

Challenges of Youth Participation

The benefits of youth participation are substantial, however implementing, continuing and developing youth participation strategies in health, mental health and/or community programs can be diminished, inhibited or interrupted by a range of challenges. Knowing what these are can assist in reducing their impact. Therefore, one of the first steps in developing youth participation strategies is to identify the barriers that may affect young people's ability to participate.

There are different barriers to youth participation for each of the different players involved; the young people themselves, the organisation and the community.

Barriers affecting young people's ability to participate include:

- A lack of trust by young people in decision-making systems
- Poor information about how to become involved in youth participation
- Insufficient time due to education and/or work obligations and family/friend commitments
- Location and lack of transport
- Skills deficits, for example in literacy, verbal skills and public speaking
- Low socio-economic status, for example homeless young people
- Lack of confidence, by both young people and staff
- Insufficient resources
- Minimal power given to young people to initiate organisational change
- Negative social attitudes to, and stereotyping, of young people
- Lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities
- Inequality, with class distinctions preventing young people from lower income backgrounds to interact with, and assume responsibilities in conjunction with, those from high-income backgrounds
- Intermittent crisis situations that can damage the capacity of young people to participate in an ongoing or consistent manner.



Barriers relating to adults, workers and organisations include:

- Organisational mindset: Organisations often recognise participation of young people in theory but not in practice
- Turnover of staff and volunteers: affecting continuity of relationships and the capacity to follow-up young people seeking to become involved in program activities
- Organisational disagreement: where issues regarding the type and manner in which young people may participate in projects may hinder their committed involvement. Support from the whole organisation is necessary
- Adult/parent mindset: a lack of parental support, with parents fearing loss of control over young people as they become more confident, independent and assertive as a result of their experiences
- Community resistance: perceptions that young people's opinions and abilities are subordinate to that of adults
- Differences in skills / abilities: a misconception that differently skilled young people need to be protected from harm or undue stress.

Alongside these challenges to participation there are a number of subgroups of young people for whom participation is especially challenging.

These subgroups may need additional support in order to participate and include young people who are:

- living in a corrective, psychiatric, child-care institution, refuge, or in foster care
- living independently or in a non-family situation
- of Indigenous descent
- living in challenging circumstances eg low income, co-resident families, rental accommodation, single parent household.

The first three 'at risk' characteristics, as listed above, are over-represented in the 15–19 year old population, when compared to the national population, leading to a high likelihood of non-participation. There are potential strategies for minimising some of these challenges, including utilisation of local youth and/or mentors within the community. This not only increases the likelihood of initial engagement but, more importantly, instils a sense of connectedness to community, therefore promoting long-term involvement.

Additional challenges to successful implementation of youth participation in mental health include:

- mental health promotion seen by some organisations as a developing area
- internet and website development is a relatively new area for some organisations (often used in engagement and development of youth participation programs)
- organisations often find broad mental health promotion strategies difficult to evaluate
- previous negative experiences of youth participation attempts
- complexity and confusion around duty of care issues and roles or responsibilities
- involvement of young people in participation programs is often transient resulting in sustainability issues
- organisational constraints such as financial and time limitations imposed owing to competing demands.

A range of organisational and environmental barriers to youth participation exist. Duty of care, skill development, adult mindsets, organisational mindsets and the transient nature of young people and workers in the mental health system are some primary issues. Limited specific funding and poor worker supports contribute to youth participation seeming 'too hard' at times.

Considerations

- Consent forms required for young people involved with media
- Parental/Guardian consent for those under 18 years
- Consent forms for participation in offsite activities
- Workers requiring 'working with children checks'/ police checks (varies by State and Territory)
- Confidentiality when working with families
- Codes of conduct
- Complaints policy
- Wellness plans and emergency contact information
- Provision of information about participation to families
- Provision of information to young people in an accessible and appealing format