

PAN-CANADIAN JOINT CONSORTIUM FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

MODULE 2: WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?



**Pan-Canadian
Joint Consortium for School Health**
Governments Working Across the Health and Education Sectors

The Students
Commission
Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement



**La commission
des étudiants**
Le centre d'excellence pour
l'engagement des jeunes



CONTENTS

WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?	11
Defining Youth Engagement.....	11
Youth Engagement: a Conceptual Model.....	15
The Rationale for Youth Engagement.....	18

VIEWING ADDITIONAL MODULES

This module of the JCSH Youth Engagement Toolkit is one among eight. The modules were developed as a single, comprehensive toolkit so we encourage you to explore them in sequence for the best experience. To view the other modules, return to the main JCSH Youth Engagement Toolkit page to access links to all eight. Enjoy!



What is Youth Engagement?



DEFINING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement defines youth engagement as *the sustained and meaningful involvement of a young person in an activity focussed outside of themselves*.¹⁰ A closer look at this definition provides important hints for effective activities and practices:

1. **Sustained:** Youth engagement that endures over time leads to positive outcomes. However, short and intense engagement experiences can also be effective if they satisfy the rest of the definition. Intense experiences often motivate sustained ones.
2. **Meaningful:** The engagement activities and topics are relevant to young people – this can be assured if youth are asked to contribute to the development of the engagement activity.
3. **A focus outside the self:** Youth are engaged when they feel connected and/or are contributing to something larger than themselves.

Full engagement consists of Head, Heart, Feet and Spirit components:

- a. Head: a cognitive component, e.g., learning new things
- b. Heart: an affective component, e.g., feeling excited
- c. Feet: a behavioural component, e.g., spending time doing an activity
- d. Spirit: a spirit component, e.g. connecting with other youth and adults to make change



Participation is the simple act of showing up; engagement occurs when head, heart, feet and spirit are involved. Engagement is a process that is dynamic, reciprocal and interactive, like a relationship. And just as every relationship is unique, there is no single right way to engage youth. However, there are some key common YE ingredients and promising practices outlined in this toolkit.



Youth are full of great insight and can challenge the perceptions you hold and consider issues in great depth."

-
Researcher



= Engagement

Why not just hold a focus group or a public consultation? What is the difference between a focus group and a youth engagement event? Focus groups are designed for a one-way flow of information from the participants to the researcher or consultation host. They are often critiqued by youth and other marginalized populations as not providing direct benefit to the participants, who never hear or know what happened with the information they contributed.

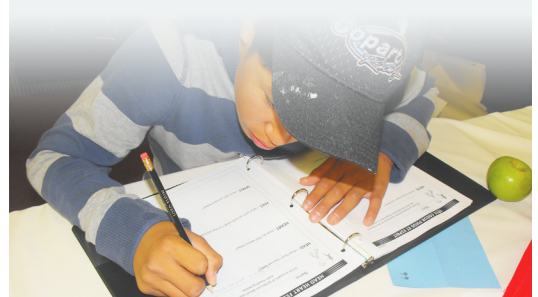
Youth engagement is relationship-based and rooted in young people's right to

Program Evaluation Tool

Check out this versatile **program evaluation**, based on the CEYE youth engagement definition.

"I feel good and confident about today. I'm glad that we got a lot done too. It also feels good to hear things from other people's opinions. It's hard to realize the harsh reality that's going on in our community"

Youth Participant



Investing in Youth

"At some point, our investment in each youth will pay dividends for as they mature, they will be in leadership positions, making decisions. I would rather position ourselves as positive influencers in their personal growth now, than stand by and let other determinants influence them (quite possibly in negative ways). Ultimately human beings have an innate desire to be part of something, to belong. As a positive player in the social arena, we have the opportunity to create the conditions of belonging to foster positive personal development, and we must seize every opportunity possible."

– Melissa Wood, Department of Municipal and Community Affairs, NT

participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them. It sets up a reciprocal exchange of information and learning between adults and youth in a positive youth development context. Young people should have opportunities to share their ideas, ask questions, and be involved with designing and implementing new programs and policies. Their engagement should be sustained over time so they can take action on their ideas and see the results of their contributions.

