

# Quality Matters in 4-H

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## *Voice and Engagement*



Learn. Grow. Lead.

# Quality Matters in 4-H

## Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) Items: Engagement

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University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development delivers education, training and professional development for adults who work with and on behalf of young people. Since 2000, the Extension Center for Youth Development has provided the latest youth development research and taught youth workers throughout Minnesota how to apply it in their work. The Extension Center for Youth Development is committed to expanding the knowledge and strengthening the practices of staff and volunteers who are committed to high quality youth development experiences for young people.

### Attachments and resources

In addition to the staff meeting and training activities included in the Voice and Engagement document of this toolkit, the Extension Center for Youth Development has provided the following attachments and resources:

- “Strategies for Voice Development,” and “Levels of Youth Participation” — excerpts from HighScope’s Youth Work Methods Series by Tom Akiva and Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship by Roger Hart.
- “Why Youth Action? Youth Community Connections,” by Andrea Jasken Baker.

### Credit and thanks

The activities included were based on two primary creative sources:

- Giving Voice to the Leader Within. (2006). Donna Gillen, Marlys Johnson and Jackie Sinykin.
  - Voice and Choice. (2007). HighScope Youth Work Methods Series. Tom Akiva.
- For more information on HighScope, go to [youth.highscope.org](http://youth.highscope.org).

This toolkit was edited and adapted by Pam McBride, Deborah Moore and Andrea Jasken Baker as a part of the resources available through the Quality Matters project.

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# Voice and Engagement

## Staff Meeting and Training Activities YPQA Items: Engagement

Research tells us that one of the best ways to engage young people in programs is to provide multiple opportunities for them to have a voice and choice in decisions that matter — in their communities, their overall programs and their daily activities.

Organizations that effectively engage youth voice do the following practices:

- Honor, ask for and engage youth wisdom
- Provide ample opportunities for young people and adults to share control and decision-making
- Understand that youth voice is a way of operating — an organizational culture and philosophy that goes beyond one leadership program offering
- Go beyond just listening and build real action around youth voice
- Identify opportunities for voice and choice within each daily activity, across sessions, throughout programs and organization-wide
- Create space, commit resources, provide support and promote opportunities for youth voice
- Understand the positive outcomes of partnership for young people, adults, organizations and communities

Youth voice can happen at many levels within activities, at the organizational level and beyond the organization. Many exciting opportunities exist that involve youths in government or in communities.

Source:

Washington Youth Voice Handbook, 2007.

Young people

- can lead and mentor other young people,
- share control and decision-making with staff, and
- have many chances to make choices about what they do and how they do it.

### Four keys to youth engagement and giving voice

- Support
- Opportunities
- Space
- Resources

### Principles of youth voice

**Respect:** If you give it, you'll receive it! Ask challenging questions, listen and avoid age stereotypes.

**Communication:** Listen up! Young people are best heard when adults step back; adults are best heard when they are straightforward and explain where they are coming from.

**Investment:** It takes time! Investing in the future is accepting young people as leaders today.

**Meaningful involvement:** Count us in! Involving young people from the beginning — of an activity, session or program — builds ownership.

## Session Setup and Materials

### Setup

Tables for small group work and conversation should be set up with an open area towards the front of the room.

Post the workshop title and agenda with the facilitator name on an easel pad.

Tape posters to the wall with the bottom taped up so participants can't read them.

### Agenda

- Welcome and Introduction Activity
- The Current Reality Activity
- Poetry In Motion Activity
- Individual commitments
- Tools, resources and handouts

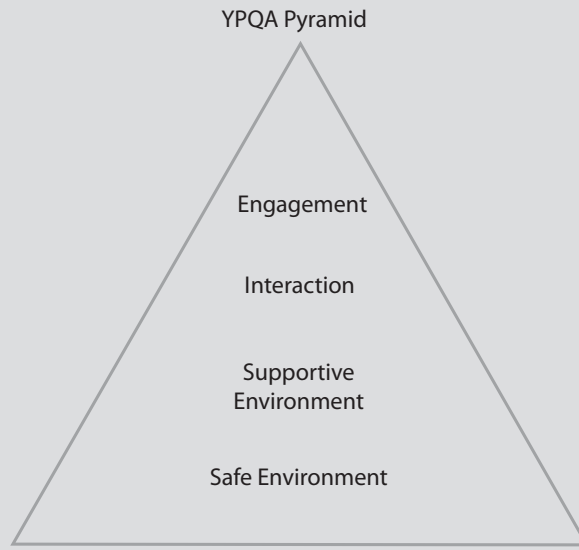
### YPQA Related Indicator: Engagement

All youths have multiple opportunities to practice group-process skills, like to actively listen, contribute ideas or actions to group, do a task with others and take responsibility for a part.

