



WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

A GUIDE TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION

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→ PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

The purpose of this document is to create a better understanding of youth participation. Our objective is to present a model that aims to create an environment of best practice which includes a strengths-based youth development approach.

Currently the youth work sector is plentiful with resources supporting youth participation, involvement and explaining why it is a necessary process. However very few resources clearly explain how practitioners can implement this.

This document intends to support the ever-growing body of knowledge surrounding youth participation strategies by practising it in our communities. More importantly, to introduce ideas and activities that will improve our working directly with young people in order to create a positive environment through excellence in our work.

This document has been written by young people and youth participation practitioners as a response to the lack of information about how to actually work together. It is based on the practical experience of youth workers and young people, so many of you will be familiar with the content we have set out.

A more specific purpose for this guide is the understanding that participation of young people is essential to the success of The Next¹ and this is clearly articulated in the aims of the project.

Therefore implicit in this document is the commitment to presenting ideas that are useful and about enhancing everyday practice. Everything presented in this guide will be, or is currently, in use as we develop our youth development project: The Next. We hope it will be useful in any other context of working with young people.

→ “view[ing] young people as key protagonists in developing solutions to the issues facing them...defining the priorities, methods and modes of delivery appropriate [to them]...”

The Next Project Proposal document

→ HOW DID WE DO IT?

This document is the result of a working party from The Next project partners coming together to develop a common understanding of youth participation and youth development, as it relates to The Next project.

A working party consisting of youth development practitioners, youth workers and young people generated a set of key principles that have formed the content of this document as four topic areas:

- » Prior to Engaging Young People [Adult Tune-In]
- » Holistic Youth Environment
- » Implementation
- » Monitoring/Evaluation [The Checklist]

A literature search of resources from around the globe and Aotearoa showed similarities between resources and the suggested principles. Following the literature search, a wider group of young people were involved to steer the direction of the document.

From the beginning much of this resource has been shaped by young people’s input by coordinating the whole process, and through the support of a Youth Advocate who has undertaken the research, consultation and writing of this guide.

The intent of the document is to promote participatory methods through a flexible and action-based process. Many of the principles and practices used to develop The Next project are reflected in the processes employed in the writing of this guide.

In other words we have tried, tested and followed what we have written, and in the spirit of this document will continue to define, clarify and reflect the realities for young people and the adults they work with.

1: The Next – an impression of hip hop expression – is a project which brings together different sectors of our society – hip hop community members and non members alike – to reflect the value of hip hop within our communities. This to facilitate the development of a resource that will provide insight into hip hop culture both in Aotearoa NZ and globally, promoting hip hop as an example of positive youth development. www.thenext.org.nz

→ DEFINING YOUNG PEOPLE

The category of young people is understood as the years 12-25. These years are a very transitional period of developmental experience, from school, to further education and careers. It is a time when young people’s relationships transform with friends, family, whanau and their communities. It is also a time when young people can gain new skills and experiences. It is an opportunity to be involved.

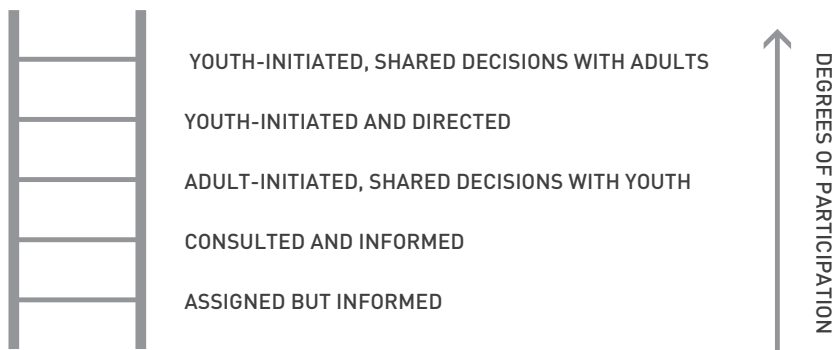
The recognition of young people as key protagonists in their lives and the wider community has increased through the creation of youth councils, forums, advisory groups and a whole host of other initiatives. However, the best way to involve young people is still developing. This document seeks to strengthen young people’s involvement in a way that is beneficial to them and the communities they live in.

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→ WHAT IS PARTICIPATION?

“Participation” is used to suit whatever practitioners wish, often resulting in varied experiences for all parties involved. This ranges from tokenistic through to full participation.

