

Model of Participation

Participation in decision-making is a right of all children and young people, not a privilege.

Children and young people have a strong desire to be consulted in decisions impacting their lives.¹ Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) holds that children have the right to have a say in all matters that affect them.² In Queensland, the *Human Rights Act 2019* also guarantees the right of every person to take part in public life without discrimination.³

While the UNCRC applies to children (defined as those under 18 years old), the principles of child and youth participation are the same for all ages. The Queensland Family and Child Commission Model of Participation (the QFCC model of participation) refers to children and young people as ‘young people’ or ‘youth’, as it’s intended for use as best practice when working with both children and young people (older and younger than 18 years of age).

To give full expression to young people’s right to participate, all organisations, both government and non-government, should offer meaningful avenues to have young people’s voices heard.

“There is a need for a greater awareness of the fact that respecting children’s views is not just a model of good ... practice (or policy making) but a legally binding obligation.”⁴

– Laura Lundy

“It is important that all young people have the opportunity to learn to participate in programs which directly affect their lives. This is especially so for disadvantaged children.”⁵

- Roger Hart

What is youth participation?

Youth participation means actively and continuously involving young people in decision-making processes. In practice, young people should be engaged in activities and offered influential roles in organisations to reflect a consistent youth voice in decisions and projects.

Why is youth participation important?

By providing real opportunities for young people to have a say, we strengthen democratic institutions and build a stronger and more inclusive Queensland. We also send an important message that young people are active and engaged citizens with meaningful views, opinions and perspectives.

Meaningful youth participation can help organisations better target their services to young people’s needs, support their communities and avoid any unintended impacts on young people and families. Youth participation brings new, unique perspectives, that can encourage innovation and lead to more effective service delivery.

Youth participation also helps young people to grow and develop authentic responsibility as citizens, motivating them to act in ways that support their communities.

“It is unrealistic to expect [children] to suddenly become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 16, 18 or 21 without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved.”⁶

– Roger Hart

The QFCC model of participation

The QFCC model of participation draws together concepts from:

- the UNCRC
- the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations⁷
- Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation⁸
- The Lundy Model of Participation⁹

It involves the combination of **two approaches** and **four key elements**:

1. **Engagement** with young people involves proactively seeking out opportunities to **connect** with them and providing appropriate **support** to help them express their views in meaningful ways.
2. **Advocacy** for the views of young people involves taking steps to **amplify** what they say and ensuring their views **influence** decision-making.

Engagement and **advocacy** are both independently important approaches. When applied together, genuine and mutually beneficial youth participation is achieved.

The QFCC model of participation promotes genuinely **connecting** with young people, **supporting** them to share their views, **amplifying** what they tell us and making sure their views **influence** decision-making.



Connect

Proactively seek opportunities to hear the views of young people.



Connect is about creating opportunities to hear the views of young people in ways that work for them. It involves being proactive, adaptable and creating an approach that is safe and suited to the young people you want to hear from.

Set intentions

From the outset, identify which young people are most impacted by the issue that your work seeks to address or explore. This may be young people in a specific location, with particular needs, of a particular age or demographic, or who use a certain service.

You should also understand why you're seeking the views of young people in your work, how you intend to act on what they tell you, and the extent to which they are able to influence.

It is important to know any legal and ethical obligations; for example, if you are connecting with young people under the age of 18 you may require parental consent or an ethics approval.

Understand influence

Young people are realistic, practical and insightful. They do not expect to be able to influence every aspect of a decision. While there is scope to engage young people at all stages of decision-making, you need to be open about the progress of your work and any limitations around timing, scope and influence.

Before agreeing to take part, young people should clearly understand what the participation involves, what will be required of them and what they can realistically influence.

Explain your expectations in clear, age-appropriate language and take active steps to ensure your messages have been understood.

Identify cohort

Young people are not a standardised group. They have different lived experiences, opinions, backgrounds and values, all of which are important. It is the organisation's responsibility to welcome young people into an environment that is age and culturally appropriate, and inclusive of gender, sexuality and ability.

Be youth friendly

Young people should be involved in decision-making in a way that is not merely a duplication of adult processes and structures. Consider how you will connect with and reach young people. Schools, youth networks, religious groups, youth groups and youth service delivery organisations all have existing connections with young people and may be able to connect you with young people. Make it easy for young people to find out about an opportunity, get in touch or express interest.

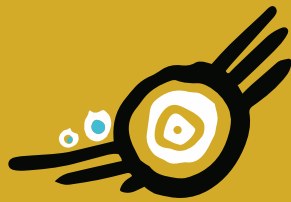
There are many types of youth participation activities:

- drawing pictures or play-based activities
- completing surveys
- engaging through social media
- taking part in interviews or one-on-one discussions
- being part of small-group discussions or focus groups
- large events or forums

How you engage young people should be well matched with the young people you want to hear from, keeping in mind their age, maturity, lived experience, culture and other characteristics.

Support

Provide tailored support to help young people fully express their views.



Support is about putting processes and mechanisms in place to ensure young people feel welcome, safe and confident to express their views. It involves offering a tailored approach that meets the needs of the young people who are participating.

Co-design with young people

Involving young people in the planning and development of youth participation activities can have many benefits. Young people tend to know what works for other young people and can help engage other young people to participate. With support and professional development from your organisation, young people can also effectively lead discussions, facilitate workshops and run meetings with other young people.