During activities, all youths have one or more opportunities to mentor an individual or lead a group (like teach or coach another)

Staff share control of most activities with youths, providing guidance and facilitation while retaining overall responsibility.

All youths have an opportunity to make at least one open-ended process choice (youths decide roles and activities).



## Introduction Activity — 30 minutes

Make four signs and hang one in each corner of the room: Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree and Strongly disagree.

Read the following statements and have participants go to the corner based on what they think about the statement. After they are in their corners, ask them to discuss their answer with the group around them. Ask for brief summaries of small group conversations in the large group.

Open it up to the large group for discussion, and hit each key learning point as noted after each statement.

**Statement one:** The best way to give youths choice and hear their voice is to have a weekly service-learning program.

*Large group discussion:* What are other ways of engaging youth voice and choice?

*Key learning:* Youth voice and choice should be built in to every aspect of operations.

**Statement two:** The best time to focus on youth voice is when there are problems to deal with.

*Large group discussion:* When is the best time to focus on youth voice?

*Key learning:* Building youth voice and choice into the ongoing culture of the organization is proactive and can actually prevent many problems. When problems do arise, youths are already empowered to be part of the solution.

**“By offering youths experiences to live their values, we contribute to their growth as leaders.”**

**— Johnson Sinykin, “Giving Voice to the Leader Within”**

**Statement three:** Giving youths voice and choice is too hard when I can just do the work and make the decisions myself.

*Large group discussion:* What are the challenges of youth voice and choice? What are the benefits?

*Key learning:* Youth voice does consume resources like time, support and opportunities, but the payoff is worth the investment.

**Statement four:** Young people have the same rights as adults to make their hopes, fears, dreams and realities known to society.

*Large group discussion:* What do we do to help young people share their hopes, fears, dreams and realities?

**Statement five:** I am intentional about engaging youth voice and choice into my daily routines.

*Large group discussion:* What are you doing? What new roles could we consider for young people?

*Key learning:* Have Traditional Models of Youth Voice and New Models (see below) on a flip chart. After people are done brainstorming, go over possibilities.

### Traditional Models of Youth Voice

- **Youths as receptacles:** Adults dump knowledge on youths without input.
- **Youths as recipients:** Adults work *for* youths based on the notion that children and youths are not able to make or take informed, practical and powerful choices.
- **Youths as informants:** Recognizing that youths know things about being young, adults use them focus groups, advisory boards and interviews.
- **Youths as promoters:** Youths persuade other youths.

### New Models of Youth Voice — Youths As...

- |                |                    |
|----------------|--------------------|
| • Facilitators | • Trainers         |
| • Researchers  | • Paid staff       |
| • Mentors      | • Decision-makers  |
| • Organizers   | • Activity leaders |
| • Advocates    | • Policymakers     |
| • Evaluators   | • Planners         |

## The Current Reality — 15 minutes

### Mapping youth voice in decision-making

Name all the places where decisions are made that affect your youth program. Then mark the lines with colored dots to note how the decisions currently address youth voice (youth-directed, adult-directed or youth-adult shared).

**Color code for dots:**

Youth-directed: \_\_\_\_\_

Adult-directed: \_\_\_\_\_

Youth-adult shared: \_\_\_\_\_

Daily activities:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Through the whole program:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Across and entire session or class:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Organization-wide:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## Tips for Engaging Young People and Discovering Their Voice

### Additional ideas to post on your office wall

- Give freely of your time and have fun.
- Actively listen to what young people are saying.
- Engage in meaningful conversations.
- Allow time and space for expression of ideas, opinions and feelings.
- Provide experiences that broaden perspectives and critical thinking.
- Earn trust by doing what you say.
- Engage youths in establishing and agreeing to guidelines for leadership activities.
- Offer opportunities for reflection and sharing.
- Leadership is a two-way street; let young people inspire you.
- Achieving a leadership voice is a process, not an event.

