



# What

“Can all contribute to the positive development of young people by creating opportunities for them to influence, inform, shape, design, and contribute to an idea or activity. Joining in and problem solving by young people also helps ensure that policies, services, and programs meet their needs. Adults, as well as young people, can gain new skills and experience through youth participation.”  
(Ministry of Youth Affairs, New Zealand 2003.)

## What is Youth Inclusion?

This is one of a series of resources on youth inclusion co-published by the Nova Scotia Youth Secretariat and HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development. The list of topics in the series include:

- Why Youth Inclusion?
- What is Youth Inclusion?
- Benefits of Youth Inclusion
- Challenges and Strategies for Youth Inclusion
- Youth Inclusion Assessment Tool
- Resources for Youth Inclusion

The concepts are drawn from experiences working with youth and the listed resources.

*Youth Development Participation Guide, Keeping It Real: A resource for involving young people, Ministry of Youth Affairs, Te Tari Taiki, March 2003.*

HeartWood developed the *Youth Engagement Spectrum (YES)* through its work in youth development programming, and through ongoing research in the Community Youth Development field (see <http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/tools.shtml> for the full resource). The YES is related to similar concepts published by other youth serving individuals and organizations, including Roger Hart (see [http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya\\_ladd.htm](http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_ladd.htm)), Karen Pitman's work (see Forum for Youth Investment at: <http://www.forumfyi.org>), the Youth Caucus, Canadian Environmental Network (see [www.cen-rce.org/eng/publications/index.html](http://www.cen-rce.org/eng/publications/index.html)), the Environmental Youth Alliance in Vancouver (see [www.eya.ca](http://www.eya.ca)), the Public Health Agency of Canada (see [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/atlantic/Publications/The\\_works/index.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/atlantic/Publications/The_works/index.html)), and Health Canada's Centre for Excellence in Youth Engagement (see [www.engagementcentre.ca](http://www.engagementcentre.ca)).

Youth inclusion is one of many terms – like 'youth engagement', 'youth involvement', 'civic youth engagement', 'community youth development', and so on – that describes the meaningful involvement of young people in the essential tasks and processes (such as planning, decision-making, program development, service delivery and governance) of groups, organizations, systems (e.g., the child welfare system, the education system, etc.), government and the community at large.

An organization, community, or system can exhibit several forms of youth inclusion simultaneously. An organization may, for example, have young people participating in programs that have been designed by adults while, at the same time, a youth committee is engaged in the planning of future programming. Perhaps the organization also plays a supportive role as a non-intrusive coach/consultant to a group of young people - external to the organization - that is attempting to launch their own services. Multiple forms of inclusion are necessary in order to serve and involve as diverse a group of young people as possible. Not all young people will sit on an advisory "council," but their input is still valuable and it is essential that we find ways to involve them more deeply. Not every organization will include young people in all forms of youth engagement, but within the community's web of groups and organizations, there needs to be multiple and varied opportunities for young people to get involved.

We chose to use the concept of a "Youth Engagement Spectrum," (HeartWood) or continuum, to illustrate some of the possible forms of youth inclusive practice.

Although it is a spectrum, being at one end is not necessarily considered better than being at the other; i.e., there is no right or wrong here. Each organization must determine what form(s) of youth inclusion will be most appropriate for them. It would be wise, therefore, to explore the full spectrum of possibilities in order to find the right fit for your organization and the young people you serve. As young people take on more responsibility and decision-making roles, both they and the organization will learn new skills and gain more confidence, which may lead to further exploration.

The Youth Engagement Spectrum is like a map on which to find ourselves. Then, we can ask, "How can we go deeper here so as to create a better quality of service?" Or, we might say, "We are doing fairly well in this area of our work, so what else can we be doing?" In the latter case, the organization may look farther along the spectrum to see what could happen in the next form.

## Forms of Youth Inclusion

### Participation in Programs/Services

Youth are participants in programs offered on their behalf by adult-led organizations. Young people may be accessing services to improve their life conditions, to upgrade their skills, to have fun, or to gain self-confidence.

