



Halton Youth Initiative

Exploring project findings and examining authentic youth engagement practices

Abstract

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.

This resource is to be used in conjunction with the Authentic Youth Engagement Workshop event from June 8, 2022. Recordings available on the Halton Youth Initiative YouTube channel.

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Land Acknowledgement

Our Kids Network is situated on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Huron-Wendat and Haudenosaunee; now home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. We acknowledge the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. We also recognize the lasting presence and deep traditional knowledge and viewpoints of the Indigenous people with whom we share this land.



<https://www.ourkidsnetwork.ca/Public/Indigenous-Literacy-Resources>

The Halton Youth Initiative

Introduction

The goal of the Halton Youth Initiative (HYI) was to elevate youth voice and empower volunteers aged 12-17 to have a positive impact in the communities of North Oakville, Acton, Aldershot (Burlington neighbourhood), and Milton. The project was youth-led, with young volunteers identifying local issues and implementing strategies leading to possible solutions. An evidence-based approach focused on relationship building was taken in all interactions and activities.

The Halton Youth Initiative Report highlights the activities, benchmarks and impact of the HYI between 2015 thru 2021. You can read the report by visiting www.haltonyouth.com

Halton Youth Initiative History

The conversations that formed the foundation of the Halton Youth Initiative began at the **Our Kids Network (OKN)** Youth Collective Impact meeting in July 2015. A committee of regional professionals identified North Oakville as a vulnerable neighbourhood with great opportunities. Youth focus groups were conducted in summer 2016 and the themes that emerged shaped the goals of the work funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation:

- increase awareness of local resources to a youth audience,
- increase awareness of topics that matter to youth, and;
- collaborate with community partners to increase positive youth hangout space.

The **Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF)** awarded a Seed Grant in 2016 for North Oakville. This work paved the way for an OTF Grow Grant in 2018 to expand the reach of Halton youth-adult councils at OKN Community Hub locations. The Community Hubs were located in Acton, Aldershot, and Milton, and brought people and organizations together from across Halton Region.

The COVID-19 Pandemic required the Halton Youth Initiative to dissolve the geographic barriers and quickly develop a model for the virtual world that would continue to tackle the goals of the OTF Grow Grant. A strengths-based approach that nurtured the existing relationships with youth members and engaged community partners kept the initiative operating, growing, and building momentum. Remarkably, youth participation increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic with 300 youth engaged throughout the project.

Halton Youth Initiative Outcomes

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 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?

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.”

- **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

How we modeled Authentic Youth Engagement

Authentic youth engagement is establishing positive, safe, and healthy relationships while engaging with others in a way that is true to you. Just as 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. It also means slowing down and being present so that each young person is seen as the unique and complex human they are. Make moments to meaningfully connect with all youth in your care; whether acknowledging something positive, following up about something they told you, or reaching out with an opportunity that aligns with their interests. There is no magic template – authentic youth engagement requires us to show up, be present, and be consistent in our desire to support young people!

Here are some quick examples of how the Developmental Relationships framework translated in the Halton Youth Initiative.

- **Express Care** – *Showing up and seeing* – Say hi to each person, celebrate birthdays, make time for fun, read the room (know when to push and when to rest), listen with intent, honour special dates, anticipate dietary choices, create letters of reference with clear examples, properly pronounce names, and look forward to seeing them!
- **Challenge Growth** – *Accountability is key* – Train and connect, ask youth to summarize how they will accomplish a task, create an understanding for deadlines and teamwork, follow up, identify strengths, explain why things can/can’t happen, apologize when you make mistakes
- **Provide Support** – *Expand on the idea of what a caring adult is* – to 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
- **Share Power** - *Youth involved in every aspect of the project* – youth focus groups created the project goals, teens part of interview process for staff, leading teams, summer students and co-op opportunities, co-creating via workshops and content to mobilize the project findings
- **Expand Possibilities** – *Connect to the world* – Weekly e-blasts, developed a HYI Leader’s circle, accepted speaking opportunities, and helped youth navigate community resources.

