



THE  
ART OF  
YOUTH  
ENGAGEMENT

**OPENINGS & POSSIBILITIES**

A Workshop on How to Initiate Youth Engagement  
Practice in Mental Health Centres

Written by Cathy Dyer and Nancy Pereira

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Ontario Centre of Excellence  
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Mental Health

**THE NEW MENTALITY**  
**DISABLE THE LABEL**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre) works to build connections, share knowledge and draw upon expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. As a passionate supporter of youth engagement for many years, the Centre is pleased to be leading efforts in youth engagement training and capacity building.

This training program is the result of tremendous effort from many creative minds, including staff at The New Mentality — a program started by the Centre and Children’s Mental Health Ontario (CMHO). The New Mentality is a provincial network of youth and mental health agencies that “disables the labels” of mental illness and engages youth in mental health organizations. The following is a list of some of the individuals and organizations that supported the development of this training program:

## Project Manager

Erin Smith, Youth Engagement Coordinator at the Centre supported the development of this training program. Her clarity and management skills ensured this program was organized, thorough and complete. She was also instrumental in providing research and expertise into adult learning and youth engagement.

## Program Developers

Catherine Dyer (The New Mentality) led the design of the program, the pilot-testing of the workshops and the train-the-trainers event. Her work with the Art of Hosting community and her vision to incorporate participatory leadership practices (i.e., World Café, Circle, and Open Space) was central to making this training program unique. Nancy Pereira (The New Mentality) conducted the needs assessment, coordinated the steering committee and gave shape to the overall program. Her knowledge about youth engagement and experience delivering similar workshops was instrumental in giving shape to this program.

## Steering Committee

Steering committee members volunteered their time to interpret the needs assessment and advise on the development of the workshop curriculum as well as to support and facilitate two pilot-test workshops. The youth on the steering committee were Mwanaisa Ali (Mental Health Commission of Canada and The New Mentality) and Andrei Biltan (The New Mentality and the Centre). The adults on the committee included: Rita Gidillini (child and youth worker at the Windsor Regional Children’s Centre), Michelle Moran (program supervisor at East Metro Youth Services) and Jessica Ripley (program supervisor at YouthNet/RéseauAdo Ottawa). Their experience, dedication and support was invaluable.

## Additional acknowledgements include:

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    - Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health
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    - Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa
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  - Mary Shirley-Thompson (Family, Youth and Child Services of Muskoka)
- BirdDog Design for their creativity, flexibility and commitment to delivering a product that looks great

As a passionate supporter of youth engagement for many years, the Centre is pleased to be leading efforts in youth engagement training and capacity building.

# THE NEW MENTALITY

By Gregory "Ritalin" Frankson

Looking all around me  
I'll be soundly working in reality  
Steeped in practicality  
Stepping forth in alliance  
Adults and young people in a mutual reliance  
Using voices of defiance  
We risin'  
Pushing new ideas to the fore  
Through creative enterprisin'  
I'm taking ownership of this new relationship  
Engagement is the key  
To spark the new mentality

Facilitate the elevation of the young  
Speak truth from the heart  
'Cause the mission's just begun  
If its youth to youth  
Or allied with adults  
The youth here can achieve the best results  
I'm taking ownership  
Of this new relationship  
Engagement is the key  
To spark the new mentality

# INTRODUCTION

While youth engagement theory and practice have been in existence for more than 20 years, they are relatively new for mental health agencies. Organizations are beginning to recognize the importance of engaging youth in order to improve clinical outcomes, ensure accountability and provide relevant programming.

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre), with a mandate from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, brings people and knowledge together to strengthen mental health care for children, youth and their families and caregivers. One of its strategic priorities is to increase the capacity of agencies to implement evidence-informed practices, including youth engagement. The Centre has an extensive history of initiating and supporting youth engagement programs (YouthNet/RéseauAdo, The New Mentality, and the Dare to Dream Program). The Centre worked with The New Mentality to develop this training program that offers effective strategies for initiating and sustaining youth engagement within a child and youth mental health agency context.

Several steps were taken in developing this program:

## Reviewing Published Research

- In 2007, The Centre supported the production of *Ready...Set...Engage!*, authored by Nancy Pereira of The New Mentality. This book provides research and strategies for building effective youth-adult partnerships for a stronger child and youth mental health system<sup>1</sup>.

## Incorporating Adult Learning and Participatory Techniques

- In preparing to provide training for child and youth mental health service providers, the Centre researched best practices and techniques for delivering training to adult learners. Catherine Dyer (The New Mentality) examined participatory leadership approaches to workshop design to ensure that the training modelled full, active and meaningful engagement.

## Coordinating a Youth Engagement Steering Committee

- The Centre supported The New Mentality in coordinating a steering committee for this program. Members brought years of experience leading youth engagement initiatives within mental health agencies to the table.

## Consulting Key Informants

- With support from the Centre, The New Mentality interviewed 14 mental health professionals to understand their training needs and to identify the challenges and opportunities that arise when operating within a youth engagement model.

## Pilot-Testing the Training Workshops

- The New Mentality, with support from the steering committee and the Centre, pilot-tested the training programs.

## Training Workshop Hosts

- Art of Hosting consultants, Tim Merry and Phyllis Novak, were brought in to co-facilitate a three-day intensive training session to prepare future hosts to facilitate the Art of Youth Engagement workshop. The training was held at the Odawa Native Friendship Centre in Ottawa.

## Launching a Community of Practice

- During the Ottawa training, the participants and hosts made a collaborative decision to become a community of practice. The purpose of this group is to be a learning community in youth engagement that sparks and sustains change in the mental health sector. This community of practice is the vehicle for ongoing capacity building beyond the Art of Youth Engagement program.

