MEANINGFULLY ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE IN THE RESEARCH THAT AFFECTS THEM

Lessons from McCreary Centre Society's Youth Research Academy

McCreary
Centre Society

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ISBN: 978-1-926675-89-3
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YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY

Copies of this guide and an abridged toolkit are available at ***mcs.bc.ca/pdf/meaningfully_engaging_youth_lived_experience_guide.pdf***, ***mcs.bc.ca/pdf/meaningfully_engaging_youth_lived_experience_toolkit.pdf***, or by emailing ***mccreary@mcs.bc.ca***.

McCreary Centre Society

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This resource was created based on learnings from the first seven cohorts of McCreary Centre Society's Youth Research Academy (YRA; 2016–2023). We are indebted to all the young people who have participated in the YRA for the opportunity to learn from and with them. Quotes from many of these youth are included throughout this resource.

We would like to acknowledge the anonymous donor who supported this project, and all the organizations who believed in the importance of youth-led research. By awarding contracts to the YRA, these organizations have demonstrated a commitment to meaningful youth engagement in policy and program development and review.

McCreary Centre Society is privileged to be located on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples –the sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-Waututh), and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) nations. We also acknowledge the ancestral and continuing connection to this land of the Métis Nation.

To cite this resource: McCreary Centre Society. (2023). *Meaningfully engaging young people with lived experience in the research that affects them: Lessons from McCreary Centre Society's Youth Research Academy*. McCreary Centre Society.

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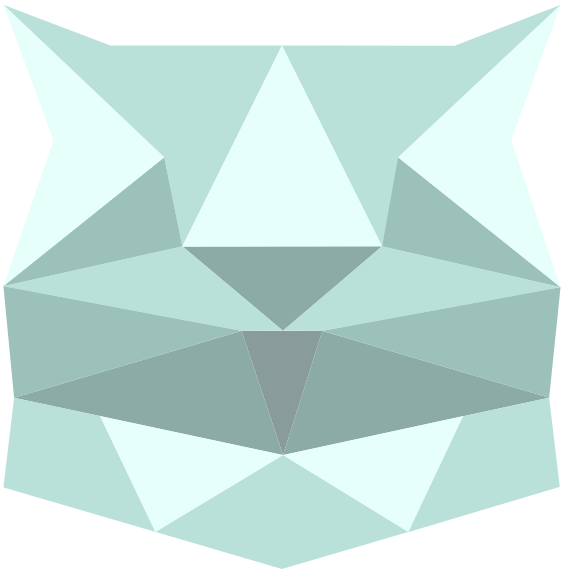

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INTRODUCTION

McCreary Centre Society (McCreary) was asked to create a resource sharing lessons learned from over four decades of meaningfully engaging young people in the research that affects them. As a result, we created a toolkit that contains key questions, worksheets, and ideas for anyone thinking about engaging youth with lived experience as researchers. The toolkit is available at ***mcs.bc.ca/pdf/meaningfully_engaging_youth_lived_experience_toolkit.pdf***.

This resource is an expanded version of that toolkit. It offers the background to those key questions and ideas. It also discusses lessons learned from our experience of youth-led and youth-engaged research, and specifically from engaging young people with government care (child welfare) experience in community-based research through McCreary's Youth Research Academy (YRA).

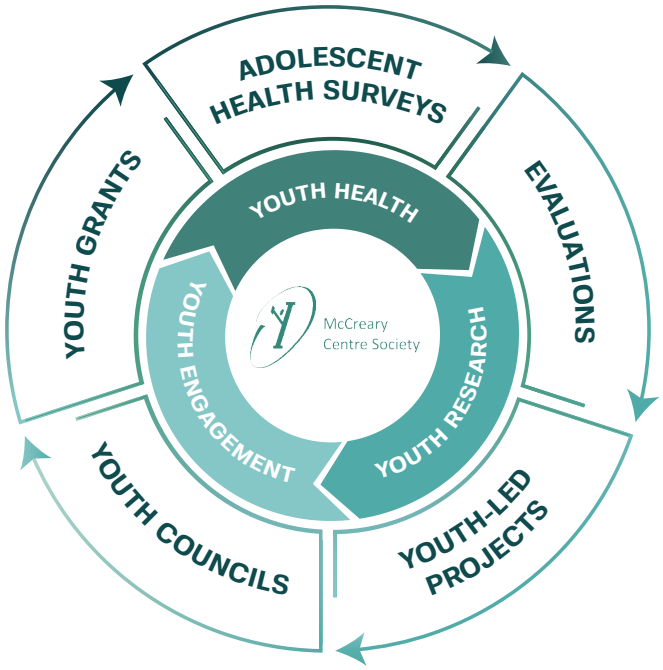
The guide begins with an introduction to McCreary and the YRA before moving on to discuss the theoretical framework which was used to develop the YRA, reflect on the role of adult alies, and consider the benefits and challenges of meaningfully engaging youth in research. The next section focuses on addressing the barriers to successfully engaging youth throughout the research process, and shares lessons learned from the YRA. The guide concludes by sharing examples of the YRA curriculum, and a summary of some successful strategies to support meaningful engagement throughout the research process.

We hope the toolkit and/or this resource will be useful for anyone considering including young people in the research process. However, we also believe there is no one correct way of engaging with young people, and all young people are unique in terms of their needs, interests, and preferred level of participation.

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact: ***mccreary@mcs.bc.ca***.

ABOUT McCREARY

Founded in 1977, McCreary is a non-government not-for-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, and youth-led projects. The Society's mission is to foster all aspects of youth health and positive development based on the strength of our research, evaluations, and engagement with youth and communities in the most culturally competent way possible.



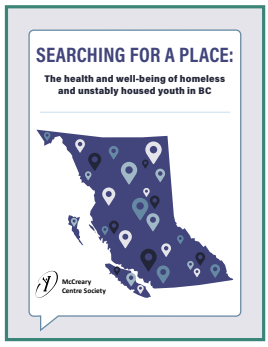
McCreary has always included youth in leadership roles, including at least two designated seats on the Board of Directors. The Society's Youth Advisory and Action Council (YAC) was established in 1995 to ensure youth have a permanent voice within McCreary. The YAC also contribute to improving youth health across British Columbia (BC) through a range of projects.

McCreary operates the BC Health and Wellness Youth Advisory Council which provides the BC Ministries of Health and Education with youth perspectives on substance use issues. Youth across BC are also employed as Youth Health Ambassadors. The role of the Youth Health Ambassadors is to gather and share youth perspectives on current health issues in local schools and communities. Through their role, the Youth Health Ambassadors also help to identify current and emerging health issues which should be included on McCreary's youth health surveys.

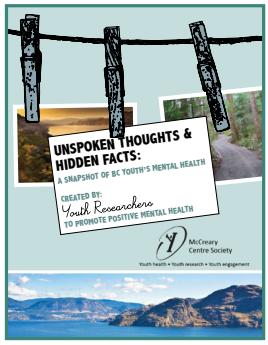
The Society has an established portfolio of community-based research projects, such as the provincial BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) which has been conducted in public schools every five years since 1992. The survey is informed by young people and reflects youth's current health picture, as well as their health-promoting and health risk behaviours. The BC AHS is considered the most reliable source for accurate information about BC youth's health and is used by federal and provincial policy makers, service providers, and other stakeholders with an interest in young people's well-being.

McCreary also conducts research projects with populations of youth whose health picture may not be captured in a school-based survey like the BC AHS, such as those who are homeless or in custody. Many of these projects are co-designed and delivered in partnership with youth who have lived experience of these issues.

Examples of McCreary youth-engaged research projects

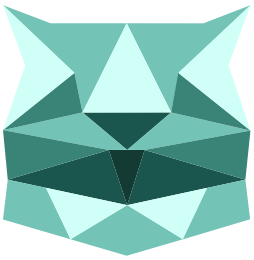


Since 1998, a survey of homeless youth has been conducted in diverse communities across British Columbia. Teams of homeless and precariously housed young people are trained to develop and co-deliver the survey, identify key findings, and create and share dissemination materials. The project has led to several positive changes among agencies serving homeless youth. The 2023 survey results are available at *mcs.bc.ca/pdf/searching_for_a_place.pdf*.

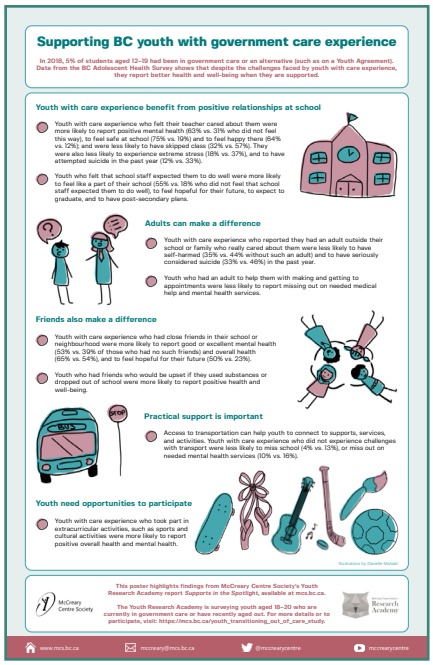


The Positive Mental Health project hired 28 young people with lived experience of mental health challenges who were interested in promoting positive mental health among BC youth. The youth worked together to develop research questions which they answered using data from the BC AHS, following training in qualitative and quantitative analyses. With staff support, the youth produced a final report and undertook a number of dissemination activities, including visiting BC school districts to share the results. To read the report, visit *mcs.bc.ca/pdf/Unspoken_thoughts_hidden_facts.pdf*.

YRA

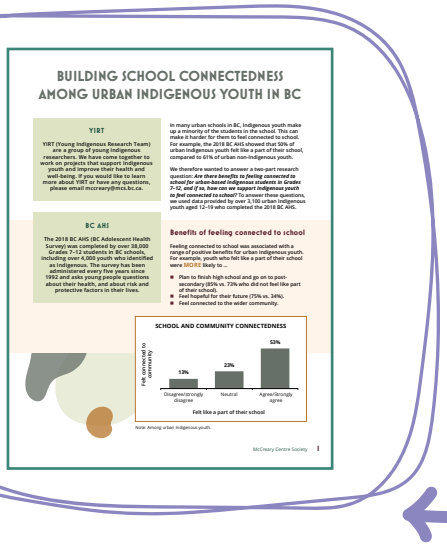


McCreary research has consistently shown that youth who have been in government care face systemic challenges to their healthy development, including barriers to achieving their educational and employment goals. For example, a 2020 report of BC AHS findings highlights some of the barriers youth with care experience face (***mcs.bc.ca/pdf/supports_in_the_spotlight.pdf***). View the accompanying poster at ***mcs.bc.ca/pdf/supports_in_the_spotlight_poster.pdf***.



The Youth Research Academy (YRA) was established to support youth aged 16–24 with government care experience who may be disconnected from education and/or employment. Through the YRA, young people can build their skills, ignite or solidify their interest in research and community issues, and be supported to engage or re-engage in school and/or the workforce. The YRA also aims to address the lack of engagement of youth in and from care in the policies, programs, and services that affect them. Since 2016, seven cohorts of youth with care experience have been employed to conduct research projects of interest to youth in and from care and the agencies that serve them. Most of the cohorts have taken place in-person, and two were completed online during the pandemic.

The YRA has exceeded all expectations in terms of engaging experiential youth as community researchers; generating sufficient income to become self-sustaining; influencing public policy; and generating public awareness of the needs of young people in BC, and in particular the needs, aspirations, and skills of youth in and from government care.



YIRT

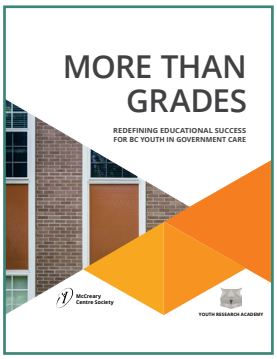
The newest McCreary youth group is the Young Indigenous Research Team (YIRT) which was formed in 2022. The group is comprised of Indigenous YRA alumni whose members work together on Indigenous specific research projects.

YIRT members have successfully secured funding to design and conduct their own research projects. Indigenous mentors and staff support are still available but there is greater independence in the projects youth choose, than was available to them in the YRA.

View the YIRT's fact sheet on school connectedness at ***mcs.bc.ca/pdf/yirt_factsheet_school_connectedness_urban_indigenous_youth.pdf***.

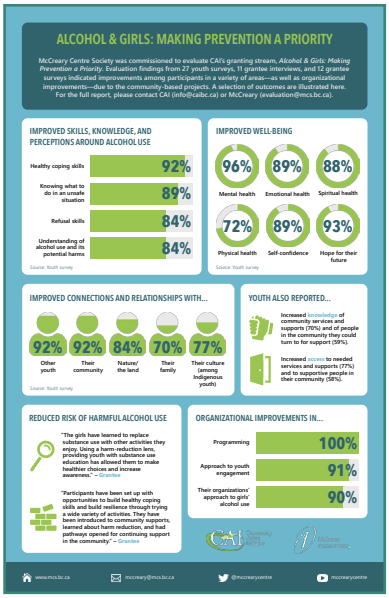
Examples of YRA projects that have led to meaningful change

The YRA were employed by a local BC agency considering the feasibility of implementing a high intensity 'family finding' model that had been used in other parts of North America. In addition to completing a literature review, the YRA interviewed agencies that had implemented the model, as well as local youth and service providers to gauge their interest in the model being adapted for use in BC. The YRA created a report of their findings and offered recommendations. As a result, the program was not implemented in BC and a program more tailored to local youth's needs was sought. A peer review article about the process is available at ***sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740923002062***.



The YRA conducted a study of educational outcomes among youth in and from care. Their findings led to the creation of navigator positions within some BC school districts, as well as the development of a graduation fund to support youth in care to have a similar graduation experience to their peers not in care. To read the report, visit ***mcs.bc.ca/pdf/more_than_grades.pdf***.

YRA members developed a survey question about length of school commute to be included in a population-level survey of youth in school, as they wanted to highlight the impact that moving to different foster homes can have if youth wish to stay at the same school. Analysis of the survey data showed that youth with a long commute were less likely to feel connected to their community and get enough sleep, and were more likely to miss school because they skipped and had no access to transport. The findings have been shared with all 60 BC school districts, and have sparked discussions about how schools can be more inclusive of youth with a long commute.



The YRA conducted a study of girls' underage alcohol use and identified protective factors which reduced the likelihood of problematic or risky use. The findings led a BC funder to support 30 projects which took an upstream approach to addressing girls' alcohol use. Evaluation results shared by the funder showed the positive impacts of these projects in the participating communities. To view the infographic, visit ***caibc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/12/Alcohol-and-Young-Girls-Summary-Infographic.pdf***.