Understanding the Project Outcomes

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.

Below are snapshots of how we achieved the project outcomes. More resources to come during 2022.

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 were: establish youth-adult councils with x youth and x adults depending on which community, and tracking total volunteer and adult hours, and in-kind support (ex. Using space for free)

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

Successful Approaches

- Relationships matter! Positive communication and focusing on individual strengths and needs created a team environment of growth and hope. A telling outcomes of that environment is the number of siblings and best friends who joined the team after their loved one joined HYI.
- Collaborating helped connect with like-minded folks and be in front of larger audiences. When the grant for Acton, Aldershot and Milton came through, the councils were developed from scratch by a staff person new to Halton – cultivating positive relationships with others in the community allowed for quick uptake to support recruitment to the council and their activities.
- Using technology platforms familiar to youth supported our internal and external goals
 - *Internally*, supporting virtual volunteers allowed for volunteer numbers to increase as transportation needs not an issue for virtual volunteers, created unique opportunities for youth to organize and stay in communication with one another during the week, and increased our 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 our message to reach further than ever before. Folks could join virtually, or watch a recording. They could interact with our content on Instagram and our website at their own pace. We were also able to amplify the messages of community partners online. Analysing the outreach data strengthened our choice to continue generating content and online/hybrid events.

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 you can mitigate risk and create 'safer' spaces and 'braver' spaces where folks can speak up. During our project lifespan we created spaces in person and online for weekly committees, as well as spaces for the community to connect with us at in person and online spaces.

Successful Approaches

- **In person team (2 hours):** Providing healthy food that youth prep 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 in actions and behaviours that are unhealthy immediately, and redirect to healthy choices. Having discussions and creating activities/event on social justice and cultural events, and being prepared to find answers to questions. These become team norms.
 - **Events:** Sign in/out sheet with guardian phone number. Provide care for their 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 (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 thing upbeat and moving, be flexible with camera on/off, pronouns encouraged but not mandatory on screen name, use breakout rooms for team building and to provide your own coaching to youth, use tools for all to contribute and keep an eye out for those hesitate to 'jump in' – can prepare 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 – that’s where a lot of important chats happen.
 - **Events:** Encourage youth to lead their events but be in attendance camera/mic off if they need you. *Here are some 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. Break the ice. Keep momentum going by encouraging folks to contribute or celebrating game activity – depending on what type of event. 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. The HYI volunteers cared about many issues and topics – and providing an opportunity to learn first and then take action happened internally and in community-faced efforts. Internally we would research, have expert support visit our teams, and we would even create 6-week learning modules called “Deep Dives” to explore topics of strong interest so that youth were well-versed. Project-wise many followed the format on having one “awareness” or educational component and a follow up “action” or event piece.
- Providing brainstorming strategies, event guidelines, project prompts were critical in supporting youth in their journey without micro-managing the process. Youth could utilize the tools as they saw fit and then approach adult support with particular questions and requests. If their ideas were ever modified in some way by adults, an explanation became a learning moment.
- Presenting opportunities for local impact when possible helped increase their knowledge and appreciation of where they live – while strengthening our bonds with community organizations and fellow residents. Even walking through downtown or local parks together connected us to our community and to each other.

Reflection Questions

- Review processes for youth 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?

Expanding Possibilities

The Halton Youth Initiative and Our Kids Network library

The Halton Youth Initiative and Our Kids Network websites are full of youth engagement resources: project snapshots, templates, an asset-building library, and more! Additionally, there will be Resource Packages and Additional Content added to the HYI website on the outcomes of the project in 2022.

- **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

The HYI ultimately is a testament to the enormous body of research on youth engagement available to learn from – *and more importantly* - is a testament of all 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.

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. (Your area use a different namesake, reach out to the youth contact at your Town/City for more info)

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/>

For further insight and support, connect with the team at **Our Kids Network**. Thank you!!

