

Engaging youth in the creation of their own health states

Youth Engagement Toolkit



About the author: mindyourmind

mindyourmind is an award-winning programme of web-based and in-person youth-adult partnerships reaching thousands of Canadian youth and young adults daily. Their most recent achievement as the winner of the 2013 Champions of Mental Health Awards in the community organisation category reflects the innovative and diverse work that they do. As AstraZeneca Canada's online partner in the Young Health Programme, mindyourmind reaches and engages young people where they are; online. They provide youth with accurate information to better equip them to support their peers and recognise when mental health assistance is needed.

Intended audience

This toolkit is intended for health practitioners, policy makers, and people that serve young people. It is designed to help you think about issues of engaging adolescents in your own practice. It will encourage you to explore:

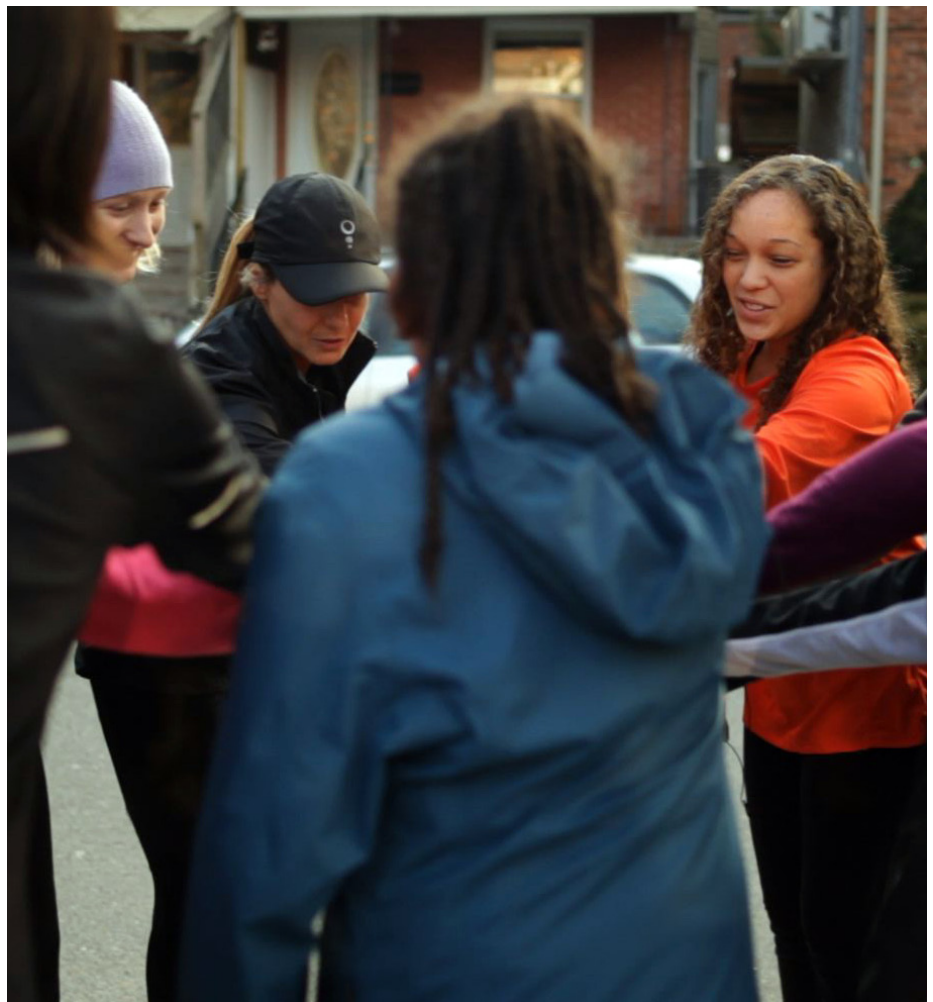
- a) Why engagement with youth is essential in transforming programme planning and delivery;
- b) How the voices of young people are currently influencing your work; and
- c) What changes you can make to improve youth engagement practices within your organisation.

What is youth engagement?

Youth engagement is the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, which has a focus outside of her or himself. Engagement also encourages youth to identify a personal connection internally, resulting in their own personal development and growth.

