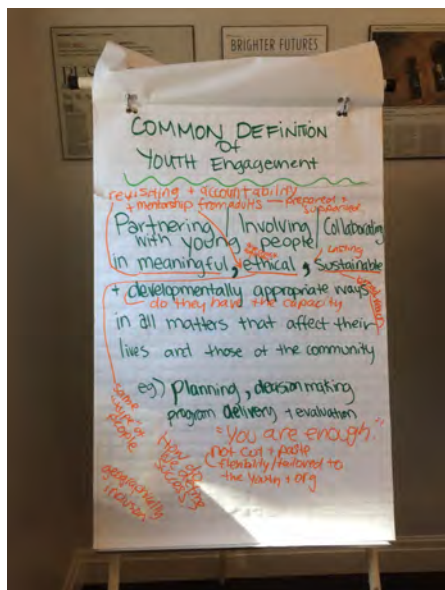**CHILDREN'S AID FOUNDATION**
OF CANADA

LEADING WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE
Youth Engagement Guidelines for the Child Welfare Sector

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Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

We heard over and over again about the need for youth engagement guidelines specific to the child welfare sector throughout the *Bus Ride Home Project*—a research project exploring how Ontario's child welfare sector can better support its young leaders, led by Children's Aid Foundation of Canada in partnership with the Ontario Child Advocate's Office, with support from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. These guidelines became one of the top seven recommendations in the final report.

Young people with lived child welfare experience have long been working to improve the child welfare sector. Despite finding the work meaningful and important, those consulted during the *Bus Ride Home Project* reported inconsistencies and concerns about how organizations engage young people, particularly in the areas of informed consent, transparency and accountability, adult allyship, respect for lived and professional expertise, development and leadership opportunities, accessibility and inclusivity, safe spaces, support, and self-care. Young people identified many organizations with adult allies who bring great intentions and care, but expressed that their engagement experiences with them have varied wildly. When engagement practices stray from a meaningful, ethical, and sustainable place, the experience can come at a serious cost to young people.

Consulted adult allies working at many of Ontario's key child welfare agencies and organizations, including the four behind the *Bus Ride Home Project*, also voiced their concerns about youth engagement practices and their toll on young people, seeking clear guidelines and training on youth engagement practice, particularly for the welfare sector.

Since the report, the Foundation continues to hear concerns from young people and adult allies about youth engagement practices. The Foundation hired a youth engagement specialist who drafted this resource and partnered with the Foundation's Youth Engagement Task Force—a team of some of the Foundation's most engaged young people, as well as representatives from the staff and board teams— who worked in partnership to revise and strengthen the resource as well as the Foundation's own youth engagement strategy and practices.

Children's Aid Foundation of Canada is proud to share this resource with anyone working in the child welfare sector or anyone keen to reflect upon how to engage and be a better ally to young people who have experienced the child welfare system. This is a living document, developed in consultation with one group of people with their own experiences, biases, and priorities. We welcome feedback to strengthen the resource in the years to come. In time, there may be an opportunity to offer youth-led training as a companion to the guide.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ORIENTATION

i. HISTORY

*Youth engagement has roots in other social movements and is captured by the concept of "nothing about us without us." It is problematic for work to be done on an individual or group's behalf without their consent and input.

Youth engagement practice can be traced to community development theory and an attitude shift in the child-welfare sector from youth services to youth development, from focusing on young people's deficits and solving their problems, to youth development, with the goal of supporting their empowerment. Leaders in the sector now know that engaging all community members makes their organizations and community stronger, and that youth in particular have expertise, strengths, and innovation capacities that are especially valuable, particularly when serving this population.

The right of every young person to know about and have a say in the decisions that affect them is also enshrined in articles 12 and 13 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Additionally, Ontario's Family Services Act stipulates that young people have the legal right to be heard on decisions that affect their lives, to express their views, and to fully participate in all matters that impact them.

Youth Engagement (sometimes also called youth participation or youth community development, youth involvement, youth inclusion, youth partnerships, youth driven, etc.) is now a robust field of theory and practice for organizations, academic institutions, and researchers devoted to its practice. Some Canadian examples include the Centre for Excellence on Youth Engagement (out of the Student Commission), Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development, the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, among other organizations, schools, enterprises, and governments. Youth engagement theory and "best practices" are built on the ideas, research, practices, and tools of many individuals and groups—led, in partnership or in consultation with young people—with many references in common. Many of these key sources and tools are used in this brief practice resource (please see "References and Recommended Reading" section).

Please note: for the purposes of this guide, "youth" are defined as those ages 15-29. However, even if your organization is youth-focused, continuing to engage young leaders is best practice. They know your organization well, may offer additional expertise, skills, and resource. As time goes on, they may be in a more stable place to withstand the toll of child welfare advocacy, and can act as excellent role models and mentors for younger people. When engaging those who have experienced the child welfare system, the transition out of youth roles can also be a traumatic one, so creating space for their continued involvement is not only beneficial for the organization, but may also be beneficial for the former youth. As for youth, possible roles for former youth/adults include: advisors, ambassadors, volunteers, mentors, donors, committee members, consultants, staff, and board members.

ii. DEFINITION

Youth engagement: Partnering with young people and involving them meaningfully, ethically, and sustainably in all matters that affect their lives and those of their community. Involvement can include planning, decision-making, delivery, and evaluation phases (both operations and governance). Success in youth engagement is best measured by ongoing feedback from engaged youth about whether it is meaningful, ethical, and sustainable.

UNPACKING THE DEFINITION…

Meaningful: The young person's role is mutually beneficial for the organization and the young person; the young person is matched to a role they are interested in and is of genuine need and value to the organization. The work is a win-win partnership between youth and adults to achieve a common goal that is celebrated.