Evaluation of the YRA

An evaluation of the YRA is ongoing, and was co-developed with members of the first cohort. The evaluation entails a self-report survey at intake, one at the end of youth's involvement, and a follow up survey 3–6 months later. Each cohort also creates two films (e.g., clay animation)—one during the first weeks of the cohort and one during the final weeks. The films reflect youth's goals and experiences in the YRA.

> ***This film represents what we are trying to do–change and grow over time. As we are growing, the research is growing with us."***

YRA evaluation results have shown that youth can be successfully engaged as skilled partners in all aspects of the research process, and that this can lead to changes within the education, health, child care, social services, and other systems that interact with young people.

The evaluation shows the YRA has been successful in supporting youth to gain research skills, develop knowledge and understanding, develop employment and educational skills, make connections, build positive relationships, and increase self-confidence and self-worth. YRA participants have noted that working on projects aimed at improving outcomes for youth in and from care has helped them to feel they have contributed to positive change, and as a result other youth may not need to experience the hardships they went through (Peled, 2022).

The majority of young people who have graduated from the YRA have stayed involved with McCreary, primarily to work on other research projects or as peer mentors. YRA graduates have also gone on to complete high school and post-secondary education, and to work in a range of fields including health care, Indigenous health, youth work, social work, finance, hospitality, research, and communications.

Clay animation and other videos can be viewed at *youtube.com/user/mccrearycentre*

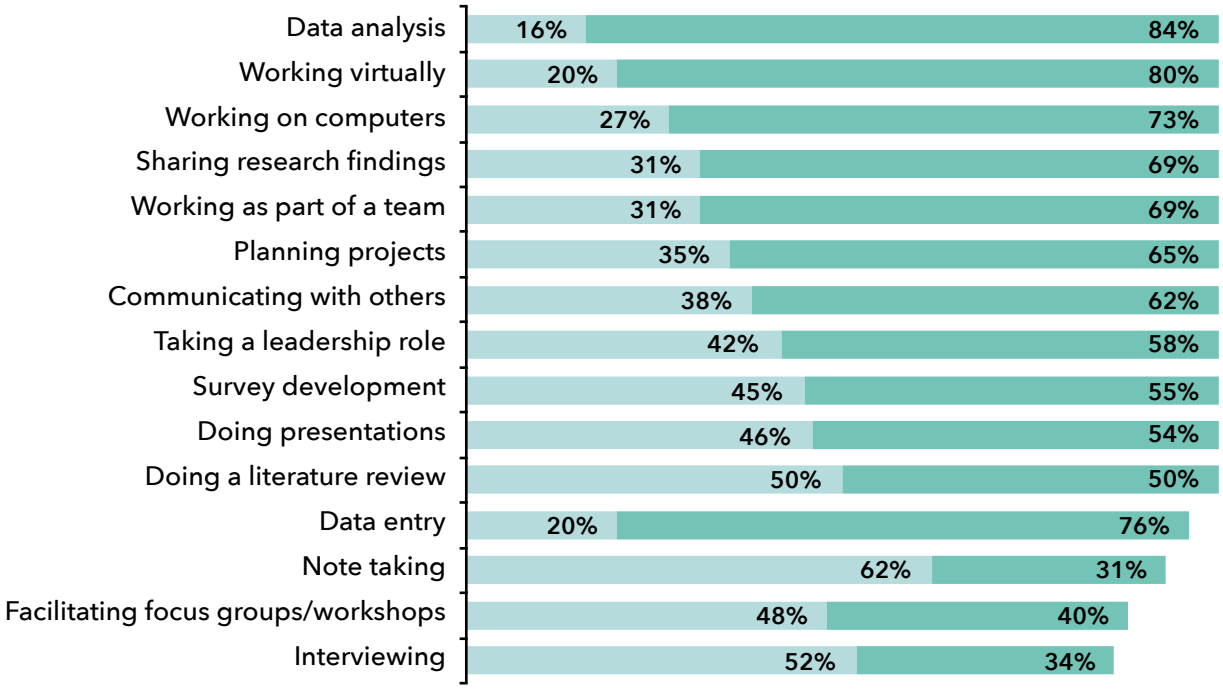
Learnings from the YRA have clearly shown that meaningfully engaging youth with lived experience in the research process ...

- ☑ Ensures the research is relevant and respectful.
- ☑ Supports youth to develop life and employment skills.
- ☑ Promotes community inclusion and helps youth to build positive connections.
- ☑ Ensures policies and programs can be informed by experiential youth.

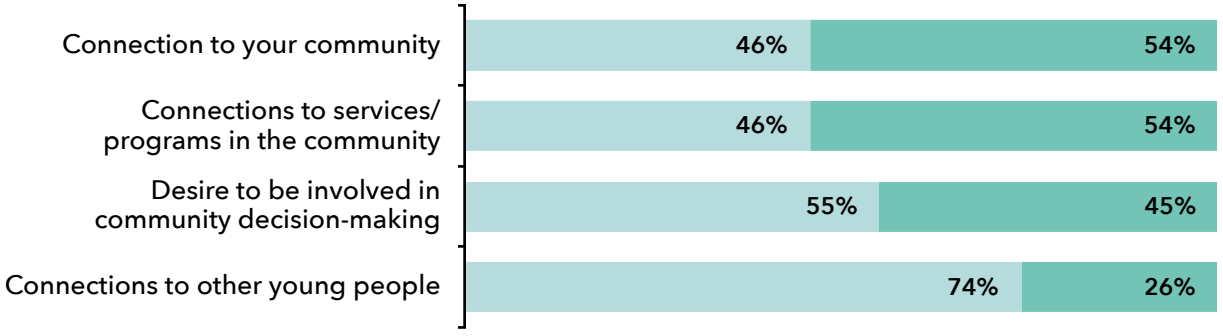
Email *yra@mcs.bc.ca* for the most current YRA evaluation results.

EXAMPLES OF YRA EVALUATION RESULTS AT COMPLETION OF THE PROGRAM

SKILL IMPROVEMENTS BECAUSE OF YOUTH'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE YRA



IMPROVED SOCIAL OUTCOMES BECAUSE OF YOUTH'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE YRA



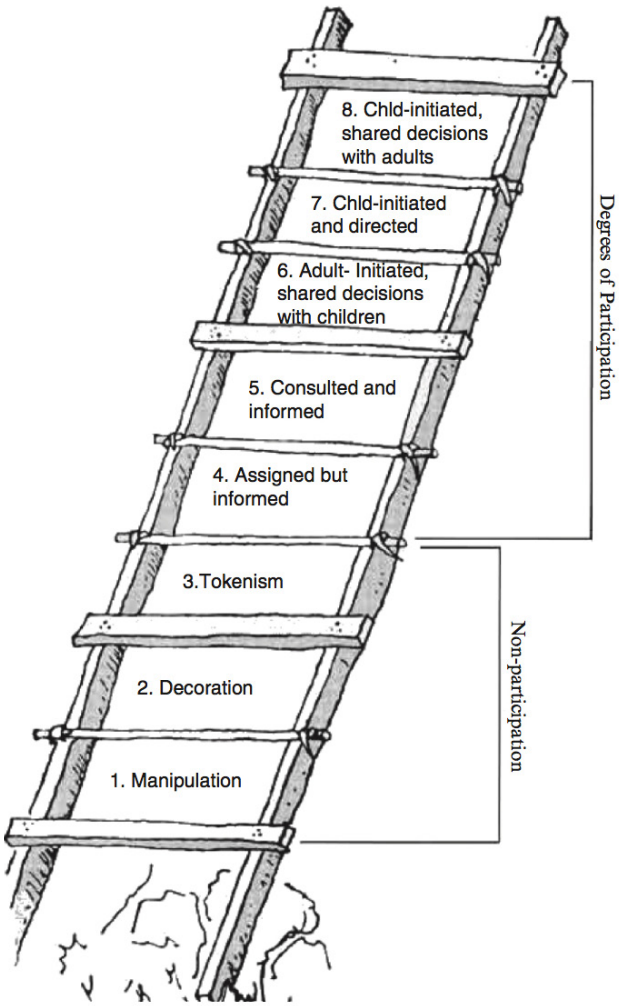
IMPROVED WELL-BEING BECAUSE OF YOUTH'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE YRA

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

McCreary defines youth engagement as: *The meaningful participation and sustainable involvement of young people in shared decisions in matters which affect their lives and those of their community, including planning, decision-making, and program delivery* (Smith et al., 2009).

Ladder of participation

There are many different frameworks of youth engagement. Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992) is one long-standing and popular framework that McCreary has used for considering levels of youth engagement within a project or organization. Hart's Ladder identifies the different rungs of youth engagement, from projects that do not meaningfully engage young people, through to genuine partnerships with adults and shared decision-making.



1 MANIPULATION

This is the first rung of the ladder and happens when adults use young people to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by young people. For example, McCreary's YAC were approached by a local politician to support a plan for changes in the use of a community space. The project was declined as the young people were expected to endorse a plan which they had no input into, and which did not reflect their views.

2 DECORATION

The second rung is also not meaningful participation as young people are used to help or support a cause in an indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people. For example, McCreary's YAC were asked to support a local university's program to engage youth with disabilities. The university group felt that the YAC's endorsement would help promote their program to youth with disabilities.

3 TOKENISM

This is the third non-participation rung of the ladder where young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate. For example, McCreary's YRA were asked to provide a 'youth voice' in the design of a provincial education initiative logo but the design of the logo had already been decided upon.

4 ASSIGNED BUT INFORMED

The first rung that is considered to reflect a degree of meaningful participation is when young people are given a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved. For example, members of the YRA were invited to sit on a local funding committee which reviewed and awarded grants. The criteria against which the grants were judged were already established, but the youth were engaged to assess the grants against those criteria.

5 CONSULTED AND INFORMED

The fifth rung is probably the most common way youth are engaged, and occurs when young people give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. For example, the BC Health and Wellness Youth Advisory Council provides consultation to the BC Ministry of Health on adult-designed media and communication materials aimed at a youth audience before these are released. Ministry representatives attend Council meetings to provide an update on how the youth's feedback has been incorporated.

6 ADULT-INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision making is shared with the young people. For example, McCreary hired a team of youth researchers to survey their peers about vaping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adults had already developed most of the items for a baseline survey and initiated the project but young people were engaged in shared decisions about additional survey items, survey administration, analysis, and dissemination.

7 YOUTH-INITIATED AND DIRECTED

The penultimate rung of the ladder sees young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role. An example would be McCreary's YAC organized a conference focused on turning research into action. The youth raised funds for the event, designed the agenda, created promotional and evaluation materials, and facilitated the conference. McCreary staff were available to provide logistical and safety support.

8 YOUTH-INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH ADULTS

The final rung of the ladder is when projects or programs are initiated by youth and decision making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults. For example, McCreary's YRA and staff team host an annual research slam for youth interested in conducting a fast-paced research project over a short period of time. Each event is co-designed and co-facilitated by McCreary staff and members of the YRA.

Hart's Ladder of Participation shows youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults as the top rung of young people's participation. However, some people believe that youth-initiated and directed projects should be the top rung. Both have merit, and it is important to consider which form of engagement is the best fit for any project, and for the young people involved.

Matrix of Participation

The Matrix of Participation (Badham & Davis, 2008) can be a useful tool to use with the Ladder of Participation. It can be used to consider where different elements of a project might fall in terms of meaningful youth engagement, whether these are the most appropriate and effective, and if improvements can be made.

Offering a range of levels of engagement across the higher rungs of Hart's ladder may be optimal. For example, by getting involved in adult-facilitated projects, young people can develop the self-confidence, skills, and networks that enable and encourage them to take a greater leadership role in future projects.

The example matrix below illustrates what youth engagement in an adult-initiated research project might look like, and highlights where there might be room for more meaningful youth engagement.

See ***Appendix 1*** for blank Matrix of Participation worksheet.

LEVEL OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT	PHASES OF RESEARCH							
		Developing research question	Planning research project	Developing measures	Collecting data	Analyzing data	Developing final report materials	Disseminating findings
	Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults							
	Young people-initiated and directed							
	Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people			✓	✓		✓	✓
	Consulted and informed					✓		
	Assigned but informed	✓	✓					
	Tokenism							
	Decoration							
	Manipulation							

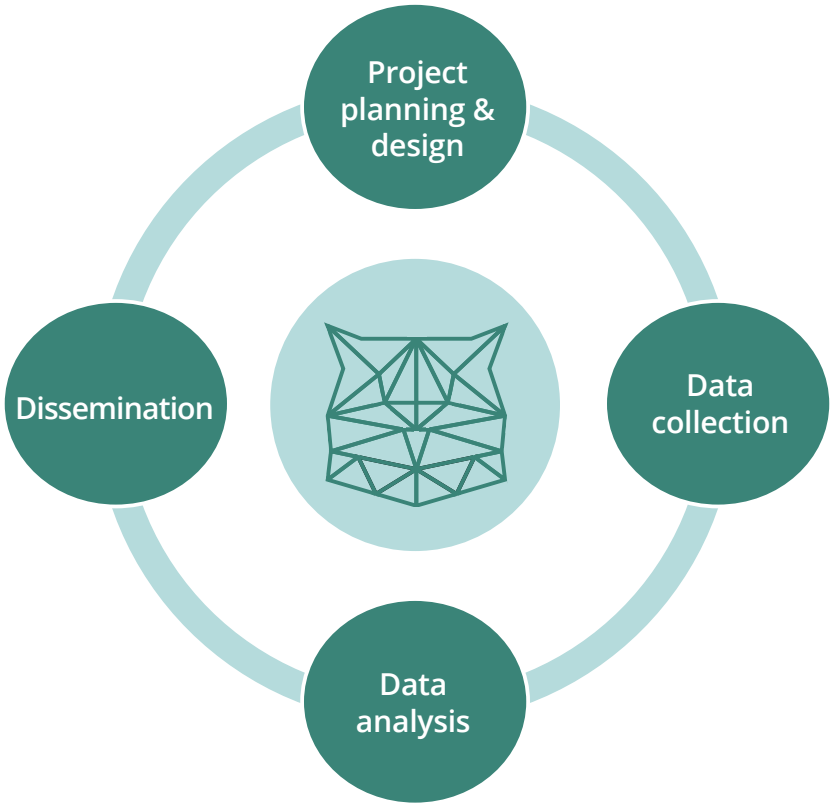
THE YRA FRAMEWORK

The YRA aims to engage youth in all aspects of the research process, while recognizing that not all aspects of every project will be youth-initiated or involve shared decisions with adults. However, before starting any project, McCreary staff conduct a thorough review of the project's purpose and components to ensure youth are meaningfully engaged in the most appropriate ways possible. For example, the YRA's longitudinal study of youth transitioning out of care in BC was co-developed by youth and adults.