Youth engagement is a partnership. Resources that are co-created with youth, in partnership with adults, have the capacity to go to scale and can be implemented routinely. Engagement with youth helps to enhance relevancy and meaning for youth both as co-creators of resources and as recipients of service.

Youth engagement is a right. Young people have the right to be heard, express opinions and be involved in decision-making. Their participation and engagement is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, not only is engaging young people in programmes an effective tool for strengthening programme effectiveness, it is fulfilling their basic human rights.



In Canada, youth were engaged to work alongside resource development and design professionals at mindyourmind to create the series Mental Health A to Z, online educational modules addressing issues of stress and wellness and a mood tracking app called mindyourmood. Youth were involved in the conceptualisation, development and dissemination phases, as well as reviewing and testing for usability, accessibility and relevancy for both tools. These resources are currently being used by education support staff, public health nurses and youth leaders in their practice. For more information go to www.mytoolkit.ca

In India, the Young Health Programme (YHP) has facilitated youth-adult partnerships to establish community-based Health Information Centres. These centres provide a safe space where young people can access information about health five days a week, and be referred onto specialist services if needed. Sometimes youth peer educators deliver health sessions by themselves at the centres, and they are also supported by adults when it is needed. Parents can come to the centres, which have sustained young people's participation. The centres are responsive to new ideas from young people – for example, some youth said that they would also like an anonymous communication mechanism, and so the centre set up a post box where questions about health can be posted and then the answers covered in group workshops. The YHP strives to remove any barriers to youth voices being heard, and to ensure that all young people can access information that they need in the manner which is appropriate for them.

“Being part of the Young Health Programme is a unique experience for me. When I became part of this programme my life changed completely because I learnt about my rights and the way I can request them in my personal life and also in social life. I feel myself to be an example to other adolescents”.
18 year old Peer Educator, Brazil

Questions for you to consider:

Why is youth engagement important for your organisation?

Is there a specific programme or process within your organisation that would benefit from engagement with youth?

Why do young people need and/or want to be engaged in their community? In your work/organisation?

Why are youth/adult partnerships important in the development of programmes and policy?

Does your organisation have clear policies and systems in place for child and youth protection?

Key principles in youth engagement

- **Youth engagement is a partnership.**
 - All the elements that make up a good partnership – such as mutual respect, consideration, exchange of ideas, co-creation, and joint expertise – apply.
- **Youth engagement is about respect and active involvement.**
 - An engagement model benefits from co-creation where youth are viewed as partners in their health states, in policy planning, in programme conception and delivery.
- **Youth engagement is empowering.**
 - It gives those involved the permission to drive change and be accountable for that change.
- **Youth engagement strengthens communities.**
 - Evidence tells us that peer educators, with strong adult support, yields demonstrated benefit to community and the peer educator.

Getting started – tips and tools for engaging youth

Prioritise communication

1. Find a common language

- Communicate in ways that are convenient and natural for youth.
- Respect their preferred modes of contact (Facebook, Twitter, texting, theatre, dance and art).
- Don't expect/ask your youth partners to go out of their comfort zone.
- Value the unique perspective of youth.

2. Be consistent in communication

- Agree on clear expectations together.
- Continue that level of transparency.
- Remember, the way you communicate will model communication for youth as well.

3. Provide opportunities for creative engagement

- This can be verbal, visual, music, street theatre etc.
- This supports different communications styles.
- Ensure you engage youth in a supportive environment with access to guidance and debriefing support.

4. Be responsive to youths' questions, comments, and feedback

- Let them know you are listening.

5. Participation and engagement at all levels

- If someone makes a suggestion you can implement, let him or her know his or her voice was heard.



Questions for you to consider:

How can engagement work best within your organisation?

What can you do to support engaged youth?

What role do you have to play as an adult partner?

What can you co-create with youth?

How can what you learn be shared within existing social systems in your community?



Motivation – keeping the goals in sight

1. Establish goals and objectives

- Establish clear goals and objectives for youth participation/engagement, keeping in mind the life-skills they will gain.
- Networking, training, skills development and the opportunity to influence policy are valuable learning tools.

