YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: EMPOWERING YOUTH VOICES TO IMPROVE SERVICES, PROGRAMS, AND POLICY

This document summarizes the report called Working with Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts to Promote Youth Engagement, produced by the CYCC Network.

It is important to understand youth engagement as central to any best practice intervention. Valuing youth engagement puts the focus on the positive contribution that youth make to programs and their effectiveness; this moves programs from being done "for" youth to "with" youth. There is a gap in the research in how to identify the source and implications of youth vulnerability for their engagement (Paterson & Panessa, 2008a; Poland, Tupker, & Breland, 2002). The purpose of this report is to explore how different youth engagement strategies are being used to help children and youth in the most challenging of contexts nurture resilience, prevent mental health problems and build a special place for themselves in the collective life of their communities.

CORE CONCEPTS

Noun: concept ('kän-ˌsept) an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances

The CYCC Network

The CYCC Network is a national body with an international reach. We bring together community groups, front line practitioners, government officials, and researchers, all working with children and youth in challenging contexts (CYCC) throughout diverse Canadian communities.

We know how to help kids do well in their lives. Now we just need to share what we know with each other. The CYCC Network represents a combination of local commitment, combined with a national and international platform.

Knowledge Mobilization

Put simply, "knowledge mobilization" is the process of taking really good ideas and turning them into action. And then taking practices and linking them with theory. It means that good research doesn't have to just end up on a library shelf. It also means that communities across the country are sharing their ideas of what works with at-risk kids.

To improve mental health and well-being for vulnerable and at-risk children and youth in Canada and around the world.

Resilience

The capacity of young people to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources they need for well-being. Resilience is also their capacity as individuals, and collectively within communities, to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways.

Best Practices

Best Practices emerge when programs and other interventions use evidence-informed practice, and combine these findings with the right mix of programming elements that fit community needs and assets.

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Knowledge

To truly provide the best service and interventions for at-risk young people, diverse types of knowledge need to be shared and integrated. Academic research (evidence-informed practice) needs to be linked to what service providers are learning (practice-based evidence) and to local community knowledge.

EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE

THIS REPORT

PRACTICE BASED EVIDENCE

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

* arrows show the flow of knowledge

CORE CONCEPTS CONT.

Vulnerable children and youth are not all the same; they differ in terms of their experiences, contexts, and cultures. They face common threats to their mental health that come from constraints and challenges built into their community and societal structures. No young person or population of young people is inherently more vulnerable than another. It is the contexts in which they reside that makes them more vulnerable.

These factors often intersect, such that a child or youth is likely to experience several stressors at once.

Some of the common factors that shape these contexts are:

Historical oppression

Populations who have been historically exposed to continuous levels of violence and mass trauma such as colonialism, war, genocide, and slavery, typically display higher rates of mental health illness such as suicide ideation, depression, anxiety , and alcohol and substance abuse. Historical oppression can create cycles of violence and trauma within individuals, relationships and communities that can be passed on from one generation to the next.

Marginalization

Marginalization is the process by which individuals or groups live at the periphery of society because of their exclusion from the economic, social, political, and/or cultural arenas of everyday life. This process is linked to social status and can have a significant impact on how resources are accessed and mobilized, and how decisions are negotiated and made.

Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is exclusion from economic, social, political and/or cultural arenas or everyday life because of indicators such as gender, ethnicity, race, and class. It can be experienced at a personal, community or institutional level.

As with historical oppression, marginalization and poverty, experiencing social exclusion can lead to low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness and depression, and increased risk-taking behaviours, as well as other adverse mental health outcomes.

Poverty

Poverty may be one of a range of factors that increase the vulnerability of children and youth.

Populations of Children and Youth that are included in the definition of children and youth in challenging context:

› Children and youth affected by war
  » Child soldiers
  » Children and youth in military families
  » Refugee children and youth
› Children and youth affected by natural disasters
› Immigrant children and youth
› Children and youth subject to maltreatment
› Children and youth in alternative care
  » Children and youth in institutions
  » Youth in juvenile detention

› Aboriginal children and youth
› Homeless children and youth
› Youth gangs
› Child labourers
  » Children and youth in the workplace
  » Children and youth who have been trafficked
› Children and youth living with health-related challenges
  » Children and youth living with chronic illness
  » Children and youth living with mental illness

A Note on Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations must be taken into account when working with children and youth. These considerations include harm reduction (the benefit must outweigh the risks), informed consent, engagement of children and youth, and program design and content development competence.

ENGAGING YOUTH

Noun: engagement (in-'gāj-mənt, en-) emotional involvement or commitment.

