



# Child and Youth Voices in Policy Development

## Literature Review and Compendium

Students Commission of Canada

Lead organization of the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement

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Child and Youth Voices in Policy Development: Literature Review and Compendium

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## Executive Summary

Canada is a signatory to the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Engaging children and youth in policy development supports the principles of the Convention's Articles 12 and 13 related to the rights of children to receive information, express views and have input on decisions that affect them. Canada's Youth Policy (2020) advocates for respecting and valuing young people's opinions.

The purpose of this literature review and compendium of practices is to describe effective, promising and emerging practices that the public service can use to engage children and youth in policy development. The spectrum of beneficial activities described ranges from secondary research on children and youth with no engagement, to informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering through decision-making with young people. The literature suggests the further along the spectrum towards more meaningful engagement, the greater the benefits for young people and for the responsiveness of policy in meeting current child and youth needs.

The literature review included 50 academic studies and 23 organizational publications (English and French). In brief, the research outlines overarching principles to guide implementation: respect for young people's voice, balancing power and relationships with adults, supporting feelings of belonging, and making space for young people to contribute on their own terms. The research shows that there are several effective practices that have been proven to engage children and youth in activities related to policy development that are documented in peer-reviewed academic literature. These include using multiple methods so diverse young people can participate (such as focus groups, arts-based activities, and surveys) and implementing iterative cycles so that young people can explore their experiences, develop their ideas and build meaningful recommendations. There are also several promising practices, which have been successful at engaging young people and gathering their voices, and are categorized as promising because they are not as well evaluated or have mixed findings. These include co-creating shared principles, hybrid online-offline methods, youth advisories, and integrating previous research with young people into policy development. Finally, there are many innovative emerging practices that are not evaluated but have been described in the recent literature. Many of these are related to current technology such as digital platforms that have been designed or adapted for engaging young people in sharing their perspectives, designing solutions, analyzing data, and developing prototypes to inform policy. Examples include use of videogames, virtual polls, and data analysis software.

Key considerations for policy makers engaging young people include diversity, consent, safeguarding, compensation, mitigating risks, benefits of virtual and in-person spaces, and using identified methods which have evolved over the past decade to reflect pressures related to social issues, climate change, a global pandemic and changes in technology and culture.

The compendium presents this inventory of practices and tools designed to support policy makers in integrating child and youth voice at various stages of the policy development process, such as identifying issues by using activities that support young people to think about the

systems that influence the policy issue, arts-based activities to gather young people's perspectives and ideas, and participatory sessions to make meaning of the data gathered to inform policy. For issues where it is especially critical to hear the voices of the hard-to-reach, the evidence indicates working with trusted adult allies to young people in those communities allows for deeper conversations and understanding about the policy issues they face.

The continuum of processes and practices together set a high bar of aspirational, gold standards of child and youth engagement to work towards. Using the framework, practices and core principles, particularly, that of respect for the significance and value of direct child and youth voice in policy development, is designed to guide policy makers to choose the scale, type and duration of child and youth engagement appropriate for their budgets, timeframes, and desired results. Advancing toward more comprehensive youth engagement in policy development using the practices and principles identified in this review benefits participating children and youth and drives creating responsive and effective policies.

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## Introduction

“As a country, we must respect and value young people’s opinions. Almost all government policies and decisions have an impact on young people’s lives and youth have the right to influence these decisions, both individually and collectively.”

Canada’s Youth Policy, 2019

The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* that sets out the rights of children (under 18 years of age)<sup>1</sup>, including the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, as well as this quote from the introduction of Canada’s first Youth Policy (for those 15 to 29 years old)<sup>2</sup> recognize the importance and value of including young people’s voices in decision-making. However, policy development processes do not often have clear entry points for young people<sup>3</sup> to participate.

The purpose of this literature review and compendium of practices is to describe effective, promising and emerging practices for involving young people as much as possible in any policy development process. While some of the methods and practices have evolved over the past decade – and even in the past five years – to reflect changes in technology, culture, a global pandemic, and increasing pressures of climate change and social issues, the core principles and practices of child and youth involvement and engagement have endured.

This paper will present a continuum of processes and practices that together set a high bar of aspirational, gold standards of child and youth engagement. The principles and practices herein can be incorporated into policy development processes to work towards these gold standards. Using the core principles, particularly the principle of respect for the significance and value of direct voice of young people in policy development, can help guide policy makers to scope the scale, type and duration of child and youth engagement appropriately.

## Framework for viewing activities with children and youth

The academic and organizational literature describes a wide spectrum of child and youth involvement in policy development. Table 1 provides a framework of involvement that delineates a range of beneficial activities from non-involvement to participation to engagement (adapted from the International Association for Public Participation, 2018; and Waite et al., 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, children are defined as individuals under 12 years of age. Children as young as two have been meaningfully engaged in informing decision-making (e.g., O’Donnell, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper youth are defined as those over 12 (adolescents) until early adulthood. It is important to note that young people under 18 are a vulnerable group (or do not have the right to vote), and so efforts focused on this age range are warranted.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper young people are defined as those as young as 3 years of age until early adulthood), encompassing both children, and youth.

**Table 1: Levels of child and youth involvement**

Levels of child and youth involvement					
Non-involvement		Participation	Engagement		
Secondary research	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Search for and include research done by a third-party that shares child and youth voices.	Provide young people with balanced and objective information to understand the problem, opportunities and solutions.	Gather young people’s feedback on analysis, alternatives or decisions.	Work directly with young people throughout the process so their concerns and goals are understood and considered.	Partner with young people in each aspect of the policy decision including development of alternatives and selecting the preferred policy.	Place or share final decision-making in the hands of or with young people.

Through each level of involvement, young people’s voices can inform policy and ensure that their needs are centered. On the non-involvement side of the spectrum, child and youth voice can be indirectly integrated into policy development through third-party child and youth-involved research, both from academic and non-academic publications. On the engagement side of the spectrum, young people can inform policy more directly.

As defined by the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, youth engagement is the sustained and meaningful involvement in something outside of the self (Pancer et al., 2002; Rose-Krasnor, 2009). The focus outside of the self is a key aspect of policy development; youth are often motivated to join and stay engaged because they can contribute to the well-being of their peers or future generations (Lawford et al., 2023). Full engagement involves a balance of positive outcomes for youth at the individual level (e.g., skill-building, identity development), at the social level (e.g., stronger relationships, larger supportive network), and system level outcomes (e.g., policies that are more responsive to young people’s needs, greater civic engagement) (McCart & Khanna, 2012). Activities undertaken at each of these levels have the potential to achieve positive outcomes.

**Why is consultation considered participation, but not engagement?** Most consultations (e.g., focus groups, surveys) do not allow for a reciprocal cycle of sharing and reviewing information and views from participants to the consultation host/researcher. Furthermore, consultations may be limited in terms of time and opportunities for young people to deliberate, to make-meaning of the initial input, to drive the agenda or to inform the questions being asked. These activities are often critiqued by young people because there is no direct benefit to them as contributors; they almost never find out what happened with their input.

In contrast, child and youth engagement is relationship-based – that is, there is an emphasis on the interpersonal connection between young people and adults – and sets up a reciprocal

exchange of knowledge and learning between young people and adults in a positive child and youth development context (i.e., strengths-based). An engagement approach can advance child and youth rights around governance related to policy decisions that affect them because young people can more meaningfully participate (McCart & Khanna 2012; Swist et al., 2022). Also, young people experience benefits directly from engagement, which is linked to positive outcomes at the individual level (e.g., sense of well-being, leadership skills), social level (e.g., connections with supportive adults and peers) and system level (e.g., community engagement, responsible citizenship) (Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2003; Khanna et al., 2014; McCart & Khanna, 2012; Ramey et al., 2019; Ramey et al., 2018).

Regardless of where one begins on the spectrum of child and youth involvement there is potential for moving towards engagement by combining activities in iterative cycles of the process. For example, engaging young people to design a survey or focus group for their peers can level up a typical consultation. Similarly, after a third-party anonymous survey, bringing a group of young people together to review the preliminary findings and collaboratively analyze them has the potential for meaningful engagement and improving interpretation accuracy and validity.

This paper shares practices of child and youth participation and engagement in policy and starts by describing the targeted methodology used to gather the evidence-base for practices. The methodology is followed by findings that identify principles and practices that have a strong evidence base (effective practices), promising practices that have less evidence or evaluation, and emerging practices that reflect the changing landscape of the past few years, particularly in relation to technology use. A discussion of key considerations and challenges for implementation follows. Accompanying the literature review is a compendium of practices for child and youth voices in policy development.

## Methodology

A targeted literature review was conducted with the goals of identifying current evidence-based and promising practices for child and youth engagement in policy development and developing a compendium of practices that could be shared across government departments. These offer public servants a point of reference for their child and youth engagement activities.

The scope of the review included English and French academic articles available through the following databases: Omni library catalogue (Waterloo University), ProQuest Social Sciences, Scopus, as well as Google Scholar. Searches were conducted using a combination of keywords. Searches for information from relevant organizations were conducted using Google and Google Scholar. For searches using Google, the first five pages of results were screened for relevance. Keywords and inclusion criteria are found in Appendix A.

Title and then abstract review were used for screening. Due to the targeted nature of this literature review, only the most relevant articles were reviewed fully. The inclusion criteria were expanded to include older articles when they were highly relevant or seminal literature. After review, a total of 50 academic publications (47 English and 3 French) and 23 organizational

publications (22 English and 1 French) about practices were included (please see Appendix B for article selection).

## Findings

### Principles for child and youth voice in policy making

The [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#), specifically in articles 12, 13, 14, and 17 outlines the rights of children under the age of 18 related to expressing their views in matters that affect them and having access to information. These rights are at the center of [Canada's Youth Policy](#), which is grounded in the recognition that multiple perspectives strengthen decision-making and policy development (Government of Canada, 2019).

In order to undertake activities that are in line with the rights of children and youth, and the Government's commitment to include youths' perspectives, it is important to follow a set of key principles that have emerged in the literature to guide the involvement of young people in policy and decision-making. These principles help to move towards meaningful child and youth engagement and are effective underpinnings for all activities and at all stages of policy development.

