



# Civics & Citizenship

## The Field Guide to keep it real when engaging children and young people

“Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account.”

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup>



This field guide is intended to inspire and guide the planning, process, and delivery of strategies and activities engaging children and young people in the decisions and actions that impact on them in response to their needs, desires, and aspirations - now and into the future.

# Why is it important?

As valued citizens of our community, children and young people have unique, diverse, and important perspectives that can enrich our understanding of almost all aspects of civic life.

Children and young people's ideas, insights, aspirations, concerns, and experiences are relevant to matters relating to public strategy and policy, as well as to the planning and delivery of public projects, infrastructure, and spaces. They are also relevant to the design and innovation of some products and services – to any aspect of life that is likely to either directly or indirectly impact on their lives now or in the future.<sup>2</sup>

While children and young people care deeply about what happens in the world around them, and want to understand their place within it, if we want to bring their voice and influence to shape the many systems, structures, policies, and processes that are intended to serve them, a determined effort and commitment is necessary to engage them effectively.

Effectively engaging children and young people in the matters that impact their lives helps to achieve desirable, appropriate, and efficient outcomes that have value and impact.

For children and young people being effectively engaged builds their personal skills and their sense of identity. It also strengthens social connections with peers and adults and cultivates civic agency.<sup>3</sup>

We consider children and young people to be between the ages of 12–25 years. Regardless of age, children and young people have vastly distinct, diverse, and dynamic developmental, sociological, psychological, and physiological characteristics, needs, and ways of being. These are elements which need to be considered in the planning and delivery of engagement activity.

Engagement activity should be led by adults with the necessary expertise, familiarity, and accountability in working with children and young people.

## What matters to children and young people?

When it comes to being engaged and involved, children and young people tell us very clearly that they want to feel:

**Understood** – “I want to feel comfortable and welcome to have a say on issues I care about”

**Valued** – “I want to be myself and express what really matters to me”

**Heard** – “I want to be listened to and respected”

**Purposeful** – “I want to be useful and make a real difference”

**Impactful** – “I want to have a real impact on the issues I care about.”

# Principles

## Keep it REAL

Cultivating the conditions conducive to quality interaction, involvement and participation can be great fun. They can also be really challenging. So here's how to keep it REAL – Respect, Emergence, Authenticity, Listening.<sup>4</sup>

### Respect

**Do no harm. Engagement must be welcoming, easy to understand, transparent, consensual, voluntary, accountable, and safe.**

#### Is it welcoming?

Participants should feel they have had adequate opportunity to initiate ideas, express their views freely and are being treated with respect, free of discrimination or judgement. Particular considerations may be required for vulnerable children and young people and those with other special needs.

Engagement must not discriminate against young people because of their age, race, colour, gender, language, religious, political, or other opinion or beliefs, national, ethnic, or social origin, disability, birth, or socio-economic status.

#### Is it appropriate?

Children and young people, even of the same age, may be at vastly different stages of development physically, socially, emotionally, cognitively, in terms of their language skills and literacy, as well as their life experiences and perspectives.

While most engagement will be undertaken by those who are already familiar with the children and young people being engaged, it is important to consider the

age-appropriateness of the activity as well as the alignment it has with their experiences, knowledge, capabilities, and interests.

**TIP:** Avoid a wide age discrepancy, which may create barriers to participation.

#### Is it transparent?

The level of influence of participants may differ from situation to situation, depending on a myriad of circumstances. This means being clear from outset about the scope of influence and the role they will be playing is important. The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum provides a useful framework to guide this.<sup>5</sup> Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation is another useful tool to help define the level of engagement and participation.

The intended purpose of the engagement, the possible and likely impact/s, and the specific use of the information provided by the children and young people, needs to be thoroughly explained and well understood before commencing the main engagement activity.

#### Is it consensual?

All information, photographs, videos, or digital images of a child or young person can only be taken and used or published with the explicit consent of the child (and their guardian) or young person for a specific use, which they understand.

Personal information such as full names and addresses must be kept confidential.

#### **Is it voluntary?**

Children and young people must be able to choose whether or not they would like to participate and be able to easily withdraw from activities at any time should they wish to. They must not be coerced into participating or expressing their views.

