

Avoiding Tokenism When Engaging Young People

Youth and young adult engagement benefits youth, adults, programs, and communities. Any program working with youth — whether local or national, clinics or schools, advocacy or direct service — has a responsibility to engage young people in respectful and mutually beneficial ways, providing opportunities for young voices to have a profound impact.

Unfortunately, it is easy to unintentionally tokenize young people. Efforts to avoid tokenism will yield greater engagement and ultimately benefit your program.

What Is Tokenism?

Tokenism is participation “for show” where young people have little or no influence¹. Even among well-intentioned agencies, tokenism is common when engaging underrepresented groups—including youth. It can be difficult to avoid when adult-led organizations elicit input from youth without empowering them as decision-makers. When youth are given opportunities to engage only in marginal roles, the chance of tokenism multiplies.

Tips to Avoid Tokenism

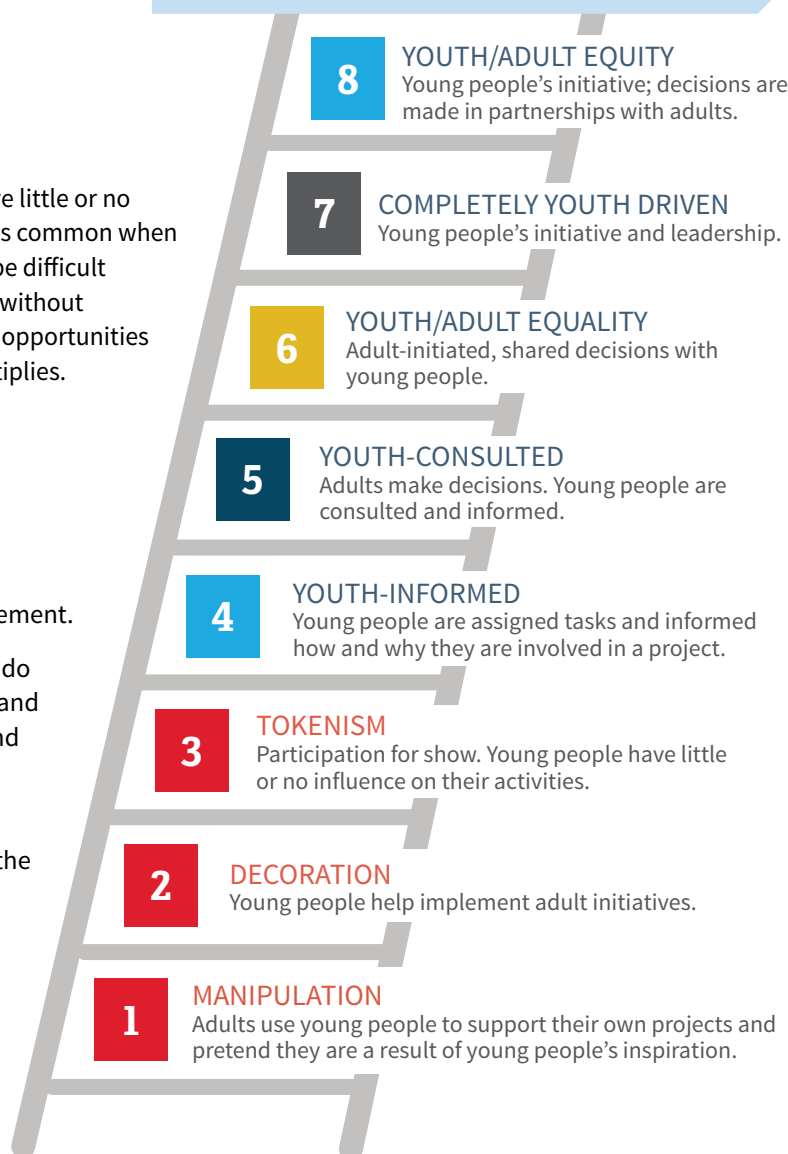
Empower Young People as Decision Makers

- Allow youth and young adults to define their own engagement.
- Expand roles beyond representatives. Young people can do more than “have a seat at the table.” Further their voice and impact by engaging youth in planning, implementing, and evaluating your organization’s work.
- Avoid extremely narrow roles, such as presenting at a conference without having meaningfully contributed to the presentation or program being shared.
- Trust youth to rise to high expectations rather than underestimating their potential.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Empower young people by considering the language you use to describe them. Unsure of how to refer to youth? Ask!