Ethical: The young person must be **informed**, fully **consent**, be **respected,** and be **supported** to succeed in the role. All parties are **transparent and accountable** to each other, and adults offer **inclusive** engagement of their youth population in **safe spaces.**

- **Informed:** The young person has all relevant information about the role, organization, expectations, goals, outcomes, support provided, benefits, and consequences to their role, and their sphere of influence.
- **Fully consent:** Ensuring someone has made a genuine choice means that, if all their basic needs were met and they had all the information, they would still opt in. Choice when working with groups facing barriers—particularly at earlier stages of young adulthood and development— can be tricky. It's not enough to say "we asked and they said yes." It means they understand all the details, potential consequences (now and in the future), and they will remain valued at the organization whether they take the role or not. It also means that they have all of their basic emotional and financial needs (where applicable) met. Consent is also ongoing. While it is important that we hold all people accountable to their professional commitments and encourage youth to really think through and commit only to roles they are comfortable with and have the time and capacity to fulfill, it is important that we recognize that not everyone, particularly developing young people who face complex barriers, will fully understand the role's commitment or consequences until later, especially if it is a new role for them. They may also experience unforeseen urgent life situations and crises they need to address. Further, the role may shift or expand in ways that were not initially outlined. Adult allies engaging youth must make it safe and clear that they can opt out of the role in full or in part at any time, particularly if the organization has changed the role. Be clear that opting out won't impact their access to programs and supports; however consistent challenges with reliability may impact selection for future roles.
- **Respected:** Young people are valued for their work and their expertise from their lived experiences as well as any of their education/professional skills. They are acknowledged for and given credit for their contributions, particularly when referring to collaborative activity in public or online. They are asked how they would like to be introduced (e.g. professional, academic, or other identifier). When in doubt, they are referred to as colleagues. If a young person takes on a staff or board role, they are treated as equals. They are not asked about any relevant lived experience or perspectives as a youth unless they offer it, and are instead sought out for the professional skills and expertise, as with any staff or board member.
- **Supported:** Ethical engagement also requires that trusting relationships are built and supports and training are in place for young people to thrive in their roles. When working with groups of youth facing barriers, this may mean accommodating needs that are beyond typical HR support practices. Everyone has accommodations that come with expenses and time, but some are more

normalized than others. For example, we commonly make accommodations for adults' mobility needs, commutes, childcare, family illnesses, and bereavement needs. Accommodations for young people facing barriers is no different, they may just vary in degree and type. With youth, especially those facing complex barriers, take the time to build rapport and trust. It's also important to take a trauma-informed and strength-based, intersectional, anti-oppressive and harm reduction approach, and ask them what they need to thrive in their role and in their lives. Be mindful of their interests and their capacity, being sure to match them to the right role. Do not wait for them to ask for support and accommodations. Proactively ask and ensure the check-ins, support, and training are ongoing, not just up-front.

- **Transparency and accountability:** All parties are transparent and accountable to each other. Organizations are open and clear about their youth engagement goals and priorities, the level of power they are willing/able to share with youth, the outcomes of their engagement and major organizational activities (within legal limits), and the expectations, consequences, and benefits of their youth engagement. They follow through on their commitments to young people and strive to not make promises they can't keep. The organization also regularly reports back to engaged youth on the outcomes of their feedback and work. Youth are transparent about their goals and capacities, and hold themselves accountable to their commitments. They work in the best interests of the organization and the communities they support, taking on only what they can responsibly fulfill while meeting the conditions of the role and without expectation of further benefits than those outlined. When unforeseen circumstances arise and a cancellation or absence is needed, youth alert the organization as soon as possible and take any possible measures to address the impact.

- **Inclusive:** Striving to engage a full representation of the youth population an organization serves allows the organization to best meet the needs of the population because it is informed by the full spectrum of their experiences and perspectives. It also creates opportunities for all young people and not the same type of "success story''—youth who are usually better resourced and have experienced more protective factors. This can reproduce narrow narratives about success that can make youth feel unworthy. As above, inclusive environments are not always the easiest route—it is always easiest to work with those who are most like us—but these environments are best in the long run. Inclusivity requires creating clear and collaborative expectations and guidelines, relationship building, flexibility, and tailoring roles to the interests and capacities of youth. Wrap-around support should also be provided to meet each youth where they are at so they can thrive in their role for the long-term. If there is no appropriate role for a young person, examine the barriers that are in place and work to increase the organization's capacity to provide the support for diverse young people to thrive in their roles. If there is no room to provide the needed support, be honest and transparent about this in the short term and, in the long term, reflect on whom you're able to currently engage from the population. You should also set goals to build capacity to improve inclusivity.

- **Safe spaces:** Adults create a safe environment for their youth population to participate in programming and engagement opportunities, as well as to share feedback about their engagement experiences and the organization. Safe spaces require compassionate, open and active listening, asking young people what they need to feel safe, and facilitating accessible, non-judgmental, respectful discussions. This helps to ensure that youth do not experience any negative consequences for their honest, respectful input, including access to programs, funding, and services.

Sustainable: Sustainability requires that the engagement is realistic and fits the capacity of the organization, staff, and young people.

While it is important and exciting, jumping into engagement of any community without a plan and processes in place, especially with young people who face complex barriers, often brings unforeseen significant risks and costs to the young people, the staff, and the organization. Engagement needs to be thoughtful with adequate training, processes, structures, and resources in place.

Those engaging young people need to have the skills, capacity, and resources to be able to consistently provide the information, support, relationships, and resources needed for their young people to be ethically and meaningfully engaged in the role. The same policies and processes must be implemented every time so the engagement is ethical and fair, and so that there are healthy boundaries for both staff and youth, and everyone knows what to expect.

Things to consider: When work gets very busy, when a staff member leading the engagement is away or transitions out of the organization, when there are last-minute youth opportunities, or when a young person needs more support or is in crisis, will staff be able to follow the processes, provide the support needed and stay on top of their work? Will they burn-out? Do they have enough time built into their work plan to ethically and meaningfully engage and support young people? Is youth engagement understood, valued and practiced throughout the entire organization and not just by one or two people? If not, it's time to pause and reflect. Is youth engagement a genuine priority? If not, take a step back from engagement. If it is, is your level of engagement realistic? If not, reflect with your young people and other stakeholders to identify the organization's engagement priorities, be transparent about this. Focus on getting engagement priorities right and ensuring the needed resources and structures are put in place to make those roles consistently doable and properly supported before growing.

