

Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment Tool

A key component to positive youth development is to make sure youth not only have quality experiences, but are also fully engaged as active participants. However, this process takes time. It is suggested that organizations and community-based partnerships should assess their programs every six months. Please take a moment to respond to the statements below. Please indicate at what level you agree or disagree.

Youth Involvement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Youth take lots of initiative working on projects.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Youth are always busy with things to do.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Youth arrive to meetings/events on time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Youth take ownership when responding to specific tasks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Youth rely on themselves to make key decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Youth always share ideas about things that matter to them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Youth help one another learn new skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Youth are fully committed to their duties.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Youth are very excited about their involvement with this project.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Youth are involved at all levels of program development.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Youth Engagement (within the Community)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. Youth display a willingness to accept leadership responsibilities in their community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. Youth have full access to information that is needed to make decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. Youth express a genuine interest in the community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. Youth display a desire to help others in their community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. Youth display a desire to mentor other youth.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. Youth take part in discussions at community forums/hearings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. Youth are applying what they learn by getting involved in other community activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

- | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 18. Youth take pride in their community. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 19. Youth seek the advice of adults in the community. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 20. Youth come up with their own ideas for improving the community. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 21. Youth are involved in several community-based projects. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 22. Youth express a sense of belonging toward their community. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 23. Youth are very concerned about community change. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Youth Retention

- | | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 24. Youth are recruiting their peers to join the program. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 25. A majority of the projects are led by youth. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 26. Youth consult with adults on project activities. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 27. Staff/volunteers (adults) have the skills to serve as mentors to youth. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 28. The ideas of this project were generated mostly by youth. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 29. Most youth have no difficulty in getting to the meetings. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 30. Adults feel comfortable working with assertive youth. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 31. Youth make decisions based on their own experiences. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 32. Some youth have been involved in this project for one year or more. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 33. As older youth leave the program, they are replaced by their younger peers. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 34. Youth see this experience as a chance to socialize with friends. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 35. Youth choose to work on this project instead of other activities (playing sports, watching TV). | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 36. Youth are routinely recognized for their accomplishments. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 37. Youth make efforts to attend every meeting. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 38. Most of the youth return to this program year after year. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 39. Youth are passionate about the issues addressed through this project. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 40. Youth recognize their strengths in working as a member of the team. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 41. Youth feel challenged to do their best. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Instructions for Using the *Youth Involvement and Engagement Tool*

1. **Youth development professionals (e.g., youth workers, teachers, 4-H agents/educators) who work closely with youth should complete the *assessment tool*** after the group has been working together for awhile (i.e., near the middle of the project/program). This will give those completing the assessment an opportunity to more thoroughly examine the extent to which youth are involved as leaders. Administering the scale too soon will not allow for accurate perceptions or experiences.
2. **Examine the computed mean scores (averages) to determine whether there are high or low levels of youth involvement or community engagement, and whether retention of youth is at risk.** The items on the scale are grouped accordingly.

The scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), indicating whether the program provides positive or negative experiences within each of the three areas. A mean score for each category between 1 and 2.4 would be classified as “low”, while scores between 2.5 and 3.4 could be considered “average” and 3.5 or above would be classified as “high”. Compare these scores to the table below to determine which areas may need improvement. The arrows in the table only signify whether levels are “low” (↓), or “high” (↑).

Descriptions of high levels of youth involvement, community engagement and youth retention are provided below the table. Low levels would be the opposite of these descriptions. Details on the potential causes of low or average levels are also explained.

Level of Youth Involvement, Community Engagement and Youth Retention existing within Community Programs

Youth Involvement	Community Engagement	Youth Retention	Description
↑	↑	↑	<p>This is the optimal result for positive youth development. It indicates a program that is youth-driven, being led by young people who are empowered to promote change. They are beyond mere involvement, and are putting into practice those leadership skills that have been developed and mastered over time.</p> <p>Programs reflecting youth participation at this level are likely implementing practices that are not episodic, but instead are consistent and sustained. This is apparent due to the high number of youth willing to remain active in the program. Youth are able to assume roles as decision-makers, and therefore have opportunities to develop their skills and abilities.</p>
↑	↓	↑	Low engagement. See tips on increasing community engagement among youth.

