

A Unique Introduction to Youth Engagement

Adam Fletcher

Founding Director of The Freechild Project



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For more information contact:

The Freechild Project

PO Box 6185,

Olympia WA 98507-6185

www.freechild.org

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A Unique Introduction to Youth Engagement

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1. What Is Youth Engagement?

This is a unique introduction to youth engagement, because I discuss youth engagement differently than many people do. After 15 years of running The Freechild Project, I have found youth engagement is bigger, broader, and more powerful than most adults know. This short publication explains how.

First, my definition of youth engagement:

Youth Engagement is anytime young people experience sustained connections anywhere in their life.

Youth engagement can happen throughout the lives of children and youth, including within themselves, in the immediate world around them, and throughout society in general.

The sustained connections young people make can be emotional, psychological, or cognitive and can happen personally and socially.

What Youth Engagement Is Not

There is a growing amount of confusion about what youth engagement is and is not.

- Youth engagement is not be what you think it is.
- Youth engagement is not just focused on one issue or activity.
- Youth engagement is not the same as youth involvement, youth voice, or leadership.
- Youth engagement does not require youth voice—youth engagement *is* youth voice.
- Youth engagement does not need adult approval, guidance, or empowerment. Youth engagement can and does simply happen.
- If you want to engage young people on purpose, you might be able to do that—but you’d better make it worth replacing something else they’re engaged in right now.
- Youth engagement is not automatically youth empowerment.

If you’ve read the entire list and you still want to learn what youth engagement actually is, read on!

2. How Does Youth Engagement Happen?

Today, "engaged youth" are generally labeled that way because they are experiencing sustained connections in ways that adults approve or acknowledge.

These young people are typically identified in places like schools, nonprofit youth programs, and athletic programs. Their engagement is generally awarded by adults with incentives, including good grades, certifications of participation, and varsity letters.

"Disengaged youth" are generally young people who aren't engaged in ways adults have determined are in the best interests of those young people. They can be found in a variety of places that adults don't approve of or recognize the value.

These include at home playing video games; at after school jobs; at a friend's house after dropping out of school; or by joining gangs, hanging out with friends on the streets, or playing pickup basketball at night and on the weekends.

However, if we agree that youth engagement is any sustained connection anywhere, anytime for any purpose in their lives, then we have to see that all youth are already engaged in almost every part of their days.

See What Exists

Organizations that want to engage young people shouldn't treat them at blank slates.

Instead, they should acknowledge that children and youth live complex lives that are full of different opportunities to become engaged. When adults ask youth and young adults to become engaged in something specific, they are asking whole, complete human beings to disengage from something else. Every young person is 100% human right now, in every way, everyday.

No matter what age young people are, whatever issue or action they're engaged in is a reflection of what they value. Because of this, it's easy to assume children and youth have different values than adults.

