

The Youth • Friendly Guide To
Intergenerational Decision
Making Partnerships

Table of Contents

- a. Editors Note
- b. Introduction
- c. Definition of youth participation & intergenerational partnerships
- d. Making the case for intergenerational partnerships
- e. Participation Graph
- f. Five principles for Intergenerational partnerships
- g. Barriers and Challenges to youth participation
- h. How to make your organization youth friendly
- i. How to make a meeting real to youth
- j. Conclusion & Thanks

A. Editors Note

The people who contributed to this guide when it was first written 6 years ago were all engaged and active youth participants in many different levels of decision-making. What we had in common was not only our activism, but our resolve that we would only see true change in the world if all young people not only had their voices heard but also a chance to be decision makers themselves.

Some of us have moved on to become artists, lawyers, professors, and activists, and some of us are still actively involved in youth issues. This edition of the Youth Friendly Guide is collaboration between the original team and youth who are working on these issues today. This guide is a great resource for forming effective intergenerational partnerships.

Enjoy!

Ilona Dougherty

Editor

**“More than a quarter
of the world’s population is
between the ages of 10 and 24
and more than one billion are
between the ages of 15-24.”**

World Bank

B. Introduction

Intergenerational partnerships are not only about creating the leaders of tomorrow, they are about supporting the young engaged citizens of today. They are about recognizing that marginalization of young people is real, that ageism is real, and that we collectively are able to do something about it.

A large percentage of Canada's youth are not actively involved in decision making in this country, and a growing number of youth are disengaged. A symptom of this was evident in the 2000 federal election, where voter turnout for voters between the ages of 18 and 35 was only 22%.

Statistics Canada²

Why are youth disengaged? There is not one easy answer. It is clear however, that part of the solution in combating ageism lies in creating meaningful opportunities for youth engagement where young voices are heard, and where ideas lead to action.

Intergenerational partnerships mean that all generations work together to create change, rather than having to compete for their right to participation. In order to form these partnerships, we need to stop considering youth as resources for adults to use or victims of circumstance, and start seeing them as contributing partners in Canadian society.

Creating intergenerational partnerships is not easy, nor will it happen over night, however it is an essential if we are serious about keeping our democracy vibrant.

C. A Definition of Youth Participation & Intergenerational Partnerships

Youth participation can be defined as involving youth in responsible, challenging actions that meet genuine needs, with the opportunity for planning and/or engagement in decision-making affecting others.

Intergenerational partnerships are based on an understanding of the interdependent, symbiotic nature of learning and teaching, and recognizing that both youth and adults have something different yet equally valuable to share with each other.

“27% of the Canadian population is between the ages of 10-29.”

Statistics Canada

D. Making the Case for Intergenerational Partnerships

When understanding why youth should be involved in decision making, it is important to recognize that involving young people is not only about the qualitative idea of inclusion. Rather, it is about recognizing that youth can offer measurable benefits to organizations and individual adults.

How adults benefit:

- Adults begin to see youth as contributors, they gain a better understanding of youth, and stereotypes about youth are broken down.
- Adult levels of commitment, attachment, and energy for an organization often increase when they gain the opportunity to work with youth.
- Adults also gain, from working with youth:
 - A fresh perspective.
 - A bridge to other youth.
 - Enthusiasm, flexibility, and creativity.
 - Pro-activeness.

How organizations benefit:

- Involving youth is a human rights issue. It fulfills the right of youth to be involved in decision-making and recognizes young people's full citizenship now!
- Engaging youth in decision-making supports youth in becoming active citizens, more likely to vote, and engaged in the democratic process.
- Engaging youth gives them the opportunity to assume leadership roles and gain skills and practical experience that will lead to more effective decision-making in the future.
- Granting youth control over choices that affect them, or that will affect them in the future, builds capacity of young people to take ownership of their communities and lives.

“ This sharing of power is practical – it leads to better decisions, better development program, and more sustained results.”

Meaningful Youth Participation in
International Conferences 4

E. Barriers and Challenges to Youth Participation

As well as recognizing how youth can contribute, it is important to recognize the barriers that sometimes stand in the way of full youth engagement.

Definition of Tokenism

Tokenism is when young people appear to have been given a voice, but really have little or no choice about how they participate. It is participation for participation's sake or for a photo opportunity.

