



UCLA
Center for
the Developing
Adolescent

Youth Engagement in Evaluation

A GUIDE FOR YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS



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INTRODUCTION

Why have we created this guide?

We have designed this guide to help organizations partner with young people to evaluate and improve their programs, policies, and services. Young people may also find this guide useful if they have ideas about ways to improve things but don't know how to get their input heard.

We begin by talking about the importance of evaluation to learn about what works best. We then summarize **why** engaging youth in evaluation and learning is important and give direction on **how** to do it.

The **why** information includes an overview of how the science of adolescent development supports actively engaging young people in evaluating and improving programs, policies, and services. We also provide some concrete examples of how engaging youth in the evaluation process supports their development. This **why** information can be used to bring partners on board and secure funding.

The **how** information aims to support you in your own youth-engaged evaluation efforts. We include tools to assess your readiness to engage youth in evaluation and guide you through creating a youth engagement plan. Lastly, we provide links to resources for organizations ready to embark on youth-engaged evaluation.

Including youth as partners in program evaluation is one way to give them voice and increase

opportunities for equity. A key focus of this guide is to **maximize the potential for effective youth engagement** while minimizing the potential for tokenism and the reinforcement of youth-adult power imbalances within evaluation.

To be clear, this guide is not intended to be the sole support for an organization interested in partnering with youth to evaluate their programs. Such efforts require capacity and resources to support youth engagement and program evaluation. Securing these resources may require being able to effectively communicate important concepts about adolescent development. This guide will help you assess your readiness (see [page 11](#)), create a plan (see [Appendix A](#)), and identify useful resources (see [Appendix B](#)). Being humble about our areas of expertise and areas of growth is key to successfully engaging youth in evaluation.



WHY ENGAGE YOUTH IN EVALUATION?

What is evaluation and why is it important?

We work in a world of finite time and resources. We all want to know that the work we are doing is having the maximum possible impact. **Evaluation is how we determine if what we are doing has the intended results. Learning happens when we translate these insights into improvements in our programs.**

When we evaluate and learn from our work, we have the opportunity to make it more effective. Evaluation of programs and policies helps us to answer critical questions including:

- 1 How well did we achieve what we had planned to do?
- 2 How did we adapt our plan to respond to the reality of the lives of the young people we are serving?
- 3 How well does our program or policy work?
- 4 What did we learn from the process?
- 5 What did we learn that can improve this program or policy? What did we learn that can help us improve our organization?

Partnering with community members to conduct evaluation is often called empowerment or participatory evaluation¹. The goal of this work is to include the voices of the people served by a program or policy to answer these critical questions. Partnering with young people to conduct evaluation enhances an organization's learning and its ability to achieve better results. It also provides the opportunity for young people to build their skills and gain experiences that will positively support their development.

Benefits of engaging youth in learning and evaluation

Adolescence, the period between the ages of roughly 10 to 25 years, is a remarkable period of growth and change. During this time, young people explore and learn from the world we live in. Young people continually evaluate and learn from experiences, which helps inform their sense of self and who they are in the world. Because of this inclination to evaluate and learn, adolescence is an ideal time to engage youth as partners and leaders in program evaluation.

Meaningfully engaging young people in evaluation benefits young people, their adult partners, and programs, policies and organizations. Depending on the scope of youth engagement, the effects may differ. For example, an evaluation where youth are engaged over a one-week period to review an exit survey will have different outcomes from a project where youth are integrated members of the evaluation team. [Table: Benefits of Engaging Youth in Evaluation](#) summarizes the benefits youth, adults, and organizations may experience.

The science of adolescence and youth engagement in evaluation and learning

When done well, engaging youth in evaluation provides them with skills and opportunities that align with the unique developmental needs of this stage of life. The period between the ages of 10 to 25 is often referred to as adolescence. Important distinctions exist between the rights (what we are allowed to do) and capacities (what we are able to do) of young people in different age groups (10- to 14-years-old; 15- to

¹ See betterevaluation.org for more information about empowerment evaluation.