#### **Demonstrate respect for child and youth voice and competency**

Respect involves listening to young people and taking them seriously, bringing to the policy development process a belief that children and youth bring valuable knowledge and expertise using a strengths-based approach, and avoiding tokenism (Khanna et al., in press; McCart & Khanna, 2012; Nesrallah et al., 2023; Oswald et al., 2023; Pancer et al., 2002; Ramey et al., 2019; Zeldin, 2004). This principle recognizes developmental competency from the early years (e.g., children 3-6 years old, Correia et al., 2019) through to young adulthood. Providing meaningful choices and opportunities to contribute to decision-making - where the decision has not already been made - is critical (Khanna et al., 2014).

#### **Balance power and relationships with adults**

Young people are motivated by high expectations, support, encouragement and guidance from adults (McCart & Khanna, 2012; Zeldin, 2004; CYCC Network, 2013). This requires an ongoing effort built into the ways of working, communicating and making decisions. It's common to focus on tasks and skip some of this relationship-building time, but it is essential for engaging children and youth (Ingman et al., 2023; Merati, 2020; Ramey et al., 2019; Sime & Behrens, 2023; Smith et al., 2022; Switzer, 2020; Thew, 2021; Young et al., 2023). Increased and compensated adult ally support is a promising approach for supporting engagement, debriefing and providing feedback (Fischer & Radinger-Peer, 2024; Nzinga et al., 2024; Tjahja & Potjomkina, 2024).

To support a youth-adult partnership model and shared understanding, efforts to ensure more equitable footing are needed (McCart & Khanna, 2012; Zeldin et al., 2014). For example, materials need to be accessible (e.g., one initiative developed a shared language and

definitions document to ensure that everyone understood terminology, acronyms and abbreviations: Nzinga et al., 2024). Similarly, other capacity building may be needed for a shared understanding (e.g., youth-adult partnership model, key components of work, other background related to policy activity). Building in training for young people and adults separately tailored to their needs and perspectives and then bringing them together to unite youth and adults is a promising practice (e.g., Nzinga et al., 2024). In terms of the process, adapting to preferred communication channels and timing activities to accommodate young people and adult schedules (e.g., evenings and weekends) are essential (Nzinga et al., 2024). This approach can be appropriate for young people when tailored to the age of the participants.

### **Support feelings of belonging and young people's importance to the process**

Adults can support belonging by welcoming children and youth, providing orientation, and highlighting the importance of their contributions (Zeldin, 2004). It is important for adults to share outcomes with young people, give them opportunity to participate in follow-up activities related to advancing policy ideas into implementation, and report back on policy wins and policy changes attributed to young people's input (Jenkins et al., 2020; McCart & Khanna, 2012; Nesrallah et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2022; Swist et al., 2022; Thew, 2021; Tjahja & Potjomkina, 2024; Young et al., 2023).

### **Make space for young people to contribute on their own terms**

Young people are motivated to participate in policy development due to the focus on contributing to something larger than themselves and giving back to their communities (Lawford et al., 2023; Pancer et al., 2002; Zeldin, 2004). Provide multiple entry points and ways to be involved and ensure that they can choose how and when they want to participate. For example, offer different activities and modes of expression such as a combination of written, oral, and action-oriented activities so young people can choose how they would prefer to contribute (Ingman et al., 2023; Switzer, 2020). For younger children, offer multiple options that rely less on words, such as group discussions, taking photos, drawings and games (e.g., 2-4 year olds: O'Donnell, 2024).

### **Effective, promising, and emerging practices**

The practices presented in this paper focus on those that are positioned to move closer to the engagement side of the spectrum. The following section will share effective, promising and emerging practices for child and youth voice in policy development.

**Effective practices** are those that are evidence-based (i.e., the practices have been described and undergone evaluation or assessment through formal peer-reviewed research). They were deemed effective based on:

- 1) outcome (i.e., the practices enabled young people to contribute to a policy-related activity);
- 2) transferability (i.e., the practices can be used in other policy-related activities or contexts); and

3) cumulative evidence (i.e., the practices were reinforced in more than one study).

Unfortunately, there is limited academic literature about effective practices for involving younger children (under 12) in policy development (Yamaguchi et al., 2023) and no academic literature that includes children under 2 (Horgan, 2024). Where available, practices for children are included.

**Promising practices** are those that may have been implemented for a long time but are under-evaluated/under-described in the academic literature, have mixed findings, or have only been published in organizational reports that have not been academically peer-reviewed.

Finally, **emerging practices** include those that are innovative and recent but may not have been evaluated yet. They often consist of new digital possibilities. As young people are using the internet more than the rest of the population, it is inevitably being explored as an option for child and youth engagement in policy development. Specifically, online options align with young people's preferences and needs (Park, 2023):

- Instantaneous communication and feedback
- Easily accessible and innovative content (i.e., visual, interactive, clear messaging)
- Informal and non-institutionalized forms of participation (e.g., social media)
- Short-term and concrete impacts of participation (Andersen et al., 2021)
- Rewards that come from gamification, such as gaining reward points or winning immediate prizes for competitions (i.e., motivation for participation)
- Opportunities for socialization and influence by peers in social networks
- Attachment to individual identity and self-expression
- Strengthened trust in public institutions

### Practices for initiating the activity

Before involving children and youth, there are several factors that indicate an environment is more ready for engaging young people (Jacobs & George, 2022):

- There is a policy window during which the input of young people is likely to be seriously considered and potentially integrated into policy development
- There is high priority and/or valuing of child or youth involvement in the institution
- Where possible, there are young people already involved in existing participatory process with trusted adults
- Where possible, there are opportunities to build relationships between young people and government
- If using participatory processes, there are opportunities that empower young people as contributors in a way that is mindful of agency and power (i.e., where they are not overly influenced by the authority of the adults initiating the policy activity)
- Where possible, there is leeway to develop policy in an innovative way

If there is an opportunity for young people to meaningfully contribute to the policy development process, the following practices can be used for reaching out to and connecting with young people, introducing the opportunity, and co-developing guidelines for collaboration.

### Effective practices

Based on the topic, the initiating stakeholders **identify the social perspectives that are critical** for the issue or policy (Lansdown, 2001; McCart & Khanna 2012; Sime & Behrens, 2023; Smith et al., 2022; Young et al., 2023). They then connect with young people via child and youth organizations or child and youth sector networks to invite them into the policy development activity (e.g., Li, 2020; Smith et al., 2024). Depending on the policy focus, connecting with groups of young people who have been working on related issues can be particularly effective. Tapping into **existing networks** or groups for young people, such as youth advisory committees, can provide quick access to young people and can be a sustainable mechanism for involving young people in different stages of policy development (Chow et al., 2024). Organizations for children and youth are empowering settings for child and youth engagement in policy; opportunities for personal growth, social capital and adult support are key predictors (Krauss et al., 2020). Furthermore, **recruitment via the child and youth sector** (e.g., organizations, teachers, youth workers) is effective for reaching diverse children and youth and engaging young people where they have existing relationships and where they may share characteristics of marginalization that allow for deeper conversations about these factors (Smith et al., 2024).

### Promising practices

To set the foundation and initiate the engagement activity, it is important to strive towards **aligning common objectives, principles and values**. Alignment will happen over time throughout the process but begins at the initiating stage (McCart & Khanna, 2012).

Collaboratively **developing shared principles** and revisiting them at the beginning of each interaction enables shifts from pre-existing norms, behaviors and biases (Nzinga et al., 2024). While principles chosen by each group may differ, there are several that repeat across many initiatives. For example, the CO-CREATE project's framework summarizes these common principles of engagement (Nesrallah et al., 2023):

- **Respectful:** Develop a shared code of conduct to promote mutual respect (Nesrallah et al., 2023) and mutual learning (Swist et al., 2022). Reinforce that all people must be treated with respect and make efforts to promote mutual understanding (Nesrallah et al., 2023).
- **Inclusive:** Meet young people where they are at, both physically (e.g., in or near schools, local community centres, youth clubs) and based on their interests and capacity (Nesrallah et al., 2023; The Students Commission of Canada, 2016). Ensure that young people can participate in whatever way they are comfortable (Fischer & Radinger-Peer, 2024; Ingman et al., 2023) with consideration of accessibility (physical, digital and cognitive).
- **Voluntary:** Communicate clearly that young people have choice to participate and provide guidance to end their participation if they choose (Nesrallah et al., 2023).

- Open and transparent: Share clear roles and expectations and invest time in the consent process. Communicate the purpose and process, while being honest about the limitations to mitigate any unrealistic expectations of the outcomes (Fischer & Radinger-Peer, 2024; Nesrallah et al., 2023; Swist et al., 2022; Thew, 2021; Tjahja & Potjomkina, 2024; Young et al., 2023).
- Accountable: Share outcomes with participants; when possible, give young people opportunities to participate in follow-up activities related to advancing policy ideas and implementation (Augsberger et al., 2023; Fischer & Radinger-Peer, 2024; Nesrallah et al., 2023; Swist et al., 2022; Thew, 2021; Tjahja & Potjomkina, 2024; Young et al., 2023). Report back on policy wins and policy changes attributed to young people's input (Jenkins et al., 2020; The Students Commission of Canada, 2016).
- Safe and sensitive to risk: Communicate where young people can go if they need help. Communicate safety measures that are in place for adults and young people to work together (Nesrallah et al., 2023).
- Empowered: Provide opportunities and capacity building for young people to take on new roles or take action after the policy development activity (Nesrallah et al., 2023).

### Emerging practices

**Social media** is increasingly used to widen the reach of opportunities, helping to identify and connect with child and youth serving organizations or directly with young people. For example, researchers have found Snapchat and Instagram to be the most successful social media platforms to recruit young people (this study included youth between the ages of 15-17 years) to research opportunities (Smith et al., 2023). However, with the rapid evolution of online youth culture, platform popularity shifts quickly. Studies also suggest using positive language and a focus on young people's needed contributions received more interest (Smith et al., 2023). However, some researchers have found that despite the potential for reaching large numbers and a wide diversity of young people, initiation via social media is typically significantly less effective than personal or in-person invitations (Moreno et al., 2017).

### Practices for identifying and scoping the issue

Depending on the policy activity, identifying and scoping the issue may be completed by policy makers, by young people, or both. The following practices describe how to identify and scope the issue with young people when appropriate.

### Effective practices

**Embed systems thinking** from the start: Systems thinking has been shown in the literature to be effective for engaging young people in system-level change including policy development. For example, in one study, youth participants (16-21 years of age) reported greater motivation and intention to engage, greater engagement in collective action, and decreases in feeling defeated by complex issues as a result of systems thinking (Sayal et al., 2016). Researchers recommend supporting young people to understand the issue holistically and identify what information needs to be gathered about the main influences on the issue, how they are caused and maintained over time, and where are effective places to intervene in the system (Knai et al.,

2023). Researchers also recommend considering a broad range of system-level influences including corporate practices (i.e., commercial determinants of health) (Pitt et al., 2024).

