

# Guidelines for the Ethical Engagement of Young People

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## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

Thank you to the individuals who participated in the written survey consultation. Comments provided by participants in the survey consultation have been included, as quotes, within the document to highlight key themes. In order to protect their privacy and anonymity they are not listed but to those who participated please accept our sincere thanks for your invaluable contribution.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the late 1990s the Centre for Organisation, Research and Education (CORE) Network of Indigenous Children, in Manipur, India, developed Ethical Guidelines for Child and Youth Participation. These guidelines were developed to support the involvement of children and young people in the organization as well as support them in speaking to their experiences, as Indigenous children and youth. As a part of a reflective and evolving process to assist children and youth in becoming safely engaged in change processes, CORE developed a framework to guide participation while safeguarding the wellbeing of children and youth. The CORE guidelines have formed the basis for a reflection on the participation and engagement processes occurring in Canadian organizations. While the threat of violence in response to public participation is minimal in Canada, there are times when the physical and psychological exclusion of children and young people continue despite efforts to engage children and youth respectfully and meaningfully in research, organizations, governance, and volunteer activities. Through a partnership with several prominent national non-profit organizations, youth representative organizations and passionate individuals we undertook a process to explore the roles and responsibilities of young people and adults in youth engagement. This document provides a first step in an evolving reflective process in Canada on the experience of child and youth engagement and the role of relationship-building in supporting past, present and future leaders.

The document was revised in 2011 and re-titled from the Declaration of Accountability on the Engagement of Young People and Adults in Canadian Organizations. Although the title was changed and the references updated, the main elements of the content remain the same.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Guidelines for the Ethical Engagement of Young People is a tool to assist organizations currently engaging with young people and those that are beginning the process. It provides a basis for reflection on their organization's structures, culture and human and financial capacity to respectfully engage with young people. This is a tool to assist young people in determining if the organization, or activity, they are engaged in meets their needs effectively, respectfully and meaningfully.

## SUMMARY OF THE PRINCIPLES

### *Youth Engagement is Not a Program*

Youth engagement should be viewed as a natural way of working in the organization rather than as a special program.

### *Contributions Match the Organization*

Young people and adults who are working with an organization should be recruited for their knowledge, skills, interests and commitment to the organizational mission.

### *One Person Cannot Represent the Many*

A young person should not be considered “the youth voice” at the table – it should be acknowledged that everyone at the table brings different perspectives to the issue.

### *Debate as a Learning Tool*

Debate is a key element of personal and organizational growth.

### *Dignity and Safety*

Under no circumstances should young people or adults in the workplace feel that placing themselves in an emotionally, spiritually, physically or cognitively unsafe space is expected or required by the organization.

### *Avoiding False Expectations*

It is important to be honest about the changing role of youth within an organization including recognizing that there are limitations that correspond to age, experience, education and training.

### *Balance and Accessibility*

Most people require workplace accommodations to support them in making the optimal contribution to the organization – including young people

*I am a leader today not  
just a leader of tomorrow*

—Jocelyn Formsma

## **PREAMBLE**

Increasing numbers of national non-profit organizations are engaging young people as advisors, staff, volunteers and leaders since the United Nations 1985 International Youth Year and the integration of child participation in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Canadian organizations have made advances in engaging children and young people in all areas from programming to governance. However, the success of these efforts varies widely, and although there are some positive examples of youth engagement in national non-profit organizations, there have also been times when young people have not felt respected or included.

There are also many organizations that would like to respectfully engage young people but are not sure how to do it in a meaningful way. This document provides a foundation for respectfully engaging young people and adults in national non-profit organizations. The series of Principles and Reflective Statements have been designed to inform the active development of relationships between young people, adults and the organizations that have brought them together.

This is a tool to assist organizations that are currently engaging with youth and those that are beginning the process to reflect on their organizations structures, culture and human and financial capacity to respectfully engage with young people. This is also a tool to assist young people to determine if the organization, or activity, they are engaged in meets their needs effectively, respectfully and meaningfully. Ultimately, true youth engagement depends on the environment in which it operates, the supports available to sustain it, and the degree to which youth and adults are actively engaged.<sup>1</sup>

To take it one step further, for young people and adults, it is a way to be mutually accountable to each other, developing the capacity to undertake the cross-generational mentoring process that inevitably occurs when youth and adults partner to achieve a common goal. Cross-generational mentoring facilitates the flow of information in a way that shapes mutual learning and growth for young people and adults.

