

The Tool Kit

Resources, Tools, and Strategies for Youth Engagement

An initiative of Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia, Canada



A GUIDE TO ACRONYMS

HRM	Halifax Regional Municipality
YES	the Youth Engagement Strategy (an initiative of HRM)
RTC	Recreation, Tourism, and Culture
CYD	community youth development
YAT	youth action team
PAR	participatory action research
YAC	youth advisory council

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Introduction and Context

Welcome to the Youth Engagement Tool Kit!

Many community-based organizations, youth-serving groups, and government agencies are asking profound questions regarding their relationship to young people: "How can we encourage youth to participate in our programs and make better use of our services?" and "How can we meaningfully involve them at the very core of our community life? Of our organizations?" and "How can we work with them – effectively and enjoyably – on goals of mutual interest so that both adults and young people learn and grow from the partnership?" A simpler way of asking those questions is, "How do we engage youth?"

Background on the HRM Youth Engagement Strategy

In 2000, Municipal Council of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) expressed a clear and direct desire to address the issues youth face in an effort to improve the quality of life for all who live in this region.

Recreation, Tourism, and Culture (a business unit of the HRM) responded to that desire and in 2004 initiated a partnership with the HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development to facilitate the development of a Youth Engagement Strategy (YES). The goal was to increase capacity to engage youth and communities in the development and delivery of programs and services for youth. The result would be the implementation and execution of various actions that would help make HRM a more youth friendly municipality.

Content and structure of the Tool Kit

This is a handbook of resources, tools, concepts & ideas, suggestions for action, real life stories, strategies for innovation, tips & reminders as you go along – all to help you in your work with young people. You might be a paid staff person who provides a service to youth (for example, a recreation program leader, or a police officer, or a librarian, etc.). Or, you might be acting as a volunteer (such as an adult supporting a group of youth to organize a skateboard park, or an older youth mentoring younger ones, or a parent who wants her community to be "youth-friendlier," etc.). Whatever your role – and whether your work is clearly seen by others as "youth serving" – if you care about young people, then this is a resource for you!

Much of the information it contains comes from a youth engagement initiative carried out by HRM's Recreation, Tourism, and Culture in Nova Scotia, Canada, and HeartWood. A Report of this initiative has been written, along with an extensive literature review called: *Youth Participation in Governance* (see <http://www.hrmyouth.ca/> and www.heartwood.ns.ca/tools.shtml).

Resources that came from specific individuals and organizations are mentioned whenever they appear. We have attempted to identify and acknowledge sources of this material, however there is so much research and innovation happening in the youth development field that this is an almost impossible task. We apologize if we have made use of concepts and practices without proper recognition of original work.

Generally speaking, we have oriented the text toward adult service providers and community development practitioners and we have written it as close to "plain language" as was possible. To avoid grammatical awkwardness, we have used both genders alternately in our choice of pronouns.

A GUIDE TO ICONS

To help you find things in this handbook, an icon system has been created to tell you what you've got when you come across it in the various sub-sections. These are:



Concepts

conceptual tools, models, or frameworks, that have been developed in the fields of youth, community, or organizational development that have been found relevant to the practice of youth engagement.



Stories

real-life stories that can inspire – and teach – us about the art and science of youth engagement.



Food for Thought

a way of thinking about some aspect of youth engagement. A kind of lens through which you can look at your work in a different – possibly new- perspective. This may help you see possibilities that were not previously apparent, or perhaps it allows you to gain a deeper understanding of what is going on.



Empowering Questions

every once in a while a question will be posed that will challenge you to think more deeply about your work with young people. Hopefully, it will give you an opportunity for reflection that will help you connect your own work knowledge and life experience to the thinking and practices being presented in this handbook.



Web Sites

ones that relate to the topic being discussed that you might want to check out for more information and resources.



Research

this is information that sheds light on some aspect of youth engagement.



Projects

projects, such as the HRM Youth Engagement Strategy, sometimes exemplify an innovative approach that seems to work well with young people. So, these are examples of “methodology;” i.e., what was done and how it was done.