Youth Engagement

The evidence is clear: youth have a lot to gain – and contribute - when they are meaningfully engaged in a positive activity. Youth engagement is a powerful strategy to promote youth health, self-confidence, and positive relationships, and to improve career outlook.[1,2] It's also beneficial for organizations and communities.

Youth engagement is the meaningful and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity focusing outside the self. Full engagement consists of a cognitive component, an affective component, and a behavioural component - Head, Heart, and Feet (and spirit).[3]

There is strong evidence that youth engagement supports positive mental health. An engaged youth is making healthy connections with peers and supportive adults. This is linked to less risky behaviour (such as alcohol and other drug use and risky sexual activity) and increased participation in activities that build community.[3,4] Compared to their peers, youth who are involved tend to have fewer problems and better skills.[5]

Engagement is also empowering. As the process unfolds, youth see that their voices can make a difference; they can help make their communities better places to live.[6] Feeling empowered leads to many other positive benefits for youth. [1,7]

Youth engagement also helps organizations achieve program objectives. Successful groups see the independence, agency, and knowledge of youth-at-risk, and give them plenty of opportunities to provide input. They know this results in better programming.[6,8-11] These organizations, some of which are highlighted in this report, actively seek youth as decision makers and tap into their creativity, energy and drive.[12] Safe spaces are created for youth voices to emerge.

Youth engagement is also good for communities. Engaged youth tend to be more civic minded. They volunteer, become valuable members of the workforce, and tend to be lifelong, active citizens.[13] Involving youth builds communities, which are then better able to support the

> " *Everyone has the right to talk and think about our society. Children and young people do. And they have a lot to say."*

youth and families that live in them.[14] For communities around the world, youth are truly one of their greatest assets.

The process for engaging youth is not straightforward. Participation, for example, is different from engagement. When youth participate, they may be invited to attend or to offer their views to adults who initiated their involvement. Sometimes youth participation is token: they are physically present but their voices are not actively heard and listened to. At this level, youth stand to gain very little.[11]
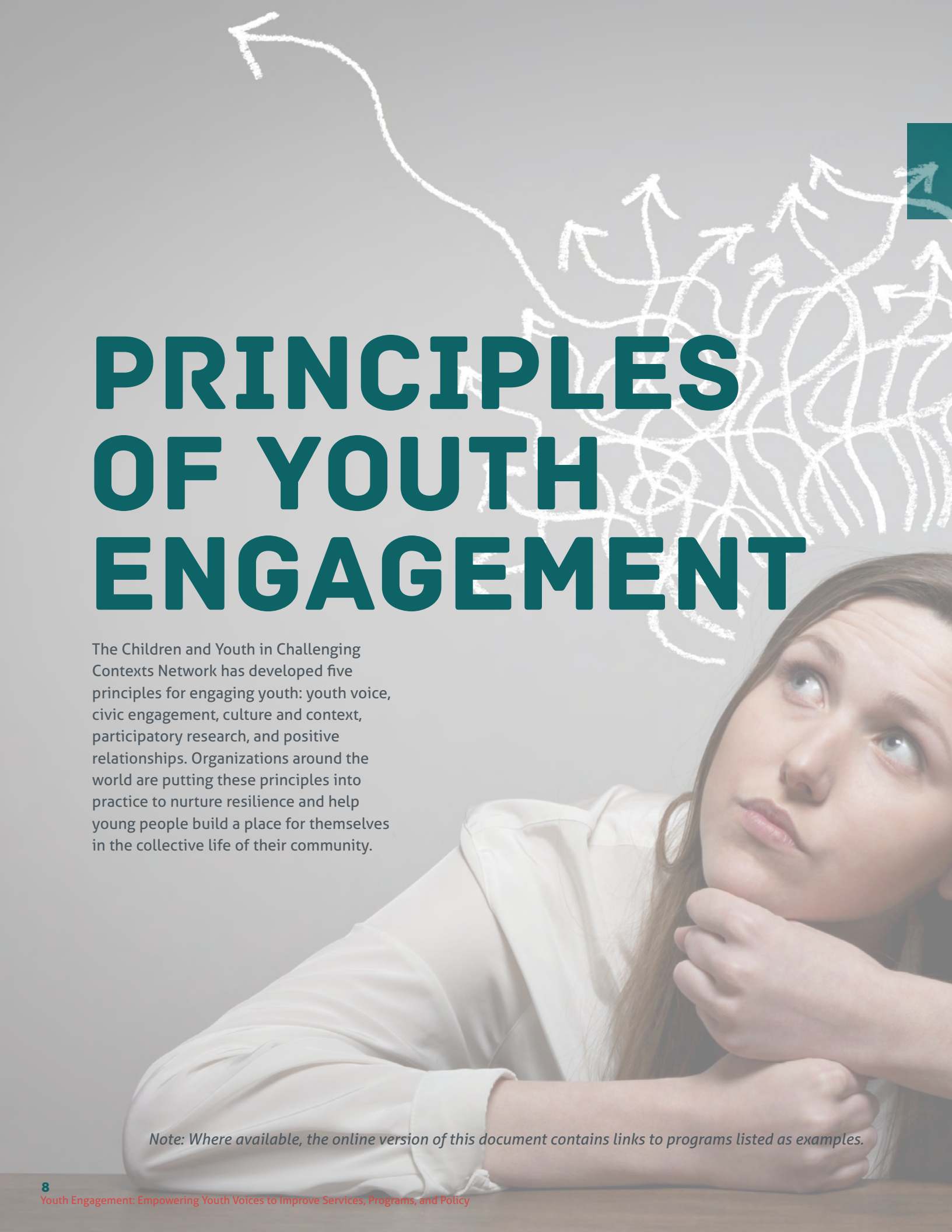
At the other end of the continuum is full youth engagement. Full youth engagement means that young people share power with adults in the design, implementation and evaluation of the programs that serve them.[11,15] Adults may initiate the involvement, but youth are encouraged to take over and to initiate their own actions. Involvement is "meaningful" or "authentic".