For this study, youth initiate and direct data collection, create key messages, and disseminate the findings with support from adults. However, they are not involved in all aspects of data analysis, as there is a risk they may recognize some of the research participants from outside the YRA based on their survey answers, which could compromise participants' anonymity.

The YRA is designed to be trauma-informed and is delivered through a rights-based approach. Suggestions for how this might look when engaging experiential young people in the research process are described in the next section.

> ***Being a member of the YRA has helped me to feel more confident, be a better person, and shown me what I want to do in life. Before, I was just angry and sad at the world, but now I feel empowered to create change."***
>
> ***"Thank you for giving meaning to my life, for giving me a chance to participate in this research academy, for helping me make a difference in youth's lives, for hearing my voice, for everything. You've given me a family to call my own, and have given me happiness during my darkest times. Words cannot express the joy that this YRA has given back to me."***



Trauma-informed

Young people are often drawn to a project because of their own past experiences. It is therefore important to take proactive steps to ensure they are not re-traumatized or 'triggered.' It is not necessary to know whether a youth has a history of trauma. Taking a trauma-informed approach can help to create a safe space for all young people.

Create safety and trust. Adults should ensure that their tone, language, and body language remain calm, open, and respectful, including when young people are agitated, upset, or lashing out. Assigning a space where young people can go to talk in private, be on their own, or skip an activity can help to build a safe environment, and to create an atmosphere of trust and understanding.

Provide choice and voice. Ensure young people have all the necessary information to make informed decisions about their participation in the project. As much as possible, young people should be able to choose the tasks they engage in, the pace at which they move forward, and the level of their contribution. Young people should also be given the opportunity to voice any concerns and have these addressed. They should also be proactively asked for their opinions, comments, and questions.

Celebrate strengths and resilience. Young people who have experienced trauma have unique strengths and resilience. It is important to make time and space to recognize and celebrate these assets.

A YRA-specific space within the McCreary office where young people can hang out.

An example of applying a trauma informed approach

Recognizing that youth who are experiencing challenges in their life can struggle to wake up early and to stay present for an extended period of time, YRA sessions are scheduled for later in the day, and are no longer than 4.5 hours. The sessions are also structured to achieve a balance of different tasks, with the most taxing usually scheduled at the beginning of the session when concentration is highest.

Planned session content is also sometimes changed at the last minute to reflect world events or events that are happening in youth's lives. For example, the discovery of mass graves at a BC Indigenous residential school led to a changed plan for that day's curriculum. Space was provided for youth to discuss their feelings and to receive additional staff support.

A rights-based approach

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that participation leads to better decision-making and outcomes within individuals' own lives and in the wider community. For example, Article 12 asserts that young people have the right to freely express their views in all matters that affect them, and they have the right to have those views taken seriously (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Similarly, Article 18 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) asserts the right of Indigenous people to participate in decision-making in matters that affect them (United Nations, 2007).

Taking a rights-based approach acknowledges that young people have unique knowledge of their own experiences and needs which, when included, can lead to the development of more relevant and effective policies and programs (Lansdown, 2011). It is particularly important to ensure that young people who are marginalized by economic, social, and cultural systems of oppression have the opportunity to influence the systems and policy decisions that directly impact their lives (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009).

The YRA is based on a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach which recognizes and engages young people as co-researchers, as opposed to the objects of research (Baum et al., 2006; Kindon et al., 2007; London et al., 2003). This approach recognizes the rights of those who have traditionally been the subject of research to be included in the research process, from developing a research question, to collecting and analyzing data, and deciding how results should be shared (Bettencourt, 2018).

Safely sharing youth voice

The YRA is designed to ensure youth can share their voice and that of youth research participants in the safest way possible. This can be particularly important when youth are involved in projects where they are asked to speak about their own experience. Creative ways are developed with young people to support them to make decisions about how much they wish to share, how they wish to share that information, and ways that they can respectfully decline requests.

Example of protecting privacy within the YRA

YRA members were asked to reflect on their experiences of using substances in school for a project aiming to improve substance use supports in schools. To protect their anonymity they created a video which had their faces masked while they read aloud another youth's comments so that the comments could not be directly attributed to that individual.

ADULT ALLIES

Any adult working on a research project with youth researchers will hold power through their position, training, status, and experience, and must consider ways to make the relationship more equitable.

Being an adult ally involves a combination of attitude, skills, and awareness. Being an ally also requires a willingness to create a genuine partnership with young people where there is shared power, leadership, accountability, and learning.

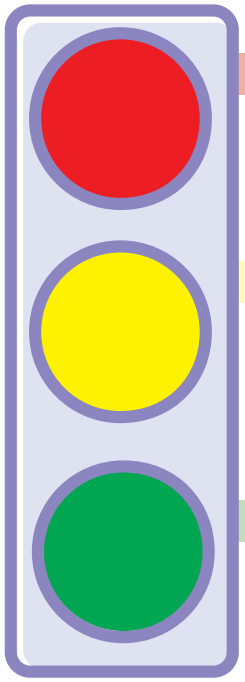
Having strong adult allies involved in a research project with youth benefits the adults, youth, and the organization responsible for the project. For example, adults are able to hear about the issues and topics that are important to youth and can respectfully ask questions to learn more; youth feel heard and valued and can learn from the experience of the adult allies; and both benefit from including the needs and wants of the youth. Organizations can also benefit by having increased credibility with young people.

Characteristics of an effective adult ally

- ☑ Non-judgmental and respectful.
- ☑ Creates a physically and emotionally safe space (including addressing discrimination and oppression).
- ☑ Actively listens and learns from youth.
- ☑ Follows through on commitments.

Adult ally traffic lights

Some people find the traffic light sheet useful as a tool to explore and record past, present, and future ways of engaging young people. The red light is for approaches or processes of engagement that have not been successful and which should be discontinued. The yellow light signals 'proceed with caution' and is used to record potential strategies of engagement which seem to have promise but which should be checked with young people before being used. The green light is used to record approaches that are currently working and which should be continued. For example:



STOP

Interrupting young people when they have not yet finished speaking.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Arranging a group outing to a hockey game as a thank you to young people for their participation.

CONTINUE

Offering young people access to healthy food when they arrive.

See ***Appendix 2*** for a blank traffic lights worksheet.

Continuous self-reflection

As an adult ally, it is important to critically reflect on your own thoughts, feelings, and biases. The self-reflection sheet in ***Appendix 3*** can be a useful tool for assessing where you are doing well and where you think you could improve.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ENGAGING YOUTH IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Benefits of meaningful engagement'

Meaningfully engaging youth in all aspects of the research process can provide opportunities for their development and empowerment, improve the research methodology, and generate useful knowledge for communities (Powers & Tiffany, 2006). This is because young people tend to:

- Know first-hand what is needed in their school and community.
- Think differently to adults and can bring fresh perspectives and ideas. For example, including youth in the development of survey questions and in data analysis can lead to important findings that might otherwise be missed. Similarly, youth input into the interpretation of research results can provide insight and context.
- Have access to their peers so they can recruit other youth researchers and study participants, which can be particularly helpful when engaging with 'difficult to reach' groups.
- Bring positive energy that can be contagious to the adults around them.
- Know about the issues that are important to young people, the ways they communicate, and the terminology they use/do not use.
- Benefit from being given opportunities. Young people who otherwise may lack positive role models and supports will not only gain tangible skills from their involvement but can also gain social and professional connections, a sense of stability, and be offered an alternative to engaging in risky activities.

IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

There are many systemic, organizational, and personal barriers that can prevent youth with lived experience from getting engaged in research projects and other potential opportunities from which they could benefit. Identifying and addressing those barriers can increase the chances that young people will be able to engage and stay engaged in a project.

Systemic barriers

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, young people have the right to be involved in decisions that affect them. However, many experience systemic barriers to participation. For example, poverty, geographical location, health conditions, and disabilities can all reduce young people's likelihood of being able to participate (Smith, Forsyth, et al., 2019). Indigenous youth can face additional barriers due to Canada's colonial history and current practices (Martin-Ferris et al., 2022). Family and cultural norms may also make young people suspicious and reluctant to engage with research institutions and adults in authority (Camur, 2006).

Organizational barriers

Whether a project is conducted by a university-based researcher or a community organization, there can be organizational barriers to engagement that need to be considered and addressed.

Questions to consider:

- What is our motivation for wanting to engage youth as researchers or as part of the research process?
- How important is meaningful youth engagement to the success of this project?
- What would successful youth engagement look like?
- What experience do we have of youth engagement and how do we learn from that?
- What are the major barriers to youth engagement within our organization?
- Are there any specific legislative or policy barriers to youth engagement (e.g., criminal record checks, employment hours)?
- Who will need to 'buy-in' to the youth engagement concept and plan before it can be adopted?
- Who will be responsible for ensuring youth engagement is safe and supported?
- Do we have the policies and practices in place to address issues that may arise?

Individual barriers

In addition to systemic and organizational barriers, young people can face personal challenges which make it difficult to participate. Common barriers include:

Distrust of adults. Young people who have previously had negative experiences with adults can be understandably hesitant to get involved in projects where they will encounter adults they do not know.

Lack of resources to participate. A lack of access to transport or money for bus fares, and inability to take time away from paid employment or from caretaking responsibilities, are just some examples of how reduced access to resources can impact young people's ability to participate.

Does not seem relevant or that anything will change. Many multi-barriered or experiential youth might be focused on meeting their basic needs. As a result, projects can seem irrelevant or unlikely to lead to the sort of change which would be needed to improve their situation.

Too busy dealing with challenges in life. Youth may be overwhelmed by the challenges that they face and have to put all their attention into addressing these.

Do not feel welcome. Youth might not feel welcome in the space where a project is based. For example, they may have had previous negative experiences entering similar spaces or cannot imagine themselves in a position where they would feel comfortable in the setting.

Do not know anyone who is involved. Young people often get involved in activities because their friends are involved. It can be intimidating to be invited to participate in a project where they do not know anybody, or think they may not have anything in common with other participants.

Are not aware of opportunities. Marginalized young people are often not accessing the spaces where opportunities are usually advertised. They may also not have the personal connections that can inform them about opportunities that might be available to them.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE YRA

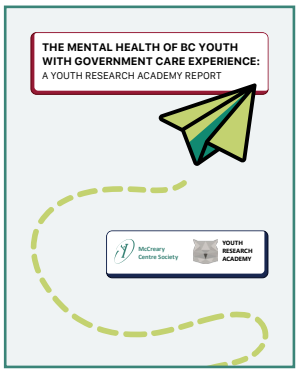
The remainder of this resource focuses on lessons learned from implementing the YRA model and shares examples of ways that barriers to participation can be overcome. A series of questions are posed which may be helpful to consider for anyone wanting to meaningfully engage youth with lived experience in the research process.

ENSURE SUFFICIENT FUNDING

Meaningful youth engagement needs to be adequately resourced for the duration of time youth are asked to commit. This is particularly important as research has shown that youth who have participated in projects and services that have ended due to a loss of funding are reluctant to get involved in other community activities out of fear that something similar will happen (Smith, Horton, et al., 2019).

YRA experience

The YRA was established with a three-year grant from a local community foundation. The funding covered start-up and office costs (desks, computers, etc.), as well as staffing costs and YRA participant wages. The ultimate aim of the YRA was to become self-sustaining. This was achieved through commissioned pieces of youth-led research and evaluation projects, which supplemented and then replaced the original grant.



The 2022 YRA report, The mental health of BC youth with government care experience, shares findings from the BC AHS, including protective factors linked to positive mental health and well-being for youth with care experience. View the report here: *mcs.bc.ca/pdf/mental_health_youth_with_government_care_experience.pdf*.

An example of a commissioned YRA report.

Questions to consider:

- How much will it cost to meaningfully engage the appropriate young people in the research?
- Do we have sufficient financial and staff resources to ensure success?
- If sufficient funding cannot be secured, can the project still go ahead in any form?
- Is there sufficient funding to allow young people to engage in all aspects of the research process?

> ***You should provide some kind of assistance with transportation costs if the organization is not an accessible location."***

ALLOW SUFFICIENT PREPARATION TIME

Developing a successful Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project or meaningfully engaging youth in research in other ways takes time to plan and prepare. The less that is left to chance, and the more prepared adults are, the more likely young people are to want to engage in the project.

YRA experience

Prior to the development of the YRA, youth were engaged in various capacities at McCreary, including as researchers, project advisors, board members, and employees. Young people's experiences in those roles were invaluable in designing the YRA.

The 10-month curriculum for the YRA took approximately three months to develop and is tweaked and adapted to reflect the unique mix of individuals, learning styles, and requirements of the commissioned projects to be undertaken by each cohort. New projects often mean changes have to be made to the curriculum, but this also ensures that learning is done on 'real life' projects.

Projects the YRA work on are all focused on positive community change and positive outcomes (rather than on negative outcomes). For example, a YRA report considering the health of youth in and from government care focused on factors that were associated with more positive health and well-being.

Ahead of each session with the YRA, staff and peer mentors plan out the activities to be conducted, including the timeline. The session begins with an icebreaker, check-in, and review of the day's agenda.

The original plan for the YRA was for them to complete two five-hour shifts a week. However, youth participants consistently started to disengage toward the end of their workday, so the plan was revisited and in-person sessions are now a maximum of four and a half hours. Online sessions are a maximum of two and a half hours (See ***page 33*** for more information about working safely online).

The YRA's *Supports in the spotlight* (2020) report used data from the BC AHS to identify protective factors that can support youth in and from government care to achieve positive health and well-being.

View the report here: *mcs.bc.ca/pdf/supports_in_the_spotlight.pdf*.

I think if anyone is starting something like the YRA, first, they should discuss what expectations they're going to have, if any, for the youth, because that way when stuff comes up they'll know how to approach it, and it's important for youth to know the expectations ahead of time … Also whoever is running or working directly with youth should be nice and friendly, because it's the thing that makes the biggest difference."

Questions to consider:

- What learnings can we bring from previous successful youth engagement projects and challenges we have experienced?
- Do we have a clear plan and realistic timeline?
- Will we periodically review the plan to determine what is and is not working?
- How will we know if we have provided a meaningful engagement opportunity?

DEVELOP MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships with other agencies can bring specialist knowledge and resources, and enhance what can be offered to youth participants.

YRA experience

Before the first cohort of the YRA, 12 local youth-serving agencies familiar with supporting youth in and from government care attended a planning session. Together with McCreary staff, the agencies identified the life skills and additional supports the youth participants would likely need to complement the employment and education skills to be offered. These agencies also provide guest speakers on a variety of topics including budgeting, tenancy rights, résumé writing, and healthy eating on a budget, as part of the life skills components of the YRA curriculum.