**Group model building** (i.e., visually mapping influences on the key issue) is one method to engage young people in systems thinking. This can be useful to identify key factors and how they are interrelated (Savona et al., 2021). As the process continues, the map can be iteratively updated to include new information and to reflect and test the factors. In research studies, these maps have served as an anchor point that kept young people grounded in systems thinking (Knai et al., 2023; Savona, 2022). In a participatory study with youth (this study included youth between 16-18 years), the maps also helped youth participants engage and contribute their input and fostered young people's ownership of the process (Knai et al., 2023).

In the literature, various methods and techniques for exploration and visioning have been used in policy activities to engage children and youth in systems thinking and understanding the issue at hand. For example, mapping- such as community mapping and body mapping - has been a successful method for engaging young people (Flodgren et al., 2024). **Community mapping** has been shown in the research to be effective because it is an inclusive and appropriate tool to engage young people's perspectives (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2003). Community mapping is a useful method to identify local knowledge of what's working (i.e., the important locations and resources in young people's communities, or the places where they feel safe and supported); visions for the future and the areas and issues that need improvement; and relationships between spatial, land and cultural elements of place (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2003; Jagger, 2014). It is well-suited to surface young children's perspectives and influence decision-making. For example, in an economically deprived area of London, UK, children (4-5 years old) created a map of their local environment and how they wished it would be. The children all preferred concrete surfacing because the grass-covered play areas (widely assumed by planners as the most appropriate) obscured broken glass and other hazards (Lansdown, 2001). **Body mapping** involves tracing one's body on a large sheet of paper and, guided by prompts related to the issue at hand, participants fill in their "body" using paint or collage to explore their experiences related to the issue. These are often used to delve into the ways that children and youth experience issues in their bodies and make connections between those individual-level embodied experiences and structural factors. Body maps are especially accessible and engaging for a wide range of ages and have been used successfully with children 5 years and older (Jager et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2006).

### **Promising practices**

**Start from young people's experiences:** This may involve young people identifying the key issues in their lives or reflecting on their own experiences related to a pre-determined issue or topic. Dedicate time for young people to reflect on their own motivations for participating, explore what they already know as experts of their own lives, and share their experiences with one another (The Students Commission of Canada, 2016).

Develop a **flexible, hybrid model** to reach diverse young people virtually and in-person: The Students Commission is currently gathering youth voice from 2000 youth across Canada for the second State of Youth report for Canada's federal government, as part of the implementation of

Canada's Youth Policy. The sessions are hosted and facilitated by youth organizations, youth facilitators, and adult allies online and in-person to reach young people where they are. Intentionality in outreach and invitations prioritizes youth facing multiple barriers, which was successful at engaging a wide diversity of youth in the first State of Youth consultation. For the first State of the Youth report, due to the COVID pandemic, one-hour youth sessions involving 1000 youth were adapted to be held primarily online. These sessions were designed in partnership with the government's Youth Secretariat and a youth advisory group. The sessions included a data party, where youth were invited to discuss and interpret data related to the key policy areas, discuss their needs and experiences in that area and often challenge the presented information (Canadian Heritage, 2021). Young people shared their voices about the key priorities outlined in the Youth Policy. In the context of child and youth policy development, how the issue/topic for policy is defined is important; historically, many policies affecting young people are based in notions of children and youth being at-risk and in need of protection, which often results in more surveillance than autonomy. Young people's autonomy is often surfaced by young people's voices. "Where contradictory narratives about youth autonomy, responsibility, vulnerability and risk underscore youth policy, there is likely to be confusion about policy intentions and outcomes" (Waite et al., 2024, p.4). Striving for alignment in defining and scoping the topic increases the relevance and facilitates the process.

### Emerging practices

**Digital platforms** can reach large numbers of children and youth to identify priorities and scope the issue. For example, Arab Youth Facts Platform invites youth, researchers, and youth-related organizations to answer questions on eight sectors critical to youth. Youth can add new questions and provide feedback on this interactive platform. Similarly, UNICEF's U-Report connects youth through chatbots via messaging, social media, and SMS to understand their needs and concerns. The results are shared with local communities and policy makers (Park, 2023). According to the U-Report Canada website, there are currently over 2600 U-Reporters in Canada. U-Report is designed to receive real-time data on youth opinions, surveying youth to amplify their voices, providing information to youth, and creating dialogue with policy-makers (Berdou & Lopes, 2017). The platform is intended to be an apolitical space for youth to learn about and advocate for their rights and serves as a pathway to civic engagement (Ayres & Krohling, 2020). In a study with U-Reporters in Uganda, youth participating in focus groups reported appreciating the opportunity to voice their views and the information shared with them on issues related to health and education. However, they were unclear on if and how their contributions were used or whether their input had any impact. In case studies, researchers found that U-Report had been successful at bringing emerging problems to the surface and obtaining a view of opinions and priorities, but their findings were not as clear in terms of the extent that the input was useful or the degree to which youth perspectives had informed policy (Berdou & Lopes, 2017).

## Practices for policy development and implementation

### Effective practices

Approaches that **mix multiple methods** for gathering evidence and input are especially effective for engaging a wider representation and diversity of children and youth, and for

capturing specific population needs (Indigenous youth: Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2021; migrant youth: Delahaye et al., 2024; Desiderio et al., 2024; spatial methods with children: Million, 2017). In a study comparing separate strategies of student engagement in school decision-making, researchers found that using a combination of methods generated complementary perspectives from each and resulted in relevant insights to inform decision-making (Ingman et al., 2023). Processes with **iterative cycles** are especially effective at building trust and validating results because each cycle of data collection validates and builds upon the previous one and has the potential to progressively engage a larger number of young people (Desiderio et al., 2024; Waite et al., 2024). For example, Desiderio and colleagues (2024) engaged young adults in focus groups to explore food policy scenarios extrapolated from the literature. Themes from the focus group were then validated through a survey that involved a broader participant base. As a result, these cycles contributed to identifying top priorities and engaged young stakeholders to inform policy making. An iterative participatory approach helps to ensure that child and youth voice is accurately represented; the approach responds to concerns that child and youth voice could be misused to legitimate policy claims about what young people need (Waite et al., 2024).

In Ingman and colleagues' study of multiple child and youth engagement techniques in a strategic planning process across 28 K-12 rural school districts in the US, they found that listening sessions (similar to focus groups with activities and prompts to structure the discussion), anonymous surveys, involving youth on task forces (a series of intergenerational meetings where members had responsibility to bring their own perspectives and other voices to the table to inform the plan), and mobile interviewing (youth conducting short, informal interviews with peers) were most popular among students and staff. Furthermore, stakeholders identified that building trusting relationships, using multiple strategies for engaging young people, and attending to equity throughout the process were key aspects for success (Ingman et al., 2023).

**Listening sessions or focus group discussions** are effective because they can engage young people including children and are developmentally appropriate for children 6 and older (Ingman et al., 2023; Peterson-Sweeney, 2005). For focus groups with younger children, smaller groups may be more comfortable for children to contribute (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005). The sessions produce valuable input and data with richer description of young people's issues and concerns than other methods (Ingman et al., 2023). Focus groups are intentionally designed to make space for insights into how an issue is perceived by different people and enables sharing of perceptions or opinions among group members without pressure for the group to reach consensus (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005). Sessions can be used as data parties for young people to interpret and contextualize existing data (e.g., population level data). Young people can also contribute in multiple ways (e.g., verbally, writing) both in in-person and online focus groups (Smith et al., 2024). However, confidentiality, particularly in smaller communities, can be a barrier (Ingman et al., 2023). Online focus groups require support from adult allies (i.e., supportive adults in young people's lives) to provide access, set up technology, and manage technical requirements. Furthermore, online opportunities can be more challenging to establish trust, to read body language, and may limit community building activities. Online, the dynamics

can move from interactive group discussion to responses directed more to the facilitator (Smith et al., 2024).

**Anonymous surveys** can effectively complement other methods and help to identify pertinent child and youth issues and define the issues from a child and youth perspective. Surveys can gather honest child and youth voice in smaller communities where young people's confidentiality may be difficult to protect. Anonymity, an outsider administrator, and incentives (gift cards) were found to be effective at encouraging participation (Ingman et al., 2023).

In a study with rural youth (age 13-22), participatory visual **design-based methods** were well suited for youth to share their input (Laursen, 2024). Participatory approaches like these are effective in more fragile contexts, such as peripheral rural areas, where young people can contribute to actions that increase local resources (Freires et al., 2023). Laursen used three design-based methods: post-its, dream cloud, and postcards. Youth wrote the good and 'less good' places in their community with different coloured post-its and placed them on a map to depict visually an overview of youth observations and perspectives. Youth then posted their wishes to enhance their lives on a visual dream cloud on the wall. Finally, youth wrote postcards to envision the future. Each of these design-based methods elicited discussion and meaning making and were followed by a dialogue with local politicians. The majority of youth (86%) reported that the participatory workshop enabled them to express their thoughts. Although the activities enabled sharing youth experiences, building and sharing valuable ideas and knowledge, and developing a sense of community, youth had no decision-making power (Laursen, 2024).

### **Promising practices**

**Youth forums** bring young people together to design, review and decide on recommendations for policy direction. There is evidence that young people's contributions at events have influenced decision-making. For example, Youth 2030 Cities hosted seven youth forums to develop and adopt National DeclarACTIONs that were later adopted at the World Urban Forum Youth Assembly (UN Habitat, 2023).

In a study of the Students Commission of Canada's national youth conference, Pancer and colleagues (2002) found that youth conferences can be effective contexts for youth engagement because they foster the engagement process. Youth delegates reported feeling empowered and expressed the importance of getting to work on solutions, making a difference, and learning skills related to sharing their voices. The Students Commission has been hosting national youth conferences since 1991 for youth to prioritize concerns and share recommendations with policy makers. They are all grounded in the Students Commission's 4 Pillars: Respect, Listen, Understand, Communicate™ (McCart, 1992). These values provide a supportive social environment for young people (Pancer et al., 2002). These conferences offer the opportunity for policy makers to request input on areas that are under development and hear recommendations from a diverse range of youth from across the country (The Students Commission of Canada, 2025; Pancer et al., 2002). Structured by the Young Decision Makers model, a model designed by youth and adults in partnership, young people work through a cyclic process of studying the issue from their own perspective and from other sources of knowledge, discussing with their

peers to gain a broader understanding of youth's experiences that are different from their own, building recommendations and working through consensus decision-making, and then informing policy makers. This tested cycle is strengthened by opportunities for youth to reach out to a constituency so that they are speaking not only from their own perspectives and experiences but also can represent more of their peers. Youth present to policy-makers and the youth sector on the final day of the event (The Students Commission of Canada, 2016; [Canada We Want national conferences](#)).

