

Effective Youth Engagement in Mental Health Guidance Document

introduction

Young people are often left out of decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. The mental health space is no exception. In order to effectively address mental health issues for young people, it is vital that youth voices are brought to the table in meaningful, constructive, and sustainable ways. While engaging youth stakeholders offers a unique set of challenges, there are some guiding principles that have been proven successful in pursuing youth engagement work.

Jack.org is a national charity empowering young leaders to take action for mental health. Through its three core programs, the organization takes a comprehensive and innovative approach to youth engagement. After more than four years of intensive program design, implementation, and evaluation with thousands of young people across Canada, Jack.org has developed a strong, generalizable approach to youth engagement that other organizations or movements - both within and external to the mental health space - can learn from and integrate into their efforts. This document offers a brief overview of these learnings in the hope that more organizations can incorporate successful youth engagement practices into their ongoing work.

what is youth engagement?

Youth engagement is often seen as a singular activity; as an action you can take to gather youth opinions, evaluate your work, or gauge youth reception. While these activities are all often part of youth engagement, they certainly do not make up the full picture. Meaningful youth engagement is actually a long-term, resource-intensive process. It is a commitment to equal collaboration and to providing sustained opportunities for youth development and growth. Any adult stakeholders who are keen to pursue youth engagement must learn to fundamentally shift their mindset; to commit to youth engagement as a process that is in itself often more meaningful than the end result. This process will not be for everyone. It requires time, resources, strong relationship building, and a reflexive mindset eager to balance multiple forms of knowledge. When done properly, however, youth engagement has tremendous benefits. Not only will the young people you work with gain knowledge, skills, and inclusion into spaces where they are normally left out, but your work will become considerably more sustainable, relatable, and effective.

While there is generally a dearth of research in the field of youth engagement, there are thematic principles that many have come to accept as essential. To be effective, the motivation for this work should be to empower young people, to build their capacity, and to learn from their life experiences and unique perspectives. If you are only willing to give young people a token role, this will not be a worthwhile activity for either your organization or the young people involved. Meaningful engagement activities should have a clear goal in mind, and should also

provide opportunities for young people to develop and build important skills as you work toward this goal together.

With these principles in mind, organizations should ask themselves two key questions before pursuing youth engagement. If either are answered negatively, you may not be ready to proceed at this time.

- 1) Does your organization have a clear vision for why you want to engage youth and the role you want young leaders to play in collaboration with you?
- 2) Does your organization have the willingness, time and/or capacity to provide young people with the environment needed for them to develop and succeed?

the Jack.org approach

Once you have decided that you have the time, resources, and capacity for meaningful youth engagement, the actual process can seem daunting. In fact, this process will look very different depending on the goals, scope, and timeline of your project. Some youth engagement projects may be a singular consultation on a strategic plan, for example, while others may be a multi-year health promotion effort. In either case, this document outlines the five foundational steps that will make up any successful youth engagement process. Jack.org has carefully honed this approach across its three core programs. These steps are general, but serve to provide a preliminary framework for organizations to work from.

i) assessment and reflection

The first step to effective youth engagement is to strategically plan for the work ahead. Since youth engagement involves a balance between different forms of expertise, it's important to define what adult stakeholders will bring to the table, what youth expertise will add to the discussion, and what skills or knowledge young people may need to develop in order to effectively lend their voices to this process. Remember, young people generally have less training and education than their adult counterparts. In order for them to effectively participate in this work as equals, developing their capacity as part of this process will be very important.

In the early stages of this work, it's important that you reflect on the following questions:

- 1. What is the primary goal of this youth engagement work?**
 - *It's important that the scope, broad goals, and intended outputs of this work are identified, outlined and agreed upon by everyone involved from the beginning. This will ensure all parties can provide meaningful input with a clear purpose.*
- 2. Who should be engaged as part of the young team?**
 - *Work to ensure the young people engaged are representative of the population you wish to serve. It's important to avoid consistently selecting the loudest, most popular voices in the youth community. Be thoughtful around who is engaged, who may benefit from engagement, and who may be wrongfully left out.*

3. What expertise, access, or qualities are youth stakeholders bringing to the table?

- *How will engaging young people help to achieve the goal(s) of this project? (e.g. do they know the culture or practices of their peers? Do they have experiences that will help shape programs or assist in evaluating service delivery or reception?)*