Partner agencies support the recruitment process for the YRA by sharing materials with youth who might be interested in joining. Partners can also be contacted to support participants with any services in which that agency specializes—for example, offering mental health supports or assistance with housing challenges.

Questions to consider:

- What partnerships will complement the project?
- Who would be important to include for an advisory committee?
- How will we support young people who have needs that are beyond our expertise?
- Who can we refer young people to if they are in crisis?

CONSIDER HAVING A PEER MENTOR

A peer (or near peer) mentor who has been through similar experiences to the youth participants can be an asset, particularly when that person can be a reliable role model to participants.

YRA experience

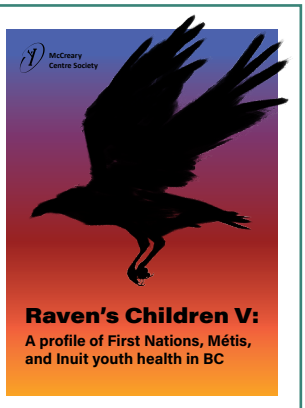
The peer mentor's role is to model and encourage active engagement in the YRA, help participants to understand and complete various tasks, and act as a liaison between staff and youth if needed. The mentors arrive earlier than the YRA participants to allow them time to go over what will be covered in the session and become familiar with the material, as well as to prepare snacks and the opening ice-breaker round. The mentors also stay for 30 minutes after the YRA ends for the day to debrief and plan the next session.

Experiences with the first YRA cohort suggested that a peer mentor could be an asset to future cohorts. At least one, and more recently two, YRA graduates have been employed as peer mentors. To address cultural safety within the YRA and to reflect the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in care, the peer mentor positions are filled by Indigenous alumni.

Questions to consider:

- Is there someone who would be suitable in the peer mentor role?
- Have we clearly communicated what the expectations of the peer mentor role are?
- Is a support system in place to allow the peer mentor to effectively carry out their role?

YRA peer mentors had an opportunity to further develop their statistical skills working on an Indigenous youth health report.



Martin-Ferris, S., Tourand, J., Moon, C., Sunday, N., Smith, A., & McCreary Centre Society. (2022). *Raven's Children V: A profile of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth health in BC.* McCreary Centre Society.

View the report here: *mcs.bc.ca/pdf/ravens_children_v.pdf*.

PREPARE AND SUPPORT ADULT ALLIES AND PEER MENTORS

Regardless of whether a project includes peer mentors, adult allies have an important role to play and need to be supported in that role.

YRA experience

Reflecting on previous projects, the budget for the YRA not only includes sufficient staffing for the hours that the YRA operates but also covers staff and peer mentor time to prepare curriculum, debrief after sessions, connect with youth participants outside of regular sessions if needed, and revise curriculum and training styles as needed. For eight YRA participants, we allocate up to 20 hours of staff time and 10 hours of peer mentor time per week.

As the YRA learn a range of skills—including conducting literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis, report writing, and dissemination—various members of the McCreary staff team teach different components of the curriculum. Regular training sessions are scheduled for the staff team and have included topics such as healthy youth development, cultural safety, mental health first aid, non-violent crisis intervention, and suicide awareness. A confidential weekly meeting is also held for staff to share challenges and successes the YRA participants are experiencing, as well as to ensure projects are on track and to identify where extra support is needed. The peer mentors also receive training and support on a regular basis.

Questions to consider:

- What staffing (and mentor) ratio will be needed to ensure the safe participation of youth researchers?
- How many additional hours might be required for planning and follow-up activities?
- Do we have the right mix of skills and commitment within the team that we need?

> ***"It's also important to have adults who are going to be youth-friendly. It doesn't mean they need to be young, but they need to be able to get along and vibe with youth."***

YRA members can work through a skill development sheet on their own or with staff support (see *page 45* for more details).

Skill	Working on →	Achieved required standard	Transferable to other employment	Comments	Goals and action plan
• Conducts literature search (academic & grey) • Summarizes literature • Critically evaluates literature • Synthesizes literature and documents sources • Completes references using APA style					
Report writing • Represents information accurately and clearly • Summarizes key findings • Effectively organizes ideas • Writes in sentences and paragraphs • Reference appropriately					
Using personal strengths • Recognizes personal strengths and skills • Uses skills in workplace • Recognizes areas requiring development					

Signed (YRA member) _____ Signed (Staff support)_____

ENSURE ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

As young people move through adolescence, they experience growth and change in a number of key cognitive and relational skills. They have an increasing capacity for abstract thought, and their intellectual and moral thinking deepens. They go through periods of emotional turmoil, their relationships change, and they begin to develop a firmer sense of identity. They are better able to delay gratification, and begin to think more about the future and about others. Younger youth tend to be more concrete in their thinking, and can be more dependent on adults to set the agenda. Additionally, some youth who have experienced significant trauma may be at a different developmental stage than might be assumed by their age. For these reasons, young people need developmentally appropriate activities and resources to be able to fully participate (e.g., Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015).

YRA experience

The age range for the YRA is 16–24, and the projects they engage in can sometimes include young people aged between 12 and 29. The curriculum is designed to be flexible. It does not always involve all youth doing the same activity at the same time but can be tailored to an individual's interests, strengths, and maturity level. For example, some YRA participants might be comfortable speaking in public or writing reports whereas others may be less so. Those who are less comfortable are given the opportunity to engage in tasks they are more comfortable with but which can also build their skills. These include creating PowerPoint slides, writing talking notes for themselves or others to present, or creating graphs and visual representations for reports.

It has been useful to build in short breaks and time for socializing into the YRA schedule, and to have clearly articulated objectives and plans available in youth-friendly language. For assignments outside the YRA (e.g., representing the YRA at a meeting of service providers, doing a presentation), a minimum of two youth are always scheduled to attend to ensure they can support each other.

Questions to consider:

- Have we considered the age and ability of young people in the project?
- Are the tasks that are assigned to young people developmentally appropriate?
- Some young people may be more or less mature than would be expected for their age. How will this be accommodated?
- Are written materials youth-friendly?
- Have acronyms and technical terms been explained, or can they be replaced with more accessible language?
- Can meeting times be flexible?
- Are there opportunities to socialize and to have fun?

Members of the YRA worked with other youth to create more youth-friendly versions of consent forms.

Youth health • Youth research • Youth engagement • Youth health • Youth research • Youth engagement • Youth health • Youth research • Youth engagement • Youth

Dear Student,

2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey

Your class is invited to take part in a youth health survey. McCreary Centre Society is a BC charity. We carry out the survey every five years. We use the results to improve youth health in your community and across BC. Schools, government, and youth workers also use the information you give us for planning programs.

We are inviting over 40,000 British Columbia students in Grades 7–12 to take part. We hope you will fill out the survey, but it is your choice. You can refuse, or skip questions, or stop at any time. If you do not want to take the survey, your teacher will give you something else to do.

The survey takes most students 30–45 minutes to complete. A nurse will pass out the surveys, and you fill it in by yourself. Questions on the survey ask you how you feel about your school, community, and people in your life. Other questions ask about your physical and mental health, injuries, and bullying. There are also questions about things you do that might affect your health, like alcohol or drug use, leisure activities, sex, foods you eat, your technology use and your sleep.

The survey is confidential

Your answers will be kept private and no one at school will see them. No one will be able to link your answers to you. We will keep the surveys in locked offices at McCreary Centre Society where only trained researchers can look at them.

Do not put your name on the survey. If you do write your name on the survey, and you say you were abused or are thinking about suicide or hurting someone, we have to report this to help keep you safe.

Risks and benefits

You will not benefit directly from taking part in the survey, but if you do, you will have a voice in planning services and programs, and will help to make change where it is needed. A risk associated with filling out this survey might be that you find a question sensitive or upsetting. If this happens you can talk to the nurse who is here today. We will also give you a card with a list of youth helplines. You can call them if you want to talk to someone about your health or issues you might be having. Another risk is that another student might try to peek at your answers, so it is a good idea to cover them up as you write.

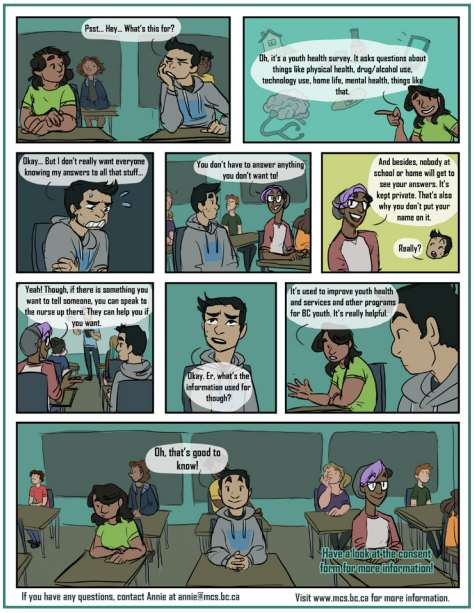
You do not have to sign anything. We will know you agreed to take part if you hand in your finished survey.

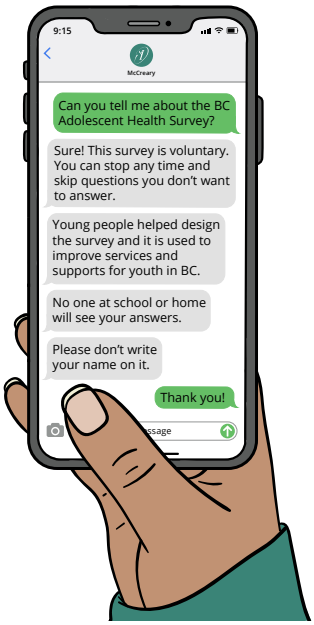
If you have any questions or want to see the survey results, contact Annie at her email or number below, or check out our website, www.mcs.bc.ca. If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or your experiences while participating in this survey, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598, or if long distance, e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Thank you,

McCreary Centre Society

Page 1 of 1





Original

Youth-friendly versions

ENSURE INCLUSION AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Creating a culturally sensitive, inclusive space requires ongoing self-awareness, self-reflection, and a commitment to learning and to reflecting on and addressing personal biases. For example, it is important to acknowledge that intent and impact may not be the same, and it should not be assumed that because something was intending to be inclusive, that this was actually the case.

YRA experience

As all the YRA are youth with government care experience, and Indigenous youth are overrepresented in the government care system, their needs, experiences, and world view need to be acknowledged and included, particularly as they may be very different to those of their non-Indigenous peers. Indigenous members of McCreary staff and the Indigenous peer mentors work with non-Indigenous staff to ensure the curriculum is culturally sensitive and incorporates an Indigenous world view. Indigenous youth in the YRA also get opportunities to work on Indigenous specific projects.

Youth are asked at the interview for the YRA if they may need any accommodations to allow them to fully participate. This provides young people with an opportunity to disclose any health conditions or disabilities that they may have, to discuss how these may impact their participation and to share how they can be supported.

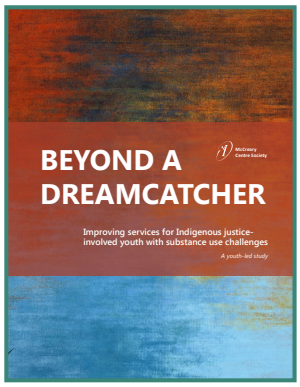
Newcomer youth are often engaged in YRA projects. The youth researchers are supported to consider and seek to address language and cultural barriers for these youth. For example, this might be achieved by ensuring there are opportunities to discuss different cultures and customs, and ensuring no events are scheduled on days which may be important cultural holidays or festivals.

> ***At the time I was fully pre-transition, and with McCreary I thought this place might actually help me to be out, and I can contribute a helpful point of view. It was so important that I could be out and it was a safe environment to do that."***

Questions to consider:

- Are we considering other relevant world views? For example, how can we move beyond a Western colonial approach to this project, and ensure Indigenous world views are incorporated and respected?
- How can we make our space welcoming of all cultures, genders, and sexualities?
- Is translation software available?
- Are there opportunities to participate that do not rely heavily on language skills?
- Have we taken the time to learn about youth's background, their cultural needs, and dietary restrictions?
- Are there cultural holidays we should plan around?

Example of a research project conducted by Indigenous members of the YRA



Indigenous members of the YRA designed and delivered a youth-led study to better understand the barriers experienced by justice-involved Indigenous youth with substance use challenges. The project identified promising practices and recommendations to reduce barriers to engaging with substance use services for Indigenous youth who are justice-involved or at risk of justice involvement (Smith, Horton, et al., 2019).

The Indigenous youth-led methodology of the project made it possible for participants to have safe and open conversations and to gather useful information from over 300 youth who may have otherwise been reluctant to take part. Evaluation findings also demonstrated the benefits of participation in the project for the Indigenous youth researchers (Smith, Horton, et al., 2019).

View the report here: *mcs.bc.ca/pdf/beyond_a_dreamcatcher.pdf*.

Dissemination materials created by Indigenous members of the YRA included a board game illustrating a youth's journey through substance use services.

DEVELOP RECRUITMENT, ORIENTATION, AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

It is important to be flexible and to learn along the way about what is effective. However, having a plan for recruitment, orientation, and retention can help to ensure a project reaches the intended young people and they remain involved.

Recruitment

Finding the 'right' young people to engage can be challenging, particularly among harder to reach groups, and requires careful consideration.

Traditional ways of targeting young people—such as advertising on school and community notice boards, or through social media and newsletters—will not reach youth who do not read these. Additionally, young people often cannot see their skills. They might need to have them pointed out and acknowledged before they will consider applying to participate.

YRA experience

> *I didn't apply originally [to join the YRA] because I was worried about not being able to reach expectations of the program, and that my depression and anxiety might get in the way."*

For the YRA, our most successful recruitment strategy has been through allies such as youth workers and school counsellors. These trusted adults can mention opportunities to young people who they think might benefit, and with whom they already have a relationship.

Youth-friendly recruitment materials are circulated to agencies that work with youth in and from care, including social service agencies, alternative education programs, and Indigenous service providers. All recruitment materials (posters and brief application forms) directly invite youth from typically excluded groups to apply, such as Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and youth with justice involvement.

YRA recruitment poster

All eligible applicants to the YRA are invited for an interview (i.e., they are aged 16–24, have care experience, and indicate they are available to work the required number of hours a week). Interviews take place in comfortable armchairs, in a youth-friendly space, and refreshments are provided. The interview is structured to be a casual conversation that covers information about projects the cohort will work on, the skills that participants can develop, and details of pay, conditions, and expectations. The interview is also used to stress that no previous research experience is necessary, and to ask about needed supports, goals, and how the youth learns best.