↓	↑	↑	Low levels of involvement. See tips on increasing youth involvement.
↑	↓	↓	Low engagement and youth retention. This could be a situation where most of the youth participants are younger and the older youth are leaving for various reasons. Take time to determine if the youth are disengaged because of bad experiences. At the same time, be sure to focus on the youth who are involved, and build their skills in hopes of preparing them for deeper engagement.
↓	↑	↓	High engagement only. This is what can happen when older youth are leaving the program and are getting involved in broader roles throughout their community. Follow up with them to determine if your program had a role in their desire to pursue higher levels of community engagement. If so, take pride in knowing that this is truly a major goal of positive youth development, especially if youth are serving in leadership roles within other groups and organizations.
↑	↑	↓	High involvement and engagement, with low retention. This can occur when youth are forced to choose other options (e.g., jobs, organized sports, graduation), despite having positive experiences within a particular program.
↓	↓	↑	This can occur when youth are allowed to serve as only passive participants. They may be a part of a program, but they have no role in decision-making. This is most common with a younger audience. Teens would rarely settle for and remain in such settings. It may be time to get on board with new strategies! Form community collaborations to determine what youth in the area really need. Solicit the help of caring adults willing to mentor and partner with youth. Most importantly, ask youth for advice!
↓	↓	↓	It may be time to get on board with new strategies. Form community collaborations to determine what youth in the area really need. Solicit the help of caring adults willing to mentor and partner with youth. Most importantly, ask youth for advice!

Note. ↓ (1-2.4) = Low; ↑ (3.5 - 5) = High. A score from 2.5 - 3.4 is considered “average”.

High Youth Involvement: Youth demonstrate high levels of active participation. They are willing to work with others while also taking on leadership roles. They feel a sense of belonging and are therefore at ease in sharing their ideas, while welcoming the opinions of others. At high levels of involvement, youth have full access to details that assist in their social, intellectual and leadership development. Also, programs with high involvement are not controlled by adults, but foster a youth-led approach, allowing young people to take ownership. Youth are intrinsically motivated to embrace the responsibilities of projects and take advantage of the opportunity to have their ideas heard, considered, and implemented.

Low or average *youth involvement* scores (1 through 3.4)

Youth development programs may be designed with the best intentions, but youth play a critical role in determining the success of their involvement level. Often they may be excited to serve as community leaders, but are lukewarm towards a project idea. On the other hand, youth may be the driving force behind a new concept or initiative that can benefit the community. However, the demands on their time due to school, other extra-curricular activities, or work may inhibit their participation.

These and many additional factors can contribute to a mediocre or average rating for youth involvement. This is common when programs/projects are new or if youth are just beginning to gain first-hand experiences as engaged citizens. They may not feel comfortable taking the initiative to lead projects or rely on their own capabilities to make key decisions. Therefore, youth development practitioners must decide if this outcome appears to be only temporary, or if it is time to move forward with implementing strategies to support and encourage youth in this area of their development. A few techniques are listed below that may help address low to average youth involvement.

Steps to improve *youth involvement*:

- Recruit youth who are experienced leaders and pair them with those who are younger and less experienced.
- Make sure youth are afforded opportunities for independence. Give them chances to make decisions and express their opinions.
- Whenever possible, allow youth to decide what project they want to implement. When they have ownership, commitment levels increase.
- Have adult support in place to assist when it is solicited. Despite their independence, youth still want help from adults when needed.

High Youth Engagement: Youth Engagement refers to youth contributing to their own development by applying learned life skills and being afforded the chance to function as effective decision-makers. Youth have the confidence to take on leadership roles and the competence to make informed decisions. Therefore, they seek out opportunities to participate in youth-driven programs and initiatives. Youth are also applying their skills by getting involved in other organizations, participating in civic affairs and serving on boards and councils.

Low or average *youth engagement* scores (1 through 3.4)

Perhaps the youth participants need more training in this area. Don't get discouraged if they seem disinterested in promoting change. It takes time for young people to develop the unique, transferable skills required to

function effectively as confident and competent leaders. Less than desirable results may be revealing an opportune time to provide training on basic principles of needs assessments (what does our community need?), asset mapping (what resources do we already have?), or how to facilitate meeting discussions. Youth, as well as adults, should be knowledgeable on these topics if they are to develop a stronger sense of community.

It is also important to nurture skills and attributes that promote goal setting, communication, critical thinking, and the ability to manage conflict. All are necessary if youth are to perform efficiently within the realm of civic engagement. Unfortunately, these are not typical lessons that are always taught to young people in formal educational settings (e.g., school). However, with some assistance from caring, more experienced adults, and those youth who are more engaged, youth can emerge as leaders who are equipped to serve and be valued for their efforts and opinions.