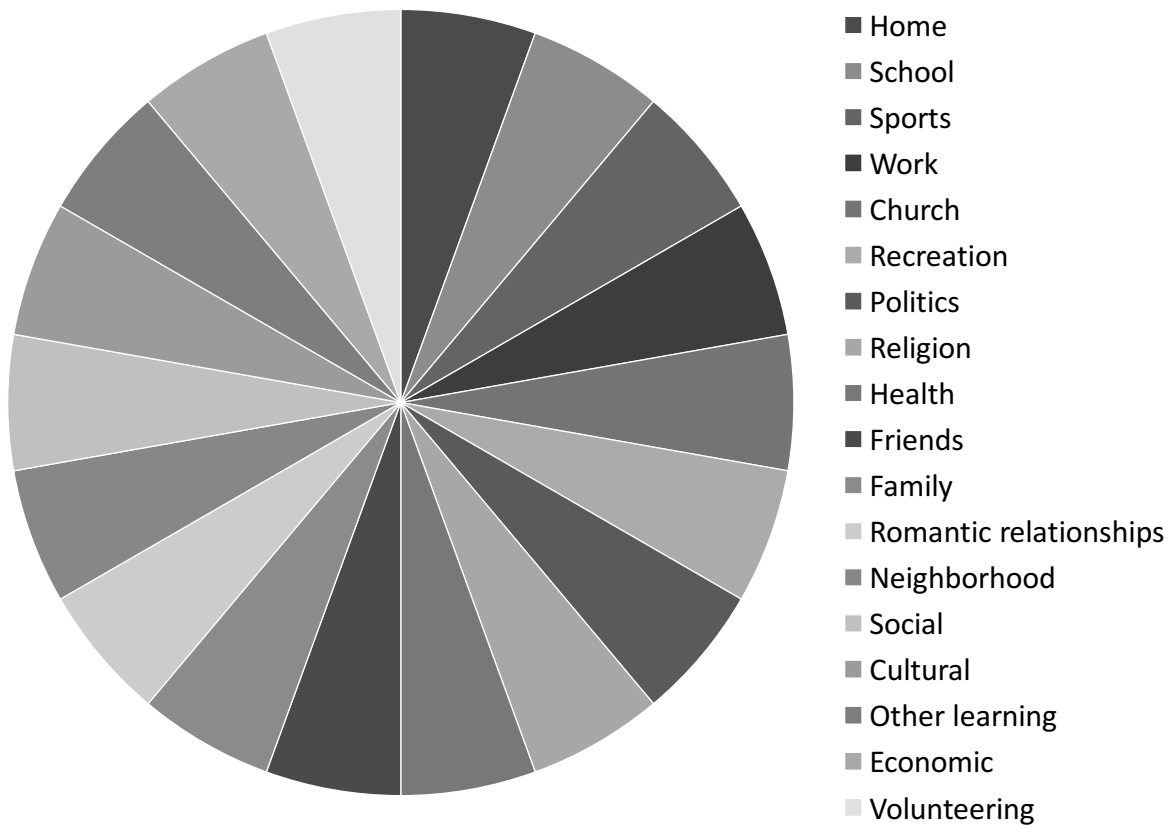
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However, that isn't the case for many young people. Instead, they frequently and simply don't know that there are other things they can be engaging in than what they're currently engaged in.

Some of the places that young people can be engaged throughout their lives include their homes, schools, sports, and work.

The following chart shows some of the different places youth and young adults can become engaged. What are the percentages of time young people in your community spend in each area?

Places Young People Are Already Engaged



3. Why Does Youth Engagement Happen?

There are several factors that make youth engagement happen. However, today's popular forms of youth engagement generally don't acknowledge those factors.

Whether or not a young person is going to become engaged is determined by three things:

