

# **What Will It Take? – Involving Youth in Policy, Planning, and Advocacy in Voluntary Organizations**

**A Moderator's Guide for  
Focus Groups with Youth**

**Prepared by:  
Canadian Federation for Sexual Health  
(formerly Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada)**

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ISBN# 1-55401-172-8

Imagine Canada's Knowledge Development Centre is funded through the Community Participation Directorate of the Department of Canadian Heritage as part of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

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# Acknowledgements

Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada would like to acknowledge Kelli Dilworth, Elizabeth Panighel, Erin McGuinty, Erin Williams, Christine Bilinski, and Heather Finn for ensuring that the focus groups were run in an effective way.

Thank you to all of Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada affiliates who took the time to respond to the survey. In particular, thank you to Planned Parenthood Waterloo Region, Planned Parenthood Metro Clinic (Halifax), Planned Parenthood

Association of Edmonton, Cumberland County Family Planning, The Sexuality Education Resource Centre (Winnipeg), CBCA Sexual and Reproductive Wellness Centre, and Options for Sexual Health of British Columbia.

Most importantly, thank you to all the youth who participated in this project. Your honest answers and willingness to contribute are greatly appreciated and have contributed immensely to this report and in turn to increasing youth involvement across Canada.

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# A Moderator's Guide for Focus Groups with Youth

## Introduction

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In 2005, Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada (PPFC) conducted a research project, including focus groups with young people in three Canadian cities (Regina, Ottawa, and St. John's), to identify what could be done to increase youth participation in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy in voluntary organizations. All of the focus group participants were active in delivering peer education programs with PPFC (e.g. Planned Parenthood Regina's Y.E.A.H. – Youth Educating about Health program, in which youth from the Regina area develop and deliver innovative and interactive education to other youth on alcohol and other drugs and their affect on sexual decision making). The research was aimed at finding out what aspects of youth peer education programs are effective and how organizations could apply these findings to effectively engage young people in policy, planning, and advocacy activities.<sup>1</sup>

While preparing for these focus groups, we gave careful consideration to the power dynamics that exist between adults and youth. Typically this is a teacher/



student or parent/child relationship, which often creates a power imbalance. An ideal youth/adult partnership in a voluntary organization would not emulate either of these relationships, but would strive to involve youth in a way that makes them feel equal to adults and that assures them

that their participation and contributions are truly valued. We kept this in mind as we designed our focus groups.

This moderator's guide, which we developed for our focus group research, can be used by any organization that wishes to involve youth in a meaningful way in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy. Focus groups with youth can provide insight into what they value about volunteering with an organization and what accommodations an organization might have to make to involve them in policy and advocacy work. We begin with some general guidelines for youth facilitation. This is followed by the moderator's guide that we used for our focus group research.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada changed its name to Canadian Federation for Sexual Health.

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## General Guidelines for Youth Participation

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The work of a good facilitator begins long before the actual focus group. The following are general guidelines that you can follow to ensure a successful and enjoyable experience for all participants... including you!

### 1. Create a comfortable space for the focus group.

- Make sure that there are enough chairs for all participants, including you.
- Set up the chairs in a way that is conducive to open discussion (e.g. in a circle, around a table if there is writing involved, in a semi-circle, in small groups).
- Sit with the youth participants instead of standing in front of them. This will level out power imbalances between adults and youth.
- Play music that is age appropriate before the session begins and as participants arrive.
- Put up posters or pictures around the room to make the space welcoming to youth.
- Provide healthy food for participants. Sharing food will make the environment more casual and fun.

### 2. Set the tone for an open and honest discussion.

- Ask participants to brainstorm guidelines that will help to ensure that discussion is open and honest. Record their ideas on a large piece of paper that is visible to the group throughout the entire session. Come prepared with guidelines of your own to supplement the list developed by participants (see Appendix A for suggestions).

- Begin with an ice-breaker activity (see Appendix B for suggestions).
- Be well prepared. Know exactly what you want to say. The focus group will run more smoothly and seem more relaxed if the facilitator is not constantly referring to notes.
- Set out clear objectives for the session to ensure that everyone is working toward the same goal.
- Have participants sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix C for a sample confidentiality agreement).