Young people have an integral role in Canadian society as evidenced by the strength of the youth engagement movement. Canada has made national and international commitments to the rights of children and youth with particular attention on youth participation as set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and A Canada Fit for Children. Ultimately, engagement of young people and adults is about developing relationships that value diverse perspectives and that support the growth of both the individuals as well as organizations.

There is a growing body of research and resources on the inclusion of young people in organizations, in conducting research (as researchers as well as subjects) and in their civic engagement in their communities. These organizations provide invaluable resources on engagement tools, strategies, benefits, challenges and successes of working in partnership with young people and adults. However, the value added of these guidelines is to provide foundational principles upon which these tools and resources can be implemented.

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1 Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement

The guidelines are a catalyst for growth in the youth engagement movement by establishing Principles that adults and youth involved in organizations can use to measure their evolving commitment and readiness to respectfully and meaningfully engage with each other. Furthermore, individuals, agencies and organizations are encouraged to commit, publicly, to the Principles. The public declaration on line at [www.fncaringsociety.com](http://www.fncaringsociety.com) will serve as a reminder to young people, staff, and the community that the organization is committed to an on-going process of youth engagement and participation.

## PROCESS FOR REVIEWING THE PRINCIPLES AND REFLECTIVE STATEMENTS

After reading the Principles, review the Reflective Statements. If you and the youth engaged in your organization are working within this model, you are ready to sign the support the Principles on line at [www.fncaringsociety.com](http://www.fncaringsociety.com).

If you are unable to say “Yes” to all of the statements, feel uncertain, or have received feedback from youth or adults in your organization to the contrary, review the Principles, talk to your staff and volunteers, and begin the courageous conversation for change. Once you are able to say “Yes”, you are ready to begin modeling excellence in engaging young people in your organization.

## PRINCIPLES

### *Principle 1 Youth Engagement Is Not A Program*

**Young people in Canada make significant contributions to society in the form of volunteer work, employment and by providing a unique perspective on society. Worldwide, young people have been the source of many of the most important social movements and thus it is critical for the wellbeing of us all, that national organizations support, nurture and respectfully engage with young people. As the contributions of young people can enhance all levels of the organization’s work, youth engagement should be viewed as a natural way of working in the organization versus as a special program.**

### *Reflective Statements*

- Our organization and our staff have begun a conversation with young people in our organization about the barriers to their participation and we have taken the necessary steps to address those barriers. This conversation will be ongoing as needs evolve.
- Our board of directors has passed a resolution or motion that clearly expresses the organization’s understanding of the value of youth engagement and has an organizational commitment to support youth engagement.
- We encourage debate and conversation, in a respectful way, and incorporate what we hear from our staff, volunteers and directors, regardless of age.
- We have reflected upon the principles of engagement and how they are, or are not, applied within our organization, and are constantly working towards ensuring that the principles are upheld.

### **Principle 2 Contributions Match the Organization**

**Youth and adults who are working with an organization should be recruited for their knowledge, skills, interests and commitment to the organizational mission – not on the basis of age alone. Employees and volunteers are much less likely to feel tokenized if the organization’s work lies within their personal knowledge and interest areas.**

#### *Reflective Statements*

- Our organization has engaged, and will continue to engage, young people and adults and respect their contributions not because of their age but because of their knowledge, skills and interests.
- All staff, adults and young people, working in the organization understand how they can contribute to the organizational mission.
- We have clearly defined policies and procedures for assessing the suitability of staff and volunteers to the organization.
- We have professional development plans for adults and youth, staff and volunteers, within the organization.
- Our organization celebrates success when adults and young people work together to achieve positive results.

