Less Telling, More Asking:

Meaningful youth engagement at a glance

Children and Youth Planning Table
of Waterloo Region

Introduction

Youth in our region have voiced that they do not feel meaningfully involved in the decisions that impact their lives. Our first shared goal at the Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT) is for children and youth to feel valued, heard, and included. Our membership recognizes the importance of youth engagement and we have prioritized this as an area for collective attention and growth. This resource has been assembled to further support skill and capacity development as we and other adult allies in the community seek to meaningfully engage with youth. The content within this resource has been informed by: local youth voice; the knowledge of our local child and youth serving organizations; and national and international literature. It includes four components:

1. Youth Engagement and Adult Allyship: What is the Difference?
2. Youth Engagement
3. Adult Allyship
4. Interested in Learning More?

Look for this icon for tips, tricks, and other things to support your practice!

Although there is a youth-focus to this resource, the skills and concepts can be used with all ages. Feel free to use this resource as a learning tool and apply the knowledge and skills gained within the unique settings of your workplace. Throughout this document, the term youth is used as a collective term for young people. Remember that each youth is an individual, and so the information within this resource is meant to be adapted to best fit various settings, situations, and people.

This resource is not meant to be one-size-fits-all, but rather a starting point that can be adapted to fit your context. Be open-minded, have fun in the learning, and get creative!

The Children and Youth Planning Table defines **youth** as any person(s) age 12 to 18ish. Although youth are grouped by age, these individuals come from all walks of life and have diverse abilities, needs, interests, and goals.

Intergenerational partnerships refer to the collaboration between youth and adults, characterized by mutual processes of teaching, learning, and shared decision-making[i].

Youth Engagement and Adult Allyship: What is the Difference?

Youth engagement and adult allyship go hand-in-hand. As adults, we often focus on youth engagement. However, when we do this we only consider the partnership as one-way (adults to youth), rather than understanding the dynamic relationship and the individual responsibilities in that relationship.

When we refer to **youth engagement**, we mean the meaningful participation and ongoing involvement of young people in planning and decision-making at all levels that includes opportunities for growth and leadership[iii]. At the CYPT, we think of youth engagement as the **what**—what you do in practice to ensure all youth in our community are involved and meaningfully participating.

> "In practice, a sole focus on youth is misplaced. Youth–adult partnerships demand **consideration of adult development**."[ii]

Adult allyship asks adults to be accountable in our behaviour in intergenerational partnerships. As allies to youth, we need to practice reflexivity—regularly looking within ourselves to understand what factors influence our behaviour and how this behaviour has an effect on those around us[iv]. At the CYPT, we like to think of this as the **how**—how you enter into partnerships and understanding your role as an adult-partner[v].

💡 Remember, "ally" is a title you are given by others, not one you give yourself.

Both meaningful youth engagement and adult allyship must be built on the foundation of **why** we do this work. For the CYPT, it is our underlying commitment to ensuring children and youth in our region feel valued, heard, and included.

Youth Engagement

Youth engagement is achieved when youth are meaningfully participating and continuously involved in planning and decision-making at any and all levels (e.g. program, organizational, system). Within this process, youth have opportunities for ongoing learning, skill development, and leadership opportunities.

So, why is youth engagement important? To begin, the youth brain is in an amazing stage of development where it has a heightened potential to change through experience[vi]. At the same time, by age 15, a person's reasoning ability, or logical thinking and problem-solving skills, is fully developed[vii]. This means that youth have insurmountable potential to contribute, which can be realized through opportunities for meaningful participation. In recognizing youth's ability to be agents of change in the community, there is a valuable opportunity to connect youth with those who hold decision making power. When we do this, communities can better leverage innovative solutions[viii].

> Youth have something to contribute now, and this means changing the mindset from "How can adults help youth" to **"How can youth and adults help each other"?**

What happens when youth are meaningfully engaged?

- Youth and adults develop new skills and build their capacities as agents for change.
- New and meaningful ideas are generated[ix].
- Organizations and programs are more responsive to youth needs and wants[x].
- Networks are strengthened between youth and adults, and an increased sense of belonging for all ages in the community is fostered[xi].
- Communities pave the way for innovative solutions to societal challenges.[xii].