## Poetry in Motion Activity and Discussion — 45 minutes

Tell the participants they are going to do a word scramble to help them organize the concepts they have been discussing into a statement reflecting their ideas.

### Step one

Divide participants into small groups of three or four participants. Give each group a set of Poetry in Motion cards. (See box below.)

### Step two

On the wall, post the following statement:

“Effective youth voice and choice...”

Ask each group to arrange their word cards to complete the sentence using all the cards. Give each group 5 to 10 minutes to complete the task. When all the groups are finished, ask a representative from each group to present the group’s sentence. The Poetry in Motion sentences can be posted on a wall.

#### Before the session: Poetry in Motion cards

Create three or four sets of Poetry in Motion cards. Each set should have 30 cards (one word or symbol per card).

Use brightly colored paper cut into shapes (like circles, triangles or squares), and write the words in large, bold letters with a marker.

The 30 cards are as follows:

a	healthy	harnessing
adult	program	organization
and	talent	voice
are	!	choice
bigger	youth	opportunities
in	together	new
include	expanding	ideas
of	of	energy
the	partnership	ways
creativity	to	different

### Step three

In the large group, ask the group the following questions:

- What common themes do you see?
- What insights have you had that you want to be mindful of as you work together?

### Get group commitment

Ask the group, “As you move forward in partnerships to engage youths, what are you committed to?”

Get a few statements from the group, and write them on the flip chart. When all the participants are together, ask the group whether everyone agrees with those commitments.

Record the commitment in a posted area to remind the group of its work together.

### Get individual commitment

Ask individuals to fill out chart below and share with one other person.

	Where can you support and provide opportunities for youth voice and choice?
In daily activities I lead:	
Across sessions:	
Throughout the program:	
Organization-wide:	



## Reinforce and Check the Microphone

In the hurried nature of the youth work field, we often forget to check in, take a pulse and adjust the volume of the microphone in our organization. We should regularly ask:

Do we hear the youth voice loud and clear?  
Are they engaged?  
How do we know?

Here are few ways to take your program's pulse:

- At a staff meeting or individual staff check-in, ask, "How many new ways to engage voice and choice have you tried with youths?"
- At a quarterly staff meeting, involve staff in a discussion about youth voice strategies. To get started, write these words and their question prompts on easel paper:

**Support:** How have you *supported* their efforts?

**Opportunities:** Have you created new projects or designed new systems for increasing *opportunities* for youth?

**Shared space:** What kind of *space* did you create for youth voice or choice?

**Resources:** How did you find *resources* like bus tokens, transportation or snacks? They might seem little but mean a lot — especially to a young person.

**Process:** Share, reflect and record these for staff to use in their own groups in the future. Find ways to celebrate your success and steps taken to create voice and engage youths.

**One** more pulse check...

- Do you have a youth advisory council? You know how to have a focused conversation, so you know the questions to ask to gauge interest of those participating. You know what they will be excited about and frustrated about, and you even know what they feel they would learn from the experience. *Now what?* Go recruit an advisory council.

Ask youths to help recruit other youths, and turn up your microphone and get the youth voice heard!

Mic check? Mic check? Testing, 1, 2, 3...

All it takes is one person to say "You can do this" to bring out the leader and the *voice* in all of us.

## Facilitating Focused Conversations With Youths

### An easy framework to provide daily opportunities for youth voice

Focused conversations provide an opportunity for a meaningful conversation; get every youth participating, not just the usual suspects, and can help get clear ideas and conclusions while broadening the group's perspective.

#### What?

Start with easy questions to get facts, sensory impressions and information so everyone can participate.

- What words do you remember?
- What did you see?
- Who was there?
- What did we just do?

#### Gut?

These questions relate to personal reactions, associations, emotions and images.

- What concerns you?
- What is clear or unclear?
- What is exciting or boring?
- What is inspiring?
- What seems most critical?

#### So what?

This section identifies meaning, values, significance, purpose, learning and implications.

- What is the importance of this?
- What difference will it make?
- What options are open to us?
- What questions did this raise?

#### Now what?

Help them identify the resolution, action, future, direction and next steps.

- What have we just decided?
- What did you learn?
- What will you do differently?

## Why Involve Young People?

When an organization is intentional and strategic about providing quality experiences around youth action and youth voice, both youths and adults benefit.

