

**Tribal Leadership Series**  
**Youth Engagement**





## Introduction

Tribal leaders are looked to by community members to set the precedent in how community issues and tribal programs should be managed. Youth engagement is no different. Tribal leaders show their communities the importance of youth engagement by making it a priority and supporting youth engagement in programs and tribal governance decisions. It is especially important for tribal leaders to make the effort to engage all youth in addressing community issues or tribal governance, not just those who are excelling in school or are more visible in the community, but others such as youth involved in the child welfare system and those who may not have a strong connection with their community. Tribal leaders can create opportunities to engage youth in meaningful ways in tribal governance. Including youth in the development of policy and decision-making allows tribal leaders to train the next generation, while creating holistic policy that is representative of the entire community. This process also creates strong peer networks in the community.

This guide provides information for tribal leaders on how to successfully engage youth, it includes

- Information on the importance of youth engagement
- Levels of youth engagement and youth and adult partnerships
- Practices to support youth and youth engagement tools
- Trauma-informed practices for youth engagement
- Examples of how to work through differences and best practices

While the material in the guide is framed to help tribal leaders build knowledge and skills around youth engagement, tribal leaders should look to their own tribe's cultural traditions and practices around youth roles as a structure to work from or look to neighboring tribes who are doing it well.

## What is Youth Engagement?

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“Youth engagement is the concept and practice of meaningfully engaging youth in decisions that affect them, their peers and their communities. Youth engagement ensures that young people become an integral part of the work of organizations and communities and that their voices help shape the future.”

(Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health, 2018). Sometimes youth engagement is referred to as youth voice, youth involvement, and youth participation.

### **Characteristics of Youth Engagement:**

- Opportunities for skills development and capacity building—Building skills that will help youth grow into capable adults such as reasoning, decision-making, and self-regulation.
- Opportunities for leadership—Leading community activities or committees, roles in decision-making processes, etc.
- Positive youth/adult partnerships—Partnerships where both the youth and adult have a mutual respect for the other and have addressed some of the attitudes and beliefs they may hold.
- Youth/adults work together to set group guidelines/values—Setting guidelines up front will help create a comfortable environment where everyone feels safe and valued.
- Community building activities to facilitate safety, belonging, and connection—Contributing to the community will strengthen youth connection to it as well as strengthen the community as a whole.
- Recognition of strengths, contributions, efforts and skills—Allow youth time and space to contribute and celebrate milestones.
- Share leadership and accountability—Expectations of a youth partner should be the same as those of an adult partner (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

(Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health, 2018)

## **Cultural Heritage**

Youth engagement is a term that is used in mainstream and tribal communities alike, however, tribal communities often have a traditional structure of youth engagement or involvement. Traditional roles of youth in the community may differ from tribe to tribe, but many see children and youth as gifts from the Creator. Tribal leaders may look to their own traditions and cultural values for guidance on how to involve youth within tribal governance and community decision-making. For instance, youth leaders may participate in policy-making for their tribe in a different way before or after coming of age ceremonies. Cultural protocols may give guidance on how a youth provides insight or feedback on a policy issue/tribal code/community initiative.

Looking to cultural traditions can help leaders to think about how to engage youth. In the Great Lakes region there is a tradition of ricing. An elder takes a young person, whom they've identified as ready to learn this tradition, out on a canoe to gather wild rice. The elder is usually an extended family member to the youth, (e.g., auntie or uncle) but could also be another community member if the youth doesn't have family able to do this. This ceremony marks an important cultural teaching and helps create strong bonds with other adult family or community members, and helps them connect to their culture and community as a whole (Nipissing First Nation member) (personal communication, December 29, 2017). This tradition may give insight on how to support youth engagement—for example a youth and elder may be paired together so that the elder or tribal leader may serve as a teacher of tribal policy/governance.

## **Why is Youth Engagement Important?**

Youth can play an important role in contributing to decisions that will affect their lives and communities (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2007). Using their community's cultural values and traditions can help youth and adults both connect to each other as well as their larger community, creating strong leaders for the future.

“...if you don't [engage youth] the work of our ancestors gets lost. If we don't teach them the values and direction of our people and the fights our ancestors fought for us...then we are creating space for external forces and influences, like social media and drugs and alcohol, to come in and take over.” Becky Kinley, Youth Leadership Manager & Social Marketing Coordinator, Lummi Nation (personal communication, January 23, 2018).

