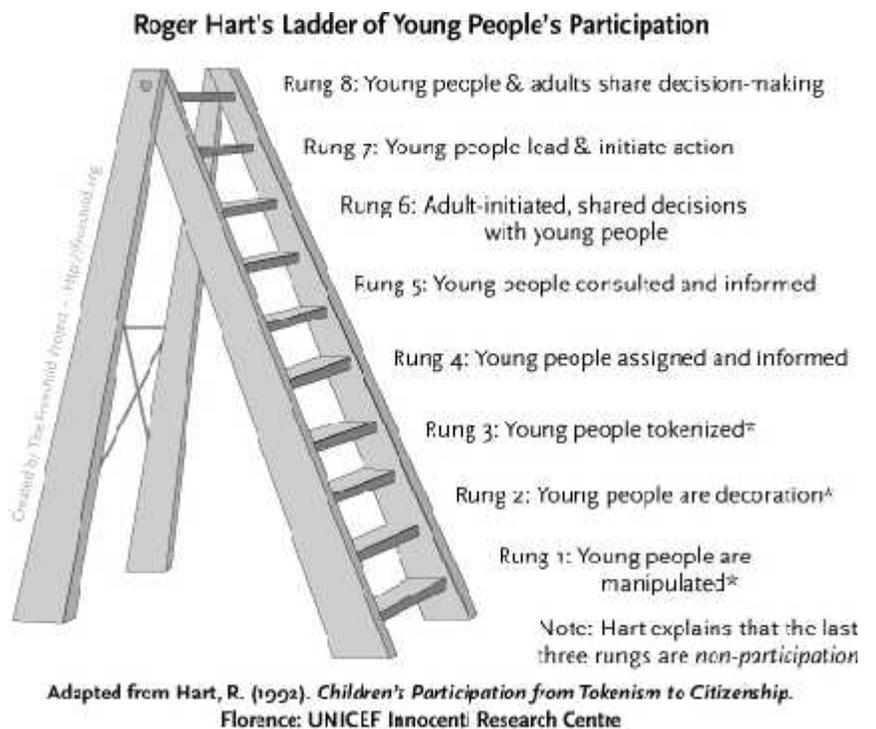




## Youth Engagement Guide

**Introduction:** In the spring of 2017, Youth MOVE Virginia, through the support the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services and the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, held a Young Adult Retreat. This retreat focused on bringing together young adults from across Virginia in order to build and grow a united youth voice in Virginia. This guide is the result of the discussions had at this retreat.

The chart on the right serves as a starting point when assessing youth engagement in your organization. This chart is one of the points of reference used in the national youth movement. Sociologist Roger Hart's essay, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, was published by UNICEF in 1992. In this essay, Hart provides his perspective on the concept of meaningful children's participation. He utilizes a "Ladder of Participation" to visually depict the varying degrees which adult-driven organizations/initiatives can engage children, youth, and young adults. Hart states that the essay is "written for those people who have it in their power to assist children in having a voice, but who, unwittingly or not, trivialize their involvement".



In addition, when talking about youth engagement, there are several definitions to keep in mind.

- Youth is defined as individuals aged 13-17.
- Young adults are defined as individuals aged 18-30.
- Young people refers to the combination of youth and young adult populations.

Youth MOVE Virginia is a contractual agreement between the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) and NAMI Virginia for youth and young adults. Its mission is to support a grassroots peer network for youth and young adults to be empowered, active guides in their own care, while advocating for mental health policy and programs that are specific to their unique needs and experiences.