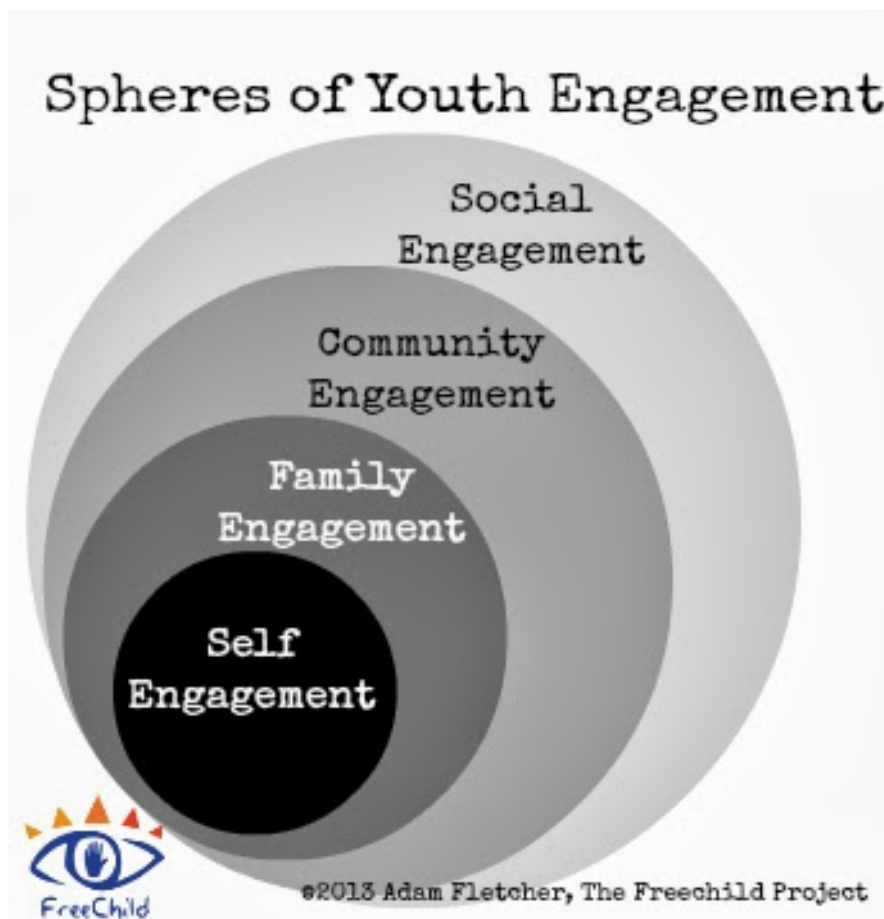
- the social and economic environment
- the physical environment, and
- the person's individual characteristics and behaviors

The ways young people live determine their engagement. Because of this, blaming youth for being disengaged from particular activities or issues or crediting them for being engaged in ways you approve of is inappropriate.

Youth are unlikely to be able to directly control many of the factors affecting youth engagement.

4. Where Does Youth Engagement Happen?

Youth engagement happens in a variety of places. Each place where youth engagement happens isn't necessarily a physical place or a set of activities. Because of this, I call these "Spheres of Youth Engagement."



Youth Engagement can happen within a person, including their emotional, psychological, or physical well-being.

Young people are generally seen as disengaged when they aren't sustainably connected to their family, peers, faith communities, school, and other community settings. There is generally little concern when young people aren't seen as connected to society, as these areas are generally seen as places for adults to be engaged. These locations including mass media, industry and the economy, social services, their neighbors, and local politics.

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Here is what the Spheres of Youth Engagement include:

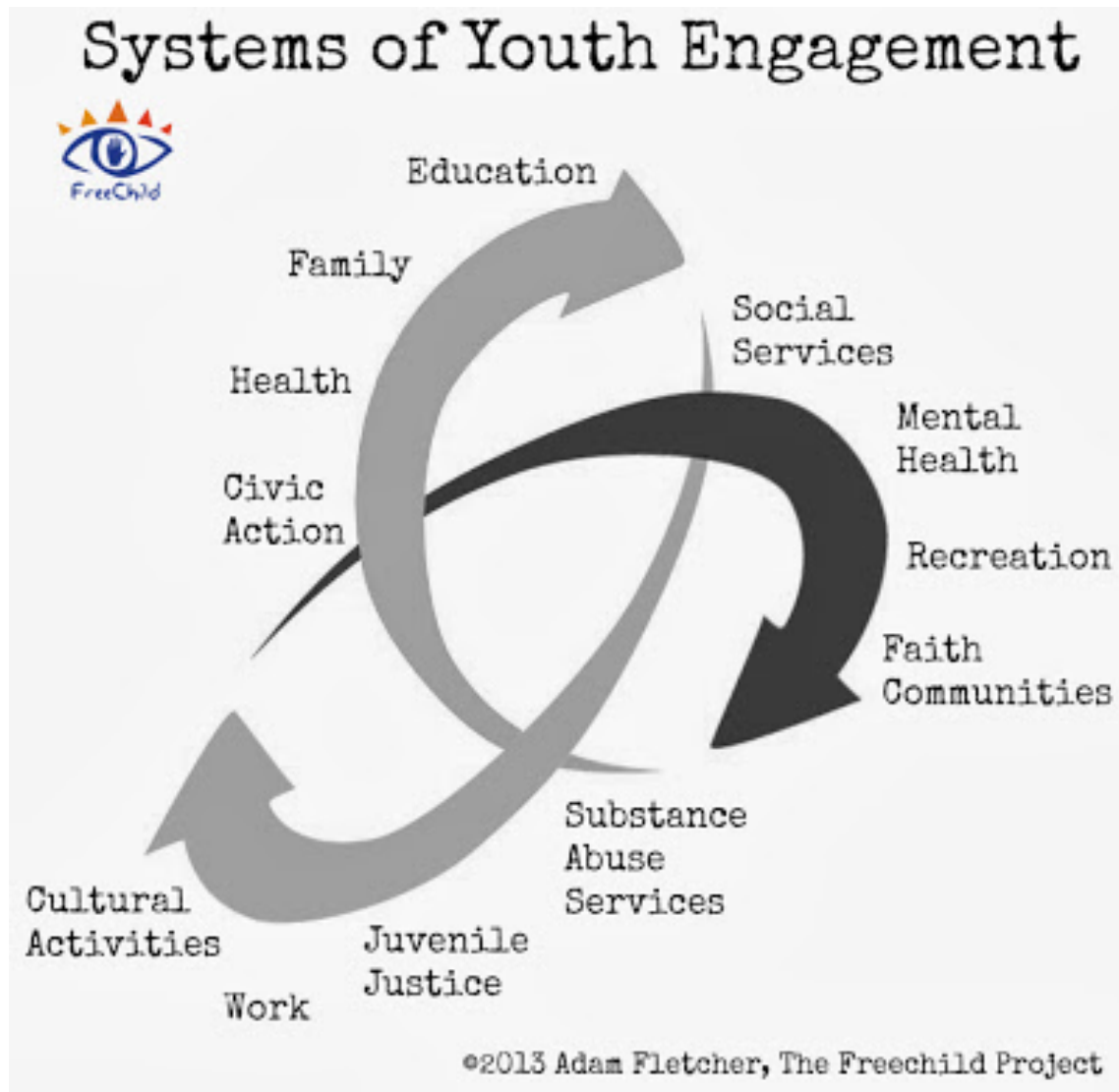
- **Self:** emotional, psychological, or physical well-being
- **Families:** home, recreation, decision-making, food and nutrition, culture
- **Community:** peers, faith communities, school, and other community settings
- **Society:** mass media, industry and the economy, social services, their neighbors, and politics

If you want to engage young people in a specific activity or issue, then you must be absolutely clear and honest about what part of their lives you want to engage them in. If you say you want to engage them in each sphere of their lives, you must be prepared to support them in each part of their lives. If you want to building youth engagement in one sphere, then you should concentrate on that sphere alone.

5. What Supports Youth Engagement?

All these individual spheres of youth engagement are parts of a generally unspoken system.

This system surrounds all young people from the time they're born through adulthood, and beyond. A system is "a set of connected things or parts forming a complex whole, in particular."



Systems of youth engagement are the broad ways young people experience sustained connections throughout their lives. There are many different ways to envision these systems operating.

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Here, I focus on the formal and informal institutions throughout the lives of young people that drive, affect, or impact the sustained connections they have throughout life.

These systems can include, but aren't limited to, their family, education, health, social services, recreation, faith communities, cultural activities, work, civic action, mental health services, and juvenile justice. Other systems can include transportation, food and nutrition, housing, business, and the environment.

When these systems function well, there are communities full of engaged children and youth. When they do not function well, young people experience disengagement in any or all of these spheres.

The fewer sustainable connections a young person experiences in each and all of these spheres, the more disengaged they become throughout their lives. The more disengaged a person is as a young person, the more likely they'll be disengaged as an adult; the more engaged a person is when they're young, the more engaged they will become when they're older.

6. The Future of Youth Engagement

Society evolves. Young people evolve, too. Ergo, youth engagement must evolve.