# DEFINITIONS

\*All definitions retrieved from The New Mentality ([www.thenewmentality.ca](http://www.thenewmentality.ca))

**Youth engagement** is about empowering all youth as valuable partners in addressing and making decisions about issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe to be important.

**Engaged youth** play an active role in program planning and decision-making. They can include clients, former consumers of service, or those who express a genuine interest in the issues.

**Adult ally** An adult assigned by the organization that supports, advocates for, and works alongside youth.

**Meaningful engagement** Youth are meaningfully engaged when they are involved in activities that they believe to have purpose, when they show commitment to what they are doing, and they demonstrate gained knowledge of the activity.

# RATIONALE AND RESEARCH

## YOUTH ARE NOT GETTING THE HELP THEY NEED

When surveyed, eighty-six percent (86%) of youth indicated that they would turn to other teens for mental health concerns<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, fewer than five percent said that they would talk to a professional — a startling statistic especially since it's estimated that approximately one in five children and youth will experience a treatable mental health condition<sup>3</sup>.

The opportunity therefore exists to enlist young people as partners in developing solutions to aid youth in getting the help that they need - when they need it. To improve services, child and youth mental health agencies need to engage the population they seek to serve by providing opportunities for youth to voice their needs and act as key players in the creation of solutions.

The average wait time for child and youth mental health services in Ontario is 69.2 days<sup>4</sup>. For youth who are experiencing distress, and/or are in crisis, this can seem like a lifetime.

Every year, 8,000 kids can't get in to Ontario's overcrowded community-based mental health services. Thousands more who need help don't even try. Two thousand kids have been waiting longer than a year<sup>5</sup>.

## PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Participatory leadership practice ensures that a diverse group of people (youth, front-line staff, management and board members) collaborate and inform the decision-making process together. Leading in participatory ways engages people in the creative process of designing their work.

Human beings who are involved and invited to work together only pay attention to that which is meaningful to them<sup>6</sup>. Conversations that highlight a shared clarity on issues of importance foster ownership and responsibility that leads to action. Actions that come out of collective clarity are sustainable because those affected have "bought-in" to the decisions<sup>7</sup>.

Truly, participatory leadership, like youth engagement, is premised on the axiom, **nothing about us, without us**. Participatory leadership builds community while carrying out the business of the day. Rich experiences with co-creating, co-deciding and co-learning builds trust and respect among the people engaged.

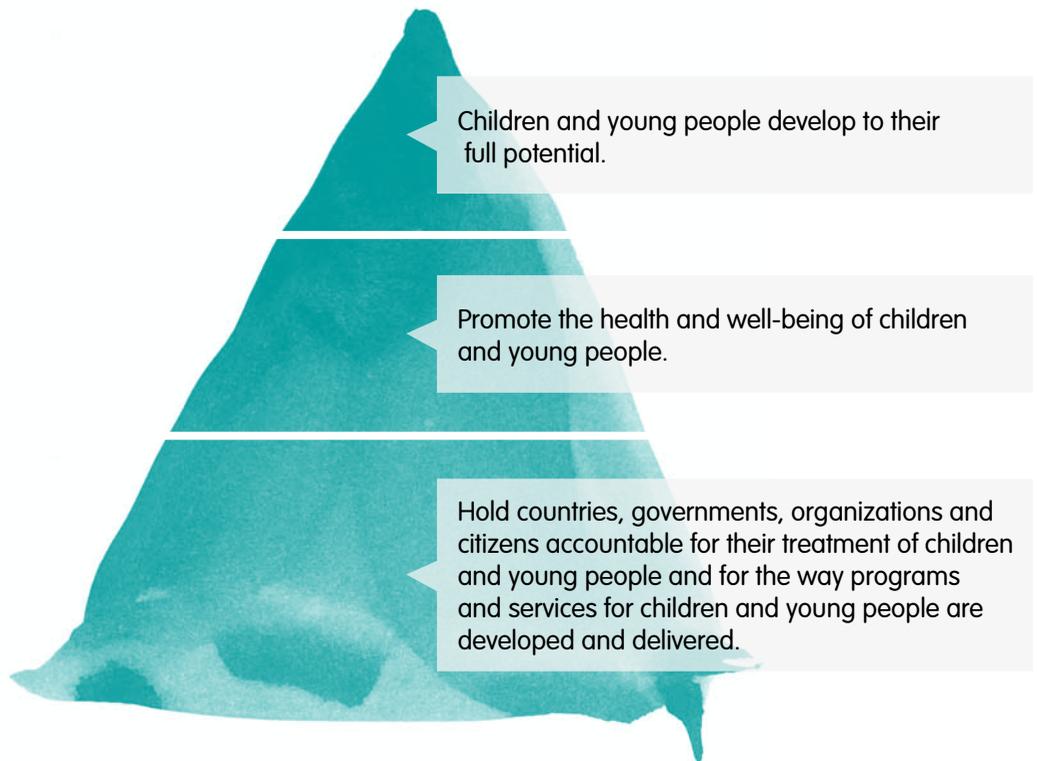
## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO TREATMENT AND PROGRAMMING

**Organizations have responsibilities** to engage young people in their treatment. This makes youth engagement a win-win. A youth engagement approach to programming and treatment builds on a young person's skills and considers their views and experience. When young people are seen as assets (not problems) and as partners (not clients) everyone benefits.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a framework for recognizing, protecting and respecting the rights of all children and young people<sup>8</sup>. This framework is a tool that can help:



Youth have the **right** to **participate** in organizations



## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IMPROVES THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUTH WHO ENGAGE

Young people who are engaged tend to have stronger self-esteem and increased critical thinking skills. They also have a stronger sense of teamwork and group belonging, and feel more committed to the particular program, activity or process they are involved in<sup>9</sup>.