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP

What are you thinking?...

We should **ask more youth** to get involved.

How is what we're doing **meaningful to young people** involved?

We should **acknowledge our biases** and give youth a chance...

But that's **tokenism**.

Try to be easygoing – **take positive risks** to allow youth to lead and make decisions.

Youth-adult partnership is about **collaborating as equals**.

A genuine youth-adult partnership involves shared decision-making power where youth feel empowered and involved.

... but I don't have enough time to train the young people required.

At their age they don't see the importance of what we're asking them to do.

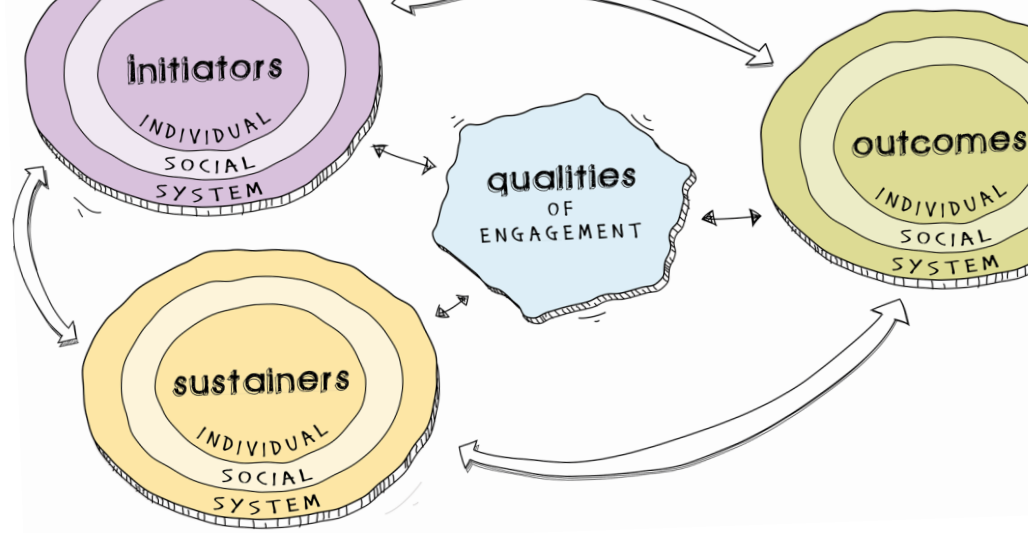
Having young people around with no clear role is unavoidable.

For their sake it's important that nothing goes wrong.

This makes me uncomfortable.*

Bad working conditions arise when youth-adult partnerships revolve around tokenism. Tokenism can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes.






YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Youth engagement experiences are complex and vary significantly depending on the context. To date, most of the research related to youth engagement has been focused on the “act” of being involved in activities, such as the type of activity and the frequency of involvement over time. However, youth engagement is more than just showing up to do certain activities: the process of engagement matters. The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement’s (CEYE) Conceptual Model¹¹ provides a useful way to think about engagement, including the various factors that lead to and support meaningful engagement and positive outcomes.