As young people and communities grow, there are more opportunities for youth engagement than ever before - and more opportunities for youth to become disengaged, too.

More sophisticated usages of technology, transformed processes, and varying thresholds for what engages young people have to be acknowledged all the time. This happens from generation to generation and across different communities for all kinds of reasons.

Youth engagement happens, no matter what. Adults may not like what it focuses on or how it happens, but it happens.

Here are three ways that youth engagement will happen in the future:

1. **Subjective relationships**—If adults want to continue to expose them to specific issues and activities, or seek particular outcomes from youth engagement, it will be necessary for them to adapt and transform their approaches.
2. **Equal relationships**—Another way is for adults to decide to value the things that young people engage in on their own volition. These youth engagement approaches entail adults meeting young people where they are currently, rather than insist that children and youth come to where adults want them to be in the future.
3. **Equitable relationships**—The middle ground between these two approaches to youth engagement requires active evolution and transformation. It requires that adults learn to see young children and youth as equitable partners in their work, and to treat them accordingly.

Luckily, no matter which approach adults choose, youth engagement will continue to exist in the individual lives of young people, where they see fit and how they see fit. The sustained connections that young people make will never be solely dependent on technology, and youth engagement will never rely solely on government agencies either, or nonprofits, faith communities, schools, or other specific spheres and systems explored above.

7. How To Engage Youth

Here are 10 steps to engage any youth, anywhere, at any time, for any reason.

1. **Look:** Who are the specific youth you want to engage?
2. **Name:** What exactly do you want to engage youth in?
3. **Listen:** What do the young people you want to engage care about? What do they say they're sustainably connected with?
4. **Acknowledge:** Let youth know you're listening to them by affirming, denying, or inquiring further about what they're saying.
5. **Authorize:** Provide active opportunities for young people to experience authority through learning and strategic positioning.
6. **Act:** Take action with or support young people as they create change.
7. **Reflect:** Look back strategically at youth engagement and identify new learning, challenges, successes, and opportunities.
8. **Critique:** Examine the elements, name the outcomes, determine the inequities, and actively challenge barriers.
9. **Strategize:** Determine new avenues for action and outcomes
10. **Close the Loop:** Use the learning, critiques, and strategies you identified to strategize new opportunities for youth engagement.

Are you trying to promote or build youth engagement? Then you should include each step listed above. If you aren't prepared to embark on each of those steps, then you should learn about them and prepare before you get there. If you aren't going to do that, you aren't going to engage youth effectively.

8. 111 Ways to Engage Youth

All young people can be engaged fully and wholly, everyday in every way. Youth engagement can happen in every way you can imagine. Here are a few different options for adults who want to engage young people in conscious, deliberate ways.

111 Ways To Engage Youth

1. **Video Games**—Play and encourage play, and be where youth are right now.
2. **Home**—Get youth engaged in their day-to-day life.
3. **Family**—Engage with young people in your family, including your children, brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews, and others.
4. **Learning**—Find ways to engage youth in their own learning at SoundOut.org.
5. **Water**—Engaging youth in the surface cover of 72% of Earth includes swimming, drinking, and protecting it.
6. **Beauty**—Becoming engaged in beautiful things can mean a lot to the young people around you.
7. **Empowerment**—Young people experiencing empowerment throughout their lives and within themselves is engaging.
8. **Work**—Engaging in what youth make money on may be the key to transforming communities.
9. **Reading**—Exploring literature about new topics, interests, or art can be engaging for children and youth.
10. **Play**—Find engaging ways for youth to dig into the things they have fun doing and allow them to enjoy it more.
11. **Hospitals**—Develop sustained connections with young people who are recovering and emerging from care.
12. **Breathing**—Get young people consciously engaged in the moment-by-moment function of living, with purpose.
13. **Advocacy**—Standing with others and empowering the powerless can be very engaging for young people.
14. **Self-Empowerment**—Youth can engage within themselves and discover the roles they have in the world within themselves.
15. **Art**—Engaging children and youth in art can mean creating it, viewing it, critiquing it, and more.
16. **Peace**—Fostering nonviolence in lives of young people and the lives of others can be very engaging for children and youth.