While these endpoints can help define the different ways youth can be involved, there is no single optimal level that has to take place across all situations.[16,17] Sometimes youth engagement is simply not practical, such as in communities or environments that are politically and economically unstable.[11]

> " *The process for engaging youth is not straightforward. Participation, for example, is different from engagement.* "

Youth engagement should be seen as a fluid process rather than a rigid practice. The Centre for Excellence in Youth Engagement (CEYE) describes it as an attitude and approach that, by its very nature, facilitates meaningful involvement and ownership on the part of the youth.[18] The process is dynamic, changing over time - just like our world and the people who live in it.

How youth engagement unfolds depends on many factors, including who is involved and what's going on in the community. The CEYE is growing a model with young people that helps map some of this out. Barriers to initiating and sustaining engagement, as well as positive and negative outcomes related to the process, need to be carefully explored and discussed with youth to make sure the process is working for them. The model can be found on the centre's website at **http://www.tgmag.ca/aorg/printmaterials_e.php#centre**.

PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts Network has developed five principles for engaging youth: youth voice, civic engagement, culture and context, participatory research, and positive relationships. Organizations around the world are putting these principles into practice to nurture resilience and help young people build a place for themselves in the collective life of their community.

Note: Where available, the online version of this document contains links to programs listed as examples.

Youth Voice

The principle of youth voice is central to youth engagement. Simply put, youth voice means that the unique ideas, opinions and concerns of young people are respected and youth feel free to express them within an organization or program. Youth voices are seen as equally important as those belonging to adults.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is another principle that, when put into practice, is a powerful way to nurture resilience. Far too often youth in challenging contexts see themselves, and are seen by others, as either the problem or the victim of their situation. When they are engaged in their community they become agents of change. They begin to see that they can positively influence a situation. They see themselves in a more positive light, and others in the community do so as well.

Culture and Context

At-risk and vulnerable youth face many common challenges related to discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other themes. But there are also many important differences between youth. A young refugee girl may experience different challenges as a female than those experienced by a First Nation girl.

Positive Relationships

Having positive, supportive relationships with peers and adults is a fundamental way for young people to develop and maintain positive mental health, nurture resiliency, and prevent harmful behaviours. This can be supported through adult-youth mentorships, partnerships, and peer mentoring.

Participatory Research

Participatory research (including participatory action research, peer research, and community-based participatory research) supports youth engagement by making youth and their communities equal partners in a collaborative research process. Young people work with researchers to identify research questions based on issues that are important to them. Youth can play an active role in carrying out all aspects of the research. The approach helps equalize adult-youth power imbalances and can contribute to well-being and healing.

YOUTH VOICE

Noun: voice ('vóis) an instrument or medium of expression

Youth Should Be Seen *and* Heard!

