



HYI as Authentic Youth Engagement

Making the Case for Authentic Youth Engagement Toolkit

Practice Brief

Introduction

Youth-serving agencies and organizations are required to show evidence of how the approach they take has a positive impact on the youth they serve. The Halton Youth Initiative (HYI) illustrated that when you intentionally build and support youth focused initiatives, communities can:

- exceed outreach goals,
- provide safe in-person and virtual spaces to gather, and
- maximize the positive impact on issues that matter to young people.



The Halton Youth Initiative was a catalyst for community youth engagement during a very challenging time. Initiatives across Canada and beyond can learn from the experience, tools, and resources collectively created by youth, community partners, and project staff.

What is Authentic Youth Engagement?

Authentic youth engagement establishes positive, safe, and healthy relationships while engaging with others in a way that is true to the people involved. Youth are encouraged to build on their strengths. Adults are encouraged to think about their strengths, values, hobbies, lessons they've learned, and find age-appropriate and context-appropriate ways to share this with youth to help them navigate the world.

Authentic youth engagement also means slowing down and being present so that each young person is seen as the unique and complex human they are. Adults are encouraged to make moments to meaningfully connect with all youth in their care. Acknowledge something positive. Follow up about something youth shared. Reach out with an opportunity that aligns with the interests of young people. There is no magic template – authentic youth engagement requires everyone involved to show up, be present, and be consistent in the desire to support young people.

The Developmental Assets and Relationships Frameworks

The Developmental Asset Framework and Developmental Relationships Framework were developed by the [Search Institute](#) and guided the proposal writing process for both the original 2016 Seed Grant and 2018 Grow Grant. These frameworks were foundational tools used in the work of the Halton Youth Initiative. Developmental Relationships were identified by Search Institute as “five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives.”

“Relationships are a critically important mechanism by which youth learn about themselves and about how to communicate and connect with another person. And, when these relationships develop in a context that supports and celebrates diversity, equity, and inclusion, they have the potential to be truly transformative.”ⁱ

- **Express Care** – show me that I matter to you
- **Challenge Growth** – push me to keep getting better
- **Provide Support** – help me complete tasks and achieve goals
- **Share Power** – treat me with respect and give me a say
- **Expand Possibilities** – connect me with people and places that broaden my world



The Developmental Relationship Framework is an organized and intentional way to view relationships. Relationships can feel like a messy component of community work and this structure makes it more manageable. It provides a visual and structured illustration of the elements of relationships and it makes a strong case for the foundational value of relationships in relation to program success.

A large body of research supports the Developmental Relationship Framework. These resources equip program leaders with prompts and statistics on how youth feel about the five pillars that can be used as discussion starters. Intentionally focusing on particular pillars with certain groups or individuals helps leaders tackle any areas that are identified as areas that need to be worked on with icebreakers, question prompts, and activities.

How the HYI Modeled Authentic Youth Engagement

Here are some quick examples of how authentic youth engagement was modeled following the Developmental Relationships framework in the Halton Youth Initiative.

Express Care –

Show up and acknowledge youth

- Say “hi” to each person
- Celebrate birthdays
- Make time for fun
- Read the room (know when to push and when to rest)
- Make note of big tests, family updates, pets and follow up with youth
- Listen with intent
- Honour special dates
- Anticipate dietary choices
- Create letters of reference with clear examples
- Properly pronounce names
- Look forward to seeing them
- Write short notes
- Make short video clips
- Provide tokens/trinkets
- Host hang out and icebreakers sessions hosted at random times to build connections with youth volunteers

Challenge Growth –

Accountability is key

- Provide training
- Connect youth with opportunities
- Ask youth to summarize how they will accomplish a task
- Create an understanding for deadlines and teamwork
- Provide follow up
- Identify strengths
- Explain why things can/can't happen
- Apologize when you make mistakes
- Speak it into fruition – acknowledge strengths, compliment in front of others
- Provide opportunities for youth to try out new skills or opportunities based on their feedback
- Hold people accountable
- Edit the work and say why you made the edits

Provide Support –

Expand on the idea of what a caring adult is

- Encourage a wide array of adult involvement, there is no one “right” way. Some adults participated weekly, others provided resources, some came in during various brainstorming sessions to provide expert support, and others invited HYI youth to speak at their organizations
- Provide tools for support such as clear agenda, brainstorming prompts, links to resources in addition to telling members that you are there to provide support each time you see them

Share Power -

Involve youth in every aspect of the project

- Youth focus groups created the project goals
- Youth take part in the interview process for staff
- Youth lead teams
- Provide summer student and co-op opportunities
- Co-create workshops and content to mobilize the project findings
- Develop a decision making process that is democratic and equitable
- Provide opportunities to learn from youth
- Allow youth to participate in budget decisions