Similarly, Shaking the Movers events have been engaging young people since 2007. Shaking the Movers is a youth conference model that takes a rights-respecting approach and has engaged children and youth (ages 10-20) in discussing a public policy issue. Young people are invited to join the working committee to plan the event and youth volunteers serve as facilitators, recorders and helpers. Child and youth participants are prepared for the discussions ahead of time during prior activities. During the consultation, adults at the event form their own group so as to ensure that young people can discuss freely without adult influence (Pearson & Collins, 2011). [Shaking the Movers reports](#) of the results are shared publicly to inform decision-makers.

Young people often do not have **access to resources and information** that adults involved in policy-making may have. Although more intensive, sustained and resourced processes that include **capacity building** have the benefit of mitigating this inequity (Faiesall et al., 2023). For example, the recent Youth Assembly on digital rights and safety in Canada involved 35 youth (18 years old) over one virtual session and a four-day-long session in person. Sessions included various expert speakers and lively discussions to learn and make meaning of knowledge and young people's experiences. As a result, the assembly developed policy recommendations for both government and industry (Canadian Youth Assembly on Digital Rights and Safety, 2023).

Youth on **task forces or youth advisories** can be effective if there is institutional readiness, for example, an institutional commitment, appropriate culture, clear expectations, and safe spaces for youth (Augsberger et al., 2023; Young et al., 2023). Youth had more ownership and were effective conduits for communicating the plans of the task force to their peers and engaging their peers for additional feedback. However, youth transience (e.g., graduating from high school), limited demographic representation (i.e., more involved students were more likely to be invited or join the task force), and scheduling (during school) were challenging (Ingman et al., 2023).

**Participatory action research** is more intensive and sustained, making it an apt approach for the deep iterative inquiry required for policy formulation. Participatory action research processes engage children and youth as co-researchers. As both researchers and participants, young people co-create research questions and the research process. Involving young people with experiential knowledge in systems as co-researchers can enhance the process and foster collective child and youth voice as a driving force for policy influence. For example, youth co-researchers with experiential knowledge of child protection services in Quebec were involved in every step of the participatory action research process. Youth and adult co-researchers interviewed young adults who had exited child protection to understand and amplify their experiences and take action to improve young people's agency in the system (Diaz et al., 2024).

Similarly, the Students Commission of Canada hosts **participatory data parties** with youth to collaboratively and iteratively interpret results from youth-focused research and evaluation. In each successive cycle, young people are involved in meaning-making, which generates more analysis, data and questions to explore in another cycle (McCart & Khanna, 2012; Ramey et al., 2020). Regular mechanisms to see the results and have a meaningful opportunity to shape the analysis has built trust and led to higher engagement in successive rounds of data collection.

In the literature, various **visual arts-based tools** such as postcards, photovoice, filmmaking and storytelling can be engaging methods to involve youth in developing and sharing ideas (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2021; Delahaye et al., 2024; Flodgren et al., 2024). **Arts- and activity-oriented consultations**, while engaging for young people, are especially accessible for engaging children because many methods, such as drawing, are common in their lives and can be used by children who do not feel comfortable or cannot express themselves with spoken or written language. For example, Martin and colleagues (2018) facilitated a lifeline activity where children (7-12) identified contributors and obstacles to their health over different life stages. They then participated in a body mapping activity where they traced their bodies on large sheets of paper and added their ideas to their body map. Finally, they did a placemat activity, where each placemat represented different contexts of their lives (home, school, community) to consider the different supports needed in each. Similarly, consultations with children have used techniques such as drawing contests (e.g., Canadian Coalition on the Rights of the Child: children 7+), storybook activities and role plays with puppets, and emojis to express how they feel (Ballarat City Council et al., 2023; Care & Learning Alliance, 2021; children 5+: Willow, 2001), and taking photos or making drawings and selecting emojis of a range of emotions to describe how they feel about the photos (2-3 year olds: O'Donnell, 2024). Where visual arts are used, encourage children and youth to add captions or record their discussion to ensure accurate interpretation (Horgan, 2024). In another study using **participatory visual methods**, newcomer children and youth created masks representing their experience and representing state institutions. Together with peers, they created living sculptures to express their needs and illustrate their experiences with systems in their new country and took photos of the scene to share their findings in discussion and communicate to various audiences (Delahaye et al., 2024).

In the CO-CREATE project, young people were supported in group building, training, and learning about existing evidence and policies related to the issue. They used **photovoice** and systems mapping to identify the key influences on the issue and their interrelationships (Klepp et al., 2023). Photovoice is a participatory, arts-based research method that involves taking photos to record the strengths and weaknesses of a community, eliciting critical dialogue about the issues through collaborative meaning-making related to the images, and mobilizing knowledge through photographic display to policy makers and other audiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). Young people in the CO-CREATE project also had opportunities for capacity building in advocacy, budgeting and other areas to support policy formulation. Additionally, each group had a budget to test policy idea elements and participated in dialogue forums with policy makers and other issue experts (Klepp et al., 2023; Savona et al., 2022).

In a study of a **real-world laboratory** approach that used multiple methods and cycles, young people (11-17 years of age) in Austria collaborated with community representatives to invite peers into a consultation process including a kick-off event, mapping to identify suggestions (for improvements, places to avoid, meeting places) and a workshop to develop ideas. The municipal office selected three financially feasible proposals based on the recommendations and young people voted for their favorite. In a subsequent workshop, young people developed implementation steps in collaboration with the municipality (Fischer & Radinger-Peer, 2024). Fischer and Radinger-Peer (2024) identified key factors that contributed to the success of the process: 1) A concrete issue relevant to young people where they can make a difference; 2) a trusted adult ally (e.g., youth worker) who translated between young people, scientists, and local policy makers; 3) legitimacy of the process through support from political decision makers; 4) human and financial resources from initiation to implementation; and 5) shared decision-making between young people and policymakers, where young people's input was taken seriously.

In situations when involving young people directly is not feasible, conducting **secondary research** (i.e., integrating results from third-party organizational child and youth voice reports or academic research involving children and youth) can bring their voices into policy formulation processes. Secondary research that actively consulted young people where their voices transparently informed recommendations can be useful to inform policy. However, there may be misalignment if the data collected was not specifically designed to address the policy topic and so may only be relevant as foreground or context for the policy discussion (Waite et al., 2024).

### Emerging practices

**A combination of virtual tools** useful for different purposes can facilitate child and youth engagement in complex policy formulation processes. For example, in participatory research with Indigenous, Black and other racialized high schoolers, Macias and colleagues (2022) used zoom video-conferencing for one-to-one and group formats for planning and development, email for intake and evaluation, Slack for reminders, virtual online Gallery through Gathertown for sharing photovoice, Google Jamboard (discontinued) for training, Kahoot for trivia night, and Dropbox for journals.

**Virtual town halls** can be used to set the agenda and contribute input into policy formulation. For example, the virtual Youth Town Hall series is a youth-led platform where youth can contribute to the Youth Agenda in New York City (Park, 2023). Similarly, online virtual town halls with Malaysian youth provided space to identify key directions for policy and strategy development related to planetary health (Faiesall et al., 2023).

**Digital platforms** can be used to develop policies and select implementation. The Republic of Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism used a metaverse platform in a youth policy participation campaign called The Youth Made Changes. They used the platform to host a series of **virtual policy discussions and consultations** with youth to develop cultural policies and select implementation projects (Park, 2023). Young Scot is a digital platform for **e-voting** processes of youth participatory budgeting in local governments in Scotland (<https://youngscot.net/participatory-budgeting-voting>). Youth can earn reward points for participating in activities.

Using existing digital tools, such as **video games**, is an emerging practice for engaging children and youth in policy. For example, the Young Gamechangers Initiative (launched in 2023) uses Minecraft as a participatory tool to engage young people to express their visions of healthy and thriving cities to provide input into urban and housing policy (UN Habitat, 2023).

**Participatory design** workshops can engage children and youth in decision-making to create tools for their benefit. For example, Indigenous young people (age 8-18 years) participated in the design of digital mental health resources. The process involved a series of co-design workshops for young people to explore concepts, understanding, language, and acceptability of electronic tools and to identify important characteristics. Various visual materials, such as previous findings, mock-ups, storyboards, and prototypes were prepared and young people were engaged in activities and interactive discussion to make recommendations and decisions (Povey et al., 2020; Povey et al., 2022).

**Ideation challenges** are activities structured to solicit solutions to complex issues. Child and youth engagement can be sustained by incorporating active, experiential, problem-based learning and a developmental approach. **Problem-based learning** involves an open-ended (policy) problem or question that has more than one potential solution and collaborative group learning about the subject or issue through the process of solving the problem. A developmental approach recognizes that children and youth need different things to learn and participate in as they grow. Jenkins and colleagues' (2020) review of studies identified key ingredients to support and sustain engagement: varying activities, flexibility in group and individual task options, space for non-productive hangout time, interim 'wins', and adult and youth mentorship.

The Youthful Cities' 30Lab is a **pop-up innovation lab** for 30 local young urban influencers to develop innovate and co-create solutions for cities. The innovation lab includes four workshops where youth work with community experts to ideate. The process culminates in projects implemented in cities (Youthful Cities, n.d.). At the individual level, the Paryavaran Saathi Chatbot in India involves young people to address pollution. Young people learn about environmental policies and can send photos of their ideas and actions to address air pollution. There are gamification elements to incentivize young people: participants earn points, and the top 100 performers earn awards (Park, 2023).

**Hackathons** have a central focus on technology. Access to open government data can enable young people to drive data innovation. For example, in a virtual hackathon, GeoYouthMappers used opensource OpenStreetMap to map Uganda's border districts to support COVID-19 planning. Similarly, the UN Youth Hackathons involved hundreds of youth teams around the world using data from the UN DESA Statistics Division to apply machine learning and AI to address global challenges (Park, 2023).

## Considerations and Challenges

The following section will explore considerations and potential challenges in the process of integrating young people's voices in policy development. The government will need to develop established practices to make space for diverse young people using a Gender-based Analysis

Plus lens and address barriers, as well as established practices for virtual spaces, consent, safeguarding, compensation, and mitigating risk.

## Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus)

In Canada, the use of Gender Based Analysis Plus approach is recognized as a key component to support the development of effective policies, programs, and legislation. GBA Plus provides federal officials with the means to continually analyze and improve their work and attain better results, by being more responsive to the diverse needs and circumstances of the populations they serve. The Government of Canada continues to work on enhancing the implementation of GBA Plus across all federal departments.<sup>4</sup>

### Diversity

Young people can be invited to participate based on various factors to ensure representation of perspectives related to geography, age, gender, sexuality, race, cultural perspectives, diversity of life experiences, economic status, and academic experiences among others. Furthermore, involvement of a diversity of young people is needed to ensure that the implications of policies are equitable for child and youth populations regardless of their demographics. The criteria for child and youth voice should be determined by the policy area: child and youth populations who would be most affected or who have the most stake are critical voices. For example, if the policy area is related to the needs of disabled people, a diverse range of disabled young people should be overrepresented (McCart & Khanna, 2012; Pearson & Collins, 2011). However, often those whose voices are typically underrepresented and most needed also face many barriers to involvement.

Multiple barriers to participation may affect marginalized young people:

- **Compensation:** As described earlier, not compensating young people for their contribution and time may be a barrier for young people in low-income situations, thereby exacerbating inequities (Flodgren et al., 2024).
- **Language:** Accommodating young people's language needs and preferences can support full participation (Coordination des ONG pour les droits de l'enfant, 2020; Flodgren et al., 2024).
- **Life schedules:** Young people may be overwhelmed with responsibilities (e.g., young people in care: Jackson et al., 2020).
- **Digital Access:** Supporting young people to access internet and technology is critical for more meaningful and equitable engagement (Coordination des ONG pour les droits de l'enfant, 2020; Park, 2023; Smith et al., 2024).
- **Other accessibility needs:** Physical accessibility to the space needs to be described clearly (e.g., transportation, stairs, gender-neutral washrooms, windows, lighting, quiet

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<sup>4</sup> [Government of Canada's approach on Gender-based Analysis Plus - Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca/en/government/department/government-of-canada/gba-plus.html)

rooms). Consider cultural accessibility (e.g., prayer room) and other provisions (e.g., food, childcare) for participation (Wisdom2Action, 2019).

The following are key considerations related to diversity (Jacobs & George, 2022; Leclerc & Wong, 2024; McCart & Khanna, 2011):

- **Representation:** Which young people are involved, and which constituencies were or were not considered? Are young people representative of the key stakeholders? Who is underrepresented?
- **Tokenism:** Take into account whether social positioning and differing perspectives were taken sufficiently into account or were tokenistic. Were individual young people expected to represent a broader group and if so, were they supported with the resources to consult a broader constituency? Were young people limited in ways that prevented challenging existing power structures or bringing about change?
- **Power relations:** Even in situations where young people and adults have trusting relationships, when engaging young people, institutional and societal power relations still have influence. What has been put into place to shift power asymmetries? What are the other power asymmetries that may be influential among young people?
- **Sustained and consistent engagement from input to decision-making and beyond:** Is the environment enabling with adequate tools, support, and resources diverse young people need?

While recruitment of young people from representation bodies (e.g., advisory councils) can make it easier for researchers and others conducting consultation (e.g., Chow et al., 2024), it may pose a problem for diversity; inequities in recruitment into youth councils often overrepresent privileged young people. Similarly, barriers such as lower socio-economic status have reduced diversity in national policy initiatives (Flodgren et al., 2024). Targeted recruitment and intentional efforts to overrepresent marginalized children and youth who are furthest from opportunity can balance these inequities and ensure that they do not feel tokenized (Khanna et al., 2025). Working with organizations and individuals that have existing trusting relationships with young people and their families in marginalized communities is most effective.

## Identity-based groups

Identity-based engagement can be important for policies on issues that have disproportionate impacts on specific communities. However, while affinity-based discussions can provide safety and shared understanding, making a single identity salient in relation to a collective identity or issue can come at the cost of internal group diversity. In some instances, it may ignore the actual heterogeneity in the group and erase minority identities. For example, gender-specific groups may be appropriate to ensure that young people feel safer to discuss sensitive issues and researchers have found this approach to be successful in promoting greater participation of underrepresented groups (Ingman et al., 2023; girls and young women: Lofton et al., 2021; Peterson-Sweeney, 2005). These groups may also marginalize individuals based on other axes of identity (e.g., race, class, sexuality). Furthermore, they also risk excluding non-binary and trans youth voices and may not surface knowledge that would arise in mixed gender groups

(Lofton et al., 2021). Intersectional approaches pay attention to, and make space for, the specific needs, experiences and perspectives of young people that may differ from one another based on their social locations (Bárta et al., 2021; Khanna et al., 2025). For example, Macias and colleagues (2022) identified that cultural and trauma responsiveness, meeting one-on-one, and flexible time commitment for engagement were conducive for Black, Indigenous and other racialized young people's needs (Macias et al., 2022).

In the Canadian context, research and consultation with Indigenous young people have historically reproduced colonial power dynamics. Effective practices to shift this dynamic include the following:

- **Prioritizing relationship building:** Build community partnerships (Crooks et al., 2010).
- **Cultural protocols:** In a review of community-based Indigenous research ethics protocols in Canada, three protocols were identified: 1) Balancing individual and collective rights, 2) upholding culturally-grounded ethical principles, and 3) ensuring community-driven, self-determined research (Hayward et al., 2021).
- **Cultural considerations** (Liebenberg et al., 2017) honor Indigenous young people's realities, world views, and ways of being. These have been described as: a sense of belonging in the physical space configured to feel safe and comfortable for a more informal conversational experience; a safe emotional space where child and youth voices are heard and acknowledged (Quintal-Marineau et al., 2024); and a culturally relevant space with food and cultural practices (Crooks et al., 2010; Morris, 2016) and honoring Indigenous ways of knowing.
- **Indigenous-led:** Indigenous organizations are better equipped to create culturally safe spaces that respect local cultural protocols, ensure representation and engage diverse Indigenous young people; they understand their realities and the roles these realities play in the community, and are responsive so consultations are customized and relevant to the children and youth involved. Young people are in control of the process and decide on the direction of the consultation rather than imposing issues (Povey et al., 2023; Quintal-Marineau et al., 2024).
- **Autonomy:** Autonomy is defined as Indigenous young people expressing concerns and priorities on their own terms, and Indigenous organizations redefining participation and having control over the process to help to challenge the power asymmetries with the settler state (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2021; Quintal-Marineau et al., 2024; Povey et al., 2023).
- **Multiple ways to participate:** For example, focus groups and surveys, multiple media platforms, online survey, virtual conversations to validate interpretations and ensure diversity was reflected, in-person discussion-based gatherings, and multiple modes of expression (e.g., oral, written, arts, activities) (Povey et al., 2023; Quintal-Marineau et al., 2024).
- **Flexibility:** Adjust the process to the local context and specific young people. For example, urban Indigenous children and youth may or may not have links to Indigenous communities, which may require adapting questions and facilitation (Liebenberg et al., 2017; Quintal-Marineau et al., 2024).

- **Access to decision-makers:** Provide opportunities for leaders and policy makers to listen to and speak with children and youth (Quintal-Marineau et al., 2024).
- **Iterative engagement:** Engage young people in identifying issues, formulation, and review in cycles (Povey et al., 2023).
- **Strengths-based:** Indigenous young people and communities are recognized for their complexity – their gifts and strengths - rather than seen through a damage-centred narrative (Crooks et al., 2010; Povey et al., 2023; Quintal-Marineau et al., 2024).

## Age

Children and youth are capable of providing critical insights to policy makers. Too often, policy makers avoid engaging young people under 18, because of the increased logistics related to parental consent and safety considerations for children and youth (Mandoh et al., 2023; McCart & Khanna, 2012). Yet these young people, without the right to vote, have the least voice in policy. Young people 18 and over are developmentally very different from their younger counterparts, and in most cases, cannot effectively represent adolescents or children who have different experiences, needs and priorities (McCart & Khanna, 2012). Furthermore, there is limited academic literature about effective practices for involving children (under 12) in policy development.

In order to be accessible for children, arts and activity-based methods are effective (under 5 years: Caring and Learning Alliance, 2021; Ingman et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2018). More typical methods such as surveys and focus groups can also be accessible to children if they ensure accessible language (no negatives, jargon, or passive voice), lower reading levels, and multiple options (including activities without reading or writing) to participate (e.g., Williams, 2004; Willow et al., 2007).

If a wide range of ages are included in a policy development activity there are benefits of dividing by age range to cater to different life stages and experiences and to ensure that younger young people are not intimidated to participate. For example, dividing young people 10-14 from 15-19 due to developmental differences, maturity and life stages may be more effective (Flodgren et al., 2024). Alternately, there are specific purposes for having a wide age range of young people together; at the Students Commission's national youth conferences, older youth and young adults take on new roles to facilitate the voice of younger youth and share their skills to help amplify them (e.g., media production). Young people can relate to one another and build trust quickly in these circumstances. These decisions can be guided by the purpose of the activity.

In contexts where young people are involved in collaborative discussions with policy makers and other adult experts, ensure a 1:1 ratio with adults for balanced representation. The goal is to prevent an adult-dominated discussion with a few young people who are expected to represent the child or youth "perspective" (McCart & Khanna, 2012; Nesrallah et al., 2023). Where possible, aim for overrepresentation of young people to shift the power asymmetry. For example, the Shaking the Movers model recommends at least two thirds of the participants

should be children and youth and that adults should participate in their own group discussions so that they do not overly influence young people (Pearson & Collins, 2011).

## Virtual spaces

The following are considerations and challenges that shape virtual child and youth involvement. These challenges can be addressed or mitigated with input from young people and proactive planning.

**Equity:** Increasingly, young people's involvement in policy development is occurring online. However, equity of access to internet and speed of internet (e.g., rural or remote communities) can limit or exclude young people (Smith et al., 2024). The lack of affordable and accessible internet and devices may be especially limiting for children and youth with disabilities, refugees, young people in families with lower income, and those living in rural, northern, and remote communities (Park, 2023).