TABLE: Benefits of Engaging Youth in Evaluation

| Benefits for Youth | Benefits for Adults | Benefits for Programs, Policies and Organizations |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Build new skills ● Establish meaningful relationships with peers and adults ● Discover their identity as valuable contributors to their community ● Create social change in programs, policies, and communities that influence their lives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Build strong and stable relationships with youth ● Understand youth voice and priorities ● Build skills in partnering and sharing decision making with young people ● Expand youth development strategies and capacities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discover new perspectives and ideas ● Improve the quality, relevance and impact of policies and programs ● Policies, programs and services better reflect the context young people live in ● Policies, programs and services more effectively respond to youth experiences, strengths and needs |

19-years-old; 20- to 25-years-old). Even within age groups, there is significant variation in the pace and timing of development influenced by biology (what is going on in our bodies), context (what is going on in our world), and experience (how we think and feel about the interactions we have with the world around us). Understanding and considering the diverse pathways along which young people develop ensures that we are partnering most effectively in evaluation activities.

There are six important developmental tasks² that occur during adolescence that engaging in evaluation can support. Below we review each of these tasks; explain how they relate to evaluation and learning; and provide scenarios of how this can inform our practices when partnering with youth. The scenarios we provide are based on experiences we have had and our reflections about how they link to the science of adolescence. For each example, we also provide samples of excellent resources that have helped support us in these scenarios.

2 Please visit developingadolescent.org/core-science-of-adolescence for more information about the Core Science of Adolescence.

SIX KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN YOUTH-ENGAGED EVALUATION

TASK #1: Risk taking and exploration

Summary of the Science

Being willing to take risks and explore the world is a common part of adolescence. Many young people find risk taking and exploration exciting and rewarding. Without healthy outlets, risk taking can lead to unhealthy behaviors. Healthy risk taking includes the positive emotions associated with successes and the negative emotions associated with failures. Risk taking and the accompanying emotions contribute to valuable learning. Opportunities for risk taking and exploration are important during adolescence.

Implications for Learning and Evaluation

Evaluation involves testing what we believe to be true which often requires taking risks. Asking people how well something is working may mean that what we like doing doesn't have the effect we intend. We may also try to evaluate a program or policy and find out that our measurement tool misses the mark. When young people effectively engage in evaluation, they have opportunities to explore, take positive risks, and continuously learn from their mistakes.

SCENARIO

A group of 14- to 16-year-olds are a part of a youth advisory network for their local school district. They are told upon joining that anything they say in meetings sessions will never be used against them. One youth advisor takes a risk and shares that some of the youth in one of the district's after-school programs don't like or trust one of the adult staff members. The manager of the after-school program becomes defensive but other district staff take this concern seriously.

Together, the youth and adults develop and implement a student survey to evaluate the quality of the after-school program staff. This evaluation confirms the problems the student raised about the staff person and the district takes action. The staff member in question receives extensive mentoring and professional development on how to better serve youth. The next year the student survey indicates that despite increased training, students still do not trust this staff member and the staff member is moved into a new position that is not student facing. A new staff member is hired to work with the youth and significantly improves the program. This success incentivizes the students to take risks to identify additional problems within the district.

RELEVANT RESOURCES:

- GripTape's [Setting Up a Youth Leadership Board](#)
- YPAR Hub's [Investigating a Problem](#)

SIX KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN YOUTH-ENGAGED EVALUATION

TASK #2: Decision making and emotion regulation

Summary of the Science

Throughout adolescence, we learn a lot about making decisions and managing strong emotions in a positive way. We also experience many changes in our lives. These changes provide opportunities for us to make new choices. Sometimes we make choices that lead to great outcomes and positive emotions. Sometimes we make choices that lead to challenges and negative emotions. Making decisions gives us the opportunity to learn from our successes and our mistakes.

