



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT 101

FOR COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICE
WORKERS IN HAMILTON

When young people are in charge of a project, how do you get out of the way and let them do it?

What are specific ways that you can work with youth to create a sense of community where they feel trusted, respected, and empowered?

What kinds of decision-making and/or leadership opportunities could youth have in your program or agency?

The following is a collection of information and some practical guidelines that we hope will help as you work with and engage youth in Hamilton.

This collection is an attempt to summarize and explain Hamilton-specific youth engagement and facilitate a concerted effort to move from the idea of youth engagement in our community to creating impact through youth-supported change.

We should always remember when working with youth that although we put them into a category based on age, there are as many stories as there are young people. What follows should be taken with the understanding that youth come from a variety of experiences and those individual experiences need to be respected and honoured.

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the funders or partnering agencies.

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What Do We Mean By 'YOUTH'?

That's not so easy to answer. Many organizations and sectors define youth differently (anywhere from as young as 12 to as old as 29). Your organization or initiative will work with whatever ages make the most sense or that may be dictated by your agency/organization's mandate. The actual age may or may not be so important. While working with a range of ages, it is important to remember that there can be a marked difference between the capacity and power of youth at each end of the age range. While we address youth as a group, workers should be aware of the developmental differences and sub-divide groups based on their age and maturity level. This will offer a more effective focus on age-related issues and participation and can provide an opportunity for older youth to act as leaders for younger youth.



For example, the recreation needs of young people who are 13 years old and the recreation needs of young people 22 years old might be very different. If you were working on enhancing recreation programs in your community, you might have two groups, one younger and one older working on the same issue.

What Is Our Vision for Youth Engagement in Hamilton?

We know that Hamilton needs youth leaders and opportunities for meaningful participation by all youth, particularly youth who are marginalized, disenfranchised, and disconnected. As a community, our goal needs to be the engagement of youth at all levels by allowing them to inform and influence policy and decision-making, contribute to solutions, and undertake projects and initiatives that are of interest to them and that benefit our community.

YOUTH CONTRIBUTING TO HAMILTON



HAMILTON CONTRIBUTING TO YOUTH



Young people and adults of Hamilton can work together to create the necessary conditions for the successful development of themselves, their peers, their families and their communities.

The First Step Toward Effective Youth Engagement:



Adult allies and youth-friendly services, places and people are to youth engagement what a foundation is to a house.

To effectively engage youth, we need to work toward cultivating the attributes of an adult ally and youth-friendliness in ourselves and in our programming.

How? You can begin the process of becoming an adult ally who is youth-friendly by listening to youth, raising the awareness of youth needs, gaining knowledge and insights into what youth need and how you can help meet those needs, seeking out support, and actively engaging youth in meaningful participatory opportunities.