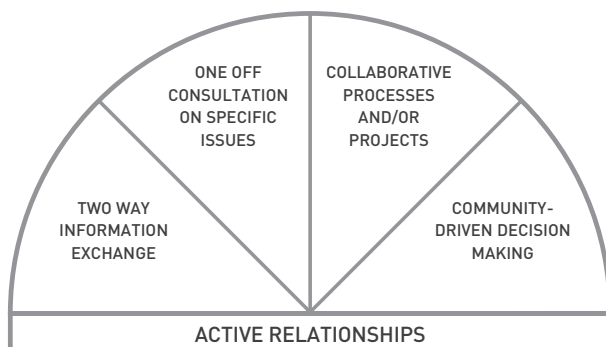
Most processes ideally aim for full participation. However, when actually running a focus group, programme or workshop, the practicalities often impede full participation. Even so, this should not discourage practitioners from seeking excellence in reaching full and meaningful participation.



→ Adapted from: Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation, Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship, UNICEF

Following the ladder, we aim towards a youth-led and youth-driven model. However, it is not always realistic to begin at this point. In this instance it is possible to develop a project that works towards the goals of full and meaningful youth participation. Although we can recognise the top of the ladder as the ideal destination, the difficulty exists in practising methods to encourage full and real participation. However, getting to the top of the ladder takes time. Being patient and allocating time is essential to the goal of successful participatory processes.

The diagram below suggests that in order to gain maximum involvement through partnership, participants in all levels of an initiative must be part of decision-making processes.



→ Ministry for Social Development He Waka Kotia - Joining Together on a Shared Journey. Report of the Community-Government Relationship Steering Group, August 2002

→ THE RIGHTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Trying to establish a level of participation with young people is not simply about gaining favour with them, or ticking off an objective. Aotearoa New Zealand has a requirement under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCROC] to ensure children and young people's rights are upheld. Particular to this project are Articles 12 and 13 which state:

ARTICLE 12

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

ARTICLE 13

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

→ The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child contains 54 different rights, or articles for all people under the age of 18.

For more information about UNCRC check out online www.savethechildren.org.uk/rightonline or www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm

→ PRINCIPLES

There are four topics to consider when working with young people. They seek to address some of the obstacles that arise despite all best intentions to engage young people fully. Each heading presents specific considerations and intentions for working with young people.

The principles under the headings are almost universal in child and youth advocacy, and are commonly referred to in many pieces of key literature and by most key thinkers. These are the important and practical everyday things that support and increase participation. In order to practise them and encourage you to try them, the following sections contain examples and suggestions to help your participatory methods.

- » Participate with a youth-friendly attitude and be willing to change your views
- » Listen to young people
- » Respect the views of young people
- » Involve young people in the whole process
- » Enable young people to build a holistic youth environment
- » Involve young people in the process of creating a participation model
- » Be aware of assumptions and stereotypes
- » Break barriers between adult and youth relationships by relinquishing and sharing power
- » Agree on realistic timeframes
- » Use appropriate language that is accessible to all
- » Reward the involvement of young people
- » Recognise the contribution of young people through formal means eg references, awards
- » Enable young people to participate fully
- » Allow young people to opt out of the process
- » Support young people to gain funding and resources
- » Be honest

→ The 4 Principles:
 Prior To Engaging Young People (Adult Tune-In)
 Holistic Youth Environment
 Implementation
 Monitoring And Evaluation

→ PRIOR TO ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE (ADULT TUNE-IN)

Before you have a youth venue, a good meeting time and a sufficient number of interested young people, you are going to follow all the suggestions, and read as many resources as possible.

You're set, right? Not quite. In our experience the most important thing that gets forgotten is "ATTITUDE!!" and the acceptance of a different way of working - it's the same outcome, but young people may take a different path.

Listening is one of the fundamental things you can begin working on. If you are working in partnership with young people, then treat them as peers. It's okay to feel vulnerable and scared, but how you project it onto young people affects the relationship.

This section covers some of the things that can better prepare you to work with young people. A youth-friendly attitude is something that requires a high degree of self-awareness and self-checking. It may seem a little challenging at first, but is the most effective tool for engaging young people. Being aware of your approach is great place to begin, as it costs nothing and the only equipment you need is yourself!

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YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED IN WHOLE PROCESS NOT JUST END OUTCOME

Consistent with the rest of this document, we advocate for fully participatory processes. Therefore attention must be given to how people are involved in the project you have asked them to join. In this case involving young people in developing the process of consultation makes participation a more genuine practice than asking young people to do something you have already devised. Several things are achieved through early involvement.

