Youth Partnership & Participation

Our vision for young Australians is that they will all have the opportunity to realise their potential, be respected by society and participate fully in our community on their terms, consistent with their human rights and responsibilities.

From the ***Mission and Vision of the Australian Youth Foundation***

Developing partnerships

Youth participation is about the development of partnerships between young people and adults across all areas of life so that young people may take a valued position and role in our society and so that the community as a whole (as well as young people) can benefit from their contribution, ideas and energies.

The Australian Youth Foundation has often encountered concerns about the possibility of encouraging young people to participate. It is our belief that adults need not be concerned that young people will take over and destroy an organisation. Rather, organisations have much to gain and any difficulties will be in encouraging full participation and promoting it on an ongoing basis.

This resource sheet is intended to assist your organisation to develop appropriate strategies to enable young people to participate, learn and share. It is designed to assist you to include young people in ongoing decision making in your organisation and ensure a genuine partnership between the young people and adults involved.

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Participation in what?

The concept of youth participation is generally used in three ways (which are not contradictory or mutually exclusive):

1. It is used at a broad level to recognise that young people, as Australian citizens, have the right to participate fully in the social, cultural, political and economic life of our country (eg, participation of young people in such areas as education, training, employment or political life).

2. It is applied at an organisational level to describe the right of young people to be included in decision making about the policies, projects and programs which are designed to ensure their full participation in Australian life (eg, involvement of young people in advisory or management roles in youth projects).

3. It describes, at a personal level, the right of young people to be included in and informed about the decisions affecting their lives (eg, in family life, while in the care of the state or as clients at youth services).

Each of these levels is important. However, this discussion paper is specifically intended to provide practical strategies at the second level: *the inclusion of young people in the policies, projects and programs designed to assist them.*
It is intended to complement other resources which address broader issues. (Some of these are listed on page 5.) The Australian Youth Foundation welcomes any comments you may have regarding this resource or any suggestions which may increase its usefulness.

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Workshop: Identifying appropriate strategies

Before embarking on a strategy of youth participation, it is important to identify the appropriate levels and forms for your organisation. A group method is suggested here to help you achieve this as such processes facilitate participation, learning and sharing. (If you are not skilled in undertaking such a group process, some general ideas and guidelines are included in the Australian Youth Foundation's *START Do-It-Yourself Evaluation Manual).*

Aim: To identify appropriate strategies for youth participation.

Participants: A group of the project's "key stakeholders"—those people directly affected by the project. In the spirit of partnership, this should include young people themselves.

Materials: Butcher paper, whiteboard or overhead projector.
Copies of this paper for all participants.

Time: Approximately 4 hours, including breaks. Could be undertaken over a number of sessions.

Procedure:

1. Break the full group into pairs, asking each to discuss what they would hope to achieve through youth participation (for young people and the project). Each pair could begin by reading "Why Have Youth Participation?" on page 2. (*Allow 5 to 10 minutes*)
2. Bring the full group back together. Ask each pair to share their expectations, writing each up on the butcher paper or whiteboard. It will be valuable to group similar responses together. Do this with a minimum of discussion or comment, respecting each person's point of view. When all groups have report, allow discussion in order to develop a list of aims. (*Time needed will depend on the size of the group, approximately 20 -30 minutes)*
3. As a full group, begin to identify what young people are available to be involved or should be invited to be involved. You may find it useful to write these up against each of the aims. (*Allow about 20 minutes*)
4. Now *brainstorm* on the question "Where and how can young people be involved in the project?" Write up all answers on butcher paper, no matter how way out they may appear at first. Participants should be as creative as possible and negative comments should be limited (you can identify later what is possible or practical). The section "Strategies for Youth Participation" can be used as a stimulus if ideas run out quickly. (*Allow about 20 minutes*)
5. Now it is time to discuss the practicalities: What are the barriers to participation? What strategies can be developed to overcome these? As a full group, analyse the suggestions from the *brainstorm*. (*Allow 30 to 60 minutes*)
6. As a group, read through the "Principles for Youth Participation". Which of them do the members of the group disagree with? What other principles might be important? Write these up on butcher paper to keep them in mind. (*Allow about 15 minutes*)
7. Ask each participant to identify, by themselves, one or two of the suggested strategies which might most effectively ensure real youth participation while respecting the principles of youth participation. Ask each person to "vote" and select the top strategies (approximately three or four). (*Allow about 20 minutes)*
8. Divide into subgroups, one for each strategy. Ask each of the groups to begin completing the following chart (perhaps on butcher paper or overhead transparency):Bring the full group back together to share their proposals. These may need to be fine tuned. (*Allow about 30 minutes*)

Outcomes (be specific)	Activities/Events	Resources (human & financial)	Timeframe (When wil it happen?)	Responsibility(Who will look after it?)