Implications for Learning and Evaluation

Evaluation activities require making a lot of decisions including what we should be measuring; what tools we need to make those measurements; and how we should use the information we gather to improve our programs. As youth engage in program evaluation, they experience emotional highs and lows as they encounter challenges, experience success and failures, and build new skills.

SCENARIO

A group of 12- to 14-year-olds are hosting a fundraiser as part of a community program they are involved in. The group has to decide between holding the fundraiser outdoors in the park during the day on a Saturday, or indoors at a school on a Friday night. Both options have pros and cons and the group members are not in agreement on which is the best choice.

Together, the group collects data about the pros and cons of each choice. They ask peers, parents, and the host site about which event may work better. Although the conversation often gets heated, their adult ally structures specific activities to guide the decision-making process using the Seeds for Change resources on [Consensus Decision Making](#). The activities and tools support the students in working through differences to make a decision. Their decision to host the event on Saturday afternoon is a huge success!

RELEVANT RESOURCE:

- Seeds for Change's [Consensus Decision Making](#)

SIX KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN YOUTH-ENGAGED EVALUATION

TASK #3: Finding meaning and purpose

Summary of the Science

As we grow and have new experiences, we build our knowledge and expertise and discover what is important in our lives. This helps us deepen our sense of meaning, agency, competence, identity, and purpose. When we are engaged as active partners, meaningful contributors, and change makers in our communities we figure out who we want to be in the world.

Implications for Learning and Evaluation

We increase our sense of meaning and purpose when we see our ideas translated into action. By engaging in evaluation, youth have the opportunity to use their ideas and skills to improve programs and policies. They get to experience working in partnership with other youth and adults to create positive change. These experiences help young people feel like their work is meaningful and gives them a sense of purpose and belonging in the world.

SCENARIO

A high school senior accepts an internship with a state representative. They have no interest in policy making, but applied for the internship to enhance their resume. During the course of the internship, the representative is asked to consider a bill mandating COVID-19 vaccines in schools. The representative asks the intern to evaluate the potential impact of this legislation on high school students. The intern works with other staff to develop and collect data which informs significant changes in the language in the bill. The intern and a small group of other youth are involved in introducing the bill on the House floor. As a result, the intern develops an interest in the legislative process and is mobilized to engage in policy making and local government.

RELEVANT RESOURCES:

- [Fostering Purpose Project's Purpose Toolkits](#)
- [Freechild's Youth Voice Toolkit](#)

SIX KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN YOUTH-ENGAGED EVALUATION

TASK #4: Gaining respect and social status

Summary of the Science

During adolescence, changes in our brains increase our sensitivity to belonging, social standing, and earning respect from the people around us. This motivates us to learn the skills we need to adapt to the social demands of adulthood. It also amplifies the impact of feeling disrespected or given messages that we don't belong—including through experiences of racism, bias and other forms of discrimination or harassment. We are also very aware when our input is not being taken seriously. As these changes are happening in our brains, our experiences in the world also change. We begin to look more like adults, which changes the expectations others have for us and the way that others treat us.

Implications for Learning and Evaluation

Engaging youth as partners, rather than subjects, in evaluation ensures that what is important to them is centered in the evaluation. This helps young people feel like they are being taken seriously and gives them a sense of ownership over evaluating and improving the program or service. Good evaluation leads to learning and organizational change. As young people see their opinions and ideas translated into action, they have positive experiences of being respected and valued.

SCENARIO

A local Youth Center noticed that very few 16- to 19-year-olds were attending their programs. They held a meeting with a group of 15-year-olds who said that they were unlikely to continue the following year because older teens were often teased for attending the Center's activities. The Center recruited a team of youth to help them assess how to attract older teens. Older teens were interested in paying jobs working with younger youth, rather than participating in Center services themselves. The next year, the Center hired a Youth Manager and a team of 16- to 19-year-old Teen Leaders to facilitate programs.

