



# Ethical Youth Engagement for Substance Use Prevention Campaigns

This resource, which focuses on the ethical engagement of youth, is part of a series developed by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) to assist substance use prevention workers in developing and evaluating prevention campaigns.

Use this tool when you want to:

- Start or develop a campaign or other prevention initiative with and for youth;
- Monitor present levels of youth engagement in your other prevention initiatives;
- Identify areas in your prevention campaigns or other initiatives where youth engagement could be improved;
- Find practical youth engagement tools that you may use or adapt for your own prevention campaigns or other initiatives; or
- Identify the need for and then develop additional ideas and tools on youth engagement (please contact [youth-jeunes@ccsa.ca](mailto:youth-jeunes@ccsa.ca) with your suggestions for additional tools).

## Ethical youth engagement in youth-driven prevention initiatives:

- Involves the meaningful, sustained and active participation of youth in the decision-making process
- Provides opportunities for youth to develop skills while working together
- Maintains focus on peers and the community as a whole

## Why Engage Youth in Campaign Development?

- Youth possess expert knowledge in youth culture and can assist in tailoring messages and identifying effective channels and messengers perceived as credible to youth audiences.
- Youth are often the best advocates for issues that affect them and can capture the attention of political leaders, the media and the public.
- Youth can benefit from skill development and learning from peers and supportive adults.
- Youth are best positioned to prioritize the needs and interests of young people.
- Youth have credibility with peers and other community members and are therefore better positioned to influence behaviour and culture change.
- Youth bring energy, creativity and innovative ideas to activities and events.



## What Is Ethical Youth Engagement?

Based on a review conducted by CCSA, ethical youth engagement can be defined as the meaningful, sustained and active participation of youth in all decisions made about goal-oriented, youth-driven prevention initiatives. Youth engagement is meant to provide participating youth with opportunities to work with each other, learn from adult guidance and develop skills while focusing on peers and the community as a whole.

Youth can be involved in prevention initiatives, such as campaigns, in many ways. Youth can be:

- The target audience or token members of committees;
- Consulted and informed; or
- Directed by adults to take action.

However, simply having youth involved in a campaign does not mean they are truly engaged. Real engagement only occurs when youth are fully involved in decision making related to all aspects of the campaign—from message development and testing through to evaluation—and function as equal partners with adults.

Youth engagement is not tokenism (e.g., inviting youth representatives to sit on a committee without giving them any real capacity to influence decision making). It also involves more than just recruiting youth as volunteers or entry-level staff. Instead, youth engagement makes youth central and essential to the work of a prevention campaign or other initiative.

## The Value of Working with Youth

You might want to reflect on the following belief statements throughout your work with youth:

- Youth have the right to participate in the decisions and structures that affect their lives.
- Youth have the desire and are able to positively influence their communities.
- Youth can positively influence individual and community development.
- Youth bring a wealth of creativity, diversity, knowledge and abilities to a project and should be respected for these contributions.
- Youth are active and contributing members of society now. They are far more than citizens and leaders of the future.



## Components of Ethical Youth Engagement with Recommendations for Action

The core components identified in the definition of ethical youth engagement are found in the following table together with recommendations for incorporating these components into the development and evaluation of substance use prevention campaigns.