***How can your practice work to increase young people’s engagement and partnership throughout the planning and implementation of activities which directly affect them? Here’s what our young people had to say.***

<b><i>Value</i></b>	<b><i>Description</i></b>	<b><i>Action Steps</i></b>	<b><i>Avoid</i></b>
<b>Authentic youth voice</b>	Valuing, strengthening, and centering young people who have diverse, lived experiences in the system(s) that your organization works within.	The presence of numerous young people during planning and implementation processes.	“Checking the box of engagement” (1 young person included in the process, but with minimal value placed on their input)
		Young people’s experiences and opinions are presented without censorship or modifications.	Modifying young people’s expressions of their experiences to increase explicit alignment between the lived experience and your organizational mission.
<b>Conducive organizational environment and culture</b>	Creating safe spaces for young people where unconditional acceptance is the norm.	Intentionally providing a physical space that is comfortable and welcoming (oversized bean bags, circles for easy discussion, coloring books, background music, etc.). Ask the young people what they want!	Expecting the engaged young people to adjust to the adult-driven culture of your organization (formal meeting environment with structured agendas). Outreach methods should reflect who the target population is (utilizing social media to promote events).
		Include diverse groups of young people. Equal space to contribute should be provided to everyone. Account for differences in participation styles (verbal, written, body language, formal, informal, etc.).	Assuming that young people who have been involved with the system that your organization works with all have similar experiences. An example, support networks do not automatically include parental figures for many young people.

		<p>Differences in opinion and preferences between participants' opinions are expected to occur. Discussions around the differences are facilitated without judgement. Compromise is sought and the resolution is agreed upon by the young people.</p>	<p>Do not avoid instances of discomfort! "If it doesn't make people uncomfortable, it's not working" –Young person participant</p>
<p><b>Authentic youth participation and engagement</b></p>	<p>Young people having ownership of the activities through low pressure stakes. In this context, "low pressure" means that young people are not necessarily held accountable in relation to the outcome. Rather, the process is what's most valuable, with an emphasis on relationship building among peers and personal growth.</p>	<p>Meetings are facilitated by the young people. Decision-making structures (how things will be decided) are developed by the young people. Group interventions and activities to be completed are decided by the young people.</p>	<p>Perpetuating the idea that young people are dependent on adults to provide information, resources, and services. This fosters dependency, rather than fostering empowerment and leadership development.</p>
		<p>Compensation provided to involved young people when appropriate or requested.</p>	<p>Devaluing the time and efforts that your organization requests of involved young people.</p>
		<p>The involvement (initial and continued) of young people is low pressure. An example, "creative meet up groups" which focus on doing a craft/project with individuals of similar live experiences—rather than a formal support group.</p>	<p>The continued involvement of young people is not expected. Outreach to increase numbers of participants should not be overwhelming, overly-persistent, or manipulative.</p>

**Appendix: Ladder of Young People's Participation Further Detail**

<b>Ladder of Young People's Participation</b>		
<b><i>Degree of Participation</i></b>	<b><i>Value</i></b>	<b><i>Expanded Details</i></b>
Rung 8	<b>Young people &amp; adults share decision-making</b>	The activity is initiated, planned, and implemented by young people. Adults are invited to join in the decision-making process.
Rung 7	<b>Young people lead and initiate actions</b>	The activity is initiated and planned by young people. Adults are available to provide input if requested. However, they express their trust in the leadership of the young people.
Rung 6	<b>Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people</b>	The activity is initiated by adults. Young people are involved in the decision-making planning and implementation process.
Rung 5	<b>Young people consulted and informed</b>	The activity is initiated and planned by adults. Young people are consulted and kept informed throughout the planning and implementation processes.
Rung 4	<b>Young people assigned and informed</b>	The activity is initiated, planned, and implemented by adults. Information about the event's development is provided to young people by the adults. Young people are requested by the adults to volunteer their time and efforts at the activity.
Rung 3	<b>Young people tokenized</b>	The activity is initiated, planned, and implemented by adults. Young people are requested to volunteer their time and efforts at the activity.
Rung 2	<b>Young people are decoration</b>	The activity is initiated, planned, and implemented by adults. Young people are requested to volunteer their time and participation at the activity.
Rung 1	<b>Young people are manipulated</b>	The activity is initiated, planned, and implemented by adults. Young people are requested to volunteer their time at the activity. The presence of the young people is for the gains of the adult-initiated objective.

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