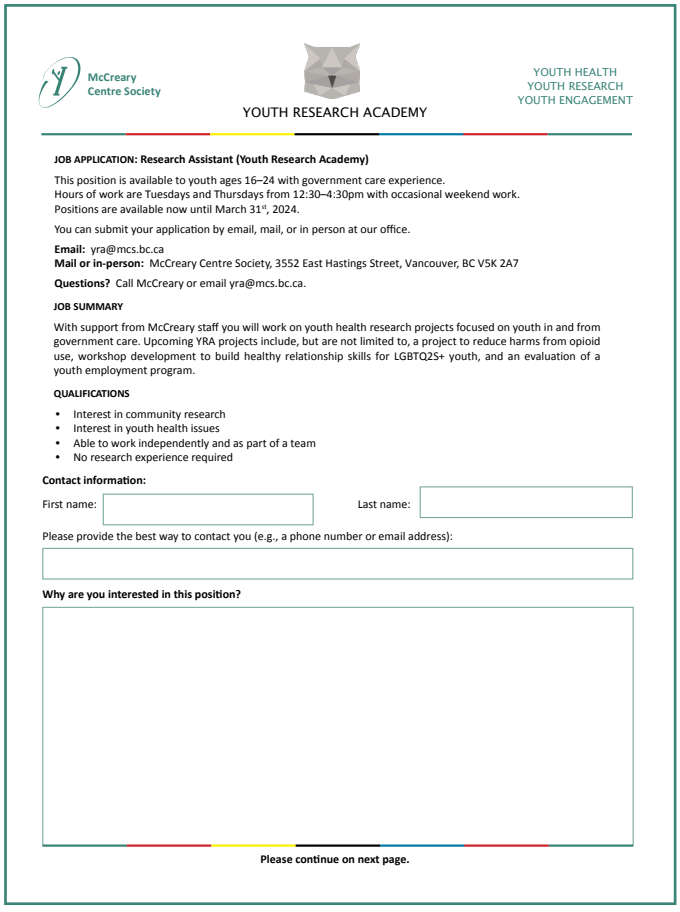
Youth are asked to provide a reference who can speak to the suitability of the youth's fit with the YRA. This is usually a caregiver, teacher, or youth worker. The referee is asked how they feel the youth learns best, if they have any concerns about the youth joining the YRA (e.g., has the youth been known to pose any danger to others), and how best to support them when they experience challenges. If youth are under 19 and in school, a check is completed to ensure the YRA will not conflict with youth's school commitments and educational goals.

The interview process is completed as quickly as possible (usually within a week of receiving an application), and the first eight eligible candidates are selected. Exceptions may be made if the prospective YRA cohort is lacking diversity. In such cases, spaces are kept open to ensure the makeup of the YRA reflects that of BC youth in care and includes Indigenous youth, gender and sexual minority youth, and youth from visible minorities. As youth in care may have faced many rejections prior to applying to join the YRA, any youth who is not immediately accepted is contacted to be given an explanation, and potential alternative opportunities are discussed.

Questions to consider:

- Is the recruitment process transparent and fair?
- How will candidates be selected?
- How will candidates be informed if they have not been successful?
- How will diversity be represented within our recruitment strategy?
- Are recruitment materials accessible and appealing to diverse youth?
- What additional efforts will be made to target those hardest to reach?

YRA application form (page 1 of 2). Available at:
mcs.bc.ca/youth_research_academy



McCreary Centre Society

YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY

YOUTH HEALTH
YOUTH RESEARCH
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

JOB APPLICATION: Research Assistant (Youth Research Academy)

This position is available to youth ages 16–24 with government care experience.
Hours of work are Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30–4:30pm with occasional weekend work.
Positions are available now until March 31st, 2024.

You can submit your application by email, mail, or in person at our office.

Email: yra@mcs.bc.ca
Mail or in-person: McCreary Centre Society, 3552 East Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC V5K 2A7

Questions? Call McCreary or email yra@mcs.bc.ca.

JOB SUMMARY

With support from McCreary staff you will work on youth health research projects focused on youth in and from government care. Upcoming YRA projects include, but are not limited to, a project to reduce harms from opioid use, workshop development to build healthy relationship skills for LGBTQ2S+ youth, and an evaluation of a youth employment program.

QUALIFICATIONS

- Interest in community research
- Interest in youth health issues
- Able to work independently and as part of a team
- No research experience required

Contact information:

First name: Last name:

Please provide the best way to contact you (e.g., a phone number or email address):

Why are you interested in this position?

Please continue on next page.

Orientation

A well-planned orientation welcomes youth and provides them with the resources and information they need to be successful. It should include time built in for relationship building and networking. (It is also important to factor in time throughout the project to build connections and develop healthy relationships.)

YRA experience

The YRA orientation is scheduled for the first two weeks of the youth's employment, and constitutes a mix of informal and structured activities. The orientation process includes opportunities to meet all McCreary staff and hear about their roles, as well as about their career path to working at McCreary. The orientation also includes a tour of the work and break spaces, and the opportunity to share a meal and get to know other participants. In addition, practical tasks are covered, such as completing tax forms, reviewing the policy and procedure manual, and discussing expectations and renumeration. The orientation is also used to discuss the projects that the youth researchers will be working on and a rough timeline of deliverables.

A range of activities are scheduled during the orientation and throughout the YRA which incorporate different learning styles. For example, some youth thrive working individually while others do better as part of a group. Similarly, some youth like to receive written materials while others prefer a more auditory and hands-on approach.

All new members of the YRA review and sign a job description as part of the orientation process.

Questions to consider:

- What will the orientation cover?
- Are there opportunities to develop relationships during the orientation process?
- Is the orientation tailored to the individuals present?

YRA job description

McCreary Centre Society

YOUTH HEALTH
YOUTH RESEARCH
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY

JOB TITLE: Youth Research Assistant (Youth Research Academy)
This position is available to youth with government care experience.

OFFICE BASE: McCreary Centre Society, 3552 East Hastings Street, Vancouver

HOURS OF WORK: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:30–4:30pm
June 22nd, 2023–March 31st, 2024
Occasional additional hours (may include weekends)

PAY: $17.00 per hour

SUMMARY: With support from McCreary staff, you will work on youth health research projects focused on youth in and from government care.

JOB QUALIFICATIONS/REQUIREMENTS:

- Interest in community research
- Interest in youth health issues
- Able to work independently and as part of a team
- Able to work Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30–4:30pm
- No research experience needed

RESEARCH ASSISTANTS IN THE YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY WILL LEARN TO:

- Develop research and evaluation projects
- Clean, enter, analyze, and interpret data from evaluation and research projects
- Organize and facilitate interviews and focus groups
- Assist in coordinating research events
- Assist in the preparation of community reports and fact sheets
- Represent the Youth Research Academy in the community
- Support presentations, workshops, and other dissemination materials

I have read and understand the requirements of this position. I have read and received training in the Society's policies and procedures and agree to abide by these.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

3552 East Hastings Street | Vancouver BC | V5K 2A7
mccreary@mcs.bc.ca | mcs.bc.ca | 604-291-1996

Retention

Retention is important to the success of any project. High turnover or dwindling numbers can negatively affect morale and effectiveness, can have budgetary implications, and can impact project timelines.

YRA experience

Youth have occasionally disengaged from the YRA as a result of health challenges or other challenges in their lives. However, the majority complete the 10-month program. A number of strategies have been useful in increasing the likelihood that young people will complete their time in the YRA. These include:

- Assigning a staff mentor to support each participant. The mentor offers regular one-to-one check-ins to support the youth to reflect on their progress, and to identify areas requiring further development or support.
- Ensuring staff are open, non-judgemental, and take a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approach.
- Providing 'real life' projects for youth to work on. For example, projects that can highlight important local issues and lead to improvements for youth in the community.
- Ensuring participants have the opportunity to witness the impact of their work in the community.
- Offering opportunities for participants to engage with peers and supportive adults to develop social networks and natural supports.
- Addressing any problems that arise as quickly as possible with clarity and compassion.
- Anticipating challenging times for participants when they may need additional support, such as during family holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving); when transitioning out of care on their 19th birthday; or graduating from the YRA.
- Connecting participants who experience additional challenges to supports and resources through partner agencies (e.g., housing, food, mental health).
- Conducting a youth-designed evaluation and making changes to the YRA based on the successes and challenges identified.
- Offering youth the opportunity to reconnect if they do disengage from the YRA.
- Ensuring youth know who to call if they will not be attending, and what will happen if they are unable to attend a session. For example, if they miss a rehearsal of a presentation they may not be able to participate in that presentation.

I felt useful and appreciated."

"I kept coming because of the new skills we were learning."

"Meeting new friends, working with data was what helped me stay engaged."

Questions to consider:

- Has a retention strategy been developed?
- Have we asked young people what will help them to stay involved?

CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Whether youth are being engaged in person or virtually, there are a number of key considerations that can help to ensure the space is as physically and emotionally safe as possible.

Safe physical space

The physical environment can impact feelings of safety, as well as productivity and engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown the need to adapt the physical environment to meet current health and safety requirements. For example, masks may be required, young people may need to sit further apart than previously, etc.

YRA experience

> *I love the calm and mostly quiet work office."*

Participants in the YRA need access to a computer, as well as the space to be able to sit in a circle and share ideas. To accommodate this, an open area in the McCreary office building was reconfigured to create workstations around the outside of the room and an open space in the middle that could be used to form a discussion circle. To reduce the potential power imbalance associated with having a staff desk, the room was designed so that staff did not have an assigned workstation. Participants however, have appreciated having a dedicated work station where they can store items such as notebooks, worksheets, and pens.

The workstations were configured to ensure that wherever youth sit, they have access to two ways to exit and that staff could sit next to youth without encroaching on their personal space. Ideally, the layout would also ensure that nobody has to sit with their back to the room. However, as this is not possible at McCreary with the constraints of the building, applicants to the YRA are shown the space prior to joining, so they can visualize whether it will work for them.

A separate space in the building has also been designated as a 'chill out room' with casual seating, soft lighting, and snacks. Youth can hang out here (without staff) before and after their shift, or if they are having a hard time and need to step away from a session. In addition, there is a communal kitchen where youth can prepare food and eat together.

Questions to consider:

- Is the space set up with consideration for trauma-informed practice?
- Is the space as quiet and free of distractions as possible?
- Is there a safe space where young people can go if they need to leave a session?
- Have the exits and washrooms been clearly signposted?
- Are there equipment and materials (e.g., pens and paper) which young people might need?

YRA peer mentors prepare smoothies for participants.

Safe online space

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a digital divide between those who have easy access to online resources and those who do not, but it has also opened up greater possibilities for online engagement.

YRA experience

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that two cohorts of the YRA were conducted virtually. This allowed us to engage young people who would not otherwise have participated, including those experiencing agoraphobia and social anxiety, living outside the Lower Mainland of BC, and experiencing transportation challenges. However, Wi-Fi and computer access were an issue for many members of the YRA, and funding had to be secured to assist young people to participate remotely.

Working virtually also raised new challenges such as how to maintain workplace standards, encourage youth to keep their cameras on, ensure other people did not hear confidential information discussed within the YRA, and how to adapt the curriculum for online delivery.

Learnings from the two virtual cohorts of the YRA showed that projects and tasks generally took longer to complete online than they did in person, particularly as screen fatigue meant that YRA sessions were reduced to 2.5 hours twice a week. It was also hard for youth to create natural connections with each other during online sessions, so additional strategies had to be used to provide them with opportunities to get to know each other. An example was having them work collaboratively in pairs in a break out room.

Questions to consider:

- How can young people's technology needs be accommodated to ensure they can participate virtually?
- Can we provide virtual backgrounds for young people working remotely?
- Have we developed guidelines with young people about the expectations for online working and meetings?
- Are we using a platform that is easy for youth to access and use?
- How will we connect with young people if they become upset or disconnect?

A YRA backdrop was created for young people to use during sessions to allow them to conceal their background.

Safe emotional space

Building a safe emotional space can include small but significant steps such as taking the time to check in on each youth's pronouns, and learning about and acknowledging the traditional territory where any meeting or event is taking place.

Creating a safe space can also include ensuring staff and peer mentors come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Having staff and mentors who reflect the diversity of youth participants helps youth feel welcome and understood. When youth see themselves reflected in those in leadership positions, they may also feel encouraged to take on new roles with greater responsibilities themselves (Smith, Horton, et al., 2019).

YRA experience

> *"It feels like a safe environment– caring & understanding."*

> *"A trauma-informed lens is indispensable for this kind of work. It's important to make sure staff working with youth are properly trained."*

To create a safe and welcoming space, staff greet youth when they arrive, ask how they are, and ensure youth know their presence is valued. Positive relationships between youth are fostered through the creation of a group agreement which sets out how everyone agrees to work together and treat each other. The group agreement is created during the YRA orientation. The finalized agreement is hung near the workstations as a reminder, and so it can be referenced if needed.

Ice breakers are used at the beginning of every YRA session to help create group cohesion, get everyone chatting, and learn more about each other. Careful consideration is given to ensuring ice breakers are culturally inclusive and keep the atmosphere light.

Sample ice breakers are provided in ***Appendix 4***, and are also demonstrated on McCreary's YouTube channel (***youtube.com/user/mccrearycentre***).

Hands-on activities which require discussion and cooperation (such as creating a clay animation film as part of the evaluation) are included in the orientation and whenever possible throughout the YRA curriculum. These types of activities can support youth to learn to express their ideas, and to work together as a team.

Learning how youth communicate and learn is also important. For example, some may require longer to process a question and formulate a respond than others. Also, some may need to feel comfortable before they feel confident offering their opinions or before they will ask or answer questions.

Sample group agreement

Questions to consider:

- Is a staff member or peer mentor present to connect with youth when they arrive?
- Is diversity represented in staff/volunteers? Peer mentors?
- Are instances of discrimination or inappropriate comments addressed?
- Do adults have the skills and training to support youth participation?
- Do adults model safe and respectful behaviours?
- Are youth included in creating guidelines and practices?
- Are power imbalances regularly reviewed and examined?
- Do youth know adults have a duty to report, and what that means?

Reporting abuse

In BC, anyone who has reason to believe that a child or youth under 19 has been or is likely to be abused or neglected, or the young person is seriously considering harming themselves or others, must report the situation to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. This is explained to all YRA participants to ensure they know what will happen if they share such information.

DUTY TO REPORT:

If you have concerns about the safety of a child or youth in BC:

- **Call 1-(800)-663-9122 to make a child protection report.**
- **Call 911 if the child or youth is in immediate danger.**

If you make a child protection report, let the youth know the steps you are going to take, what will happen and what supports will be available to them through the process.

For duty to report legislation in other jurisdictions, consult a local child welfare organization.

Questions to consider:

- Are staff trained to recognize and deal with reports of abuse?
- Has it been explained to youth what steps will be taken if they reveal abuse of someone under 19?