The principle of youth voice is central to youth engagement. Simply put, youth voice means that the unique ideas, opinions and concerns of young people are respected and youth feel free to express them within an organization or program.[7]

Youth voices are seen as equally important as those belonging to adults.[19]

> *...the views of children should be heard and given 'due weight' in matters relating to them.*

The importance of youth voice is reflected in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It states that the views of children should be heard and given "due weight" in matters relating to them.[20]
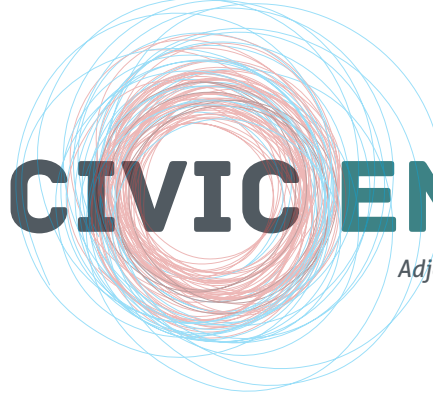
Organizations can put the principle of youth voice into practice by creating opportunities for youth to speak, be heard and be listened to. Policies that shape governance and programming can require that youth are actively involved in all stages of programming: planning, implementing, problem solving, and evaluation. Opportunities are developed for peer and adult partnerships and mentoring, and for community involvement.

> *Organizations can put the principle of youth voice into practice by creating opportunities for youth to speak, be heard and be listened to.*

Leaders of Today has adopted the principle of youth voice. Operated by Heartwood in Nova Scotia, Canada, one of its main activities is to hold an annual summit where diverse youth meet with government officials. The focus is to connect youth and communities to provincial government activities and strategies so youth voice can be amplified.

Creating a safe space is key, particularly with at-risk youth. Adults can help by building honest, trusting and respectful relationships. They can also advocate for greater space for youth voice to emerge.

Youth Engagement: Empowering Youth Voices to Improve Services, Programs, and Policy

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Adjective: civic ('si-vik) of or relating to a city or town or the people who live there

Collective Action for Community Problems

Civic engagement is another principle that, when put into practice, is a powerful way to nurture resilience.[21] Far too often youth in challenging contexts see themselves, and are seen by others, as either the problem or the victim of their situation. When they are engaged in their community they become agents of change.[22-25]

They begin to see that they can positively influence a situation. They see themselves in a more positive light, and others in the community do so as well.[26]

> *Far too often youth in challenging contexts see themselves, and are seen by others, as either the problem or the victim of their situation.*

There are five ways to promote civic engagement: community participation, social enterprise and economic participation, online engagement, political participation, and sport.

Community Participation

Community participation is when youth contribute to the wellness of their community. They do this in many different ways, such as planning community social events, promoting physical activity, helping out seniors, and participating in community design plans.

Many municipalities are engaging youth through Municipal Youth Advisory Councils (YACs). Young people advise and make suggestions to municipal council on youth-related issues.[27] They also take action to engage more youth in civic issues. The Regina Youth Advisory Council, for example, held a youth forum in 2012 to better represent youth voice in the city.[28]

Youth of Choice in South Africa, engages youth in the community through youth-identified and led campaigns such as Action 4Hunger and Dance to Inspire.

River of Unity is a youth council started by Nenan Dane Zaa Deh Zona Children and Family Services in northern British Columbia, Canada. First Nation youth sit with council members and elders to discuss important issues in the community. Youth voice is seen as important in the redesign of First Nations services.

Online Engagement

Online engagement is another type of civic engagement. Young people are among the biggest users of online technology[29] and it is a strategic

tool to initiate and sustain their involvement. Young activists around the world use it to coordinate protests, communicate between civilian networks, and appeal to the international community to do something to stop violence or injustices happening within their country.

Tread Lightly uses online engagement to empower youth to reduce their ecological footprint and to take action on climate change issues. Being an online movement provides opportunities for greater reach.

Apathy is Boring uses online resources to engage youth in the political process. Resources about democracy and Canadian politics are youth-designed and young people are encouraged to participate in civic life.

Political Participation

Apathy is Boring is also an example of political participation, another type of civic engagement that helps youth become socially aware and active in their communities.[30,31] While some argue that youth today are less involved in politics,[32-35] others say it is more a matter of *how* they are involved, not *if*.[35,36] Traditional forms of political participation are less manageable and appealing to young people.[32] Youth want to connect politically using tools, such as social networking technologies, that meet their needs.[8]

Political engagement is not always a positive space for youth to occupy. In some war-affected areas, political involvement is seen as a negative role for youth[22] and politically-involved youth may be feared. When they are seen as part of the problem, they can be further alienated within the community.[37]

Politics also casts light on unequal power relations between adults and young people.[35,38,39] To what degree do young people actually have a voice in policies that directly affect their lives? Are they fully

> *While some argue that youth today are less involved in politics, others say it is more a matter of **how** they are involved, not **if**.*

engaged or only participants? Addressing power imbalances is even more complex when working with vulnerable youth. Effective strategies have to be put in place to make sure they are able to participate, and comfortable doing so.