**Appropriate communication channels:** Young people do not typically use e-mail and are more likely to prefer communicating by phone app such as GroupMe, WhatsApp, or text (Nzinga et al., 2024). Digital tools need to be low-barrier and match the participants. For example, in a study, Black, Indigenous and other racialized youth found a variety of virtual tools for promoting their voice (e.g., Zoom, email, Kahoot, virtual online gallery, Google Jamboard, and Dropbox) effective (Macias et al., 2022). Low-barrier technologies are those that have no financial cost for participants, do not require setting up an account, are relatively simple to use, and are familiar to the group. In a group with less comfort with technology, start with an interactive and fun activity that gets everyone familiar and on the same page with the functions needed for the interaction (Magee et al., 2024).

**Relational practices online:** Options to turn off video/audio and participate via chat in online consultations are important for autonomy and comfort but may have an impact on trust-building and bringing lesser-heard young people's voices into the conversation (Smith et al., 2024). Quasi-digital participation (i.e., young people are in-person together, but online with a facilitator) can be beneficial to minimize the number of devices or internet access and encourage group discussion. However, this may make it difficult for the facilitator to get embedded in the group, or hear clearly (Magee et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024).

**Safety:** Consider how you will keep young people's information private and protected (secure and encrypted) and ensure that your privacy policy is transparent and accessible to young people (Information Commissioner's Office, n.d.). Remind young people not to share personally identifying information in online opportunities (e.g., address, phone number, schedule, school). Put in place measures and policies to prevent cyberviolence and revisit shared guidelines and expectations of one another.

## Consent to participate

Children and youth have evolving capacity to decide whether to participate in an engagement activity. It's important to consider the need for parental/caregiver consent when engaging young

people under the age of majority. At the same time, parental/caregiver consent requirements may impact participation.

Research activities in Canada are governed by the [Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#), which outlines ethical considerations and guidance on the consent process in research involving children and youth (Canadian Institutes for Health Research et al., 2022). This can be a useful guide for consultation and engagement activities with young people. Where risk of harm is judged to be minimal (i.e., by a research ethics board), scholars argue that youth as young as 12 should be granted capacity to consent to participate in research (Samdal et al., 2023). For example, in [Sharing the Stories](#), a current research study about young people's experiences and outcomes in child and youth programs in Canada, young people 12 and over can consent to participate (Ramey et al., 2020).

Participating in events or sessions may require parental consent. For example, consulting younger children (under 12) may be more easily done in their own communities, through programs trusted by parents/caregivers, where issues of caregiver/parental consent and involvement can be resolved (McCart & Khanna, 2012). For events and activities in-person, particularly those that require travel or overnight stays, parental consent is recommended for young people under the age of majority.

Ethical guidelines for participation and informed consent in research suggest that young people should be informed about the purpose of their participation, what will happen, how their input will be used, and how decisions will be made (Canadian Institutes for Health Research et al., 2022; Coordination des ONG pour les droits de l'enfant, 2020; McCart & Khanna, 2011). Researchers suggest using multiple ways to communicate this information (written, verbal, video) and making sure that all questions are answered before young people sign the consent form. In addition, confirming that they know that their participation is voluntary and that they can opt out or withdraw at any point (and how) is recommended. During this process, it is recommended to ask about what additional supports young people need to participate fully. Consent to participate may be more challenging online due to more limited communication and the lack of visual cues that might be helpful to understand consent (e.g., nodding, confusion: Smith et al., 2024).

## Safeguarding

Safer spaces require safeguarding structures. Children in Scotland, a non-governmental organization, recommends the following safeguarding structures (Children in Scotland, 2019):

- Ensure that staff or other adults involved have had appropriate checks completed (e.g., vulnerable sector checks).
- Ensure that it is clear to staff and young people who to go to for safety concerns (i.e., designated person trained in child protection). Child and youth-serving partner organizations often bring this expertise and relevant policies. They can also provide support for young people beyond the end of the policy development activity.
- Engage young people in developing guidelines for participation that apply equally to young people and adults.

## Compensation

Compensating young people for their contributions when possible has a strong rationale. First, compensation can reduce barriers to participation, particularly for young people whose basic needs are not being fully met; involvement comes at the cost of other things young people could be doing instead, including generating income. Second, adults involved in policy development are often compensated for their work so compensating young people helps to provide a more equitable footing. Third, compensation is a way to recognize the value of young people's expertise and contribution (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d.).

Typically, young people are provided compensation in the following ways based on their involvement: 1) Gifts or prizes (e.g., gift cards, raffle entry) as a thank you or incentive to participate, 2) honoraria (up to \$500) as a thank you for voluntary time-limited contributions, or 3) fee-for-service for contributions that are sustained for youth 15 and older (above \$500). To calculate hourly compensation for fee-for-service, a living wage is a good guide (these vary depending on where youth live). Some organizations choose to hire youth as consultants and provide higher hourly rates that are comparable to other hired consultants (Casey Family Programs, 2022). For activities that require caregivers (for individual young people) or volunteer chaperones (i.e., for 24-hour supervision of youth at an event), provide honoraria where possible.

For research activities, such as collecting data from young people (i.e., completing a survey or an interview), the amount should be a small incentive that is not so large as to be coercive as outlined in the [Tri-Council Policy Statement](#). For example, a \$25 cash or gift card, or entry into a raffle for a prize would be reasonable for a survey or a half hour interview. A recent Canadian study with youth and young adults (15-30 years) found that direct e-transfer was more effective at incentivizing young people to participate in surveys than draws and non-cash rewards (Cifuentes et al., 2025).

Explain tax implications so that young people are aware of what is coming and do not have to pay an unexpected bill at tax time (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d.). If young people are on disability assistance, ensure that their compensation does not exceed the annual earnings exemption in order to avoid deductions from their assistance payments. If compensation may exceed this amount, offer other options, such as gifts or other opportunities that confer equal value for that young person.

Connect with young people about how they want to receive compensation and offer alternatives to accommodate individual young people. Gift and cash cards are convenient to send virtually but may limit young people's autonomy and are not always child or youth-friendly; they are limited in their choices of where they can make gift card purchases and cash cards often need to be transferred to a bank account, expire within a relatively short period, and may carry high service fees. Cheques may also be difficult for young people to use if they have limited access to banking. Where feasible, paying young people with cash is easiest to access and use in whatever way they choose. Also, consider cash advances (or credit card payments in advance) for travel or if young people are going to need to make purchases to fulfill their role (e.g., if youth

are facilitating data collection with peers, they may need to purchase facilitation supplies such as markers, paper, and snacks) (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d.).

There are also non-monetary ways to recognize young people, such as credits for volunteer hours, co-authorship, certificates to add to their resume, and/or reference letters (McCart & Khanna, 2012). Additionally, consider other compensation to mitigate barriers to participation such as food, bus tokens or mileage, childcare, and/or internet or phone stipend (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d.).

## Risks

To address some of these considerations and challenges, anticipating and mitigating risks proactively from the early initiation stage is recommended. The following table is an example of common risks and mitigations (Nesrallah et al., 2023).

**Table 2: Risks and mitigations**

Phases of Engagement	Risks	Mitigation
1. Identifying and inviting participants	<p>Poor alignment between government goals and stakeholders</p> <p>Risky stakeholder groups (e.g., conflict of interest)</p>	<p>Develop shared guidelines that apply equally to all stakeholders</p>
2. Participant dynamics	<p>Unequal power dynamics between young people and adults</p> <p>Domination of a stakeholder agenda which may shift the narrative, dilute a policy idea, or dominate at the expense of vulnerable actors such as children and youth who may feel uncomfortable or unable to share their views</p>	<p>Ensure balanced representation (or overrepresent young people)</p> <p>Empower young people to take leadership roles</p> <p>Avoid technical or unnecessarily complex language – ensure all materials are accessible</p> <p>Intentionally involve diversity of participants to avoid overrepresentation</p> <p>Promote inclusion of less powerful/visible actors</p> <p>Resource and compensate young people</p>
3. Creating a safe engagement	<p>Risk of harm (physical, emotional, verbal) to young people</p>	<p>Do no harm principle and safeguarding</p> <p>Exit strategy and support for children and youth</p>

		Resources or help lines for support  Having a counsellor ready when doing in person or live online work
	Superficial involvement/tokenism  Stakeholder misrepresentations	Ensure organizers and young people can control the publicity  Code of conduct and consent to ensure stakeholders cannot make public statement on behalf of the group without approval  Support constituency building so stakeholders can represent their constituency  Publish summaries, commitments online

**Benefits of working with an external vendor**

External child and youth-serving organizations that have experience in engagement and trusting relationships with young people and their communities are invaluable for supporting child and youth voice in policy development and mitigating challenges. Partnership with child and youth engagement organizations from the outset can help to establish the creation and implementation of the child and youth engagement model (e.g., young people -adult partnership). These organizations can support debriefing and provide feedback into the process effectively (Fischer & Radinger-Peer., 2024; Nzinga et al., 2024; Tjahja & Potjomkina, 2024). They also play a critical role in translation between young people, researchers and policy makers (Fischer & Radinger-Peer, 2024). For issues where it is especially critical to hear the voices of hard-to-reach young people (e.g., in marginalized communities, and furthest from opportunity), working with trusted adult allies in those communities is highly recommended; often they have existing relationships and may share characteristics of marginalization that allow for deeper conversations about these factors (Smith et al., 2024). Finally, working with external vendors can reduce liability for risks related to working with young people. This is often most critical for in-person child and youth events (especially overnight). External vendors with mandates to regularly work with young people have structures and mechanisms in place to create safer spaces for them, such as safeguarding policies, trained child and youth workers with vulnerable sector checks, insurance, and established consent processes, which may not be available to the public service. This reduces time and resources (e.g., going through an institutional ethics board, training staff, developing and approving policies) and risk (i.e., responsibility for the health and safety of minors).

## Conclusion

Children and youth are capable and can be deeply invested in contributing to policy development. They are directly impacted by a wide array of policies that influence all citizens, not just those categorized as "child" or "youth" issues. Therefore, there is significant potential to incorporate the voices of young people into policy-making processes. Habits of civic engagement formed early in life also have the potential to stay with young people throughout adulthood.

Engaging young people at any level of involvement is a valuable first step toward understanding their unique needs, benefiting from their insights, and crafting policies that are responsive and effective for both young individuals and the broader community. This review highlights a range of effective, promising, and emerging practices that have meaningfully integrated children and youth in policy development across Canada and globally. Regardless of where gathering voices begins, adhering to the core principles and practices identified in this review can enhance the depth and quality of child and youth participation, ultimately advancing toward more comprehensive and impactful engagement.

