

A TOOLKIT FOR ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE IN THE RESEARCH THAT AFFECTS THEM



**McCreary
Centre Society**

McCreary Centre Society is privileged to be located on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples—the sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), sel̓ilwítulh (Tseil-Waututh), and x̓m̓əθk̓əy̓əm (Musqueam) nations. We also acknowledge the ancestral and continuing connection to this land of the Métis Nation.

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Copies of this toolkit are available at mcs.bc.ca/pdf/meaningfully_engaging_youth_lived_experience_toolkit.pdf, or by emailing mccreary@mcs.bc.ca.

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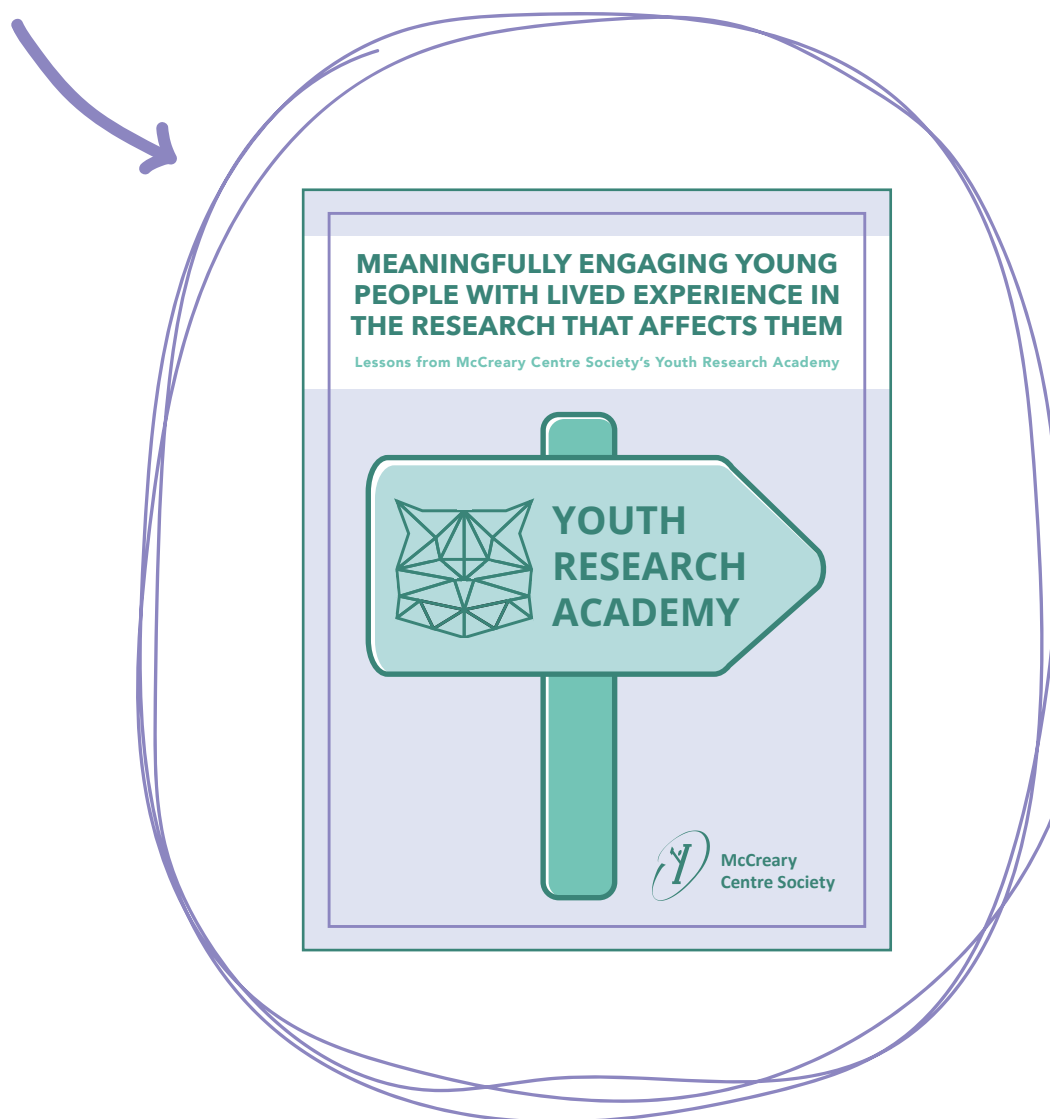
INTRODUCTION

Since 1977, McCreary Centre Society (McCreary) has sought to meaningfully engage youth in the research that affects them. In 2023, we produced a resource which documents the lessons learned from that work, and specifically from the development and sustainability of McCreary's Youth Research Academy (YRA). This toolkit is an abridged version of that resource.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

The toolkit contains some key questions and ideas that we hope might be helpful for anyone thinking about engaging youth as researchers, or in other ways as partners in the research process. The questions and exercises can be used for personal reflection and to stimulate discussions within a research team.