Youth Engagement Best Practices

To understand the best practices when engaging with youth, we looked to the experts—youth! This section is primarily informed by local youth and service provider voices. Please keep in mind that there is not one prescribed method when engaging with youth, and it will look different depending on context. Youth want to know that their involvement is valued, their experience is worthwhile, and they are having an impact. It is helpful to think about youth engagement as a collaborative process, rather than an end result or a specific program[xiii]. This process involves exploring together, continuous reflection, evaluation, and change. Our membership and local youth highlight some things to think about when engaging youth[xiv]:

Communication

- Communication and learning styles may look different depending on the purpose and who you are communicating with.
  - There are various modes of communication—ask what method works best (e.g. texting, calling, social media). There are different learning styles—ask what works best (e.g. visual, auditory, reading/writing, kinesthetic).
- Set clear expectations. This may include roles, responsibilities, and accountability measures. Have a conversation and create these together because expectations go both ways.
- Be transparent and let youth know what is going on.
  - Provide regular updates through avenues that work for everyone. If you asked for their thoughts and ideas, share how you are using their input.

Be Prepared

- It takes time, effort, and planning to create a space for success. Ask questions to know who is attending and what is needed.
- To show respect for the commitment and time youth are giving, have the space and required materials ready for full participation.
  - Work together to develop a plan, so you know what is needed.

Meet Youth Where They Are At

- Meet youth at a time that allows for participation. Just like adults, youth have responsibilities (e.g. school, work, family). This means there will need to be flexibility in when you meet.
  - Keep in mind the time of year—are exams coming up? Are there any cultural or religious considerations?
- Transportation can be tricky, so keep in mind where you meet. This could mean providing transportation supports, depending on youth needs.
- Create spaces for youth with diverse experiences. Communicate with youth to know who is coming and what is needed.
  - Tailor supports to the youth's needs. Some youth might require child care, an interpreter, or a support professional.

Safer Spaces

- Create a space where everyone feels they are welcome, accepted, and that they belong. It allows for members to respectfully engage in difficult conversations. A safe space is created through the overall environment of the space, whether it is a physical space or online. Work with youth to create an atmosphere that meets diverse needs and wants.

- Support opportunities for youth to establish a sense of ownership in the space. Ask youth what they want and work alongside each other when creating a space meant for them.
  - 💡 It may range from deciding on a park or a coffee shop where youth feel comfortable to meet at, to colour schemes and design of an online hub.
- Allow for everyone to feel valued and included.
  - 💡 Work together to develop group guidelines to help create a safe and welcoming space for all.

Show Appreciation

- Provide food! Decide together on what snacks would be most enjoyed.
- Provide an honorarium! Chat with the youth to get their ideas on what would be best to show appreciation for their participation.
  - 💡 It could be gift cards, "merch" for the project, etc.
- Value all participation and input! Give thanks and credit where it is due.
- Every success is important! Celebrate all achievements—big and small!

Adult Allyship

Adult allies are the bridge between individual youth and the systems that affect their lives[xv]. This is a big responsibility! Adult allies play a critical role in navigating between youth and systems to understand factors impacting engagement and identifying opportunity for linkages and partnerships[xvi].

Youth and service providers in our community identified some key characteristics of successful intergenerational partnerships[xvii]. An **adult ally** is someone who…

- recognizes youth have something meaningful to contribute
- is empathetic and supportive
- works in collaboration
- intentionally listens
- practices reflexivity and acknowledges power imbalances
- is willing to learn, change their mindset, and work in new ways
- shares power and decision-making opportunities

Exploring our biases and assumptions

As adult allies, we need to practice reflexivity to become aware of the opinions, beliefs, and values informing our role in the relationship. Understanding our own biases and assumptions, and those ingrained in our organizations, allows us to begin the process of addressing them. This opens us up to new ways of working in partnership with youth. Here are some key questions to ask yourself:

- What are my (and my organization's) biases and assumptions about the role of adults and youth in society? Where do these assumptions come from? How can I work on shifting my mindset and letting these assumptions and biases go?
- What power do I hold as an adult in society? What power does my organization/position hold? How is this power exerted on the youth I work with? How can I (and my organization) work on redefining these roles?
- What does it mean for me (and my organization) to work in partnership with youth? What are the barriers I may face to authentically engaging and working with youth? What benefits do I bring into a partnership?

Adult and Youth Partnerships

It all starts with relationships! Every relationship is different and dependent on the context in which it is built. However, there are a few things that are always good to keep in mind as we enter into opportunities for partnership.

What opens opportunities and/or creates barriers to youth participation?