Expand Possibilities –

Connect to the world

- HYI Leader’s circle provided leadership opportunities
- Seek out speaking opportunities
- Intentionally connect people together for the talents you see in them
- Call in “expert support” so adults can be part of the magic
- Help youth navigate community resources
- Host career panels that allow youth to ask questions about different types of careers, be sure to have youth introduce guests and ask questions

HYI Project Outcomes as Authentic Youth Engagement

The Halton Youth Initiative illustrated that when you intentionally build and support youth focused initiatives, communities can: exceed outreach goals, provide safe in-person and virtual spaces to gather, and maximize the positive impact on issues that matter to young people. The outcomes provide evidence that the HYI embodied authentic youth engagement. Below are snapshots of how the project outcomes were achieved.

Outcome 1 - Exceed outreach goals

The Halton Youth Initiative had two streams of project goals: internal team goals and external outreach goals. Each year the numbers for the project goals increased.

Internal goals included: establish youth-adult councils with a set number of youth and adults depending on the community, tracking total volunteer and adult hours, and in-kind support (e.g. using space for free)

Outreach goals included: increase awareness of local resources to a youth audience, increase awareness of topics that matter to youth, collaborate with community partners to increase availability of positive youth hangout space.

Successful Approaches

- **Relationships matter!** Positive communication and focus on individual strengths and needs, created a team environment of growth and hope. A telling outcome of the positive environment was the number of siblings and best friends who joined the team after their loved one joined the HYI.
- **Collaborating helped connect with like-minded folks and put them in front of larger audiences.** When the grant for Acton, Aldershot and Milton was awarded, the councils were developed from scratch by a staff person new to Halton. Emphasis was put on cultivating positive relationships with others in the community using tools with a Development Relationship focus in this process. This allowed for a quick uptake and support of recruitment to the council and their activities.
- **Using technology platforms familiar to youth supported for internal and external goals.**
- **Internally** - Supporting volunteers to join virtually allowed the numbers to increase. Transportation needs were not an issue when meeting virtually. Volunteers created unique opportunities for youth to organize and stay in communication with one another during the week. Meeting virtually increased HYI's ability to connect with adults from Halton Region and beyond. Tools such as Google Drive, Instagram chat, and ZOOM were particularly beneficial.
- **Externally** - Utilizing technology allowed HYI's message to reach further than ever before. Folks could join events virtually, or watch a recording. Participants could interact with HYI's content on Instagram and the website at their own pace. HYI was also able to amplify the messages of community partners online. Analysing the outreach data strengthened the choice to continue generating content and online/hybrid events to share.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways do you and your organization make time for relationships?
- Is there internal encouragement to take on collaborative endeavors? What conversations may need to take place to enhance partnerships?
- In what ways can you better support your key stakeholders through outreach activities? Is your marketing team open to sharing and amplifying messages from other agencies?
- How can technology support your outreach goals? What challenges/limitations might you face?

Outcome 2 - Provide safe in person and virtual spaces to gather

While it is impossible to guarantee a complete 'safe' space, there are ways that organizations can mitigate risk and create 'safer' spaces and 'braver' spaces where folks can speak up. During the lifespan of the HYI, spaces were created in person and online for weekly committees. Spaces were also created for the community to connect with the HYI at in person and online spaces.

Successful Approaches

In person team (2 hours): When these actions are taken they become team norms.

- Providing healthy food that youth prepare themselves is good for nutrition and life skills.
- Using names regularly with correct pronunciation.
- Creating time for informal chatting, celebrating birthdays and other important milestones, and identify strengths in front of others.
- Calling actions and behaviours that are unhealthy immediately, and redirect to healthy choices.
- Having discussions.
- Creating activities/events focused on social justice and cultural events.
- Being prepared to find answers to questions.
- **For Events:**
 - Sign in/out sheet with guardian phone number.
 - Provide care for participant's needs such as water, snacks, sunscreen, and bug spray.
 - Allow youth to explore community events to see the activities and resources.
 - Lead by example and show youth how to interact with participants/customers/guests (you can even have a cheat sheet script!)

Virtual team (1 hour): Video call fatigue is real!