### 3. Be aware of the environment during the discussion.

- Pay attention to participants' body language. This will give you cues about how people are feeling.
- If the energy in the room starts to drop, try a refresher exercise (see Appendix D for suggestions).
- If you sense that participants are tired, stop and ask them about their level of engagement and whether or not they need to take a break.

### 4. Get feedback and give appreciation at the end of the session.

- Hold a debriefing at the end of the focus group to get feedback from the participants.
- Have participants fill out an evaluation form (see Appendix E for a sample evaluation form).
- Tell participants how they can contact the organization if they have questions.
- Provide tangible tokens of thanks (e.g. gifts or honoraria) to show participants that you appreciate their time and effort.
- Tell participants how they can get a copy of the final report or product of the project.



## Capturing the Voices of Youth: A Moderator's Guide

This section contains the moderators' guide that was used for Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada's (PPFC) focus group research with youth. All of the youth who participated in our focus groups were already volunteering with PPFC peer education programs, such as Planned Parenthood Regina's Youth Educating about Health program. The focus groups were designed to find out:

- why youth volunteer so readily and effectively in peer education programs;
- what would it take for youth to become involved in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy in a meaningful way; and
- what an organization would have to do to motivate, maintain, and encourage youth to participate in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy.

Other organizations can use this guide as a model for their own focus groups about what it would take to get young people involved at this level in their own organizations.

### Suggested Agenda: Focus Group (2 hours)

1. Welcome / Housekeeping	10 minutes
2. Icebreaker	10 minutes
3. Review facts and research questions	5 minutes
4. Research Question Number One	20 minutes
5. Research Question Number Two	25 minutes
6. Break / Energizer	10 minutes
7. Research Question Number Three	20 minutes
8. Evaluation	10 minutes
9. Energizer / Debrief	10 minutes

### After the Focus Group Session

Here are some tips for summarizing the information that was gathered during the focus groups.

- Have someone take notes at the focus group session. Make sure this person is thorough.
- Structure the session to include opportunities for participants to write down their thoughts and ideas. This will ensure an accurate record of what was said.
- Consider videotaping or using a tape recorder to record the session – with the consent of the participants. This will ensure a completely accurate record of what was said that you can use to check against your notes.
- Take a few moments to do your own personal debriefing after the session (see the facilitator debriefing chart in Appendix F).
- Be careful not to over-generalize when transcribing information from the focus group.
- Consider using direct quotes from the youth when you write your report.

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## Choosing the Space

Adult spaces (e.g. offices and boardrooms) are often formal or businesslike, but you can make them more youth-friendly by putting up posters, quotes, and pieces of information or facts that demonstrate your organization's commitment to the 'youth voice.' We have included some facts (see page 5) that you can post in your meeting space.

The best room is one that is large enough to allow the group to sit in a circle. But the best isn't always available. If you find yourself in a boardroom sitting around a board table, move the chairs back from the table so that all participants can see one another. Play youth-oriented music as participants are arriving and during the break.

## What You Will Need

You will need the following items for your focus group:

- agenda (see Suggested Agenda on page 3)
  - flip chart paper and stand
  - name tags
  - markers
  - masking tape
  - handouts: confidentiality agreements (see Appendix C); evaluation forms (see Appendix E); "Barriers" (blank sheets of paper with the word "Barriers" written across the top); "I volunteer because" (blank sheets of paper with "I volunteer because..." written across the top); and "To get me there" (blank sheets of paper with "To get me there" written across the top)
  - snacks and drinks
  - a diagram that shows how the organization is structured
- posters (welcome sign, research questions, facts, see page 5)
  - pencils / pens for all participants
  - post-it notes
  - gummie bears and sugarless gummie bears
  - one-line quotes from your organization's volunteer board members answering the question, "Why do you volunteer as a board member of this organization?"