Components	Recommendations
Meaningful, sustained and active participation	<p>Together with youth, develop terms of reference (ToRs) or a group agreement for the campaign or initiative. In the ToRs, clearly outline expectations and roles for youth and adults in decision making.</p> <p>Ensure youth are able to take on roles and responsibilities that are important to the campaign.</p> <p>Ensure youth perceive their roles as meaningful. Activities in which youth are simply passive listeners are not sufficient.</p> <p>Develop terms of references for advisory and working groups that acknowledge youth as equal and participating members.</p> <p>Encourage group-based activities that allow for continuous interaction with program content and other youth.</p> <p>Provide youth with multiple opportunities to actively participate at different levels.</p> <p>Clearly articulate that youth participation is valued and highlight its impact.</p> <p>Proactively and creatively engage youth in determining campaign focus, messaging and formats on issues of interest and importance to them.</p> <p>Include the ongoing recruitment and retention of youth as an activity of the campaign plan.</p>
Youth-driven	<p>Ensure youth have decision-making power on all aspects of the campaign, including development, implementation, evaluation, management and governance.</p>
Goal-oriented	<p>Support youth in setting SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timed) goals for the campaign. Include these goals in the ToRs.</p> <p>Provide details on how youth can be involved and can have an impact on achieving these goals.</p>
Focus on others	<p>Ensure that the aim of prevention efforts is to affect change in other youth or the greater community.</p> <p>Establish opportunities for youth to create youth advocacy groups and participate in civic activities.</p> <p>Encourage youth members to canvass the ideas of a larger group of youth. This can be accomplished, in part, through the use of social media.</p>
Opportunities for capacity development	<p>Provide opportunities for youth to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Take on multiple roles that aid in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs;</li><li>• Transition through a variety of roles and levels of engagement (e.g., from beneficiaries to collaborators to initiators);</li><li>• Reflect on and learn from youth and adult perspectives on the success of the youth engagement process; and</li><li>• Increase their roles and responsibilities as they develop skills and accumulate experience.</li></ul> <p>Include specific allocations for expenses related to training for youth and adults in campaign budgets.</p>



Components	Recommendations
Adult support and guidance	<p>Ensure there is at least one adult mentor or support assigned to the initiative. Make adult experience available for youth to draw on and learn from. Involved adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enable youth to express themselves, put their ideas forward and use their strengths and skills;</li><li>• Allow youth to fully manage the organization, management and decision making;</li><li>• Set clear expectations and limits with youth;</li><li>• Support them in clarifying roles and responsibilities to help them fully implement their decisions;</li><li>• Help them think critically about their actions and decisions;</li><li>• Provide constructive feedback based on their contributions;</li><li>• Offer them space so they can fully participate;</li><li>• Have the capacity to manage the initiative while adhering to the principles of youth engagement;</li><li>• Step back and allow youth to make their own decisions while still providing a high level of support and guidance;</li><li>• Have opportunities to reflect on and learn from youth and adult perspectives on the success of the youth engagement process;</li><li>• Respect and actively listen to the ideas presented by youth;</li><li>• Use appropriate language that youth can relate to that avoids jargon, acronyms, or technical or academic terms;</li><li>• Do not be overly formal (but do not oversimplify or dumb down your language either, as this could be perceived as patronizing); and</li><li>• Use concrete examples that are relevant to youth culture in making your points.</li></ul>
Youth-friendly environment	<p>Ensure the environment is one that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respects and encourages the ideas of youth;</li><li>• Matches their interests;</li><li>• Does not require them to conform to adult culture, standards or rigid expectations;</li><li>• Accommodate the potential limitations and commitments of youth (e.g., initiatives should address issues concerning transportation, youth schedules and limited incomes);</li><li>• Is developmentally appropriate;</li><li>• Facilitates active and ongoing involvement;</li><li>• Recognizes positive contribution;</li><li>• Helps develop individual and collective capacity;</li><li>• Reduces or eliminates barriers to participation; and</li><li>• Promotes shared decision making.</li></ul> <p>Recognize and compensate youth for their effort and commitment (e.g., through stipends, wages or reference letters). Include specific allocations for expenses related to youth engagement (e.g., honoraria, travel and food expenses) in the campaign budget. Provide new recruits with adequate support.</p>



## Additional Tools and Resources

To inform the development of this tool, CCSA conducted a literature review to find practical, effective, evidence-informed tools that can be used by the substance use prevention workforce in the ethical engagement of youth. Many of these tools are listed below. No evaluations of any of these tools were found, meaning their impact on substance use prevention initiatives is yet unknown.

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