- Say hello to each person as they arrive.
- Keep things upbeat and moving.
- Be flexible with camera on/off.
- Pronouns are encouraged but not mandatory on screen name.
- Use breakout rooms for team building and to provide coaching to youth.
- Use tools for all to contribute and keep an eye out for those hesitate to 'jump in.'
- Prepare the group by saying "after Habiba speaks, let's hear from Kevin on what colours the event post should be".
- Allow folks to leave the call instead of simply ending it. A lot of important chats happen during that informal closure time.
- **For Events:** Encourage youth to lead their events but supportive adults should be in attendance camera/mic off if they are needed.
- **Tips for youth leading online events:**
 - Welcome all guests by name.
 - Create a Land Acknowledgement that also ties into the event to enhance meaning.
 - Lay out the event agenda and anticipate common questions people may ask.
 - Have a process in place if there are unhealthy actions and behaviours taking place.
 - Have a breakout room for those who need a minute or are over stimulated.

Reflection Questions

- Have youth vetted your spaces and team orientation processes? How often is that revisited?
- In what ways are youth encouraged to co-create healthy spaces with staff/adult volunteers?
- How does your organization show its commitment to creating/providing equitable spaces for youth? (ex. considerations for gender, sexuality, race, religion)
- In what ways do you and your organization respond to actions and behaviours that are unhealthy for your space? How do you respond to youth brave enough to speak up about what they may experience in your spaces?

Outcome 3 - Maximizing the positive impact on issues that matter to young people

Providing real-world insights, tools, and templates for youth-led teams is key for project and activity success. This may be the first time that a young person has hosted an activity, spoke in a public setting, or organized a virtual event. Providing support while challenging growth helps maximize the positive impact of the project and its effect on the young people involved.

Successful Approaches

- **Build learning into doing.** HYI volunteers cared about many issues and topics. The projects they undertook provided an opportunity to learn first, and then take action. The HYI members would research and invite experts to support the teams as they learned about the subject. For some topics members created six-week learning modules called “Deep Dives” to explore topics so that youth were well-versed and had a strong base of knowledge about the subject. Many projects followed the format on having one “awareness” or educational component and a follow up “action” or event.
- **Provide brainstorming strategies, event guidelines, and project prompts.** It is critical to

support youth in their journey without micro-managing the process. Youth could utilize the tools as they saw fit and then approach adults for support with particular questions and requests. If the ideas needed to be modified in some way by adults, an explanation became a learning moment for both the youth and adult.

- **Present opportunities to youth that create local impact, increase youth knowledge, and appreciation of where they live.** The experiences strengthened the bonds of the HYI members with community organizations and fellow residents. Even walking through downtown or local parks together connected members to the community and to each other.

Reflection Questions

- Review processes for brainstorming sessions and project management – is the content clear and youth-friendly?
- How may you create a spirit of ownership for the projects/activities youth work on – while still being open to your feedback and advice?
- In what ways do you measure success? How do you measure impact?



Call to Action – Authentic Youth Engagement

There is an enormous body of research on youth engagement. The HYI was a testament to what can happen when elements of this research are intentionally put into action. The HYI is an example of how communities can learn from the youth, community partners, summer students, and project staff who connected with the project to share their time, talents, skills, and passion to inspire amazing community efforts and relationship building.



- How can you establish a positive, safe, and healthy relationships with the young people in your life?
- How can you engage youth in a way that is true to you?
- How can you encourage youth to build on their strengths?
- How can you encourage other adults to think about their strengths, values, hobbies, lessons they've learned, and find age-appropriate and context-appropriate ways to share this with youth to help them navigate the world?

The Halton Youth Initiative and Our Kids Network websites are full of youth engagement resources: project snapshots, templates, an asset-building library, and more.

- **HYI Website:** www.haltonyouth.com
- **Project videos on YouTube:** Halton Youth Initiative
- **Legacy youth council on Instagram:** @HaltonYVC
- **Our Kids Network Website:** www.ourkidsnetwork.ca

Resources and networks to explore

Readers are encouraged to explore these resources and to reach out to their local Youth Friendly Network to connect with their peers, stay abreast local news, and find opportunities to learn via trainings and presentations.

To learn more about youth engagement trends, models, and research explore:

Search Institute: <https://searchinstitute.org/>

Volunteer Canada: <https://volunteer.ca/>

Canada Service Corps:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/youth/canada-service-corps.html>

Students Commission of Canada:
<https://www.studentscommission.ca/>

YouthREX: <https://youthrex.com/>

¹ Search Institute (2020). The Intersection of Developmental Relationships, Equitable Environments, and SEL [Insights & Evidence Series]. Minneapolis, MN: Author.

Published by Our Kids Network. *Halton Youth Initiative: Making the Case for Authentic Youth Engagement Practice Brief* shares the journey of the HYI and creates awareness of how a municipal initiative can successfully provide a platform for youth voice and action.

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