Youth engagement plays an important role in youth development. Youth engagement promotes leadership, positive identity, community involvement, and healthy relationships, which all help youth to develop in healthy ways (Act for Youth, 2018). Youth also serve as great messengers if they are involved and excited about a community issue. Youth are great at educating other community members and encouraging them to be involved. After serving on the Grand Ronde Youth Council for almost two years, Raven Harmon feels she has gained the skills to talk to her peers and other youth without hesitation, which has increased her impact on individuals and the community. “I know adults that are unable to connect with youth and that’s why I feel it is important to have youth leaders that are open to conversation and problem solving [with their peers and adults alike].” “Leaders within a tribe don’t have to be adults, I believe a leader can be anyone who has the patience to teach others.” R. Harmon (personal communication, January 22, 2018).

For young people involved in the child welfare system, it is important that they know their rights and responsibilities, and that they have a voice in decisions that will directly affect their lives. Being involved in their case planning and setting goals for their future provides youth a chance to develop skills that will help them as they transition into becoming an adult. Often youth who are involved in the child welfare system are removed from natural opportunities for engagement. Creating opportunities for youth engagement with this population also helps them to engage in the community and expand their support network as well as connect with activities that are of interest to them, like participating in paddling and learning songs and dance for canoe journey, gathering traditional foods, or learning their language. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012)

## Levels of Youth Engagement

Tribal leaders have many different opportunities to engage Native youth in the development and implementation of tribal policy. However, different policies and initiatives may require varying levels of youth engagement. Levels of youth engagement may vary depending on resources available. One resource that can be helpful to determine what level of youth engagement is appropriate is the Ladder of American Indian/Alaska Native Youth Involvement—a Native specific adaptation of Hart’s Ladder of Youth Participation. Each rung of the ladder describes a different level of youth engagement. Although the rungs of the ladder show varying levels of youth engagement, they do not represent all of the roles or opportunities for engagement of Native youth in tribal policy (Hart, 2013).

## How Tribal Leaders Support Youth Engagement and Participation

As mentioned above, there are many different roles that Native youth might have in the development, implementation, and monitoring of tribal policies and services. Strategies to support youth engagement should incorporate cultural strengths and strategies that are designed around the tribe’s or community’s history and tradition. The Forum of Youth Investment developed a set of principles that may inform how leadership and community support youth engagement. These eight principles are taken from “Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change,” and adapted for tribal communities. Tribal leaders and youth should consider how each principle could be modified or shaped by the community’s culture and history.

### **Principle 1:**

Design an outreach strategy—invite youth to participate, this could be for designated youth roles on a committee or on a tribal youth council. Recruit youth at tribal events, local schools, community centers, and other youth-serving organizations. Create a plan on how to engage new youth when youth “age-out” of positions, that may include cultural practices around the passing on of responsibilities to the next generation.

### **Principle 2:**

Create a “home base”—create a youth-friendly environment at in-person meetings, on conference calls, and in shared office spaces. Include Native youth-oriented artwork and education materials. Provide transportation options to youth to and from meetings and schedule meetings outside of school hours.

“Leaders within a tribe don’t have to be adults.  
I believe a leader can be anyone who  
has the patience to  
teach others.”  
*Raven Harmon*

# Levels of Youth Engagement

## 1 Decoration

Young people are used to bolster a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by youth.

## 2 Tokenism

Young people appear to be given a choice, but in fact they have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

## 3 Assigned But Informed

Youth are assigned a specific role and informed as to how and why they are being involved. This includes inconsistent youth involvement or temporary consultations such as focus groups or surveys.

## 4 Informed Dialogue

Youth give ongoing advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. Youth are informed as to how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. Youth are involved in evaluation of programming.

## 5 Adult-Initiated, Shared Decision-Making

Projects or programs are initiated by adults, but the decision-making is shared with youth. Attempts are made to use youth-friendly procedures and language.

## 6 Youth-Initiated Partnerships

Youth and adults join together as equals to accomplish programming, plan activities, operate the program, or complete specific tasks.

## 7 Youth-Initiated Leadership

Youth serve as peer leaders in a paid or volunteer capacity. Youth lead activities with their peers or with adults. Adults are involved only in a supporting role.

## 8 Organizing and Governing

Youth have a central role in the organization’s structure, driving programmatic or strategic decisions. Youth are empowered to be part of shared decision-making processes and have the opportunity for youth to learn from life experiences and expertise of adults.