Social Enterprise

Social enterprise development is another type of civic engagement. Social and economic processes are brought together to support children and youth in challenging contexts. Young people are engaged through vocational skill development and creating employment opportunities. Adults help by accessing finances and building enterprise and service-type social networks.

Bringing marginalized youth into the formal economy creates positive "side effects" for youth such as improved physical and mental health.[40,41] Research with homeless youth found that the youth experienced improved self-esteem, family respect, and were more motivated.[42-44] Through

social enterprise development, young people can earn an income in ways that don't exploit them[45] and they develop positive social identities within their community.[42]

> *Bringing marginalized youth into the formal economy creates positive 'side effects' for youth...*

The YES (Youth Engagement Services) Network in Pakistan works with vulnerable young people to develop their employment skills and to become self-reliant and contributing members of society.[46] YES believes that youth involvement is sustained in the organization by providing them with tangible opportunities.

SPARK is a worldwide network that promotes small business development and entrepreneurship for young men and women in post-conflict areas such as Burundi, the Palestinian Administered Areas and the Republic of South Sudan. Young people are seen as important economic and social actors that can lead their societies into prosperity.

Sport

Sport is the last type of civic engagement. In 1978, UNESCO described sport as a "fundamental right for all" and the **UN Office on Sport for the Development of Peace (UNOSDP)** has argued that sport has the huge potential to attract, mobilize and inspire young people to lead positive lives.[47]

This view is shared by many organizations and researchers.[48-51] Sport and peace have common core values relating to fair play, cooperation, sharing, and respect.[52] Through play, children become aware of other children's needs, their own, and how to handle situations that may not go their way.[49] Sport can be a safe place for youth to come together, particularly important in post-conflict areas. It emphasizes teamwork and cooperation, which can be used to repair relationships, re-open lines of communication, and revive or instil a sense of unity. By encouraging interaction, sport can create a space where healing can occur.[53] Using it to achieve these ends requires conscious and well-planned implementation.[54,55]

Viva Rio promotes sport as a way to engage youth.

> *...sport has the huge potential to attract, mobilize and inspire young people to lead positive lives.*

In partnership with the Haitian Soccer Federation, it created the **Black Pearl Academy of Soccer** that engages youth, including street-involved, to play in a fun, safe and supportive environment. Viva Rio also runs **Swinging for Peace**, which engages youth through the traditional Portuguese dance, Capoeira.