## Compendium

Practices for child and youth voices in policy development are on a spectrum of involvement. Selection of the level of involvement is based on how critical it is to get young people’s voices on the issue (i.e., the policy will have direct impact on young people’s lives), the realistic influence young people could have on the policy (i.e., can they influence the policy direction or decision?), and feasibility (i.e., timeframe, resourcing).

There are many different ways young people can be engaged in policy development along this engagement spectrum. Table 3 summarizes how child and youth voices can be integrated in policy activities along a spectrum of involvement.

**Table 3: Methods for a spectrum of child and youth involvement in policy** (Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation model, 2018; and Waite et al., 2024)

Levels of involvement					
Non-involvement		Participation	Engagement		
Secondary research	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Search for and include research done by a third-party about young people’s voices on the issue in policy development.	Provide young people with balanced and objective information to understand the problem, opportunities and solutions.	Gather young people’s feedback on analysis, alternatives or decisions.	Work directly with young people throughout the process so their concerns and goals are understood and considered.	Partner with young people in each aspect of the policy decision including development of alternatives and selecting the preferred policy.	Place or share final decision-making in the hands of or with youth.
Environmental scan  Literature review  *Secondary data analysis	Fact sheets  Websites  Papers  Open houses	*Focus groups  *Surveys or polls	*Arts-based  *Participatory research  *Forums	*Advisory committees  *Task force  *Participatory research  *Ideation & design sessions	Ballots  Delegated decision

\*These methods are included in the effective, promising and emerging practices identified in the literature review and described in more detail in the compendium table below.

Table 4 provides an overview of the effective, promising, and emergent practices identified in the literature. All of these methods can be beneficial and can be selected based on the target child or youth population that they are best positioned to reach, some of the resources required, relative cost, strengths and challenges, tips, how-to resources, and policy development stage.

The evidence shows that it is effective to include **multiple practices** so different young people can participate in ways that work for them. According to research, combining practices or methods in **iterative cycles** can be especially effective and build strong policy; young people can be involved meaningfully in multiple cycles of data collection, meaning-making, policy generation, and validation that build upon each other.

**Table 4: Practices for child and youth voice in policy development**

Methods	Works best for	Resource & Materials Associated	Cost & Time	Considerations	Tips: Works best when...	How-to resources	Policy Stage
Focus groups and listening sessions (in-person or virtual)	All ages	Honoraria  Platforms for online engagement  Quiet, accessible spaces for in-person.  Skilled facilitators and discussion guides.	\$\$  Moderate time	Strengths: In-depth and rich input from young people.  Can be used with children as young as 6 years old and can be combined with arts and activities.  Challenges: Confidentiality, particularly in smaller communities may be an issue.  Each focus group can accommodate only a small number of young people (ideally no more than 12 to	Include community-building activities and a relational approach (in-person and virtual).  Use these sessions to invite young people to interpret and contextualize existing data (e.g., population level data, survey data).  Integrate arts or activities to prompt discussion with children and early to middle adolescents.	<a href="#">Guide to host a focus group discussion.</a> <a href="#">(The Students Commission of Canada, n.d)</a>	Agenda Setting  Identifying and scoping issues

		Training opportunities for young people.		ensure everyone can contribute).  Can be less interactive when conducted online.			
Youth on task force  Youth advisory bodies	Tends to attract older youth (12+) who are more involved and resourced to attend regularly.	Honoraria or stipend for youth  Resources to establish and build trust, relationships and regular communication  A range of diverse opportunities	\$\$\$  High time	Strengths: Youth had more ownership and were effective conduits for communicating the plans of the task force to their peers and engaging their peers for additional feedback.  Challenges: Youth transience (e.g., graduating from high school), limited demographic representation (i.e., more involved students were more likely to be invited or join the task force), and scheduling.  May not be accessible to children without a child-friendly design.	Provide resources to create a sustained mechanism for diverse representation to directly influence policy-makers.  Provide training and mentorship opportunities.  Young people can influence the direction, goals and co-create actions.  Young people co-design the terms of reference.	<a href="#">Mini-guide to establish and maintain a youth advisory (Office of Youth, 2024)</a>	Policy formulation  Policy selection  Policy implementation and dissemination
Anonymous survey or poll	8+  Geographic and demographic diversity  Rural children and youth	Low barrier secure online platform (e.g., Survey Monkey, Qualtrics)  Devices for in-situ surveying (e.g., at events, schools)	\$  Low time	Strengths: Potential wide geographic reach.  Identifies pertinent issues, defines the issues from young people's perspectives, and complements other engagement methods.  Effective for gathering honest voice in smaller communities where young people's	Anonymity, an outsider administrator, and incentives (gift cards) are effective at encouraging participation.  Combine with more in-depth methods for deeper understanding.  Questionnaires are co-developed or tested with young people. Use short	<a href="#">Tips for good survey questions (Qualtrics)</a>	Identifying issues  Policy validation

				<p>confidentiality may be difficult to protect.</p> <p>Data can be disaggregated to reflect diverse needs and perspectives of different populations of young people using a GBA+ lens.</p> <p>Challenges: May not be accessible (e.g., literacy challenges, language barriers).</p> <p>Response rate may be low or may not reach target populations.</p> <p>Adult interpretations of data may be inaccurate.</p>	<p>sentences, simple language, and visuals to explain terms.</p> <p>Read questions aloud to accommodate children with lower literacy levels and optionally use emojis for the scale.</p>		
Arts-based workshops (Photovoice, mapping)	All ages	<p>Honoraria for young people and/or prizes</p> <p>Art supplies and devices</p>	<p>\$\$</p> <p>Moderate time</p>	<p>Strengths: Understanding young people's experiences that may be difficult to articulate.</p> <p>Suited well to children, particularly body mapping, community mapping, photovoice and drawing.</p> <p>Supports systems thinking.</p> <p>Visual products can mobilize knowledge to policy-maker audiences.</p> <p>Engages young people who are creative, who find writing</p>	<p>Young people provide interpretations of their art (e.g., captions on photos) so they are not misinterpreted.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for collaborative meaning-making (i.e., young people share their art with each other so that the group can make new meaning and connections).</p> <p>Support and training from art mentors can build child and youth capacity to create products they want to share with target audiences.</p>	<p><a href="#">Youth community asset mapping toolkit (Sustainable Cities, 2009)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Body mapping guide (Gastaldo et al., 2012)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Arts and activity based toolkit (Save the Children Norway, 2008)</a></p>	Identifying & scoping issues

				<p>or speaking a barrier to participation, and feel more comfortable expressing themselves artistically.</p> <p>Challenges:</p> <p>Negotiating ownership of art products and consent to share them can be challenging, especially if they are collaborative and/or personal. Ensure young people understand the implications of sharing something personal to a broader audience.</p>		<p><a href="#">Concept mapping resource</a></p> <p><a href="#">Guide to leading a Photovoice session.</a> (Rabinowitz, n.d)</p> <p><a href="#">Platform for mapping activities</a> (Miro)</p>	
Ideation and design sessions (e.g., real-world laboratory, Innovation labs, design workshops, dream clouds)	All ages	<p>Honoraria for young people</p> <p>Physical or digital space</p> <p>Materials and agenda for activities</p> <p>Digital tools (e.g., Miro for interactive whiteboard and sticky notes)</p>	<p>\$\$</p> <p>High time</p>	<p>Strengths:</p> <p>Taps into young people's creativity and knowledge to develop innovative solutions to complex issues.</p> <p>Generates new ideas and new ways of understanding issues.</p> <p>Can involve design elements and developing prototypes.</p> <p>Some ideation methods, such as community mapping and dream clouds are more accessible to young children.</p> <p>Challenges:</p>	<p>Young people's expertise is valued and decision-making power is shared.</p> <p>There is more than one workshop.</p> <p>Visual and/or tactile methods are used.</p> <p>Young people are prepared with the skills and knowledge to meaningfully participate.</p>	<p><a href="#">Collaborative ideation tool</a> (Miro).</p>	<p>Policy development</p> <p>Implementation</p>

				Requires preparation and skill-building to develop solutions.			
Participatory action research	All ages	Honoraria or stipend for young people  Research training for young people  Skilled research facilitators	\$\$  High time	Strengths: Potential to gather open, honest responses from peer-led research  Arts-based methods work well with participatory research processes  Research questions are relevant  Builds upon young people's existing critical thinking about systems that affect them.  Challenges: Power imbalance with adult researchers.	Young people's expertise is valued and decision-making power is shared.  Avoid assuming that young people are not interested in research; many young people may feel ill-equipped or may take some time to see themselves as researchers.  Build child and youth capacity through research training and mentorship.  Identity-based co-researcher groups may be appropriate depending on the policy area.	<a href="#">Workshop for collaboratively analyzing data.</a>  <a href="#">Youth Participatory Action Research Hub (UC Berkeley)</a>  <a href="#">Arts and activity-based research toolkit (Save the Children Norway, 2008)</a>	Identifying issues  Policy development  Evaluation
Events: e.g., roundtables, forums, assemblies, conferences, summits, virtual town halls, hackathons	10+	Space and accommodations appropriate for young people  Funds for travel  Conference agenda and activities  Datasets and software for	\$\$\$\$  Moderate time	Strengths: Young people from diverse backgrounds can share their experiences (where they are similar and different).  Can be used for multiple stages of policy development.  Effective for full engagement.	Take advantage of the longer duration and deeper engagement by building young people's capacity and knowledge about issues.  Offer opportunities to interact with experts and policy makers directly.  Co-design and co-facilitate with young people.	<a href="#">Conference planning manual.</a>  <a href="#">Shaking the Movers Model (Pearson &amp; Collins, 2011)</a>  <a href="#">Public policy youth conference model (McCart)</a>	Identifying issues  Policy formulation  Policy selection  Policy implementation

		hackathons (youth)		Challenges: Intensive for staffing and other costs (less so for virtual events).	Include creative exhibitions to showcase young people's insights and recommendations.  Offer multiple accessible ways to participate.	<a href="#">&amp; Khanna, 2012)</a>	
Digital methods: e.g., digital platforms, video games, e-voting	6+	Existing digital platforms (e.g., U-Report)  Internet and devices	\$\$  Low or moderate time	Strengths: Young people engage online.  Videogames are engaging for children and young people  E-voting and digital forums can reach large numbers of children and youth across large geographic distances.  Real-time input from young people.  Can be integrated into a hybrid model (virtual and in-person components).  Accessible to young people who cannot attend in person (e.g., transportation barriers, disabilities or health concerns).  Challenges: Equity of access to and capacity with internet and devices.  Intensive to moderate.	Provide low-barrier tools (free and easy to use).  Co-develop guidelines for safety and connection, and share clear privacy policy.  Provide access to fast internet.  Offer rewards for contributions online (e.g., gamified points).  Match the digital tool to the purpose.  Use positive language that describes to young people that their contributions are needed.		Identifying issues  Policy selection

				<p>Protection of privacy and security online.</p> <p>Initiating relationships and building trust.</p>			
Secondary research	All ages	Existing research and reports including child and youth voice	<p>\$</p> <p>Low time</p>	<p>Strengths: No additional consultation activities when it is not feasible.</p> <p>Weaknesses: Existing research may not be directly relevant to the policy issue or include young people's recommendations.</p> <p>Existing research may also be out of date or may be missing perspectives of critical stakeholders.</p>	Young people made clear and informed recommendations in the policy area.		<p>Identifying the issue</p> <p>Policy validation</p>

## Putting principles into practice checklist

### Demonstrate respect for young people's voice and competency

- Acknowledge young people's perspectives. Name their expertise and experience.
- Be curious and listen actively to young people's input and experiences.
- Provide opportunities for young people to be meaningfully involved in planning and decision-making. Explain the limitations of decision-making and how their voice will be used or not.
- Offer graduated responsibilities to young people as they build capacity and interest.
- Offer meaningful choices.
- Acknowledge and celebrate individual and group achievements.