## Welcome / Housekeeping

- 1. Make introductions.** Introduce everyone in the room, including the facilitator, the youth intern facilitator, all participants, and all staff members. Explain that the youth intern facilitator is present for three reasons: (1) to learn from the more experienced facilitator; (2) to be a liaison between the young participants and the facilitator; and (3) to ensure that all the notes are recorded in youth-friendly language. Give some background on PPFC and explain that the purpose of the focus group is to find out how PPFC can involve young people in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy within the federation. Explain what PPFC intends to do with the information that is gathered as well as how the youth will be able to access the final documents at the end project. Answer any questions.
- 2. Review the agenda and post it.** Explain where the washrooms are, when breaks will be, and when snacks will be available.
- 3. Explain the guidelines for the session.** Explain that guidelines for group discussion are important to help everyone feel comfortable in expressing themselves and to encourage equal participation. Ask participants to suggest guidelines that could help create an open and supportive environment.



Write the suggestions on a flip chart and post them on the wall. The facilitator may supplement participants' suggestions with the guidelines provided in Appendix A.

## Icebreaker

### Gummie Bears

Have the group sit in a circle with the facilitators and youth intern facilitator. Pass the bag of gummie bears around (have sugarless ones available for those who want them) and ask participants to take as many as they would like, but not to start eating them yet. When everyone has taken some gummie bears, explain to the group that they will be introducing themselves and for each gummie bear they have taken they will tell one thing about themselves. As each piece of information is given, they put one gummie bear in their mouth. A facilitator will start the round, having taken at least five gummie bears. Mother always said, "Never speak with your mouth full." Have fun finding out why!

You can find more icebreaker suggestions in Appendix B.

Hand out name tags. Ask participants to write their first names on them. Although most participants will probably know each other already, it is important for the facilitator to be able to address each participant by name.

### Review Facts and Research Questions

Read the following facts aloud and post each one on the wall. These facts show that the organization knows and values the contribution youth are already making in their communities.

**Fact:** In Canada, in 2000, there were 6.5 million volunteers who contributed approximately 1 billion hours to society. The volunteer rate for youth aged

15-24 was 29%. The average hours volunteered by youth increased to 130 hours from the 125 hours reported in 1997.<sup>2</sup>

**Fact:** Peer education programs like the one that you are involved in are one way that youth are investing in their communities.<sup>3</sup>

**Fact:** Youth willingly volunteer to participate in peer education programs and have proven to be very effective in the delivery of services.<sup>4</sup>

Read each of the following research questions aloud. Post the questions on the wall.

### Research Questions

1. Why do youth volunteer so readily and effectively in peer education programs?
2. What would it take for youth to go from volunteering in peer-led programs and services to volunteering in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy?
3. What could an organization do to motivate and encourage youth to participate in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy?



<sup>2</sup> Source: Hall, M., McKeown, L. & Roberts, K. (2001). *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada, 2005.

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## Research Question Number One

Why do youth volunteer so readily and effectively in peer education programs? Here are some questions and activities to help you answer the first research question.

1. Ask participants how they found out about the peer education program that they are currently participating in. Record responses on the flip chart.
2. Ask participants why they chose/volunteered to participate in a peer education program? Have participants answer this question on the handout “I volunteer because...” Have participants read their responses aloud. Post them on the wall around Research Question One.
3. Ask participants how they would evaluate whether or not a peer education program is successful and/or what the indicators of an effective peer education program might be? Brainstorm answers and record them on the flip chart.
4. Ask participants what they think would make youth continue to volunteer in a peer education program. Brainstorm answers and record them on the flip chart.
5. Divide participants into pairs and have them answer the question, “What are we currently doing to interest youth in participating in peer education programs?” Record their answers on a flip chart and post them on the wall.

## Research Question Number Two

**What would it take for youth to go from volunteering in peer-led programs and services to volunteering in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy?** Here are some questions and activities to help you answer the second research question.

1. **Mapping Exercise:** Post the diagram of the organization’s structure on the wall. Be sure to include a space on the diagram to add an ad hoc committee or a youth board if that is how the participants decide that they would like to become involved. Use post-it notes to outline what is done at each level within the organization (i.e. policy development, committee membership, ad hoc committee membership, strategic planning, program development, and program delivery). This will help the participants understand the structure of the organization.

Ask participants “*What is policy development?*”

Record their answers on the flip chart and post them on the wall near Research Question Two.

Ask participants, “*What is strategy development/strategic planning?*” Record their answers on the flip chart and post them on the wall near Research Question 2.