Young people also report that being engaged improves their overall mental health by helping them build positive relationships with adults and developing feelings of self-worth and identity. It also helps them feel valued as responsible members of the community capable of making valuable contributions despite their mental health status<sup>10</sup>.

## **YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IMPROVES ORGANIZATIONS**

Most frequently, adults concluded that their level of involvement in the work at hand increased because of their collaborations with youth. The emotional connection that youth bring sparks adult interest and passion in these issues. Their emotional energy is contagious. The optimism and motivation of youth stretches adult staff. Adults report coming out of youth-adult partnerships with new strategies for interacting with youth and a growing sense of competence in relating to them<sup>11</sup>.

Through engagement, organizations learn about the needs and concerns of youth directly and can develop more relevant programming that addresses those needs and concerns<sup>12</sup>. Youth engagement programs often shift the public image of organizations to be more youth-friendly, which inspires confidence in the organization among youth<sup>13</sup>.

Youth-adult partnerships lead to enhanced social capital and civic involvement of youth and more inclusive and effective decision-making processes within organizations. This leads to better health outcomes, communities that are more responsive and better prevention and early intervention programs and policies<sup>14</sup>.

## **MENTAL HEALTH CENTRES WOULD ENGAGE YOUTH IF THEY KNEW HOW**

In 2007, a survey on youth engagement was administered to 90 children's mental health centres in Ontario and only four agencies reported engaging young people in a meaningful way<sup>15</sup>.

It is evident that mental health agencies have a desire to engage youth, but in order for the practice to sustain itself, agencies will be required to change the way that they do business to work with youth rather than for youth. Child and youth mental health agencies that are new to the practice of youth engagement should strongly consider having all staff trained on this methodology. Participation from all staff will allow for a shared understanding from the initial stages of implementation, and in turn will provide an opportunity for youth engagement to emerge as a method of operating rather than a program that exists within a larger structure.



One of the most unique and groundbreaking things about the UNCRC is its "Participation Rights". As children's abilities develop, they should have increased opportunities to participate in the activities of their society, especially in matters that directly relate to them and affect their lives<sup>8</sup>.

# OPENINGS & POSSIBILITIES:



## Agency Workshop

### Description:

This interactive and intensive workshop has been carefully crafted to address the specific needs of child and youth mental health agencies, and will present professionals with practical strategies and tools for **initiating** youth engagement practice into the work that they do. Through reflection, problem-solving, visioning and planning, participants will become equipped with strategies to implement effective youth engagement practices within their agency.

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**Guiding question: How do we initiate youth engagement?**

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By the end of this workshop, participants will:

- Know the benefits and outcomes that youth engagement brings
- Understand how to assess the capacity of their agency to engage youth
- Understand the rights and risks associated with youth engagement, and identify solutions for overcoming potential barriers
- Craft a plan to help make their agency 'youth-friendly'
- Explore effective recruitment and retention strategies to encourage youth to want to become engaged with their agency

### WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

This workshop is designed for a mental health agency that serves youth. In order for an agency to adopt the practice of youth engagement, staff at all levels (i.e., front-line workers, management, board members, etc.) must be trained on the principles and practices.

**The purpose of this beginner training workshop is not only to introduce theories and principles of youth engagement, but also to reduce the anxieties of professionals to work alongside youth in roles that extend beyond the traditional client-service provider relationship.**

# WORKSHOP APPROACH

The training workshops utilize social technologies and facilitation tools as taught through The Art of Hosting. The Art of Hosting<sup>16</sup> is a community of global practitioners, an operating system for participatory leadership, and a set of powerful facilitation techniques. The Art of Hosting uses several activities, which include:

The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter is a new practice of democracy that we really need in the world now.

- Phil Cass, CEO, Columbus Medical Association, and Foundation, Ohio, USA<sup>16</sup>

The Art of Hosting is a practice that heals the broken relationships between people.

- EU Commission official<sup>16</sup>

**The Circle**<sup>17</sup> - The first and most basic will be the Circle. A circle is a place where youth, adults and facilitators are equals. No one is higher or lower and everyone respects the voices of the others.

**Open Space Technology**<sup>18</sup> - Open Space Technology is a process originally designed by Harrison Owen that allows leadership and the agenda structure to emerge from the participants.

**World Café**<sup>19</sup> - The World Café is a method for creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter in real life situations.

**Mind Mapping**<sup>20</sup> - A collective mind-map is a quick and simple way to create a shared overview of issues and opportunities relevant to a particular subject or challenge.

Each methodology has been developed independent of one another but are all linked by the common purpose of promoting participatory leadership. Not only have these methodologies been used across multiple sectors (financial, government, private and charitable), they have also been found to be useful for promoting youth engagement.

The Art of Hosting is an approach used to create an environment in which groups of people are safe to:

- learn to be together in the best possible way
- remember and speak about the knowledge and experience they hold
- appreciate that being afraid is part of the journey and so gain the courage to travel through the fear
- be together in an authentic way

# SECTION 1

What is youth engagement and why should I practice it?

