

*Engagement
as a
Youth Sector
Challenge*

Produced by the National Youth Homelessness Learning Community

Dictionary definition of engagement:

“... the act of engaging or the state of being engaged”

Young people teach us that they understand ‘*engagement*’ in two ways:

1. **Join**: bring together; ... this is the ‘*act*’ of engagement

⇒ explained as the willingness and choice of a young person to approach/enter our organization

2. **Retain**: to ‘*solidify*’ to an ongoing status; ... this is the ‘*state*’ of engagement

⇒ explained as the willingness and choice of a young person to participate in/with our organizational structure, programs, goals

The starting point for any act of engagement is the personal *volition* of the young person.

vo•li•tion – noun (source: dictionary.com)

1. the act of willing, choosing, or resolving; exercise of willing:
She left of her own volition.
2. a choice or decision made by the will.
3. the power of willing; will.

Youth will choose what makes sense:

- ⇒ to their world view
- ⇒ to their experienced learning
- ⇒ to their personal goals

As **youth services sector representatives**, we need to remind ourselves daily that youth accessing our services have starting points unique to their situations.

Understanding where youth are coming from is the first step to engaging them in our organizations.

For this discussion, Street dependent and homeless youth are our specific interest.

- ⇒ THEY come from and live in environments that are unsafe emotionally, economically, and physically.
- ⇒ THEY have learned to depend on themselves and their lives are focused on survival.
- ⇒ THEY consistently have trouble acquiring adequate food, shelter, and acceptance.
- ⇒ THEY have little sense of control in their daily lives and don't feel valued by society. They often respond to adults and society in a defensive way.

Culture of the Street

- ⇒ We must **listen** to understand, and be mindful in all our conversation and dialogue. Street youth have participated in and adapted to fit in a **culture** of the **street**.
- ⇒ Cultural learning is not a simple matter of making different choices and moving to immediate success.
- ⇒ Cultural learning is a **process**.

For the purposes of this handbook, the three participating organizations presented questions to our young people to get feedback and insight. Youth responded in the following areas, identifying **factors which challenge their choice to engagement** in youth serving agencies...

Insufficient funding: **14%**
⇒ Good Ideas are often not possible due to lack of funds

Agency process: **16%**
⇒ The approach of the agency does not engage young people

Adult powerbase: **15%**
⇒ Staff and leader perspective is to control and manage

Lack of purpose: **08%**
⇒ What is the point to what you offer?

Not comfortable: **12%**
⇒ Not a fit for them

Not heard: **05%**
⇒ Adults often do not really listen to young people

No way to contribute: **06%**

Personal reasons: **13%**

Do not trust organization: **07%**

Do not fit: **05%**

Staff not available: **02%**
⇒ Preoccupied with other responsibilities

Role of Youth Services Sector Initiatives

1. *Listen* first.
2. *Encourage young people to like who they are, and be themselves.*
Knowing that you value them as a person regardless of where they're coming from does a tremendous amount towards youth valuing themselves.
3. *Be real.* Be ourselves. Young people immediately recognize pretense.
4. *Encourage faith in their own ability to make choices and accomplish their goals.* Let them know that making choices and accomplishing goals is how learning in life happens for all of us. Support them to choose and learn from their choices.
5. When responding to or interacting with young people *communicate their value* through active listening and respect. Their ideas are necessary for their own success.
6. *Commit to believing in them.*
7. *Create non power based relationships* with young people. Do not establish yourself as an authority or someone who knows what's best for them. Create a relationship that is based on the youth knowing they are valued as a person first - regardless of their starting points.
8. *Model unconditional acceptance. It is foundational to the trust required for engagement.*
9. Always ask ourselves: "*What's in it for the youth?*"
Young people are pragmatic and have learned from their survival skills how to make choices that work for them in real life.
The strategies we offer them must be of value within their contexts.

Volition/Choice to '*engage*' with the youth services sector will occur with strategic imagination and application of the above.

JOINing requires:

- ⇒ creating environments that are safe for youth
- ⇒ making the engagements offered meaningful to the young person

STAYing involved requires:

- ⇒ opportunities to make mistakes, finding new options, achieving personal goals
- ⇒ understanding that this is all valuable as personal learning in the process of moving away from the street.

Engaging youth with our organizations starts with youth engaging in themselves.

Key Points:

- ⇒ Change must come from within.
- ⇒ Trying to change someone doesn't work.
- ⇒ Youth must be respected valued.
- ⇒ Youth must make their own choices to move forward.

Example:

It has been witnessed and concluded in various observations that: People with substance abuse problems who are mandated by a court, peers, or organizations to attend addiction counseling or rehabilitation will very likely relapse into substance abuse.

People who have made the volitional choice to seek treatment for their addictions have a much higher success rate staying clean.

Choice to please others is about compliance.

Choice that originates within the person's own will and mind is about change.

This handbook has been written and produced by the Youth Homelessness Learning Community, a collaborative effort of youth organizations to share knowledge and build the capacity of our sector to more effectively meet the needs of youth across Canada.