The Youth Manager worked with the Teen Leaders to design program activities, foster partnership and collaboration, and troubleshoot challenges that came up. The Youth Manager also served as a liaison between the Youth Leaders and Center staff; helped make employee policies more friendly; and conducted ongoing trainings for staff on adultism and inclusion. As a result, the culture of the Center became more youth friendly. The Youth Leaders were respected by their adult colleagues and adored by younger youth in the community. Within one year, the Youth Leader jobs had become one of the most competitive and desirable jobs for high school students in the community.

RELEVANT RESOURCES:

- The Youth Advisory Board of the New Orleans Children & Youth Planning Board's [*Dismantling Adultism Toolkit*](#)
- Freechild's [*Facing Adultism Toolkit*](#)

SIX KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN YOUTH-ENGAGED EVALUATION

TASK #5: Perspective taking

Summary of the Science

During adolescence, we learn that our experiences and perspectives are not universal and that much can be gained from understanding the perspectives of others. Throughout adolescence, our brain develops in ways that help us consider the needs and perspectives of others, think abstractly, and analyze complex issues. In addition, during adolescence we are exposed to a larger social community and people with varying experiences. The changes in our brains and our exposure to a broader social world allows us to better understand and have compassion for the fact that people have differing experiences and perspectives.

Implications for Learning and Evaluation

Evaluation activities provide a platform for adolescents to understand multiple perspectives. Effective evaluators must identify and control for their own biases to provide an appropriate review of an organization's impacts. Engaging in evaluation activities provides adolescents with a framework to analyze, test and explore the world around them. Experience in evaluation can motivate young people to understand the value of challenging their own beliefs and asking questions about why things are the way they are and what can be done to make them better. Young people become more reflective about the programs, policies and communities that influence their lives.

SCENARIO

A student is elected to serve as a Youth Commissioner for their college's Board of Trustees. In one of the Trustee meetings, the Youth Commissioner is asked how "students feel about the campus's response to sexual violence." The Youth Commissioner doesn't have personal experience with sexual violence and feels that the response has been sufficient but takes the time to conduct some interviews with other students on campus who they have never talked to before. From these interviews, the Youth Commissioner learns that many students feel that the campus's response has been inadequate and even harmful to people who have experienced sexual violence. The Youth Commissioner shares this back with the Trustees who agree to engage more stakeholders to develop the next phase of the response. The Youth Commissioner realizes that to be a voice for the diverse experience of students on campus, they must gather information rather than speaking solely from their own personal experience.

RELEVANT RESOURCES:

- UC Berkeley YPAR Hub's [*Investigating a Problem*](#)
- GenerationOn Game Changers' [*Establishing a Youth Advisory Council Toolkit*](#)

SIX KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN YOUTH-ENGAGED EVALUATION

TASK #6: Support from caring adults

Summary of the Science

During adolescence, as we explore and expand our social worlds, caring adults continue to play an essential role in our healthy development. We spend more time with our peers, and our circle of supportive adults also begins to expand. We begin to build more independent relationships with teachers and other adult allies. Secure relationships with supportive adults can help us build resilience, develop a positive sense of self, and navigate challenges.

Implications for Learning and Evaluation

Working together on evaluation provides an opportunity for youth and adults to share expertise and build positive relationships. These relationships can increase the sense of ownership all project partners feel towards the program. These relationships can also be critical resources as young people build strong relationships with adults who can write them letters of recommendations, serve as references for a job, or provide emotional support or advice.

SCENARIO

A team of middle school students partners with a teacher to conduct a youth-led evaluation of the school's health services. The youth meet with the teacher weekly to work on the evaluation. In addition to providing training and support to the youth around the evaluation, the teacher also creates space for the youth to talk about their lives and what is important to them. By the middle of the year, the team of students are gathering for lunch daily with the teacher and the classroom has become a safe space to discuss a lot of diverse topics. The students feel a strong connection to the teacher and when they run into a serious issue at school or in their personal lives and they don't know what to do, they drop in for support. This teacher is also able to serve as a reference for students when they apply for jobs and other school opportunities.