### Principle 3:

Convey an intentional philosophy—tell youth why you want them to be engaged and be clear about their roles and responsibilities, especially if this involves teaching youth about cultural protocol. Emphasize how important tribal youth are to creating community awareness around community change.

### Principle 4:

Identify core issues—work with youth to connect them to issues in the tribe or community that they are passionate about. This could include issues that they face every day (i.e., tribal education or traditional foods) or ones in which they have lived experience (i.e., foster care or tribal health care). Challenge youth to link community issues to community assets.

### Principle 5:

Create youth/adult teams—engage youth as tribal leaders. Consider pairing youth with adults or elders in the community to facilitate intergenerational sharing and story-telling. If youth take on active engagement or leadership roles, consider providing compensation or incentives.

**Principle 6:**

Build youth and adult capacity—provide youth opportunities to build skills, cultivate cultural and historical knowledge, and increase awareness on community issues. Consider providing youth with training on writing, facilitation, or public speaking. Plan for shared reflection time that gives youth, adults, and elders the chance to share about the experiences in the engagement process (i.e., talking circles).

**Principle 7:**

Provide individual supports—create an environment where youth feel safe and supported—emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Youth are growing into their leadership and face stressors in their transition (i.e., school, relationships, family, health, etc.). Resources that focus on Native youth well-being should be provided for youth in development and youth in crisis.

**Principle 8:**

Sustain access and influence—connect the work that youth in your tribe or community does with larger initiatives in Indian Country. Allow youth to present their recommendations or work to the tribe or community at a tribal council meeting or community event. Highlight the work of Native youth in your community to encourage the next generation of tribal youth engagement.

(Pittman, Martin, & Williams, 2007).

**Tools**

The Relational Worldview Model (RWV) is a framework that can be used to provide an Indigenous context for well-being. Based on traditional medicine wheel teachings, the RWV highlights how individual, family, and community well-being occurs when balance and harmony exist among the many aspects of life, including spiritual elements. It can be used to adapt and examine tools and processes that are used (Cross, 1997).



There are many tools that can be used to engage youth. Tribal leaders may be very familiar with youth councils or may have other roles that youth play in tribal governance. They may be less familiar with how to engage youth in other processes like permanency planning in child welfare. Listed below are several tools for youth engagement.

“Our youth are sitting in front of us, and so we’re examples to them. It’s really helped us stay on point and remember that the decisions that we are making [are] for [those who] are right here. They’re not old enough to vote, they’re not 18, but they’re right in front of us and so we should be thinking about not only their generation but the next seven generations.”

**Theresa Sheldon,**  
*(Tulalip)*

- **Culturally relevant opportunities**—Culturally relevant opportunities can include things such as learning to be fire keeper at a sweat, participating in gathering traditional foods, participating in canoe journey, planning community gardens with traditional foods, etc.
- **Youth forums**—Holding a youth summit, youth wellness day, music performance, or other community event can provide opportunities for youth to share their ideas and perspectives and interact with other youth in the community (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2007).
- **Youth council**—Youth councils may be built around the needs and values of each community. They can prepare and organize youth for tackling issues within their communities. (Unity, 2014) They can be especially effective when they have the full support and respect of the tribal leaders in their communities.
- **Roles in tribal governance**—Elevate youth voice in tribal governance. An example from the Tulalip Tribes is how they have included their youth council in their annual general council meetings. The youth council sits in front of the tribal council members where they are able to hear everything. It has changed the way the community speaks and keeps them focused. “Our youth are sitting in front of us, and so we’re examples to them. It’s really helped us stay on point and remember that the decisions that we are making [are] for [those who] are right here. They’re not old enough to vote, they’re not 18, but they’re right in front of us and so we should be thinking about not only their generation but the next seven generations. And that’s what our ancestors did and that’s what we should be doing ourselves as well.” Theresa Sheldon, Tulalip Tribes Board of Directors (personal communication, January 24, 2018).
- **Youth MOVE**—Youth MOVE National is a youth driven, chapter-based organization that works to improve services and systems that support positive growth and development. They do this by uniting the voices of individuals who have lived experience in various systems including mental health, juvenile justice, education, and child welfare (Youth MOVE National, n.d.). Tribal chapters adapt this model to address these topics in a culturally relevant way for their community and can be a line of communication between tribal council and youth in the community.
- **Youth-led research**—Youth gathering information about the needs and issues important to young people in their community can help to shape policies that are developed to serve youth. At the same time, youth are engaging in their community and building skills in research and community development (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2007).
- **Community asset mapping**—Community asset mapping is an activity that many local community organizers first conduct when they begin to focus advocacy on a specific issue within their community. Asset mapping can identify programs and resources in the community that engage youth and those that could benefit from adding youth voice into their program structure. Having youth involved or leading the process is key.
- **Permanency planning**—Youth involved in the child welfare system where the tribal court and tribal social services are arranging a permanent placement for a youth other than returning them to their birth parents should have a lead role in the development of their own case planning. Making decisions about their lives and planning for their futures will help them understand their rights and responsibilities and successfully transition to adulthood (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). Gaining these skills may get them excited about teaching others and advocating for youth in similar situations. It also helps them to interact with different adults in the community to expand their network of support.

