

WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?



CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Youth Engagement

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Youth engagement is the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself. The kind of activity in which the youth is engaged can be almost anything - sports, the arts, music, volunteer work, politics, social activism - and it can occur in almost any kind of setting.

WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN?

One way of thinking of youth engagement is in terms of where it occurs. The following are some different kinds of activities, organizations, and contexts in which engagement can occur:

- community organizations (e.g., doing volunteer work helping people)
- youth organizations (e.g., help plan events, run programs)
- music (e.g., playing in a band, school orchestra)
- sports
- ethnic/cultural organizations
- work/career/employment
- school
- social activism (e.g., working on an issue for social change)
- politics (e.g. volunteering for a political party)
- religion/spirituality

HOW DO ENGAGED YOUTH ACT?

How do we know from a youth's behaviour that he or she is engaged in an activity or with a particular organization? There are a number of things that can indicate engagement:

An engaged youth

- performs the activity or spends time with the organization frequently
- talks to others about the activity/organization
- initiates the activity him/herself (rather than at the suggestion or urging of others)
- participates actively and regularly, with a specific purpose in mind
- brings other people to the activity/organization and seeks out others with similar interests
- leads and organizes others who are involved in the activity/organization
- advocates energetically on behalf of the activity/organization
- seeks adult support and structure when needed, acts independently when appropriate

WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Not all youth are engaged to the same extent or in the same way. A youth may show interest in an activity/organization by simply attending meetings or activities, and paying close attention to what is happening (without necessarily saying anything or participating actively). A youth may show leadership by bringing others to the activity/organization and helping to organize the activities of others, or by advocating on behalf of the activity/organization.

More research is needed to understand the impacts of various activities and what makes engagement meaningful for different youth in different activities. Also, we need to better understand how youth get involved in the first place; what helps keep them involved; and in which situations, in what activities, and for which youth does engagement lead to positive benefits. We do know that it is important for youth to connect to the activity and find it meaningful.

HOW DO ENGAGED YOUTH THINK?

How do we know from the way a youth thinks that he or she is engaged in an activity or with an organization?

An engaged youth

- thinks the activity/organization is an important one
- is well-informed about the activity/organization
- sees an important sense of purpose in the activity/organization

Web Resources

www.engagementcentre.ca

The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement is a diverse collaboration of Canadian organizations and universities that are concerned with young people's futures. This site has many web resources.

www.mcs.bc.ca

"The McCreary Centre Society is a small non-profit organization concerned with the health of young people in British Columbia." Visit this site for a concise introduction to youth participation.

www.mcs.bc.ca/yps/

A fun site that uses a grocery store metaphor to provide excellent information about youth participation. A one-stop youth participation shop.

www.search-institute.org

"Search Institute is an independent non-profit organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities."

www.cydjournal.org

"CYD Journal promotes youth and adults working together in partnership to create just, safe, and healthy communities." Some free articles available.

www.freechild.org

"The mission of the Freechild Project is to advocate, inform, and celebrate young people taking progressive action to change the world."

WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

HOW DO ENGAGED YOUTH FEEL?

How do we know from the kinds of feelings that a youth has that he or she is engaged?

An engaged youth

- cares about the activity/organization with which he or she is involved
- derives a sense of belonging from the activity/organization and feels connected to the people in the activity/organization
- finds the activity or participation in the activity fun or enjoyable
- feels that the activity is meaningful - that it's an important and worthwhile thing to be doing
- feels that the activity is an important part of his or her identity
- derives a sense of pride, accomplishment or satisfaction from achievements in the activity/organization
- gains a feeling of competence and sense of control over events related to the activity or organization (agency, effectance)
- feels disappointment, sadness or frustration when participation in the activity is blocked or things are not going well

An engaged youth needs adults

- adult support is a key ingredient of effective youth engagement
- adults who support youth need support from their organizations

References

The definition and description of youth engagement that we use at the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement comes from our own theoretical work (see Pancer & Pratt, 1999; Pancer, Rose-Krasnor & Loiselle, 2002); other theories of youth engagement (see Mahoney, Schweder & Stattin, 2002; Nakamura, 2001); our own narrative studies of the involvement of youth from across Canada (see the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement web-site, at www.engagementcentre.ca); and from the insights of youth involved on a daily basis in the work of the Centre.

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUTH GET ENGAGED?

