for flexibility in program design to accommodate learners' needs. For example, if online meetings are not working to get learners talking, facilitators might pivot to an online platform such as Discord for learners to message each other directly.⁹

04. Foster connections with program material, facilitators, and peers.

For maximum and sustained engagement, learners need opportunities to interact with the material, the facilitator, and their peers.^{22,9} Program content that lacks interactivity or real-world applications can feel dry, reducing interest and enthusiasm for learning.²² Fostering a connection to facilitators and peers by fostering a sense of community can improve program retention and completion rates.¹¹ For example, providing youth with feedback on their work helps them track their progress, recognize when they are meeting learning goals, and stay engaged, ultimately supporting retention in the program.⁴

Developmentally appropriate and interactive curriculum materials – such as assignments

to make introductory videos for peers and facilitators to view²⁴ or that involve active online research into topics youth are interested in – are essential to keep learners motivated. One approach to program planning that considers diverse learning styles is the Read, Reflect, Display, and Do Model, which categorizes program activities into four groups.⁴ This model encourages facilitators to design activities that engage auditory learners (read), observational learners (reflect), visual learners (display), and hands-on learners (do).⁴

Active guidance from facilitators can also help foster success.² Secondary and post-secondary learners should be able to contact facilitators via email or participate in brief synchronous sessions to receive support.²² Younger learners may benefit from meeting with facilitators together with their parents/caregivers. Whether programming is synchronous or asynchronous, peer-to-peer learning opportunities are vital, as youth benefit from online games, discussion boards, group chats, social media, or live-sharing of their learning where they can connect with peers.²²

05. Leverage the power of online tools.

With the increase in online programming for youth, there has also been an increase in interactive online tools to support learning. For example, Zoom is an online meeting platform on which youth can join breakout rooms, draw on virtual whiteboards, utilize the chat feature, and choose whether to have their cameras on or off. Canva is an online design platform where youth can play with design tools for effective communication of learning. YouTube, TikTok, Discord, or other social media can be used to facilitate peer interaction, demonstrate learning through video or blog creation, and search for resources.

Use tools like polls, quizzes, games, and collaborative platforms to create hands-on and visually engaging learning experiences.^{25,24} Incorporate discussion boards, forums, or group projects to allow learners to connect with peers.^{25,9} Learners can share insights, ask questions, or collaborate on assignments, even asynchronously. Interactive quizzes and exercises with instant feedback help learners address misunderstandings immediately while fostering a sense of achievement. Gamified progress bars or completion certificates can make self-paced learning more rewarding and motivate learners to stay on track.²⁵ Myriad other tools exist online to foster collaborative learning – the best tools are ones youth are already using,⁹ so don't be afraid to ask them what they like.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "online learning AND youth engagement", "online learning AND parent OR caregiver engagement", "asynchronous learning AND youth OR children", "online after-school program AND youth engagement", "asynchronous learning AND engagement".

ENDNOTES

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