



How to engage parents and other practitioners when supporting young people in youth voice activities

Proudly supporting youth social action



Department for Culture, Media & Sport



THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH VOICE

Part of YMCA George Williams College

Introduction

This guidance helps youth voice practitioners engage and build relationships with parents, carers, professionals, or services involved with the young people they work with.

The guide offers practical guidance should you be:

- Explaining your work to others;
- Looking to understand the legal responsibilities of others; or
- Aligning your support with others.

Following this guidance and adapting it to your context should help you to:

- Build positive relationships with others;
- Ensure consistency in care and support to young people; and
- Maintain appropriate boundaries.

Young people's engagement with parents or services varies depending on their individual circumstances or needs. This general guidance will need adaptation for those young people who may have more intensive or sustained support from parents or services, such as disabled young people, those in contact with the criminal justice system, or those seeking asylum.

Why this is important for effective youth voice activities

Young people are in a transition to independence. They are gaining the skills, knowledge, and confidence to navigate the world on their own terms. Youth voice activities can enable young people to make decisions, take responsibility for their actions, and establish their identity. Every young person will have different types of caregivers and support networks. Successfully navigating these networks in young people's lives can enable young people to engage and stay actively involved in your youth voice activities. You should do so in a way led by the young person without making assumptions about their lives – such as whether they are in school, who their parents or carers are, or how safe they feel in these spaces.

Evidence from the #iwill Fund 'Evaluating Youth Voice' research project showed that those delivering youth voice activities need to build strong links with other adults in young people's lives. Doing so can ensure that young people are best supported to engage in youth voice activities without feeling burdened or torn between opportunities and obligations. In particular, schools can play a key role in gatekeeping and supporting – or not – young people's engagement in youth voice activities. This can cause challenges for young people where they can feel pressure from others. Young people said it was important that adults were respectful and understanding of these commitments and relationships so that they could engage in a practical and sustainable way.



Benefits of engaging with others in young people's lives

Fostering these relationships can benefit your work and the young people you support through:

Increased understanding: Build a better understanding of the young person's background, home environment, familial relationships, sense of safety, and other demands in their lives so you can better tailor your support and remove barriers to participation.

Enhanced communication and collaboration: Open lines of communication supports information sharing of issues related to the young person.

Strengthened continuity and consistency: Consistency between home, school and your work contribute to a stable environment for the young person and reduces young people experiencing or perceiving conflict between others in their lives.



Working with parents and those with parental responsibility

Who has parental responsibility?

Parents under English law, and those with parental responsibility, have the legal rights, duties, and responsibilities to make important decisions that affect a child's life, including their consent to participate in activities. It is not limited to biological parents but also those who acquire parental responsibility through adoption, marriage, or being named as a parent on the child's birth certificate. Courts may also assign parental responsibility to others – such as siblings, wider family members or others with long-established relationships with the young person.

Gaining consent

You should gain written consent forms from the parent or carer of any individual under 18. This assures both the organisation and the parents that their participation has been given proper consideration. Generally, the parent or carer the young person primarily lives with should be the primary contact and they would be requested to consent.

These forms should be comprehensive, clearly outlining the activity details and any required permissions (e.g. relevant medical information, such as known allergies, pre-existing conditions, medications) and emergency contact details. Always ensure you understand the relationship of the person with parental responsibility for a young person taking part in your activities.

Top tip: *a parent's or carer's consent does not preclude getting the young person's consent. Youth voice activities should be based on young people's voluntary participation. No young person should be pressured or forced to take part in your activities by parents or carers.*

Steven has applied to get involved in a Young Inspector project. The application was excellent – very detailed and professional. At the first meeting, Steven seems initially very disinterested. In conversation, it becomes clear that Steven didn't apply. His parents have done so as they wanted him to gain more skills. It is explained to Steven that taking part is his choice and that there is no pressure to attend. The worker offers to speak to his parents if he would like. Steven says that it was better than he expected and wants to try it but will let you know if he doesn't want to take part anymore.



When a parent is resistant or refuses to consent to their young person's participation, approach the situation with respect, empathy, and open communication. Each situation is unique and maintaining respectful dialogue and focusing on the young person's best interests is key. You should:

Understand why: allow the parent to express their concerns and reasons for refusing consent. Listening attentively and hearing their perspective without interrupting or making assumptions, showing genuine interest in understanding them. Ask open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding of concerns. Clarify any misconceptions and address specific worries. Offer to provide additional information or resources if needed.

