

INVOLVE **YOUTH**

A guide to involving youth in decision-making



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In order for young people to truly experience social justice, we must create a society in which young people are full citizens, empowered to contribute ideas and make decisions. Youth participation is an idea whose time has come...

- Anne B. Hoover and Amy Weisenbach
"Youth Leading Now!"

InvolveYouth: A guide to involving youth in decision-making

Introduction

Community organizations play a vital role in the life of Toronto. Everyday, all over the city a wide array of community groups make Toronto a better place to live, work and play. They deliver social services, direct housing co-ops and condominiums, offer cultural, educational and recreational programs, and advocate on behalf of business and neighbourhood concerns. Some are small groups with limited mandates; others are large agencies providing a complex mix of programs and services.

Community organizations are the cornerstones of local democracy. They are guided by boards of directors, advisory groups or councils made up of individuals who have taken on the responsibility for decision-making. To be successful these organizations must reflect the needs and views of their members, users and stakeholders — the strength of their decision-making lies in their ability to be representative and inclusive.

There is one demographic group, however, that is too often ignored or overlooked when it comes to decision-making. There are more than 300,000 young people between ages 15 and 24 living in Toronto — over 12 per cent of the city's population. Yet relatively few community organizations include youth in their decision-making processes. Youth are a huge untapped resource. They bring energy, ideas and a whole new perspective that can enrich the decision-making of any organization. Involving youth pays big dividends for young people, the organizations that invite them to the table and for the community as a whole. Youth engagement leads to youth development and youth development contributes to the health of vibrant and inclusive communities.

As part of its commitment to public engagement, the City of Toronto has been listening to young people. The Toronto Youth Cabinet was created in 1998 as the voice of youth at City Hall. Over the past 18 months, the City has sponsored a series of focus groups, town hall sessions and a youth safety survey to ask hundreds of young people across the city about their concerns and ideas for creating healthy communities. The consistent

message expressed throughout these forums is that young people want to be heard and they want to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives and the communities in which they live.

There may be many reasons why community organizations have not engaged youth in decision-making. Some are based on misconceptions or an uncertainty about how to bridge communication and generational gaps. Sometimes young people are viewed as being apathetic or problematic. There are, however, many success stories about young people who have made significant contributions to their communities and about organizations that have successfully invited youth to their decision-making tables.

The City of Toronto has launched InvolveYouth, a citywide campaign to increase the number of young people participating in leadership roles in community organizations. Groups across the city are being encouraged to extend a warm and genuine invitation to young people in their community to become involved in decision-making.

This guide describes important benefits that such participation can bring — to organizations, young people and communities. It also offers ideas about how organizations can successfully extend the invitation and create a respectful and hospitable environment within which youth can participate.



Young people are the last group we are allowed to systematically and openly exclude. An adult may be able to represent the issues of youth, but can they represent the spirit and interests of youth?

- Mike Males
The Scapegoat Generation

No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline.

- Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General

It is important in building citizenship that we extend opportunities for civic participation to everyone and young people are no exception. It's about inviting young people in and having the courage to see where that takes you as an organization.

- Nathan Gilbert,
Executive Director
Laidlaw Foundation

The board of the Laidlaw Foundation and each of its program advisory committees have at least two youth members.

Benefits of youth involvement in decision-making

For organizations

- **Broadens the representativeness of decision-making.**
Youth make up a significant proportion of the community. They can bring unique perspectives and experiences to the table. They also bring innovative ideas and dynamic perspectives about the future.
- **Helps the organization make better decisions.**
A broader range of views and experience can energize the decision-making process.
- **Helps the organization improve its services for youth.**
Organizations can serve youth better if they have a better understanding of this population group.
- **Improves the image of organizations.**
Creating a youth-friendly organization inspires the confidence of young users, clients and stakeholders and enhances the reputation and credibility of the organization.
- **Helps attract other youth as volunteers.**
Involving youth as decision-makers signals that the organization is serious about dealing with youth respectfully and encourages young people to assume a variety of roles.



