

Youth Participation

“Participation for young people is about getting them involved so they can have their say in a way that is comfortable and appropriate for them. It involves adults actively listening to what the young people have to say and incorporating their ideas in decision-making.”

NSW Commission for Children and Young People
www.kids.nsw.gov.au

Participation gives young people a say about what is important to them, allows them to ‘own’ decisions made about their lives, increases self confidence and skills, and empowers them. Young people’s participation in decisions that affect them and the life of their community is valuable and has a range of positive outcomes for young people and those who engage with them.

Young people are excluded from full membership of society because of their age. Youth work and youth participation seek the redress this. Youth participation is a fundamental principle of youth work and underpins the way youth workers interact with young people.

Youth participation can be difficult to achieve and requires a commitment from organisations to financially support the process and to build a culture where young people are able to contribute in valuable and meaningful ways. Without adequate support and commitment to the implementation of youth participation policies and practices, organisations are at risk of engaging young people in tokenistic ways.

Participation should be meaningful and this can only occur when young people are adequately informed and supported in their involvement, their contributions are valued and they believe the work they are doing has a purpose. We can all improve our youth participation practices in some way or another. This section provides ideas for how you can improve the way you work with young people, it includes:

- Hart’s Ladder of Participation;
- Tips for ensuring youth participation is beneficial to young people;
- Tips for recognising and respecting the needs and contributions of all involved; and
- More Information.

Hart’s Ladder of Participation

Hart’s eight rung ladder of participation, which is described below, has been a foundation in the development of youth participation. The ladder should not necessarily be seen as a hierarchy but rungs one to five could be seen as a spectrum of youth participation – different contexts may call for different types of participation. That being said we have to be sure we aren’t copping out and, for example, using rung five because it may seem easier. We must always strive to improve our youth participation practices wherever we can. Note: Rungs 6 – 8 are considered non-participation.

1) Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults

This happens when projects or programs are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults. *This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth/adult partnerships.*

2) Young people-initiated and directed

This step is when young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role. *This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth-led activism.*

3) Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

Occurs when projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people. *This rung of the ladder can be embodied by participatory action research.*

4) Consulted and informed

This happens when young people give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. *This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth advisory councils.*

5) Assigned but informed

This is where young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved. *This rung of the ladder can be embodied by community youth boards.*

6) Tokenism

When young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

7) Decoration

Happens when young people are used to help or "bolster" a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people.

8) Manipulation

Happens where adults use young people to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by young people.

Adapted from Hart, Roger. 1993. *Children's Participation: The Theory And Practice Of Involving Young Citizens In Community Development And Environmental Care* for UNICEF.

Is the youth participation initiative you have planned beneficial for young people?

Why should young people bother to be involved? What will they get out of it? How will this activity improve their life? Below are some questions that can help you identify how your activity may be beneficial to young people.

Do young people have informed choice?

Young people should be informed about what is involved, but it is unreasonable to expect that all young people will want to or should participate. Partnership is not possible if participation is compulsory.

Is it enjoyable?

Participatory activities should be fun, exciting and challenging.

Is it relevant?

Activities should address those issues and needs that are perceived as real by the young people involved.

Is it developmental?

Activities should raise young people's awareness of the social, political, economic, cultural and personal aspects of the issues affecting them.

Is it educational?

Activities should provide opportunities for both formal training and the informal development of skills.

Is it relationship focused?

Activities should provide opportunities for building active and supportive working relationships between young people and other members of the community.

Is there support, supervision and monitoring?

Young people should be provided with whatever is required to promote success and to handle failures or setbacks.

Are there enough resources?

Activities should be adequately resourced with sufficient time, space, funding, information, etc (include this issue in normal budgeting processes).

What benefits will the young people receive?

Benefits for the young people need to be included. This may be simply that the involvement is enjoyable, educative, etc or in some cases may involve specific payment (eg. consultation on a specific issue).

Does your youth participation initiative recognise and respect the needs and contributions of all involved?

Be sensitive to the inherent difference in experience, status, power, control, knowledge of resources, language, etc. How can you acknowledge this, incorporate it and overcome any problems caused by it? Below are some questions that can help you identify how your activity is beneficial to young people.

What accountability mechanisms are in place?

Mechanisms need to be included to provide for monitoring, accountability and feedback for activities undertaken by all involved.

Have young people been involved in developing goals and strategies?

Young people must be given the opportunity to identify and define the problem as they see it, exploring options and alternative strategies.

Do young people feel valued?

Activities should provide young people with a sense of belonging and ownership. Young people should be able to recognise that their participation is valued and that they have ownership in the process.

How are young people involved in decision making?

For a range of reasons sometimes things can't happen – that's okay. It is the process that is important. How have you worked with young people to make decisions along the way?

Do young people know what you can / can't do? Do they know the reasons why?

The knowledge, responsibilities and commitments of the adults involved need to be acknowledged.

Do young people feel they are being taken seriously?

Young people must be offered real roles or they will quickly recognise that they are not being taken seriously.

What does an individual young person need to participate?

Options for participation must be sensitive to each young person's value systems, availability, commitments, language, skills, culture, financial resources, access to transport, etc.

Are young people viewed as individuals?

Young people are not a homogenous group, and having some young people participate does not ensure the inclusion of the views of all young people.

What expertise do we need?

Some tasks need to be undertaken by trained professionals, either because adequate training is not possible or due to legislative requirements.

How will we know what's working and what isn't?

Activities should include ongoing critical analysis of experiences, actions taken and outcomes.

Are suitable young people involved?

Does the young person have personal experience of an issue (ie: homelessness)? Is this important? Are young people being put in a position to represent an issue or group of young people they may not know about (ie: hip hop)? What is the possible impact?

How is confidentiality ensured? Do the young people know about your confidentiality processes?

The confidentiality and privacy of any personal or sensitive data held by services must be preserved.

Adapted from The Australian Youth Foundation. (n.d). *Youth Partnerships and Participation*. Available from The Foundation for Young Australians, www.youngaustralians.org

More Information

TAKING PARTicipation seriously

NSW Commission for Children and Young People

TAKING PARTicipation seriously is a resource for organisations who want practical advice about how to involve children and young people in activities, events and decision-making about issues that affect their lives.

Web: www.kids.nsw.gov.au

The Foundation for Young Australians

The Foundation has a number of publications available, including resources on youth participation.

Web: www.youngaustralians.org