To access the full resource: mcs.bc.ca/pdf/meaningfully_engaging_youth_lived_experience_guide.pdf.



SELF-REFLECTION

Engaging young people as researchers in a way that is beneficial to them and the project takes time, compassion, and skill. Asking a few self-reflection questions can help us determine if we are committed to the process.

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

CONSIDER WHETHER YOU ARE READY TO ENGAGE YOUTH

Before beginning any research project which seeks to engage young people there are some key 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/project?
- Who will need to 'buy-in' to the youth engagement concept before we can move forward?
- Who will be responsible for ensuring youth engagement is safe and supported?
- Do we have a plan in place to address issues that may arise?

Having decided to move ahead, careful thought should be given to ensuring the project is taking a **trauma-informed**, **rights-based** approach, which is **inclusive and culturally sensitive**. Taking such an approach requires ongoing self-awareness, self-reflection, and a commitment to recognizing and addressing personal biases.

Any research project engaging youth should pay attention to the following questions:

Trauma-informed

- Are we giving young people all the necessary information to make informed decisions about their participation in the project?
- Are young people able to choose the tasks they engage in, the pace at which they move forward, and the level of their contribution?
- Do young people have the opportunity to voice any concerns and have these addressed?
- Are we proactively asking youth for their opinions, comments, and questions?
- Do we provide time and space to celebrate youth's successes?
- Do we have a quiet, safe space where youth can take a 'time out' if they need to?

Rights-based

- What steps are we taking to ensure young people who are marginalized by economic, social, and cultural systems of oppression have the opportunity to participate?
- Are there opportunities for youth to be engaged in all aspects of the research process, and to freely express their opinions?
- Do we acknowledge that young people are the experts in their own lives?

Inclusive and culturally sensitive

- How can we ensure different world views are incorporated and respected?
- How can we make our space welcoming for all cultures, genders, and sexualities?
- 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, holidays, and dietary restrictions?

ENSURE THERE ARE SUFFICIENT FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

Meaningful youth engagement needs to be adequately resourced for the duration of time youth are asked to commit. For example, 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 youth's contribution and to address resource needs (e.g., transportation, child care). Providing a healthy meal as part of the project can also help to build connections, while addressing youth's basic needs.

Questions to consider:



- How much will it cost to meaningfully engage the appropriate young people in the research?
- How will young people be compensated for their time?
- 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?
- Do we have the right mix of skills and commitment within the team that we need?
- How many additional hours might be required for planning and follow-up activities?
- Is there an opportunity for youth (and adults) to share a healthy meal together?

ADULT ALLIES

There should also be thought to which adults will be involved, and how these adults will support youth engagement. Any project will need committed adult allies who are prepared to share power with youth.



Checklist for being an effective adult ally:

- ☒ Non-judgmental and respectful.
- ☒ Actively listens.
- ☒ Follows through on commitments.
- ☒ Is prepared to reflect and adapt as needed.

PEER MENTORS

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 good role model to participants.

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?

ALLOW ENOUGH TIME FOR PLANNING

The less that is left to chance, and the more prepared you are, the more likely young people are to want to engage in a research project, and to stay engaged.

Questions to consider:



- What learnings can we gather from previous youth engaged research projects?
- Do we have a clear plan and realistic timeline?
- Will we continually review the plan to determine what is working and what might need to change?
- How will we know if we have provided a meaningful engagement opportunity?

MEET IN A SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE LOCATION

Whether meeting in-person or online, it is important to ensure young people can access the location, and feel safe doing so.

Hold in-person meetings in a venue that is accessible by transit.



Questions to consider:



- Is the space youth-friendly?
- Is the space welcoming to youth of diverse genders, sexual orientations, health conditions, disabilities, and who have childcare responsibilities?
- How will any accessibility issues that may arise be addressed?
- If meeting online, do youth have all the equipment and technology they need to join? If not, can these be provided?
- Is the location safe and accessible at the time of day young people will be accessing it?

ENSURE ACTIVITIES ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Young people need developmentally appropriate activities and resources to be able to fully participate. For example, younger youth may be more dependent on adults to set the agenda and facilitate discussions, whereas older youth may want more opportunities to lead these activities.

Questions to consider:

- Have we considered the age and ability of young people in the project, in relation to the tasks they will be doing?
- Some young people may be more or less mature than might 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?

Providing opportunities to engage in arts-based activities can help to create a sense of connection to the project and within the team.



DEVELOP RECRUITMENT, ORIENTATION, AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

RECRUITMENT

Finding the ‘right’ young people to engage in a research project requires careful consideration, particularly when seeking to engage harder to reach groups. For example, traditional ways of targeting young people—such as advertising on school noticeboards, or through social media—will not reach youth who do not read these. Additionally, marginalized young people may not feel they have the skills to join a research team, and may need to be encouraged and supported to participate.