Minimise any risk

Like any organisational activity, youth participation comes with potential risks to participants and to the organisation. This does not mean that youth participation should not occur; rather, risk should be continuously assessed and mitigation strategies put in place. Mitigation strategies should be trauma informed, strengths-based and culturally appropriate, with a focus on conflict resolution and natural justice.

You should also have documented processes around confidentiality, right to privacy and managing disclosures from young people that are clearly communicated to participants on a regular basis.

Create safety

Young people should have a central person to contact and connect with before, during and after their participation. This person should be trained in trauma-informed practice and experienced in working with young people. There should also be other support staff available including those who are aware and can advise on relevant cultural protocols needing to be adhered to.

While young people often tell us they prefer face-to-face engagement, sometimes virtual engagement is the most suitable or practical option (for example due to COVID-19 restrictions). Your virtual platforms should be safe and welcoming for participants, in the same way a face-to-face engagement would be.

Appropriate engagement activities

Engagement activities should be suited to the age and maturity of the young people involved and be inclusive and welcoming for all participants. This means encouraging different modes of expression, highlighting that there are no right or wrong ways to explore the topic and explicitly valuing the contributions of all young people.

While it can be tempting to control the activity or lead a conversation in the direction you think is best, it is important to make sure young people have control and can explore the topic from multiple angles.

Compensation

The views of young people are valuable and should be compensated accordingly. While financial remuneration is best practice for older participants, this may not be suitable for younger participants and not all organisations are able to offer this. Other forms of recognition can be provided to participants such as gift cards, travel subsidies, formal recognition of participation and in-kind remuneration, such as skills building, personal development opportunities and invitations to relevant events.

Amplify

Promote young people's views without modification.



Amplify is about promoting the views of young people in an accurate way. It involves understanding how, what and where young people want to share and making sure it is done in respectful, safe and culturally appropriate ways.

Ask young people

Ask young people how they would like to further share their views. The answers may surprise you. As well as sharing their views in writing, sometimes young people like to create art, write a poem, attend a meeting with decision-makers or record a video.

It is important to explore the concept of amplification with young people and go through the options available to them. Provide realistic information on what's involved and what it may mean for participants. Practical considerations should not be used to constrain the ways young people share their views. If it is, this is an area for organisational change.

Always seek explicit consent from young people to share their views in any way. They must retain control of their intellectual property as it is unique to their knowledge, skills and experiences.

Understand nuances

Young people's views are personal and unique to them and their own experiences, and they do not talk for all young people, groups or communities. Be mindful of this when sharing views with others both publicly and privately. This is especially relevant when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

young people, who may need to adhere to cultural protocols within their communities.

Young People's safety is important. Always consider whether a young person could be identified through the ideas you are amplifying and determine whether you need to avoid specific identifiers such as their name, school or social media tags.

Do not filter

Young people are experts on the things that impact them and are able to speak for themselves. The views of young people should not be filtered or reworded as this can dilute or distort their expression. Young people should be given the opportunity to review, edit and approve the final version of their contribution when it is included in recordings, documents or other publications.

Share your experience of youth participation

It is important to give credit to the young people who have participated in your organisation's work. Tell you partners and stakeholders about your experience working with young people. These conversations help demystify youth participation and can encourage others to involve young people in their work.

It is also very important to provide feedback to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and communities about the youth participation that has occurred in their communities.

Influence

Make sure the views of young people have impact.



Influence is about incorporating the views expressed by young people into decision-making processes in meaningful ways. Young people's views should be taken seriously, with direct feedback given when any action is or isn't taken.

Incorporating young people's views

It is important to advise young people about the action taken as a result of their contribution. This gets challenging when young people have differing views or when external factors make it impossible to directly implement ideas. Always communicate transparently about these situations and explain reasons for decisions and how their contribution was still meaningfully considered.

Keep young people informed

It is important to demonstrate respect for the contributions of young people by following through on committed action and providing clear, regular updates to young people. Ask young people how and when they would like to receive updates, and accommodate these preferences where possible.

The specific outcomes of their ideas and any outputs achieved after the opportunity should be shared with young people and promoted across the organisation and publicly. By doing this, you will play a part in changing the discourse about the positive impact young people can have when directly involved.

Honour reciprocity

It is important to give back to the individuals and communities that have generously helped you throughout your journey of youth participation. This includes giving back to young people what you have captured. Young people should be given digital and hard copy versions of publications that include their views and they should be given the option to participate in promotion and media activities to further their views.

Direct connections

You can help young people continue their influence by connecting them with other decision-makers in your organisation or broader industry. There may be opportunity for you to support other organisations to actively listen to young people and act on their advice.

More than once

Take steps to ensure young people remain an important part of your organisation. Ways to do this include:

- creating a regular newsletter or mailing list for young people
- establishing internal youth leadership opportunities and programs
- engaging youth facilitators (young people who run youth conversations for you)
- setting up a youth advisory council or youth network for consultation
- establishing networks with stakeholders championing youth participation (include young people)
- creating opportunities for youth internships, scholarships and apprenticeships.

Youth participation should be part of organisational culture including governance and corporate decisions. Your commitment to youth participation should be celebrated in external facing statements including annual reports, strategic plans and websites, with connections continuously being made with many different young people.

Youth participation is everyone's business. It can range from a small, single opportunity to an embedded model across a whole organisation or system. Every opportunity that is created for young people to express their views and have them genuinely listened to is important. We all have a vital role to play in upholding the rights of young people and acting on what we hear.

When we give back to young people, support them and amplify their views, we influence change and produce more sustainable solutions for everyone.

References

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