Steps to improve youth engagement:

- Take time during program meetings to discuss issues affecting the community. Both youth and adults should bring topics to the meeting. One way to stimulate discussion is to have everyone bring a copy of the local paper (no more than two weeks old), then identify pertinent articles and discuss the topics in detail, including a discussion on whether the group can address a topic of interest and how.
- Invite community leaders to come and speak to youth about issues in the community.
- Let youth decide if they want to develop action plans to address any specific concerns. This allows the youth to have ownership from the very beginning. If they are not passionate about a particular issue, their willingness to become engaged decreases substantially.
- Youth-adult partnerships are very useful in promoting youth engagement. A partnership can provide youth with several adult mentors who may have a better understanding of the community and can impart this wisdom to youth. On the other hand, youth can provide their expertise on those issues that are important to them and their peers. Also, social change can be a daunting process for those new to community organizing. Partnerships can balance the responsibilities between youth and adults as they strive to make a difference.
- In some cases, youth may not be ready to take on issues on a broader scale. If so, don't force them. It may be wise to spend more time developing their leadership and social skills, through involvement, in order to equip them for civic engagement.

High Youth Retention: Success in retaining youth in programs is demonstrated by youth consistently returning to the program on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. It should be clear that they are making a choice to participate when they have other options to choose (i.e., serving in this program in lieu of sports or going home to play video games). Key factors that foster retention include, but are not limited to:

- Caring, supportive adults;
- Opportunities for youth to connect/socialize with peers;
- Recognition of youth for their efforts;
- Opportunities for youth to make decisions;
- Youth enjoyment of the challenge of serving and being recognized as community decision-makers;
- Genuine youth interest in the issues being addressed; and
- As older youth leave the program due to graduation, jobs, etc., other youth are encouraged to join the team to sustain efforts.

Low or average *youth retention* scores (1 through 3.4)

This can be interpreted in multiple ways. It could reflect weaker relationships and a disconnect between those involved. At times, the strategies adults put into action to recruit youth may not be the most effective. That is why it is important to solicit the advice of youth, inquiring what they believe to be useful in recruiting others. Youth want to be amongst their peers, and working within the community can serve as an ideal setting.

Retention rates could also be influenced by a low sense of camaraderie between youth and adults. Although youth have a strong desire to associate with peers, they need to form affirming relationships with adults as well. Youth development practitioners must always realize that some youth may have limited encounters with positive adults and are looking for those with whom they can form a bond. Occasionally, they may deem a relationship to be threatened or non-existent if they don't feel a supportive connection with adults, or if adults seem too preoccupied with other youth or responsibilities. As a result, a young person may decide that the only option is to seek the desired attention elsewhere. Although it is critical that youth learn to deal with community issues, it is equally important for them to be comfortable forming friendships with adults who are willing to stand in as mentors and role models.

Another cause for low to average retention could be related to some lack of a vested interest. Adults may be passionate about a project that is of no relevance to youth. This could also hold true for youth who want to implement an idea, but who have little support from skeptical peers or adults. In both scenarios, those with no interest may begin to feel pressured to get on board or they may become convinced that they have no say in decision making. The end result in both cases is that participants eventually abandon the program or project. This, in turn, causes disappointment among the leaders of the group, who ultimately shift their energies elsewhere.

Lastly, location of programs and events can affect retention. It may be a challenge to consistently attend meetings or events if a youth lives several miles away. Often, changing meeting locations periodically to accommodate participants may help address issues with attendance.

Steps to improve *youth retention* may include:

- Allowing time for socializing among peers. Youth need to recognize the program as a venue to *have fun*. The news will spread quickly when a group of youth can tell others about opportunities that build confidence while having a good time.
- Giving youth a chance to get to know adults and form trusting relationships with them. Bonding time can occur during field trips or other scheduled events.
- Being sure youth are involved from beginning to end. This contributes to feeling valued.
- Being assertive in recruiting younger participants who can gain experience while being mentored by older peers.
- Using the expertise of adult volunteers by allowing them to work with youth to help create and enhance programs that are more appealing.
- Recognizing youth for their efforts on a regular basis, both formally and informally.

- Considering the location of the program, and making sure all youth feel as though the meeting place is a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment.
- Trying not to demand too much or expect too little from young people. Heavy demands can cause stress and frustration. Asking too little can be perceived as a waste of their time.
- Changing the focus. If the youth keep changing (coming for a short time and then leaving the program), then it may be time to change the program or project!