#### **Is there a trusted complaints procedure?**

A clear and confidential formal complaints procedure allows children involved in participatory engagement activities to make complaints in confidence. Information about the procedure should be made available in relevant languages and formats.

#### **Is it safe?**

The adults leading the engagement have a duty of care to ensure the necessary safeguards are in place to prevent physical or emotional harm being done to any of the young participants. This includes undertaking the necessary legal administration and police checks, ensuring supervision is provided at all times and that safe travel arrangements to and from the activity, medical insurance and expenses, are all covered or put in place.

## **Emergence**

**Embrace ambiguity. Engagement assumes that there is value in gaining insight into the experiences and perceptions of others. It is therefore important to trust the process, embrace ambiguity, and create space for ideas to emerge.**

#### **Is it interesting?**

Conversations are inherently intuitive, so following hunches is important.

Find ways to provoke wonder around the matter you are exploring. Provoke participants to consider different perspectives and ways forward while avoiding being coercive or providing preconceived responses. Quality arts in all forms offers powerful instruments to inspire.

#### **Is the approach genuinely curious?**

If you know the answers to the questions you are asking – don't ask them! Ask those questions you genuinely want to know the answers to. Staff need to have a seeking and learning mindset – to remind themselves that it is not about a reflection of what they know. It is about what they don't know – so there is no such thing as wrong information.

#### **Is it reflective?**

Allow time and hold the space for reflection throughout the activity. Enable early thoughts to form and be shared and for responses to emerge and bounce around with each other. Avoid filling in empty space with chatter.

## **Authenticity**

**Engagement should be intentional, have purpose, meaning, be good quality, and genuinely influence and contribute to better outcomes and actions.**

#### **Is the issue relevant to their lives?**

Be honest and clear about what the engagement and what the broader project is in service to. Participation should require and validate the ideas and experiences of those involved.

#### **Is it early?**

Engagement should ideally involve participants as early as possible in the project or process for which they are being engaged, and may even contribute to designing the process and activities.

#### **Is it worthy?**

Use tools and methods that are interesting and specifically selected or designed for the activity, the topic, the needs of the participants, and the setting. This will work to honour all of those involved as well as elevate the importance of the process and the outcomes.

#### **Is the activity suitably well planned?**

Provide adequate notification and provide multiple platforms for participants to contribute. The choice of venue and room set up should support the activity and consider the accessibility of all those involved including those with diverse abilities.

**Is the engagement process clear?**

Explain the life cycle of the project for which participants are being engaged. Include details of the engagement process and how the role of current and other participants fits into the bigger picture. Consider what the anticipated outcomes and benefits children and young people might expect, desire, or be pleasantly surprised by through their participation.

**Is the purpose and impact clear?**

It is important to be clear and transparent about the purpose, intent, and level of influence of their participation including the intended pathway of the information they will be sharing and how it will be used. Include the various ways in which it is likely to be presented.

**Is there an opportunity for further involvement?**

Consider ways that participants might be able to continue to be involved, and provide information regarding ways for them to make contributions into the future on current or other projects.

**Are the staff involved suitably prepared?**

Staff involved must have knowledge and capacity to facilitate meaningful participation and listen deeply. Appropriate training, tools, and constructive attitudes and behaviours are important. They include treating participants and other staff positively and respectfully, and modelling appropriate behaviour.

**Are you expecting the unexpected?**

There is a significant responsibility that comes with inviting children and young people to express themselves. Participants may raise issues and share information that staff will be morally and possibly legally required to act upon either immediately or closely following the activity. It is important that staff are aware of how to navigate issues of this kind effectively and have knowledge of the processes that have been put in place to manage them.

## Listening

**Give voice. Children and young people see, feel, and experience life very differently from adults. Adequately understanding the complexities of their experiences and perspectives requires deep and active listening. This means being fully present, without distraction so you can perceive, hear, see, and sense what is being expressed verbally and non-verbally throughout the engagement process.**

**Is the dynamic helpful?**

All adults change the dynamics of the conversation.