2. **Read the following aloud:** “*In 1989 Canada hosted the United Nation’s World Summit for Children, and in 1991 ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Canada agreed that children and youth have the right to make their views known in decisions that affect them.*”

Divide participants into two groups and have them answer the question: “*What prevents youth from participating in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy?*” Have participants list barriers to youth participation on the “Barriers” handout. Bring participants back together and have them present their group’s answers. Post these on the wall near Question 2.

3. **Ask participants:** “*If youth were involved and sitting at the table at the policy level, how would we know that they were participating in a meaningful way and that they felt that their input was valued?*”

How do you know that your organization values your input? Record their answers on the flip chart and post them on the wall near Question Number Two.

### Break / Energizer

Take a break and do an energizer activity. See Appendix D for suggestions.



### Research Question Number Three

**What could an organization do to motivate and encourage youth to participate in policy development, strategic planning, and advocacy?**

Here are some questions and activities to help you answer the third research question.

**1. Hand out the quotes from your organization’s volunteer board members answering the question:** “Why do you volunteer as a board member of this organization?” Have participants read these quotes and post them around the diagram of the organization’s structure. Compare participants’ responses from Research Question One “I volunteer because...” with the board members’ responses. Ask participants if they see any similarities or differences.

Refer back to the list of barriers that participants identified earlier. In groups of three, have

participants brainstorm what the organization could do to remove these barriers and make the organization more youth friendly. Ask participants to record their answers on the “To get me there” handout.

The following quote can be read to inspire participants:

*“Craig Kielburger began his campaign against child labour at the age of 12. He and a group of elementary school students began to speak out publicly and raise money to support a cause that they believed in, Free The Children. Over the years, this organization has grown to over 100,000 children helping children in 35 countries around the world.”*

**2. Ask participants:** “If you were interested in speaking or advocating on behalf of this organization, what would you need to feel comfortable and empowered to do this?” Have the youth intern facilitator write down their answers.

### Evaluation

Leave enough time for participants to fill out an evaluation form. See Appendix E for a sample evaluation form.

### Energizer / Debriefing

At the end of the focus groups session, be sure to take the time to see if the participants have any questions or wish to discuss anything.

Be sure to thank the youth for participating in the focus group. If you are providing honoraria to participants, hand them out now.

An energizer can be a nice way to end the session. Please see Appendix D for examples of energizer activities.

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## Appendix A: Guidelines for Discussion

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The following is a list of guidelines that can be used to supplement the guidelines put forth by the youth participants:

- Respect each other.
- Be specific.
- None of the comments made in this room should leave the room.
- One person talks at a time.
- No side-talking.
- Be supportive of participants who may be shy or nervous to speak.
- Criticize ideas, not people.
- Keep an open mind.
- Realize that others may have opinions that are different from your own.
- Everyone has the right to pass if there is a question they do not want to answer.
- Do not be hesitant to leave the room at any time, for any reason.
- Listen constructively.
- Everyone is responsible for their own learning.
- No finger pointing.
- Have fun.
- Do not interrupt people when they are speaking.
- Remember that making mistakes is okay.
- Everyone should try to focus on the current topic.
- Feel free to ask questions.
- Remember that everyone's experiences are valuable.
- Conflicts are often positive and can lead to a more in-depth discussion.
- Be yourself.
- Use time wisely.

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## Appendix B: Icebreakers

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### 1. Toss the Ball

- Get something you can safely throw (e.g. a rolled-up newspaper, a plush toy, a kush ball, etc.).
- The facilitator tosses the ball to someone. That person says his or her name as he/she catches the ball.
- That person then tosses the ball to a second person, who says his/her name, and so on...
- Continue passing the ball around until all participants have said their names.
- Once the ball has been passed to everyone, send it around again, but this time participants must say the name of the person to whom they are throwing the ball.
- A twist can be added to this game: The facilitator can challenge the participants by timing the game. The participants should come to the realization that the less space there is between them, the faster the game will go.

### 2. Same Letter Game

- Ask participants to sit in a circle.
- Have participants introduce themselves one by one and say something about themselves that starts with the same letter as their name (e.g. My name is Erin and I like elephants).
- Each person must repeat the name and information given from previous participants until the last person must repeat the information from everyone in the room!