Outcomes



INDIVIDUAL

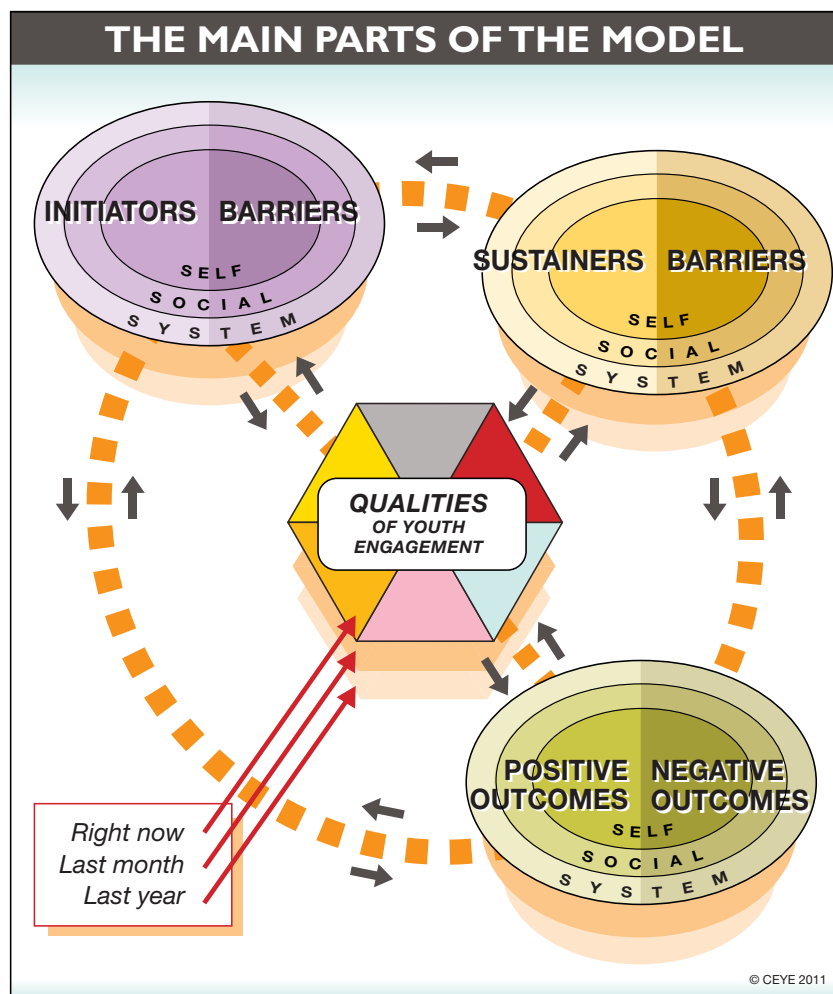
YOUTH
ENGAGEMENT
MODEL

Click above to see the “Youth Engagement Model” video.



*“Be realistic:
just because you
can’t do the ‘ideal’,
you can still do bits
of it well... start
small and you’ll see
success for youth and
your organization”*

—
Annie Smith, Executive
Director, McCreary Centre
Society



CEYE CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

a dynamic process with four key components:

1. **Initiators (and barriers):** Those things that encourage or hinder a young person from becoming engaged in an activity, organization or process (they need volunteer hours to graduate, their friend brought them, they want to make a difference in their community, etc.)
2. **Qualities of a Youth Engagement activity:** How an activity, program, or process is carried out – the key features (Young people are involved with setting goals, positive social norms, opportunities to belong, skill building, etc.)
3. **Sustainers (and barriers):** Those things that keep young people engaged over a period of time, or cause them to disengage (Follow up activities and projects, adults report back to young people

on the impact of their ideas, spaces and social networking for maintaining relationships, etc.)

4. **Outcomes (positive and negative):** The impacts on young people, adults, programs, organizations and the community as a result of the engagement process (a decrease in risk-associated behaviours, more effective youth policies, better relationships between youth and adults, etc.)

The youth engagement process occurs at three levels:

1. **Individual or “Self” level:** for example, a young person’s values, temperament, interest, etc.
2. **Social level:** for example, the influence of friends, family, teachers, community, etc.
3. **System level:** for example, opportunities or policies in schools, organizations, government, etc.



When planning a youth engagement initiative, be deliberate about addressing all three levels of engagement.

Take a moment to think about the various features of the youth engagement model and what you are currently doing at your school, department or organization to initiate and sustain youth engagement. What are the qualities of your engagement activities and what are the associated outcomes? Alternatively, if you are currently planning a youth engagement program, consider what needs to be in place. Use the **CEYE Youth Engagement Model Worksheet** to guide your reflection. This is a great activity to do in partnership with youth. See the **Youth Engagement Model** booklet for an explanation.