Maximize accessibility

Part of creating a safe space may involve ensuring the space is easily accessible to youth with disabilities, as well as those who rely on public transit or walk to the location. It can also include considerations such as the availability of gender-neutral and accessible washrooms, and creating a welcoming space for LGBTQ2S+ youth, those who have child care considerations, are English language learners, etc.

YRA experience

McCreary is fortunate to be located opposite a transit hub which is easily accessible for youth travelling from various parts of BC's Lower Mainland. The interior of the building has been designed to be as accessible and youth-friendly as possible. It also reflects diversity. For example, there is artwork by local Indigenous artists and youth around the building, as well as rainbow flags on every entrance. Applicants for the YRA are asked about any specific accessibility issues they may have so that these can be anticipated and addressed.

Questions to consider:

- Is the location safe and accessible at the time of day youth will be accessing it?
- Is the space youth-friendly?
- Is the space welcoming to youth of diverse genders, sexual orientations, health conditions, disabilities, and who have child care responsibilities?
- How will any accessibility issues that may arise be addressed?

Example of a rainbow flag located at a McCreary entrance.

PROVIDE HEALTHY FOOD/SNACKS

Sharing healthy food together can support youth to socialize and connect with each other, and helps to ensure they are not hungry during the session. Also, youth who live outside their family home may have a diet that involves convenient, quick, and inexpensive food which is often missing the nutrients needed for youth to thrive.

YRA experience

McCreary staff have often been asked by adults why we do not serve pizza and pop to young people. Organizing youth activities and events comes with a responsibility to be a positive role model and to offer opportunities for young people to learn healthy life skills. A healthy diet during adolescence can support bone growth, organ and tissue development (including brain development), and can help lower the risk of obesity. Check out: ***aboutkidshealth.ca***.

During the orientation with each YRA cohort, McCreary staff and the peer mentor talk about the role of nutrition in supporting concentration, learning, and engagement and ensure no one is starting the day hungry. The orientation is also used to learn about any dietary allergies and food preferences. This allows us to cater to each youth's individual needs and ensure they feel heard and valued within the group. Also, some youth may not have had the opportunity to try foods, such as from outside their culture, and may need some extra encouragement and adaptations to try new things.

Where possible, meals and snacks provided to the YRA include fruit and vegetables; contain protein; are baked rather than fried; and are not processed or high in sugar, sodium, or saturated fat. Popular examples include fresh fruit smoothies, carbonated water, crackers, granola bars, salad bars, sushi, curry, and ingredients for wraps and sandwiches. Less healthy treats are incorporated in moderation into celebrations such as birthdays to show that a healthy diet does not have to totally exclude these.

Offering traditional foods eaten by local Indigenous groups (such as salmon and berries in BC's Lower Mainland) can not only ensure Indigenous youth have access to these foods, but can also provide a good opportunity to teach newcomer youth and others about local food sources.

> ***I have a severe food allergy and it is great to know that this is taken seriously and honoured when I come here."***
>
> ***"I was a bit nervous to try [Thai food] at first because it was not what I was used to and I didn't know what to expect, but once I did, I can't get enough of it and is what I always ask for when I have a choice."***
>
> ***"When you go to meetings at [local agency with a Youth Advisory table] they always give the youth pizza, and then you see the lovely salads and sandwiches that adults get at their meetings, and it makes you feel like you don't matter as much. They are eating expensive salmon and we are having pepperoni."***

Questions to consider:

- How can we ensure young people are not hungry?
- How can we best meet the dietary needs of the young people we are working with?

OFFER COMPENSATION

Young people should be compensated for their time in a way that shows they are valued and that their perspectives matter. The compensation does not always have to be financial but should be sufficient to show appreciation for the contribution and to address resource needs (e.g., transportation, child care).

YRA experience

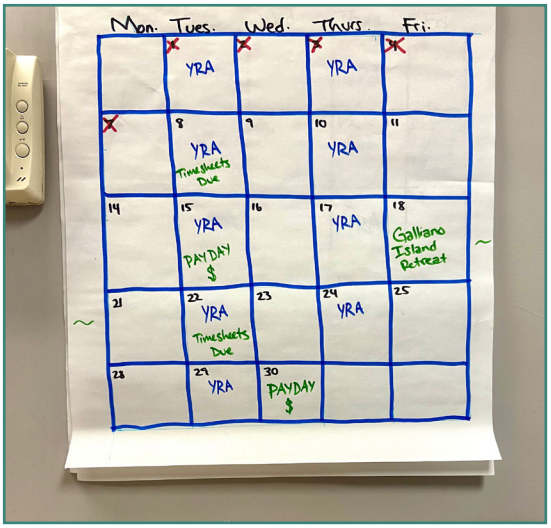
Young people receive a wage (which is slightly above minimum wage), and support with child care if needed. Sometimes they can also receive school credits. Projects conducted by the YRA that involve other youth offer participants honoraria, food, and support with travel.

> ***Without help with child care I would not be able to take part in the YRA."***
>
> ***"Getting paid means I have been able to stay involved to the end. There is no way I could have done this if we weren't paid as I need to pay my bills!"***
>
> ***"I remember not having money for food until I started working here. I was also just in my first year of being sober, I was trying to stay sober, you guys saved me."***

Questions to consider:

- What sort of compensation would be appropriate for this project?

YRA calendar including when timesheets are due and paydays.



CONSIDER ENGAGING YOUTH IN EVERY ASPECT OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Adults may be reluctant to engage youth in all aspects of the research process, often assuming they will lack the skills or interest to participate in certain tasks.

YRA experience

When the YRA was being developed, some professionals involved in youth work were skeptical that youth with care experience would be interested in the various aspects of the research process. While not all youth enjoy every element of the research process, they appreciate being introduced to each component and deciding for themselves whether they like it or not.

Each cohort learns to conduct a literature review; create and administer surveys; design and facilitate focus groups; enter data into a database; conduct quantitative and qualitative analyses; write community-friendly reports; and share findings at stakeholder events.

A YRA report and infographic about vaping among youth with care experience.

View the report here: *mcs.bc.ca/pdf/vaping_among_BC_youth_with_care_experience.pdf*.

Questions to consider:

- What assumptions have we made about the aspects of a research project that youth can and cannot be involved in?
- Have young people expressed interest in different parts of the research process?
- Are we committed to seeing youth as skilled partners in the research process?
- Do we have the right people involved to ensure we can support youth to engage in every aspect of the process?

I liked that we all got to take charge and determine what we wanted to study and analyze."

"[I liked] getting familiarized with doing crosstabs & graphs."

"I am looking forward to using my math skills to analyze data, since it's been a while and I love math."

"We got to contribute to a magazine article, we did presentations; I really enjoyed giving presentations. The skill building [in the YRA] was good in that it allowed for a bit of flexibility in that some people could do some things if they were really keen and some not if they weren't but everyone got to try everything at least once."

SELECT SUITABLE PROJECTS

It is important to ensure that any research project in which young people engage will be something they are interested in, can benefit from, and is not likely to overly distress them.

YRA experience

As youth with care experience often come with a history of trauma, we need to ensure that involvement in projects is not re-traumatizing. For example, youth who had not received services to which they were entitled struggled to engage in all aspects of a project looking at improving those services, as they felt anger and resentment toward the service provider who commissioned the project. The youth were supported to articulate their feelings. They then worked with staff to decide on the aspects of the project they wished to contribute to, and identified ways they felt safe participating.

Questions to consider:

- Is this topic likely to be emotive?
- Is the project suitable for youth researchers to be engaged in?
- What can be done to reduce any distress youth might feel by the topic?
- Can youth have some choice about the topics they research?

HAVE CLEAR BOUNDARIES

Setting appropriate boundaries protects the youth and adults who are working with the youth, and can provide excellent examples for young people who may not have experienced healthy boundaries in their life.

It is important to recognize when a young person's situation or behaviour warrants support that is beyond what an adult ally can provide. For example, if a young person requires specialist mental health or substance use counselling, the young person should be referred to external supports or resources.

YRA experience

During the orientation, young people are told what to expect in terms of confidentiality and boundaries. They are also encouraged to consider whether or not they wish to share personal information (such as through social media) with others in their cohort.

Staff who are the same age as YRA participants may sometimes need additional support to set clear, professional, and respectful boundaries.

Questions to consider:

- Are there clear guidelines about connecting with youth participants outside of the project?
- Have we built in opportunities to discuss boundaries within the project?
- Are we clear about what supports we can provide, and what supports we are not able to provide?

ADDRESS CONFLICT

Conflict can be a healthy part of any project as it can lead to growth and change. However, it can quickly cause a toxic and stressful environment if not handled properly.

YRA experience

I've learned how to look at stuff from other people's perspectives."

"I learned that whether we like each other or not, we have to learn to work together to get things done."

"Honestly, it really felt a lot like family in the YRA. Even when things got crappy among us as a group we did conflict resolution and it was really helpful."

After experiencing conflict within the first cohort, we conducted conflict resolution workshops for all participants, and have proactively delivered these to subsequent cohorts (see ***page 53*** for an example of the conflict resolution curriculum). The workshops include working through likely scenarios and having facilitated conversations about how best to resolve workplace conflict.

Questions to consider:

- Are staff prepared for conflict that may arise?
- Have youth been taught strategies to deal with conflict?

BE HONEST AND TRANSPARENT

Transparency can be particularly important for young people. For example, those who have been in the government care system have often experienced adults making decisions about the youth's life without consulting them, explaining the decision, or checking if they understood or agreed with it. In research projects, it is important to be honest and realistic about young people's role, the level of their involvement, and how the results of the research are intended to be used. It is also important to explain to young people that projects they work on may contribute to tangible improvements such as changes in programs or policies, or they may affect change in less obvious and immediate ways, such as by sharing new perspectives with decision makers.

It is also important to let young people know the project expectations, including the time required and length of commitment needed to participate, so young people can make an informed choice about whether they are able to commit to the project.

YRA experience

Not all youth who join the YRA have the skills or are in a place where they can safely interact with other young people to collect research data, travel to represent the YRA, or share results of a project at a public event. Young people are informed as early as possible if it seems that they will not be ready in time to participate in an activity, the reasons for the decision, and what they might need to address in order to participate in such opportunities in the future.

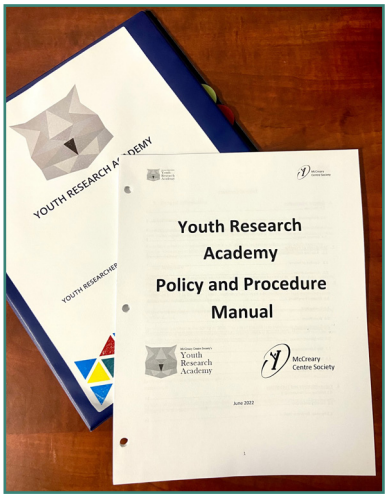
As part of the orientation, YRA members receive information about all the steps that will take place around safety issues, and receive periodic reminders throughout their time in the YRA. For example, if they unexplainably miss YRA sessions, do not let anyone know, do not respond to messages, and cannot be contacted, steps may be taken to ensure they are safe, such as connecting with their emergency contact.

The orientation is also used to discuss the tension that can sometimes arise between participants' lived experience and the objectivity of the research process. Throughout their time in the YRA, participants are encouraged to acknowledge their biases, identify ways those biases might impact their work and the objectivity of the research process, and seek to find workable solutions.

Questions to consider:

- Do we have clear policies and procedures in place, and have we articulated these to the youth?
- Do youth know what will happen if they do not follow the policies and procedures which are in place?
- Will there be opportunities which are only open to some youth? If so, how will we select who participates and how will we share this information?

YRA Policy and Procedure Manual



BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

Building connections beyond those involved in the immediate project can support young people to develop healthy networks and offer them access to people and opportunities they might not have been exposed to previously.

YRA experience

> ***Before joining the YRA, I had no idea that there was a community of youth from care. Only after connecting with McCreary did I find all the other opportunities available to us, like [local network of youth with care experience] and [local collective impact initiative aiming to improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of care], and MANY other great connections."***

> ***"I had the chance to network and connect with many people in the Vancouver area and even follow up with them at a later date."***

Each YRA cohort has the opportunity to work and socialize with other youth, including members of McCreary's Youth Advisory and Action Council (YAC) through an annual 'working weekend' where the two groups work together on a project and have the opportunity to socialize. Events with YRA alumni are also scheduled throughout the year, including an annual Holiday Party and a celebration event during BC Child & Youth in Care Week.

Members of the YRA have the opportunity to build connections outside the organization. For example, they are connected to the local youth employment agency and meet representatives from organizations such as the Public Guardian and Trustees, Ombudsman, and the BC Representative for Children and Youth. Outside agencies also conduct workshops for the YRA on various topics including financial literacy, tenancy rights, and the availability of resources for youth in and from government care.

Questions to consider:

- Are there opportunities for youth to develop social capital within and beyond the project?
- Are the opportunities provided relevant to youth's individual needs and identity?

A poster the YRA and YAC made during their working weekend.

> ***The YRA and YAC retreat was excellent because we get to do a lot of learning at the same time as having fun."***

BE PREPARED FOR MEDIA INTEREST

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, youth have the right to privacy, yet a youth-led research project has the potential to attract media interest. How this is handled requires thoughtful consideration.

Find a poster of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in child-friendly language here: *unicef.ca/sites/default/files/2021-09/CRC_POSTER_FINAL_EN.pdf*

YRA media release

McCreary Centre Society
Youth health • Youth research • Youth engagement

Photo/Video/Media Release Form: Youth Research Academy

McCreary Centre Society would like to use photos and video of the Youth Research Academy in order to raise awareness of youth participation projects and for promotional purposes in print materials and on the Internet. In order to use your photo, video or other images of you, your signed permission (including that of your parent/guardian if you are under 19) is required. It is entirely up to you if you agree to be photographed or filmed. Here is what you need to know before you decide.

Your photo or footage may be reproduced and shown publicly in print materials (e.g. flyers, newsletters) and on the Internet (e.g. McCreary Centre Society) for promotional purposes and as communication tools. If you are not comfortable with your image being shown, then please feel free to opt-out. If you would like more information before you decide to give permission or if you give permission but later change your mind about allowing your image to be used, then please contact **Katie at McCreary Centre Society at 604-291-1996 (ext. 236) or katie@mcs.bc.ca** to let us know.

All participants, please read carefully and complete **(please use pen to fill out form)**.
Please check **YES** to consent to the media release, or **NO** to opt-out.

___**YES**, I freely give permission for McCreary Centre Society to use photos and/or video of me during approved activities with the Youth Research Academy. (If yes, please fill out the box that applies to you below)

___**NO**, I do not give permission for McCreary Centre Society to use photos and/or video of me during approved activities with the Youth Research Academy activities. I do not give media consent.