Follow up: Set a date to evaluate the success of the strategies and undertake further development if needed. Identify criteria for the evaluation—how will you know that youth participation has had an impact?

Resource 1: Why have youth participation?

There are many reasons for developing partnerships with young people in your project:

- You can model young people's broader right to full citizenship and participation in Australian life and make this possible.
- You can support the individual young person's right to participate in decisions affecting them.
- You can tap into young people's expertise on their own social and cultural conditions.
- You can assist young people to develop skills, confidence and awareness so that they can take initiatives and tackle issues on their own.
- Active and productive youth involvement can challenge negative stereotypes of young people otherwise perpetuated in the community.
- Young people can bring new perspectives, influencing outcomes in new and unexpected ways.
- Participatory mechanisms can make your service more responsive, understanding and considerate of the young people with whom you are working.
- Policies and programs incorporating young people in their design and delivery are likely to be more efficient and effective.
- The United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, to which Australia is a signatory, endorses the right of young people to participate as fully as possible in their society.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

"[Countries] 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 12)

"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." (Article 13)

Principles for youth participation

The following broad principles need to be used as the basis for youth participation strategies:

1. Youth participation should be beneficial for young people:

Why should young people bother to be involved? What will they get out of it? How will this activity improve their life? Make it more fun? Give them a sense of control? …and so on!

Informed choice: Young people should be informed about what is involved, but it is unreasonable to expect that all young people will want to or should participate. Partnership is not possible if participation is compulsory.

Enjoyment: Participatory activities should be fun, exciting and challenging.

Relevant: Activities should address those issues and needs that are perceived as real by the young people involved.

Developmental: Activities should raise young people's awareness of the social, political, economic, cultural and personal aspects of the issues affecting them.

Educational: Activities should provide opportunities for both formal training and the informal development of skills.

Relationship focused: Activities should provide opportunities for building active and supportive working relationships between young people and other members of the community.

Support, supervision and monitoring: Young people should be provided with whatever is required to promote success and to handle failures or setbacks.

Resourcing: Activities should be adequately resourced with sufficient time, space, funding, information, etc (include this issue in normal budgeting processes).

Beneficial: Benefits for the young people need to be included. This may be simply that the involvement is enjoyable, educative, etc—or in some cases may involve specific payment (eg. consultation on a specific issue).

2. Youth participation should recognise and respect the needs and contributions of all involved:

Be sensitive to the inherent difference in experience, status, power, control, knowledge of resources, language, etc. How can you acknowledge this, incorporate it and overcome any problems caused by it?

Accountability: Mechanisms need to be included to provide for monitoring, accountability and feedback for activities undertaken by young people.

Goals and strategies: Young people must be given the opportunity to identify and define the problem as they see it, exploring options and alternative strategies.

Ownership: Activities should provide young people with a sense of belonging and ownership.

Value: Young people should be able to recognise that their participation is valued and that they have ownership in the process.

Negotiation: Young people will not necessarily dominate the decision making. The knowledge, responsibilities and commitments of the adults involved need to be acknowledged.

Avoidance of tokenism: Young people must be offered real roles or they will quickly recognise that they are not being taken seriously.

Flexibility and space: options for participation must be sensitive to the particular young people's value systems, availability, commitments, language, skills, culture, financial resources, access to transport, etc.

Diversity: Young people are not a homogenous group, and having some young people participate does not ensure the inclusion of the views of all young people.

Expertise: Some tasks need to be undertaken by trained professionals, either because adequate training is not possible or due to legislative requirements.

Evaluation: Activities should include ongoing critical analysis of experiences, actions taken and outcomes.

Recruitment: Appropriate recruitment and selection processes will ensure the right young person for the job.

Confidentiality: the confidentiality and privacy of any personal or sensitive data held by the project must be preserved.

Developing structures for youth participation

Simple "good will" to include young people and their views in decision making is unlikely in the long term to ensure it. Youth participation mechanisms have to be guaranteed and not dependant on the whim and personal commitment of individuals.

Projects committed to partnerships with young people need to develop structures which support this participation at a fundamental level:

- Incorporation into your mission and vision statement.
- Inclusion in your organisation's memorandum and articles of association.
- Documentation of appropriate policies and procedures.