17. **Friendships**—Developing short or long term connections with people they choose can engage youth.
18. **Wildlife**—Young people surveying animals, studying birds, sustainable fishing and hunting can all be engaging.
19. **Communication**—It can be engaging for children and youth to share thoughts and wisdom with others in creative or direct ways.
20. **Skating**—Young people who like skateboarding are often very passionate about it. Skate with them.
21. **Pets**—Engaging in sustained connections to the animals young people keep as pets or helping others doing the same.
22. **Critical Thinking**—Developing sustained connections with the honest, authentic, and real responses of young people can be engaging.
23. **Parks**—Go and walk, lay, eat, draw, paint, climb, run, paddle, swim, and have fun with young people, and encourage them to do the same.
24. **Friendships**—The people youth spend recreational time with want to be engaged with, too.
25. **Physical Activity**—Movement by young people that supports healthy bodies can be very engaging.
26. **Ethnic Backgrounds**—Engage young people in learning about the backgrounds of people from specific places.
27. **Nature**—Find youth engagement in the gardens, forests, ocean, lawns, and air around you.
28. **Neighboring**—Actively knowing and interacting with the people around us can be engaging for young people.
29. **Community**—Stand with people youth relate to and engage with them.
30. **Culture**—Engage children and youth in the shared attitudes, traditions, and actions of a connected background.
31. **Libraries**—Be in these public places designed to share free learning with young people and adults.
32. **Coaching**—Engage young people in providing encouragement and support to others trying to achieve things.
33. **Music**—Sharing melodies with young people can be very engaging.
34. **Health**—Getting engaged in their health and well-being can connect young people deeply within themselves.
35. **Graffiti**—Engage young people in creating street art that means something to them.
36. **Community Centers**—Get young people engaged in the places where community is fostered in play and sharing.

37. **Anti-Racism**—Young people challenging racist thinking and action can be very engaging for them.
38. **Meaning-Making**—Any activity that helps young people make meaning out of their lives and the world they live in can be engaging for them.
39. **Music**—When young people listen, share, create, dream, sleep, and breathe music, they become engaged in the sounds of life.
40. **Place-Based Connections**—Living rural, urban, or broadly can be engaging for young people when done intentionally.
41. **Hanging Out**—Show young people that you, as an adult, have the ability to chill out and relax.
42. **Teaching**—Facilitating others learning experiences can be a deep avenue for youth engagement.
43. **Family Building**—When youth are parents, nurture family by building their capacities can engage them.
44. **Mediation**—Developing deep connection within oneself can engage children and youth.
45. **Self-Development**—Engage young people in challenging negative assumptions or building skills and knowledge.
46. **Globalization**—Engaging young people in enriching world perspectives and uniting cultures.
47. **Hiking**—Walking, climbing, and otherwise traveling by foot can be very engaging for young people.
48. **Nonprofits**—Engaging young people with staff who are building on missions to help the world, or supporting them to start their own.
49. **Poetry**—Engaging young people in the feelings, motions, ideas, and thoughts of others and themselves can happen through poetry.
50. **Refugees**—Supporting people who escape from oppression or suffering can be engaging for young people.
51. **Love**—Young people can know the greatest engagement in deep love for the universe and all that is within it.
52. **Cooking**—Engaging young people in foods and meal-making can be sustained throughout a lifetime.
53. **Homelessness**—Create lasting connection with youth, families, and others without a permanent home can engage young people.
54. **Farming**—Growing food and consuming local farm food can deeply engage children and youth.
55. **Heritage**—Youth can become engaged in the history of their neighborhood, family, or other identity.

