

Youth Involvement in Decision-Making: What Difference Can It Make For Your Community?

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Has your community ever made an important decision or implemented a project that directly impacts youth, yet the voice of the youth was not represented in the decision-making process? If so, then perhaps you should read the following which outlines why and how communities should engage young persons in decision-making.

The fact is that youth under the age of 18 represent 26% of the population. Although they are not yet old enough to vote, they have a large stake in decisions that will affect the future of the community in which they live. After all, the youth *are* the future of communities in which they live.

Meaningful youth participation provides real opportunities for youth to become involved in decisions that affect their lives and their communities. According to the Youth Activism website ([www.http://www.youthactivism.com](http://www.youthactivism.com)), the benefits of involving youth include the fact that they:

1. serve as role models and peer educators.
2. diagnose problems and provide a reality check.
3. challenge conventional thinking.
4. influence their parents and other adults.
5. attract news media and coverage.
6. capture the attention of decision-makers.
7. pursue unorthodox tactics and circumvent roadblocks.

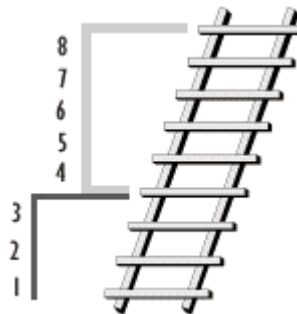
What defines participation?

The **Ladder of Participation** is a model for thinking about youth participation developed by Roger Hart. The bottom three rungs describe youth involvement that is not true participation, whereas the top five rungs describe true participation.

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

8) Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults is when projects or programs are initiated by youth and decision-making is shared among youth and adults. These projects empower youth while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults.

7) Youth-initiated and directed is when young people initiate and direct a project or program.



Adults are involved only in a supportive role.

6) Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth is when projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people.

5) Consulted and informed is when youth give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. The youth are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.

4) Assigned but informed is where youth are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved.

3) Tokenism is where young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

2) Decoration is where young people are used to help or "bolster" a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by youth.

1) Manipulation is where adults use youth to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by youth.

How can youth of all ages be involved in community decision-making?

From preschoolers through elementary, middle and high school, there are a variety of activities that can be initiated, led or be possibilities for participation by local youth. These can include:

Preschoolers

- going with their parents when they vote—let them see how it works first-hand!
- working with groups in town to make their community a better place to live, such as helping on town clean-up days or visiting with the elderly who don't get a lot of visitors to hear how the community was when they were younger

Elementary/School Age

- helping to evaluate their school's performance, from teachers to the academic program and sharing it with the local School Board
- take disposal cameras home and take pictures of their favorite/least favorite places around town and do a short write-up for why these places are of value to the town

Middle School

- writing articles for the local newspaper, newsletter or website to get the youth voice heard about issues going on in the community
- assisting in voter activities such as state and national primaries doing such as activities as helping to organize transportation for those who need it and helping at the polls,

High School

- sitting on local government boards such as school boards, planning boards, conservation commissions and city councils and participating in activities such as updating Master Plans, developing open space plans and developing town budgets
- facilitating or scribing for community visioning processes or holding their own process to get the youth perspective on what might be needed in the community.

This process takes time, energy, and commitment—in order for it to be effective it is important that youth are treated with respect, valued as resources, and given appropriate support. Youth participation in decision-making can only be effective when it is experienced by youth as meaningful and provides the community with valuable insight.

What are the benefits to communities?

Involving youth in an initiative/decision-making process may result in the following benefits (Klindera & Menderweld, 2001):

- fresh, new ideas,
- new perspectives on decision-making, including more relevant information about the needs and interests of youth,
- open and honest responses about existing programs or services,
- additional human resources due to the sharing of responsibilities between youth and adults,
- greater willingness by youth to accept the services and messages of programs and activities, and
- greater credibility of the decision to both youth and advocates.

Youth participation increases the likelihood that the community's programs and services will fit the needs of youth. It gives young people a sense of belonging to the community, promoting the youth's sense of responsibility and citizenship. Through youth participation in decision-making, young people and adults can learn from each other to find relevant and effective solutions.

In summary, communities that involve youth as respected leaders and participants in decision-making can clearly experience the exuberance and excitement of a group of stakeholders who have the unique abilities and experience to ensure decisions that affect youth are well thought out, sustainable and worthwhile endeavors.

Resources:

At The Table (<http://www.atthetable.org/>) Grounded in the conviction that institutions and communities benefit from the voices of young people, a growing national movement of youth and adults is working to secure a place for youth "at the table" where decisions are made that affect them. AttheTable.org is designed to provide resources and information about how to involve young people in decision-making.

Building Partnerships for Youth (<http://msg.calsnet.arizona.edu/fcs/index.cfm>) This site provides some valuable resources to begin to enlist youth in community decision-making, including the developmental considerations necessary in deciding when youth involvement will be mutually beneficial for both youth and the communities.

Center for Youth as Resources (<http://www.yar.org>) Provides resources for youth-led service learning projects, including identification of needs, skill development and mobilization of resources. Promoting 'youth as grantmakers, youth-led community service and youth-adult partnership in government'.

Do Something (<http://www.dosomething.org>) Promoting youth involvement in service projects, utilizing their experiential 'five step process for creating community change: see it, believe it, build it, do it, reflect'. Long-term and short-term projects and challenges for youth focused on community building, health and the environment. Do Something Brick Awards of \$5000 scholarships plus \$5000 for continued work for youth 18 and under available.

Ministry for Children and Families (<http://www.mcs.bc.ca/yps/home.htm>) This "youth participation shop" provides information about how why youth participation in decision-making is important, what's necessary for success and other helpful resources for adults and youth interested in doing more in their communities' decision-making processes.

Youth Venture (<http://www.youthventure.org>) "Empowers young people ages 12-20 by providing them all the tools necessary to create civic-minded organizations, clubs or businesses." A national network of young people, media opportunities and up to \$1000 seed money available to help youth "launch" their efforts. Grew out of Ashoka effort supporting social entrepreneurs around the world—recently expanded outreach in New Hampshire.