*“I feel more connected to my country knowing
I can influence governmental figures”*

—
Youth Participant, Tobacco Control Conference

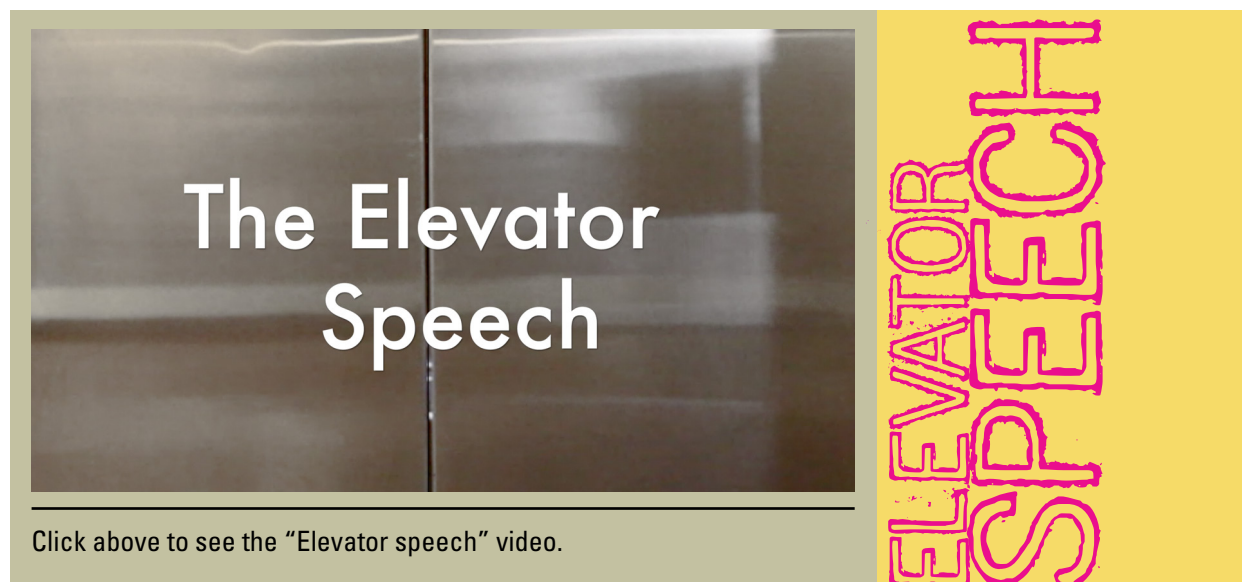
THE RATIONALE FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

There are many important reasons to support youth engagement – from positive outcomes for young people, to better programs and policies. However these three rationales emerge as the most prevalent: ¹²



Check out the **Rationale for Youth Engagement handout**

Those individuals who practice youth engagement on a day-to-day basis are well aware of the benefits, and they likely know these benefits from experience and not from research. Youth engagement makes programs more effective, policies more relevant, and adults and young people more capable and confident – resulting in stronger relationships and community. However, not everyone has experienced youth engagement first hand, so how do we help others understand the benefits? What evidence and experience will convince decision makers that it is worth the time, effort, and resources to involve young people in governance, program and policy development, and implementation? A number of experts who have had to make the case for YE shared their best “elevator speech”:



The positive outcomes related to youth engagement are many – both for individuals and for society. See the **Youth Engagement Outcomes handout**. (For full references related to these impacts, please see the **Literature Review**)

“Young people have the right to be consulted and have a voice.”

–
Matt DeCoursey, Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, NB

“New ideas and faces have opened me to share my own thoughts and feelings. I felt like everyone was accepted and ‘fit in’, which is rare in my circle of friends at home. I am leaving the conference refreshed and with a new attitude.”

–
Youth Participant

“Youth engagement doesn’t always have to be expensive, or about money - it can be as simple as making a policy change or using existing resources in a new way”

–
Jill Lightwood, Dept. of Environment, Labour and Justice, PEI

“I feel happy that I was able to contribute”

–
Youth Participant, Tobacco Control Conference