Organizational Barriers to youth participation

- Under-resourced projects that make action difficult or impossible.
- Negative social attitudes towards, and stereotyping of, young people.
- A lack of trust between adults and youth.
- Lengthy meetings, complicated or long agendas, jargon etc.

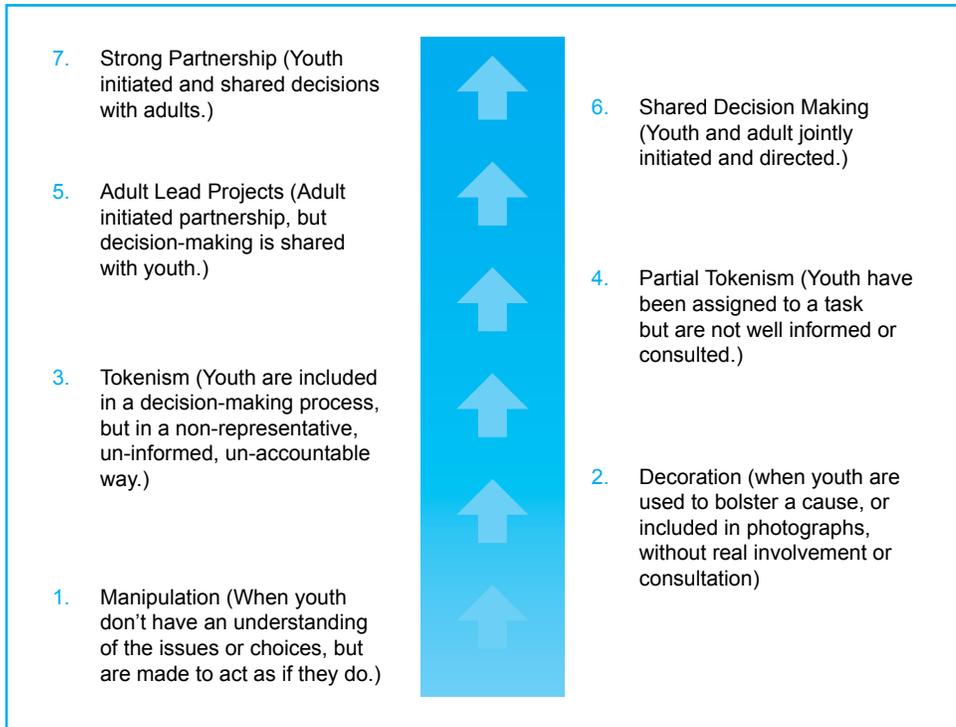
Barriers that Youth Face

- Sometimes youth have trouble keeping their commitments because of outside factors out of their control (eg. money, school commitments, parent etc.)
- The state of youth is transitory, and experienced people become too old to fulfill their roles, often, once high school or university is over, youth tend to move away.
- Two of the most common assumptions that youth face are that young people can do nothing because they are naïve or inexperienced, or that young people can do everything because they have so much energy! Neither of these assumptions is realistic or useful when involving youth in decision making.

“Children are undoubtedly the most photographed and the least listened to members of society” 5

F. The Ladder of Participation⁶

The ladder that leads to genuine youth participation is one where youth are invested with real responsibility. This not only fosters a feeling of trust across generational lines, it also puts young people in touch with the consequences of their choices, thereby cultivating an empowering feeling of stewardship over their future.



Youth need:

Meaning: to feel like they are doing something that matters, and that they can believe in;

Control: that they are making real decisions, actually being heard, and that they have what it takes to see the task through to the end
Connectedness: the opportunity to work with others and be a part of a community.

Connectedness: the opportunity to work with others and be a part of a community.

“Children must be given better opportunities to participate in shaping their own future. Young people’s involvement in civil society creates a sense of belonging, solidarity, justice and responsibility within the community.”

Ms. Maj-Inger Klingvall, Minister for Development Cooperation, Sweden.

G. Five Principles for Intergenerational Partnerships

The five principles outlined below are suggestions to help ensure that true youth participation takes place rather than tokenism. This is not an exhaustive list, nor will it be possible to use all the suggestions all the time. But these are all useful and proven ways to help facilitate youth participation.