For youth

- **Builds self-esteem and self-confidence.**
Taking on responsibilities for guiding an organization provides opportunities for leadership and is an important step a young person's personal development.
- **Develops important skills.**
Leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, consensus building and networking are among the skills that can grow out of participating in the decision-making process.
- **Provides experience relevant to education and employment.**
Undertaking decision-making roles enables young people to fulfill community involvement requirements for graduation while teaching skills that are not always learned in the classroom. It also helps young people plan their careers, build their résumés and gain skills that will be valuable on the job.
- **Gives youth a creative and productive outlet for their energy and creativity.**
Youth are sometimes stereotyped as being cynical or apathetic. The responsibility that comes with decision-making will prove these stereotypes wrong. Inviting young decision-makers to the table creates an opportunity for them to be appreciated for what they have to offer.
- **Connects youth to other youth and to their community.**
Giving young people a stake in decision-making improves their understanding of citizenship and connection to other individuals and institutions within their community.



One of the benefits of having young people involved in decision-making is that they insist on honesty and integrity, on asking why certain decisions were made. They challenge others to think creatively and consider new ways of operating.

- Violetta Ilkiw,
Youth Engagement
Program Co-ordinator
Laidlaw Foundation

Young people are in the best position to know what is needed and the best way to offer programs for youth. They keep the organization relevant and provide for future leadership.

- Uzma Shakir,
Executive Director
Council of Agencies
Serving South Asians
(CASSA)

Four of the eleven board members of CASSA are young people.

Organizations benefit from having youth members because they bring fresh ideas, new vision and revitalization. For young people, it's impossible to develop decision-making skills unless you are in that role and learning from those with the experience.

- Alina Chatterjee,
Youth Board Member
Council of Agencies
Serving South Asians
(CASSA)

Young people bring energy, idealism, optimism and big picture thinking that can benefit any organization.

- Cathy Dyer, Project
Leader, Youth In Care
Connections Program
Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies
(OACAS)

*OACAS is in the process
of creating a Youth
Committee to meet
with senior directors*

For communities

- **Overcomes negative stereotypes about youth and creates new respect for young people.**
It allows them to demonstrate their skills and commitment and put to rest the preconceptions and mistrust that often cloud the relationship between youth and adult society. It also builds inter-generational partnerships that benefit the whole community.
- **Strengthens community capacity and local democracy.**
Giving youth a stake in decision-making builds a broader base of citizen involvement and creates stronger, more inclusive communities. Youth engagement also builds commitment to the whole range of organizations that serve communities in so many different ways. Everyone benefits when organizations are effective and well run.



How to make youth decision-making a success

Before starting

- **Review your organization's policy and practice on inclusive decision-making.**
Does the decision-making in your organization fully reflect your clientele, your membership and your community? Discuss the value of inclusiveness and who may be missing from the table. Youth are an important population group to consider but there may be others to consider as well.
- **Be certain that the members of your organization are willing and able to collectively support youth participation.**
Youth involvement in decision-making will not work without the whole-hearted support of staff and board members; particularly those who play leadership roles. They must be prepared to surrender at least some of the privileges of adult power.
- **Build understanding about the value of listening to the voice of youth.**
Lay the groundwork carefully to help all parts of your organization understand the value of inviting young decision-makers to the table.
- **Plan your approach.**
Establish a framework for youth engagement. Determine what kind of participation makes the most sense for your organization — board membership, policy development, program planning or evaluation — and how it can be matched with the particular skills and interests of the young people. Plan ahead for outreach, orientation, and training for existing board members, staff and volunteers and any other resources that may be needed. Review the existing organizational culture and determine how it might create barriers for participation by youth.
- **Be prepared to treat youth as equal participants in the decision-making process.**
Youth will quickly become frustrated and disaffected if they feel they are being patronized or denied equal status.