AROUND THE WORLD

Canadian Roots
Exchange Program
Canada

Center for Excellence in
Youth Engagement
Canada

Big Brothers Big Sisters
Canada

Apathy is Boring
Canada

My Word
Rigolet, Labrador

Riverot Unity
Fort St. John, Canada

Heartwood Centre
for Community Youth
Engagement
Halifax, Canada

Passport Toward Success
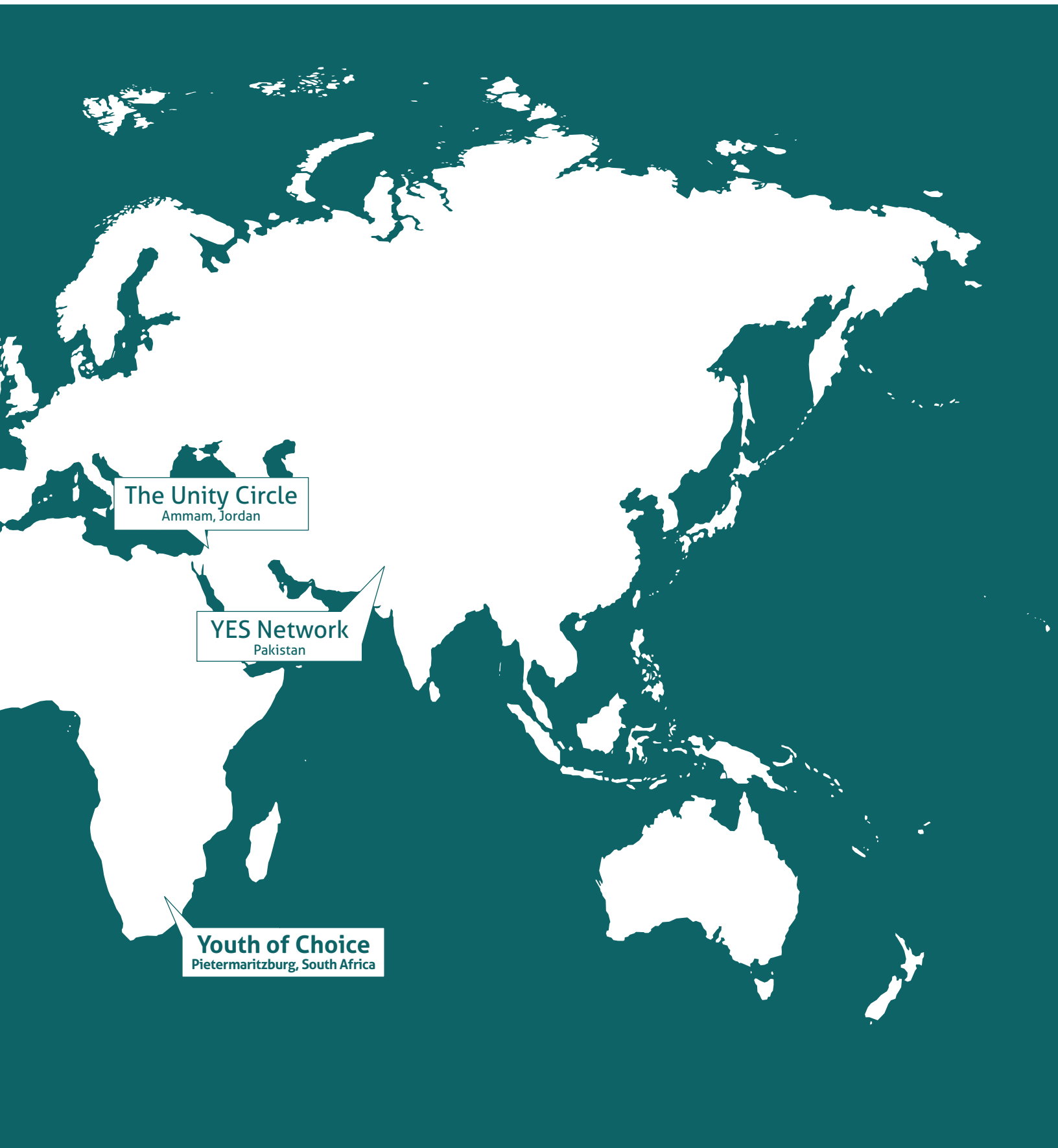Lafayette, USA

Viva Rio
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

SPARK Network
International

Tread Lightly
International

SOS Children's
Villages International
International

The Unity Circle
Ammam, Jordan

YES Network
Pakistan

Youth of Choice
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

CULTURE AND CONTEXT

Noun: context ('kän-ˌtekst) the situation in which something happens : the group of conditions that exist where and when something happens

Embracing Differences, Supporting Strengths

At-risk and vulnerable youth face many common challenges related to discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other themes.

But there are also many important differences between youth. A young refugee girl may experience different challenges as a female than those experienced by a First Nation girl.

> *Universal beliefs about what young people need often comes from ideas about what childhood should look like.*

Universal beliefs about what young people need often comes from ideas about what childhood should look like.[56] Believing that children need to play and what that play should look like, for example, can blind us to how it might look like in different cultures and contexts. In child-headed households in Rwanda, for example, a singular view of play can prevent us from seeing the struggles and needs of young people in these homes.[25] Childhood standards need to be challenged so that we can see how culture and context influences them.[25]

Using a strengths-based approach can help put this understanding into practice.[3,57-59] A strengths-based approach draws on the inherent strengths in young people that come from their capacity to overcome challenges in their past and in their everyday functioning.[60] Protective factors such as community or social supports become the focus of engagement,

rather than risk factors and deficits that need to be "fixed".[61-63]

A strengths-based approach with Aboriginal youth, for example, places community struggles in the context of a long history of colonization, assimilation and abuse.[62] Focus is placed on the resiliency of First Nations youth within this context to function and overcome daily challenges. This approach has proven to work well in preventing thoughts of suicide,[64] substance abuse,[65,66] and other harmful behaviours, especially when it is rooted in a connection to heritage and culture.[8,60]

The project My Word, out of Rigolet, Labrador, Canada, uses a strengths-based approach to preserve and promote Inuit oral storytelling and community health. Youth tell their stories about health issues and climate change using videos, pictures and music, and post them a website.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Noun: relationship (rī'leī·ʃən ʃīp) the way in which two or more people, groups, countries, etc., talk to, behave toward, and deal with each other

We're Stronger Together

Having positive, supportive relationship with peers and adults is a fundamental way for young people to develop and maintain positive mental health, nurture resiliency, and prevent harmful behaviours.[4] This can be supported through adult-youth mentorships, partnerships, and peer mentoring.[7,67,68]

Supporting healthy family and community relationships can do this as well.[69-71] Family care-givers and community members can act as protective agents, providing support and resources for healthy child development.[69,72]

In adult-youth mentorships, the adult is a positive role model for the young person, giving support, advice, and encouragement. The adult is someone to go to in difficult times.[62,74]

> *In adult-youth mentorships, the adult is a positive role model for the young person, giving support, advice, and encouragement.*

Big Brothers Big Sisters has an adult-youth mentorship program for at-risk youth. **Game On!** for boys and **Go Girls!** for girls are group programs that create safe spaces to learn about physical activity, nutrition, and positive communication skills.[75,76]

SOS Children's Villages International has villages all over the world that help at-risk families stay together. When this isn't possible, children are supported by substitute caregivers and mentors within the SOS Children's Villages.