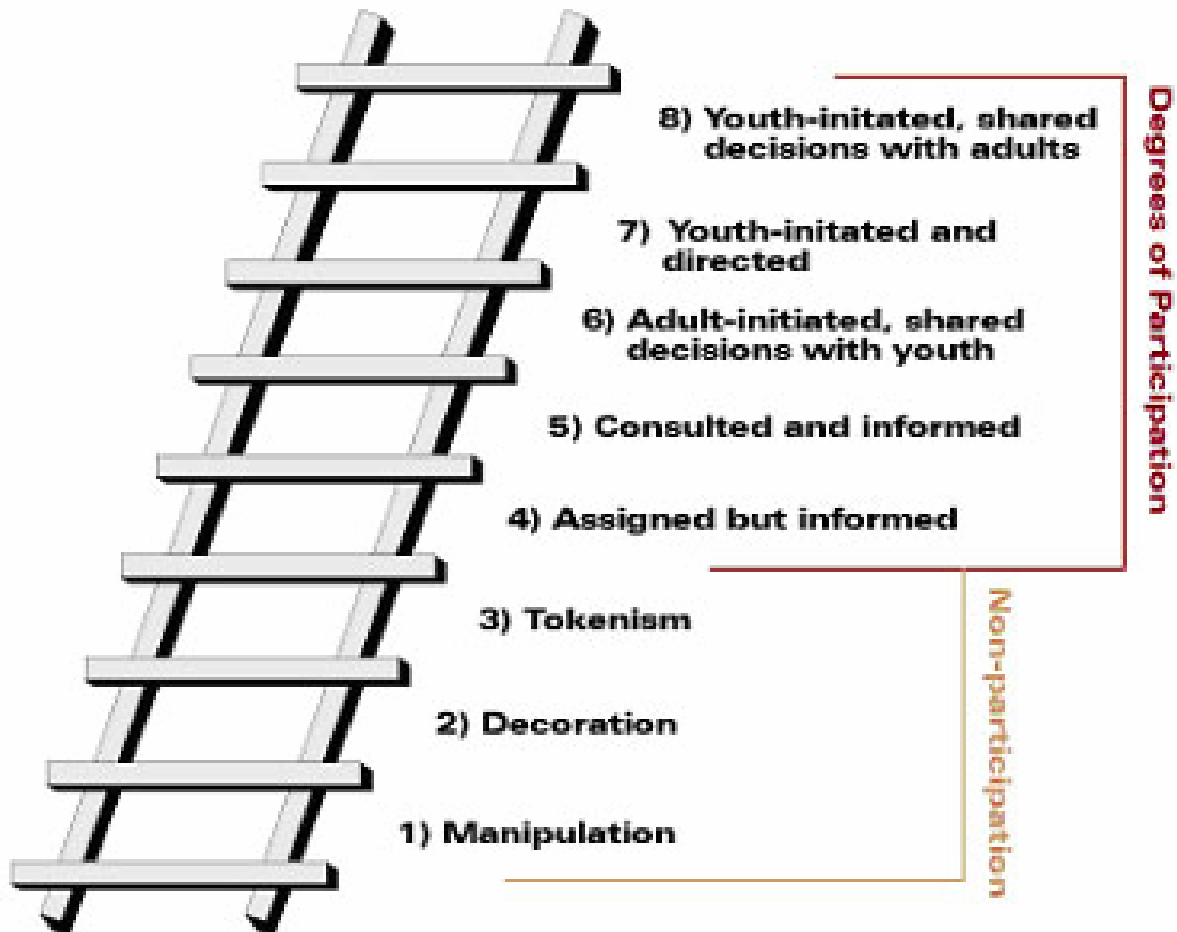
We recently asked Hamilton youth to describe what an **adult ally** is for a young person and what it means to be **youth-friendly**. This is what they said:

Characteristics of an Adult Ally	What it Means to be Youth-Friendly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Friendly ▪ Positive ▪ Reliable ▪ Responsible ▪ Compassionate ▪ Confidential ▪ Does not use “put-downs” ▪ Honest & straightforward ▪ Mature ▪ Organized ▪ Genuine ▪ A role model ▪ A mentor who provides support for growth ▪ Respectful of youth, their situation & experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compassionate ▪ Understanding ▪ Addresses youth issues ▪ Mature & respects boundaries ▪ Approachable ▪ Open ▪ Confidential ▪ Provides unconditional acceptance ▪ Does not pretend to be youth-friendly ▪ Listens ▪ Organized ▪ Does not stereotype ▪ Youth are visible & represented

A Conceptual Framework for Youth Engagement:

The ultimate goal of youth engagement is to provide youth with choices and opportunities for community participation that are **YOUTH-LED** and **YOUTH-DIRECTED**.

In youth-led and youth-directed activities, adults are involved only in a supportive role. Decision-making is shared. These kinds of opportunities empower young people while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and knowledge of adults. In turn, youth provide adults with the opportunity to access and learn from their experiences and expertise.



From: Roger Hart, Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship, UNICEF - 1992.

Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation provides us with a conceptual framework with which we can assess how well we are engaging youth and set goals for improvement by aiming for the "top of the ladder." As a community, we need to aim for all sectors of Hamilton to foster a working environment for youth that builds on what has been done in the past at the lower levels of the ladder and strives to reach for the top of the ladder.

