

Youth Engagement Resource Guide

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Introduction

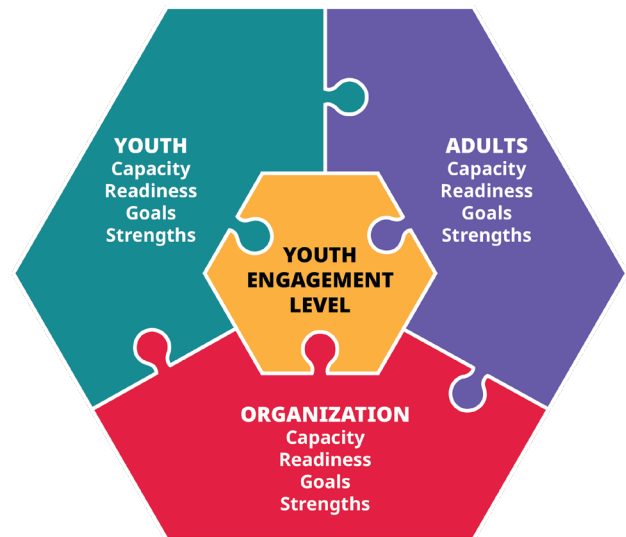
Adults working in youth serving organizations are, as expected, focused on youth engagement. Youth engagement has been defined as youths' involvement in "sustained, meaningful participation in an activity outside of the self."¹ However, it is easy to get lost in the definitions and frameworks of what youth engagement is and how to do it. **The purpose of this resource guide is to provide background information and related research to support decision-making for adults working with youth.**

Research on youth engagement indicates positive outcomes such as:

- Civic engagement,
- Skill development (e.g., leadership),
- Identity development,
- Positive relationships with peers and caring adults,
- Improved self-esteem, and academic achievement.^a

To achieve these positive outcomes, youth engagement efforts should be intentional and match organizational, adult, and youth capacity, readiness, goals, and strengths. Figure 1 shows youth, adult, and organizational capacity all as pieces of the puzzle in the level of youth engagement.

Figure 1. Factors Informing Level of Youth Engagement



Multiple resources exist to conduct self-assessments for youth engagement approaches and are included in the Resources section. Sample questions are included below.

- At the organizational level: Do managers and leaders at the organization understand and support youth engagement efforts? How important is youth engagement to the organization's mission?
- At the adult level: Are adults ready to take youth views into account? Do adults have appropriate training?
- At the youth level: What are the youths' strengths and how are we matching these strengths to available opportunities?

^a For a detailed literature review of youth engagement outcomes, see the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health's Youth Engagement Toolkit, Module 8: Resources and Endnotes found in Resources.

Throughout this document, letters denote footnotes and numbers denote references.

One of the most often cited frameworks of youth engagement is Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation.² This ladder includes eight rungs, each depicting increasing level of engagement, from "manipulation" (adults using youth ideas for their own gain) on the bottom to "youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults" at the top. According to Hart, this highest rung is the ultimate goal of youth engagement. However, over time Hart's Ladder has received criticism for two reasons.³ The first critique is that it is missing an additional step at the top that includes organizing and governing. The second critique is that the ladder positions the top rung, or engagement level, as the goal, when we should be viewing the levels as a continuum. This shift from a ladder to a continuum allows for the incorporation of the capacity, readiness, goals, and strengths of the organization, adult/s, and youth to determine which level of youth engagement is best. These two critiques are accounted for within this guide. As an aside, in 2008, Hart published a chapter clarifying and addressing these critiques of the ladder.⁴

Youth Engagement Levels

As we will address, not all types of youth engagement are equal. In fact, some ways in which adults engage with youth can be harmful. Table 1 includes rows for each of the nine types of youth engagement, three of which are not associated with positive youth development and should be avoided (manipulation, decoration, and tokenism). The table includes a label indicating the youth engagement level, a description of the level, youth development outcomes associated with each level with supporting references,

relevant resources and curricula, and practical examples. Examples were identified from the authors of this resource guide in collaboration with prevention professionals. Note that Table 1 spans three pages.

Crosswalk of Youth Engagement Frameworks

Different disciplines often use different models and words to describe the same thing, so when we want to communicate across disciplines, it helps to find these overlaps. In this vein, there are multiple youth engagement frameworks. Table 2 pulls these frameworks together to highlight their intersections. As with Table 1, the levels of participation are meant to be a continuum, not a hierarchy. Once you support meaningful youth engagement, the most appropriate form of participation is dependent on the capacity, readiness, goals, and strengths of the youth, adults, and organization. Youth serving organizations should strive for youth participants to experience all levels by the time they are adults as opportunities allow.

The initial youth engagement levels are adapted from Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation with the addition of a level focused on organizing and governing (same as Table 1). As is evident by the table, the youth engagement models featured in Table 2 are similar in name and description.

Table 1. Levels of Youth Engagement²

	Description^b	Developmental Outcomes	Resources & Curricula	Examples
Organizing and Governing	Youth have a central role in the organization's structure, driving programmatic or strategic decisions. Youth are empowered to be part of shared decision-making and have the opportunity to learn from the lived experiences and expertise of adults.	Psychological empowerment ⁵ Civic engagement Self determination ⁶ Leadership skills ⁷ Life skills ¹ Connectedness ¹	Youth participatory action research curriculum	Youth-Adult Program Development: Youth partner with adults to develop a new program, setting programmatic structure, goals, strategy, and sharing leadership of implementation. Youth participatory action research project.
Youth-initiated Leadership	Youth serve as peer leaders in a paid or volunteer capacity. Youth lead activities with their peers or with adults. Adults are involved only in a supporting role.	Leadership skills ⁷ Life skills ¹ Connectedness ¹	Teens as teachers curriculum	Youth Club Officers: President, secretary, recreation leader, etc. Youth lead an afterschool youth-initiated service-learning club; adults provide only logistic facilitation support as needed.
Youth-initiated Partnership	Youth and adults join together as equals to accomplish programming, plan activities, operate the program, or complete specific tasks.	Leadership skills ⁷ Life skills ¹ Connectedness ¹	Youth-adult partnerships curriculum	Youth-initiated Community Service Project: A group of students ask school administration to create a "caring closet", which leads to a youth-adult committee sharing leadership to complete the task. High school prevention club where youth work alongside adults to plan activities and run events and informational campaigns.