## Welcoming New Practice

The purpose of this section is to:

- Expand participants' knowledge of youth engagement
- Build participants' confidence in knowing how to manage risks for initiating youth engagement

Individual reflection: Youth-adult partnerships<sup>21</sup>

PERSONAL STATEMENT	WORKING ON IT	MOSTLY	ALWAYS
I consider the feelings and ideas of young people and adults equally			
I realize that it is more effective for youth to develop their personal beliefs from their own experiences rather than simply following the advice of the adults in their lives			
I am able to hold back when I have the urge to tell youth what to do.			
I am aware of the current issues facing young people today.			
I try to look for the root causes in a young person's behaviour or mood.			
I understand how 'adulthood' can influence adult attitudes towards young people & I change my own behaviour.			
I believe that youth have what it takes to make a difference in their communities.			
I listen with an open mind to people of all ages and value their opinions.			
Within my workplace, I try to create opportunities for youth to get involved beyond receiving service.			
I find it easy to establish a positive rapport with young people.			
I say something when youth are being disrespected or when their rights are being violated or denied.			
I look for the strengths in young people and consider them to be valuable assets, rather than problems that need fixing			

## DISCOVERING WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW

### Purpose:

- To create a collective understanding of the purpose, importance and impact of youth engagement practice. Participants are encouraged to openly express their personal thoughts (positive/negative) towards youth engagement practice. This activity is a series of small group discussions to allow for the collaboration of participant ideas, insights and emerging themes.

**What anxieties do I have about starting?**

In the space below, harvest the learning from your group discussions. Record your learning:

- **Listening for the Head (the thinking level)** - to thoughts, facts, concepts, arguments, ideas and the principles behind these. "What did I think?"
  
- **Listening for the Heart (the feeling level)** - to feelings, emotions, mood, experience and the values behind these. "What did I feel?"
  
- **Listening for the Feet (the action level)** - to intentions, energy, direction, motivation and will. "What do I intend to do? How can it be achieved?"

## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT DEFINITION

The term youth engagement is an emerging practice that does not possess a universal definition. The New Mentality defines youth engagement as, "empowering all youth as valued partners in addressing and making decisions about issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe to be important"<sup>1</sup>.



## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS

- Youth-adult partnerships (working relationships)
- Shared decision-making
- Involvement of youth in the design, planning and implementation of programs
- Youth perspectives being valued and regarded as credible
- Youth and adults assuming the dual role of teacher and learner



## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS NOT

- Service provider/client relationship (treatment)
- Adults asking youth to offer a vote of approval on decisions that have already been made
- Youth attendance in a program that was planned solely by adults
- Youth perspectives, knowledge and experience filtered through adult interpretation
- Adults mentoring youth

## THE RISKS AND RIGHTS INVOLVED

While youth engagement theory and practice have been in existence for more than 20 years, they are relatively new for mental health professionals. The shift in working with youth as clients, to engaging them as decision makers, can at times seem overwhelming. Youth engagement practice can introduce feelings of anxiety among many due to an uncertainty around expectations, what to do, and how to get started.

The first lesson in youth engagement is that there is no magic formula. Youth involvement will look and feel different depending on an agency's location, capacity and the youth they are engaging at any given time. In order to succeed, youth, adults and the organization as a whole must be open and willing to take risks, think outside the box and develop new attitudes towards youth - not as problems that need fixing, but rather resources to be tapped into.

**What are the risks of engaging youth?  
What are the risks of not engaging youth?**

In the space below, harvest the learning from your group discussions. Record your learning:

- **Listening for the Head (the thinking level)** - to thoughts, facts, concepts, arguments, ideas and the principles behind these. "What did I think?"
- **Listening for the Heart (the feeling level)** - to feelings, emotions, mood, experience and the values behind these. "What did I feel?"
- **Listening for the Feet (the action level)** - to intentions, energy, direction, motivation and will. "What do I intend to do? How can it be achieved?"

## THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISIONS

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the most widely ratified human rights treaty that exists in the world. It is a framework for countries and the governments and citizens within them — to recognize, protect and respect the dignity of all children and to ensure the necessary environment for each child to develop to his/her full potential. The UNCRC was adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and ratified (signed and legalised) by Canada in 1991. To date, there are only two countries in the world that have not ratified the UNCRC.

Some of the most unique and ground-breaking things about the UNCRC are its 'Participation Rights', that explain that as children's abilities develop, they should have increased opportunities to participate in the activities of their society, especially in matters that directly relate to them and affect their lives.



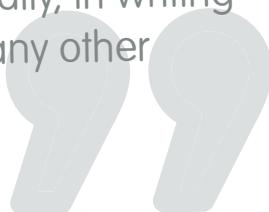
Organizations  
have a  
**responsibility**  
to create  
opportunities



...the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters effecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child

— UNCRC Article 12<sup>8</sup>

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.



- UNCRC Article 13<sup>8</sup>

In the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) Strategic Framework (2008-2012), it states as one of its goals, 'every child and youth has a voice'<sup>22</sup>. For MCYS, agencies should:

- Create opportunities to involve clients in program design, implementation, delivery and assessment on an ongoing basis.
- Establish safe forums and activities for clients to have their requests and concerns with services heard and responded to.
- Support young people involved in services to develop and exemplify leadership both in the context of the services they receive and as active members of their community.

- Promote opportunities for children and youth involved in services to participate in community activities.
- Establish opportunities within services for young people to build leadership skills.

## What is the evidence supporting youth engagement?

### OUTCOMES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

#### HEALTHY YOUTH

- **Mental health** - Services that promote and respond to consumer/youth/parent perspectives achieve better mental health outcomes in terms of compliance, retention and/or meeting client mental health needs<sup>23, 24, 25, 26</sup>. Engaged youth report lowered rates of substance use, for example, cigarette smoking, marijuana, other 'harder' drugs, and alcohol<sup>27</sup>. Engaged youth also report significantly lower levels of depression than non-engaged youth<sup>28</sup>.
- **Employability** - Through engagement, youth develop skills that can lead to employment, make connections to resources and people, become empowered, and build self-confidence. Connectedness is linked to a decreased likelihood of suicide attempts, early sexual activity, drugs and other risky behaviours<sup>29</sup>.
- **Higher academic performance, healthier peer, and adult interactions and improved decision - making** abilities are also associated with youth engagement<sup>30</sup>.

#### HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

- **Healthy communities** - When youth and adults work collectively, the result is healthier and safer communities<sup>28</sup>.
- **Staff morale** - Youth engagement creates positive behavioural changes among adults. Most frequently, adults concluded that their level of involvement in the work at hand increased because of their collaborations with youth. Their emotional energy is contagious. The optimism and motivation of youth stretches adult staff. Adults report coming out of youth-adult partnerships with new strategies for interacting with youth and a growing sense of competence in relating to them<sup>11</sup>.
- **Organizational performance** - Through engagement, organizations learn about the needs and concerns of youth directly and can develop more relevant programming that reflects those needs and concerns<sup>12</sup>.
- Youth engagement in programs often shifts the public image of organizations to be more youth-friendly, which inspires confidence in the organization among youth<sup>13</sup>.
- **Better prevention and intervention programs** - Youth-adult partnerships lead to enhanced social capital and civic involvement of youth and more inclusive and effective decision-making processes within organizations. This leads to better health outcomes, more responsive communities and better prevention and early intervention programs and policies<sup>14</sup>.

# SECTION 2

What are the best practices?

## Exploring Possibilities

### Purpose:

The purpose of this section is to:

- Learn about best practices to understand youth engagement
- Reveal what youth engagement activities are happening
- Explore how attitudes affect youth engagement
- Practice creating a youth-friendly environment

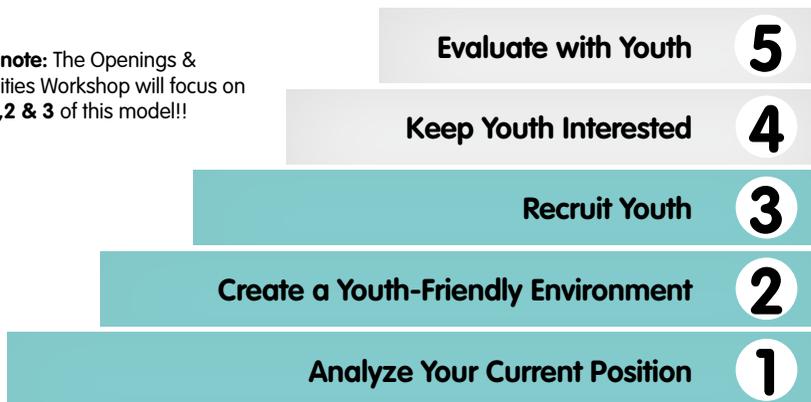
[Agencies] must also have the freedom to adopt flexible models of youth engagement. These organizations should give careful thought to their own goals around youth engagement<sup>15</sup>.

# Mental Models

## FIVE STEPS TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT<sup>1</sup>

These concrete steps, created by Nancy Pereira in *Ready...Set...Engage!*, can be taken to help organizations initiate and sustain youth engagement.

**Please note:** The Openings & Possibilities Workshop will focus on Steps 1, 2 & 3 of this model!!



- 1. Analyze your current position** - It is easier to fan flames rather than start sparks, so build on what is working. Know your motivation and resources for engaging youth.
  - Example: *The Board of Directors of agency X has just agreed that youth engagement should be a strategic priority. Staff must now determine in what area of the agency youth should be engaged, how much staff time can be allotted and where there is already some work being done.*
- 2. Create a youth-friendly environment** - The meeting place design is as important as values held by the agency and by staff to making youth feel welcome.
  - Example: *Agency X realizes that Child and Youth Mental Health Week is approaching and they want to have youth design posters and speeches. Before they recruit youth, staff need to create a meeting room comfortable to youth, ensure there are staff members who understand how to engage youth on a project like this and ensure there is a welcoming environment created for youth when they enter.*
- 3. Recruit youth** - It is important to create clear roles and qualifications for youth before they are recruited as volunteers.
  - Example: *Agency X has decided to use their programming room for a youth committee to meet to create a Child and Youth Mental Health Week campaign. They have identified an adult ally and staff are welcoming. Now, it is time to recruit youth who want to help the cause and feel personally motivated by the issue.*
- 4. Keep youth interested** - Youth are attracted to social change opportunities so make the experience meaningful.
  - Example: *Eight youth are meeting weekly to create a campaign. The adult allies know that meetings have to be a mixture of relationship building and agenda setting. Youth help run the meetings and are responsible for most of the projects being created. They are passionate to see their ideas realized.*

5. **Evaluate with youth** - Youth are constantly moving on, it is important to keep renewing your engagement efforts by understanding what's working and what's not.

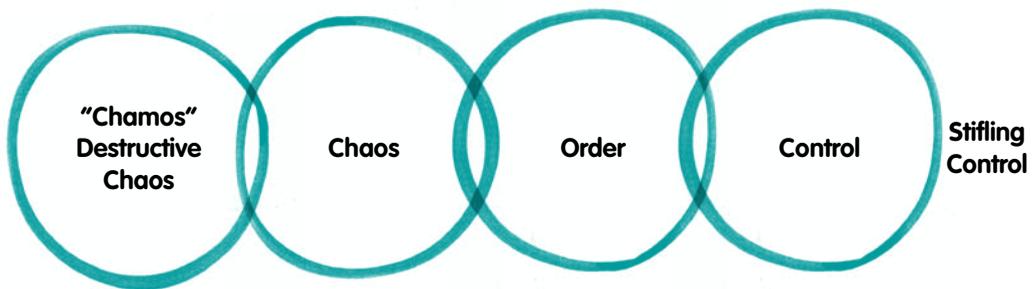
- Example: *Determine with your youth participants how you are going to evaluate the outcomes and process of your Child and Youth Health Week campaign. Make sure the things you measure are meaningful to staff and youth.*

## CHAORDIC PATH<sup>31</sup>

In order for a new practice like youth engagement to emerge, staff and youth need to operate in the space between chaos and order (cha-ord). The term chaord, was coined, by Dee Hock, founder of VISA<sup>33</sup>.