1. Recognises young people's abilities: who better to ask how to work with young people, than young people themselves? If you are having difficulty figuring out a process to consult with young people, ask them for ideas.
2. Creates a more equal relationship between adults and young people: asking young people's opinions from the outset establishes a less skewed power balance. Acknowledging that you need to learn things from them, means that young people won't feel so threatened and less-skilled in whatever environment you are inviting them to.
3. Good attitude minimises tokenism
4. Have faith in the process: be prepared to accept that young people's way of working may feel uncomfortable to you as an adult. Don't worry! So long as you have other strategies suggested in this document - it will be fine.

LISTEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND RESPECT THEIR VIEWS

In other words when young people told us that adults don't listen, or they lie, this means that adults needed to check their practice.

It also indicates that adults need to be honest with young people. Here are some ways to improve your respectful listening skills:

- » What perspective are young people coming from? Be aware that they may not have all the information that you have access to. In this instance, it is often easy to inadvertently lecture young people. To avoid this, try facilitating a more open discussion, asking more questions and prompting young people to come up with the answers.
- » Let young people facilitate/chair or organise meetings
- » Be clear about the constraints around the project - aim for a 'no surprises' approach. This gives young people the opportunity to make informed decisions and it can help formulate realistic compromises, rather than having their suggestions rejected as too idealistic.
- » What are the adult objectives? Give young people an opportunity to challenge these, share the task of developing where you are going. Young people are not petulant monsters that will say no to everything. If you give them a chance to be heard, their comments could pleasantly surprise you!

→ PRIOR TO ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE (ADULT TUNE-IN)

RE-EDUCATION OF ADULTS

Check your attitude! We all come with preconceptions, assumptions and blindspots - we just need to be aware of them. Sometimes when trying to be more participatory our attempts can become quite patronising and agonising when we do not mean to be like this at all! There are many reasons as to why this happens, but the important question to ask yourself is whether you are prepared to challenge the assumptions you make.

Being in partnership with young people can be outside your comfort zone, there are issues of power-sharing, gatekeeping and exclusivity. Although there is no magic wand solution to this, you can be aware of it and constantly challenge your practice.

Part of an attitude check is to also be flexible in your expectations of time. By nature, participatory processes are 'time-consuming'. However the value and depth it adds to the effectiveness of the outcomes is very real and worthwhile.

BREAKING BARRIERS BETWEEN ADULT AND YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

It's no one's fault that we have very ingrained societal attitudes based on age. We just have to find ways of working around it. If adults and young people are going to work in partnership, then there needs to be compromise and awareness from both parties alike.

- » Relinquish power: participation is about sharing power and adults need to share that. Young people are not going to disrespect you for trying to do that, especially if they are fully aware of their accountability and more so if they had input to formulate such processes. In fact you may have any old stereotypes pleasantly dispelled.

→ If adults and young people are going to work in partnership, then there needs to be compromise and awareness from both parties alike.

→

→ HOLISTIC YOUTH ENVIRONMENT

A lot of literature emphasises the importance of a youth-friendly environment - but what is it? A holistic youth environment is a space that is agreed to and created by young people. It needs to be self-determined, involving young people in its creation. If some effort is made to create a safe and positive space, the resulting work will be of value to you and the young people.

The experience should be win-win between adults and young people, where both may gain from working together, even if there are different things happening at different levels.

PROJECT NEEDS TO BE YOUTH-RELATED

Youth related means that young people's involvement is engaged by using things that are relevant and of interest to young people. This means being aware of how information is communicated, through to young people being recognised as stakeholders of a particular issue.

- » Ask young people what makes them comfortable

YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO BE INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS - NOT JUST PARTICIPATING IN AN EXISTING THING

In order to fully practise the participatory models we have presented [the sections about Hart's Ladder and Participation Range diagrams], it is essential that there is awareness of the environment young people are being introduced to.

Are young people participating in an existing and organised format or do they have input into developing the model of participation they will be involved in?

- » Aim to be clear about the intent of your work - this minimises the danger of setting up young people to fail.
- » Are young people clear about what is happening to the information they are giving you?
- » Have they agreed to this?

REALISTIC TIMEFRAMES FROM FOCUS GROUPS THROUGH TO PROJECT COMPLETION

With young people's involvement often voluntary and not necessarily the initial driving force in a project, it is important to stipulate from the outset how much of their time is needed. This includes providing adequate preparation times for meetings, workshops and other events. A realistic timeframe means that there is time allocated to enable young people to be equally involved and informed. It is important to accept that young people may not want to attend every meeting.