At the back of the handbook is a CD that contains the Tool Kit, the YES Report, and the literature review. As well, HeartWood has provided a number of sharable resources. You are welcome to use these in any way imaginable... just *please* remember to attribute the source when you do so.

HeartWood will continue to provide more resources in the future. They have created a section of their web site, called *Tools and Resources for Youth Engagement*, and you can freely download whatever you find there. For starters, it contains all the resources on the CD, but there will be new additions from time to time, so keep checking:

www.heartwood.ns.ca/tools.shtml

So, come on in, get started and enjoy!





A definition of youth engagement



Youth engagement...inclusion, ...involvement, ...development, ...volunteerism – these are some of the terms being used in the emerging youth sector. We also hear community youth development, and more specifically in a municipal or geographic community context, civic youth engagement. At the heart of all these terms is the idea of involving young people in meaningful ways in the essential tasks and processes of community (including the whole community and, more specifically, community organizations or groups, as well as “systems,” such as education or health care, for example).

What is youth engagement?

There is mounting evidence that youth engagement – involvement, inclusion, volunteerism –has a significant positive impact on young people –and their communities!

It improves youth health, self-confidence, career outlook, the quality of the relationships they form with peers, older youth, adults, and elders, as well as their ability and inclination to participate in the civic life of the community. It reduces crime, violence, and vandalism. The communities, in turn, benefit from young people's capacity for innovative problem solving, their passion for social justice, their zeal to contribute and serve, their fresh perspective, their ability to rise above traditional boundaries in our society to make new connections, and their courage to pose the tough questions that need to be asked as communities struggle to renew themselves (Garrison, L., 2005).

Municipal leaders regularly make decisions, shape policies and take action on issues that directly affect youth, i.e. public transport, parks and recreation, use of public spaces, health, child care, education, housing, etc. Unfortunately, young people lack access to the official avenues (i.e. voting, courts, trade unions, etc.) through which adults can give their input to governments. Yet, youth are the experts on their experiences, needs, and interactions with their local environments. If governments do not engage youth, well-intentioned programs and policies for youth are more likely to fail. Municipalities and organizations that actually engage youth in decision-making processes will make decisions that are more responsive and appropriate to youth needs and interests (Garrison, L., 2005, p.15).

In addition to the general positive benefits that youth engagement has for communities, there are more specific reasons to involve young people.

It could also be argued that municipalities have a *legal obligation* to engage young people. Are they not citizens too? Do they not deserve the same access to services and facilities that the community provides to others? Should their voices be heard with the same degree of attention as anyone else?

Research shows that youth who have



opportunities for meaningful participation in their communities are less likely to engage in risky behaviour. They tend to have higher self-esteem, be more physically active, show a greater commitment to friends, families and communities, and are more likely to achieve healthy development (United Nations, 2004; National League of Cities, no date; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2000; International Institute for Child Rights and Development, & Environmental Youth Alliance, 2004; Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2003).

According to Mayor Nancy Bates of Farmington Hills, Virginia, youth are: “... a whole resource out there that



we're not touching ... [they're] bright, they're articulate, and they're positive ... [they] have good ideas, and they have perspectives that adults don't have and a lot of energy. A lot of intergenerational activity is very constructive for the community” (National League of Cities, 2002).

Municipalities have a legal obligation to engage youth. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the most universally supported human rights treaty in history, was adopted in 1989, and states



that children (0 to 18 years) have a right to express their views freely and fully participate in all matters that affect them. Since the ratification of the UNCRC, other international and national commitments to engaging youth in governance have been made.¹ These commitments will only be fully realized when they are supported by local governments and rooted in the communities that children inhabit (Garrison, L., 2005, p. 5).

1. Chapter 25 of Agenda 21, signed by world leaders at the 1992 Earth Summit; Habitat II, the 1996 UN Conference on Human Settlements; The UN's World Program of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and beyond; A World Fit for Children, adopted by 180 nations at the 2002 UN special session on Children; Government of Canada's A Canada Fit for Children released in 2004.