- It is good youth development:** In the last 20 years, discussions about what youths need and can do have moved from problem prevention to preparation, from preparation to participation, and from participation to power sharing:

*...Even preparation and development are not sufficient goals. Young people need to be fully engaged — in their own development, in organizations and in their communities. (Youth Action, 4+)*
  - It promotes learning and long-term growth:** Youths provide a new generation of leadership. Opportunities for youth voice builds their capacity for critical thinking, leadership and organizational skills, while promoting practical civic education. These experiences provide young people with the tools they need to be current and continued active members of their communities.
  - Adults and organizations improve:** Recent research found that some adults unknowingly buy in to stereotypes about youths. However, through firsthand experience with competent youths, they begin to perceive young people differently and experience a stronger sense of community. Organizations that support youth voice find that young people help clarify and bring focus to the mission, while building credibility within the youth development field.
  - Young people can diagnose problems and provide reality checks:** With firsthand knowledge about their environments, young people are the experts. They can enhance existing pools of data
- that inform policy decisions and provide an inside perspective for problem-solving.
- Young people widen the sphere of influence:** Young people have a great deal of influence on their extended families. They can speak their truth to media and decision-makers in a different way than paid professionals.
  - Young people bring energy and creativity:** Authentically engaging youths in partnerships with adults can bring fresh perspectives, tenacity and sometimes much-needed creativity to the work. Research shows that working with youths enhances the commitment and energy of adults.

Adapted or excerpted from:

*YouthActivismProject.org*

Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development and National 4-H Council. (2001.) At the table: Making the case for youth in decision-making. University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Prepared for Youth Community Connections by Andrea Jasken Baker, March 2006.

## Principles for Supporting Youth Voice

Youth programs can provide a range of opportunities for youth voice. However, emerging voice requires the tangible support of adult partners. Several principles for supporting youth voice are listed below. These principles can be used as a gauge to determine the success or failure of voice experiences.

**Visibility:** Young people have opportunities to take the lead in decisions and actions. This might involve facilitating discussions, facilitating operation of a group, serving as spokespersons, presenting issues to key decision-makers or serving in a point-person role. Adults support visibility by coaching and mentoring young people as they gain a range of skills to fulfill these roles with confidence and competence.

**A safety net:** Adults and peers support various voice opportunities for young people by mentoring and coaching. Adults allow young people to step out of a leadership role when it becomes overwhelming or uncomfortable. This is followed up with reflection and jointly derived strategies for future success. This safety net helps create a psychologically safe space in which young people feel comfortable trying new ideas and challenging one another and adult facilitators.

**Goals:** Young people are encouraged to focus on clear goals and tasks. This supports their emerging leadership skills and encourages reasonable expectations of success. Concrete products, information and activities lead to solid accomplishments that young people can feel proud of and build on for future actions. In contrast, abstraction and ambiguity make learning the ropes of leadership extremely difficult.

**Structure:** Just as improvisational theater provides actors with key props and an opening scene, adults provide an overall structure within which young people can define roles and tasks. Structure comes in a variety of forms: providing information, conducting skill-building training, creating group ground rules or asking critical questions.

**Support:** To take risks and act on opportunities, young people should feel enthusiastic support from adult partners. This is particularly true in cases where youth voice might be questioned or where adults are not used to sharing control with young people. Young people need access to the skills, knowledge, resources and relationships that adults possess, as well as opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in a supportive environment. They should not be set up for failure because of a lack of tangible support.

**Preparation:** Young people are as prepared as their adult counterparts in conducting activities and tasks associated with their leadership role. Opportunity without preparation can lead to frustration and diminished feeling of success. Young people want to feel and be seen as competent. This principle is key in avoiding the extremes of adults taking over to save young people or young people being left out on a limb. Coaching, training, opportunities for practice and feedback are all valuable resources for young people preparing for leadership roles.

## Strategies for Voice Development

**Use groups as “laboratories” for voice development.** Youth voice does not emerge in a vacuum or as a result of being introduced to abstract concepts in an academic way. Intentionally use existing groups within your setting to provide multiple opportunities for youths to develop leadership skills. Young people can experiment with voice by figuring out a productive role for themselves, gaining awareness of the needs of the whole group, constantly switching roles and being responsible for both process and outcomes.

**Offer voice opportunities for many, not a few.** Because groups can form around so many varied goals, provide opportunities for voice that need varying degrees of skill and experience. When adults move from a dominant role to a facilitative role, multiple opportunities for leadership emerge.

