



Youth Participation in Practice

By Aaron Bingham, Christa Myers, and Cora Cray

ROGER HART'S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION



RUNG 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults: Youth-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

RUNG 7 - Youth initiated and directed: Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

RUNG 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth: Adult-led activities, in which decision making is shared with youth.

RUNG 5 - Consulted and informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

RUNG 4 - Assigned, but informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

RUNG 3 - Tokenism: Adult-led activities, in which youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

RUNG 2 - Decoration: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

RUNG 1 - Manipulation: Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding of the purpose for the activities.

Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, as cited in www.freechild.org/ladder.htm

1. **Manipulation:** Adult-directed activities, without any input from youth. This can lead to youth not understanding the reason for the request or not caring about it. *This rung of the ladder reflects adultism.*

Juvenile court hearings are places where manipulation can occur. Adults in roles such as judge, magistrate, attorney and probation officer may speak for the youth, and youth are merely told the orders they must follow. The formal environment and power structure in the courtroom can cause unintended consequences and prevent youth from providing input, even if asked.

A judge in the Reclaiming Futures network shared recently that she uses child-friendly language, a whole family approach and tries to be positive when working with youth. One suggestion for moving beyond manipulation is giving the youth input on both their earned incentives and sanctions, and linking them to specific behavior and consequences.

2. **Decoration:** Decoration Happens when young people are used to help or "bolster" a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people. *This rung of the ladder also reflects adultism.*

An example would be diversion groups in which the young person participates without opportunity to provide feedback or participate in planning.

3. **Tokenism:** Adult-directed activities, with minimal input from youth. One youth might be asked to serve on an adult board or committee and placed in the role of representing the voice of all youth. This can lead to the youth not feeling valued, or overwhelmed with the need to represent their full constituency of young persons. *This rung of the ladder reflects another form of adultism.*

An example of tokenism is asking one youth to join a team of adults to plan the Juvenile Drug Court monthly activities. While the adults might value the ideas of the youth, the actual planning and implementation of the activities remain in the hands of the adults. Move up the ladder a rung or two by having the youth plan and implement some of the activities. This could be used as a program incentive.

4. **Assigned, but informed:** Adult-led activities, where youth have an understanding of the reasons for the activity/request and are asked to have a role in the decisions. This can lead to more interest by the youth in the outcome. While young people might not have had an opportunity to plan and implement the activity, they may have been able to vote on the activity as a group.

An example of assigned, but informed is when a youth is asked to have some input into his/her treatment plan. The plan is written by the adult treatment counselor, case manager, or probation officer, with adult language and motivations, but a youth gets a chance to review the document and make suggestions for changes. An adaptation to this is to have a shared care plan with input from the full team, led by the youth and their family, created at a team meeting with all interested parties present.

5. **Consulted and informed:** Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions. Many organizations realize the importance of youth voice in their work, but struggle in how to get there. Rung four and five are where most people start their work with supporting youth as collaborators in the process. As you move up the rungs of the ladder, trust needs to be built among all the team members, including youth and their families.

One of our Reclaiming Futures sites recently hosted a community-wide visioning process and wanted to make sure youth voice was a part of the day. Unfortunately, the event was scheduled during a school day, which decreased the participation level of the youth. In the months following the session, focus groups were held with youth so that they were able to have a voice in the project. When planning events where youth voice is needed, make sure to consider the day and time carefully when scheduling, and ensure facilitators are trained in youth engagement.

6. **Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth:** Occurs when projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by participatory action research. Young people provide feedback about the court's diversion program. The feedback is valued and change occurs.

Moving on up the ladder, the Center for Court Innovation in New York has a program called the Youth Justice Board. Youth apply to be part of this after school program and are selected for a year term. While the adults typically select the advocacy issue that will be addressed during the program cycle, youth do the research around the subject and create policy recommendations with assistance from adult staff.

7. **Young people-initiated and directed:** This step is when young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth-led activism.

Young people are running groups within the Youth M.O.V.E. organization that are 100% youth led and youth driven. Young people create the topics, give coaching, and lead advocacy workshops.

8. **Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults:** This happens when projects or programs are initiated by young people 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. This rung of the ladder can be embodied by youth/adult partnerships.

Youth M.O.V.E recovery groups are created collaboratively with youth and adults. Both come together to make decisions around implementation and how groups operate.

Encouraging Youth and Family Voice

by Aaron Bingham, Christa Myers and Cora Crary

Questions Juvenile Justice Staff Should Ask Themselves

- Have I thoroughly explained the process to the youth and their family? Were they in the room together? Do they need to hear this together to ensure they heard the same thing? Can they repeat what they heard back to me?
- Have I collaborated with natural/professional supports in the decision making process? Do they feel welcome at team meetings? Is the timing of the meeting conducive to all interested parties?
 - For example: mentors, positive adults and/or peers, school counselors, therapists, case managers, etc.
- Do the youth, their family, their natural supports and I agree that the decision will positively impact the positive development of the youth?
 - If not, is there an opportunity to advocate/suggest something more appropriate?
- Did the decision impact the youth the way the team and I intended? What did we learn? What if anything would we do differently?
- Have we created a plan around the decision as a larger stakeholder group? Did everyone feel empowered?

Questions Youth Should Ask When Meeting With a Service Provider

- Do I feel like I understood the process?
- Have decisions regarding me or my family been thoroughly explained?
- Do I feel like my voice is respected and valued?
- Do I feel like the process is beneficial to my life goals?