

Youth Engagement 101



WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Youth engagement is all about empowering youth and making them valued partners in addressing and making decisions about things that affect them. It involves adults working with youth to create opportunities for young people to improve the community, organization, or system in which they are involved.

In The New Mentality, youth engagement is also about valuing youth with lived experience as experts in their own mental health journey and as people who have important wisdom to contribute.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS IN CREATING THIS?

Meaningful Engagement Meaningful engagement is when an individual is involved in activities or experiences that they feel passionate about, have purpose and help them gain life and professional skills. When you are meaningfully engaged, you tend to show commitment to the cause, see your input being used in important decision making and experience personal growth. *You should feel as though the work that you do is important, valued and leads to personal growth.*

Organizational Commitment Because it is a shift in how organizations usually run their day-to-day business, youth engagement requires the organization to buy-in and show that they value the expertise that youth bring. *You should feel that the organization supports what you are doing and provides you with the tools and resources to do this work.*

Valuing Youth Adults and professionals should value youth as assets to their work and as the leaders of tomorrow. Adults and professionals need to adopt a new lens through which they value “expertise of lived experience” and wisdom that develops from those experiences. *You should feel like an asset to the organization and that your experience is a type of expertise—and should be valued as such.*

Youth-Adult Partnerships Adults should view youth as equal partners, and vice versa. All members of a youth-adult partnership should be participating in decision making, have equal control over the direction of the project and share accountability for emerging successes and lessons learned. Each individual will have moments where they step into the role of teacher or student. We learn from all people involved in this partnership—adults will learn from youth and youth will learn from adult allies. *You should feel that your adult allies are open and willing to learn from you, just as you are open and willing to learn from them. You should feel a shared sense of ownership over the work that you do—it is not just yours and not just theirs.*

Realistic Expectations You may come to this work with a sense of infinite possibility—and that is a good thing! Be gentle with yourself as you work collaboratively, as working in this way takes practice and reflection. Recognize that the adult allies are there to provide you with space to exercise your leadership potential while still providing appropriate supports, resources, feedback and space for growth. *You should feel that your adult ally is there to support, teach you and give you feedback you if, when and where you need it.*

Negative Youth Engagement

Tokenism takes place when young people are said to be given a voice but in fact have little to no influence over the situation or decision at hand. Rather than recognizing youth as assets, this approach uses youth as props. Even though youth are present, responsibilities and decisions continue to rest in the hands of adults.

Young people are **decorations** when youth are being used to amplify a cause but are falsely labeled as being leaders.

Manipulation occurs when young people are used to support a cause and are advertised as its leaders when in fact they were only brought in for the endorsing of it.



**Ready... Set...
Engage!**

Building Effective Youth/Adult Partnerships
for a Stronger Child and Youth Mental Health System

Check our **Ready, Set, Engage!** resource for more information on these youth engagement practices.

If you feel there is negative youth engagement happening in your group, we encourage you to talk with your adult ally or a staff member in your host agency.

If you are not comfortable talking to your adult ally, you can contact The New Mentality's Staff Team.

Visit **thenewmentality.ca**
for up-to-date staff
contact information.