Provide information: offer clear and accurate information about the activity, including its purpose, benefits, safety measures, and any steps to address the parent's concerns. If possible, propose alternative options, reasonable adjustments or changes that might address their concerns while still allowing their child to participate in a modified way or in a different activity. Organisations may offer to pay for parents' travel expenses to accompany young people to and from youth voice activities if this would remove a barrier to the young person's participation.

Maintain open communication: keep the lines of communication open with the parent, expressing your willingness to address any future concerns or discuss alternative activities.

Avoid pressure: you should avoid pressuring or attempting to change their mind against their wishes. Recognise that the young person can feel caught between their desire to participate, their relationship with you, and their relationship with their parent.

Keep doors open: where the dialogue with the parent or carer has not been successful, try to keep communication channels open to enable future engagement if the situation changes. Ask their permission to check-in with them at a later stage.

Amina has applied to join a Youth Advisory Board. She has been sent information to pass on to her parents, including a consent form. Amina informs the organisation that she disappointingly will have to turn down the opportunity as her parents won't allow her to participate. Through Amina, the worker speaks to the parents. They offer reassurance about the group, answer questions about the planned residential and sleeping arrangements, and provide copies of the organisation's safeguarding policy and relevant insurance certificates. Feeling reassured, the parents allow Amina to take part.



English law recognises young people's evolving autonomy and right to participate in decisions directly affecting their lives. Generally, the older and more mature a child is, the more likely parents' power is limited over their children. Children under the age of 16 can give valid consent to participate in youth work activities if they demonstrate sufficient understanding and intelligence to fully comprehend the nature and implications of the activity, including the risks, benefits, and alternatives (so-called Gillick competence). In practice, it can be very challenging for the young person and raises risks of legal liability for your organisation. You should always seek specialist advice if you do not have parent's consent for their child to be involved with your work.

Maintain accurate and detailed records of your organisation's interactions with parents. Ensure you have a written follow-up on discussions, decisions, and actions taken to ensure consistency and accountability. Wherever possible, always include the young person you are working with in any written communication.

Other situations

Engaging parents who are separated or divorced: establish clear lines of communication with both parents where possible and appropriate, ensuring that information is shared consistently and transparently. Be mindful that weekend trips or evening activities may disproportionately reduce contact time with one parent and needs careful consideration with them and their child. Maintain a neutral and impartial stance, treating both parents respectfully and avoiding taking sides.

Parents of a disabled child or with medical needs: approach interactions with empathy, recognising the unique challenges and experiences faced. Recognise that they often have high expertise on their child's specific needs and can advise on their child's abilities and any necessary accommodations or adaptations. Seek to understand how care and support needs are met at home or at school and what can best be replicated when they are in your care.

Parents of a young carer: A young carer is a young person who supports and cares for a family member, relative or friend with a disability, a long-term illness, or a problem with alcohol or drugs. Without this help, the person would struggle or be unable to cope. Be alert to young people who have caring roles. Support the young person to consider any potential consequences of them engaging in your activities and how this will impact on their caring role. Seek specialist support and be mindful of the boundaries of appropriate care. The caring role should not dominate their lives or prevent them from participating.



Top tip: You may gain information about a parent from their child, in advance, or through their direct engagement. For example, over time as you build trust, a parent may share details of their disability or health needs. You should always store this private and sensitive data safely and securely in line with your organisation's Data Protection Policy and Procedures. You should be considerate of the boundaries you offer, stay focussed on how engagement with parents breaks down barriers to the young person's participation, and be cautious of becoming a support role for the family.

Social workers for children in care

There are approximately 80,000 'children in care' in England at any one time (also referred to as a 'looked after child'). A child in care may come into the care system for various reasons, including concerns about their welfare, safety, or concerns about the ability of their parents to provide appropriate care. The local authority will play a role in their care, acting as their corporate parent. They may be placed in a range of settings such as with a foster carer, residential children's homes, or specialist accommodation. They will have an allocated social worker who supports them.