Principles of youth engagement

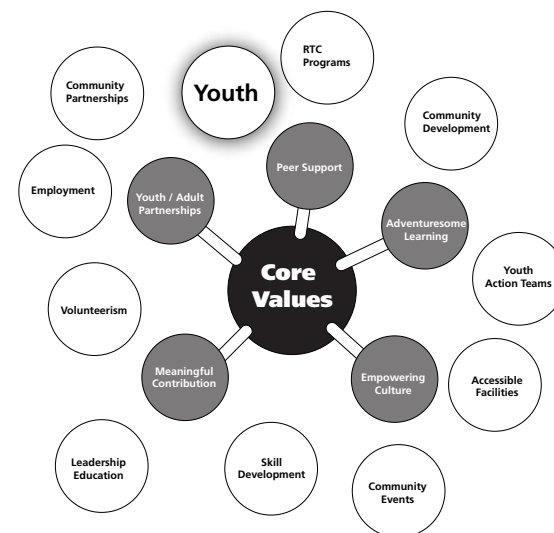
The great variety of possible resources and strategies that can be used to engage young people suggests that there is no need for a “cookie cutter” approach; i.e., developing an “excellent” program or service model that can be used everywhere and every time. Nevertheless, groups and communities tend to seek out that very thing, hoping to replicate the success that the original program or strategy was able to achieve. The drawback with the “one size fits all” approach is that every community is unique, so the fit is never exact, which may mean that the program does not work so well in the current circumstances, given local youth issues, the people involved, and so on. More importantly, the community’s unique qualities, assets, knowledge, experience, and capacity to engage youth may be under-utilized by a generic approach that can only deal in generalities.

It is far better to use a principle-based approach. That is, if we can discover and articulate the principles, or *core values*, that underlie effective youth engagement, *and* create a framework that can put these values into action, we will have a solid foundation on which to build. We can then devise innovative programs, services, and strategies that can be used in specific *local* applications, while making best use of available resources. The great advantage of *this* approach is that there is no end to the possibilities and as circumstances change, the strategies will evolve.

The HRM Youth Engagement Strategy adopted – and then *adapted* – HeartWood’s framework for community youth development (CYD), which grew out of their work with more than 25,000 young people over 15 years. HeartWood spent a lot of time reflecting on their experience, conducting research on their approach, and engaging in dialogue with youth, adults, and agencies as to outcomes.



HeartWood’s CYD framework looks like this:



As HeartWood explains it...

“We now understand that most young people, most of the time, are attracted to programs, activities, services, and so on, which embody certain core values, which are: being able to make a difference, connection with others (peers and supportive adults), being able to follow their passion (things that are really important to the young person), having fun, and taking action. These are what draw young people to tasks, events, and processes in organizations and communities. These will also keep them involved for as long as the values are active.”

“To put these values into practice on an everyday basis, we discovered that there are 5 program tools, or components, which must be present - and in equal, or balanced, proportions. Different practitioners use different terminology, ours are: adventuresome learning (i.e., learning that is fun, engaging, and challenging), meaningful contribution (i.e., serving others, the community, the planet), peer support (i.e., feeling a sense of belonging, being part of a group, team, or community), adult/youth partnerships (i.e., being in relationship with positive, supportive adults and older youth), and empowering culture (i.e., being in circumstances, and/or a place, and/or with others who appreciate and value the individual’s contribution and where he finds the self-confidence to step forward to make a difference).”

“We then learned that youth development couldn’t happen in a vacuum – it has to be genuinely connected to an organization, system, or community. When young people are engaged, they need to have the support of individual adults, who, among other things, help the youth get started as a group, get organized to work on an initiative, and help connect them to the greater community. The community itself – represented by individuals, formal agencies and organizations, as well as informal groups and associations – has to step forward and actively support the youth. This is a matter of viewing all *youth* as “our youth” and thinking in terms of support being given the youth - the time, energy, and resources – as an investment for the whole community, both in the short term and for years to come.”