## What is Trauma-Informed Youth Engagement?

When working with Native youth, tribal leaders and tribal organizations should utilize trauma-informed and culturally appropriate approaches to youth engagement. Trauma-informed approaches to youth engagement encourage resiliency, promote healing from trauma, and enhance youth participation.



### **What is trauma?**

Trauma is defined as “an event, or series of events, that causes moderate to severe stress reactions. Traumatic events are characterized by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death...affecting those who suffer injuries or loss.” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Centers for Disease Control, n.d.) Trauma affects youth in all communities, but Native youth experience distinct forms of trauma, including:

- **Cultural trauma:** “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004).
- **Historical trauma:** “a constellation of characteristics associated with massive cumulative group trauma across generations” (Brave Heart, 1999).
- **Intergenerational trauma:** “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma.” (Brave Heart, 1999).
- **Current trauma:** emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. (American Psychological Association, 2018).

### **How does trauma impact Native youth?**

If a Native youth has experienced trauma, especially if it is unresolved, it can impact how a youth responds to stressors that occur while in leadership roles and community activities. Some common trauma responses to stressors include: guilt, helplessness, withdrawal, risk-taking, mistrust, and social anxiety. Below is a table from *Understanding Trauma: When Bad Things Happen to Good People* that has been adapted for Native communities (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.).

### **How can my tribe or community implement a trauma-informed approach to youth engagement?**

In order to implement a trauma-informed approach to youth engagement, tribal leaders can learn about the impacts of trauma through trainings and webinars. Those leaders involved in youth engagement should make a list of natural community supports to refer youth to and allow flexibility in rules and management to encourage Native youth to learn safety, self-regulation, and coping skills (Morsette, 2006) (Bigfoot, 2013).

## **Working Through Differences**

Many tribes and communities have different cultural activities that they can look to when working through differences. In the “ricing” example above (cultural heritage section), there may also be times where youth may feel that they are ready to participate in the ricing ceremony, but the elder feels that they are



## What Does Trauma-Informed Youth Engagement Look Like?

### Trauma-Informed

Recognition of high prevalence of trauma  
Tribal leaders/supporters—focus on collaboration

Address training needs of adults and youth to improve knowledge and sensitivity on youth development and youth engagement

Tribal leaders/supporters understand function of coping behavior to stressors (guilt, social anxiety, withdrawal)

Programs are flexible in rules to allow youth to learn positive leadership skills

### Not Trauma-Informed

Lack of education on trauma prevalence and “universal precautions”

Rule enforcers—focus on compliance  
“Youth-blaming” as fallback position without training on youth development and youth engagement

Behavior seen as intentional and provocative

Youth are removed from engagement activity or role without an opportunity to learn from behavior

not ready. In this case, a youth must take steps to show they are ready by working to make the tools necessary for ricing, keeping the fire, or other tasks. Cultural practices and teachings can help tribal leaders think about how to work through differences, and how they may need to invest in youth to help build up their skills so that they can contribute as full partners in decision-making.

## Best Practices

Talking circles are used in the Great Lakes region and beyond to successfully work through differences. Many communities use this approach when dealing with an issue where there are many strong feelings, an eagle feather may be passed around and only the person holding the feather can speak at that time. It may be an effective way to work through differences between youth and adults allowing each person the chance to speak and be heard with respect.