NOTE:*In order for any of these principles to work, youth need to feel valued, that they have ownership over the process, that they are being given responsibility, and that they are being held accountable for the decisions being made.*

1. Set Out Clear Expectations and Limitations

For true partnerships to take place, youth voices must be included from the beginning of any project, their participation clearly recognized, and the work they do attributed to them. Power struggles are the most common reason for a breakdown in relationships between adults and young people. It is important to be clear about who makes what decisions, when and how decisions will be made, and what are the expectations and limits of the actions being planned.

- Have **realistic expectations**; don't overburden participants.
- Be realistic about the time and resources that are available to include youth.
- Allow proper lead-time for projects, space for reflection, and time for trial and error.
- Set out a timeline with tasks including who is committed to what, and who is responsible for what, so that everyone knows what their responsibilities are.
- Accept that levels of experience will change over time.

2. Encourage Creativity and Difference

When setting up partnerships with youth, the atmosphere needs to accept the reality of youth cultures and lifestyles. Youth need access to role models that encourage creativity and individuality. **Remember; don't judge a book by its cover!** Youth, regardless of how they might dress, or their personal style, need to be respected for their abilities, knowledge and the diversity they bring to the process. It is also important to empower youth to speak out when they encounter age discrimination within an organization. Make sure to take their comments seriously and ensure that there are effective mechanisms in place to deal with concerns or problem areas.

3. Make Connections between Generations

Partnerships work best when connections are made with other demographic groups who have parallel experiences, interests, resources and networks to share. In the case of ageism, senior citizens often deal with age discrimination as well. Young people can bring fresh and creative views while seniors bring wisdom and experience, and both groups can learn a lot from each other.

4. Provide Mentorship and Support

Support young people with adult experience; don't threaten them with it!

Setting up mentorships is a good way of ensuring that communication flows between all those involved in a project. Mentors should be people who are experienced in the subject matter and are trusted or even chosen by youth. Remember they don't always have to be adults. Allow space for cooperative relationships between younger and more experienced youth to occur. For youth by youth mentorships are often valuable teaching /learning relationships that can focus on working together, and knowledge sharing.

Along with setting up mentorships, ensure that support, financial and otherwise, is available to assist youth to participate in all aspects of decision-making. Examples are; helping youth pay for bus fare to attend meetings, and providing them with written orientation material at the beginning of a project as well as for frequent reference throughout.

5. Communicate Openly – LAST BUT NOT LEAST!!!

Make sure everyone is on the same page before decision-making takes place. Is everyone comfortable with how things are going to happen and what the decision making process will be?

Communication often means being patient and hearing all of what someone has to say even if you don't agree. It also means making sure there is an adult who is available if youth have questions or concerns, and most importantly maintaining a sense of humor!

Good communication includes following-up after the fact. Make sure youth know where their input has been used and what will happen next. Ask them what they got out of their experience...evaluate and then celebrate!

Avoid devaluating statements like:

'You are so smart for 15!'

'We know what is best for you.'

'My daughter/son/hamster is your age.'

H. How to make your organization youth friendly

A youth-friendly organization is a people friendly organization!

When working towards becoming a youth-friendly organization, it is important that top decision-makers are committed to supporting youth governance and building youth-adult partnerships. The commitment must be reflected in the policy, programs and actions of the organization. As a first step it is useful to define your organization's motives for involving youth. Some helpful questions to ask include:

- What are the qualifications, skills, interests, or commitment levels needed for youth to effectively contribute to our organization?
- Are we willing to commit time, money, or the needed staff time in order to give youth the proper support required?
- How fast is our organization willing to adapt to the diverse needs of youth?

Options for youth involvement:

It is also important to determine how youth will be involved with an organization. There is no right answer, but as outlined above expectations have to be clear on both sides.

Some options include:

- Involving youth directly in an existing adult body such as an advisory board, board of directors, policy committee, program committee, or task force.
- Setting up an adjunct body consisting of youth only, whose task is to advise another decision-making body in the organization.
- In the case of political parties or other groups with elected positions, running youth candidates is always an option.