2. Be inclusive

- Reach out to a diverse group, including the most marginalised.
- Let your language reflect gender and diversity in age groupings.

3. Build capacity for young people and adults

- Capacity building and support for both adults and young people will enable an effective partnership and meaningful participation.
- Encourage older youth to mentor the younger ones.

4. Follow best practices

- Follow the example of organisations such as Plan that demonstrate the value of youth engagement by including them at the highest level of decision making on their boards.²

Creating a culture for youth engagement

1. Establish organisational buy-in

- Staff need to know why youth are involved, the objectives and perhaps most importantly, what their working relationship with youth will be.²
- Answering questions such as ‘How are youth involved in my day to day work?’, ‘What can I ask them for help on?’, and ‘What can they ask me to work on?’ are vitally important in deciding the space that youth will occupy within the organisation.

2. Create “Frequently Asked Questions” and “Guiding Principles for Participation.”

- These documents help staff and the youth to work together.

3. Recognise staff investment

- Staff will invest time, commitment and creativity in supporting young people to develop in-depth knowledge about your organisation and its plans. It is important to recognise this within the organisation.

4. Encourage times and spaces that nurture youth engagement

- Look to provide a “safe space” that feels comfortable, friendly and supportive, not overwhelming.

5. Be prepared to change yourself

- Youth engagement acculturates young people and organisations to each other. Everyone has the potential to learn and be changed.

Questions for you to consider:

Who do you need to connect with to get organisational buy in?

How much time and commitment can you reasonably invest?

Anticipate organisational acculturation. How will you identify change and growth?

In what ways do you expect change through this process?



Structure, training and support

1. Identify 'Youth Champions'

- Identify a youth champion within each department that will act as an advocate and contact point for youth engagement.²

2. Assign a youth engagement officer

- Assign an individual the role of youth engagement officer to respond to concerns with questions about the process.
- Youth engagement officer is the go-to-person and looks at engagement issues, tracks and documents the process, and encourages sustained engagement.

3. Train, train, train

- The more thorough the training and orientation for the young person, the more effective his/her engagement becomes with the organisation as a whole.