**Break down projects and actions into component parts.** This helps young people become more conscious of the process, the specific role and steps they can contribute to the process, and the emerging needs for leadership as the process moves forward. This is especially true for large-scale, open-ended or abstract projects. Planning strategies, opening activities and divergent questions become tools to increase awareness of the process and identify component parts.

**View voice as “response”-ability.** Encourage young people to carefully consider their responses to people and circumstances, then act and review their intentions, decisions and outcomes afterward. Through intentional activity and adult support, young people will discover new strengths and gain greater awareness of who they are becoming and of the roles they will commit to.

**Provide authentic choice.** When young people feel free to define how they participate, they are more interested in participating. In addition, providing adolescents with real choices and opportunities to carry out their own plans lets them embrace leadership roles. These authentic leadership roles help students gain valuable skills as they engage in projects of their own design.

**Engineer success.** Facilitating success for young people at all levels of expertise encourages voice development. Engineering success is not the same as

saving students from the natural consequences of poor decisions and actions, nor does it mean setting up false accomplishments. Engineering success is often linked to the assumptions adults make about success. Adults may need to rethink their own definitions of success and encourage young people to define it in unique and personal ways. For instance, success can be the audience response to a performance, or simply the youth’s personal enjoyment. Success can be learning to make mistakes and trying something over and over until students get it the way they want it. Success can be learning to take risks, understanding how to solve a problem or seeing that their contributions matter to the people around them.

**Establish a “mistakes allowed” environment.** Being actively involved in a project requires students to feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. Voice opportunities are created when students make mistakes and apply the lessons learned to future situations. In the voice development model, mistakes are treated matter-of-factly, as a new problem to be solved. Individuals who view mistakes as new challenges rather than as reasons to give up are more likely to continue to participate and to guide others through the ups and downs of collaborative work.

**Recognize student achievements.** Recognition is an effective vehicle for keeping young people actively engaged in projects and activities. Provide opportunities for them to present their work to peers, family members, schools and the community. Remember, however, that recognition should come in the form of encouragement, not empty praise.

**Practice inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.** Effective youth voice involves the ability to work with and value peers and their contributions. It is important to set up an environment in which all young people are valued and given voice opportunities. When one or a select group of young people receives most of the voice opportunities, rifts can develop that diminish the overall goals of voice.

## Levels of Youth Participation

Youth voice is a key component in offering a high-quality youth program. The ultimate goal is to move toward the high-impact program feature of a youth advisory structure. A program that uses this will have youth-centered policies and practices. Young people will have an influence on the setting, activities, structure and policy of the organization. Despite several attempts to try to give young people a voice, the opportunities are seldom genuine. When providing opportunities for youth voice, focus on giving youths ample content choices, getting feedback from youths, involving youths in deciding what to offer and setting up meaningful advisory structures.

Before setting out to accomplish these tasks, it is important to understand the different levels of youth participation. While you may mean well, it is easy to use youth voice in an inauthentic way where the young people end up being tokenized or manipulated as opposed to engaged in the process of true youth advisory.

Roger Hart<sup>2</sup> developed a framework that illustrates the degrees to which young people can participate in this process. He symbolizes the process with an image of a ladder.

Each rung represents a level of youth participation. The top four rungs represent true youth voice, and the bottom four represent a more adult-centered approach.

### Hart's ladder

#### **Rung 8: Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults**

Young people initiate projects and programs.  
Young people and adults share decision-making.

#### **Rung 7: Youth-initiated and directed**

Young people initiate and direct projects and programs. Adults take on the role of support.

#### **Rung 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youths**

Adults initiate and direct projects and programs but share decision-making with young people.

#### **Rung 5: Consulted and informed**

Adults design and direct. Young people act as consultants for projects and programs. Young people are informed about how their input is used.

#### **Rung 4: Assigned and informed**

Young people are assigned roles and informed about their involvement.

#### **Rung 3: Tokenism**

The appearance is given that young people have a voice, but they actually have little to no say in their participation.

#### **Rung 2: Decoration**

Young people are used to indirectly help support a cause. Adults *do not* pretend the young people inspired the cause.

#### **Rung 1: Manipulation**

Young people are used to support a cause. Adults pretend that young people inspired the cause.

<sup>2</sup> Hart, R. (1992). Children's participation from tokenism to citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

## Notes