RELEVANT RESOURCES:

- Search Institute's [*Relationship-Rich Spaces for All Youth*](#)
- Community Futures, Community Lore's [*Stepping Stones Curriculum*](#)

The developmental science of adolescence can inform the design of youth-engaged evaluation efforts that align with the developmental stage of the youth participants. Paying attention to the timing and pace of adolescent development can protect against tokenism and exploitation of youth, ensure appropriate allocation of time and resources, and maximize the benefits for youth associated with engaging youth in evaluation efforts.

How to engage youth in evaluation

What to consider as you engage youth in evaluation

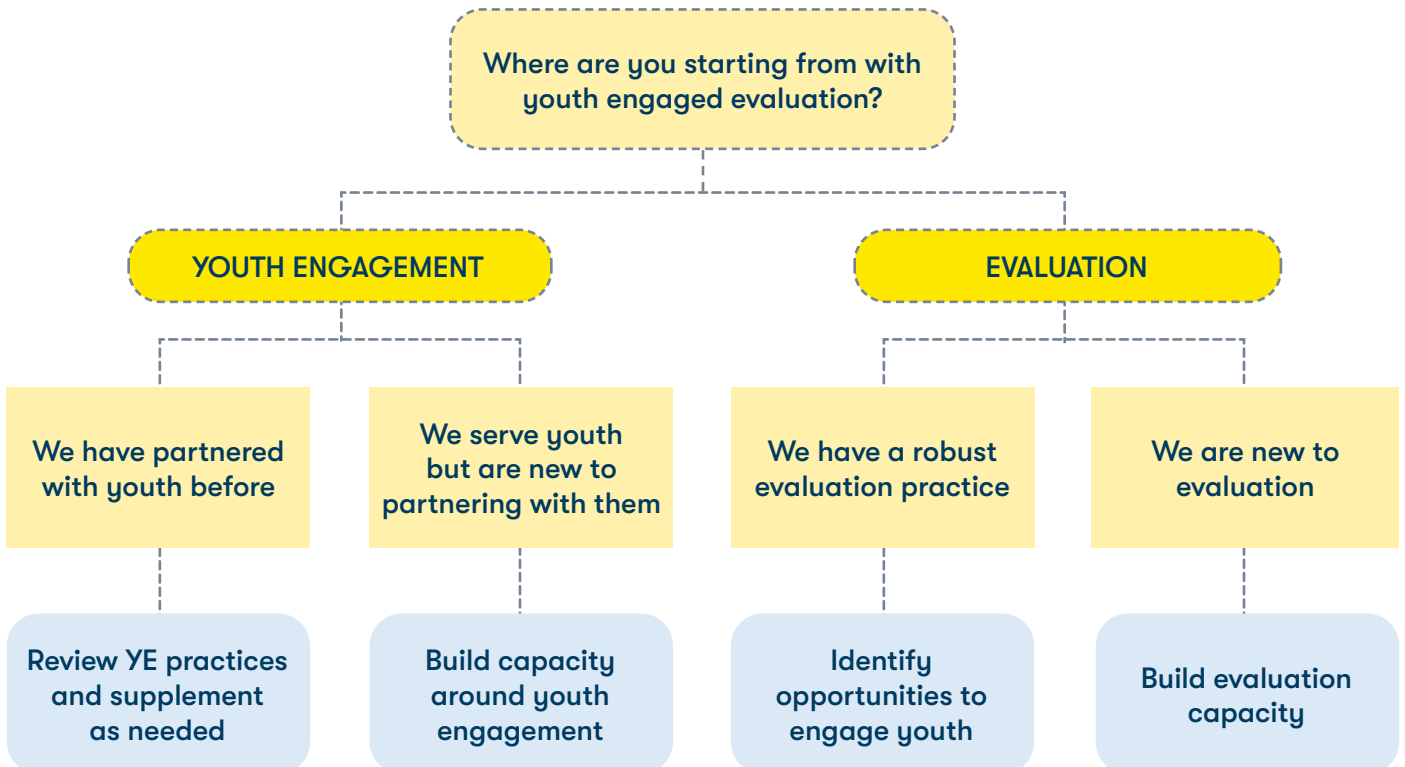
Engaging youth in evaluation requires careful planning. Bringing in youth early on in the planning process is a good way to ensure that the experience will best serve youth, the evaluation, and the organization. Youth engagement is not

one-size-fits-all. The best youth engagement effectively balances youth development goals, organizational expertise, programmatic goals, and available resources. It is important for your organization to determine what is essential for you.