Tribal leaders can show the importance of youth engagement by inviting youth to the table. The Tulalip Tribes did this by taking the Gen-I or Generation Indigenous challenge—an Obama Administration initiative—and created a youth council. The full elected council sat down with the full elected youth council and had a discussion to ask their youth what they need from them as tribal leaders and how they could help them. Tribal leaders can be afraid to talk to youth and ask “what do you need.” By having that conversation they found that sometimes they are way off base in what their youth need and what they as leaders think their youth need. At Tulalip they found that their youth wanted to know that tribal leaders and adults cared and that the adults in their lives had positive expectations of them. “When you are able to talk to them and share teachings and traditions with your youth and empower them to step into those leadership roles, it makes a big difference and it helps change your community.” T. Sheldon (personal communication, January 24, 2018). Since the start of the youth council in 2014, tribal leaders from the Tulalip Tribes have traveled all over the country to conferences like Unity and National Congress of American Indians with their youth.

A practice that has been used at Lummi Nation is “Grab a youth and tag them along with you!” This is a great example of how to engage youth. Tribal leaders or other figures of authority are paired up with a youth and the youth can “tag along” with them. In this process youth feel seen, they feel like their opinion matters, and tribal leaders are creating opportunities for growth and also get to better see where youth can contribute and gain experience. B. Kinley (personal communication, January 23, 2018).

## Barriers to Youth Engagement

On the next page is a table, adapted from the Youth Involvement in Systems of Care: A Guide to Empowerment, 2005, that identifies some barriers and solutions to youth involvement.

## **Youth Involvement in Systems of Care**

<b>Barriers to Youth Involvement</b>	<b>Solutions to Youth Involvement</b>
Youth have ideas, but don't know how to implement them	Provide training opportunities for youth on tribal governance, cultural protocols, tribal programs and policies
Adults don't want to share decision-making with young people	Educate about the cultural importance and benefits involving youth
Adults plan projects without involving youth	Provide training for adults who will partner with youth
Adults have limited experience or knowledge of how to incorporate young people into tribal governance and programming	Create opportunities for youth to train adults and providers
Youth don't view themselves as change agents	Listen to and value the suggestions of young people so they become more comfortable and competent when making suggestions
Youth are reluctant to get involved if not invited to the table before	Use youth leaders to link with other youth in the community
Lack of support for young people when they come to the table	Identify an adult mentor, youth coordinator, or elder for youth to help in understanding meeting processes and protocols
Distrusts between youth and adults	Facilitate a discussion, talking circle, or activity where youth and adults can learn about each other
Lack of transportation to meetings (either on the reservation or off of the reservation)	Hold meetings in a youth-friendly location and help youth get to the meeting (e.g., provide bus tokens if youth use public transportation or schedule a car pool)
Scheduling of meetings	Schedule meetings after school and provide dinner if the meeting is during a meal time
Financial constraints	Provide compensation for youth involvement (e.g., cash, vouchers, credits, community service hours, etc.)
Cultural differences	Provide cultural competency training that includes youth

(Matarese, 2005)

### **Conclusion**

Meaningful youth engagement means that youth are full partners in policy and services development and decision-making. Youth may not always be equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage in tribal governance, so there should be investment in training and mentoring. Often times there are cultural traditions and practices that can guide tribal leaders in this important work. Youth actively

engaged in community issues are great educators and are important contributors to getting others involved in community development. Tribal leaders should remember that it is important to engage all youth, because the diversity in experience allows for richer contributions for policy and community development. Using a trauma-informed approach can encourage resiliency, promote healing from trauma, and enhance youth participation. Tools and methods from this toolkit or one's own community, such as talking circles, can help youth and tribal leaders work through differences. Tribal leaders are responsible for leading their communities to well-being, and youth have a lot to contribute to the process. Opportunities that foster youth engagement in tribal governance help to create a community of strong, healthy people and leaders for our future.



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### **The First Kids 1<sup>st</sup> – Every Child is Sacred Initiative**

is a national collaborative effort and is comprised of leading Native American organizations, allies, and partners from all backgrounds, focused on changing national, tribal, and state policy to create conditions in which American Indian and Alaska Native children can thrive. We are working to cultivate and nurture strategies and policies that build and strengthen equitable and local supports for vulnerable Native children in their communities.



A Partner With Communities Where Children Come First

*The First Kids 1<sup>st</sup> partner organizations would like to thank the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for their generous grant support which made the development of this document possible.*



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