Sustainability also requires the consideration of each young person's capacity and development. Match the young person with a role and accompanying support that fits their capacities without assuming what people are capable of off the bat based on superficial factors, such as their age, education level, income, having child welfare involvement, etc. Take the time to ask them about their individual circumstances, interests, goals, and capacities. Some considerations include: developmental stage, training, skills, stability in life outside the organization, any trauma and where they are at with their healing, current barriers and challenges, traveling distance, support system, and other commitments.

Note: Navigating youth engagement (or any community engagement) is not without difficulties—if it isn't, it may not be genuinely engaging. It's challenging but rewarding work for organizations to engage youth meaningfully, ethically, and sustainably. When things go wrong—and they will—that's okay because it presents an opportunity to for growth. Work on creating a culture that welcomes check-ins and feedback, and honest, compassionate, solutions-focused discussions. Support the young people and staff through it, learn from them and the experience, and make adjustments to build organizational capacity (e.g. funding, staff training, and time) to support youth engagement.. Modeling this kind of self-accountability, life-long learning, and compassion toward self and others can have a powerful impact on young people and any organizational culture.

If individuals and organizations are not able to engage youth **meaningfully**, **ethically**, and **sustainably in a way that aligns with their capacities**—especially if young people are facing barriers—then they should stop or reduce their engagement efforts until they have the training, resources, and buy-in needed to do it. Quality over quantity. When an existing group wants to begin incorporating youth engagement practice, it requires deep reflection on current practices, policies and processes, and core values. This may include making fundamental change in the bones of an organization, shifts in thinking and behaviour, and transformation of culture.
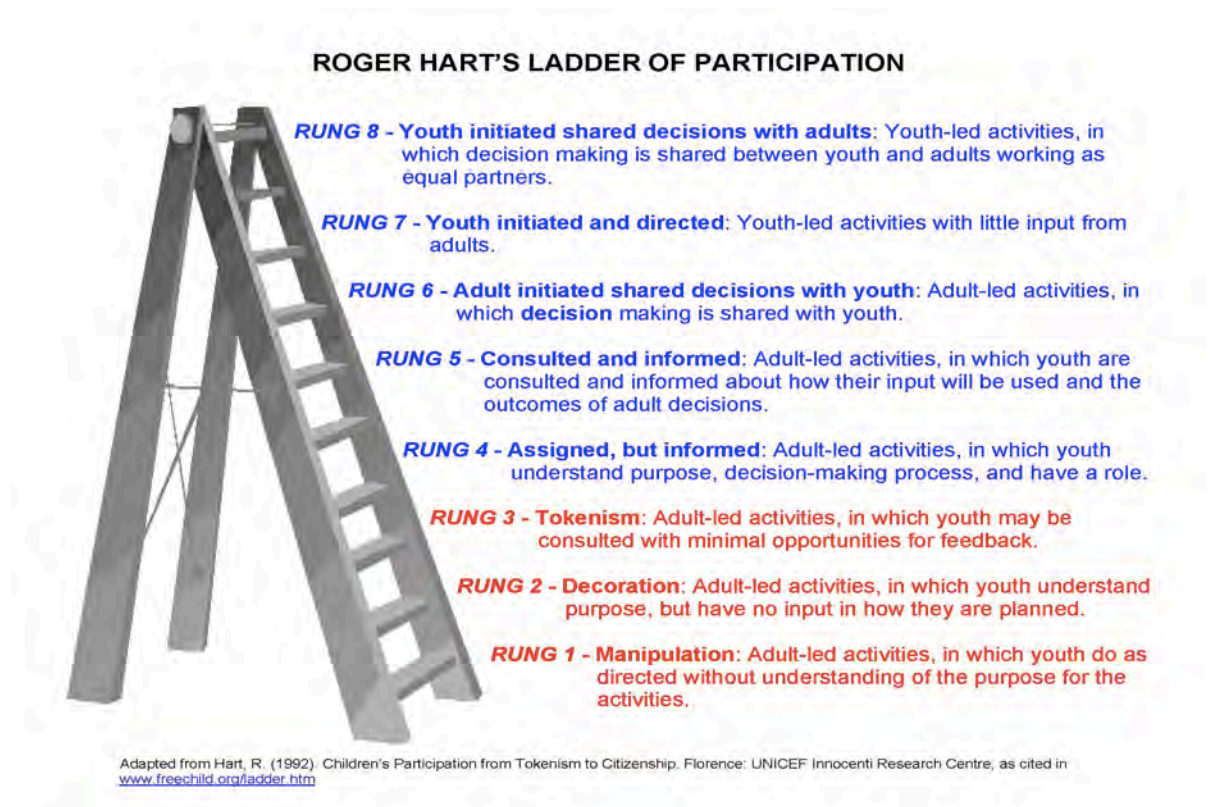
iii. TOOLS FOR DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

There are many different youth engagement frameworks; the following are two widely used in the sector. These are not meant to be prescriptive, but can facilitate reflection.