### The Extremes:

- **Control** ensures things are predictable but can lead people into apathy when there's too much control. Sometimes, when the chaos makes people uncomfortable, they go straight to control.
- **Chamos** is the place where there is too much chaos, where people just keep talking about ideas but nothing ever happens. After a while, you get frustrated and stop showing up.



**Chaos** is all about new visions, wide-open possibilities, creativity and new ideas. Many youth are great at this.

**Order** ensures that projects are organized and that there is a clear plan that will help execute ideas. Adults tend to like order!

# POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT<sup>1</sup>

(This model was adapted from Hart's Ladder of Participation<sup>33</sup>)



## POSITIVE

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### Youth-adult partnerships:

Shared decision-making and equal power balance between youth and adults working as a collective to achieve common goals.

### Youth initiated:

Youth create project idea and involve adults to make it happen.

### Adult initiated:

Adults create project idea and involve youth to make it happen.

**Consulted and informed:** Youth advise adults on ideas and projects and understand how their participation fits into the overall process.

**Assigned but informed:** Adults give youth specific tasks, but let youth know how their work will contribute to the project as a whole.

## NEGATIVE

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### Youth tokenism:

Young people are invited to be members of a group but have little to no influence and decision-making power.

**Avoid this** by creating a structure where youth have access to one-on-one support, and procedures to bring forth ideas, opinions and concerns.

### Youth Decorations:

Young people are used to augment a cause with their presence at an event.

**Avoid this** by only inviting youth if they contributed to the planning of the event or will benefit from attending as participants.

## CONTINUUM OF CHANGE IN ATTITUDES<sup>14</sup>

One of the biggest barriers to introducing youth engagement practice into adult-led organizations is the biases that both youth and adults possess about each other. If these false perceptions are not addressed it can lead to oppressive behaviours. Of course, attitudes work both ways.

Youth are viewed as the <b>target audience</b>	Youth are viewed as an intermittent resource— <b>the focus group</b>	Youth are viewed as a <b>volunteer source</b>	Youth are viewed as <b>decision makers</b> , equal partners and agents of social change
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
Adults are viewed as <b>authoritarians</b> —out-of-touch with the younger generation	Adults are viewed as an intermittent <b>advisor</b> —someone to go to in times of need	Adults are viewed as <b>mentors</b> —someone to learn from in both good and bad times	Adults are viewed as trusted guides and lifelong learners— <b>they both teach and learn from youth</b>

The Continuum of Change (a conceptual model developed by Youth Infusion) illustrates the different ways that youth and adults may perceive one another within partnerships.

## SIX KEY ELEMENTS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT<sup>1</sup>

$$\text{Agency Readiness} + \text{Relationship} = \text{Youth Engagement}$$

1

**Realistic expectations** - Limitations correspond to different levels of development<sup>34</sup>. Give youth room to develop new skills by establishing realistic goals, timelines and expectations.

2

**Beyond programming** - Youth engagement exists only when youth make important contributions throughout all levels of an organization<sup>35, 36</sup>.

3

**Organizational commitment** - Because it is a shift in how organizations operate, youth engagement requires significant organizational buy-in throughout all levels of the organization<sup>37</sup>.

4

**Valuing youth** - Adults can sometimes overemphasize or exaggerate youth's lack of experience and need to embrace youth as being assets today, not just leaders of tomorrow.

5

**Youth-adult partnerships** - Youth need adult support and organizational opportunities<sup>38</sup>. Youth are in partnership when they and the adults have a voice in decisions and both adults and youth are valued for their contributions<sup>12, 38</sup>.

6

**Youth Engagement - Meaningful participation** - Youth engagement must possess real meaning and purpose to both the organization and the individuals involved.

In the space below, harvest the learning from your group discussions about mental models. Record your learning:

**Listening for the Head (the thinking level)** - to thoughts, facts, concepts, arguments, ideas and the principles behind these. "What did I think?"

**Listening for the Heart (the feeling level)** - to feelings, emotions, mood, experience and the values behind these. "What did I feel?"

**Listening for the Feet (the action level)** - to intentions, energy, direction, motivation and will. "What do I intend to do? How can it be achieved?"

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative Inquiry challenges organizations to take a strengths-based approach when assessing and adapting their services for youth. It asks individuals to look at what is working, or what has proven to be successful in the past, in order to help build a strategy that will work in their program, agency or local community.

Collective mind mapping activity: Reflecting on past initiatives

1. What is working within the organization to engage youth?
2. What factors, strategies or processes made the effort so successful?
3. If your agency were to tackle this same initiative again, what do you think it could do to build on its success?
4. What would it look like for our agency to better carry out youth engagement efforts?