### **Principle 3 One Person Cannot Represent the Many**

**All members of an organization bring a particular identity and perspective, but people who come from unique cultural groups or life experiences should not be asked to speak on behalf of that group. For example, a young person should not be considered “the youth voice” at the table – everyone’s voices at the table should be acknowledged as bringing different perspectives to the issue. Diversity of voice is integral to the growth of inclusion and engagement within organizations.**

#### *Reflective Statements*

- Our organization has a clearly identified policy where no one person will be asked to represent the voice of other members of a group they may be affiliated with.
- Our organization has a clear statement that the views of young people are welcome in all issues respecting the organization (except in matters that are clearly stated).
- Our organization has a clear statement that the views of adults are welcome in all issues respecting the organization in discussions involving young people (except in matters that are clearly stated).
- Our organization has identified a network of organizations that can provide and enhance our capacity to represent the many voices of youth and adults who are engaged in our organization.
- We have identified ourselves as an organization to our networks that can be called upon to assist and speak to issues of relevance to our mandate.

### **Principle 4** *Debate as a learning tool*

**Debate and critical analysis are key elements of a learning organization and personal growth. Debate and critical analysis of issues and organizational approaches, conducted in a safe and respectful way, challenges assumptions, builds on the experiences of experts and advocates and provides solutions to identified barriers to inclusion and engagement.**

#### *Reflective Statements*

- Our organization has a way of describing how it learns and we are able to communicate this clearly to adults and young people within and outside of the organization.
- Our organization has a way of gathering and analyzing challenging ideas, and emerging research etc., that are different from those held by the organization.
- Our organization clearly articulates to staff and volunteers that their suggestions and ideas are welcome – including those that may challenge organizational understandings and ways of working. If there are limits on this, these limits are made clear to everyone in the organization.
- Our organization has developed a procedure for responding to the suggestions or ideas of employees and volunteers.

### **Principle 5** *Dignity and Safety*

**Under no circumstance should young people or adults in the workplace feel that placing themselves in an emotionally, spiritually, physically or cognitively unsafe space is expected or required by the organization. This includes, but is not limited to: 1) sharing personal experiences 2) unsafe working conditions 3) expectations to take on more responsibility than the person is capable of managing and 4) exposure to traumatic situations without adequate training or support. Although many organizations are very thoughtful when it comes to these matters there have, unfortunately, been times when well-meaning young people and adults have placed other young people in situations that have been unsafe often because the potential consequences have not been thoroughly examined.**

#### *i. Sharing personal stories*

The dignity and safety of individuals who are sharing personal information will be protected. Sharing of personal experiences will be the choice of the storyteller. No person should feel obligated to share a personal story either as a way of being heard or to make broad-based change. Sharing a personal story must include the recognition of the possible consequences for the storyteller and his or her family and friends. These impacts can be short and long term and may offset any potential benefits for the organization. Although it is true that sharing personal stories can change an individual's point of view, it is rare that it leads to systemic change. Therefore, the use of personal stories is reserved for audiences who can respectfully hear the story and have the power to implement change – this is rarely the case in conference settings, for example. The motives of both the storyteller and the organization will be made clear and be discussed ahead of time. Measures are in place to support the storyteller before, during and after the sharing of personal experiences. Storytellers are more than their “one” experience and are recognized as such.

*ii. Workplace safety*

Young people and adults working in organizations should be fully briefed on workplace safety standards and possible hazards in keeping with workplace safety laws and regulations. This information should include: 1) how to identify and report unsafe situations 2) the right not to work in unsafe conditions or operate unsafe equipment and 3) safety procedures in the event of an emergency.

*iii. Non discrimination and harassment*

Young people and adults should be fully briefed on workplace standards and procedures to address workplace discrimination and harassment. It is particularly important to let young people know that harassment or discrimination of any kind is not allowed in the workplace. This includes, but is not limited to, discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, gender, disability, religion and sexual orientation. All employees and volunteers must be advised on how to report and get redress for incidents of discrimination or harassment.

*iv. Exposure to traumatic situations or events*

Special care and attention should be paid to ensure that adults and young people are not exposed to traumatic situations or events that are beyond their level of training or personal ability to manage. It is important that all employees and staff working in settings where traumatic events are possible are fully briefed on protocols for addressing traumatic situations and supports are provided by the organization before, during and after the crisis.