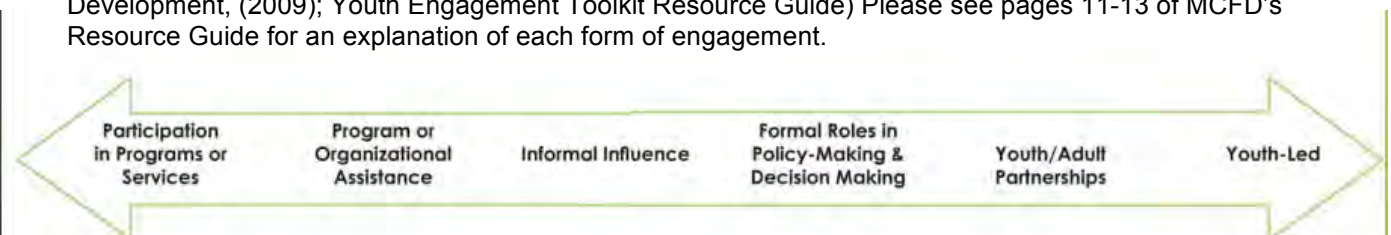**1. Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation:**

This tool helps to identify when engagement practices are truly participatory (ethical and meaningful). "When adults struggle with how youth involvement can work, there is a tendency to practice on the first three rungs of the ladder, referred to as non-participation. When adults see value, meaning, and strength in youth participation and engagement, their work is reflective of the higher steps on the ladder." (p. 14, BC Ministry of Children and Family Development Youth Engagement Toolkit Resource Guide; 2013)

In an effort to garner much needed support for a critical cause, well-meaning engagers can end up slipping into the non-participatory part of the ladder (Tokenism, Decoration, and/or Manipulation) because they lack understanding and the ends seem to justify the means.

ROGER HART'S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

RUNG 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults: Youth-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

RUNG 7 - Youth initiated and directed: Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

RUNG 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth: Adult-led activities, in which **decision** making is shared with youth.

RUNG 5 - Consulted and informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

RUNG 4 - Assigned, but informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

RUNG 3 - Tokenism: Adult-led activities, in which youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

RUNG 2 - Decoration: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

RUNG 1 - Manipulation: Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding of the purpose for the activities.

Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, as cited in www.freechild.org/ladder.htm

2. The Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development Youth Engagement Spectrum:

This spectrum "identifies different opportunities for youth engagement in organizations, communities, and systems. Youth engagement opportunities exist along a spectrum; however being at one end is not necessarily considered better than being at the other. There is no right or wrong here. The various forms of youth engagement will generate different degrees of individual, organizational and community outcomes. The Heartwood Centre suggests exploring the full spectrum of possibilities in order to find the right fit for your organization and the young people that you serve." (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, (2009); Youth Engagement Toolkit Resource Guide) Please see pages 11-13 of MCFD's Resource Guide for an explanation of each form of engagement.

| Participation in Programs or Services | Program or Organizational Assistance | Informal Influence | Formal Roles in Policy-Making & Decision Making | Youth/Adult Partnerships | Youth-Led |

iv. BENEFITS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

It is easy to think of youth engagement in terms of helping young people. But done meaningfully, it is a win-win partnership from which youth, adults, organizations, and communities all benefit, share power, and learn together. Some benefits are noticeable right away, but most are long-term, indirect and not easily measured.

Stronger communities: Youth engagement creates engaged citizens. Strong democracies depend on engagement, but it's unrealistic to expect people to become engaged, responsible citizens overnight when they become an adult, so early investment makes sense. Adults partnering and sharing power with young people facilitates cross-generational learning, mentorship, and support. It also challenges age stereotypes and builds social capital for all.

Stronger organizations: Young people are naturally open, innovative and have a greater ability to challenge the status quo. Child and youth-serving organizations further benefit from youth engagement because only young people have the fresh perspective and expertise of lived experience, knowing which aspects of a program or service would be helpful or where barriers exist for other young people. They can help an organization to do a better job of creating and sustaining programs, services, resources and messaging that reach young people and meet their needs. Once engaged and feeling ownership over the organization, young people are often more comfortable than adult allies making tough, pragmatic decisions or policies. For example, youth will often create codes of conduct for themselves and their peers that hold young people to an even higher standard than adults would. Optically, youth engagement improves any youth-serving organization's credibility, and helps build a reputation for being an "in-touch" thought leader, drawing support from community, including youth who access the organizations programs or services, and potential organization champions, volunteers, donors and partners. Youth engagement helps organizations demonstrate that they walk their talk. Finally, there are no better organization and brand ambassadors for a youth-serving organization than meaningfully, ethically engaged young people.

Stronger youth: The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Child and Ontario's Family Services Act (section 107, 108, and 109) stipulates that young people have the right to express their views and fully participate in all matters that impact them. Engaged youth build social and professional competencies as well as social responsibility. Without meaningful ways to develop competencies and a place in society, youth may rely on less healthy avenues. When their voices are considered, they are more likely to consider the voices of others. Meaningful, ethical, and sustainable youth engagement practice provides young people with relationships and support (especially using a strength-based, positive youth development approach) that can lead to their empowerment and greater confidence in their skills and potential. Youth become part of a community and build their esteem, self-worth and sense of purpose, accountability, and their role in their communities, especially toward social justice. They know they are needed.

v. COMMON BARRIERS TO PRACTICING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Adult attitudes: More and more, there's a greater appreciation that everyone across generations has much to teach and learn from each other. But the prevailing adult-to-child dynamic is still one where adults teach children. Roger Hart and others have written much about this (see "References and Recommended Reading" section). When needed or given the opportunity, most young people around the world—especially outside of the West—contribute their talents and labour to their families, communities, and countries. Of course, not all of this engagement is ethical. Wealthier and/or Western global regions, generally speaking, have shifted toward providing young people with more voice and power, but have significantly reduced their roles and responsibilities. Less wealthy regions and/or non-Western/traditional cultures may continue to place a high value on obedience, with a greater emphasis on revering elders; their young people may not have as much power, but they often have important roles. These are sweeping overgeneralizations, but Hart's observations ring true.

Youth engagement requires sharing both power *and* responsibility with young people.

Youth engagement requires an intentional cultural shift for most individuals, organizations, and communities, and it works best when everyone is on board. Sometimes adults are on board with involving young people, but not always in the most meaningful, ethical, or sustainable way. Not all adults in even a youth-serving organization will be youth engagement champions right away (or early adopters), even if they care passionately about young people, so it's important to make sure those who really love being around and working with young people, and genuinely believe young people have uniquely vital ideas, skills, and expertise are the ones interacting with youth and leading any youth engagement opportunities. These are often the adults young people naturally gravitate to. They tend to be fun, warm, "real," and youthful (not necessarily young) while still professional in the ways that matter when working with youth (e.g. reliable, great boundaries, prioritize young people's and the organization's needs).