56. **Disconnection**—Engaging young people in fostering healthy disconnection and bridging new engagements can be vital.
57. **Construction**—Fostering lifelong connections for young people to build homes and places for others matters.
58. **Volunteering**—Engaging children and youth in supporting others, places, or issues can be rich and exciting.
59. **Relief**—When places cannot get enough of what they need, it is engaging for young people to provide relief.
60. **Nutrition**—Learning about healthy eating, food knowledge, and diverse food sourcing is engaging for young people.
61. **Sports**—Being engaged in athletic play, competition, or achievement can be sustained for all children and youth.
62. **Finances**—Engaging young people in personal, community, organizational, or cultural economics can be rich.
63. **Politics**—Develop lasting connections between young people and the formal and informal structures of influence and power.
64. **Crafts**—Creating homemade supplies, arts, food, clothing, and other items can be engaging for young people.
65. **Social Action**—Protest, picket, tweet, facebook, teach, advocate, evaluate... do whatever you can to engage young people in social change that changes the world.
66. **Orphans**—Engage young people with children and youth without parents through play, mentoring and other ways.
67. **Schools**—Young people can teach, learn, or help others do the same in the formal places where education happens.
68. **Outdoor Education**—Deep connections by young people in participating in and facilitating outdoor learning can change the world.
69. **Responsibility**—Engaging children and youth in the topic of responsibility, especially personally and socially can be very engaging.
70. **Decision-Making**—Lean into the decisions young people make everyday to engage them meaningfully.
71. **Play**—Do fun things, and show that as an adult, you value play no matter what age other people are.
72. **Government**—Engage children and youth deeply in the social structures designed to ensure all people can engage.
73. **Education**—Engaging in the challenges and opportunities others face in learning can change young people’s lives.
74. **Small Business**—Supporting and creating local, small, and nimble business can be very engaging for children and youth.

75. **Writing**—Making imagination and knowledge pour on paper can be engaging for young people.
76. **Travel**—Becoming engaged in visiting places children and youth aren't familiar with can defeat ignorance.
77. **Restoration**—To engage young people in bringing life to old things can be enlightening and powerful.
78. **Evaluation**—Looking at their own life, the world they live in, and the people they are engaged with can engage young people deeply.
79. **Repairs**—Fixing broken things can be engaging for children and youth.
80. **Protesting**—Engage young people in sharing concerns with lawmakers and officials about issues that concern them.
81. **Internet**—Youth can engage in connecting, learning, and creating content on the web.
82. **Reporting**—Engage young people in sharing news, stories, and details with others in dynamic ways.
83. **Senior Centers**—It can be very engaging for children and youth to be with wisdom as it goes towards the end of life.
84. **Tutoring**—Helping other learners discover their capabilities in any topic can be very engaging for young people.
85. **Strategic Thinking**—Young people can become engaged in new and logical avenues for seeing wisdom.
86. **Environmental Restoration**—Engage children and youth in rebuilding and enriching the natural cycle of life on Earth.
87. **Emergencies**—Engaging young people with others in times of need and crises matters immensely.
88. **Clubs**—Connecting over professional and personal interests can be engaging for children and youth.
89. **Censorship**—Engaging young people in examining, challenging, testing, and changing censorship can be engaging.
90. **Philanthropy**—Engage young people with issues that matter by fundraising and giving money to causes.
91. **Trees**—Examining, learning, reforesting, planting, preserving, or caring for trees can be engaging for children and youth.
92. **Media-making**—Engage young people in creating websites, newspapers, television, videos, and other media.
93. **Fun**—Engage children and youth in creating, becoming part of, or expanding fun in their own life or with others.
94. **Exploring**—Exploring new spaces and examining where they already live can be engaging for young people.