There is an assumed age-related power imbalance between adults and children and adults and young people. Other nuanced pre-existing dynamics amongst participants that you will need to be aware of and perhaps manage throughout the activity may emerge. There needs to be a determined effort to honour the unique contribution of each child or young person. Establishing trust so that participants feel comfortable sharing information with others is crucial.

# The Process

## Think. Plan. Do.

## Distil. Check.

Engaging with children and young people is undertaken formally and informally by a vast range of organisations and community groups for a variety of reasons and at varying levels of complexity. However, the steps for engaging with children and young people are relatively similar.

For some organisations it may be helpful to articulate a 'theory of change' that includes a situation analysis that is informed by robust data and information, clearly documented objectives and reports of previous evaluations, policy, and legislative context, as well as resourcing of information and other research related to the reason for wanting to undertake the engagement in the first place.

### **Think it.**

#### **1. What is the purpose of the engagement?**

It is important to consider what you are engaging children and young people in and for. Consider what you are seeking to understand. How does it fit into the bigger picture? Whose interests are being served? What ways will children and/or young people likely be better off as a result of their participation (either directly or indirectly), and what is in scope and what is not.

A helpful first step may be to frame the current situation or problem you are trying to understand and address.

#### **2. What is the framing question?**

Regardless of the magnitude of the project, consider framing the situation as a single base question that begins with "How might we....?"

Try and frame the base question in a manner that will make sense and have meaning for children and young people. Getting the base question right may take a few iterations, but this step in the process will shape the quality of everything that follows.

### **Plan it.**

#### **1. Who will be engaged?**

Consider and map all the children and young people who are likely to be directly or indirectly impacted by the matter, or who may be interested in the outcomes; including the various ways in which they might be contacted and informed.

Also consider the value and opportunity to engage young people as early as possible in the planning process.

## 2. What are the barriers?

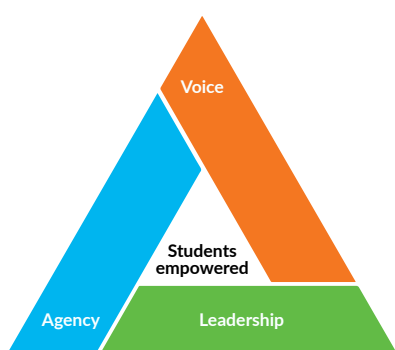
Consider and address potential logistical, social, and emotional barriers to participation.

Factors such as location, language, affordability, and self-confidence, can all influence an individual's interest and capacity to participate in an engagement activity.

## 3. What is the scope of influence?

To ensure the engagement is effective and meaningful (not exploitative or tokenistic) it is important to be clear and honest about the level of influence the participating children and young people will have throughout the engagement process. This will differ greatly in various situations.

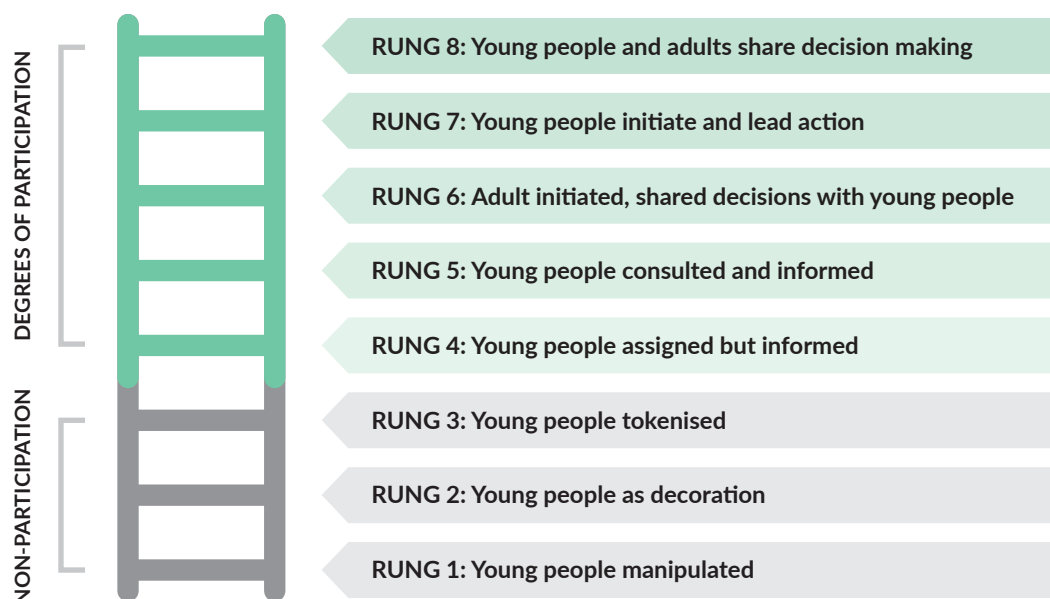
While the intentions and applications may overlap and evolve, it may be helpful to consider the level of engagement as enabling and empowering either voice, agency, or leadership.<sup>6</sup>