Different Models for Engaging Youth:

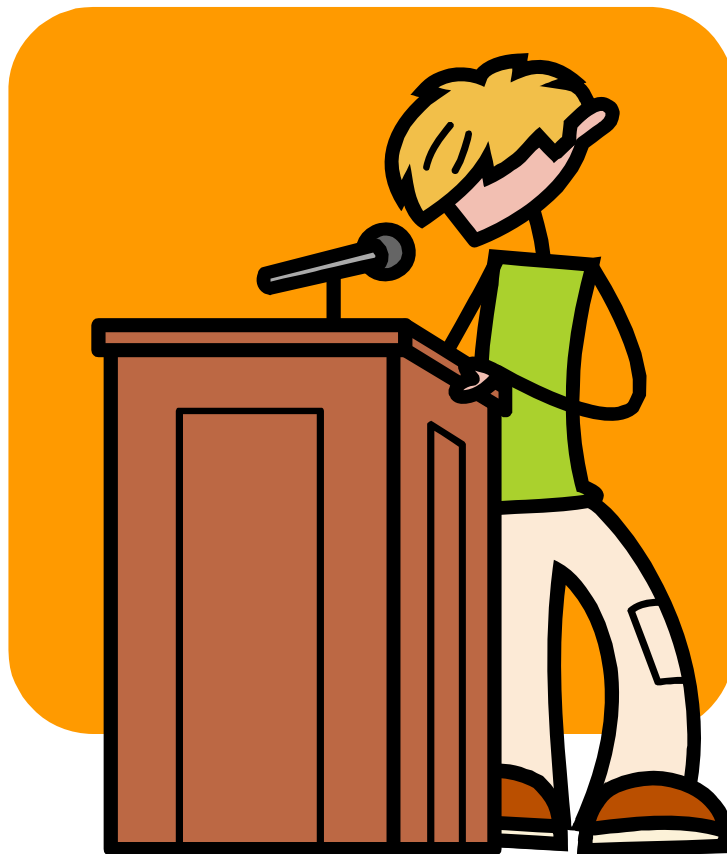
Not all youth programs are youth *engagement* programs. If you are in contact with youth from a youth services approach, which defines young people as clients and provides services and support to address individual problems and pathologies of young people, there are still many opportunities for you to build effective youth engagement practices into your everyday work with young people:

Youth development - You can provide youth with access to caring adults and safe spaces, opportunities for growth and development, the chance to meet other young people where they are, build on young people's individual competencies, provide age appropriate support, emphasize positive self identity, and support youth-adult partnerships.

Youth leadership - You can build in authentic youth leadership opportunities within your programming and organization, help young people deepen their historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community issues, help youth to build skills and capacities to be decision makers and problem solvers, and assist youth to participate in or contribute to community projects.

Civic engagement - You can engage young people in political education and awareness, build skills and capacity for power analysis and action around issues that young people identify, begin to help young people build the collective identity of young people as social change agents, and engage young people in advocacy and negotiation.

Youth organizing - You can build a membership base of youth and adult allies, involve youth as part of your core staff and governing body, engage youth in direct action and mobilizing, and engage youth in alliances, coalitions, and collaborations.



Engaging Youth - The Basic Formula:

Assess and Inform: Assess your personal and your organization's capacity, motivation, and opportunity to engage youth or improve on current practices. This includes the availability of strong adult allies, an anti-ageism framework, policies and procedures that reflect inclusive decision-making, a mechanism for youth to safely raise concerns or challenge organizational practices, and the inclusion of youth in the hiring process for staff who will work one-on-one with youth. After assessment, inform yourself and your organization through literature, best practices, and connecting to experienced youth engagers.

Attitude shift and Minimizing Organizational Barriers: Cultivate an attitude shift, which includes focusing on youth assets rather than deficiencies, encouraging success and permitting failure, knowing when to let go, adapting and adjusting as a group, and breaking down ageist stereotypes as well as working from an anti-oppression framework. Be prepared to face challenges and work to minimize the organizational barriers that prevent effective youth engagement.