No young person should ever face detriment or exclusion from youth voice activities because they are in care or care experienced. You can ensure they have equal access to your opportunities with appropriate planning and effort. If a young person you are working with is currently in care, do consider:

Legal responsibility: the local authority acts as the child's legal guardian and has the authority to provide consent for the child's participation in activities. The child's placement agreement, which outlines the rights, responsibilities, and arrangements for the child's care, may include provisions regarding consent for activities on behalf of the child. Depending on the individual circumstances, it can take longer to gain consent as the local authority may have internal processes for authorisation. If the child has a foster parent, they should be able to provide consent directly, but it may vary depending on the placement's specific situation and legal status.

Engage their social worker: a young person's social worker should work closely with the child, their carers, and other professionals involved with the child. They should understand the young person's situation, needs, risks, vulnerabilities, or therapeutic needs. Try and make contact directly with the social worker, providing your contact information. You may need to be persistent and flexible in seeking

contact and highlighting the benefits of working together.

Dealing with differences in views: every child in care has an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) appointed to review their care plan and ensure their needs and rights are met. The IRO may also be involved in discussions and decisions regarding the child's participation in activities, providing an additional layer of oversight. They can help unlock any resistance from the social worker that may prevent the young person from engaging in your youth voice activities.

Confidentiality: a young person's care status is private and personal information. You should ensure that this is held securely and that you do not share this information with other colleagues or other young people without the young person's consent.

Other youth voice activities: children in care may have specific opportunities or support to help them influence their care and the wider care system. Many local authorities will have a 'Children in Care Council' and each child in care will have an advocate who can offer advice and support to a child in care to express their wishes and feelings. Talk with the young person about these arrangements and how they can access them.



Rob has applied to join a Youth Advisory Board. The Board meets monthly online and has three residentials a year. After being selected, he informs the Board organiser that he is in care and living in a children's home. He shares contact details for his Social Worker. Staff provide further information to the Social Worker about the opportunity. The Social Worker requests information about the risk assessment and the DBS checks of staff. Once provided, the Social Worker signs the consent form for Rob to participate.



Teachers and schools

Teachers can play a key role in supporting – or inhibiting – young people's participation in youth voice activities. You may ask a young person to miss some or all of a school day to participate in a youth voice activity such as a meeting or workshop. Such requests should be minimised, be irregular, and avoid repeatedly falling on the same days of the week. Such requests should be an exception rather than a norm.



Ask young people to be open: give opportunities for young people to share the demands they are experiencing from schools. Highlight how youth voice activities should add value, not be a source of stress. Be open about recognising the demands from coursework or revision and respecting these being prioritised. Understand what relationships young people have with the people in their lives. Should you need to contact the school, for example, so a young person can attend an event, ask them who they would like you to approach. For example, rather than approaching their form tutor, consider whether they have a better relationship with another staff member like a learning mentor.

Plan your activities in light of the school year: plan your activities with the academic year in mind, avoiding key events in the school year. Local authorities set the holiday dates for all schools under their control, whereas Academies set their own dates. However, they tend to be similar in a local area. In England, most young people studying GCSEs (aged 16) or A levels (aged 17 and 18) will have exams from mid-May to late June. There are differences in Scotland with schools returning from a summer holiday in mid-August.

Explain your role: always provide schools with clear information on the youth voice activities and the benefits for the young person to participate. Explain the intended outcomes or exceptional nature of the request.

Offer to share photos: if the young person also consents, offer to share photos from any event or meeting so that the school can promote it in their newsletter or social media.

Respect their decision: government guidance for schools clarifies that only “exceptional circumstances” warrant granting an authorised absence. This is granted entirely at the headteacher’s discretion. Many will see the clear benefits for young people to participate in your activities. However, it’s important to recognise that schools are under a legal obligation to ensure high attendance and there are penalties for unauthorised absences for parents. Their decision should always be respected.

How to build relationships

Whether engaging with parents or other practitioners, there are some common tried and tested ways to support collaboration in the interests of the young people you work with.



Provide information: you should openly share details about the youth voice activity, including its purpose, location, and duration. Describe the nature of the activities, highlighting any specific skills or learning outcomes young people will gain.