Youth attitudes: Like adults, some young people may not fully understand youth engagement; they may think it's only about assuming power and/or their individual needs and ideas. Young people new to youth engagement, those who are not used to being treated with respect, or those who have experienced youth engagement that hasn't come with a lot of clarity may need more time adjusting to the idea that with power comes responsibility, team work, and working toward the greater good. Even if young people completely understand and support youth engagement practice, if the terms of reference aren't clear (e.g. project and organization goals, supports and accommodations available, non-negotiables—like budgets, laws, organizational policies, boundaries, their role and sphere of influence or how long things will take), it can lead to frustration for youth and adults alike. Whether young people have already been engaged or they're new to a role, it's never too late to check in, do some team building, and develop very clear terms of reference and, community guidelines (e.g. "How we are when we're together" or "What do we need from each other to actively and safely participate") collaboratively. Then be sure to check in regularly around these with individuals and/or as a group if there are any challenging dynamics or updates that need to be made. The key is to make sure young people and adults alike are involved and are committed to very clear goals, expectations, and outcomes.

Time, energy, and costs: Many young people will need little support to be engaged. There are some young people who will always join in, raise their hand, and find a way to be heard, especially those who've grown up with minimal barriers to participation, including trauma, neglect, poverty, mental health challenges, low self-esteem, and lack of social capital. The genuine engagement of a population requires representation from a true cross-section. When we engage young people, we are required to identify conditions that maximize their opportunities to participate competently and work to put these in place.

Without doing so, we reproduce the very marginalization youth-serving organizations are trying to address. This can cost more because it takes more time, effort, and accommodations, and requires more expertise, but it is necessary.

Challenges for non-frontline organizations: Organizations that focus mostly on providing front-line service, programming, engagement, or individual advocacy to young people will have a much easier time prioritizing youth engagement—focusing on relationships with youth is already a priority and staff will typically be well trained and qualified to work directly with and support young people. They may also be in a position to devote more of their time and resources to direct interactions with youth. The reason they exist and how they do their work focuses mostly on young people.

For example, child and youth-focused foundations also exist to benefit young people and may have some advantages when it comes to doing great youth engagement work, like access to more resources and partners, they can be more nimble and responsive to changing needs, and they are in a position to take strong positions as thought leaders. They also face some challenges. The reason they exist is to help young people, but *how* they do that is through fundraising. This means they also need to spend time focusing on donors and donor prospects, and that directs the mission, staff skill set, capacity for youth engagement, and the organizational culture. It's important to remember that engagement of the population being served is critical to help keep the organization in touch with the issues facing them and to be accountable to them. Meaningful, ethical, and sustainable youth engagement helps a youth-serving foundation gain credibility within the sector and, with young people's guidance, become a respected thought leader.

Children's Aid Foundation of Canada: How are we doing with youth engagement today?

Children's Aid Foundation of Canada initially produced these guidelines as part of their internal youth engagement assessment and strategy development. The Foundation is committed to engaging and working in partnership with members of the community we serve. A significant step in formalizing our youth engagement occurred in 2013 with the creation of the Young People's Advisory Council and through our involvement of young people with lived child welfare experience as advisors, ambassadors, and volunteers, and the hiring of a youth engagement specialist, we—young people, staff, and the board—have shared a collective desire to do even better. We would like to strengthen our youth engagement practices so they are as meaningful, ethical, and sustainable as possible while helping the Foundation do its best job of fundraising and supporting Canadian young people affected by child welfare.

To do this, in July 2017, we created a Youth Engagement Task Force—a team of some of our most highly engaged young people as well as a few staff and a board member. Together they used an evaluation tool to identify the Foundation's strengths and priority areas of improvement and growth, concluding that our current engagement sits at Rung 4 and 5 on Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation, and is spread across the Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development's Youth Engagement Spectrum up to Youth/Adult Partnerships.

Based on this input, we developed a strategy and work plan that, as of July 2018, emphasizes the following:

- Further policy and procedure development
- Increased and more inclusive youth engagement outreach, orientation and training for youth and staff (including reviewing and publicly releasing these guidelines for others in the sector to access); and
- Annual evaluation and goal setting.

In the longer term the Foundation will continue to explore youth decision-making and mentoring opportunities, and a more formalized feedback and evaluation process across the organization.

PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LIVED CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCE TO LEAD THE CHILD WELFARE SECTOR

Great youth engagement practice involves support.

Though a diverse population, growing up in the child welfare system is a unique experience, one that required being raised away from their families and within government institutions. This kind of trauma and institutionalization typically brings a specific set of adverse childhood experiences, a painful "foster kid" social stigma, instability, poverty, a well-meaning but inadequate system, lack of healthy permanent relationships, and connection to identity and culture, to name just some of the barriers that make it difficult to pursue goals and thrive in their youth and adulthood.

Youth engagement frameworks and best practice guidelines typically identify ways to engage in youth-friendly ways, and some provide guidelines to working with marginalized populations, but few focus specifically on young people with child-welfare experience.

But those with lived and practical experience know there is often more to it than that. Throughout the recent *Bus Ride Home Project* consultations—a Children's Aid Foundation of Canada and Ontario Child Advocate (formerly Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth) partnership project—nearly all of the 143 young people and adults working to improve child welfare interviewed, most with lived child-welfare experience, consistently identified the need for specific supports and accommodations to make sure that young people who want to be engaged can be.

The need for practice guidelines, training, and certification to ensure a cross-sector cultural shift was identified.

While there are many folks doing great work to support young people to thrive in their engagement, it is still an emerging practice that needs to be articulated, trained, and regularly evaluated. Because of this commonly articulated need for youth-from-care engagement practice guidelines, one of the seven recommended programs and resources out of the *Bus Ride Home Project* was to develop such a guide, training, certification, and evaluation in partnership with young people with lived experience. These guidelines are a first step.