	<b>Voice</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
<b>Intentions</b>	To contribute communicate ideas, insights, experiences, and opinions with the intention to influence outcomes.	To contribute iteratively throughout the end-to-end life-cycle of a collaborative design process to influence change.	To contribute to governance to direct, inform and make decisions.
<b>Applications</b>	Project, Product.	Process, Program, Policy, Strategy.	Board, Council, Advisory Group.

Above: The State Government of Victoria's Amplify work presents this effectively in the context of education and learning.<sup>6</sup>

Right: Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation is a useful tool to help consider the level of engagement showing the highest rung on the ladder is where child-initiated shared decisions with adults occurs, through to the lowest rung being manipulation by adults; using children and young people to support an existing position.<sup>7,8</sup>



# IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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Above: the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation may also be helpful, particularly when engaging young adults.<sup>9</sup>  
 (© International Association for Public Participation, www.iap2.org)

#### 4. What might the most effective ways of engaging children and young people be?

There are a growing number of ways to involve and engage young people. Informal engagement can be effective through a range of social media platforms or via surveys, petitions, focus groups, interviews with youth groups or in local community meetings. It can also be undertaken through more formal instruments such as via online public engagement platforms, or through youth councils and youth parliaments.

Some projects may involve partnering with other service providers to undertake the engagement effectively and should be made clear to participants from the outset.

Consider consulting young people on technology decisions as they are generally more knowledgeable about what platforms for engagement with their peers are best, what works well and what doesn't – and not just for their peers, but for other audiences too.

#### 5. What other engagement has taken place recently?

Being engaged too often without seeing results and impact can lead to disinterest and disengagement. Consider what other engagement may have been undertaken recently that is relevant to the subject the engagement activity is seeking to find out more about. That way you will be ensuring former contributions will be acknowledged and demonstrating respect and an interest to build further on what has already been shared.

#### 6. What resources are available to undertake the engagement?

Considering what financial and human resources will be needed to support the engagement activity will help inform the scale and methods used, as well as the outcomes achieved.



Costs associated with the marketing and communications of the engagement can cover a vast range of items. These can include the invitation to participate, incentives (if appropriate) to do so, venue hire, event management, lighting and sound, security, AV, photography, filming, facilitation, transport, transit costs (for guest speakers and participants), event and staff food, beverages, engagement materials (ipads, paper, printing, markers, tape, blutack, whiteboard) and tools, as well as the costs of transcribing, drafting, production and editing of reports, illustrations and diagrams, and other artefacts and ephemera collected. The follow up communications and the costs associated with the presentation of the findings need to also be factored in.

### **7. How will the insights be expressed?**

Consider how best to balance the recording, transcribing, and gathering of information throughout the engagement activity to avoid impacting on the mood or risk diluting the enthusiasm of participants while they are contributing.

While there is value in convening conversations, it is the distilling and expressing of the ideas, insights and information attained throughout the engagement that will be the most interesting and inspiring to others. Consider creative ways to effectively present the information so it can be shared. This could include use of data visualisation graphics, illustrations, diagrams, zines, short audio and film media files, vox pops, podcasts, animations or a combination of these.

### **8. Map the engagement lifecycle**

Develop a project plan that maps the lifecycle of the engagement process. You will need to consider the timeline necessary to undertake the engagement as well as schedule in the key dates and milestones you will need to reach to keep the process moving.