95. **Rights**—Examining what rights are, what they aren't, and how to have them respected matters can deeply engage young people.
96. **Languages**—Engaging young people in languages can mean listening, speaking, or exploring communication.
97. **Solar Power**—Connecting children and youth deeply with alternative energy can change the world and themselves.
98. **Identity Issues**—Fostering and exploring connectivity between and within identities can be engaging for young people.
99. **Playgrounds**—Engaging young people in play with other young people is supporting their development and your community.
100. **Clothing**—Establish deep connections with other's and their own clothing needs by making, critiquing, and distributing clothes.
101. **Dance**—Creative movement, motion, rhythm, and melodic play can all be engaging activities for young people.
102. **Self-Teaching**—Learning new things and developing their understandings can be engaging for children and youth.
103. **Inter-generational Partnerships**—Engage young people in forming deep connections beyond their own age group.
104. **Civic Action**—Volunteering, voting, connecting, and building in communities can be engaging for young people.
105. **Healthcare Access**—Engaging young people in making sure everyone can access healthcare is important.
106. **Service Learning**—Connecting real learning goals with powerful community service can engage young people deeply.
107. **Social Engagement**—Fostering sustainable connections to the world around them is vital for all children and youth.
108. **Personal Engagement**—Recognizing the ways they're engaged within themselves can be essential for young people.
109. **Inequality**—Bridging social, cultural, and structural differences can be engaging for all children and youth.
110. **Dreaming**—Envisioning the future, seeing alternate possibilities, and knowing how to use their imaginations engages young people.
111. **Living**—Young people can engage in finding the value, purpose, and belonging within their own lives.

9. Resources

For more resources and information, visit The Freechild Project, connecting young people and social change around the world at www.freechild.org and Adam Fletcher's website focused on writing, speaking, training, consulting, coaching, facilitating, and blogging at www.adamfletcher.net. Following are some of the resources Freechild offers to support youth engagement.

The Freechild Project Youth-Driven Programming Guide—This guide is an introduction to youth-driven programming for nonprofits, government agencies, and other youth-serving organizations. The booklet gives a definition and compares approaches, and then provides planning tools, evaluations and assessments, and more. It includes the Ladder of Youth Voice, rubrics for assessing youth-driven programming, and links to examples and resources that readers can explore on their own. Available for \$14.99 at <http://amzn.com/1482607727>

Freechild Project Youth Engagement Workshop Guide—24 hands-on, interactive workshops designed to teach youth and adults about how to successfully engage young people. Includes workshops on communication, planning, and other topics. Available FREE at <http://freechild.org/FPYEWG.pdf>

Washington Youth Voice Handbook—An introductory guide that lays out what, why, who, when, where, and how youth voice happens in diverse communities across Washington State. The handbook includes a Youth Voice Assessment, the Washington Youth Voice Directory, and a resource section. Available FREE at <http://freechild.org/WYVH.htm>

Guide to Social Change Led By and With Young People—Centering on the "Cycle of Youth Engagement," this publication is a summary of the social change issues and actions addressed by and with young people around the world. Written by Adam Fletcher and Joseph Vavrus. Available FREE at <http://freechild.org/socialchangeguide.htm>

10. Build Youth Engagement in Your Community

Here are three ways THE FREECHILD PROJECT can support you in building youth engagement in your organization, school, conference, or community:

1) Explore THE FREECHILD PROJECT online. FREECHILD offers dozens of publications, resource collections, and more for young people and adults. They focus on youth engagement, youth voice, and social change led by and with young people. Almost all of our resources are free on our website, with a few available from popular booksellers. Visit www.freechild.org

2) Bring THE FREECHILD PROJECT to You! Many communities like bringing our Train-the-Trainer program to them. This enables FREECHILD to customize the training and expose an unlimited number of participants. FREECHILD offers one, two, three, and seven-day in-house trainings. Our rates and availability varies. Contact us to learn more.

3) Arrange for THE FREECHILD PROJECT to Present a Special Institute. FREECHILD is available to come to your community and deliver an exciting three- to seven-day youth engagement institute. Every participant starts a youth engagement program, designs action plans, determine goals and objectives, identifies ongoing measures, learns to find useful tools, and designs additional materials. Everyone receives a certificate, materials, and more.

To learn more about THE FREECHILD PROJECT programs and resources contact

The Freechild Project
www.freechild.org
(360) 489-9680



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