It's important to create a space where young people are not just observers. Some of the things to think about in accomplishing this are the timing of meetings so that youth can attend, how meetings are run so that everyone has an opportunity to speak, giving youth proper orientation and opportunities for informal mentorships to develop with experienced board members. When involving young people, you have to give more thought into what supports and additional training might be needed. It's also important to do informal check-ins after meetings to find out how they found the meeting and whether the youth feel they were heard.

- Violetta Ilkiw,
Youth Engagement
Program
Co-ordinator
Laidlaw Foundation

Boards need to have the same expectations from youth that they have of other board members, but adult members need to be prepared and understand that it's about sharing power and valuing youth members.

- Deborah Senior,
Youth Board Member
Laidlaw Foundation

My best piece of advice to organizations thinking of engaging youth in decision-making is not to do it out of tokenism or it will not work. You need to stop and think about why you are doing this and then plan to engage young people in a meaningful manner. Flexibility is important and you have to be much more flexible where young people are involved.

- Uzma Shakir,
Executive Director
Council of Agencies
Serving South Asians
(CASSA)

Making choices

- **Be clear with youth participants about the expectations, responsibilities, scope of decision-making authority and other practical details of the role that you are inviting them to take on.**

Discussing expectations will ensure that the young person is prepared and well informed to make the right decision. The right fit is important and will ensure success for both the young person and the board. Organizations need to consider their own needs and choose for success.

- **Make diverse selections.**

Like all board appointments, the selection of young people will be most beneficial if it is representative — from an ethno-cultural, class and geographic perspective — of the community the organization serves. For example, business improvement associations dealing with graffiti may find it useful to engage a young person with a graffiti background. Don't target just high-achieving youth; search out young people from diverse ethno-cultural and class backgrounds who may have a broader understanding of the issues facing youth in their community. Particularly, encourage young males to become involved

- **Ensure that young decision-makers are not isolated.**

Invite more than one young person to join the board or advisory committee to provide mutual support.

- **If youth are being elected or appointed as representatives, ensure that reporting and accountability mechanisms are clear.**

To get full value for youth participation, organizations must have clear channels of communication and reporting to all involved members.

- **Recognize and address legal and systemic barriers.**

Youth under the age of 18 may not be legally eligible to vote as members of the board but still may have important contributions to make to decision-making.

Getting acquainted

- **Create an environment that is welcoming in both physical and social terms.**

Ensure that the physical space in which you meet is not intimidating and that all staff and board members are prepared to be friendly and accommodating to new decision-makers.

- **Provide orientation to the organization.**

Ensure that newcomers understand what the organization does and the role of the board or advisory committee. Explain the history and mandate of the organization clearly.

- **Schedule meetings at a time that match the busy school and work lives of youth.**

Daytime meetings can create time conflicts that make it difficult for youth to participate effectively.

- **Make sure the location is not a barrier to participation.**

Subsidize transportation expenses by providing TTC tickets.

- **Provide refreshments and snacks.**

Young people have larger appetites than adults do because they are growing and lead active lives. Providing cold beverages, snacks or light meals, if the meeting time coincides with meal times, goes a long way to ensure their active participation.



In response to our youth members, we've created an orientation package that stresses the rights of members and how youth can raise issues. It's important for both management and board members to take the time to sit, listen, and have a conversation and dialogue with youth. Youth need to be taken seriously and existing board members need to share power.

- Soni Dasmohapatra,
Youth and Community
Development
Co-ordinator
Council of Agencies
Serving South Asians
(CASSA)

Adult members and staff need to understand what youth are all about. One idea is to have youth facilitate a training session, almost like a cultural studies workshop. Through this they can teach the older members what's cool with young people, decode jargon and interpret behaviours to break down misunderstandings. Informal times like dinner before the meetings are a good time for board members and youth to interact, get to know each other in a friendly environment.