Early communication: notify others well in advance about upcoming activities to allow for proper planning and consideration. Work with young people to agree dates, times, and locations to enable and maximise engagement. Wherever possible, provide a clear schedule of activities, including dates, times, and locations.

Be transparent: always be transparent with the young people you work with about the information shared with others and other services.

Share contacts: always provide contact details for the youth organisation or relevant personnel who can address any questions, concerns, or follow-up inquiries regarding the activity. Ensure the availability of multiple communication channels (email, WhatsApp, etc.) to accommodate different preferences.

Provide information on safety: provide detailed information about safety measures in place, including supervision ratios, first aid provisions, and emergency procedures. Always share your safeguarding policy and procedure or risk assessments if requested.

Educate yourself: take the initiative to educate yourself about your group's different cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Ensure you are aware of significant religious holidays, observances, customs, traditions and practices such as dietary restrictions and make necessary accommodations during activities or events.

Offer ongoing updates: provide regular updates throughout the activities, sharing highlights, achievements, and any changes in schedule or plans. Communicate any incidents or concerns promptly and transparently while maintaining confidentiality as necessary.

Facilitate others' involvement: encourage others' involvement and support through volunteering opportunities or attending information sessions related to your activities. Make time to give feedback on the young person's successes and achievements. Try to keep an 'open-door policy' where they feel comfortable approaching you with any queries or feedback.

Seek and share feedback and involvement in evaluation: with young people's consent and knowledge, seek feedback from parents after activities to gauge satisfaction and identify areas for improvement. Encourage parents to share their observations and suggestions for future activities. Provide follow up information about the impact of involvement and any evaluations you undertake.

Learn more

- If you have concerns about who has parental responsibility for a child, consider the Department for Education's guidance **Understanding and dealing with issues relating to parental responsibility**. While aimed at schools, it offers useful oversight of key issues; including where there is conflict between separated parents.
- To learn more about gaining consent for participation in youth voice activities, read the NYA **Guidance on informed consent**. This details what information is required to inform individuals properly and how this should be managed for youth programmes.
- Learn more about organising safer activities and events, including model consent forms when working with children on the **NSPCC website** and wider issues of consent when working with adults on the **Ann Craft Trust website**.
- Learn more about Gillick competency on the **NSPCC website**.
- Read the Department for Education's guidance **Working together to improve school attendance** for details on expectations for authorised absence from schools.
- The NYA **Review of the role and contribution of Youth Work with Schools** offers useful wider information on how schools and youth practitioners can collaborate for the benefit of young people.
- The Government's guidance on **Information Sharing** can guide you on your duties to get consent to share information with others in children's lives.
- Statistics of children in care in England are held on the **Department for Education website**.



About this guide

This guidance has been produced as part of a project that captured youth voice's impact within the #iwill Fund. During 2021-2023, a Young Evaluators Panel of young people from across England steered the collection and analysis of data on how young people are heard within the #iwill Fund and other youth voice activities. A participatory process allowed other young people, practitioners, funders, policy makers and academics to review their findings. A final report of their findings is available on the Centre for Youth Voice website.

The Centre for Youth Voice team has drafted these guides based on the learning generated through the project, the views of young people engaged in the project and wider good practices. All scenarios are hypothetical composites informed by examples provided by young people, practitioners, and the team's experiences. Links are provided to learn more but they do not constitute an endorsement or approval by YMCA George Williams College and we bear no responsibility for its accuracy, legality, or content.

About the Centre for Youth Voice

At YMCA George Williams College, our vision is for a just and equitable society that invests in support for all young people to learn, grow, and explore their relationships with the world around them. Established in 1970, the College works to provide transformational support to practitioners, funders, and policy makers across the sector, to improve the quality and impact of provision and outcomes for children and young people across the UK. This support is characterised by safe spaces, high quality socio-emotional skill development opportunities, and relationships with trusted adults.

As part of its work, the College hosts three Centres of Expertise. The Centre for Youth Voice at YMCA George Williams College advocates for and supports a stronger role for the voices of young people in evaluation and continuous quality improvement. Underpinned by the belief in participation of young people in the decisions that affect them, the Centre for Youth Voice develops and shares relational, structural, and practical approaches to embedding the voices of young people, and directly supporting them to develop their research and evaluation skills.

About the #iwill Fund

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