Please read on for some key insights from young people with lived child welfare experience who were consulted for the *Bus Ride Home Project* on best youth engagement practices, particularly when engaging youth to strengthen the child welfare sector. Not all of these insights would be relevant to all organizations—some are better geared for front-line services, others for advocacy agencies, others for foundations, governments, and more—but they are all useful to understand for anyone seeking to engage young people affected by the child welfare system. Additionally, you'll find some key insights from the research, identifying the kinds of supports that work when engaging young people in and from care and in creating roles for them that are meaningful, ethical, and sustainable.
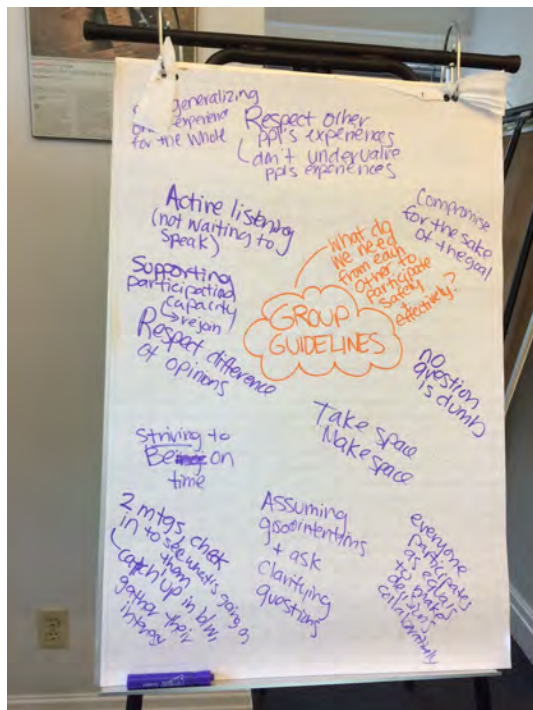
Young people with lived child welfare experience appreciate when those who engage them…

Are allies who create a diverse and welcoming environment at the organization.
1. Foster and engage youth in welcoming, inclusive, anti-oppressive, and accommodating environments ("no spaces are automatically neutral") where there is a focus on relationship building between staff, youth, and peers. Ensure that the pressures associated with certain identities are acknowledged, and cultural learning and exchange can take place.
2. Foster dynamics where it's safe to make complaints, give feedback, say no to opportunities, and identify challenging dynamics and experiences. Encourage asking for help and identifying accommodation needs for all staff and volunteers—whether from care or not.
3. Support cross-agency collaboration, working together focusing on solutions and build bridges between youth and adult services. Create programs and services with key performance indicators that young people know about and can evaluate. Promote respectful, de-stigmatizing public engagement and awareness.
4. Create expectations, terms of reference, and community guidelines collaboratively, including safety containers around group disclosures. Foster loving, learning cultures where staff and volunteers alike are encouraged to be vulnerable, get it wrong, acknowledge mistakes, learn together, and keep trying.

Prioritize lived expertise along with academic and professional expertise in hiring.
1. Offer youth-staff positions, regular positions, and hiring practices that prioritize hiring people with lived (child-welfare) experience as a qualification or asset.
2. Have lived (child-welfare) experience or who have invested in learning from young people to "get it" and what being an ally means.
3. Hire staff—from care or not—with youth in and from care as part of the hiring process.

Provide supports to young people to address their professional goals.

1. Help young people develop their identity and skills to prepare for "real world" jobs and life challenges in and beyond child welfare advocacy.
2. Create supportive pathways to employment, meeting young people "where they're at" in their development and capacities (e.g. job shadowing, mentorship, project interns, youth researchers, and regular staff roles), then support them to "level up" and connect them to mentors and supports in the community so they are not left hanging after a program or position ends.
3. Offer leadership roles, particularly more sophisticated roles like sitting on boards and staff teams. Provide accolades, certificates, awards and recommendations that don't out youth as from care so they can be used in professional contexts.

Create youth leadership opportunities at the organization.
1. Offer meaningful roles where engagement is a win-win partnership between adults and youth, and create youth leadership roles where young people are elected or hired by their peers when possible and represent diverse models of success, avoiding tokenism and creating a "special class" of leaders.
2. Provide skill development and training, including life-skills and leadership skills (which includes storytelling and peer mentorship/support training) as well as mentorship for leadership roles, particularly roles with more decision-making power, such as senior staff and board roles.
3. Provide support for youth-led and youth-driven initiatives where young people can participate and lead child welfare change. Support could include, but is not limited to, honoraria, travel reimbursement, meals, and even transit passes and cell phones when appropriate.
4. Support access and connection to older people from care for mentorship and support; it's important that older people from care continue to have a role after they're no longer "youth"

Establish informed consent, including clear objectives, roles and responsibilities, and training.
1. Identify roles clearly (e.g. volunteer, staff, paid advisory/nominal professional, etc,) and work with young people to identify which should be what; allow young people to identify how/if they want to be compensated; ensure payment in advance or day-of as reimbursements for costs are a major barrier.
2. Are clear and up-front about expectations and the youth's sphere of influence and decision-making power in the project or organization.
3. Offer media and storytelling training, and have lots of conversations with youth whom they recruit to share their story for fundraising and engagement purposes about whether they are truly interested in such a role, think through the potential implications, support them to identify for themselves when along their healing journey they may be to be ready to share (e.g. raw trauma versus processed trauma), offer options to share their story in other less public and more supportive spaces and options to volunteer and give back in other ways.

Ensure resources and opportunities are inclusive, properly supported, and meet them where they are at.
1. Go to where the youth are, and engage them where they're at so we don't continue to prioritize only the most resilient and/or resourced young people and those who live in convenient urban centers; young people need not always carry the travel burden. Host meetings at youth-friendly times and locations. Rotate locations when possible.
2. Avoid "one-size-fits-all" approaches and opportunities, tailor support to each youth, their interests and needs. Provide supports, programs, and services when a young person is ready and not within a specific age range because they recognize young people from care need to navigate many more barriers than most and often pursue goals later on (e.g. a four-year funding program should be available at the age a young person is ready).
3. Recognize that if we require expertise from a population that is typically busy, has experienced trauma, and could be struggling financially, we need to support them accordingly as we would with any other accommodation need. That may mean ensuring they have wrap-around support for housing, adequate honoraria or, if staff members, livable incomes, a support system, and an on-site mentor who is not their supervisor.

