Understanding young people’s needs

Participating in the community creates great outcomes for young people; however it can also be a stressful and frustrating experience. The following points provide suggestions to make the experience enjoyable for young people.

• Provide meaningful inclusion and avoid tokenism. Make it clear to young people that your organisation and its staff appreciate the time they have given up to participate. Ensure all contributions are appreciated and valued, even small contributions such as a 10 minute online survey. Young people sometimes feel that their participation is just about making an organisation look good.

• Consider opportunities for handing over control and allowing young people to do their own thing. This may be difficult to manage, but could produce amazing results. When young people see that their actions are critical to the success of a project, they show more commitment and have a greater sense of achievement when it has been completed. Being in control allows young people to work with their own strengths and gives a greater sense of satisfaction.

• Take time to explain the role of young people in your organisation and how they are going to make a difference. Explain the outcomes of the feedback they provide as evidence that their comments were used.

• Make sure that the ideas and suggestions made by young people are given the same weight as others. It is frustrating for young people to see their idea trivialised or stolen. This does not encourage creativity or meaningful contributions.

• Young people need relationships with adults that reinforce their value. This means relationships built on equality and respect. Young people typically feel disempowered by their age and inexperience, and may be hesitant to ask for information and resources for fear of being seen as incompetent. If you provide them with adequate resources and information, they will feel valued, respected, more confident and effective in their participation.

Tips for Engaging with Young People

There are many things to consider when setting up and running a youth participation initiative. This resource covers some of the key things to consider for the best chance of success.
The Workplace Health and Safety, Privacy, and Equal Opportunity laws set requirements for organisations around engaging with volunteers and service users. An organisation has a responsibility to keep young people safe and to protect them from harm.

Young people don’t always understand how organisations work, or how decisions are made. They may find processes frustrating and slow moving and this may need to be managed by keeping them informed. Minimise processes where possible, and manage young people’s expectations where it isn’t. Try to respond to the ideas put forward by young people in a timely manner.

The words you use when talking to young people, and about their ideas, will shape how they perceive your commitment to their participation. For example, it is important to avoid referring to them as “kids” or “teens”; instead use “young people” or use the name of their group.

For long-term involvement, young people will need ongoing training and support. This will help them to be more effective in your organisation, as well as improving their own skills and experience. Providing training, even informal training where young people share skills with each other, is always valuable. Similarly, there should be a staff member at your organisation who the young people can go to for advice, to talk through issues, or to raise any concerns. You need to choose the right person for this job to make sure the young people will go to them if they need help.

Promoting innovative thinking

Young people are often willing to stretch their imagination and challenge everything. This makes them the ideal drivers of innovation, which is about developing and implementing new, creative ideas.

There are a few things that can help to foster creative thinking:

- Give young people total control of the processes and the project.
- Make the environment fun and inspirational for creative thinking.
- Give young people details of the goals of the project, resources available and any important background information they need to consider, then ask them to start brainstorming.
- Keep young people involved in the project during development and implementation by providing regular feedback and encouragement.
- Consider using techniques like those described below, which can be used in one-off or ongoing initiatives.

Useful techniques for encouraging creative and innovative thinking include:

- Deliberative consultation
  Deliberative consultations involve giving young people pre-reading material on an issue. They are then better informed to discuss the issue at a meeting and come up with a solution. This approach allows young people to push the limits of what can be done within the organisation’s set boundaries. It also facilitates those ‘aha!’ moments.

- Design workshops
  A workshop where relevant stakeholders provide young people with the information they need to know about an issue. The young people are then given the opportunity to design a solution as creatively as possible. For example, they might use magazines to create a collage, annotating it to explain what is appealing from the images selected, or work in groups to create a diorama-style scene with children’s toys to show how a new service might work and then explain their scene to the organisation.

- Appreciative inquiry
  A creative technique that builds on what is working well, rather than focusing on what is not. Participants first look at how similar issues have been successfully addressed, which becomes the inspiration for imagining creative solutions to other issues. Stories are shared and a single proposition is formed by the group. This can become the focus of future workshops, in which the proposition is developed into a strategy.
Case Study: Youth Affairs Council of WA

The Youth Affairs Council of WA (YACWA) is the peak body for youth in WA, advocating for young people and running a range of projects to share and celebrate young people’s voices.

YACWA strongly values and advocates for youth participation, and commits to having youth input into all aspects of their work. There are two positions on the YACWA board specifically for young people, and the organisation’s advocacy work is informed by consultations with young people that take place through online surveys, workshops and other methods.

“We’re committed to listening to young people—if we’re going to advocate for young people, we need to be guided by them.”

Ross Wortham, Chief Executive Officer

YACWA engages young people using a range of forms across different projects, in order to ensure that the participation model is suited to the project and its target audience. For example the:

• Youth Educating Peers project is a peer-to-peer sexual education program which is organised and delivered by a team of young volunteers.
• Home is Where My Heart Is project works with past young participants each year in the planning for the next year’s project.
• Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network is guided and advised by a team of multicultural young people, who have been empowered to create their own initiatives including the three day Catalyst Youth Summit held in 2016.
• Aboriginal Youth Services Investment Reforms initiative is a unique government-led reform in which YACWA has supported young people to participate, both at the highest levels through membership of the steering committee and on-the-ground work with agencies.
• Music Feedback project uses music and popular culture to promote youth mental health, encourage help seeking, and reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues. The project is guided by a steering committee made up of sector representatives and young people.

“You have to support young people to understand the context and reality of the issues they’re discussing. There’s a difference between listening to young people’s experiences—which is a legitimate form of participation in itself—and then taking the next step to help them to formulate ideas and do the ‘reality checking’ to shape those ideas into practical opportunities to make change.

“This is particularly important with the young people who are the most disenfranchised and disempowered, where you need to have a continued amount of energy and focus to maintain a connection and draw out their contributions. It takes more work, but it has a huge impact in empowering and enriching the lives of those young people.”

Ross Wortham.

YACWA also maintains social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) to allow for a more casual dialogue with young people in the community.
The Department of Local Government and Communities, in partnership with the WA Youth Mentoring Reform Group, have worked hard to increase the opportunities for quality youth mentoring in Western Australia. As part of a four-year reform project, organisations have developed new resources to support mentoring. For example, JobsSouthwest has produced an online training resource, Minding The Match, to assist mentors and mentees in regional Western Australia. With this, and other Mentoring Worx resources, the quality of mentoring will be improved for organisations and young people alike.

Participants at the 2016 Catalyst Youth Summit, organised by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network.