- » Aim to have an agreement between adults and young people about the level of commitment required

USE OF APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE THAT IS UNDERSTANDABLE TO ALL

Young people we have spoken to and many resources indicate that language and the use of jargon often prevents their full participation. Not only does this negate the purpose of engaging young people, it can stymie involvement to the detriment of a project. For example, spending one's free time in a series of meetings where adults are talking incomprehensible jargon or referring to documents that are less inviting than a maths textbook, is not going to retain youth involvement, in fact it achieves the opposite. Exclusion by language can have the effect of stereotyping young people as disinterested, rude or disrespectful of the process.

Many youth development and participation resources emphasise the need for unambiguous language and clarification of jargon. A number of these resources also suggest strategies to create a more inclusive environment.

→ The experience should be win-win between adults and young people, where both may gain from working together, even if there are different things happening at different levels.

→ Exclusion by language can have the effect of stereotyping young people as disinterested, rude or disrespectful of the process

→ HOLISTIC YOUTH ENVIRONMENT

INVOLVEMENT IS OFTEN VOLUNTARY, THEREFORE MUST BE SUFFICIENTLY REWARDED/VALUED

As most young people's involvement is unpaid, it is important to recognise their input and reward them accordingly. This can be achieved through several different ways

- » Reimbursements
- » Gifts/koha
- » Building young people's capacity
- » Formal recognition

REIMBURSEMENTS

Covering young people's travel expenses, or any costs related to their involvement.

GIFTS/KOHA

While paying young people to attend meetings, focus groups or workshops may not be appropriate, or within budgetary constraints, music or book vouchers, movie tickets or a meal out etc, are good ways of recognising and appreciating young people's interest. It is worthwhile to discuss these options with young people to get an indication of what may suit them and you.

BUILDING CAPACITY

Being involved affords young people the opportunity to learn new skills and hone existing ones. Some projects may even give them access to training that was not previously available to young people. The experience that young people gain through involvement also builds their capacity.

FORMAL RECOGNITION

Recognising involvement may take form as references, letters of recommendations, certificates, or formal accreditation. It could also include formal recognition of a young person/s role e.g. advisory board, spokesperson, representative etc.

Another important thing to remember is what 'voluntary' means, so respecting a volunteer's right to come and go demonstrates the value of their input.

Rewarding involvement is a very effective way of increasing opportunities to participate. Everyone appreciates having their time and energy recognised and young people are no exception.

YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TIME TO SUCCEED AND ASK FOR HELP

Again, this objective is related to several other areas. There are several strategies and simple things you can do to ensure this, all it requires is genuine time and support. If we realise that young people are volunteering to participate in something that is not necessarily part of their everyday experience, to the point of being foreign and quite adult-centric, we can see an unequal power dynamic.

Therefore, if young peoples' perspectives are truly required in a process, that process must negotiate and adapt to allow young people to at least be an equal partner in the relationship. This means giving young people all the information and skills so they are able to contribute.

Here are some examples of how time can be managed:

- » Pre-meetings
- » Fora that allow young people to develop the necessary skills
- » More time allowed for questions and additional support work e.g. having time to answer their questions
- » Being available and organising gatherings after school hours, rather than office hours
- » Holding meetings and gatherings that are youth-friendly i.e. not having young people have to wander around corporate-clad professionals looking for an obscure office.
- » Try having meetings in a local community centre or youth space. Or somewhere that is neutral.

INVOLVEMENT IS NOT IMPERATIVE - OKAY TO OPT-OUT

Choosing not to participate is a form of participation, having the choice to opt-out from involvement is also important too. If you have followed some of the other suggestions in this section, then allowing this is simply part of the wider youth environment.

→ Rewarding involvement is a very effective way of increasing opportunities to participate. Everyone appreciates having their time and energy recognised and young people are no exception.

→ IMPLEMENTATION

Given the right environment, young people do know what they want and the key to success is for adults to be supportive. This section looks at how this might be done.

PROVIDING RESOURCES AND FUNDING

Many young people we spoke to appreciate the financial and resource support obtained through adult assistance. Young people value the efforts their youth workers or organisations make to attract funding for initiatives to benefit young people. This often takes the shape of internet and/or computer access, phone or photocopier. If young people are to initiate or be involved in projects, adults can often provide them with the means to achieve it.

The flipside is what young people perceive to be unnecessary barriers erected by funders. There is no easy remedy to this, as sometimes it is the young people themselves that are overlooked as potential funding recipients. This may be through the application process itself, or young people being rejected on the basis of adults' stereotypes and biases against young people.

Support young people by operating on a no-surprises approach, by taking young people right through a process, for example

- » Get young people to apply for funding: walk them through a funding process from the initial application forms by getting young people to fill them out. Also inform them about the requirements and responsibilities that come with gaining funding e.g funder's reports, keeping receipts etc.
- » Offer the funding: in a relative sense, as an adult you may attract funding more easily than young people. Involve young people in the decision-making process by allowing them to allocate the funding.