How ready is your organization to engage young people in evaluation?

The most important thing to keep in mind when engaging youth in evaluation is being honest and humble about your current organizational capacity. The skills and capacities for effective youth engagement and program evaluation are different. The figure below offers a decision tree to help you determine how to best prepare to do this work. [Appendix B](#) has resources to help you build your capacity. If you are new to understanding adolescent development and want to use science to justify engaging youth in evaluation, we highly recommend you review the [Core Science of Adolescence](#).

FIGURE: Where are you starting from?



Tips to avoid tokenism and exploitation of young people

It is important to remember that engaging youth in evaluation does not automatically mean that we are capturing the stories and experiences of all young people. For the young people who do engage, it is important that their participation is authentic and meaningful. This means having staff and partners who are open to disrupting the way things are normally done in adult-driven projects. It also means being excited and inspired by the new ideas that youth bring to the table.

It is also important to remember that not all young people have the same opportunities or bandwidth to engage in an evaluation project. Sometimes, the way we recruit youth, the commitment we require, or the support we have available excludes important voices. While we cannot guarantee a completely inclusive process, we must be honest and intentional about who we are engaging in our work.

- Everyone involved in the evaluation should have real power and should be engaged as trusted members of the team. Clearly outline who has authority to make decisions over which components of the evaluation. Have a clear discussion with the full team about how decisions will be made. Youth should have an equal and clear voice. Pay attention to whether the ideas of youth are being questioned or adult-led efforts are being used to “verify” youth findings. Working in partnership requires full trust.
- Sometimes evaluation brings up the need for important but uncomfortable changes. We often design programs and policies because we believe that they are the best possible strategy to achieve a certain outcome. Unfortunately, sometimes we guess wrong and evaluations point to the need for important changes. Embrace rather than deflect feedback. Use these discoveries as opportunities to learn and improve.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While youth-engaged evaluation is highly rewarding, it can also stretch us as the team learns and grows. You may want to begin by engaging youth really well in a small part of the evaluation, learn from the experience, and expand the role of youth as you go. Here are some action steps for engaging youth in evaluation:

- 1 Pull together key project partners, including young people.
- 2 Leverage the expertise your organization has in engaging youth and determine what help you need to be successful in this work. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Many of us are experts at serving youth but this does not always translate into having the skills to partner with youth. We have provided some suggestions about tools and resources below.
- 3 Create a youth engagement plan! We have provided a set of guiding questions at the end of this document to guide your planning process.
- 4 Evaluate your progress. Check in with all of the partners, including the young people, as you go along. Make adjustments as you go to ensure the most positive experience for everyone

Engaging youth in evaluation is an opportunity to support young people's positive development, build the skills and capacities of adult staff, and improve the quality of programs, policies and services. This is learning in action!

APPENDIX A: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Developing a plan for meaningful youth engagement requires acquiring appropriate resources and capacities (funding, time, and staff with expertise in youth engagement). Here is a checklist for creating your youth engagement plan. Determining the answers to these questions will help promote effective partnership and outcomes in the evaluation.

Project Goals

What are the goals that we have for engaging youth in this evaluation? How will youth benefit? How will adults benefit? How will our program/policy benefit?

Youth Definition

Who are the youth we want to engage?

How many young people do we want to include?

What skills and capacities do we want youth to bring to the table?

How old will they be? What legal or ethical constraints might influence this?