- Cathy Dyer,
Project Leader,
Youth In Care
Connections Program
Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies
(OACAS)

Making it work

- **Provide enough staff support so that youth decision-makers can succeed.**
Organizations can be complex and confusing. Dedicate staff resources to help young board members get up to speed.
- **Match youth decision-makers with mentors from the board.**
Provide the time and opportunity for a relationship of trust to develop before youth enter the organization. The mentor should be available to provide information and answer questions that the young person has about process, vocabulary and other issues as they arise.
- **Provide ongoing training to help young people develop the skills they need to be effective board members.**
Recognize that there is likely to be turnover in youth membership and that it may be necessary to replace youth decision-makers more frequently than their adult counterparts. Young people are at a point in their lives that brings about change. They move from one educational institution to another or they enter the world of employment. They move out of the family home into their own residence. Their understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world they live in are in constant transition. Change is a significant factor that distinguishes youth from adults.
- **Provide training for adult board members to build understanding of youth development and community development.**
Bringing youth involvement to an organization can require many adjustments. Some extra support can help existing board members to deal with all the dynamics at work.
- **Conduct meetings sensitively.**
Help overcome any possible power imbalances or feelings of intimidation by providing open and respectful leadership of meetings. Young people must feel that their active participation is welcomed and respected and that they are not merely token representatives.



- **Manage meeting agendas effectively so they are not too long or unnecessarily complex.**
Young people can sometimes become frustrated and impatient about how long it takes to produce decisions and take action. Streamline decision-making processes wherever possible.
- **Recognize that the relative inexperience of youth can be both a strength and a weakness.**
Youth can bring a fresh, new perspective to the table, but need time to develop an understanding of an organization's history and challenges. Create a respectful decision-making environment that balances those strengths and weaknesses.
- **Evaluate your success in terms of the impact on the organization, youth and the community.**
Get feedback from all the stakeholders about what youth engagement has meant for the organization and the individuals involved. Ensure that the contributions of young people are generously acknowledged both publicly and privately.

To make it work, you have to constantly remove barriers and to really begin to think outside of the box. Some of the specific things an organization can do to include young people are structure meetings that are user-friendly, and accept young people as they are. Food is important. We now alternate what we serve to suit their tastes, so we have pizza often. It's important to be cordial toward youth, supportive, and seek their comments. Youth are not as experienced, so the board chair will seek out their comments if the youth have been quiet on an issue.

- Ron Rock,
Executive Director
East Scarborough
Boys & Girls Club

East Scarborough Boys & Girls Club has a Youth Council and a youth representative sits on the club's board of directors.

Issuing the invitation: Advice from youth

What is a good outreach strategy organizations can use to engage youth as decision makers?

Use youth to attract other youth. If you don't have any youth connected to your organization hook up with a youth run organization and co-host an event together.

Recognize that youth do not operate on a nine-to-five schedule. Conduct youth outreach during weekends and evenings.

Take a look at your services, literature, and programs. Make them transparent to young people. Skip the super fancy language and just state the history of the organization, what it does and why, and where it would like to go. As well, throw in something about how decisions are made so that we can see ourselves as potentially being a part of that instead of being intimidated.

What can organizations do to make sure youth feel valued when they walk through the front door?

Organizations need to be prepared to change before even thinking about inviting a youth to the decision-making table. They need to be willing to adjust some of their practices and the way they run their meetings and programs and not assume that doing this will sacrifice their outcomes. If they do not do this youth will not stay connected.

Adults should not feel undermined when youth challenge them. They also need to have a strong chair or facilitator who is aware of potential power imbalances and make sure that youth are heard within the main discussion. They cannot have a youth around as a token.

Organizations need to check in with youth on a regular basis. They need to be prepared for young peoples' varying levels of experience. They also need to recognize young people's strengths. Basically they need to initiate and develop a real relationship with the young person.

- City of Toronto youth focus group participants
Spring 2003

Resources

At the Table

At the Table Resource Catalog
"14 Points to Successfully Involving Youth in Decision Making"
www.atthetable.org

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Youth Activism Project

www.youthactivism.com

Youth on Board

Organizational Assessment Checklist
www.youthonboard.org/organizationalassessment.pdf