Questions to consider:



- Is the recruitment process transparent and fair?
- How will young people be selected to participate?
- How will young people 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?

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.

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?

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 timelines.

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 considerations that can help to ensure the space is as physically and emotionally safe as possible. For example, having team members from diverse backgrounds and life experiences who reflect the diversity of youth participants helps youth feel welcome and understood.

PHYSICAL SPACE

Creating a safe physical space may include ensuring exits and washrooms are easily accessible, the space is well lit, the space is the right size for the group, and the seating is comfortable.

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 you clearly signposted the exits and washrooms?
- Are you providing any equipment and materials (e.g., pens and paper) which might be needed?
- Is the layout welcoming and accessible to youth of diverse genders, sexual orientations, health conditions, disabilities, and who have child care responsibilities?

Provide youth with the tools and materials they will need to participate.



VIRTUAL SPACE

Creating a safe virtual space can include practical steps such as providing virtual backgrounds, so that youth can maintain their privacy and not reveal their location. It is also important to ensure youth are aware of expectations around use of cameras, chat boxes, etc.

Questions to consider:



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



EMOTIONAL SPACE

Building a safe emotional space can include 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.

Questions to consider:



- Is someone present to connect with youth when they arrive?
- Is diversity represented?
- 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?
- Are staff trained to recognize and deal with reports of abuse?
- Do youth know adults may have a duty to report, and what that means?

DUTY TO REPORT:



Youth may sometimes disclose that they are experiencing violence or neglect, or are thinking of harming themselves or others. In most places, you will be required to report this in order to keep a minor safe. Be aware of the laws in your area, and what your responsibilities are.

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.

A sample group agreement.



BE CLEAR AND FAIR

It is important to be honest and realistic about young people's role in a research project, the level of their involvement, and how the results of the research will be used.

It is also important to let young people know the project expectations, including the time required and length of commitment needed. This allows young people to make an informed choice about whether they wish to participate.

Questions to consider:



- Do we have clear policies and procedures in place, and have we articulated these to the youth in an accessible way?
- Do youth know what will happen if they do not follow the policies and procedures?
- 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?

HAVE CLEAR BOUNDARIES

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

Questions to consider:



- Have we built in opportunities to discuss boundaries within the project?
- Are there clear guidelines about connecting with youth participants outside of the project?

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 emotionally unsafe environment if not handled properly.

Questions to consider:



- Are you prepared for conflict that may arise?
- Have young people been taught strategies to deal with conflict?

BUILD CONNECTIONS

Building connections can support young people to develop healthy networks. It can also offer them access to people and opportunities they might not have been exposed to previously.

Questions to consider:



- Are there opportunities for youth to develop positive relationships and connections within the project?
- Are the opportunities provided relevant to youth's individual needs and identity?

RECOGNIZE MILESTONES

Youth may sometimes need support to recognize the skills they are developing. 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. It can also increase their motivation to tackle new tasks.

Some youth may need support to transition out of the project if they have established strong connections. It is important to discuss how the completion of the project will look, and if there are opportunities for on-going connections.

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 youth been made aware of the transferability of the skills they have learned?
- How will milestones and the end of the project be celebrated?
- Is there a need for a transition plan for youth involved in the project?

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. However, with consideration and planning, youth can benefit from being involved throughout the process.

Questions to consider:



- What assumptions have we made about the aspects of a research project that youth can and cannot be involved in?
- What steps can we take to meaningfully engage young people throughout the whole research process, if they are interested?
- How can we support young people to overcome any barriers to staying meaningfully engaged?

ENSURE PROJECTS ARE SUITABLE

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

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?
- Do we have a strategy to support youth if they do become distressed by a topic?

DISSEMINATION

Engaging youth in disseminating findings and representing the project publicly may require additional considerations to ensure young people are protected.

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?
- Have youth who are speaking publicly received media training?

PARTICIPATION WORKSHEET

The Matrix of Participation¹ can be a useful tool to consider where different elements of a project might fall in terms of meaningful youth engagement. The columns in the matrix represent the different phases of a research project, and the rows represent levels of youth engagement.

Placing a check mark in the most appropriate row for each phase of the project will help to illustrate whether the level of youth engagement for that phase is appropriate, and if improvements can be made.

PHASES OF RESEARCH								
LEVEL OF MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT		Developing research question	Planning research project	Developing measures	Collecting data	Analyzing data	Developing final report materials	Disseminating findings
	Youth & adults share decisions							
	Youth initiate and direct decisions							
	Adults initiate and direct decisions							
	Youth are consulted on decisions							
	Youth are assigned tasks							
	Youth are informed of decisions							
	Youth's involvement is tokenistic							

¹Badham, B., & Davis, T. (2008). The active involvement of young people. In R. Harrison, C. Benjamin, S. Curran, & R. Hunter (Eds.), *Leading work with young people* (pp. 80–96). Open University Press.

NOTES

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