

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

What Is It?

Program design should include input from young people, as they are best placed to name the barriers and challenges they face in seeking sexual and reproductive health services, and to offer creative solutions and innovations, thus making the program more likely to succeed. (IDS, 2016).

Meaningful youth engagement allows young people who are directly affected by programs to design, implement, monitor and evaluate these programs alongside implementers and program managers. It means that their input is respected, valued, and taken seriously.



This toolkit builds on the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) definition of [youth-centered programming](#), which is:

Encouraging young people to think, question, explore and search for answers, and in doing so they may be empowered to transform their lives and to influence the cultural context and local power dynamics that affect their lives.

Program designers and implementers must do their best to understand urban young people's realities, including by working in direct partnership with them and ensuring that their voices are integrated into every step of the program. This means viewing adolescents and young people as agents navigating a range of social, economic and political factors in their daily lives, rather than merely as program beneficiaries.

What Are the Benefits?

- In addition to bringing energy and fresh perspectives into program design and implementation (PSI, 2016), young people can **infuse insight into their worlds** at any stage of program design, implementation, and evaluation. By including young people in the decision-making process, it is possible that appropriate attention will be given to problems that might otherwise go unnoticed by adults (Dasra, 2017).
- Young people often **"speak the same language"** as the very population that adolescent / youth programming is trying to target. Specifically for urban poor young people, peer outreach can help to remove barriers to engagement. Therefore, the most hard-to-reach are often most likely to be reached by their peers (Speizer et al., 2013).
- When young people are engaged in every stage of a project—from design to evaluation—they are **exercising their right to participate**, which encourages their buy-in to the outcomes of the project as well as positive youth development.
- Young people need to trust the adults and their institutions in order for their collaboration to be meaningful. **Adult allies must build trust** by engaging young people throughout the process, demonstrating (not just saying) that their help is crucial, and making sure young people are taken seriously.

Convention on the Rights of the Child: Rights to participation

ARTICLE 12 | You have the right to give your opinion, and for adults to listen and take it seriously.

ARTICLE 13 | You have the right to find out things and share what you think with others, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms or offends other people.

ARTICLE 14 | You have the right to choose your own religion and beliefs. Your parents should help you decide what is right and wrong, and what is best for you.

ARTICLE 15 | You have the right to choose your own friends and join or set up groups, as long as it isn't harmful to others.

How to Implement?

Consult with young people prior to developing a program to better understand their lives

This will mean that young people can identify the taboos, potential barriers and nuances that may have an effect on program efficacy.

Partner with young people as researchers as the program is being designed

This will ensure that all of the “right” questions are being asked of the intervention. This includes using participatory research methods like [PhotoVoice](#) and engaging young people as interviewers.

Integrate young people throughout the project lifecycle to ensure accountability

This means that young people are informing the research question, the design of the activities, the engagement with partners, the feedback mechanisms and the analysis of the feedback.

You will find tips on how to effectively engage young people in all of the proven and promising approaches outlined in this toolkit.

What Is the Evidence?

While there are few data specifically correlating youth participation and contraceptive outcomes, especially for urban young people, there are several resources that outline models, principles, best practices and theories for why meaningful youth engagement and participation is crucial for sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

Helpful Tips

- Young people are not homogenous, **and any youth programming must account for their differences.** It's important for implementers to plan for diversity and be adaptive and receptive to feedback about what is working and what is not working. Just because people share an age group does not mean that one program approach will work equally well for all of them.
- **For youth participation to be meaningful, it must employ a human rights-based approach.** Meaningfully engaging young people goes beyond improving a specific health outcome. Quite simply, participation is their right.
- **Ensure that feedback loops are built into the project.** Are young people able to review the activities? Is their critical input taken seriously? Are they part of finding solutions to any problems that arise in the project or program? Are they able to reach their peers who are not accessing the service to determine why?

! Challenges

- **Reaching the hard-to-reach.** Depending on your context, you may need to ensure that the engagement of young people from key populations is prioritized. If your program is attempting to reach “the hard to reach,” try to reach them before you design an entire project or program.
- **Recognizing and rewarding young people’s expertise.** Don’t assume that young people can design your project with you on an ongoing voluntary basis. Offer honoraria, transit reimbursements, snacks, etc. for the time they spend with you designing or improving your intervention. Make the terms of their engagement clear by drafting a simple but clear memo of understanding, so that all expectations can be managed and everyone is set up to succeed.
- **Fully resourcing youth participation efforts.** Meaningful youth participation can often require more time and resources (especially in staff time). Account for this in your budget and workplan, and make sure you build in time and space for unexpected outcomes or insights.
- **Coupling youth participation with other youth-friendly service delivery approaches.** Some programs will include young people in the absence of truly integrating other strategies that make services youth-friendly. It is crucial that youth participation is one strategy among many to make sure that urban young people can access services that meet their needs.

Tools Related to This Approach

- [Young at Heart](#) (English | French), IPPF
- [For youth and Sexuality, Training Manual: The A to Z of MYP](#), CHOICE
- [Youth Participation Guide](#), UNFPA
- [Youth Engagement in Development: Effective Approaches and Action-Oriented Recommendations for the Field](#), USAID
- [Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change](#), Pittman, K., Martin, S., Williams, A.
- [Assessing Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics in India: The Perspectives of Adolescents and Youth](#), Population Council (INDIA)

References

- International Planned Parenthood Federation (2016) [Young at Heart: How to be Youth-Centred in the 21st Century, An Introduction](#)
- Population Services International (2016) [From innovation to scale: Advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people. A review of PSI programming approaches and experiences](#)
- Speizer et al (2013) [Timing and circumstances of first sex among female and male youth from select urban areas of Nigeria, Kenya, and Senega](#)
- UNICEF (2006) [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Child-Friendly Language](#)
- USAID & DASRA (2017) [Body of Knowledge: Improving SRH for India’s Adolescents](#)

To find out more, please visit TCI University at tciurbanhealth.org.