When youth are engaged, they may experience many significant benefits. Researchers have found links between engagement and several different kinds of positive health outcomes, including the following:

Decreased alcohol use

Grade 7 students who were involved in planning alcohol-free activities for their schools reduced their drinking significantly more than did students who only participated in the activities. ¹

Decreased marijuana and hard drug use

Students in grades 8, 10 and 12 who reported being involved in extra-curricular activities were less likely to use both soft drugs such as marijuana and hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin than students who were less involved. ²

Lower rates of school failure and drop-out

Students who were involved in extra-curricular activities were less likely to drop out of school than students who were not. This was particularly true for youth from poor families and youth with poor social and academic skills. These young people were 5 times less likely to drop out than similar youth who weren't engaged. ³

Lower rates of sexual activity and pregnancy in girls

Girls who were involved in a national volunteer program were 41% less likely to become pregnant as teens, when compared with girls who were not involved in the program. ⁴

Lower rates of anti-social and criminal behaviours

Boys and girls who were more involved in extra-curricular activities were less likely to be arrested for criminal offenses as young adults than those who did not participate in extra-curricular activities. ⁵

Lower rates of depression

Eighth graders who participated in structured after-school activities had significantly lower levels of depression than those who did not participate in such activities. ⁶

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE:

- **Involve youth in decisions that affect their lives.** Youth engagement can begin in the family, and expand to school, community organizations, and governments. Talk to young people informally and formally about issues that are important to them. Involve them in decisions and in developing and running youth programs. Hold youth forums, include young people on boards or committees that make decisions about how their schools, social services and municipalities are run, or strike youth advisory committees that will provide input on important decisions.
- **Create opportunities for young people to work in partnership with adults** on important social problems and issues such as racism, poverty, and the environment.
- **Encourage youth to help one another with their problems** (for example, through peer-helping programs).
- **Promote youth leadership** by encouraging young people to plan and facilitate meetings and activities.
- **Help bring young people together** to work creatively in action-based events such as workshops, conferences or exploring new activities
- **Assist young people in developing skills** that will allow them to advocate better on their own behalf and create programs and activities that will engage other youth. For example, provide young people with opportunities to learn research skills, or community development skills such as community mapping.
- **Actively listen to, and respect the ideas of, young people.** Assist them to connect with organizations and institutions that can support them in executing those ideas, take action on issues that concern them, or explore new skills and activities (like outdoor adventuring, a new sport, environmental action, volunteering at a food bank).
- **Support the adults and organizations** who effectively support and work with youth in meaningful ways.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

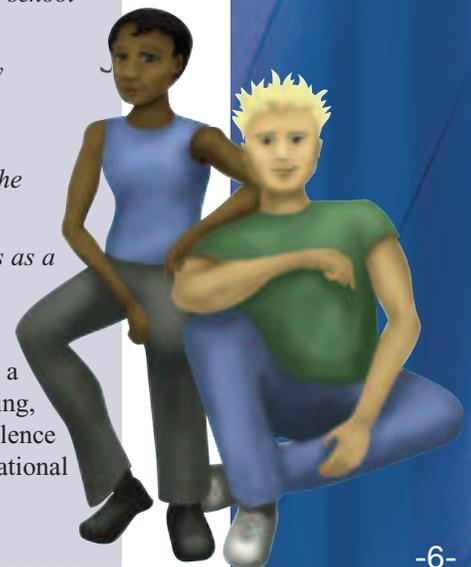
THINGS TO BE AWARE OF:

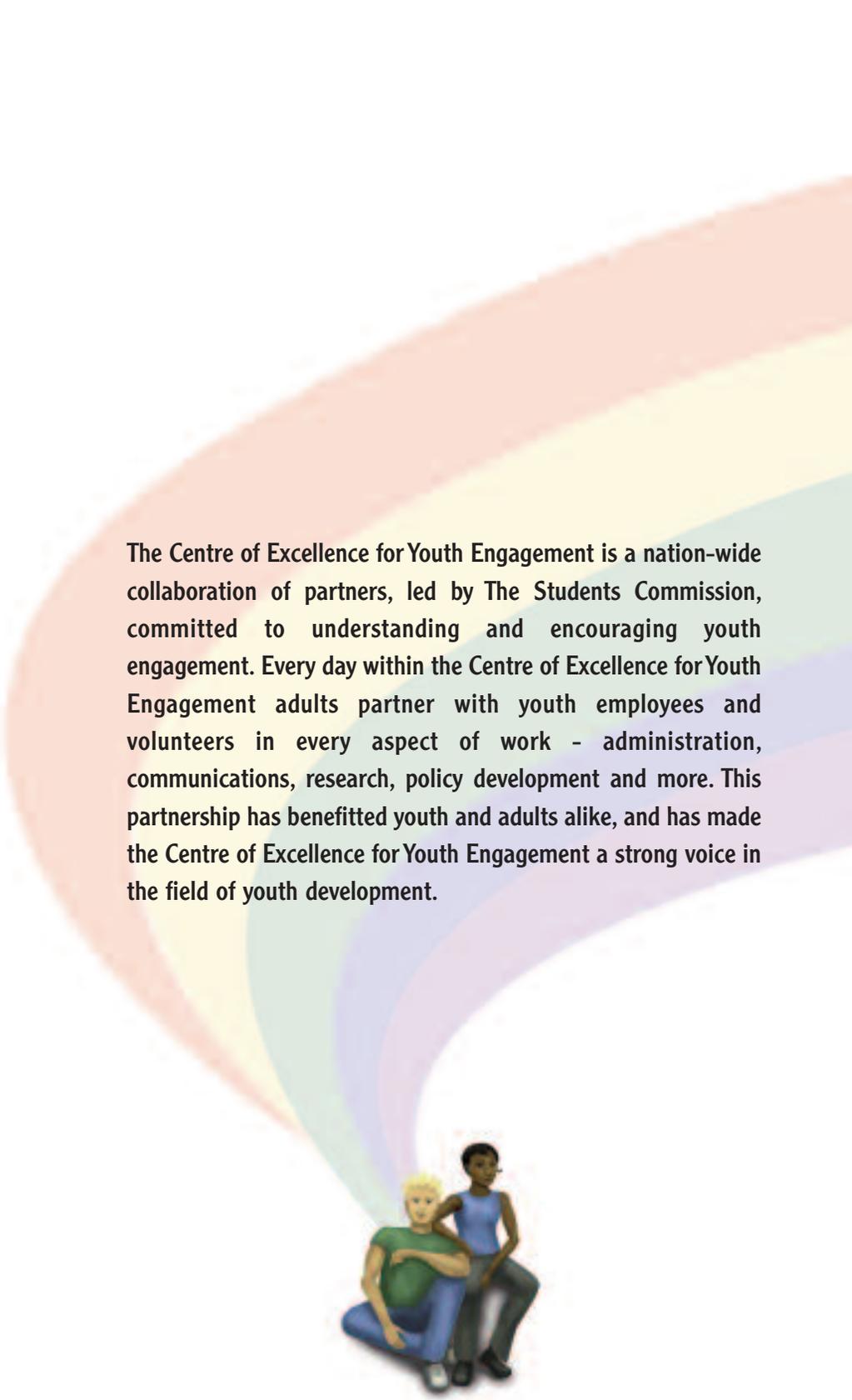
- engagement can be a long slow process with lots of "ups" and "downs"
- the process is as important as the product
- it's important for adults to avoid taking control of projects or activities just because they want things to get done "right" or quickly
- when working with youth, adults should think about what they can learn from young people, not just what they can teach them
- adults who work in partnership with youth need to learn how to give up control, "depower" themselves, and share power with young people
- youth involvement has to be meaningful, and not just "token"
- one young person doesn't necessarily speak for all young people, but for him or herself, or sometimes the organization they have been chosen to represent
- adults need to be flexible about things like etiquette, dress, the times and dates of meetings
- food is a good way to bring young people (and adults!) out to a meeting or an activity
- when working with young people, it's important to be open-minded and respectful of differences, and to expect the same from the young people

References

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The *What Can You Do* and *Things to Be Aware Of* sections were written by Marla Pender, a young person actively involved in the Centre, who has been doing youth facilitator training, engagement, and adult ally training and evaluation for 6 years. See also the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement web-site, at www.engagementcentre.ca for reviews of other organizational literature and the results of a program scan of 78 organizations on effective practices.





The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement is a nation-wide collaboration of partners, led by The Students Commission, committed to understanding and encouraging youth engagement. Every day within the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement adults partner with youth employees and volunteers in every aspect of work - administration, communications, research, policy development and more. This partnership has benefitted youth and adults alike, and has made the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement a strong voice in the field of youth development.



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