Full and active youth participation will not occur overnight. It is a developmental process. Young people who are disadvantaged or marginalised in particular will have been excluded from decision making for most of their lives and will need a lot of encouragement and support. The young people who volunteer the most quickly will tend to be the loudest, most assertive or most confident. To ensure real equability in participation, you may need to go to other young people and find strategies that will give them the space, time and resources to participate. You may need to act as an advocate for young people's right to participate, even among young people themselves.

Strategies for youth participation should be incorporated at all stages of a project: planning, development, programming, operation, monitoring and evaluation.

Resource 3: Strategies for youth participation

In 1987, Gill Westhorp of the Youth Sector Training Council identified a continuum of youth involvement.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Ad hoc input	Structured consultation	Influence	Delegation	Negotiation	Control

The continuum does not imply that more control is better, just that the options exist and that some will be more appropriate in some situations than others. A variety of different strategies and approaches will ensure that a variety of different young people can participate. The participating young people may be disadvantaged or not, may be clients or ex-clients. Participation should happen in all areas of service: planning for new programs, development, monitoring, and evaluation.

While the underlying concept of the following pages is based on Westhorp's outline, the material has been developed beyond this. The options for youth participation are drawn from the experience of people working with youth and the literature on youth participation. It is by no means exhaustive and the various strategies can be adapted to achieve a variety of aims.

Additional Resources

Alder, C. and Danny, S. (1990) "Youth Researching Youth" in *Youth Studies* 9:4, November 1990, pp 38-42.

Brown, C. (1991) "Marginalised young people and the Power of decision making" in *Youth Studies* 10:4, November 1991, pp 41-46.

Department of Local Government (1998), *How Young People would like to be Consulted: A report of findings from interviews with young people as part of the Youth Consultation Research Project.*

Ewin, J. (1994) "Youth Participation: concepts and structures" in *Youth Studies Australia*, 13:3 Spring 1994, pp 13-20.

Hoyne, A. (1993) "Involving Young People" in *The YACWA News Bulletin*, Spring 1993, pp. 3-5.

Johansson, K., Brooks, M. and Hart, K. (1998) *Evaluation of the Youth Week Program, Final Report.* Prepared for the Youth Assistance Strategies Section, Department of Education and Training

Kaplun, M. (1995) *Promoting youth participation: A rights perspective: Discussion Paper* Sydney: National Children's and Youth Law Centre.

Westhorp, G. (1987) *Planning for youth participation: a resource kit,* Youth Sector Training Council of South Australia.

Wilkins, V. *et. al.* (1993) "Youth Participation in Youth-Focused Research", in *Youth Studies Australia* 12:3 Spring 1993, pp. 49-52.

1. Ad hoc input

At this end of the continuum, an environment is established where young people are able to contribute their ideas or information about their needs. This strategy flows directly out of the right of young people to be included in and informed about decisions affecting their lives. If an organisation is seriously undertaking this, an environment will develop where the view and concerns of young people are heard and can be incorporated into the project design.

Advantages:
A larger group of people can have input.
Enables input from young children or very marginalised young people.
Solutions usually based on some theoretically underpinning.

Disadvantages:
Input is indirect (and must be interpreted by adults).
Limited sense of ownership developed by young people.

Options:
Creative art workshops (gather young people's ideas through paintings, photos, poems, films, newspapers, drama, role plays, songs, slogans, etc).

Periodic events such as youth days or youth weeks with activities to stimulate input.

Individual discussions with staff.

Suggestion box.

Documented policies on client input and complaints procedures.

Regular staff sessions to share and interpret ad hoc input.

Information sessions to keep participants informed and enable response.

2. Structured Consultation

This involves deliberately developing a strategy to seek young people's opinions about what they need, what problems they face or what strategies might be able to respond. Consultation implies a two way flow of information and ideas.

Advantages:
Direct input by young people.
Exploration of issues in depth is possible.
Solutions usually based on some theoretically underpinning.
Consultations are less time consuming than full participation.
Increased credibility with the broader community because strategy is developed by adults.
Can challenge and expand existing approaches.

Disadvantages:
The outcome may not reflect what young people want.
The outcome may not be based on actual need but on adults' interpretations of the need.
Young people may not recognise the outcome as their own.
Does not guarantee any decision-making power
Can create expectations for rapid follow-up and disillusionment if no feedback is received.

Options:
General forums, workshops and discussion groups involving a wide group of young people — regular opportunities where young people can come together to identify, discuss and resolve issues.

Issue specific forums to address certain components of the projects work.