Promote self-care and development, and provide emotional support, safe spaces, and a sense of community.

1. Create safe one-on-one and group spaces where young people can discuss difficult topics, including grief, discrimination and suicidality. This includes low-barrier, walk-in, community-based support hubs for youth in and from care (e.g. PARC, local youth in care networks). Connect them to peers and peer mentors, hosting spaces where youth can support each other, build relationships and advocate for change together. Support them to identify/find "that one caring adult" who can provide a healthy, unconditionally loving relationship; who can go "above and beyond" and be available when needed; to help them develop a safety net—people and resources to access during crises and emergencies.

2. Provide wrap-around, Positive Youth Development support around key resilience indicators (e.g. relationships, housing, education, and employment), connecting youth to resources, relationships, and working together to plan and check-in on goals outside of their child-welfare advocacy; staff supports work collaboratively with other supports in each young person's life. This could include support to stay housed, out of poverty, and to access healing and self-care practices (e.g. counseling, mindfulness practices, cultural medicines, etc.), especially to a range of accessible, self-selected options. Provide support to explore various identities and share those with others, particularly cultural practices.

3. Take a trauma-informed and attachment-informed approach, knowing that, instead of pathologizing young people from care with challenging behaviours, they are often predictable, normal responses to trauma. Make time to prioritize and build their relationship with them and are part of a work culture that allows them to love their young people unconditionally, with boundaries that are also in the best interest of the young person, where staff can maintain life-long connections with their youth when youth are interested. Also, help connect youth to and support them in maintaining relationships with their people, including facilitating ongoing conversations about permanency and/or adoption.

4. Avoid creating tokenized foster care "poster children." Normalize diverse success and create space for healing and self-care as part of success, avoiding creating a pedestal for only some youth. Do not pressure youth to share personal details for any reason, including internal organization conversations or support, awareness, and fundraising efforts.

5. When youth decide to go ahead with public storytelling, providing lots of support to do so safely, including options to speak about collective experiences instead of individual, identifying for themselves what kinds of things they may want to share (strategic sharing around what's still raw or will have ramifications versus what's processed and will have minimal ramifications). If this is happening a lot, support young people to cut-down on advocacy, take a break, and come back as needed, within a culture that promotes and acts on self-care-first.

6. Support youth and their allies to gather in person and stretch meetings over two or more days when possible to minimize stress and promote relationship building—trust and relationships are better built with youth in and from care especially in person and over time.

If you are engaging young people with lived child welfare experience and you do not have lived experience yourself, or if you would like to help educate those in your organization and the broader community about what it looks like to be a great ally to those with lived child welfare experience, take a look and review the following How To Be a Great Ally guide.

How to be a great ally to people with lived child welfare experience

Created with guidance from both Children's Aid Foundation of Canada's Young People's Advisory Council and Youth Engagement Task Force

Everyone needs allies and can strive to be allies to others. "Allies recognize their unearned privilege from society's patterns of injustice and take responsibility for changing these patterns. Allies include men who work to end sexism, white people who work to end racism, heterosexual people who work to end heterosexism, able-bodied people who work to end ableism, and so on." (Bishop, Anne. 2002)

Those who have not experienced the distinct trauma, instability, and social isolation of growing up in the child welfare system (e.g. foster, group, or kinship homes), who grew up with a consistent family—or "family privilege," and who work to end the inequities facing people who have experienced child welfare are also allies. These allies work to learn about the injustices and stigma they face, and then take action to address them.

No one can call themselves an ally—it's not a noun but a verb that we each can strive towards. At Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, our community of supporters and partners join us in striving to be allies to young people in and from care across Canada through a growing network of regional and national programs and funds, providing support to address the barriers, inequities, and traumas they face. We are always learning from our young people and others who have experienced care about how we can best meet their needs, and are so grateful for their expertise and guidance. From them, we have learned about ways we all can be great allies to those who have experienced child welfare.

TOP 10 WAYS TO BE A GREAT ALLY TO THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED CHILD WELFARE

1. Ongoing self-education: Educate yourself about the child welfare system's policies, realities, and myths. There are countless reports and other media featuring the voices and experiences of those who have experienced care. The emotional labour required to educate others about personal traumas and systemic barriers takes its toll. Do your best to learn from existing resources first like this[1], this[2] and this[3] and consider the following: by youth resources ongoing education from the youth perspective

2. Listen actively: Actively listen and learn from those with lived experience. Many people from care have also pursued academic and career paths in the field and have professional expertise.

3. Avoid pushing for personal information: If you have built a rapport with someone, when invited, ask open questions over very specific ones, always in a private setting. Example: *What was aging out of care like?* Is preferable to: *Were you ever homeless?* No matter what, assume and practice confidentiality, including when making introductions to others.

4. Ask what is needed: Avoid assuming you know what's best for the child welfare sector and respect lived expertise at least as much professional and academic expertise. People who have experienced care have been guiding the child welfare sector and youth-in-care movement for decades along with some allies and much brilliant work has already been done. Look to reports and the published and otherwise public perspectives from those in and from care and build on it.

5. Use preferred language: Across the sector, people use terms like "youth in and from care," "former youth in care", "alumni of care," "people with lived experience," among others. Most are generally accepted, but listen to how people describe themselves. Never use "foster kids."