I, _____, hereby grant McCreary Centre Society permission to interview, photograph and/or film me and to use my likeness in any and all media either in existence or invented in the future, taken as a result of my participation in the Youth Research Academy. I will make no monetary claim or other claim against McCreary Centre Society for the use of the interview(s)/photograph(s)/video(s).

_____ _____
Participant Signature Date

_____ _____
Witness Date

Participants under the age of 19, please have your parent/guardian complete the following release **(please use pen to fill out form)**.

___**YES**, I freely give permission for McCreary Centre Society to use photos and/or video of _____ (participant) during approved activities with the Youth Research Academy. (If yes, please fill out the box that applies to you below.)

___**NO**, it do not give permission for McCreary Centre Society to use photos and/or video of _____ (participant) during approved activities with the Youth Research Academy activities. I do not give media consent.

I, the parent/guardian of _____ (participant) hereby grant McCreary Centre Society permission to interview, photograph and/or film him/her and use his/her likeness in any and all media either in existence or invented in the future, taken as a result of his/her participation in the Youth Research Academy. I will make no monetary claim or other claim against McCreary Centre Society for the use of the interview(s)/photograph(s)/video(s).

_____ _____
Parent/Guardian Signature Date

_____ _____
Witness Date

YRA experience

Youth who enter the YRA may come from unsafe and abusive backgrounds or may have other reasons for not wishing to have their name included in published reports and other work that enters the public domain. Youth participants are supported to understand the potential positive and negative implications of having their name attached to a publication. Youth who are speaking publicly to research findings receive media training, including ways to avoid answering personal questions, and to focus conversations on the report findings.

The YRA's media training curriculum provides opportunities for youth to practice developing the key messages they wish to convey. They also learn some key phrases which can help them to refocus a conversation away from questions they do not feel comfortable answering.

Questions to consider:

- Are youth supported to understand the implications of having their name or image associated with the project?
- Are youth able to use a pseudonym?
- Is there any reason why it is necessary to use youth's images?
- Have youth who are speaking publicly received media training?

RECOGNIZE AND CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS

Youth may sometimes not realize the skills they are developing. It is important to articulate, document, and celebrate these, particularly as doing so has been shown to support youth to maintain employment (Collura, 2010).

Celebrating the successful mastery of a skill and completion of a project allows young people to reflect on what worked well and to feel a sense of accomplishment, and it can increase their motivation to tackle the next task. Marking personal milestones (such as high school completion, birthdays, etc.) shows the youth that they are important and noticed.

YRA experience

Most youth who enter the YRA have not previously been successful at keeping a job, so learning transferable workplace skills can be as important as learning research skills. At the beginning of their time in the YRA, youth receive a skill development worksheet which is a checklist of the skills they can learn through their involvement and which includes room for them to add additional skills if they would like. The checklist includes skills such as punctuality, teamwork, and communication, as well as research skills like data analysis and facilitation. The checklist is regularly reviewed during one-to-one check-ins and youth are encouraged to reflect on their progress, and to consider how they can reflect the skills on their résumé.

YRA participants are credited on all work that they complete, and have the option to use their full name, first name, nickname, or a pseudonym. They also receive a copy of any report they have worked on, and are offered assistance to add the reference to their résumé.

Many youth who join the YRA have very limited family and social connections, so staff ensure participants' birthdays and other major events are recognized and celebrated. As a group, each cohort participates in a 'graduation' event where they are formally recognized for their contributions to the YRA, receive a certificate and small gift, and attend a celebratory meal. Project partners are invited to attend a portion of the event to hear what the cohort achieved and/or to share how the YRA's research has been used to contribute to positive change.

> ***I am building office and research-related skills, becoming accustomed to a structured environment."***
>
> ***"There were many skills around data analysis and problem solving that I learned. I think the problem-solving skills will be very useful in other situations."***
>
> ***"I think we had a little party, that was nice. It was a good way to end off with a celebration for all the hard work. Everyone had put a lot of work in."***

Questions to consider:

- Is there a list of the skills that youth can develop through the project?
- Is there a plan to assist youth to update their résumé with the skills they have learned?
- Have skills been discussed in a way that highlights their transferability and alignment with youth's individual goals?
- How will milestones be celebrated?
- How will the end of the project be marked?

PREPARE FOR TRANSITIONS

Youth may have previously experienced transitions that were unplanned or unwelcomed, and that resulted in a feeling of loss. It is therefore important to begin planning early for transitioning out of the project when it is over, and to be clear about whether there will be opportunities for ongoing connections when the project is completed.

YRA experience

The YRA is designed as a time-limited employment opportunity, which means transitions need to be planned early and carefully. Transition planning is included in one-to-one check-ins from the beginning of the YRA. Participants receive support to move towards their next education and/or employment goals, including support preparing a résumé and writing cover letters. Additional opportunities to stay engaged with McCreary are also offered. These have included opportunities to work as summer students, in casual and permanent administrative and research positions, and to join the Board of Directors.

All alumni receive holiday gifts, receive information about opportunities they may wish to get involved in, and are invited to key celebrations and events to ensure they can continue to feel connected for as long as they wish.

Questions to consider:

- Is time put aside for youth to do job searching and work on their résumé?
- Is transition planning factored in from the start of the project?
- Is there flexibility if a young person is not ready to complete the transition?

The annual YAC and YRA holiday party includes games and a gingerbread house making competition.

EXAMPLES OF YRA CURRICULUM

Each YRA cohort follows a 10-month curriculum that includes learning basic office and teamwork skills, as well as how to conduct a literature review; look up and record references; conduct data entry, analysis, and interpretation; write reports; and disseminate research results through activities such as creating presentations, workshops, and infographic posters.

SURVEY CREATION

As part of the curriculum, members of the YRA learn about developing surveys for research projects and program evaluations. One exercise that we use involves giving the YRA a sample survey with methodologically problematic questions. They are asked to identify the issues and suggest improvements. In doing so, they are introduced to survey design issues such as using unbalanced response scales and overlapping (non-mutually-exclusive) response options.

EXAMPLE OF AN UNBALANCED SCALE:

How much do you agree with the following statement: My life is going well.

- ❍ Very strongly agree
- ❍ Strongly agree
- ❍ Agree
- ❍ Disagree
- ❍ Strongly disagree

EXAMPLE OF OVERLAPPING RESPONSE OPTIONS:

How old are you?

- ❍ 16–17
- ❍ 17–18
- ❍ 18–19
- ❍ 19 or older

The curriculum also addresses topics such as the advantages and disadvantages of asking forced-choice and open-ended questions; and using response sets that permit respondents to select all response options that apply to them, compared to a single option.

EXAMPLE OF A FORCED-CHOICE QUESTION:

How would you describe your mental health?

- ❍ Poor
- ❍ Fair
- ❍ Good
- ❍ Excellent

EXAMPLE OF AN OPEN-ENDED QUESTION:

How would you describe your mental health?

The YRA also practice composing questions that are clear, easily understandable, and not leading. As well, they learn the importance of asking separate questions when multiple concepts are involved, rather than combining them all into one question.

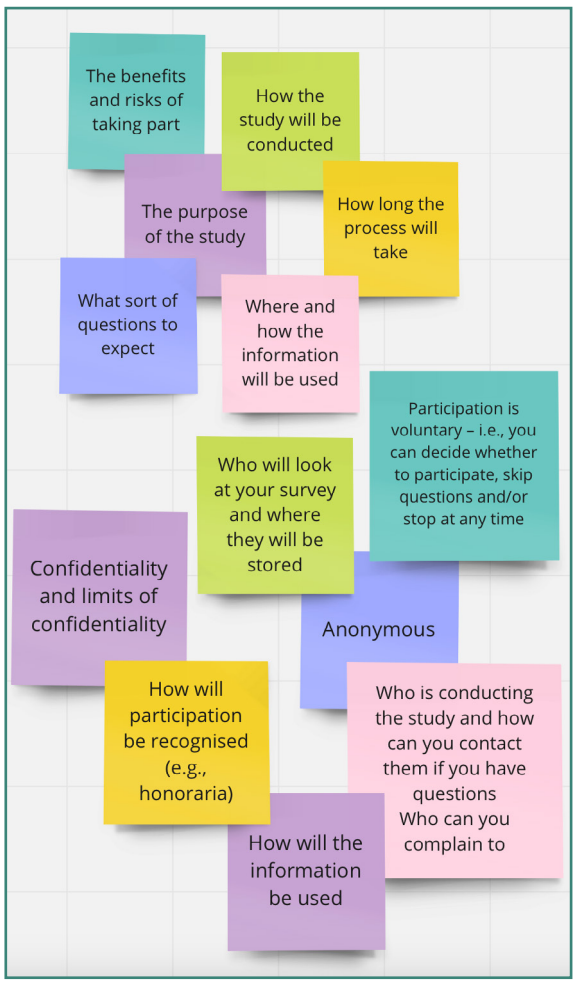
EXAMPLE OF COMBINED RESPONSE OPTIONS THAT SHOULD BE SEPARATED

What were your feelings about today's session?

- ❍ Excited or worried
- ❍ Irritated or interested
- ❍ Curious or skeptical
- ❍ I don't know how I felt
- ❍ Other (please explain): _____

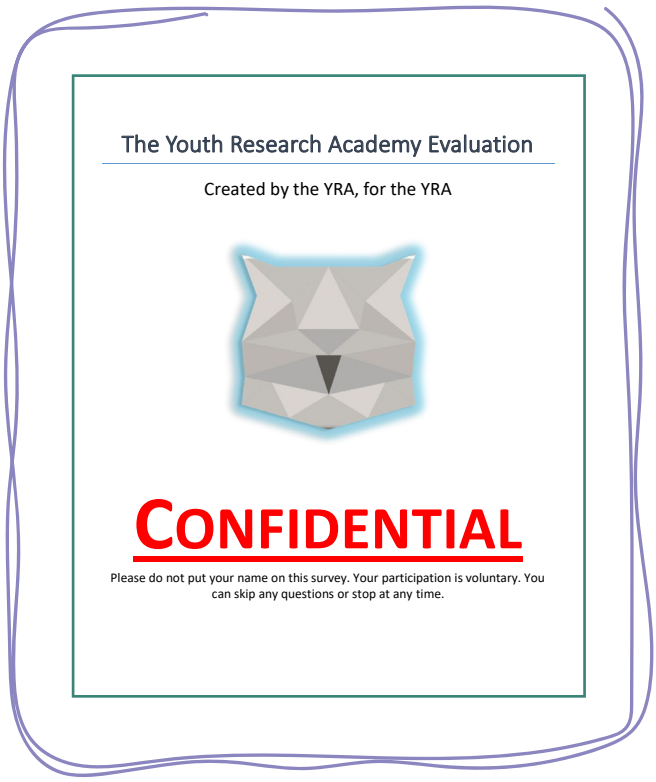
DESIGNING A CONSENT FORM

YRA members are supported to generate a list of everything that should be included on a consent form. Once the list has been created they can apply this list to the project they are undertaking and create a draft form.



PROGRAM EVALUATION

To learn about program evaluation, one exercise the YRA have done is to create an evaluation of young people's experience in the YRA. They learn about what information needs to be included for the funders, and then decide what else they think is important to include. The program evaluation framework and surveys created by the first cohort of the YRA have been used with all subsequent cohorts.



Although the YRA learn to analyze survey data, they do not analyze data from their own evaluation survey, to ensure it remains anonymous.

CREATING A POWERPOINT

The YRA are often asked to present at conferences and events. The curriculum is designed to ensure they get opportunities to create and present PowerPoint slides. They also get the opportunity to observe McCreary staff and other presenters to see which elements of those PowerPoint presentations they think work well and what might work less well.

Example of curriculum

KEEP THE TEXT SIMPLE AND CLEAR

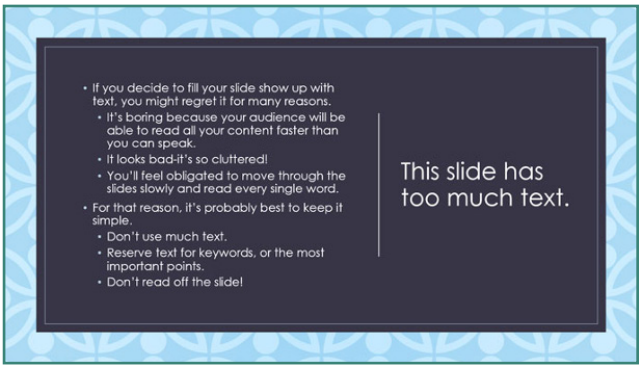
- Where possible, include a heading for each slide.
- Avoid long sentences.
- Include no more than approximately 6 lines per slide and 6 words per line.
- Suggested font size: 30–48 point for titles, 24–28 for text.
- Proofread carefully for spelling and grammar.

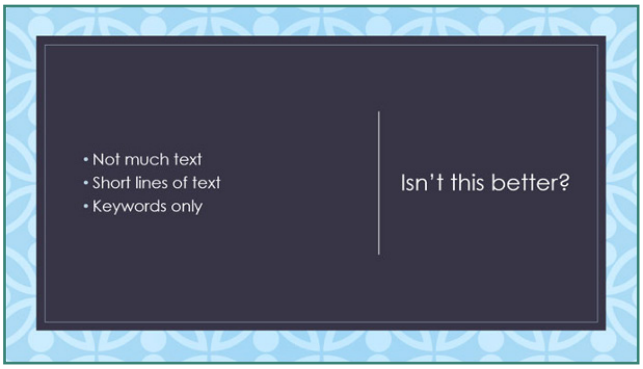
KEEP THE IDEAS SIMPLE

- Having too many ideas crammed onto one slide can confuse the audience. Stick to one idea per slide.

ENSURE THE SLIDES ARE EASY TO FOLLOW

- Focus on keywords rather than long sentences.
- Use images and diagrams to make the presentation visually stimulating, captivating the audience's attention more easily.
- Embrace empty space.
- Use contrasting text colours to ensure visibility/readability (e.g., Black text on white background or black on light blue).
- Choose readable colours and fonts–try to use no more than 5 different colours.
- Use animations sparingly.
- If you use transitions, use the same kind each time.
- If you use images, try to stick to 1 image per slide.





Credit: edu.gcfglobal.org/en/powerpoint-tips/simple-rules-for-better-powerpoint-presentations/1/#

QUANTITATIVE VS. QUALITATIVE

Members of the YRA learn about the benefits and drawbacks of different research methods.