You may want to check out other organizations and initiatives that use a principle-based approach in their work. You will likely find that the essential ingredients are very similar, although different organizations and communities will probably use different words. What is most important is discovering your *own* core values and being clear on their importance to the work you do every day.

Resiliency Canada

Resiliency Canada strives to advance the well-being of children, youth and their families by generating knowledge about - and the ability to assess - the resiliency factors and developmental strengths that are essential to the well-being of individuals and the communities they live in. www.resiliencycanada.ca

Growing Up in Canadian Cities

The social inclusion of children and youth implies that all young people are respected for the unique knowledge and assets they possess. It also assumes a responsibility to ensure that their diverse voices are genuinely heard and their needs met within families, communities, and local governance structures. Finally, social inclusion promotes the creation of an enabling environment to allow young people to represent themselves in ongoing decision-making processes that affect their lives and shape their communities and local environment (GUICC Team, 2003). www.growingupincities.ca

Health Canada's Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement

Meaningful youth engagement produces benefits to youth and the community in which they live. Through engagement, youth gain a sense of empowerment as individuals and make healthy connections to others, which result in the reduction of risk behaviours and increases in positive activities. In addition to the social benefits of these behavioural changes the community gains through the energy and ideas that youth bring to organizations, activities, and their relationships with adults. www.engagementcentre.ca

Canadian Volunteerism Initiative

Canadians have a rich history of volunteering and community involvement. From soup kitchens to fire departments, helpful neighbours to dedicated drivers, volunteers strengthen the fabric of Canadian society. The Canada Volunteerism Initiative (CVI) is a practical way to invest in community and in volunteers. The CVI is a pan-Canadian program that is distinctive in its mixture of national leadership and strategy and local perspectives and delivery. www.volunteer.ca/volcan/eng/content/canvol-init/canvol-init.php

Carnegie Corporation Council on Adolescent Development

See: *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century* for a presentation on their principles of adolescent development. www.carnegie.org/sub/research/index.html#adol

Search Institute

The Framework of 40 Developmental Assets are concrete, common sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to raising successful young people. These assets have the power during critical adolescent years to influence choices young people make and help them become caring, responsible adults. www.search-institute.org/assets

{Note: the Canadian partner organization to the Search Institute is called Thrive! The Canadian Centre for Positive Youth Development and their mission is to promote Developmental Assets and other strengths-focused strategies within a Canadian context. They also organize an annual education conference to showcase the work that is being done. See: www.thrivecanada.ca. }



A variety of strategies will more likely serve the various needs of different young people...

Once you have identified the principles and values that will ground all that you do, it is time to consider the grand variety of resources, tools, and strategies... *almost* time, that is.

First, there are good reasons for having such diversity. In the same way that every community is unique, so are young people. What works for one may not work for another. What works this time, may not on the next occasion.

The other reason for a diversity of ideas is to convey to the reader of this Tool Kit, the breadth and depth of possibility – it is *endless!* Use your own experience and imagination to devise strategies that fit your own circumstances. Use what you find here as a starting point, but venture farther than we have!

When you do create your own tools and strategies, please let us know – we would love to learn from your experiences just as much as you learn from ours!



One crucial principle is employing a diversity of strategies for engaging youth... (in governance). Youth councils and youth representation on boards are typically thought of in relation to youth governance. While these strategies tend to allow youth direct interaction with adult decision-makers, and a greater capacity to directly influence planning and decision-making, they generally only reach a small percentage of the youth population, often those youth who already feel comfortable in leadership roles. On the other hand, less formal structures, such as youth action teams,² typically engage a larger number and broader diversity of youth. The hands-on nature of youth action teams is appealing to young people's desire for action. To build the capacity of all youth to engage in governance, a framework which incorporates multiple levels for youth participation is the best strategy, including opportunities to engage at the neighbourhood and community level (i.e. youth action teams) as well as opportunities to engage within formal government structures (i.e. youth representation on boards)
(Garrison, L., 2005, p. 6)

2. The term "youth action team" - a YAT - is used widely by various groups, including HeartWood. HeartWood's definition is... an ongoing group of young people who live in a specific geographical community (or, are involved in a "community of interest") in which they take action and/or provide service that contributes to the well-being of others. Older youth and adults have supportive relationships with the team and, because they are so active, the community supports their efforts and holds them in high esteem."