Recruitment

It is critical to involve youth from the beginning of a project, however 'better late than never' is OK, too. The ideal is to start involving youth when the initial discussions begin, not when a project is launched. This allows youth to feel genuine ownership over the project, and have their unique perspective heard at the outset.

The amount of energy that is dedicated to recruiting youth will be reflected in the abilities, character, diversity and commitment of the young people you recruit. **Recruitment processes are an opportunity for outreach**, not only to the youth community but also to a variety of organizations that work with an intergenerational demographic. Examples of places for outreach include schools, youth clubs, youth centers, young offenders institutions, health centers, and libraries.

Involving youth in the recruitment process is also a great way to get the word out. It is important to recognize that if the young person recruited is already over-committed in other areas, inexperienced, or not really interested in the project, the partnership is not likely to succeed. Make sure that the selection process is open, democratic, transparent, and that youth are clear on what they are committing themselves to.

Training

Youth need time to learn about the process, meeting procedures, as well as roles and responsibilities. Be sure to provide background information on dress code, timeliness, and accepted social conventions, so that youth can make choices about how they want to participate in meetings or events. Recall that often, youth representatives will not know everyone involved, yet. Also ensure that adequate background information about the organization is available in written form, and that there is a chance for youth to ask questions before any formal process starts.

Written Documents

Written documents are critical for keeping up to date on what is happening throughout a specific process, however these documents can be alienating and confusing. Everyone has had the experience of sitting down to read something and having no clue how to decode it.

It is good practice to recruit young participants in pairs, so that they don't feel outnumbered, or that they are just a token youth left without peer support.

“Youth action starts in many places. It ends up producing powerful impacts in every aspect of community life.”

Youth Acts, Community Impacts

“Schools, as an integral part of the community, should be an obvious venue for fostering young people’s understanding and experience of democratic participation.”⁷

Here are some tips to help make writing dynamic, accessible, and participatory:

- Incorporate stories and examples to help illustrate the point.
- Provide a good index if the document is large.
- Provide tables with good graphics, cartoons or drawings that summarize the main point.
- Be creative in language expression. Pull up interesting quotes, and highlight main ideas.
- Don't talk down to youth, also don't try to be to hip or cool because you likely won't succeed.

Policy and Bylaws

Policy and Bylaws are the legal backbone of any organization. As such, it is important to implement policy that confirms an organizational commitment to non-discrimination, including ageism. Changing bylaws reflects

an institutional commitment and can show youth that the organization is serious about its commitment to youth involvement.

Legal Issues

It is important to know the laws that might affect youth participation in a particular province or territory. This is particularly relevant if young people under 18 years of age are to serve on a board of directors. Here are some things to think about:

What are the legal obligations of all board or committee members, regardless of age?

How is voting handled with young members on a board of directors?

What happens if there is a tie vote and a board member is under 18?

Step by step...recruiting...representation...follow-up

Adult Roles	Youth Roles	Time Frame
Set up a youth driven selection process with representatives from different youth groups.	Make sure there are networks in place to access a broad range of "youth representatives" to meet any criteria.	At least 2 months notice before representation.
Define criteria and responsibilities for youth participation.	Help develop criteria and responsibilities. Follow criteria and fulfill all responsibilities to the best of your ability.	A least 2 months notice before representation.
Call for applicants and choose at least two representatives.	Circulate call for applications and ensure that the same youth are not always chosen.	At least 1 month notice before representation.
Set up orientation and briefing information packages, and select a representative mentor.	Make a commitment to attend all orientations, read all info provided, and work with your adult mentors as closely as possible.	At least 2 weeks notice before representation.
Consult with youth about their specific tasks and roles.	Make yourself available for pre-meeting planning and development. Try to aid process in every way.	At least 2 weeks notice before representation.
Representation Happens!!	Representation Happens!!	Representation Happens!!
Ensure adequate follow-up with youth who were consulted, including draft decisions circulated for comments, and debriefing sessions for youth.	Contact others to share results, and connect other youth to any new contact people.	For at least 2 months after representation.

“By learning through
adult experience we’re standing on
the shoulders of giants.”

Gabriel Saunkeah, United Methodist Youth Orga-
nization

I. How to make a meeting real to youth

Meetings don't have to be boring! Keeping meetings real for youth means committing to make meetings relevant, on topic, swift-paced, effective, and fun. Youth have their own unique ways of planning meetings; ask them to offer suggestions!

