

GUIDE 06

**SAFE AND
ETHICAL
ENGAGEMENT**



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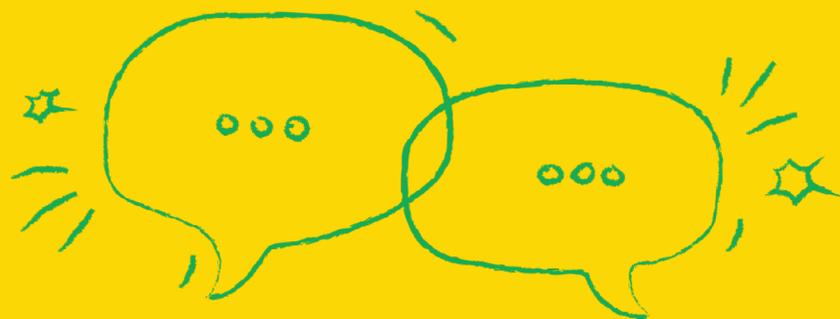
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Why is safe and ethical engagement important?

No matter how you engage with young people, it is important you assume a duty of care to ensure children and young people are safe and you are acting in their best interest. This means taking reasonable care to protect a young person from a foreseeable risk of harm. It also includes making decisions and taking proactive measures to avoid exposing young people to harm.



01

PROTECTING YOUNG PEOPLE

It's important to create a culture that has strategies and takes action to promote wellbeing and prevent harm.

As well as doing no harm, ethical engagement with young people is about:

- Everyone taking responsibility for ensuring the highest ethical standards are met when working with young people. All team members must be aware of their responsibilities.
- Respecting the dignity of young people and their views, cultures, evolving capacities, and diverse contributions.
- Treating all young people equally so that young people are not unfairly excluded and barriers to participation are challenged.
- Engagement that benefits young people.
- Obtaining young people's fully informed agreement, or 'consent' to take part.
- Continuous reflection on practice, and attention to assumptions, values, beliefs, and practices that influence the engagement process and impact young people.¹

A child and youth safe organisation:

- Creates an environment where the safety and wellbeing of young people is at the centre of thought, values and actions. This approach takes different capacities of different people into account.
- Places emphasis on genuinely engaging with and valuing young people.
- Creates conditions that reduce the likelihood of harm to young people.
- Creates conditions that increase the likelihood of identifying any harm.
- Responds to any concerns, disclosures, allegations, or suspicions of harm. Professionals working with young people under some circumstances may also be mandatory reporters (see more information here).²

1. Adapted from Ethical Research Involving Children: Charter

2. Child Safe Organisations, Australian Government. <https://childsafe.humanrights.gov.au/about/what-child-safe-organisation>



Establishing and maintaining boundaries.

It's important to balance developing rapport and trusting relationships with young people, while maintaining professional boundaries. Strategies to maintain these boundaries can include not providing personal contact details (use a work phone or email for communication), letting young people know when you'll be available (e.g. work hours), not communicating with young people on social media, and keeping your social media profiles private.



The Office for Youth has comprehensive child and youth safety guides, frameworks and considerations and if you need further advice, please contact youth@education.gov.au.

You should also refer to your department's internal child safeguarding guidance and requirements.

02

ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONSIDERATIONS

Benefits and harms

BENEFITS

Benefits to youth of engagement can include:

- Empowerment
- Building skills and knowledge
- Recognition of efforts through certifications, letters of recommendation or honorariums
- Improvement of policies, services and systems that serve the broader youth community.

HARMS

Harms of youth engagement can include:

- Injury
- Distress, embarrassment, anger, other strong emotions
- Damages to relationships, bullying, peer pressure
- Stigmatisation
- Burdens (e.g. unable to carry out familial responsibilities or missing out on paid employment or study).

Harms and their impact are different for everyone. Cultural and individual factors influence how harms are felt.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

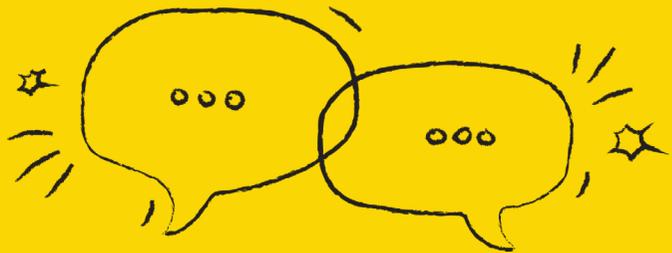
- How will the engagement benefit young people?
- What are the risks of harm?
- What harms may occur after engagement?
- What plans can be put in place to reduce risk?
- Does the team have the necessary clearances, capacity, skills, knowledge, and cultural awareness to prevent and/or respond to these risks?
- Are some young people at higher risk?
- How can our engagement design minimise distress or discomfort? Trauma-informed approaches that consider how past experiences shape feelings of safety in the present can help create safe spaces that promote young people's wellbeing. See more guidance on creating trauma-informed, safe spaces [here](#).

See the '[Preventing harms safeguarding checklist](#)' to help you with this step



What do strengths-based engagements look like?

