Benefits of Youth Participation

What is Youth Participation?
Youth participation allows young people to have a role within an organisation's structure where their opinions are valued. Youth participation can encompass other terms such as 'youth partnership' and 'youth consultation'. Similarly, 'peer support' means participation in some form of systematic structure to allow young people to support others to participate, and incorporates terms such as 'peer leadership' and 'youth mentor'.

Youth Participation is different from Consumer Participation

Why Youth Participation?
Within a mental health framework, people that access services are often referred to as 'consumers'. While this term has general acceptance within adult mental health provision, it needs to be re-thought when considering mental health services for young people. Young people's experiences of mental health problems are often different to that of adults and their service needs are different in nature. For young people the experience of mental health problems is often episodic rather than chronic and as such, their consumption of mental health care is often short term rather than long term. Consequently they may not relate to or identify with the term 'consumer'. Even young people that have a serious mental illness often reject the term 'consumer' preferring to be identified as a 'young person'.

Young people experience considerable barriers to accessing care and are often resistant to help seeking. Involving young people in service planning and delivery provides an opportunity to increase access for young people that would not otherwise utilise services.

In the youth sector it is not uncommon for a variety of young people to become involved in youth participation activities. Youth participation, rather than consumer participation, allows for young people who do not have mental health issues, or who may have been experiencing mental health issues but have not accessed help, to be included in strategies. Including this diversity of experience and motivation brings a richness and depth to the contribution that is gained from involving young people in youth services.

Youth Participation activities within Mental Health Services should be directed to all young people between 12-25 years of age, regardless of whether they identify as having had mental health issues.

Youth Participation - what's in it for…

… young people?
Youth participation has the potential to:

- Give young people a say about what is important to them
- Allow young people to 'own' decisions that are made about their lives
- Increase self-confidence and skills
- Empower young people
- Help protect young people by promoting resilience.

… communities?
Encouraging and supporting young people to participate in decision making and the development of policies and programs which affect them can have benefits such as:

- The development of social competence and social responsibility
- The development of skills that contribute to the establishment of their own belief system
- Community capacity building through learning of health promotion, leadership, and livelihood skills
- Demonstrating that positive group experiences can work for the benefit of the community as well as for individuals
- Promoting a more inclusive and cohesive community.

… organisations?
Encouraging and supporting youth participation can:

- Bring new perspectives and influence outcomes in new and unexpected ways
- Make programs more responsive, understanding and considerate of young people's needs
- Improve the development and delivery of effective policies and programs through the incorporation of young people's views
- Sometimes be an inexpensive way to implement change within the organisation to be more relevant to those accessing the service.

Participation gives young people the opportunity to talk about and influence services that are important to them. It helps ensure programs are appropriate and responsive, saving valuable time and energy in the long term. Participation creates better outcomes for the young people and organisations involved in the decision-making process. It contributes to the developmental needs of youth while benefiting organisations in a unique way. More broadly the community benefits though capacity building and the development of social competence and social responsibility.

> Meeting all the young people was a great experience, to learn from their knowledge, and them from mine, was a unique and rewarding experience for me. I felt overwhelmed with excitement that the group was united for one common purpose; to advocate and encourage programs and services to better meet the needs of young people. Something I feel very strongly about.
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> The weekend was full of training, team building and direction, creating goals as a group and individually to strive for and achieve. The group bonded quickly and we all felt passionately about the reason why we came together, for young people of Australia and for our communities, to promote and raise awareness of youth mental health and alcohol and other drug issues. To make others aware help is available.
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> **Jason, 24 QLD**

Source: Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association, 'National Youth Participation Strategy Scoping Project Report'. Stepney: Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association, 2008

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