### MY MIND MAP

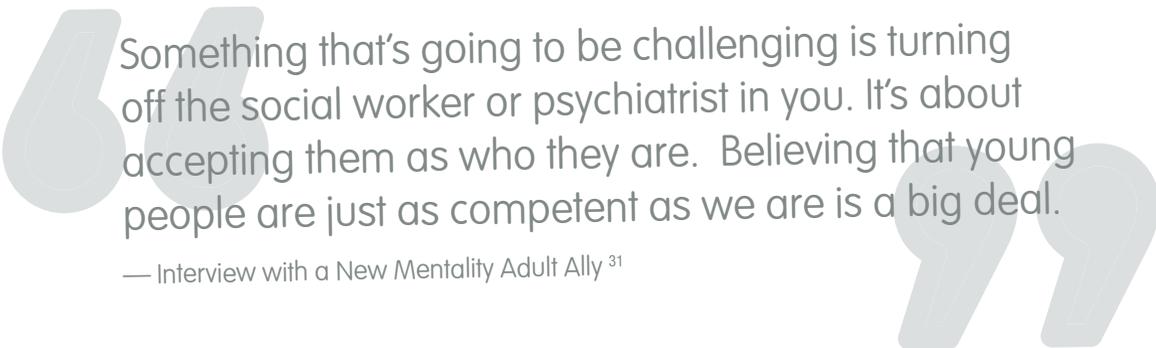


In the space below, harvest the learning from your group discussions. Record your learning:

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**Listening for the Feet (the action level)** - to intentions, energy, direction, motivation and will. "What do I intend to do? How can it be achieved?"



Something that's going to be challenging is turning off the social worker or psychiatrist in you. It's about accepting them as who they are. Believing that young people are just as competent as we are is a big deal.

— Interview with a New Mentality Adult Ally <sup>31</sup>

## Step 1: Analyze Your Current Position

### Start by Understanding Attitude Barriers

Old habits and stereotypes are hard to change. In a study of fifteen American organizations, Zeldin et al. (2000) noted that overcoming old habits required leaders within an organization to feel drawn to the purpose of the organization and the value of meaningful engagement. When perceived as tokenism, staff fell back to old habits and stereotypes of youth. Change happened slowly through repetition and experiential learning when adults participated meaningfully with youth and saw the value of their contributions in terms of good process and good outcomes. When youth performed well within decision-making teams, adults increased their confidence and thus increased further opportunities for engagement.

### Valuing Unique Contributions

Meaningful youth-adult partnerships permit all members to draw upon and contribute their expertise. To achieve this, research indicates that these partnerships must move away from a traditional focus on trying to define power relations, towards an asset-based frame of thinking<sup>11</sup>. Developing a real understanding about the contributions that the two groups can offer each other allows the roles to define themselves.

### Youth can provide adults with:

Enthusiastic energy; Creative talents; Fresh perspectives; Direct access to youth population; Up-to-date information on the best mediums to reach other youth; and Knowledge about current challenges facing youth.

### Adults can provide youth with:

Opportunities to get involved; Resources; Mentorship; Support; Experiential knowledge regarding operations of organization; and Credibility with other adults and when they take programs out into the community.

### Notes and ideas:

## Step 2: Create a Youth-friendly Environment

### Transforming Place into Space

Since youth engagement requires that youth feel comfortable in their physical surroundings, it is important to transform a physical environment from a generic space into a youth-friendly place. This transformation requires youth interacting with their meeting space/work space and building sentimental attachment to it<sup>39</sup>. This interaction could be simply meeting in that space and building memories or it could be changing the set up so that it reflects the unique characteristics of the youth<sup>40</sup>. A house is not a home until people put their “personal touches” to it.

We are not even part of the organization, you know what I mean? We are partners but we are not... We are using their space and support from our adult ally.

— Interview with a New Mentality Youth Facilitator <sup>15</sup>

## World Café: Transforming Places to Spaces

**Purpose:** Discover how to take a space and create a place for youth

**Cafe Questions:**

1. What does a youth friendly space look like?
2. What does a youth friendly place look like?

### Notes and ideas:

**SPACE**

---

**PLACE**

---

### Step 3: Recruit Youth

When there is organizational buy-in, that is, when commitment to the practice is shown by all levels of the organization (from Board to front-line workers), the agency is ready to recruit youth. When there is commitment not to create another program but to shift the way of operating towards youth engagement, an agency is ready. When staff members are confident that they have realistic expectations of youth and establish goals and timelines that complement young people’s lives and agency capacity, they are ready to recruit youth.

“We do not have young people, well, we do not have clients or ex-clients on the Board, largely because our young people aren’t particularly interested in that kind of experience...the opportunities that we have created are opportunities that, for our kids, are more comfortable and natural opportunities for them.”

— Interview with mental health agency Director<sup>15</sup>

## Stop Lights: Story Telling & Listening for Themes

**Purpose:** Youth and adult practitioners of youth engagement will share their stories, recommendations, and effective strategies for engaging youth.

**Record your thoughts as you listen to the stories:**

- **Red Lights:** Record recruitment strategies identified as being 'unsuccessful'
  
- **Yellow Lights:** Record recruitment strategies you would like to try
  
- **Green Lights:** Record recruitment strategies identified as successful

# SECTION 3

How can I initiate good youth engagement practice?

## Amplifying the Practice

### YOUTH ROLES WITHIN AN AGENCY

- **Ad Hoc committees** - Consult on a particular youth-related issue.
- **Youth as consultants** - Provide feedback on an organization's programs and services.
- **Reference groups** - Suggest strategies for improvement which are then passed onto persons with decision-making power.
- **Advisory groups** - Advise on the operations of the organization.
- **Peer-to-peer support** - Receive training in areas such as active listening, facilitation, conflict mediation and issues that youth commonly face (e.g., substance abuse, anxiety, depression, peer pressure, etc.).
- **Peer educators** - Lead a workshop or discussion forum.
- **Researchers** - Assume the dual role of subject and researcher to help define the problem, develop the primary research questions, establish goals and outcomes, and evaluate the results (practice known as Participatory Action Research or PAR).

### STAY FLEXIVOL

The following eight characteristics should be considered when recruiting youth<sup>41</sup>:

**FLEXIBILITY:** young people seek choice - provide volunteer opportunities after school, on weekends or during school holidays.

**LEGITIMACY:** Provide information about the full range of volunteer opportunities available and explain their significance - young people want to know how they are making a difference.