Plan and Prepare: Comprehensive planning for youth outreach and action will ensure that the foundations for effective engagement practices are in place – the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*.

Recruit, Recruit, Recruit: Don't focus on your typical "A" student but reach out to at-risk youth and youth from diverse populations. This will provide for a variety of perspectives and contributions and allow for learning between youth. A recruitment strategy is on-going and always seeks to add to what already exists or provides replacements for when youth are fluid and/or become inactive.

Accessibility, Inclusion, and Incentives: Ensure full access to all opportunities that are provided, offer incentives for youth involvement and enable participation by breaking down barriers that youth face.

Continuity, Stability, Sustainability, and a Home Base: Be an adult ally who is fully accessible to youth, encourages partnerships and working collaborations, provides skills development, establishes a safe and secure space for youth to meet and work from, and facilitates the development of simple ground rules for operation and relations.

Choices and Adapting to Change: Provide youth with the opportunity to make choices and be prepared to adapt and change. Check in with youth regularly and as youth change their focus, try to keep them on track but allow for deviations in projects and decision-making as the motivation and interest of youth change.

Manageable Goals, Productivity, Celebration and Learning Opportunities: Set realistic goals with youth and work productively to achieve those goals. Celebrate successes along the way and learn from when things go "wrong." Young people lose interest if things take too long and processes inhibit them from achieving results. Also, engage youth in real work because if they are being used as tokens or decorations that are being manipulated, they will know the difference.

Support: Assist youth in their participation by helping them and not doing things for them, taking care of logistics, talking to each youth to orient them and continuing to give them any personal assistance that they may require, and cultivating many opportunities for young people to teach and to lead.

Recognition: Reward youth for their involvement and contributions in the moment, daily, and on a larger scale.

Tips for Incorporating MEANINGFUL Youth Engagement In Your Work:

TIPS

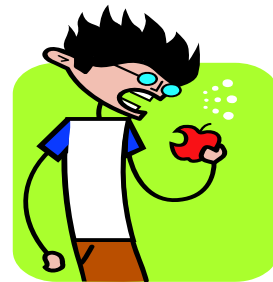
- Hold meetings when youth can actually attend and in youth-friendly places. Work toward making youth feel welcome.
- Trust youth to do the “hard jobs” rather than using them as tokens and free labour. This involves taking the time to give youth the skills that they need or build on their existing assets to do well. Not preparing youth to do the “hard jobs” sets them up for failure and completely defeats the purpose of engaging them in meaningful participation.
- Know young people and connect with them on things that are important to them. This also includes having them support or contribute to work that they deem to be important to them and to the larger community of which they are a part.
- Be genuine and honest. This sounds easy but it is often the most difficult thing to do because you need to be yourself and “real” in the eyes of young people.
- Recognize that youth are the experts and help them to apply that expertise and knowledge. Their participation is linked to first-hand experience and rooted in real issues and local spaces and places.

EXAMPLES

- Holding a committee meeting at 4:30 p.m. at the public library (on a bus route) and making a point of welcoming the youth and thanking them for being there.
- Have a young person say a few words at a public event (with assistance in getting prepared) instead of only being asked to hand out flyers or staff a table.
- Take the time to build a rapport. Find out about what the young person you are working with is interested in. Mention it next time you see them.
- Don’t dress like a young person to “connect” with them, don’t use language that you heard on Much Music if that’s not comfortable for you – youth will see right through it.
- Tell youth that they are the experts. If you are developing an after school basketball club, talk to youth about it and discuss how you are going to advertise – let them know that you need them for your project to be successful.