Partnerships are different from mentorships. In a partnership, the youth and adult work together as a team. Both sides are seen as having something to contribute and there is a mutual exchange of support. Partnerships challenge adult-youth power imbalances by emphasizing equality in the relationship.[4] **The Centre for Excellence in Youth Engagement** uses partnerships to promote healthy, empowering relationships.

Peer mentoring is another way to develop healthy relationships. Camaraderie and mutual support builds a culture of youth engagement that strengthens relationships and builds supportive communities for at-risk youth.[77] Young people feel empowered when they can help their peers.[78,79]

> *Young people feel empowered when they can help their peers.*

Passport Toward Success is a peer program for young people in military families. Children meet other children who also have parents deployed in military duty. Together they learn how to reduce stress, problem-solve, and communicate how they are feeling.[80]

The **Canadian Roots Exchange Program** brings First Nations, Inuit, Métis and non-Indigenous young Canadians together to learn more about Aboriginal history and the daily realities of Aboriginal communities. Team building breaks down stereotypes and facilitates honest conversations.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Adjective: participatory (pär-'ti-sə-pə-ˌtōr-ē) providing the opportunity for people to be involved in deciding how something is done

Where Youth Lead, Youth Succeed!

Participatory research (including participatory action research, peer research, and community-based participatory research) supports youth engagement by making youth and their communities equal partners in a collaborative research process.[81,82]

Young people work with researchers to identify research questions based on issues that are important to them. Youth can play an active role in carrying out all aspects of the research.[22,81,84,85] The approach helps equalize adult-youth power imbalances[86] and can contribute to well-being and healing.[87]

Participatory research tends to be solution focused, matching local needs and assets with program delivery.

Participatory research tends to be solution focused, matching local needs and assets with program delivery. Rich findings about youth experiences can improve programming.[88,89] Social change and action is promoted.

Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development in Nova Scotia, Canada, supported youth to do community asset mapping. The project identified assets (people, material resources and networks of relationships in the community) and gaps in what is needed for young people in the community.[90]

The Unity Circle used participatory action research with Iraqi boys and girls living as refugees in Amman, Jordan. The young people identified challenges and coping strategies using their own words and images.[91]

Protections have to be in place when children and youth are involved in research. The use of an ethical framework can prevent further vulnerability and risk.[86]

Protections have to be in place when children and youth are involved in research.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Engaging youth is central to any best practice that involves young people. Best practices are developing, but even more knowledge is needed about which strategies work best for youth living in different challenging contexts, representing all genders and age categories.[92]

In many current programs, the young people who are engaged tend to come from higher income and/or privileged backgrounds. They already have many of the family and community supports needed to initiate and sustain their engagement. We know, for example, that young people with less education are less likely to volunteer in their communities.[94] Researchers and leaders of organizations need to be clear about who is being engaged, and how the voices of marginalized youth can be made stronger.

Engaging young people also has to be done with great consideration for their capacities and needs. Youth are not superhuman; adults may need to help them with activities such as raising money, or helping to create more supportive environments within the family and community.[12]

One of the greatest challenges to successful youth engagement is the frequent lack of action taken on their concerns and ideas. Program donors and policy makers often don't place value on youth voice. Adults need to advocate strongly for youth engagement as a best practice.

> " *In many current programs, the young people who are engaged tend to come from higher income and/or privileged backgrounds.*

> " *Engaging young people also has to be done with great consideration for their capacities and needs.*

> " *One of the greatest challeng-es…is the frequent lack of action taken on their concerns and ideas.*

CONCLUSION

Youth voice is far too often absent from important discussions and decision-making processes about issues that impact them.[95] This is even more concerning for children and youth in challenging contexts because they often live in circumstances that ignore or deny their experiences.