As allies, we need to be aware of what barriers may be preventing youth from participating. These might be structural (e.g. youth unable to physically access a meeting space) or systemic (e.g. youth labeled as "disengaged" and so not included). It is also important to note why engaged youth became engaged[xviii]. By having conversations with youth who are and are not engaged, we can better understand why. We also need to continue asking, and keep communication lines open to understand what barriers youth may face in sustaining engagement. With a clearer understanding of barriers and entry points we, as adults, can better advocate to have resources in place that support engagement.

> To meet youth where they are at, we need to know where they are at. To know where they are at, **we need to ask them.**

How do youth want to be engaged? What topics do they want to be engaged on?

As adult allies, we need to practice intentional listening. Youth are the experts of their own lives. We need to acknowledge our assumptions through reflexive practice, and do the work to leave these assumptions at the door. Keep in mind that what adults want youth to be engaged on, may differ from what youth want to be engaged on. The same might be true with the engagement avenues we offer.

- Ask youth what they are excited and passionate about to understand where and how they want to get involved. Offer multiple entry points, from low-risk engagement opportunities to those with deeper involvement[xix]. This allows for youth to engage in ways that feel comfortable for them.

How do we build and sustain relationships?

To truly work in collaboration with youth, we as adults need to contribute to building trust. Trust, and how we build it, varies across individuals and situations[xx].

Our conversations with youth, service providers, and the literature show that there are a few key things to consider when building trust and entering into intergenerational partnerships:

- **Start by listening to understand.** Have you ever experienced a time when you are listening to a youth and feel tempted to jump to solutions or advice? Or, as youth speak, you are situating their experience in your own understanding of being a youth? When adults do this, we are working from the assumption that we know best, and the experiences of youth today are the same as our own experiences were. When we listen to understand, we can move into co-created action to address the issue.
  - Host listening sessions where youth and adults ask "why" questions to understand each other's perspectives. As we heard at a community event: less telling, more asking.

> "When I realized that [service providers] are **willing to hear our voice** instead of push us aside; [that you] want to take in what we're saying, really appreciate it and acknowledge it, **I feel hopeful.**" (Youth Participant)

- **Acknowledge and address power dynamics—but do not go "all or nothing."** There will always be power imbalances in intergenerational partnerships. Being open and honest about how these imbalances impact the relationship is a key piece in moving forward and figuring out how to shift ideas about youth-adult roles[xxi]. Additionally, adults often fall into the trap of "giving power" in partnerships, in an attempt to recognize and address power imbalances. Sometimes, yes, great things come from moving aside and allowing space for youth to exercise power. However, by completely stepping aside, we miss out on the opportunity to leverage our personal and institutional power for the betterment of the partnership. We want to move away from "power giving" and towards "power sharing"[xxii].
  - Be clear about roles, responsibilities, and boundaries to ensure that power sharing does not turn into adults overstepping.
- **Challenge assumptions and continue to engage through the discomfort.** Working with those who think differently than you may lead to moments of discomfort. Challenges to ingrained power dynamics and status quo may also lead to discomfort. The key is to stay committed, work through the discomfort, and be open to learning from youth. At the CYPT, we have made a shared commitment to relentlessly strive to maximize wellbeing. This means staying at the table when things get tough.
- **Dedicate time to get to know each other.** Leave time and space for youth and adults to connect, show interest, and learn about each other—apart from the goal or project[xxiii].
  - Incorporate check-in and check-out opportunities, or regular ice breakers into every meeting to encourage everyone to get to know each other.
- **Be transparent and practice open communication.** Adult transparency around possible opportunities and constraints in the partnership helps to level the playing field[xxiv]. Remember to be mindful about where there is flexibility for youth input (and organizational action on that input) and where there is not. Be transparent about these opportunities as well, and be honest when the input can not be used. True collaboration can only happen when everyone is working with the same information and valued as equal partners.
- **Partnership is a two-way street.** Research shows that the most successful intergenerational partnerships are those founded on a common goal or purpose, rather than those solely focused on mentorship or youth development[xxv]. Framing the partnership around a common goal reinforces that youth are capable and have something to contribute now[xxvi]. Doing this also encourages shared accountability. Work together, learn together, fail together, and succeed together.

A note to adults and organizations:
A key to being a good adult ally is leveraging your power and continuing to advocate for the inclusion of youth in all decisions that affect them. It is not a simple task! It requires a commitment from both you and your organization. Adults doing this work "require support and resources to challenge conventional adult roles of authority and power over youth"[xxvii]. We have to work to shift not only our own mindsets, but organizational and societal mindsets about the innovative role of youth in affecting community change.

Interested in Learning More?

The information in this resource is the first step to inform your skills in engaging youth in your work. Take a look at these additional resources to deepen your knowledge and continue your learning journey!