### Balance power and relationships with adults

- Demonstrate caring by being supportive, encouraging and offering guidance as needed.
- Provide resources to young people, such as compensation and other recognition, that ensure that young people are structurally on a more even footing with adults.
- Make all materials accessible (e.g., clear language without jargon).
- Integrate capacity building for young people to support their involvement.
- Implement fun activities that require adults to leave their comfort zones and be vulnerable.
- Prioritize young people's schedules and preferred communication channels.
- Clarify adults' roles; ask them to be "listeners" – ask them to record young people's comments.
- Invite adults to ask questions rather than make statements to avoid the automatic assumption of authority conferred to adults. Use questions to prompt critical system thinking.

### Support feelings of belonging and young people's importance to the process

- Connect 1-on-1 to offer personal invitations and welcome children and youth warmly.
- Facilitate community builders to build safety for diverse young people and for collaborating with adults. Ensure that community builders set an inclusive culture for the process (e.g., multilingual, accessible modifications, many ways to participate, pass without judgment).
- Focus on building a sense of belonging among all participants by caring, building confidence with names, pronouns and roles for young people and adults, and connection to a shared purpose.
- Check-in 1-on-1 on a regular and informal basis for feedback.
- Recognize young people for their contributions by compensating them for their expertise and acknowledging them in products. Provide other recognition of their contribution, such as thank-you letters, certificates, volunteer hours accreditation letters, and reference letters.

- Report back on how young people’s contribution is used and the impacts of their contribution. If their recommendations were not used, provide the rationale.

### **Make space for young people to contribute on their own terms**

- Create pathways for young people to join or take new roles and easy ways for them to exit.
- Integrate fun and interactive activities to address different learning styles and pace “head” or mental activities with “feet” or tangible or physical activities.
- Offer multiple flexible ways to participate (e.g., writing, discussion, drawing, theatre), online and in-person, and options for anonymous sharing (e.g., anonymous surveys).

### **Initiating the activity checklist**

- Generate shared objectives, principles and values regarding child and youth engagement.
- Where possible, engage young people as part of the planning team.
- Identify background information and research, and questions for which policy developers seek young people’s input.
- Prepare child and youth-friendly materials and processes for the activity in collaboration with child and youth facilitation experts, youth advisors, and content experts.
- Identify who are your target participants (specific demographics). Identify whose social perspectives are critical for informing the policy issue.
- Recruit and prepare young people for participation through child and youth organizations, networks, schools, tribal councils, etc.
- Recruit, prepare and orient adults for participation.
- Collaboratively design and review the engagement processes and purposes of the activity to ensure a shared team approach.
- Revisit and refine the shared values and principles regularly.
- Clarify how young people’s input will shape outcomes.

### **Identifying and scoping the issue checklist**

- Start from young people’s experiences. Create a safe, non-judgmental environment for young people to explore their experiences and knowledge related to the issue. Remind young people they do not need to share personal stories unless they want to.
- Facilitate a child and youth-friendly process for young people to learn about the issue holistically from other sources of evidence. Ask questions that encourage them to use system thinking – thinking about the root causes and influences on the issue – such as:
  - Why do you think that? Where does this message come from?
  - Who does it benefit? Who does it harm?
  - What are root causes? Is that a symptom or a cause?
  - What gets in the way of change?

- Use visual methods (e.g., mapping influences on key issues) to record child and youth voice and contributions. Display them so they can be updated and anchor discussion in system thinking.

## **Policy development and implementation checklist**

- Facilitate community builders to create a safe and positive environment and encourage relationship building.
- Select a combination of methods (see Table 4) based on what is needed for informing policy on the issue, who are the critical children and youth stakeholders, what is the most fitting method to achieve the purpose, and feasibility.
- Employ iterative cycles of inquiry and meaning-making with young people youth including data collection, collaborative interpretation of data, and generation of new questions as needed.
- Continue to use visual methods to display young people's contributions throughout the process.

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# Appendix A: Literature review inclusion criteria and search terms

## Inclusion

- Countries: international
- Age: Children and youth up to 25 years
- Academic and organizational literature
- English
- 2020-2025

## Search terms

Combination of terms in each category below:

- Child\*
- Youth
- Adolesc\*
- Teen\*
- Engage\*
- Involve\*
- Participat\*
- Voice
- Consult\*
- Policy development
- Government policy
- Online
- Social media
- Gamification

Targeted searches to address gaps re: micro-populations:

- Rural
- Immigrant
- Newcomer
- 2SLGBTQ+
- Low income
- Disabled
- Indigenous
- Racialized

For example: “Child\*” OR “Youth” OR “Adolesc\*” OR “Teen\*” AND “Engagement” OR “Involvement” OR “Participation” OR “Voice” AND “Policy development” OR “Government Policy”

## Appendix B: Article selection

Figure 1: Article selection process

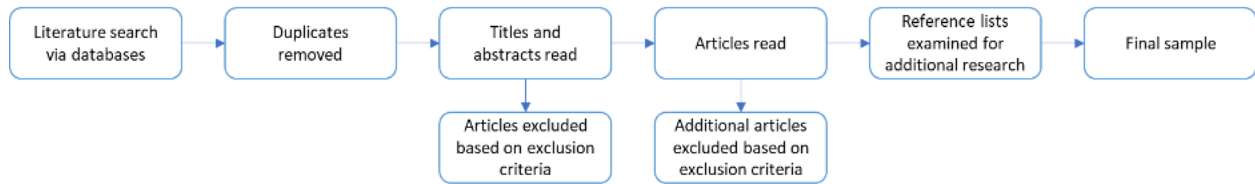
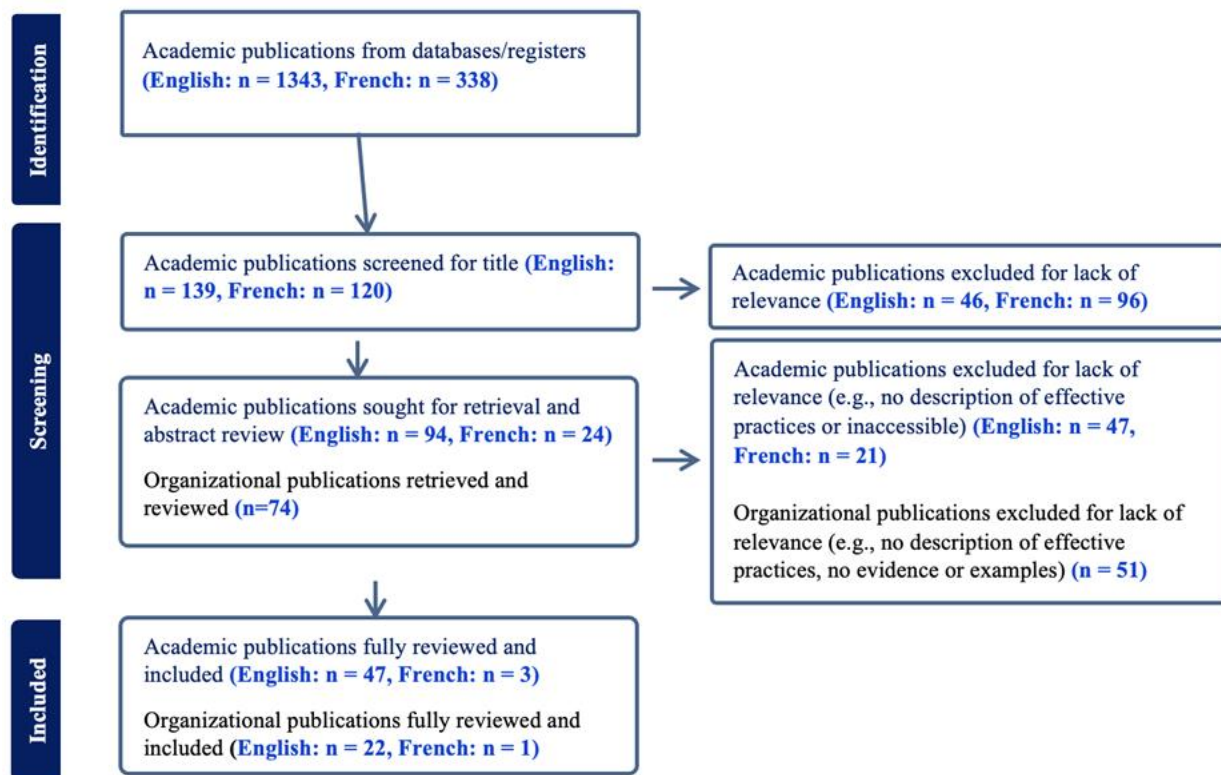


Figure 2 below illustrates the exclusions at each stage of the selection process for both academic and organizational literature to identify effective, promising, and emergent practices to involve youth in policy development.

Figure 2: Review flow chart



## **Annex**

### **Safety tips for virtual youth engagement**

- Secure and encrypted data collection and storage
- Transparent and easy-to-read privacy policy
- Guidelines that clearly lay out expectations for one another to prevent cyberviolence
- Reminders for youth about online safety practices: for example, do not share personally identifying information (e.g., address, phone number, schedule, school, or photos that might include any of these)