QUANTITATIVE:

- Answers to … "What?" or "How much?"
- Benefits:
  - Good for large samples
  - Less expensive to collect
  - Analysis done faster
  - Seen as objective
- Drawbacks:
  - Need to understand statistics
  - May miss important information (perceptions, experiences, unintended outcomes)

QUALITATIVE:

- Answers to … "How?" or "Why?"
- Benefits:
  - Rich, in-depth data
  - Flexible framework
  - Fits within oral tradition
  - Deeper understanding
- Drawbacks:
  - More labour intensive, often more expensive
  - Complex and time-consuming
  - Seen as more subjective

QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE:

- Called a 'mixed methods' approach
- Benefits:
  - Can get really rich and informative data
  - Allows participants to participate in more than one way

Comic by Matt Lavoie

NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION

The curriculum includes an explanation of naturalistic observation, a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this research method, and information about ethical data collection. Each cohort then gets to devise a research question and visit the local summer fair to conduct a naturalistic observation. Their entry ticket allows them to stay into the evening, so once the research is completed the youth can choose to stay and enjoy the fair with their peers if they want to.

ADVANTAGES

- **Allows you to observe behaviour exactly as it happens in the real world (ecological validity).**
- **It allows researchers to study things that can't be manipulated in a lab due to ethical issues. For example, it would be unethical to look at the effects of being jailed by actually putting people in jail, so we can gather information by using naturalistic observation in real jail settings.**

DISADVANTAGES

- **It can be difficult to determine the exact cause of a behaviour (can get at "What" but can't always answer "Why").**
- **Reliability issues. The observer's biases can affect what is seen and recorded. We come in with our own views and experiences, which affects how we see things.**

Images such as these are used to spark a discussion about observation and interpretation.

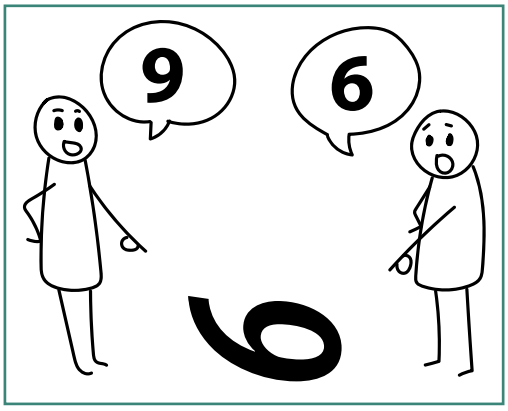
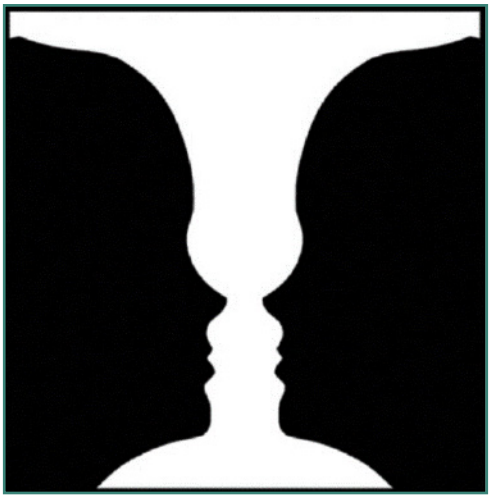


Illustration: Danielle Mahdal

Credit: Joseph Jastrow



Credit: Edgar Rubin

Naturalistic Observation

- **Come up with a topic**—what do you want to observe?
- **What is your research question(s)?** For example, what flavour ice cream do people most commonly buy?; How many choose cone vs. cup?; How many scoops?
- **Decide how you will observe,** such as ...
  - ***What*** exactly will you be looking at? Make a list of behaviours you plan to observe.
  - ***How long*** will you observe for, and how many intervals of observation (e.g., 30 minutes and then stop; or 10 minutes, take a 5-minute break, then observe for another 10 minutes)?
  - How will you record your observations (e.g., you can ***create a tally sheet***)?
- **Notes**—take qualitative notes of what you observe.
- **Questions to answer after your naturalistic observation:**
  - What is the answer to your research question(s)? Are the findings consistent with what you had expected?
  - What might explain the findings? [We won't know for sure.]
  - Are there any limitations to your findings? What might your findings not explain?
  - Would you do anything differently the next time?

Example: What flavour ice cream do people most commonly buy?

Flavour purchased	Number of observations	Total
Caramel		
Chocolate		
Mint		
Strawberry		
Vanilla		

Carry out your naturalistic observation, and then tally (total) each behaviour you observed.

Flavour purchased	Number of observations	Total
Caramel	IIII	4
Chocolate	IIIIIIIII	9
Mint	IIIIIII	7
Strawberry	III	3
Vanilla	IIIIIIIIII	10

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

For many participants, the YRA is their first employment opportunity. The curriculum therefore supports the development of skills beyond those directly related to research and evaluation, including conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution

YRA participants share their tips for resolving conflict and if these are not raised, staff ensure the following are discussed:

- **Avoid name-calling and raising your voice.** If you are too upset to talk without yelling, take a break and come back to the other person when you can. If the other person is too upset to talk without yelling and name-calling, end the conversation and let them know that you are happy to talk about the issue later.
- **Address the issue, not the person.** Use 'I statements'. Talk about the action or situation that caused the conflict, not the person.
- **Be prepared to compromise.** Try to find a happy medium that everyone can feel okay about. If this is not possible, you might have to just agree to disagree and move on.
- **Look at the issue from their perspective.** Something may be upsetting to someone else that would not bother another person. Acknowledge that people see things differently and try to respect their needs.

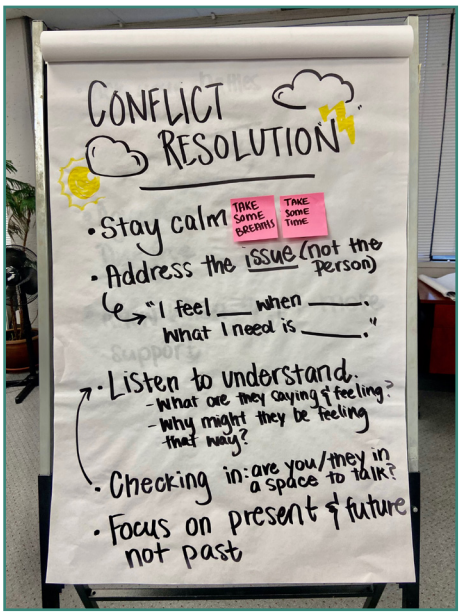
YRA participants also work through a number of scenarios which cover typical situations in which conflict may arise.

> *The other thing about being in the YRA that was valuable were the soft skills–writing, being a good communicator. These are job skills that I've applied onwards for sure. At the time I thought it was going to be the hard skills that would be my big take aways, and it ended up being the soft skills. These gave me a leg up in communicating for other jobs."*

> *"It was great being able to practice all those skills in a relatively low-risk environment. Being able to get feedback on emails, for example."*

> *"What the YRA taught me was how to be a little bit less abrasive and aware of the emotional impact of what I say on other people."*

Cohort 7 of the YRA worked through a conflict scenario activity.



Examples of discussion scenarios

Scenario: Jordan, a fellow YRA member, has not been contributing equally to complete a project and they have not done the work they said they would take on. Jordan feels that they are contributing, but are currently couch surfing after splitting up with their partner and are finding it hard to concentrate.

Some fellow YRA members are upset about the effect Jordan is having on the project and want to complain to the staff. You are good friends with Jordan and know they are not lazy. When you tried to talk to Jordan individually, they got defensive and accused you of not being understanding.

What else could you do other than involve the staff? How could this alternative approach improve the situation for Jordan and the rest of the team?

Scenario: Other than yourself, there are seven members of the YRA working on a project. You notice that four are very quiet and three are dominating the group discussions and decision making. You are worried that some good ideas are not being included because of this dynamic and want to bring this up but are worried about being dismissed. One of the quieter members has told you that they feel intimidated to speak up but don't want you to tell anyone.

What could you do in this situation?

Scenario: A fellow YRA member, Jasmin, is doing a presentation to a community audience about the work of the YRA. You are the only other member of the YRA who is present for the presentation. In the presentation she takes credit for things that you personally completed and does not acknowledge the work of the team on any projects. She also makes hints that she is the only one doing things. You feel that the presentation reflected badly on the rest of the members of the YRA.

How could you handle this?

TOP 10 SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

The success of the YRA has shown that youth with lived experience can be engaged in all aspects of a research project, and when supported, their investment in the issues can contribute to new and valuable research findings. Based on these experiences, the top 10 tips for meaningfully engaging young people in the research that affects them are (in no particular order):

1. **Provide opportunities to participate in the whole research process from developing the research question to disseminating the results.**
2. **Value the expertise that young people bring.**
3. **Actively address equity, diversity, inclusion, and cultural safety.**
4. **Provide healthy meals/snacks.**
5. **Ensure staffing levels are sufficient to support meaningful youth engagement, and to do regular check-ins with youth.**
6. **Limit distractions in the workspace and create a safe physical and emotional environment.**
7. **Address issues as they arise, honestly and fairly.**
8. **Connect youth with supports and resources in the community which may be helpful to them.**
9. **Celebrate successes and milestones.**
10. **Plan for transitions early and often.**

> *"My involvement [in the YRA] has impacted me in ways that are very positive. I'm learning more about myself and what I'm capable of."*
>
> *"Being in the YRA gave me something to look forward to every day. It gave me something to be excited about, and gave meaning to my life."*

For more information, to request a presentation or workshop, or to discuss any of the content of this guide, please contact ***mccreary@mcs.bc.ca***.

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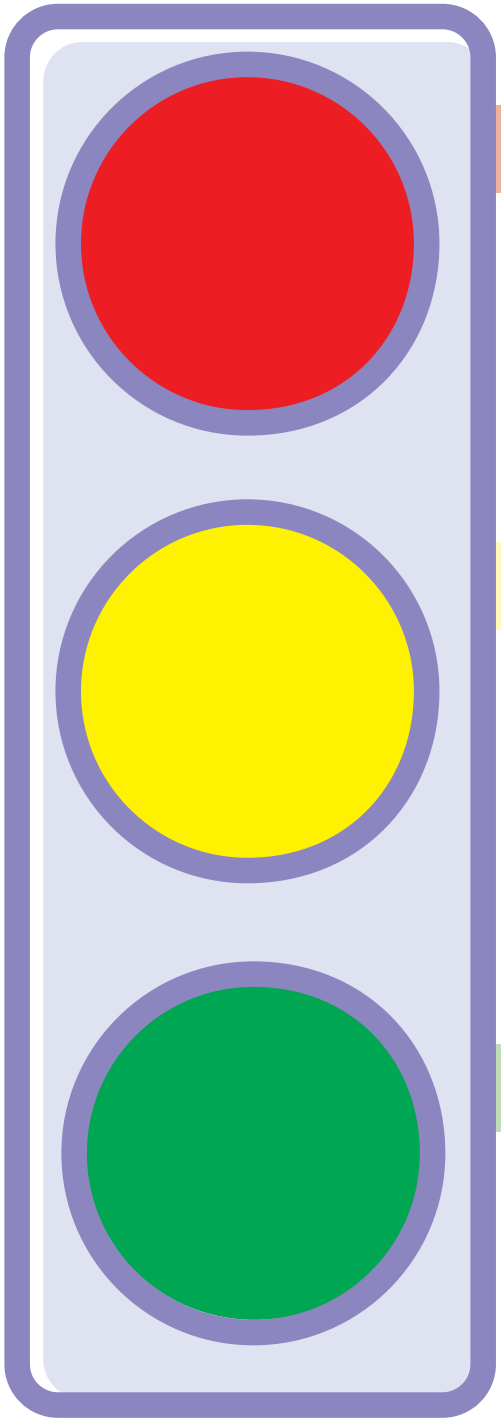
APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Matrix of Participation worksheet

LEVEL OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT	PHASES OF RESEARCH							
		Developing research question	Planning research project	Developing measures	Collecting data	Analyzing data	Developing final report materials	Disseminating findings
	Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults							
	Young people-initiated and directed							
	Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people							
	Consulted and informed							
	Assigned but informed							
	Tokenism							
	Decoration							
	Manipulation							

Appendix 2: Adult ally traffic lights worksheet



STOP

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

CONTINUE

Appendix 3: Adult ally self-reflection sheet

This sheet can be a useful way to check in on your own thoughts, feelings, and biases. You can use it to see where you are doing well and where you think you could improve. Mark the appropriate number for each statement, with 1 reflecting *"I do not do this well at all"* and 5 reflecting *"I do this really well."*

	1	2	3	4	5
I respect young people's ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
I continually give encouragement.	1	2	3	4	5
I do not judge young people when they tell me things I might not approve of.	1	2	3	4	5
I listen to young people's ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
I provide the tools young people need to succeed in the project.	1	2	3	4	5
I think about young people's schedule when setting meetings, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
I model appropriate interactions.	1	2	3	4	5
I give young people time to get to know each other/adults.	1	2	3	4	5
I compensate young people for their time.	1	2	3	4	5
I am open to different forms of communication (e.g., texting rather than emailing).	1	2	3	4	5
I focus on the process not just the product.	1	2	3	4	5
I include young people in all aspects of decision-making.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 4: Sample ice breakers and energizers

Three favourites: This activity involves pairing two participants who are asked to discover three of their partner's favourite things. After a brief breakout session, the pairs return to the group and introduce one another to the group using this information.

Two truths and a lie: This activity allows participants to share interesting or unusual pieces of information with one another by telling two 'truths' and one lie about themselves. Other participants then guess which statement is untrue.

Ask a silly question: Asking random questions can raise the mood of the group and provide great talking points. YRA favourites include:

- If you could shoot one condiment out of your finger which one would it be?
- If you could invent a machine that did a household chore, meaning you never had to do this again, what would it be?
- What is the most interesting thing you've ever eaten?

Visual check in or check out: Facilitate this activity virtually by collating various images on a slide or white board, or in person by gathering images from old magazines or picture books. Participants choose an image which reflects what they are thinking or feeling, or their response to a specific question posed by the facilitator. Participants then share with the group the reason they chose the image they chose.

Web of connections: This activity can be used to debrief or reflect on learnings as a group. Standing in a circle, one participant begins by holding a ball of yarn and answering a question, such as 'One thing I will take away from today is ...'. Holding on to a piece of the yarn, the participant then tosses the ball of yarn across the circle to another participant. The cycle continues until each participant has had a chance to answer the question, at which point a web will have formed connecting the participants to each other.

Shake it out: Sometimes you just need to get out of your chair and shake it out. Participants shake out each limb, counting down from eight to one. Start with your left arm counting down out loud from eight, then your right arm, left leg, and right leg. Next shake each limb counting down from 7, then 6, and so on until you reach one shake per limb. Finish off with a cheer.

Check out McCreary's youtube channel (*youtube.com/user/McCrearyCentre*) for visual demonstrations of ice breakers.