Focus groups (in depth discussions with a smaller, but representative group of young people).

Cooperation with other youth organisations (particularly important for projects with state or national scope).

Research and **surveys** designed to elicit the views of young people on their own situation or attitudes concerning issues that are significant to them.

Reference Groups — committees of young people who evaluate current operations and suggest new strategies.

3. Influence

This involves some formal, structured input in order to ensure at least a minimal level of influence on the organisation.

Advantages:

Young people have considerable independence to speak their minds.

Young people have a direct link with decision making.

Disadvantages:

The actual impact can be limited.

Can create expectations for a rapid follow-up

Requires feedback – young people must be assured of real influence.

May require young people to fit into adult structures and environment.

Options:

Advisory groups or youth councils making formal recommendations to management.

Formal processes for acknowledging and acting on the recommendations of advisory groups, including feed back.

Meetings (*regular or ad hoc*) between advisory youth forums and others involved in the organisation's management to ensure interaction and flow of information.

Youth representatives on management:

— may be *ad hoc* where young people do not attend all meetings.
— may involve formal elections where representatives are accountable to a particular group who elected them.

Agenda items: ensuring input and advice from young people is an official part of meeting agendas.

4. Delegation

Young people are provided with real responsibility for undertaking particular tasks of an organisation. Clear guidelines must be provided and there must be a mutual understanding of the extent of power that young people have.

Advantages:

Young people have clear and real responsibility.

It can be tailored to young people's interests and needs.

Disadvantages:

May still exclude from decision making.

Confusion over expectations can cause conflicts.

Options:

Youth spokesperson (a young person could be your organisation's representative to external bodies, especially to media)

Identified responsibilities:

— **Youth researching youth**: youth respondents feel more at ease and give better responses to interviewers from their own peer group
— **Peer education**
— **Employment of young people**
— **Programming**: Including young people centrally in developing new programs. This can lead to *negotiation* or *control* roles in the new program.
— **Sub-committees and working groups** including young people.
— **Staff selection panels**, preparation of job descriptions and selection of personnel
— **Project publicity and media work**.
— **Fundraising.**
— **Hospitality roles.**

(Projects need to identify the components of their program where non-specialists can be involved).

Training Programs with components of experience working within the organisation.

Documented "terms of reference" to provide guidelines, direction and checks and balances for delegated responsibilities.

5. Negotiation

In negotiation, young people and the rest of the organisation each contribute their ideas, information and perspectives and decisions are reached by consensus and compromise. This implies that young people have some bargaining power and that decisions are acceptable to all parties.

Advantages:

Able to create a genuine partnership.

Provides significant developmental benefits for the young people involved.

Young people are actively involved in the development of solutions.

Disadvantages:

Can be subtly destroyed by the unequal levels of power between young people and adults.

Involves adapting meeting structures to facilitate youth involvement.

The process can be time consuming.

May require young people to fit into adult structures.

Options:

Integration of young people into existing structures—could involve the allocation of a percentage of positions on all committees involved in the organisation.

Mentoring—an adult committee member can be appointed to assist with information, guidance, and easing bureaucratic meeting procedures.

Youth Advocates—someone can be appointed to specifically negotiate between the view of young people and adults.

Youth participation committees where young people who are involved meet together to support each other.

Documented agreements (such a "contract" or "memorandum of understanding" can protect the rights of young people in involvement).

Adapted meeting procedures and structures to make them more "youth friendly".

Policy forums — policy development meetings designed to specifically include young people in the policy process.

6. Control

Control implies that young people make all or many of the crucial decisions within the organisation, from policy and programming to financial management and hiring and firing of staff. Total control is rare, except in organisations which are only open to young people or which are youth initiated, developed and managed.

Advantages:

Young people are actively involved in the identification of issues and the development of solutions.

Young people have ownership of the processes and solutions.

Skills are acquired by young people

Solutions are relevant to young people.

Ensures for total involvement in all stages of planning, programming and monitoring of the processes.

Disadvantages:

The process can be time consuming

Adults often find it difficult to step back and hand over power.

Relinquishing control involves taking risks/ trusting young people to succeed, fail, learn an grow.

A range of support from adults may be required.

Options:

Young people's groups with no adult involvement.

Constitutional requirements:
— Membership limited to young people
— Voting rights
— Balance of power on management.

Central involvement in initial planning (young people come up with the opinions, plans, ideas).

Support roles only for adults to provide advice, helping to refine ideas, supporting decisions.

A reference group of young people with responsibility for the strategic directions of the project.