- The facilitator can encourage people to help each other. The purpose of the game is to build unity among the group members.

### 3. Find that Person

- Create a list of questions like the following:  
Who has been to China?  
Who had oatmeal for breakfast?  
Who has a younger sister?  
Who likes broccoli?  
Who wants to be a lawyer?  
Who can speak more than one language?
- Distribute a copy of the questions and a pen or pencil to each participant.
- Have participants walk around the room asking each other the questions.
- The first person to fill up the entire sheet wins a prize.

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## Appendix C: Sample Confidentiality Agreement

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This agreement is intended to make clear our appreciation of your commitment to [organization name and project name] and to ensure the confidentiality of any information that may be disclosed. We aim to create a safe space in which all participants will feel comfortable to contribute their ideas and opinions. We hope to make this a valuable and enjoyable learning experience for all participants!

### Your Commitment to Us

1. I agree that as a participant in the focus groups, I will maintain confidentiality of any information regarding other participants.
2. I understand that if I would like to stop participating at any time during the focus group, I will be excused by the facilitator or youth intern facilitator without question.
3. I agree to be photographed during my participation in this project and will submit a release agreement. This means that [organization] may share my photos in newsletters or other promotional material.

### Our Commitment to You

1. We agree to create a safe space where all participants can feel comfortable expressing their opinions and views.
2. We agree to respect the dignity and individual needs of all participants
3. We agree to respond to any questions or concerns about the process or procedures of the focus groups.
4. We agree to provide all participants with access to the final report that may result from, or include information gathered during the focus groups.

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Signature of Youth Participant      Date

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Signature of PPFC Representative      Date

Should there be any future projects with [organization] concerning youth, may we contact you?

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## Appendix D: Energizer Exercises

### 1. The Human Knot

Have participants stand in a circle, cross their hands, and hold onto the hand of the people on either side of them (i.e. their right hands will be holding the left hand of the person to their left, and their left hands will be holding the right hand of the person to their right). Once everyone in the circle is holding hands, participants must untangle themselves, without letting go of their hands they are holding, until everyone's hands are uncrossed and everyone is standing in their original spot.

#### *Variations of the Human Knot:*

- Participants must untangle themselves without speaking.
- Participants must close their eyes and have one person outside of the group (e.g. the facilitator) untangle them.

### 2. The Silent Puzzle

Give every participant a jigsaw puzzle piece and have everyone put the puzzle together without speaking.

### 3. The Tap

Have participants sit around a table and cross hands with the people on either side of them. Participants should end up with their right arms over the left arm of the person to the right of them and their left arm under the right arm of the person to the left of them.

Somebody starts the exercise by tapping his or her hand on the table. The tapping continues clockwise around the table in the order that the hands are placed i.e., a participant must tap his or her right arm before the person sitting to his right taps his left hand. If one person taps his or her hand twice, the direction of the game switches. Anyone who misses a turn or

hesitates and misses the beat is eliminated from the game. The object of the game is to get around the table as quickly as possible with no mistakes.

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## Appendix E: Sample Evaluation Form

Please take a few moments to complete the following 'Discoveries' statements. We are learners too. Your answers will help us to improve our facilitation skills and help us in designing other focus groups.

Please do not put your name on this evaluation form.

### Discoveries

I learned...

I enjoyed...

I was surprised...

I never knew that...

I felt uncomfortable...

I found it hard to believe...

I felt encouraged...

I wonder...

I wish...

I plan to...

Any other comments:

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## Appendix F: Chart for Debriefing

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### Chart for Facilitator Debriefing

<b>Number of Participants</b>	
What is your overall feeling after the focus group?	
Where there any answers that were surprising? What were they?	
If you could do it over again, what would you change?	
Where there any areas that you would have liked to spend more time on? What were they?	
Were there any parts of the session that were uncomfortable? What were they?	
Was the length of time appropriate for the amount of material covered? If not, how much time should there be?	
Were there any comments that stand out in your mind? What are they?	
Name one area of the focus groups that could be improved upon.	
Name one area of the focus group that was highly successful.	



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# Notes

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# Notes

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