*Reflective Statements*

- Our organization has clearly defined policies on workplace safety and discrimination/harassment that are presented in a form that everyone in the organization (staff and volunteers) are able to access and understand.
- Our policies on workplace safety have special considerations for the safety and wellbeing of young people.
- Our organization has a policy that clearly states that adults and young people should not be asked to publicly share personal stories in any way without full disclosure of the possible risks including, but not limited to:
  - Possible personal trauma associated with sharing a difficult life experience across their life stages (e.g.: sharing something in video when you are young may cause you difficulty when you are an adult).
  - Negative impact on family or friends.
  - Being identified for one experience in their life (i.e., a sexual abuse victim) versus as a whole person.
  - Duty to report if the situation involves a crime or safety risk to a young person or other members of the public.
  - Liability if others cited in the story disagree that the content is a true telling of events.

- We have discussed the sharing of personal experiences as one tool in the change process and have ensured everyone in the organization, including young people, understand the limits and benefits of sharing personal stories.

### **Principle 6** *Avoiding False Expectations*

**It is important to be honest about the changing role of youth within an organization recognizing that there are limitations corresponding to age, experience, education and training. For example, some opportunities may be provided to youth only and are not open in the same way to adults or there may be different standards of qualifications for summer students acting in a particular role than experienced full time staff. An open, honest and clear conversation with young people about these limitations is important. It is also important for young people to realize that as they transition to adulthood, qualifications for career positions will change and they must be provided with the guidance and support to continue their education, and grow into different positions, as appropriate.**

### *Reflective Statements*

- Our organization has activities or processes that require specific levels of education, training or experience that are clearly articulated.
- If our organization provides unique mentoring opportunities for youth that expose them to activities or opportunities normally only available to people with specialized training or experience, we have clearly identified the levels of training/experience a young person would need to pursue to make this a viable career option.
- Our organization only engages youth to a certain age or within a certain age range, and we have clearly articulated our reasons for doing so.
- Our organization actively supports young people in their education by providing flexible work/volunteer hours and providing them with credit for their work so that they can include it in a resume.
- Our organization has policies in place to assist young people with their transition to adulthood within the organization and as they transition out of the organization.



*“Respect is reflected in thought, spoken word, and actions of a person or group that looks out for the betterment of others. It requires equality, balance, awareness, and acknowledgement from an individual without bias or prejudice.”*

### *Principle 7 Balance and Accessibility*

**Most people require workplace accommodations to support them in making their optimal contribution to the organization – including young people. These accommodations for young people may mean flexible meeting times, transportation and support for youth before, during and after their time at the organization. Accommodations for young people should be viewed as comparable to those made for adults in an organization. Many organizations have accommodations for employees and volunteers to assist them in making the maximum contribution to the organization (e.g.: flexible working hours, working from home, educational leave). A discussion about meeting the needs of the organization, and of the youth, involves concrete and measurable goals that are positive and possible.**

### *Reflective Statements*

- Our organization works with young people to identify any accommodations that can be made within the organization to support them in reaching their maximum potential.
- Our organization has a policy that volunteers, particularly young people, do not have to pay out of pocket to conduct their volunteer activities – including transportation to and from the workplace.
- Our organization has a policy of meeting with young people to ensure that activities and hours of work are structured in a way that supports their education and healthy development along with ensuring that they have enough time for family and recreation.
- Our organization has a policy to support the participation of persons with disabilities and this has been shared with young people in the organization.

## **DECLARING YOUR SUPPORT**

Once you have reviewed, and agreed, with all of these statements you can move on to publicly registering your support. Individuals of all ages as well as organizations can register free of charge by going to [www.fnrcaringssociety.com](http://www.fnrcaringssociety.com), clicking on the 7 ways to make a difference icon and then on the Guidelines to Support the Ethical Engagement of Young People. It takes under two minutes and is completely free. Congratulations to all individuals and organizations who register their support, and commitment to ensuring the active and meaningful engagement of young people.

## **SELF-MONITORING**

Because this initiative has been established by a Working Group of organizations there is no formal monitoring body. The action of publicly declaring your commitment is for the benefit of all members of Canadian society and the onus to maintain the integrity of the commitment is the responsibility of each signing organization. This tool opens the door for any individual, regardless of age, to hold their organization accountable and find opportunities to strive for excellence in youth engagement.

## ARTICLES AND REPORTS

This is not an exhaustive list of resources on youth engagement, however, it does provide links to resources that will assist your organization in continuing to provide quality support to staff, volunteers, youth and adults.

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*“If I am committed to youth engagement, I am committed to a relationship that goes beyond a project or a program.”*