4. Remember, it's a process

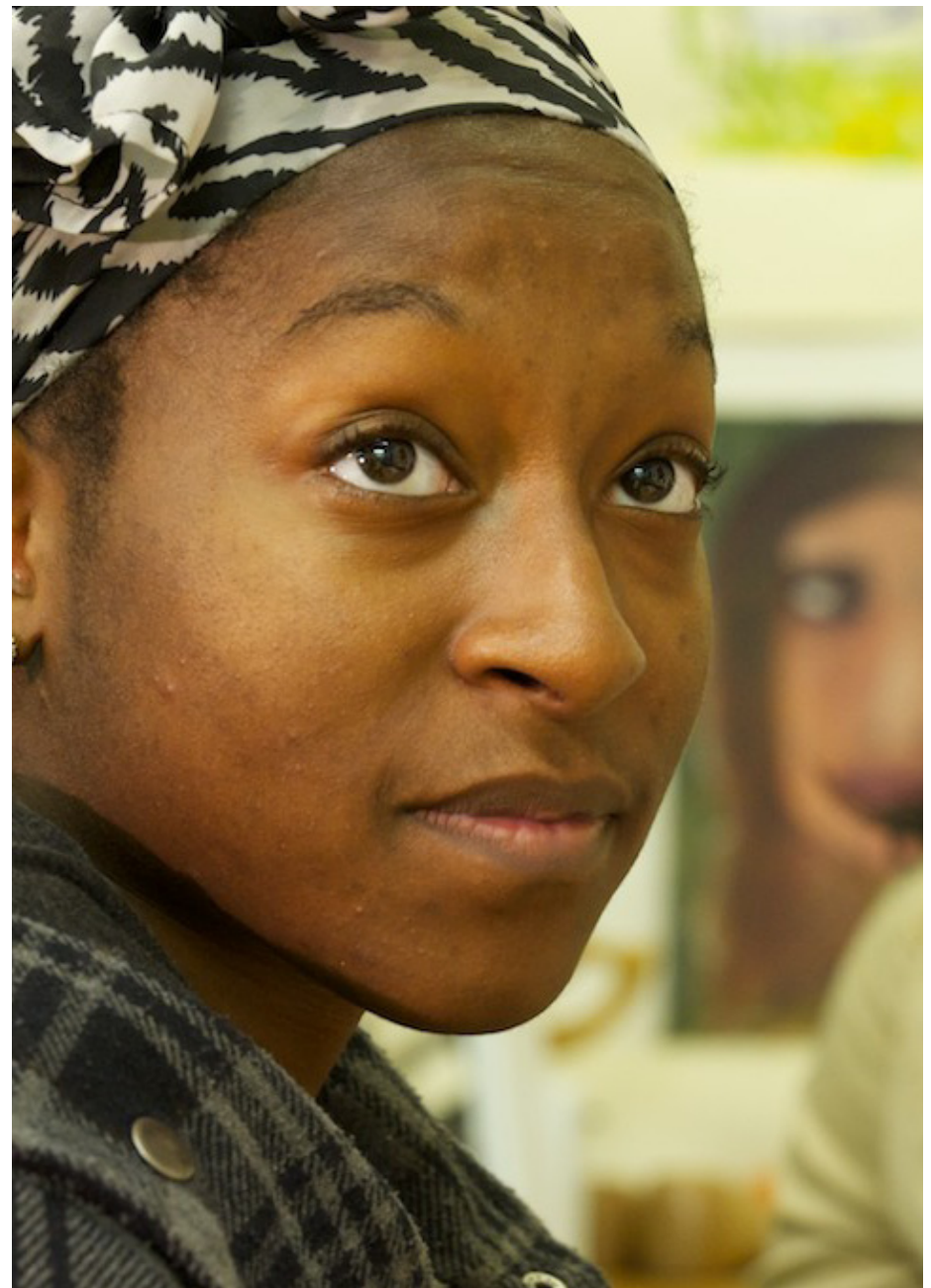
- Engagement is a process - everyone learns gradually.
- Expect diverse learning curves.
- Provide honest yet constructive feedback and work through material together.

Questions for you to consider:

Who can lead engagement within your organisation?

Who are the champions on your team? Identify names and roles.

What are the obstacles to engagement in your organisation/system?



Build and sustain engagement

1. Build/earn trust before you need it

- Be active in the community you are trying to reach for familiarity. Don't start out by asking for participation.
- If youth don't know you, they have no reason to trust you and may not wish to become involved.

2. Recruit respecting 'youth life' flows and demands

- Youth may be expected to work and attend to family and community priorities, or have many other time demands during specific times.
- Create opportunities around their life demands.

3. Maintain motivation

- Motivation plays a key role in sustaining youth engagement.
- Create opportunities for youth to understand and articulate why they're engaged.

4. Establish points of contact

- When working with vulnerable or transient youth identify at least three points of contact.

Questions for you to consider:

What would an engaged youth look like? What roles would they play in your organisation/system/programme?

What is the ideal time to recruit? List considerations regarding youth responsibilities.





"What I like about mindyourmind (MYM) is how it makes me feel comfortable and not alone within my journey. Everything I have done, and will do is largely in part to knowing that I have great support from the awesome people in MYM in my corner. When I am wrong or say something they disagree with, they engage me in a conversation about why I think that, and we both learn from those awkward but needed conversations. I also feel like I can be myself, I can be goofy and professional while working with them. I feel like by working with MYM I have not only achieved way more than I thought possible, but also have regained trust in adults".

mindyourmind youth participant

To find out more about mindyourmind please visit
mindyourmindpro.ca
www.younghealthprogrammehp.com or email
youthvoices@mindyourmindpro.ca

¹ Pancer, S.M., L. Rose Krasnor and L. Loiselle. (2002) "Youth conferences as a context for engagement," In B. Kirshner, J.L. O'Donoghue and M. McLaughlin (Ed). *Youth participation: Improving institutions and communities. New Directions for Youth Development*, 96:47-64

² Plan UK (2011) *Fresh Perspectives: Setting up a youth advisory panel*