

5.1 For, With, By Youth: A Youth Engagement Continuum for Our Kids Network

Summary

What is youth engagement?

Youth engagement is made up of two things: participation and empowerment.

Engaging youth may seem like something all professionals who work with and serve youth do; however, the relationship between youth and a youth-serving organization is based on how much the young people believe their opinions matter.

According to the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, youth engagement is “the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself.”¹ This document presents a continuum and recommendations for meaningful youth engagement within the structure and activities of Our Kids Network.

Make deliberate efforts to increase engagement

Engaging youth must involve deliberate efforts to create opportunities for them to meaningfully participate in activities that affect them. This will determine the many ways that young people are integrated into our schools, neighbourhoods, community organizations, and governments. Their voices must be heard and heeded, not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the entire community. Youth-serving organizations play an important role because their decisions and programs directly affect young people.

Youth engagement happens when young people have opportunities to participate and to feel empowered while doing so. The notion of empowerment is important because it helps make young people’s participation efforts meaningful by giving them control over their contributions. Young people cannot feel empowered if they are not given opportunities to be a part of the structures that affect their lives.

Participation means that young people’s opinions are included during decision-making processes, while empowerment is about a deliberate shift in power relationships, to make their efforts truly meaningful.

The Our Kids Network structure and community

Our Kids Network (OKN) is a Halton-wide partnership of organizations, agencies, and community planning tables serving children and youth birth to 18 years old. Guided by research, OKN plans and integrates services and supports so that all children thrive. OKN gathers research to support children, youth and their families living in Halton and builds relationships between partner agencies to promote a shared vision for children and youth in the region. Its vision is that all children thrive and its mission is

¹ Centres of Excellence for Children’s Well-Being.(n.d).What is Youth Engagement? Retrieved from: http://www.tmag.ca/aorg/pdf/Whatis_WEB_e.pdf, p.1

“to promote the healthy development, security and safety of all children, youth and families through neighbourhood collaboration, service integration, and measuring results.”²

The collaborative was formed in 1996, and its partnership base – i.e., the organizations that make up the network by deciding to follow a formal agreement to work together and share information and resources – now contains eight organizations. These organizations provide education, health, mental health and safety services to children in the region.

OKN is based on the values of working together, building evidence, using a holistic approach to human development, adopting a framework (i.e., Developmental Assets[®]), and accountability through a Results-Based Accountability framework. Representatives from each organization work together as committee members and project partners to address issues affecting children and communities in Halton.

Our Kids Network’s commitment to a holistic and assets-based approach to child and youth development fits nicely with the principles and practices of youth engagement.

Working within the OKN environment: why a continuum?

The continuum diagram at the end of this document is a representation to help you determine appropriate ways to make youth engagement meaningful in your activities. Making a commitment to engage youth supports the OKN vision of all children thrive. By adopting youth engagement practices, OKN is able to develop better services for youth and give young people opportunities to gain the positive experiences and personal qualities they need to build Developmental Assets. This helps youth contribute to their communities in positive ways.

Based on the unique, committee-based structure of OKN, one overarching strategy for youth engagement is not appropriate. OKN partners have agreed to work together to provide children and their families with better access to services in the Halton region. Although OKN’s own youth engagement policy only applies to its governance structure, this commitment influences how OKN partners deliver their services as a collective. That’s why a continuum is used – to demonstrate commitment to youth engagement while ensuring some flexibility.

How to use the continuum

This continuum is intended to ensure the genuine engagement of young people. It can be used to review and evaluate a committee’s activities for barriers to youth engagement and to help incorporate young people’s voices into operations. Committees make a variety of decisions over time, so youth participation can happen at any point in the process.

To use the continuum, plot your practices on the scale, based on the degree to which young people can become involved in your committee’s activities. At each level of participation, you can make the involvement of young people more or less meaningful by changing the level of empowerment – i.e., how much control you give youth over the activity or decision-making process. Decide how much responsibility you are willing to give to youth participants based on what you believe is appropriate.

² Our Kids Network. (2011). About. Retrieved from <http://www.ourkidsnetwork.ca/Public/About>

The aim is to embed a range of youth engagement practices into your committee's activities at the highest appropriate level of engagement. Each committee should operate at the level that makes sense to them; however, every level of the continuum should be represented in at least one OKN committee.

Informed youth

Regardless of the mechanism chosen, youth should be able to choose to participate only after they are fully informed about the activity. Give clear guidelines and help them understand the extent to which their opinions will influence the final decisions. Invite feedback about their participation experience.

Categories and mechanisms for engagement

The continuum separates youth engagement practices into three categories, which become progressively more inclusive as we move to higher levels of participation and empowerment. Youth engagement practices **for youth** encompass the lowest levels of participation and empowerment, engagement practices **with youth** create opportunities for more participation, and engagement practices **by youth** create opportunities for the highest levels of participation and empowerment [see diagram].

For youth: Practices that create opportunities for the lowest levels of participation do not produce conditions where youth can take on leadership roles in a committee's activities. These opportunities include young people in a committee in a passive and ad hoc manner. An example would be ensuring that all the information youth need to be involved is available.

With youth: These practices create opportunities for youth and adult committee members to work together. Examples include creating a youth action team – comprised entirely of young people – to conduct research and report to a committee on the opinions of their peers, or providing training to both adults and youth to help them work together.

By youth: These practices are the most inclusive and empowering. Examples include reserving a percentage of seats in a committee for youth representatives or creating a youth advocate position where one youth acts as an advisor to adult committee members. These practices create opportunities for youth to fill authentic leadership roles in a committee.

Refer to “From Participation to Engagement: A Review of Conceptual Models for Developing Youth Engagement Strategies” and “Guidelines for Youth Engagement: An Environmental Scan of Youth Engagement Policies in Canada and Internationally” for ideas and options for embedding youth engagement practices into committee activities.

For, With, By Youth: Youth Engagement Continuum diagram

