



# What is youth participation?

## Youth Participation Kit: Organisations

### Resource 1

The term ‘youth participation’ is used to refer to the practice of involving young people in service delivery and decision-making in their communities. A wealth of research exists about the theory and practice of involving young people in organisations.

#### **Empowering young people**

The overarching principle of all youth participation is that it empowers young people to take control of their own lives. This includes developing confidence, self-efficacy and a range of practical skills. Young people can then apply the skills with confidence to influence both their own lives and their wider community.

Youth empowerment is an important part of engaging young people in decision-making around matters that affect them.

There are a range of terms given to activities which work towards youth empowerment. Understanding the difference between these will help organisations plan appropriate youth participation activities.

#### **Youth participation**

Youth participation empowers young people by giving them opportunities to meet community needs through decision-making and delivering services to the community. Young people can see that their actions have positive outcomes and learn skills to support their own and the wider community’s development.



## What is youth participation?

### Youth engagement

Youth engagement refers to a wider scope of activities, which empower young people by involving them in their communities. While youth participation is focussed on action taken by young people themselves, youth engagement also incorporates activities provided to young people in community settings. Youth engagement can also lead to empowerment of young people, and may be a good stepping stone for young people into youth participation activities.

### Youth development

Youth development includes actions taken to assist young people along their developmental journey. It includes all activities which assist young people to develop their skills and abilities to be part of the community—including youth participation activities. The term youth development is often used to refer to actions and projects which support young people who may be disengaged or require support.

## Models of youth participation

There is a large volume of literature that seeks to categorise different levels of youth participation. One of the most popular models is Roger Hart's '[Ladder of Youth Participation](#)', published by the UNICEF International Child Development Centre in 1992. Hart considers the different amounts of decision-making power granted to young people along a continuum, as well as including three levels of 'non-participation' which may appear to be participation from an outsider's perspective. While the model suggests that the top level is the best form of youth participation, it is important to note that any level in the 'participation' category is valuable and empowers young people.

Table 1: Levels of youth participation (adapted from Hart's ladder)

| PARTICIPATION |  |
|---------------|--|
| 9             | Ideas initiated, designed and run by young people  |
| 8             | Ideas initiated and run by young people; decision-making shared with adults  |
| 7             | Ideas initiated and run by young people in full partnership with adults  |
| 6             | Adult-initiated ideas, with decision-making shared with young people   |
| 5             | Young people consulted on ideas, and informed of the purpose of their input  |
| 4             | Young people assigned specific role/s in an idea or initiative, and informed of the (usually limited) purpose of their input |



## What is youth participation?

| NOT PARTICIPATION |  |
|-------------------|--|
| 3                 | Tokenistic involvement of young people, with no meaningful input or influence  |
| 2                 | Young people involved for decorative purposes without any input into the cause |
| 1                 | Young people's ideas or participation manipulated to achieve adults' aims      |

You may also like to consider the information available on [youthpolicy.org](http://youthpolicy.org)'s webpage [Participation Models: Citizens, Youth, Online](#).

### Critical factors for success

There are a few key factors which are critical to successfully involving young people:

- take it seriously
- make time to engage well, even for small or short-term initiatives.

Young people involved in youth participation commonly report being frustrated by:

- feeling ignored
- having their ideas stolen by others
- lack of respect and not being treated equally
- feeling like they're not being set up to succeed
- not being informed of the outcomes of their involvement.

These are the kinds of things that can occur when organisations don't take young people's involvement seriously—when the practice of involving young people doesn't lead to empowerment. Any youth participation initiative should aim to:

- empower young people and support their development of skills and self-efficacy
- provide purposeful and meaningful ways for young people to contribute
- be inclusive of all young people.

The remaining resource sheets in this publication provide a guide to planning for effective and empowering youth participation.

### Case study: Youth Week WA Young People's Planning Committee

The Young People's Planning Committee is the key group who plans and organises Youth Week celebrations in WA. The group is supported by Propel Youth Arts in partnership with the Department of Communities.



## What is youth participation?

The Committee work to develop a diverse program of events for Youth Week WA that will appeal to young people, as well as developing the theme for Youth Week WA and promotional materials. Committee members reflected on their experiences:

“Being youth, we see what’s needed for young people. So it’s really cool to be able to organise events to meet those needs, like our ‘Life Admin 101’ forum—I need that!”

“Sometimes in the workforce we feel like we’re not taken seriously because of our age, but on the Committee I’ve been able to do so much by myself and using my own ideas.”

“We could walk into any other committee now and feel confident in ourselves that we know how things work and we can have a voice—the feeling of confidence and competence is great.”

“It’s taught us a lot more about the community and also how to be humble.”

“We’re so lucky that we get the opportunity to be involved in the community, so to do something that will give an opportunity to someone else makes me feel really grateful.”

“More businesses and organisations who provide products and services for young people need to have young voices, to get direction from young people they are servicing and find out how things are now. It makes sure that what they’re doing is relevant.”

“I feel like it’s furthering my career options but also my personal development.”

