

“Don’t Forget:” Additional Programming Considerations



SIZE

The size of a youth engagement program, activity or event is most frequently determined by the location and budget. Effective programs and events can range from 10 to 500, as long as the program design is appropriate for the size. The key with larger events is to understand and plan for a process-driven event, rather than an information delivery format. Remember, how young people experience the activity is just as important as the activity itself. Large events and programs should not compromise a young person’s opportunity to engage in hands-on activities, develop skills, share their voice, be supported, and feel like they belong. Using a knowledge inquiry and exchange process like the Young Decision Makers Model (YDM) model or Participatory Action Research is a great way to get a large group of young people engaged in exploring an issue.

LENGTH OF TIME

If you are bringing together a diverse group of young people from across the province or country, it is important to hold a program that makes the most out of this rare opportunity. Make time for achieving the program deliverables as well as creating an environment that encourages positive youth development(room for fun, safety,

learning, belonging, efficacy and contribution). Ensure there is adequate time for youth to get comfortable with each other and the agenda, before asking youth and adults to collaborate together. This community building will lend itself to a more productive and meaningful experience. Youth events are often scheduled for a Friday travel day, Saturday engagement, Sunday return travel day. This works, but an extra day or two provides significantly more effective program time. Week-long events can provide extraordinary results.

AGE

Do not underestimate the capacity of children and youth, when adults are actively listening, to provide important insights to policy makers, researchers and practitioners. Children as young as five and six helped inform Ireland's national indicators for child health by drawing pets in their representations of their "ideal" home – a component of home that was not yet considered by policy makers.

With the appropriate program design, children and youth of any age are capable of providing important insights to researchers and policy makers. Consulting younger children, 10-12 and under, is more easily done in their own communities, where issues of caregiver/parental consent and involvement can be resolved.

The rationale for youth engagement in policy and program development includes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which applies to all young people under the age of 18. It is appropriate, and part of Canada's UNCRC obligation, to engage youth in decisions that affect them. For instance, researchers and policy makers for the Health Behaviour in School-

Aged Children (HBSC) study brought together 15 youth ages 13 to 15 to review the study's findings because that was the age group that the study surveyed. The capacity of the 13-year-olds to work with the data and the graphs surprised many of the adults: "I learned that young people are smart, insightful and creative thinkers. I will see our data in a different way," (Researcher, Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study).

Too often, policy makers avoid engaging young people because of the increased logistics related to parental consent forms and unaccompanied minor travel arrangements for younger youth. However the voices of these young people are the most under-represented in our society (e.g. they cannot vote, they have limited purchasing power, cultures do not value their input as much as adults, etc.), which can often make them the most marginalized. While it may be easier to engage young adults, it is important to note that those 20 to 29 are developmentally very different from 13 to 17 year olds, and do not, in most cases, effectively represent youth because developmentally they are concerned with different priorities.

ADULT/YOUTH RATIO

The adult/youth ratio is influenced by the objectives of the initiative; in general the guideline is to ensure that there are enough youth to ensure diversity of youth voice, as well as a sense of collective youth voice. If only a small number of youth can be present, the agenda and the preparation of the adults should be shaped to ensure youth voice is prioritized.

If the objectives of the engagement activities include youth and adult

collaboration, and exposing policy makers/researchers to the youth engagement process, then a 50/50 youth adult ratio can demonstrate those principles in a visible way. However, the larger the number of adults you have present, especially if there is not much time to orient them, the more challenges exist in implementing a program that sustains meaningful and reciprocal youth-adult dialogue. Often, adults may be very well intentioned, but unaware of how their behaviours and language can disengage youth. If training adults is not the key priority, try to ensure there are more young people than adults represented.