

League of Women Voters of Florida: Youth Outreach Guide

WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Youth engagement is the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself. The kind of activity in which the youth engages can be almost anything—sports, the arts, music, volunteer work, politics, social activism—and it can occur in almost any kind of setting.

HOW DO ENGAGED YOUTH ACT?

How do we know from a youth's behavior that he or she is engaged in an activity or with a particular organization? There are a number of things that can indicate engagement.

An engaged youth:

- Performs the activity or spends time with the organization frequently
- Talks to others about the activity/organization
- Initiates the activity him/herself (rather than at the suggestion or urging of others)
- Participates actively and regularly, with a specific purpose in mind
- Brings other people to the activity/organization and seeks out others with similar interests
- Leads and organizes others who are involved in the activity/organization
- Advocates energetically on behalf of the activity/organization
- Seeks adult support and structure when needed, acts independently when appropriate

Not all youth are engaged to the same extent or in the same way. A youth may show interest in an activity/organization by simply attending meetings or activities, and paying close attention to what is happening (without necessarily saying anything or participating actively). A youth may show leadership by bringing others to the activity/organization and helping to organize the activities of others, or by advocating on behalf of the activity/organization.

More research is needed to understand the impacts of various activities and what makes engagement meaningful for different youth in different activities. Also, we need to better understand how youth get involved in the first place; what helps keep them involved; and in which situations, in what activities, and for which youth does engagement lead to positive benefits. *We do know that it is important for youth to connect to the activity and find it meaningful.*

HOW DO ENGAGED YOUTH THINK?

How do we know from the way a youth thinks that he or she is engaged in an activity or with an organization?

An engaged youth:

- Thinks the activity/organization is an important one
- Is well-informed about the activity/organization
- Sees an important sense of purpose in the activity/organization

HOW DO ENGAGED YOUTH FEEL?

How do we know from the kinds of feelings that a youth has that he or she is engaged?

An engaged youth:

- Cares about the activity/organization with which he or she is involved
- Derives a sense of belonging from the activity/organization and feels connected to the people in the activity/organization
- Finds the activity or participation in the activity fun or enjoyable
- Feels that the activity is meaningful - that it's an important and worthwhile thing to be doing
- Feels that the activity is an important part of his or her identity
- Derives a sense of pride, accomplishment or satisfaction from achievements in the activity/organization
- Gains a feeling of competence and sense of control over events related to the activity or organization
- Feels disappointment, sadness or frustration when participation in the activity is blocked or things are not going well

An engaged youth needs adults:

- Adult support is a key ingredient of effective youth engagement
- Adults who support youth need support from their organizations

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE

Below are a few suggestions your organization can implement to engage youth.

- Involve youth in decisions that affect their lives. Youth engagement can begin in the family, and expand to school, community organizations, and governments. Talk to young people informally and formally about issues that are important to them. Involve them in decisions and in developing and running youth programs. Hold youth forums, include young people on boards or committees that make decisions about how their schools, social services and municipalities are run, or

strike youth advisory committees that will provide input on important decisions.

- Creating junior-level leadership positions for young people is a great way to engage young leaders and give them not just a place at the table, but a voice at the table too.
- Create opportunities for young people to work in partnership with adults on important social problems and issues such as racism, poverty, and the environment.
- Give young people a responsibility within the organization. Whether this means asking them to print something for the next meeting, or help create the agenda. Building a sense of commitment helps young people feel both engaged and meaningful to an organization.
- Encourage youth to help one another with their problems (for example, through peer-helping programs).
- Promote youth leadership by encouraging young people to plan and facilitate meetings and activities.
- Help bring young people together to work creatively in action-based events such as workshops, conferences or exploring new activities.
- Assist young people in developing skills that will allow them to advocate better on their own behalf and create programs and activities that will engage other youth. For example, provide young people with opportunities to learn research skills, or community development skills such as community mapping.
- Actively listen to, and respect the ideas of, young people. Assist them to connect with organizations and institutions that can support them in executing those ideas, take action on issues that concern them, or explore new skills and activities (like outdoor adventuring, a new sport, environmental action, volunteering at a food bank).
- Host events and workshops that are appealing to young people and fits their schedules. Most young people are college students or young professionals who work in the day. Hosting events in the evening and on college campuses helps make them more accessible.
- Support the adults and organizations that effectively support and work with youth in meaningful ways.

THINGS TO BE AWARE OF

- Engagement can be a long slow process with lots of "ups" and "downs"
- The process is as important as the product
- It's important for adults to avoid taking control of projects or activities just because they want things to get done "right" or quickly
- When working with youth, adults should think about what they can learn from young people, not just what they can teach them
- Adults who work in partnership with youth need to learn how to give up control, "depower" themselves, and share power with young people

- Youth involvement has to be meaningful, and not just "token"
- One young person doesn't necessarily speak for all young people, but for him or herself, or sometimes the organization they have been chosen to represent
- Adults need to be flexible about things like etiquette, dress, the times and dates of meetings—working professionals or young parents may be unable to attend every meeting. Create opportunities for people to virtually login to meetings.
- Food and drinks are a good way to bring young people (and more experienced members) out to a meeting or an activity
- When working with young people, it's important to be open-minded and respectful of differences, and to expect the same from the young people

Questions To Ask Yourself:

- What are your current demographics?
- How will youth outreach benefit your group or cause?
- Who are you targeting with your outreach right now? What changes can be made to outreach to young adults?
- Why would someone want to join your group or cause? What will they get out of it? How does this tie-in with your mission statement?
- Rate your current recruitment effort or plan. How could you improve?
- Rate your current youth recruitment effort or plan. How could you improve?
- Do you have a recruitment announcement? A member application? Do you have other tools your group needs to produce to help with recruitment?
- What are some cost-effective ways to recruit young members for your group? Remember to list ideas that are financially smart and cost effective!
- Next steps—based on what you've discovered, what are the three most important action items to improve your youth outreach strategy?