> " *Youth engagement is a core best practice for working with children and youth in challenging contexts. There is strong evidence that it can promote positive mental health and well-being.*
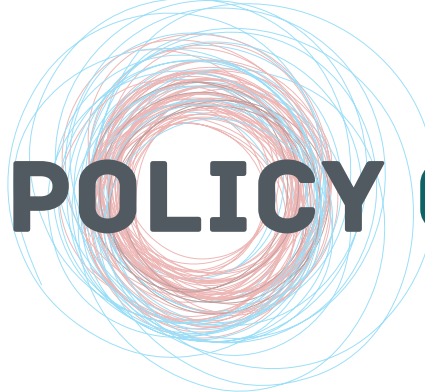
Youth engagement is a core best practice for working with children and youth in challenging contexts. There is strong evidence that it can promote positive mental health and well-being. Through engagement, youth make healthy connections with others and this is linked to a reduction in risky behaviours. Engagement increases a young person's involvement in the community and youth are empowered when they see the positive impact their contributions can make. Organizations and communities become stronger when they tap into youth energy, insight, knowledge and creativity.

Youth engagement at its best is comprehensive -- it can't be compartmentalized or wheeled out to suit political purposes. It is a dynamic process that is embedded in an organization's culture to be responsive to youths' needs and to push for a better world. It adapts to change and reflects diverse cultures and contexts. It is a highly effective strategy to promote change.

Adults may be needed to initiate the process, but youth engagement is most effective when youth lead. The deeper the engagement process, the greater the benefits.

Many successful organizations around the world already know this. They are focusing on the inherent strengths within young people and their communities, and they are building upon these rich resources.

Breaking down disciplinary barriers and sharing what works among researchers, practitioners, and communities will significantly promote expansion of this practice and the value of youth voice.

POLICY CHECKLIST

Many service providers, researchers, and communities are already actively engaging young people as a way to support their positive mental health and well-being.[96,97] This checklist can help create, review, or revise youth engagement strategies and policies.

Youth engagement policy recommendations	✓
1. Youth engagement is a best practice for supporting the positive mental health and well-being of young people. It is an effective strategy to promote resiliency.	
We understand the value of youth engagement and pursue it as a best practice.	
We are initiating youth participation as a first step towards engaging young people.	
We are moving towards full youth engagement, where appropriate.	
2. Best practices support youth being involved in organizational decision-making processes and at all levels of program development, planning, implementation and evaluation.	
Our organization's governance structure has a place for youth representation at multiple levels.	
There are planned opportunities for youth to speak during meetings.	
We have established an all-youth Youth Advisory Council that represents a cross section of the population that our organization serves. This advisory council has a strong voice in organizational decision making.	
We have safety policies to ensure vulnerable youth are not re-traumatized through their participation.	
We provide youth with necessary training and education, and/or mentoring and partnership opportunities, so that they feel comfortable participating in decision making and speaking at meetings. The training can include role-playing and learning from peers who have filled similar roles.	
We provide staff and volunteers with education and training on youth engagement processes and why the organization values youth voice.	
We continually monitor and assess the level of youth participation in decision making to make sure we are moving towards fuller youth engagement.	

Youth engagement policy recommendations   ✓

3. **The process for engaging youth needs to be relevant to the needs of children and youth from diverse contexts and cultures, across gender and age groups.**

We recognize that children and youth from challenging contexts have diverse and changing needs. We engage youth from different cultures and contexts so that our engagement process reflects their needs.	
We have and follow a protocol for checking that children and youth from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can understand resources (spoken and written).	
We prioritize the availability of translators when needed and ensure that they are people who can be trusted by young people.	
We have and follow a protocol that ensures that, where culturally appropriate, a young person's family is also engaged.	

4. **Involving youth in research, program monitoring and evaluation will result in better services for youth.**

Youth are co-researchers and co-evaluators in a participatory research and evaluation process. They have opportunities to be involved in all stages of the research, monitoring and evaluation process.	
We follow an ethical framework when doing research involving children and youth to prevent further vulnerability and risk.	
We monitoring the level of youth involvement in monitoring and evaluation practices to ensure we are moving towards fuller youth engagement where appropriate.	

5. **Children and youth in challenging contexts are better served when they are given opportunities to influence their care plans.**

There is a protocol developed and followed that provides children and youth with meaningful opportunities to give input into their care plans.	

6. **Involvement in community, as well as participating in mentoring and partnerships, supports youth well-being.**

We provide youth with empowering opportunities to contribute to their community, such as volunteer activities and political participation.	
We have created mentoring and partnership opportunities.	

Youth engagement policy recommendations ✓

7. Youth engagement is a process. The needs of youth and the community constantly change. The engagement processes need to be flexible and able to adapt to changes. Other organizations can benefit from our experiences.

We have a set schedule for review and adjustment of current engagement practices.	
Young people are involved in the review and adjustment of current engagement practices.	
We are documenting as best we can our process so that we can share what we are learning.	
We are connected to other organizations that use youth engagement so that we can share and learn from each other.	

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