Before the meeting

- Keep written information available for frequent reference
- Send youth representatives detailed information packages and make a briefing phone call before the meeting so that youth delegates arrive at the meeting fully prepared.
- Send background information on youth participants from other areas, or orientation information about processes.
- Let youth know that they are needed at each meeting and that they will be missed if they don't attend.
- Remember that parents are part of the equation with younger youth and that they will likely influence their child's participation.

Sensitive Facilitation / Chairing

Sensitive facilitation / chairing helps create a safe space so that everyone will feel comfortable to speak and participate. The role played by the chairperson can be critical in ensuring the involvement of young people during meetings and in structuring discussion to enable youth to both learn and participate. Here are some ways to do that:

- Make sure everyone gets to know everyone else.
- Make sure young people's involvement is highlighted in the process and they know their role.
- Allow a mentor to sit with the youth to provide explanations, especially early in the process.
- **Maintain the momentum**; keep things moving along, don't let everyone get bogged down on one issue.
- **Don't rush to consensus**; make sure everyone has had their say.
- **Give everyone a break!** Allow time for people to stretch or move, this can help break tension.
- Include skills development activities, to build capacity of participants.
- Provide appropriate food, not just coffee and cookies but also juice and healthy snacks. We will all feel better.....
- Remember that the process is just as important as the final product!
- Allow time for evaluation by youth delegates and seek feedback at the end of the meeting. 'check-ins' and 'closing go-rounds' can provide this opportunity.
- **Celebrate progress!!!**

What to avoid:

- Large documents – Let's be honest who actually reads these.
- Technical Jargon and unclear acronyms.
- Agreements that are reached in bars, clubs or anywhere where youth are not present.
- Receiving documents or the agenda too late to make effective changes or preparation/research.
- Inflexible meeting times and locations with no consideration given to limiting factors such as transportation or educational responsibilities.
- Unfair or non-transparent selection processes.
- Having the same youth repeatedly asked to represent youth views.
- Inadequate preparation by organizers.
- Lack of follow-up when the meeting is over.

J. Conclusion & Thanks

The level of youth involvement in an organization or in a society is often an indicator of the level of inclusion for ethnic groups, the aged, the disabled, and those of different sexual orientations.

Through intergenerational partnerships, youth have the chance to learn from adult mentors about power structures, contexts, and strategies without having to repeat mistakes. There is also an opportunity to use the long-standing experience and traditions of activism in combination with the unique, creative energy of youth. Youth need to be able to take advantage of the wealth of information and experience available through mentorship models. If they can participate and share skills effectively, they can learn and accomplish more, in less time.

Intergenerational partnerships are an exciting and effective way to ensure lasting positive change in our communities. Respect for governance structures comes from youth feeling as though their voices are meaningful. Being a leader can change the life of a young person, as it helps them to develop confidence in their opinions, ideas and self-worth.

We hope this guide has offered some useful ideas about how to involve youth in decision-making and has helped demonstrate that intergenerational partnerships are exciting and positive for all involved!

Do you have a story about an effective intergenerational partnership? Share it with us!

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K. Credits

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www.yen-rej.org

L. Resources

Documents

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Youth Environmental Network www.yen-rej.org
Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa www.cayfo.ca
What Kids Can Do www.whatkidscando.org
At the Table www.atthetable.org
Resource Generation www.resourcegeneration.org
McCreary Centre Society www.mcs.bc.ca

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End Notes

¹ Six Billion and Growing: Why Population Matters?
<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/HDNet/hddocs.nsf/0/93D364A3B7676F00752C42?OpenDocument>

² <http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/demo10a.htm>, Population by sex and age group 2003

³ National Commission on resources for youth. (1974). New roles for youth in school and community. New York: Citation Press (pp.25, 227)

⁴ Meaningful Youth Participation in International Conferences – CIDA p. 12

⁵ Hart, Roger A. Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship Innocenti Essays No.4, Unicef 1992 page 8.

⁶ Hart, Roger A. Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship Innocenti Essays No.4, Unicef 1992 page 9.

⁷ Hart, Roger A. Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship Innocenti Essays No.4, Unicef 1992 page 43.