4. What expertise, access, or qualities are adult stakeholders bringing to the table?

- *Are there foundational elements of expertise that need to be incorporated (e.g. medical knowledge, signs of distress, safety guidelines)? Do you require educators? Medical expertise? Policy-makers?*
- *What doors might you need opened? What questions may you need answers to?*

5. What resources or training will youth need to support them in this engagement process?

- *Is there information that they require? (e.g. policy frameworks, mental health 101)*
- *Are there skills that need to be strengthened? (e.g. effective written communication, public speaking skills)*
- *Is there training they require to ensure safety with respect to mental health content? (e.g. avoiding triggering language, ensuring personal readiness, establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries)*

6. What community resources already exist that are working to address this issue?

- *Avoid reinventing the wheel and/or duplicating efforts. Are there organizations you can or should be partnering with to do this work?*

Answers to these questions will guide the work outlined in the steps below. They will help you plan which stakeholders to reach out to, the duration of this work, and the outcomes you will work toward together.

ii) building foundational knowledge

The next phase is to transfer knowledge between youth and adult stakeholders. Part of this step will be to build the knowledge of the young people involved in this process. The goal of this phase is not necessarily to have youth leaders become experts on a given topic. It is instead to fill in any knowledge gaps they may have so they can meaningfully develop their own ideas and participate in the work that you intend to do together. For example, if the young people you intend to engage with will need to consult on mental health services, they likely will need to be educated on what services are available and the intricacies of your mental health system. Or if your group intends to design a health promotion campaign, your young team members will likely require foundational knowledge of the health issue you intend to address.

It is also during this stage that young people should be regularly asked for their opinions and ideas. Whatever expertise they offer to this process (e.g. their experiences, community knowledge) should be sought during this stage, and adult stakeholders should work to

meaningfully integrate this youth knowledge into work moving forward. To continue the above example of a health promotion campaign, youth team members will be able to provide valuable knowledge of their peers (e.g. any health misconceptions they hold, their baseline knowledge on the health topic). This expertise will be beneficial in guiding the messages of your health promotion campaign and the content you'll need to incorporate. Importantly, you will not yet be doing any of the work of designing, consulting, or planning activities in this phase - and that's intentional. Instead you will be focussing on adequately preparing youth stakeholders for the work to be done, transferring valuable knowledge between all parties, and building a relationship of trust along the way.

iii) developing necessary skills

Once all parties have the knowledge required to accomplish your goals, you can move to identifying and developing the skills that young stakeholders require in order to succeed. The specific skill set needed will vary considerably based on your group's intentions, but generally the goal of this phase is to provide the resources necessary for youth stakeholders to develop these skills. To repeat the above example, if the young people you intend to engage will be giving a presentation to the Ministry of Health as part of their mental health consultation work, they likely will need training on effective public speaking. They may also require training in graphic design in order to create an engaging set of slides, but only if that's an activity the youth team will be doing. This is where you must work to strengthen the skills of the youth team members so that they can elevate their voices to the level required for meaningful engagement, and so they can be effectively heard.

One common misconception in youth engagement work is that the baseline skillset of young people is a key element of their youth identity. At Jack.org, we disagree. If young stakeholders are set up to deliver a poor presentation solely because they have not had the opportunity to receive effective training or they have been given a task that is inappropriate for them, that is a failure of the youth engagement program. Their expertise lies in their community-specific knowledge and their experiences as youth. It is up to adult participants to support young people to bring this expertise forward. Further, since youth engagement is a partnership that respects the expertise of all parties, it will not make sense or be appropriate to have young people do everything. For example, while it may be important for young team members to deliver a presentation, they do not necessarily have to be the ones who conduct the research or create the PowerPoint slides. Finding an appropriate balance where all parties can use their knowledge and skills is essential.