*Examples: Participants on a youth exchange program, students using services in a school-based health centre, youth who access an employment centre or a teen service at a library, participants in a community recreation program.*

### Program/Organizational Assistance

Young people are asked to "help out" the organization in areas such as research, programming, publicity, fundraising, and so on. They simply carry out tasks without much input into what those tasks are or how they are done.

*Examples: Fundraising for a charity, setting up furniture for an event, photocopying resources for information packages, being a program volunteer.*

### Informal Influence in Organizations and Program Development

Youth informally help plan and implement programs and are involved in a range of organizational activities. They have influence as advisors and advocates on various issues. They are not yet included in the core planning processes of the organization, but they may contribute their ideas via informal discussions, or even impromptu conversations.

*Examples: youth involved in public education initiatives, young people working in front-line positions at a community centre.*

They may also be consulted by adults in more structured ways to give their input in identifying community problems and potential solutions. As well, they may be asked to participate in the development of policies, programs, and strategies.

*Examples: youth being consulted by participating in focus groups, surveys, forums, World Cafés (World Cafés) regarding their views and interests in youth employment programs, recreation services, the development of library programs for younger children, etc.*

**Note: So far, all these forms of youth inclusion are still adult-led, but the youth are exercising more influence.**

### Formal Roles in Policy-Making and Decision-Making

Youth participation in core planning processes is viewed not just as an opportunity for their own development, but also as a valued contribution to the whole organization. Their input (including their right to vote) is respected on formal decision-making bodies such as Boards and committees. As well, young people may hold staff positions with a high level of authority.

*Examples: Youth as members of a Board of Directors, young people in senior-level staff positions, municipal youth councils, an advisory committee at a youth health centre.*

### Youth/Adult Partnerships

Youth are integrated into existing organizational structures and have equal status in its decision-making processes. As well, adults recognize youth members as full partners that share responsibility and accountability for the development and implementation of the organization's programs and services.

*Examples: An organization in which half of the Board members are youth, a skateboard park that is organized and maintained by youth and adults together, an environmental education program for children that has been designed and implemented by older youth and adults working as partners, a community-based youth action team made up of youth and supportive adults.*

**Note: Some of these partnerships may be youth-led with adults playing support roles**

### Youth-Led Initiatives

Young people control the governance and decision-making of their own organization, or initiative. All of the organizational responsibilities - program creation, financial management, program facilitation, and service provision - are carried out by youth.

*Examples: Youth-governed drop-in centre, university student union with full student governance, meals-on-wheels service prepared and delivered by youth, a First Nations youth media service.*

**Note: Adults, if present at all, serve only as resource people or advisors.**

### Summary

Helping young people develop their participation skills is the foundation for the whole spectrum of youth inclusion. Taking that first step to join in, to become part of something (peer group, community organization, an action, an event), to become involved, is often a turning point in a young person's life.

Focus on the promotion of participatory skills for all, not just leadership skills for the few. Leaders will always emerge, but all children and young people need the chance to learn the multiple skills of listening and collaborating in groups if they are to discover that they can play very different roles in building communities and achieving change.

(United Nations Economic and Social Affairs, 2003, 286-287.)

From the community's perspective, we need to involve young people. We need their input now and we would be wise to start supporting them in leadership roles. The earlier we do that the better. From these initial key experiences, young people often develop an interest in civic involvement that will last a lifetime.

Involving young people in our organizational life makes good business sense. There is compelling evidence that organizations that incorporate diverse forms of youth inclusion will strengthen their organizational resilience (Langlois, M., 2003).

For more information regarding the benefits of youth inclusion, please see the other resource article in this portfolio, entitled Benefits of Youth Inclusion.

A World Café uses dialogue to engage large groups of people in meaningful conversations around questions that matter. For more information, see: [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com).

United Nations Economic and Social Affairs. (2004). Youth Participation in Decision Making. World Youth Report, 2003. Retrieved from Chapter 10 of: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wyr03.htm>

Langlois, M. (2003). In Service to Youth and Community. Major Paper for Masters in Management Program at McGill University. See: [http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/resources\\_publications.shtml](http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/resources_publications.shtml)