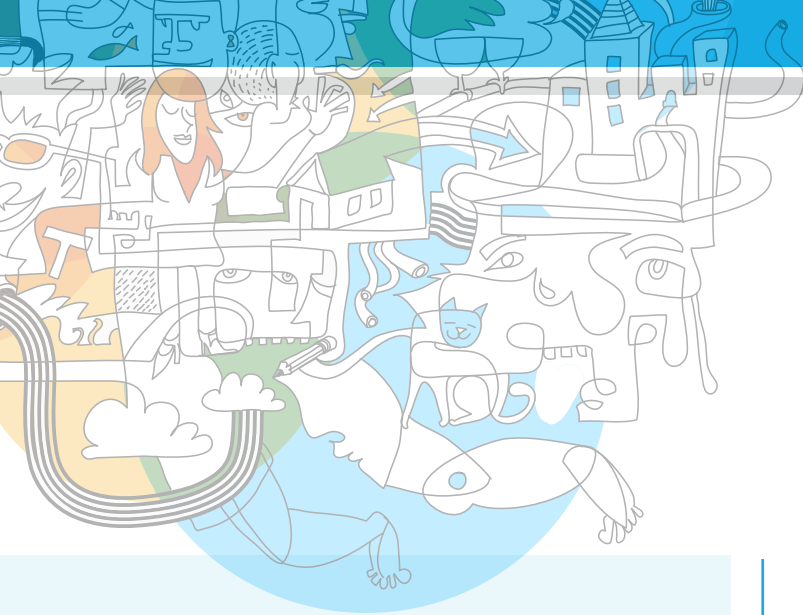
“To avoid tokenism you have to make sure that everyone is equal and that you don’t limit the youth. You can try to make sure if [they] want to do a project, they are allowed or encouraged to do so.”

—Youth Advisory Board Member

HART'S LADDER: LEVELS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



¹ Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf



“Words matter. We want to be taken seriously, as equals, rather than a step below. Using words like ‘kids’ or ‘teens’ is disrespectful.”

—Youth Advisory Board Member

We would like to thank the YESS youth advisory board members—especially Amritha Anup—who contributed to the development of these tips.

Substance use prevention and early intervention strategies for adolescents have historically been developed, implemented, and informed by adult perspectives. In an effort to bring youth and young adult voices together to transform how we think about these services and supports, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is partnering with the Center for Social Innovation (C4) to explore current status of and potential opportunities for youth engagement. Youth Engagement Strategies and Support (YESS) leverages the learning of pioneers in youth engagement and explores how these lessons can be applied to adolescent substance use prevention and early intervention.

Be Transparent

- Plan explicitly how youth will engage and participate.
- Be clear about what is and is not possible. Understanding how much they can shape the project allows youth to meaningfully contribute within any confines, rather than just being heard and dismissed.
- Collaborate with youth, rather than making rules to follow, to progress together toward shared goals.

Carefully Consider the Role of Storytelling

- Asking young people to share their story can be a powerful way to communicate a message. However, it can also have unintended, negative consequences, such as causing mental or emotional strain or making a young person feel responsible for an outcome that is outside their control.

Carefully consider the purpose of sharing stories, including the young person’s readiness to share and the potential outcomes of sharing. There are many other ways young people can contribute.

Provide needed support when young people do share their stories as part of their involvement.

Encourage Diversity

- Pursue a balanced mix of participants instead of relying on “first come, first served” and “most qualified” (e.g., grades or prior leadership experience). Youth are not monolithic. The perspective of one young person will not reflect those of all youth.
- Create a safe space for youth to discuss their ideas, opinions, and experiences while providing avenues for them to advocate for themselves.
- Encourage honest contributions and opinions without expecting youth to conform to preconceived stereotypes or to be experts on youth behavior.
- Evaluate diversity and inclusion practices at every stage. Keep representation in mind during times of turnover.