iv) providing a platform for action

Once you have built the knowledge and skills of involved youth leaders and prepared all parties for engagement, the next step is to provide young team members with a platform to actually act upon. The nature of this platform will take different forms depending on the specific initiative you are running, but the goal in this stage is to provide youth leaders with an arena where they can use their learnings to tackle an important issue, plan a meaningful initiative, or

otherwise have an impact. The presentation example given above is a good example of a platform. If young people merely prepare and synthesize their thoughts on an issue, but are not given an opportunity to effectively share these thoughts, this youth engagement activity will not drive meaningful results. Importantly, this platform can be as large as an audience with the Ministry of Health, or as small as a conversation with youth peers aimed at tackling stigma in their school or community. What matters is that they are given an opportunity to take part in their work and play a key role in its impact. Young stakeholders must be given a platform for engagement, and in this step you provide them with meaningful space to be heard.

v) closing the loop

In order to keep young leaders empowered and engaged, it is important that they see how the work they are doing is being heard, utilised, and having an impact. It is vital that you report back to young team members (e.g. through progress reports, evaluation reports), that they are given opportunities to reflect on their work, and that their achievements are celebrated. This ensures they know that their work was put to good use and allows you to gain their feedback to inform future youth engagement endeavours you take on. If you fail to report back to your youth team, they may feel as though their input was not used or valuable, or that nothing came from their hard work. While this is the final step, your youth engagement process will certainly not be over at this time. It is extremely beneficial to view these steps as a cycle and to restart this process with any new reflections you gain. If your ongoing work will continue to be aligned with youth-focussed issues, meaningful youth engagement will continue to be necessary to achieving your goals.

conclusions

With these five steps, any organization should be able to develop a successful youth engagement program. This process is best thought of as a true collaboration. Each stakeholder involved - various experts, your organization, and of course the young people themselves - provides a unique set of knowledge and skills that must be successfully developed, supported, and integrated for the best outcomes to be achieved. For a summary of how the steps above manifest in Jack.org's programming, please see the appendix provided.

APPENDIX: This Approach in Jack.org's Programs

Step 1: Assessment and Reflection

Jack.org was founded after the realization that no organization existed to help train and develop youth advocates to address issues surrounding mental health and lend their voices to decisions affecting their care and wellbeing. The programs at Jack.org (Jack Talks, Jack Chapters, and Jack Summit) were developed to meet this growing need.

Step 2: Building Foundational Knowledge

Jack.org's goal is to build youth leadership and advocacy skills to address issues around mental health in community-specific ways. Our young leaders must have a foundational knowledge of mental health, what factors contribute to distress, what barriers prevent their peers from seeking help, and what can be done to eliminate those barriers. In all our programs, we begin with a comprehensive training program that builds this knowledge before participants proceed. We then ask students to reflect on how these concepts play out in their diverse communities. We gather their knowledge of their experiences, peer beliefs, and cultural realities, and this gets used in the development of the activities they plan.

Step 3: Developing Necessary Skills

In the Jack Talks program, young leaders go into schools and give mental health education presentations. All Jack Talks speakers go through an extensive public speaking training course that teaches the skills required for effective public speaking, audience engagement, and safe, evidence-based storytelling. The Jack Chapters program also involves an extensive training process. Then, groups of young people work in their communities to identify and tackle barriers to positive mental health. Chapter leaders learn the skills required to reflect on their community-specific needs, develop concrete goals and action plans, and lead their teams. Jack Summits (national and regional) are dedicated entirely to leadership development. Summit leadership teams work to identify the skills they most wish to develop, and plan Jack Summits to fill these gaps for their fellow student leaders.

Step 4: Providing a Platform for Action

During a Jack Talk, speakers are provided with the platform of their presentation. Students see their impact each time they speak, and are given the tools to contextualize presentations to the audiences they interact with. Jack Chapter students are given the platform of the registered chapter through which they hold their events. In our chapters, students lead events year-round in their schools and consistently work toward their goals. These platforms provide youth leaders with a chance to use their knowledge and advocacy skills, and directly see that their work is having an impact. We also work to amplify youth voices and recognize their efforts by having young leaders act as Jack.org spokespeople in most of the media opportunities we are presented with.

Step 5: Closing the Loop

At Jack.org, young leaders contribute to and receive annual reports that describe the positive impact their involvement is having, provide updates on program redesign as a result of their feedback, and help keep them motivated to continue with their advocacy efforts. These reports are a new development at Jack.org as a result of youth feedback. In our early years, we were not as effective at closing this loop, and it affected long-term youth engagement. Adding these reports has had hugely positive effects, and this has guided the addition of this fifth step.