These might mean avoiding direct discussion of personal experiences of adversity and instead using fictional scenarios or personas to explore challenges. If discussing issues or challenges with young people, also discuss available supports, the positive things in young people's lives and their strengths and resilience. End discussions on positive, hopeful, and inspiring notes. Give young people options about how to respond, this could be to write or draw a picture, so young people who may not be confident writers (or have limited literacy) can also take part.



Don't forget to ask!

When engaging with young people, always explore with them (privately and discreetly – not in front of a large group) what they need to feel safe, respected, and heard. Every young person is different, and their needs might vary depending on their background, culture, or individual experiences. Consider:

Psychological safety: What can we do to create an environment where young people feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment or repercussions?

Cultural sensitivity: What cultural norms should we consider? In some cultures, young people may not be accustomed to contributing to sensitive conversations or making eye contact. Explore these differences, and then acknowledge and respect their beliefs and values.

Neurodiversity: How can we support inclusive participation? Some young people may need clear communication, quieter spaces, or other accommodations to feel at ease.



Checking in with young people, either through onboarding processes or informal conversations shows respect for unique experiences and helps create a space where young people can engage meaningfully. Now that you've checked, does your original plan need any changes to make it more inclusive?

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent means a young person understands what is being asked of them and what will happen with their information. It means they understand any risks and benefits associated with taking part, and that they are agreeing to take part voluntarily, with no negative consequences if they decide to stop taking part. Obtaining informed consent demonstrates honest practice, and respect for the young person's dignity – their capability and right to make decisions about things that affect them.

Consent should be provided by the young person themselves, no matter their age. There may be circumstances where others are involved in a young person's decision to take part, if the young person can't provide fully informed consent (like those highly dependent on medical care, and people living with an intellectual disability or mental illness). For young people under 18 in Australia, consent of parents, guardians or caregivers is also required.

Consent should be sought from young people (and parents for those under 18 years old) when:

- They are invited to take part in interviews, focus groups, workshops, surveys, etc.
- You wish to take/use their photo, video or voice recording.
- They are invited to speak with the media.
- You wish to use their artwork, words or other creations.

If you're collecting personal information from young people (e.g. gender, chosen name, pronouns, cultural background), make sure you have checked what information they are happy for you to share with others, and what they want kept confidential.

Important considerations:

- How can we ensure young people have the capacity to provide informed consent?
- What if someone lacks capacity to provide fully informed consent?
- How do we ensure young people are not pressured to consent?

See the '*Obtaining informed consent*' mini-guide and the '*Obtaining informed consent safeguarding checklist*' to help you with this step.





PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

See your department's policies for guidance about the collection and use of young people's information to ensure you are compliant with relevant legislation and procedures.

It is important to maintain an individual's privacy and protect their personal information (e.g. name, address, date of birth), health information (e.g. physical or mental health information, disability information), and sensitive information (e.g. cultural background, sexuality, religious beliefs).

Remember, you may have mandatory reporting of child abuse/neglect requirements, which are State/Territory dependent (see here for guidance), and mean confidentiality may need to be broken. Young people need to be aware of this.

Important considerations:

- How can privacy and confidentiality be maintained during youth engagement implementation, data storage, analysis, and publishing/reporting?
- Are there circumstances when confidentiality needs to be breached?
- What type of information from young people are we collecting? Where can this be safely stored?

See the 'Privacy and confidentiality safeguarding checklist' to help you with this step.

ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

Youth engagement should be equitable, non-discriminatory, accessible, and inclusive. You should consider if you have diverse lived experiences in the room, including from the following backgrounds:

- First Nations young people
- Young people living with disability (including physical, intellectual and psychosocial impairments)
- Young people living in regional, rural, and remote locations
- Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds
- Young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and non-English speaking backgrounds
- Refugee/migrant background young people
- Young people with low digital literacy/access
- Young people experiencing homelessness or out-of-home care
- LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse young people

Before engaging with young people with diverse lived experiences, consider why you are seeking their particular expertise. What are you asking of them, and are there other parts of their identity they are bringing to the table? Be mindful that one young person cannot be expected to represent the ideas and experiences of all young people in that community, and shouldn't be expected to feel this way!



Hard to reach or hardly reached?

Young people with certain lived experiences are often labelled as difficult to engage in policymaking processes. This often ends up meaning that they are excluded. But this doesn't have to be the case. Think about how your recruitment methods can be tailored to be appropriate for specific groups of young people, co-design materials with young people, and seek guidance and support from youth organisations who support them. Additionally, there may be an area of government that does regularly engage your 'hard to reach' group of young people - reach out to Office for Youth if you require assistance.



Important considerations:

- What might exclude certain young people?
- What methods and approaches can ensure that all young people can participate?
- How can we support young people with accessibility requirements?
- How can we ensure engagements are culturally appropriate and safe?
- Are we continually seeking to understand the unique lived experiences of the young people we are working with?
- How can we honour the lived experiences of young people, without allowing their experiences or identities to define and limit them?
- Are there themes or conversations that might need to be avoided?

Click here to access the '[Accessibility and inclusion safeguarding checklist](#)' to help you with this step.

Click here to access the '[Resources for respectful and inclusive engagement](#)' tool for links to specific resources for young people with diverse lived experience.