- Capitalize on moments to engage youth. These are like teachable moments but in this case, it is about engaging and connecting with them.
- It is really important to remember that youth are fluid and change so you will need to be flexible and not become frustrated with youth.
- Share successes and challenges and then learn from them. Engaging youth is a process and the journey is just as important as the destination.
- Recognize youth and their efforts no matter how much they are contributing. Sometimes even being involved at the planning table is a lot for a youth. Youth meet a genuine need and their contributions make a difference. Their contributions need to be rewarded, recognized and celebrated.
- Meet the basic needs of youth so that they can participate (financial, emotional, physical – space, etc). Special groups of youth require particular attention because of the barriers that they face to meaningful participation – oppression (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer youth, youth of colour, Aboriginal youth, disabled youth) and socio-economic conditions (street involved and homeless). Also, sometimes youth don't have complete control over their lives and are strongly affected by outside influences that make participation more difficult – school, peers, parents, culture.
- Support youth when they want to take risks. Their participation offers youth a challenge, adventure, and provides for new learning.
- Teamwork and collaboration with youth is vital in accomplishing goals. By working together youth can get more accomplished, their sense of belonging can be nurtured, they are provided with peer support, and they can build healthy relationships with one another.
- If a youth talks about a movie they saw or a song that they like, demonstrate real interest – you'd be surprised what you can learn from youth when you connect issues to popular media.
- A formal committee of youth may morph into being an informal working group that continues to play an advisory role when necessary or an issue working group may entirely change the direction of their project focus.
- Celebrate along the way (don't wait for the big end result) and be honest – if only a few people showed up to the movie night you were planning, talk about why.
- Even if a youth did not say a word during a meeting, thank them for coming. After, acknowledge that they were quiet and ask if there is anything you can do as a facilitator next time to hear from them.
- Make sure the basics like bus tickets and food are provided. Hold meetings in places where youth already go and feel comfortable – the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre or the Hamilton Public Library.
- A youth tells you that they want to develop a brochure on youth issues – you might think that this project is too big – ask youth how you can realistically support them and be honest about that. They need to understand what your boundaries are but give them the option; try not to automatically dismiss an idea because it's too big or too hard.
- Invite additional youth to help plan and make decisions - existing youth members might not feel that their voice alone is the voice of all youth.



- Youth need regular feedback to empower them to continue and further use their voices and share their skills and talents.
- Youth need choice and opportunities.
- Talk to youth and tell them how they are doing. Praise them often. Be honest about what they need to work on.
- Don't relegate the "youth jobs" to youth automatically. Maybe you are developing a task-list and have youth welcoming people to an event and handing out agendas but maybe that young person has amazing, untapped public speaking skills – let him or her introduce the key note speaker!



Last Words of Advice:

Always start with the gifts, talents, knowledge, and skills of young people; never with their needs and problems.

**In every way possible, amplify this message to young people:
*We need you! Hamilton cannot be strong and complete without you!***

**Working with young people is not always easy.
It takes a lot of time and planning to do it properly.
Just remember that it is highly rewarding and you are making a very real
difference in the lives of the young people
that you support and encourage.**

Project Updates:

Youth Engagement & Action in Hamilton (YEAH):

- In development are a small grants program that will provide catalyst funds for youth project work around issues of interest to youth in our community, a detailed manual that will outline best practices and a protocol for engaging young people in Hamilton, and an inventory and searchable directory of existing groups of youth who are engaged in various work and decision-making across Hamilton.
- We need enthusiastic young people to join our project's Youth Advisory Collaborative (functioning as an advisory and a working group). We also need youth groups and community partners/agencies to join us in building a citywide collaborative that will change the way Hamilton is engaging young people.

In partnership with the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and a collaborative of multi-sector community stakeholders, the YMCA gratefully acknowledges funding provided by the Hamilton Community Foundation, the Government of Canada – Department of Canadian Heritage, and the Hamilton Spectator.



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THE HAMILTON
SPECTATOR

Addressing the Needs of Street-Involved and Homeless Youth in Hamilton – SPRC and Street Youth Planning Collaborative:

- In implementing the 27 recommendations from the 2005 report, *Addressing the Needs of Street-Involved and Homeless Youth in Hamilton*, we are working on a range of projects from outreach to community education to mental health training. We are striving to have young people engage meaningfully in this work, advising, helping to hire and joining planning committees.

The SPRC gratefully acknowledges its partners in the Street Youth Planning Collaborative and funding for the Addressing the Needs of Street-Involved and Homeless Youth in Hamilton project provided by the Government of Canada – Public Safety.



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