What types of lived experiences do we want our youth partners to have? Do we want them to currently be living through these experiences or do we want them to have perspective on a past lived experience?

Who on our team will support and partner with the youth?

What demographics do we want them to represent?

Power Analysis

What existing relationships or power do we want our youth partners to have? What are we prepared to help them build?

What existing power structures will we be challenging by inviting youth into this project?

What will we need to facilitate the redistribution of power in this project?

Youth Scope of Work

This should be a clear description of the role. What do we expect youth to do in this project? How often will they work with us? What is the compensation for their engagement? What skills do we want them to gain? What will they gain from the experience?

Youth can meaningfully contribute in designing an evaluation plan, developing evaluation questions or tools, collecting and analyzing evaluation data, or reporting including sharing findings and recommendations. Which parts of the evaluation will youth be involved with?

Recruitment and Retention Plan

What outlets will we use to identify youth? What will the recruitment process look like?

How will we onboard the youth?

What are the opportunities for growth for the youth engaged in the project, either within this organization/community or within partner organizations/communities?

How long do we plan to engage them?

What type of feedback will we give to youth on the team? How often will we provide it?

Resource Assessment

What is our experience with engaging youth in the past? What have been our greatest successes engaging youth? What have been our greatest challenges?

What resources do we have to meaningfully engage youth in this project? What is the budget that we have to support youth engagement?

What capacity do we have to meaningfully engage youth in this project? What capacity do we need to build?

What technical assistance, if any, do we need to successfully complete this project?

Where in the project will youth engagement be most meaningful?

Where in the project are we open to responding to youth ideas and input? What components are not open for youth input? How flexible can we be on these boundaries?

Measurement and Evaluation

What do we want to track and measure about our youth engagement efforts? What do we want to be able to share with others about how youth engagement changed our work?

What tools and strategies are we going to use to capture the impact of youth engagement on the youth, our organization, and the programs or policies we are evaluating?

Thinking about the developmental tasks of adolescence, what outcomes would we like to see the greatest progress on? What metrics will we use to measure those changes?

What do we plan to do with the findings? How will we use them to facilitate learning?

How have our programs and practices changed because of youth engagement? What changes do we want to sustain? What resources do we need to sustain those changes?

APPENDIX B: TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Once you have committed to engage youth in evaluation, there are many, many resources out there to support you. Depending on the youth you want to engage and the goals of your project, you can find curricula for training youth as evaluators. In the [Six Key Developmental Tasks of Adolescence and Their Importance in Youth-engaged Evaluation](#) section, we included links to relevant resources depending on the type of youth engagement you are doing. Here we highlight some additional resources to get you started:

1 Youth-engaged and Participatory Evaluation

- [YPAR Hub](#) and [Community Futures, Community Lore Stepping Stones Curriculum](#) both offer free, comprehensive curricula on youth participatory action research (YPAR). These both include lesson plans and trainings for many skills that are essential for evaluation such as developing research tools, collecting and analyzing data, and using data to inform learning and action.
- [Betterevaluation.org](#) offers an excellent overview of empowerment evaluation and a wealth of free resources to support organizations in building their capacity to do empowerment evaluation.

2 Technical Assistance and Training for Youth Engagement

Finding technical assistance to meaningfully engage young people can sometimes be challenging. You may already know of organizations in your networks that do this well. If so, we encourage you to reach out to them and see if local partnerships can help you build your capacity. If not, here are some additional resources that may be helpful.

- [Search Institute](#) offers resources and technical assistance on positive youth development and youth engagement.
- [Youth Era](#) offers training and technical assistance for youth-serving groups, organizations, and agencies interested in integrating youth voice into building, improving, and running youth/young adult programs and services.
- [Freechild Institute for Youth Engagement](#) offers tools, training and technical assistance focused on building the capacity of organizations to partner with you to create social transformation.

3 The Science of Adolescent Development

If you are interested in learning more about the Core Science of adolescent development, the [UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent](#) has a number of available free resources.



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