Table 1. Levels of Youth Engagement² (continued)




	Description ^b	Developmental Outcomes	Resources & Curricula	Examples
<p>Adult-initiated, Shared Decision-making</p>	<p>Projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with youth. Attempts are made to use youth-friendly procedures and language.</p>	<p>Life skills¹ Connectedness¹</p>	<p>Leadership skills curricula</p>	<p>High school club led by a public health nurse working to provide peer prevention supports. Adult-initiated Service-Learning Project: Adults secure funding, set a goal to teach health and wellness to 100 kids, and recruit 5 teens to help; recruited teens help select the curricula, design activities, recruit kids, and teach. Sharing coalition strategic plan with high school students for review, approval, and veto authority.</p>
<p>Informed Dialogue</p>	<p>Youth give ongoing advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. Youth are informed as to how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. Youth are involved in evaluation of programming.</p>	<p>Connectedness⁸ Knowledge or awareness of topic⁸</p>	<p>Youth Advisory Council toolkits</p>	<p>Youth Advisory Committee: An organized collective of youth who provide input for a school district, school, youth program, etc.</p>

Table 1. Levels of Youth Engagement² (continued)

	Description^b	Developmental Outcomes	Resources & Curricula	Examples
Assigned but Informed	Youth are assigned a specific role and informed as to how and why they are being involved. This includes inconsistent youth involvement or temporary consultations such as focus groups or surveys.	Development of interest	Youth engagement toolkits	Youth Program Evaluation: Youth are asked to fill out a survey to share their input on program needs and direction, but not involved in data review or decision making. Youth design logo for community coalition.
Tokenism	Young people appear to be given a choice, but in fact they have little or no choice about what they do or how the participate.	Little to no long-term positive outcomes		Token Board Member: A youth is selected for a leadership role so the board has at least one youth member, however little support is given, power is not shared, and youth voice isn't valued.
Decoration	Young people are used to bolster a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by youth.	Little to no long-term positive outcomes		Grant Application: The names of youth are added to a grant as a show of youth partnership, but youth did not initiate the project or hold a leadership role within it.
Manipulation	Adults have complete and unchallenged authority and abuse their power. They use young people's ideas and voices for their own gain.	Little to no long-term positive outcomes		Award Application: An adult grossly over represents their value to a youth-initiated and youth-lead program to bolster a youth-partnership award application.

^b Description wording adapted from Texas Network of Youth Services toolkit (see Resources).

Table 2. Comparison of Youth Engagement and Participation Frameworks

Hart's Youth Engagement Levels ²	Pathways to Participation ⁹	Youth Engagement Continuum ¹⁰	Modes of Participation ¹¹	Level of Participation ¹²	Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment ¹³
Organizing and Governing	Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.	Youth Organizing	Adolescent-led participation	Empower	Autonomous (youth control)
Youth-initiated Leadership		Civic Engagement 	Adolescent-led participation	Empower	Independent (youth control)
Youth-initiated Partnership	Children are involved in the decision-making process.	Youth Leadership 	Collaborative participation	Collaborate	Pluralistic (shared control)
Adult-initiated, Shared Decision-making	Children's views are taken into account.	Youth Development 	Collaborative participation	Involve	Symbolic (adult control)
Informed Dialogue	Children are supported in expressing their views.	Youth Services Approach	Consultative participation	Consult	Vessel (adult control)
Assigned but Informed	Children are listened to.	Youth Services Approach	Consultative participation	Inform	

Note: Grayed out cells had no equivalent level in the framework.  indicates this cell applies to all levels above.

Resources

Curricula

- Youth Participatory Action Research
Contact Dr. Mary Arnold at mary.arnold@oregonstate.edu for this curriculum
- Teens as Teachers
<https://shop4-h.org/products/youth-advocates-for-health-curriculum-teens-as-teachers>
- Youth-adult Partnerships
<https://shop4-h.org/products/youth-advocates-for-health-curriculum-youth-adult-partnerships-for-health>
- Leadership Skills
<https://shop4-h.org/products/leadership-skills-you-never-outgrow-level-1>

Youth engagement toolkits

- Texas Network of Youth Services
<https://tnoys.org/youth-engagement-toolkit/>
- Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health
<http://www.jcsh-cces.ca/en/resources/jcsh-core-resources/>
- School-Based Health Alliance
<https://www.sbh4all.org/what-we-do/services/training/youth-development/youth-engagement-toolkit/>
- National Resources for Access, Independence, Self-determination and Employment
<https://raisecenter.org/youth/>
- Urban Institute
https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104936/youth-engagement-in-policy-research-and-practice_0.pdf
- Youth Advisory Council toolkit and resources
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yac/index.htm>
 - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
<https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/toolkit-implementing-authentic-youth-engagement-strategies-within-state>
 - Wisconsin Department of Health Services
<https://dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02250.pdf>

Resources (continued)

Youth engagement evaluation/readiness assessments

- <https://youthrex.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Youth-Adult-Engagement-Readiness-Assessment.pdf>
- <https://www.youthpower.org/ye-indicator-youth-level>
- <https://ssce.cps.edu/student-voice/for-school-leaders/harts-ladder/>

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