

Models & Methods – how to involve young people

There is a significant amount of literature relating to models of youth participation yet very little of it relates specifically to youth participation in the area of mental health.

It is sometimes difficult to apply generalist youth participation models to mental health as they do not recognise young people's fluctuating capacity for participation.

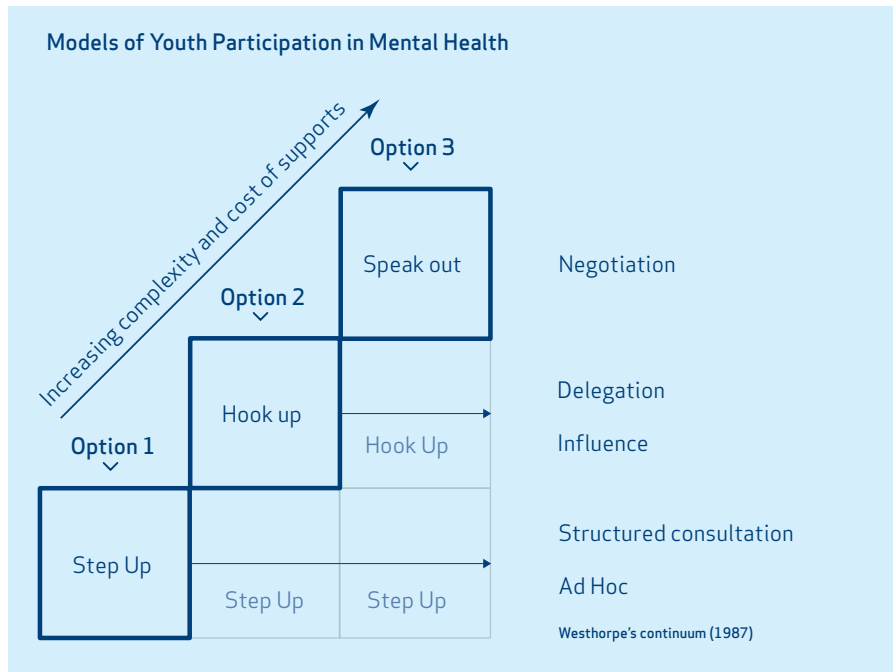
Youth participation should not be evaluated on the idea of decision-making being the key element. Instead other factors and support mechanisms, like peer support and skills development, should be taken into consideration.

A continuum approach which avoids implying the need for young people to always have control or decision making powers is preferable within mental health. Westhorpe (1987) recognises that options exist and that some youth involvement strategies will be more appropriate in some situations than others. Further, this continuum of youth involvement acknowledges that a variety of different strategies and approaches need to be utilised to be inclusive. The continuum describes the following conceptual options:

Ad Hoc	Where an environment is established which supports young people to contribute their ideas or information about their needs.
Structured Consultation	Involves deliberate development of a strategy to seek young people's opinions about what they need or what problems they face, and implies a two-way flow of information and ideas.
Influence	Involves some formal, structured input in order to ensure at least a minimal level of influence on the organisation.
Delegation	Where young people are provided with real responsibility for undertaking particular tasks within an organisation recognising that there must be a mutual understanding of the extent of power that young people have.
Negotiation	Where young people and the organisation each contribute their ideas, information and perspectives and decisions are reached by consensus and compromise.
Control	Young people make all or many of the crucial decisions within the organisation, from policy and programming to financial management and hiring and firing of staff.



Utilising this continuum, the following three models of youth participation have been specifically developed for mental health.



Option 1: Step Up

Step Up is about asking young people for their views, ideas and feedback about specific issues. Young people participate through structured or ad hoc consultation. Step Up allows young people's views to be valued and taken into account, however, there is little influence on the outcome/s.

This method is most useful where young people or the organisation want:

- Comment on policy and national plans
- Review of marketing tools and resources
- Focus testing of new program initiatives and/or resources
- To share personal stories, journeys and experiences

Option 2: Hook Up

Hook Up gives young people a more direct influence on programs. Young people are provided with real responsibility and clear guidelines for undertaking particular tasks and participate through 'influence' and 'delegation' consultation. Young people and adults need to have an agreed understanding of working together to achieve specified outcomes, therefore the level of influence is extended.

This is the recommended method where young people may:

- Be involved in a series of state based forums, defined by a time period
- Share concerns, ideas and collaboratively problem-solve strategies with mental health programs
- Develop and review good practice principles, policies and strategic plans
- Participate in resource design and review
- Attend and present at state-based conferences
- Participate in peer mentoring to ensure sustainability of processes for longer-term projects

Option 3: Speak Up

Within this framework, young people contribute their ideas, information and perspectives. Decisions are reached by some form of consensus, and young people's participation is at a level of 'negotiation'. This means that young people are actively involved in all aspects of the consultation process from design, to implementation, dissemination and evaluation. Young people research the ideas and beliefs of their local communities and/or the young people involved in Step Up and/or Hook Up activities, and then present this collective data. At this step, young people act as 'youth researchers' within the consultative process.

This is the recommended method where young people may:

- Be involved in a national forum and program to share concerns, ideas and problem solve strategies in a collaborative way
- Liaise with programs and broader groups in the community around the development and review of good practice principles, policies and strategic plans
- Design resources within projects and participate in their trial, implementation and review with the broader community
- Attend and present at national conferences
- Participate on program committees that meet on a regular basis

Limitations

No particular option guarantees that consultation will be participatory and all options have advantages and disadvantages. Selection of the options should be based on:

- the program's needs
- desired outcomes
- the type of data required and
- the characteristics and preferences of the young people involved.

Other considerations include resource availability, worker experience and the availability of young people.