SECTION II

RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND STRATEGIES

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Stating our assumptions...

In organizing and writing this Tool Kit, we have made some assumptions about you, the reader, and they are:

You already know things...

We assume that you have experience and knowledge in this area, perhaps quite a bit of knowledge. Our challenge was to gear the level of the material to an unseen audience, so we had to go for "basic." Nevertheless, even if you find the information too simplistic, you are bound to find some useful tools and resources within these pages. If nothing else, please consider it an opportunity to reflect on your work with an eye to renewal.

A cookie cutter approach does not usually work, although we can learn from each other...

We explained above what we meant by this approach and its disadvantages. Having said that, we can learn from each other's experience. We just have to be careful that we don't try to import a good idea into our situation without first adapting it to our local circumstances, capacity, and so on.

You are interested in engaging youth in a more meaningful way... Youth work has evolved from youth services, which had a focus on needs and "problems" to youth development, which is strengths-based, to community youth development, where youth develop their participation skills in a real community – their own – for the benefit of all; i.e., it is an excellent strategy for building strong, healthy, and inclusive communities! Where to next? We appear to be in an evolving continuum of possibilities, which means that there is always room to grow, to shift, and to learn.

When we say "working with youth..."

We don't just mean that you are a professional youth service provider. You might also be a volunteer in a program or service, or maybe you have no formal role and you are just interested in helping out. Or, maybe you are a parent who wants the community to be a youth-friendlier place for your child to live. Or, perhaps you serve some other segment of the community and you don't really think of yourself as having much to do with youth. Some of the concepts in the Tool Kit may challenge you to re-consider that stance; after all, where is the next generation of leadership and service providers in your service area?

How we organized the resources...

Here you will find good ideas, suggestions for action, success stories, innovative strategies, concepts, best practices, tough questions you may need to ask yourself, and approaches that have proven effective in other places, other circumstances... in short, tools and resources that you can use to engage young people in the activities and processes of your organization and/or your community.

We imagine that you are already doing some things – maybe a lot of things – to engage young people and, perhaps, you are doing these very well indeed. Carry on! Your strategy seems to be working! Keep up the good work.

On the one hand, you could build on what you are already doing well, perhaps doing it more intentionally and more often, perhaps applying that same strategy to other areas of your work with youth, perhaps to other locations in the community. At the very least, you could share your success with others so that they can benefit from your experience.

On the other hand, we invite you to challenge yourself to explore new ground, try something different, possibly discovering better ways of doing things! Imagine new possibilities to what you are already doing!

The resources are organized into the following 3 sub-sections according to the level of action that would be required to use that particular tool.

The levels are:

Actions just for you...

simple actions that you can do right away with existing resources that will energize you and that will generate energy, which in turn attracts energy, i.e., mobilizes others.

Actions with others...

projects/initiatives (i.e., action that is more complicated) that are short-term and that involve people working together to achieve results that are not possible "going it alone."

Actions for the whole community...

strategies (i.e., action that is complex) that are long-term with varying time-frames, involve multiple partners in various roles, and that are designed to have a deep impact on the whole community, the system (like child welfare, education, health, etc.), or between sectors (like public, private, and not-for-profit/voluntary).

IN EACH SUB-SECTION, THERE ARE THEMES AROUND WHICH THE VARIOUS TOOLS AND RESOURCES HAVE BEEN FURTHER ORGANIZED.

These are:

Find out what's going on in your community (i.e., doing formal and informal research, talking to people, getting information)

Build capacity
(i.e., for adults: professional and organizational development; for youth: skills in participation, connecting to others, and taking action)

Build relationships

Create and contribute to an empowering culture