**EASE OF ACCESS:** Provide the youth with information about your organization, their potential role and what supports will be in place to assist them.

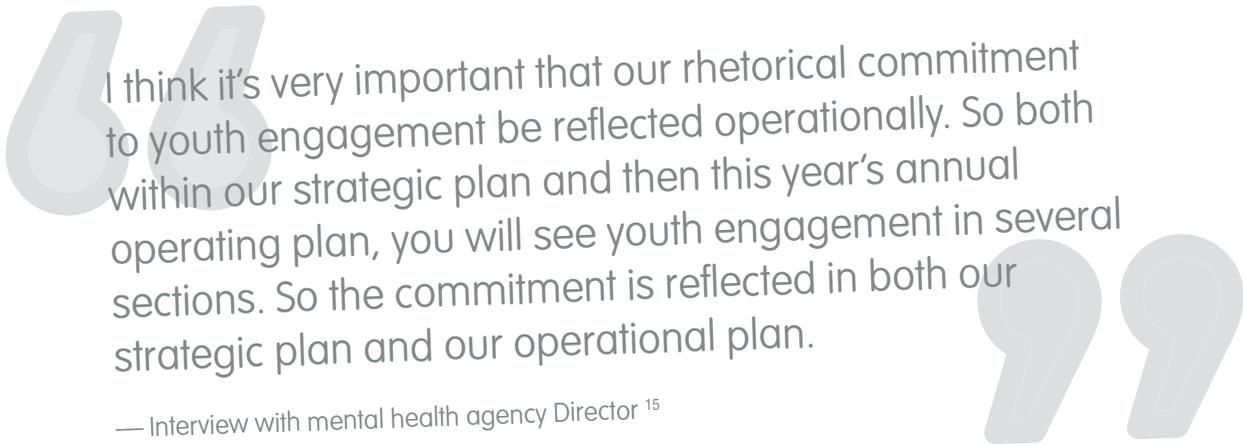
**EXPERIENCE:** Explain to youth what skills they will gain by volunteering with your agency and how these skills can be transferred into employment.

**INCENTIVES:** Offer tangible rewards for the work that youth do (appreciation events, meals/snacks, free transportation, etc.).

**VARIETY:** Offer opportunities for youth to learn about new things and access opportunities that complement their personal goals.

**ORGANIZATION:** Young people want to volunteer in an environment that's efficient (i.e. where things get done), yet relaxing (i.e., where they can be themselves).

**LAUGHS:** Youth are looking for volunteer experiences that are enjoyable, satisfying and fun.



I think it's very important that our rhetorical commitment to youth engagement be reflected operationally. So both within our strategic plan and then this year's annual operating plan, you will see youth engagement in several sections. So the commitment is reflected in both our strategic plan and our operational plan.

— Interview with mental health agency Director <sup>15</sup>

### Pro-action café

**Purpose:** to collaborate with colleagues and discover the next steps for the agency's youth engagement initiatives.

**Participants will help each project discuss:**

1. What is the quest behind question/project?
2. What is missing?
3. What am I learning about myself? What am I learning about my project?
4. What next steps will I take?
5. What help do I still need?

## FINDINGS FROM THE NEW MENTALITY'S PROJECT EVALUATION<sup>15</sup>

The keys to the successes of local projects included:

- Partnerships that demonstrated strong equality between youth and adults along with active adult support
- Piggybacking on existing complementary structures
- Having two leaders in each project site, tangible project outcomes, and new opportunities for youth
- Youth reported benefits such as respect, value, leadership, confidence, and personal benefits (e.g., mental health)
- Youth reported feeling they were making a difference in the reduction of stigma and that they were having an impact on the mental health system in the future

The key is to keep momentum and sustain outcomes. For that to happen, the program and participants need:

- Consensual understanding of the youth engagement model
- Full support from organizations and easily accessible adult allies
- Sustained funding

## TIPS FROM THE INNOVATION CENTRE (ADAPTED)<sup>21</sup>

**Take the time to really LISTEN to youth** - Listen to what youth are saying and demonstrate empathy by taking time to understand their thoughts and where they are coming from.

**Welcome the ideas of young people and validate their opinions** - inviting youth to speak on an issue or plan an event means nothing if you don't engage in conversation with them, and inform them on how their contributions will be used.

**Allow youth to make mistakes** - when working with youth adults often feel that it's their job to help youth to succeed and prevent them from failing. Successful youth engagement is not about outcomes, but rather the process of being meaningfully involved.

**Allow yourself to make mistakes** - recognize that it's going to take time to break habits. The key is to be honest with yourself and learn from your mistakes. This also allows youth to see positive role modeling of how to take personal responsibility and move on in a positive way after mistakes are made.

**Take time to understand the balance that you need to exercise as the adult ally in a youth-adult partnership** - it is important that you give up some control and allow room for youth to make decisions. Be sure to offer youth support and training as they enter into their new roles.

**Hold realistic expectations of young people** - keep in mind that in most cases, youth aren't paid staff and so a project that involves youth may take longer to complete - not due to lack of motivation, but time restrictions.

**Never underestimate the potential of youth** - Youth aren't an age, they are people, experts of their own experiences, capable of making valuable contributions.

**Be real with young people** - the only person that you should want to be is yourself. Young people don't want or expect you to be youthful around them - they want you to be you.

**Practice what you preach** - if you want young people to be open and honest with you then show them the same courtesy.

**Above all** - always remember: treat youth with respect!

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# NOTES & IDEAS



## **ABOUT THE CENTRE**

Bringing people and knowledge together to strengthen care.

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers.

We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practices. Together with our partners, we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth, and their families and caregivers.



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**for Child and Youth  
Mental Health**