The support you can give such as applying for funding, or providing a space to do things creates potential for real partnership between young people and adults.

ADULTS BEING HONEST

Operate on a 'no surprises' basis, give young people all the information they need to make informed choices and suggestions. Being honest means that you are allowing young people to succeed. Leave the agendas and the politics behind-or let young people know about these things. If you know about it, ask yourself why don't young people know?

→ THE CHECKLISTS

PURPOSE

The previous sections have explored the practical elements of ensuring good youth participation process. This area looks at how this can be done. It will provide the elements that will serve as a preparation list, monitoring tool and a means of evaluating what you have done. The monitoring and evaluation checklist also helps this document to remain relevant and flexible to the tension between prescriptive ideals and the actual reality of doing it.

The Youth Participation checklist can help establish the participatory process, by supporting what you are doing as you are involved in the establishing process. Refer to the list as the process evolves.

→ YOUTH PARTICIPATION CHECKLIST

PRINCIPLES	CHECK	STRATEGIES	ACTION
PRIOR TO YOUTH INVOLVEMENT			
Is it clear what will be done with the information gathered from the young people?		Have they agreed to this?	
Has enough time been allowed for the process to take longer than expected?		How has this been achieved?	
Has information on project outcomes and expectations of young people been clearly communicated?		If so, how? Have young people been given an opportunity to comment/provide input? Have young people had the chance to indicate their expectations and level of involvement?	
HOLISTIC YOUTH INFORMATION			
Have youth been involved from the outset? Did youth determine the shape and form of the engagement?		Time Place Format	
How is involvement being recognised?		Do young people receive copies of the end material? Expenses paid? Celebratory event at the project end/milestone? Koha or equivalent?	
IMPLEMENTATION			
Has the need for further input been determined?			

→ THE CHECKLISTS

PURPOSE

Use this framework to review & evaluate the process you have used. This is an opportunity to assess both the successful and not so useful part of the participatory process.

→ POST EVENT PARTICIPATION EVALUATION

OBJECTIVES	CHECK	SPECIFIC AREA	ACHIEVED OUTCOME
Have youth been involved from the outset?			
Did youth determine the shape and form of the engagement?		Time Place Format	
Has information on project outcomes and expectations of young people been clearly communicated?		If so, how? Have young people been given an opportunity to comment/provide input? Have young people had the chance to indicate their expectations and level of involvement?	
Have timeframes and level of involvement been agreed upon with young people?			
Is it clear what will be done with the information gathered from the young people?		Have they agreed to this?	
Has the need for further input been determined?			
How is involvement being recognised?		Do young people receive copies of the end material? Expenses paid? Celebratory event at the project end/milestone? Koha or equivalent?	
Has enough time been allowed for the process to take longer than expected?			

→ RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

REFERENCES

Taking the Initiative: International Perspectives on Young People's Involvement in Public Decision-making, 2002, Carnegie Young People Initiative

Good Practice Guide on Involving Young People in the Governance Of Connexions as Decision-makers, 2002, Connexions Service National Unit

He Waka Kotuia - Joining Together on a Shared Journey-Report of the Community-Government Relationship Steering Group, August 2002, Ministry of Social Development

Keeping it Real-A Resource for Involving Young People , April 2003, Ministry of Youth Affairs/ Te Tari Taiohi

Summary Analysis of Responses from Secondary School Aged Young People for Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa, Ministry of Youth Affairs/ Te Tari Taiohi

Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa, Ministry of Youth Affairs/ Te Tari Taiohi

Empowering Children & Young People, Save the Children UK

The State of the World's Children 2003, UNICEF

Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-Making, UNICEF

RESOURCES

Partnerships Online

<http://www.partnerships.org.uk>

A fantastic site full of resources about building participatory partnerships in the community

Customer Service

<http://www.mcs.bc.ca/yps/customer.htm>

Canada's Youth Participation Strategy, presented as a delicatessen.

Gisela Konopka's Paper "Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth"

<http://cyfernet.org/youthdev/konopka.html>

Written in 1973 it is still miles ahead of what is practiced or preached in most places.

The founding document to a youth development approach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Hamilton rangatahi from Te Ahurei A Rangatahi and Whaimarama urban connex, thanks for your help !

And many thanks to people who read, proofread and re-read this guide - your help has been invaluable.

→ Want to share your experiences or see how the next is using this guide ?

Then you should check out www.thenext.org.nz