While there are many different approaches and methods to delivering engagement activities to children and young people, below are some general tips which might be helpful:

- Cultivate a positive mindset. Start out from a place of deep curiosity – not from a place of already knowing.
- Be positive. Be optimistic. Be kind.
- Use everyday language – no jargon.
- Attention spans vary so keep sessions to one hour maximum.
- For face-to-face sessions always have other adults who know the children and young people participating in the room.
- Always have a facilitator to help manage the unexpected.
- Never have more facilitators than participants.
- Find ways to build instant rapport – don't be annoying!
- For many children and young people, their strongest frame of reference of adults is through school. School reinforces compliance, quiet classrooms, correct spelling and neat handwriting – so remind them that they are not at school, that you don't care about spelling or handwriting, and they don't need to know anything more than they already know – that they are the experts in their own lives.
- There are a plethora of tools and activities to engage children and young people in a range of ways that are suitable for diverse settings – choose a few that appeal to you.
- Life is confusing enough – avoid over familiarity, flirtatious behaviour, or attire that may be confusing or interpreted as sexual provocation.



## **Distil it.**

Consistent themes are likely to emerge throughout the engagement. Insights, information, and data attained can be prepared and presented in a myriad of engaging ways, both informally and formally.

Even some of the most formal reporting mechanisms allow for interesting images, illustrations, infographics, audio/video recordings and other media files, enabling the activity to be presented in an honest and authentic way.

Stewarding the integrity of the information while distilling it into a useful format that can inform impact is an important process. It may be helpful to present recordings or direct quotes verbatim but keep surnames out.



## **Check it.**

Reflect honestly on how you think the engagement activity went. Consider holding a de-brief conversation with those who were involved in leading the process.

Check in with participants on the quality of their experience and involvement.

To what extent did they feel:

- the activity made sense?
- understood and comfortable to have a say on issues they care about?
- valued to be myself and express what really matters to me?
- heard, listened to, and respected?
- as though they were making a real difference?
- that there was adequate opportunity to share their perspectives?
- happy to participate again in the future?
- they know what will happen to their information?
- they understood the likely impact of their involvement?

**Most importantly,  
enjoy it!**

# Resources

## **Better Together: A practical guide to effective engagement with young people.**

A practical guide to plan and undertake successful consultations and engagement activities with children and young people. Developed in South Australia by the Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI), the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC) and the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA).

<https://bettertogether.sa.gov.au/>

## **IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum**

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) is a widely utilised model that provides a framework on how government can effectively engage the community in decision-making processes.

<https://www.iap2.org.au/resources/spectrum/>

## **Hart's Ladder**

Hart's Ladder is a model that sets out the various levels of influence for young people participating in engagement processes.

[https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens\\_participation.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf)

## **Field Guide to Human Centred Design**

A tool kit of teaching tools and a step forward in sharing the practice and promise of human-centered design with the social sector.

<https://www.ideo.com/post/design-kit>

## **The Collective Intelligence Design Playbook by NESTA**

Tools, tactics, and methods to harness the power of people, data, and technologies to solve global challenges.

<https://www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/collective-intelligence-design-playbook/>

## **Endnotes**

- 1 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. 1990. Available at <https://www.unicef.org.au/our-work/information-for-children/un-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>
- 2 <https://www.youthpower.org/youth-engagement-cop>
- 3 Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health's Youth Engagement Toolkit. Available at [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/eecd\\_YETOOL\\_E.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/eecd_YETOOL_E.pdf)
- 4 Council of Europe, Children's Rights Division and Youth Department. Child participation assessment tool. 2016. Available at <https://s25924.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Child-Participation-Assessment-Tool-Web-A4-1.pdf>
- 5 IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. Available at <https://www.iap2.org.au/>
- 6 Amplify: Empowering students through voice, agency and leadership. State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training). 2019. Available at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teaching/resources/practice/improve/Pages/amplify.aspx>
- 7 Roger Hart. Children's participation - from tokenism to citizenship. UNICEF International Child Development Centre. 1992. Available at [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens\\_participation.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf)
- 8 Better Together - A practical guide to effective engagement with young people. Available at <https://bettertogether.sa.gov.au/>
- 9 The International Association for Public Participation. Available at <https://www.iap2.org.au/resources/spectrum/>