Frameworks

- Hart's Ladder of Participation
- Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) Framework
- The Developmental Assets Framework

Toolkits

- Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health (JCSH) Youth Engagement Toolkit
- Adult Allies in Action
- Safe at School Youth Empowerment
- Youth Centred Design Toolkit
- Youth Engagement Toolkit Resource Guide
- Ready...Set...Engage! Building Effective Youth/Adult Partnerships for a Stronger Child and Youth Mental Health System
- Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health Youth Engagement Toolkit

The members of **the Children and Youth Planning Table** intentionally connect to planning bodies across the community and work together to collectively mobilize as one system for children and youth that relentlessly strives to maximize wellbeing, throughout generations.

website: childrenandyouthplanningtable.ca
twitter: @CYPTWR

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Notes

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[ii]Ibid., p. 79
[iii]Camino, "Pitfalls and Promising".; Ho, Elaine, Clarke, Amelia and Ilona Dougherty, "Youth-led Social Change: Topics, Engagement Types, Organizational Types, Strategies, and Impacts", *Futures 67*, (2015):52-62, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328715000075
[iv]Bolton, Gillie, and Russel Delderfield, "Reflective Practice: An Introduction." *In Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development* (New York: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), 1-24.
[v]Khanna, Nishad and Stoney McCart, *Adult Allies in Action*, (Toronto: The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2007), https://studentscommission.ca/assets/pdf/en/publications/Adults_Alies_in_Action.pdf
[vi]Dougherty, Ilona and Amelia Clarke, "Wired for Innovation: Valuing the Unique Abilities of Emerging Adults", *Emerging Adulthood* 6, no. 5 (2018):358-365, https://doi-org.libproxy.wlu.ca/10.1177%2F2167696817739393
[vii]Ibid.
[viii]Ibid.
[ix]Overlap Associates, *Session Output: Children and Youth Planning Table Problem Mapping Session*, (Waterloo Region: CYPT, 2018).
[x]Dougherty & Clarke, "Wired for Innovation".
[xi]Khanna & McCart, *Adult Allies*.
[xii]Khanna & McCart, *Adult Allies*.; Dougherty & Clarke, "Wired for Innovation".
[xiii] Ministry of Children and Family Development, *Youth Engagement Toolkit Resource Guide,* (British Columbia: n.d.), https://www.ubcm.ca/assets/Services/Youth~Engagement/BC%20Minsitry%20-%20Resource%20Guide.pdf
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[xv]Khanna & McCart, *Adult Allies*.
[xvi]Ibid.
[xvii]CYPT, Youth Engagement in.; Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT), "Placemat Results", *Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT) January Meeting: Youth Engagement and Adult Allyship*, (Waterloo Region: CYPT, 2019).
[xviii]Khanna & McCart, *Adult Allies*.
[xix]Dougherty, Ilona, "Engaging Youth in Decision-Making: Moving from Volunteerism to Active Citizenship", *The Philathropist* 24, no.2 (2011):103-107, https://thephilanthropist.ca/2011/11/engaging-youth-in-decision-making/
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[xxi]Zeldin, Shepherd, Camino, Linda and Carrie Mook, "The Adoptions of Innovation in Youth Organizations: Creating the Conditions for Youth-Adult Partnerships", *Journal of Community Psychology* 33, no. 1 (2005): 121-135, https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20044
[xxii]Dougherty & Clarke, "Wired for Innovation".
[xxiii]SWR, *Youth Engagement Summary*; Khanna & McCart, *Adult Allies.*; Zeldin, Shepherd, Petrokubi, Julie, McCart, Stoney, Khanna, Nishad, Collura, Jessica and Brian Christens, "Strategies for Sustaining Quality Youth-Adult Partnerships in Organizational Decision Making: Multiple Perspectives", *The Prevention Researcher* 18, (2011): 7-11, https://sohe.wisc.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/TPR18-RI-Zeldin.pdf
[xxiv]Zeldin et al., "Strategies for Sustaining".
[xxv]Zeldin et al., "Strategies for Sustaining".; Khanna & McCart, *Adult Allies*.; Camino, "Pitfalls and Promising".
[xxvi]Ilona Dougherty, "Wired for Innovation: Understanding the unique abilities of young people" Presentation, *Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT) January Meeting: Youth Engagement and Adult Allyship*, (Waterloo Region: CYPT, 2019).; Camino, "Pitfalls and Promising".
[xxvii]Khanna & McCart, *Adult Allies*, p. 6.