6. Respect intersectionality: Those from care, like all people, have unique, diverse identities, experiences and needs. As with any social justice solidarity work, challenge any biases and practices that assume people in and from care are a homogenous group. Their identities cannot be considered in isolation, but interact as part of a whole complex identity. For a variety of reasons, including centuries of discrimination and intergenerational trauma, some groups are more heavily represented in care, including those from Indigenous, LGBTQ2S, and African Canadian communities. These identities often cause further discrimination and trauma while in care. Inclusive support that is mindful of intersectionality will be more effective and avoids further marginalizing those from overrepresented communities.

7. Take action: We all have a role to play to ensure young people have the opportunity and support they need to thrive. Reflect on your capacities and skills and see what you can do to take a stand with young people in and from care, including:

- Continue to learn about their experiences
- Raise awareness in your network
- Get involved in advocacy
- Volunteer, foster, mentor, adopt, or donate
- Offer pro-bono services and be thoughtful friends, partners, colleagues, employers, and landlords
- Authentically live your allyship at all times, not just when it's your job or you are around someone with lived experience

8. Work behind the scenes: Contributions from allies are needed and welcome. However, please acknowledge those who have taught you and who have laid all the groundwork, and see if you can support their leadership/initiatives. If you find yourself in the spotlight, do your best to share it and create pathways for those from care to take on yours and other leadership roles. Work in partnership with, not for, people who have experienced the child welfare system.

9. Be okay with messing up: As human beings, we only know our experiences and constantly strive to learn from others' about theirs. Acting in solidarity with others means taking an important risk that you'll mess up—and that's okay and totally expected. Listen to feedback, apologize, take accountability, and do your best to act differently going forward.

10. Seek emotional support about your allyship elsewhere: Acting in solidarity can be frustrating, exhausting, and overwhelming—especially when you're overwhelmed by others' traumatic experiences, angry about injustices, encounter challenging behaviour as a result of trauma, when you feel rejected or triggered, or when you make mistakes. Do your best to only commit to what you can sustainably take on, take breaks, practice ongoing self-care, and seek emotional support from those outside the community you are hoping to assist. It's not their role to comfort or reassure you about this work.

[1]Mante, Amma. "8 Things Kids in Foster Care Want People to Know." Elitedaily.com. https://www.elitedaily.com/life/kids-in-foster-care-want-you-to-know/1492485 (accessed February 9, 2018)

[2] Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. My Real Life Book: Report from the Youth Leaving Care Hearings.provincialadvocate.on.ca. https://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/reports/advocacy-reports/english-reports/YLC_REPORT_ENG.pdf (accessed February 9, 2018)

[3]Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks. 2016 Youth Speak Report: The top issues facing youth in and from child welfare today. fbcyicn.ca. fbcyicn.ca/sites/default/files/YouthSpeak_Report_2016.pdf (accessed February 9, 2018)

GOING FORWARD: Youth engagement practice strategies for the child welfare sector

Developing, building upon, and evaluating youth engagement practices cannot be done well by one person, but in consultation and, ideally, in partnership with the young people you serve.

It *takes* youth engagement to figure out how to best practice youth engagement. Here are some ideas for next steps for any organization seeking to develop, further build upon, and evaluate its youth engagement practices:

1. Review and share these guidelines with your organization.
2. Meet with organization's leadership to identify youth engagement goals and parameters
3. Conduct interviews with the organization's young people, staff, and board to learn:
   a. Current youth engagement practices and policies
   b. What's working, areas of improvement and opportunities for growth
   c. Blue-sky vision for where we want to be in 5-10 years
4. Summarize findings in a report
5. Facilitate staff (and board if possible) Youth Engagement Training Day to get staff on board and excited about youth engagement, and to help ready the team for any needed cultural and practice shifts. Training curriculum could include these guidelines and other relevant components such as anti-oppression and anti-racism training.
6. Use existing tools or modify existing tools from the sector to develop a youth engagement strategy and annual evaluation process in partnership with young people, staff, board, and other stakeholders who are keen about building on youth engagement practice, and develop a small taskforce (6-12 people) with some of these stakeholders where there are more young people than adults. One useful tool to guide the taskforce: the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development's Youth Engagement Toolkit. This taskforce would create a work plan with realistic goals to develop or build upon youth engagement practice as identified in the strategy with annual evaluation.
7. Conduct an annual evaluation and strategy review and ongoing training.

Reflections on practicing youth engagement as a former youth: An interview with Lorena Bishop
May, 2016

Lorena has been a pillar of the youth in care / youth child-welfare and youth engagement movements in cities across Canada since her early youth, drawing upon her education, training, practical, and lived child welfare and youth engagement experience. Having worked for a variety of organizations in many roles—from participant to volunteer to executive staff leadership—she has worked on and authored a number of vital youth engagement resources and reports, some of which are referenced in these guidelines. At the time of this publication, she is the Executive Director of the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks. Here, she shares with us many powerful insights as both someone who engages young people in and from care and experienced youth engagement as a young person from care. This interview is also featured in the recent *Bus Ride Home Project*.

What do you think great youth engagement looks like?
To me it's an opportunity for a young person to explore, discover, build on their strengths, passions, interests, and ideas, and for the organization to benefit, but there has to be a partnership between the organization and the young person. It's not about saying, "oh, we need this to happen; we need to get a young person to do it." It's about connecting young people with opportunities that you may have in the work you're doing and finding meaningful ways to connect young people to work in the organization.

Do you have anything to add to when it comes to engaging young people in and from care?
Young people in care may require additional support and [we need to be] mindful of the realities and barriers they may have in terms of their everyday life… that may impact their ability to participate in the organization's work. So, be mindful, but also help them to eliminate or to reduce those barriers and provide them with the support and training they need to do the work, whether it's training, or showing how to do a task. Don't just make assumptions that a young person knows something straight forward that we take for granted—it may not be straight forward to them if they haven't had the exposure. Also, check in about any additional challenges and barriers they may have related to their being in care, like FASD….We need to find creative and supportive ways to support them to do the work.

Why does youth engagement require support? Shouldn't it just be about including young people in the work? Is support needed only for those from care?
No. All young people need support, but the level of support that people need [to participate in work] varies depending on their experiences and circumstances—for example, if they're from care. You have an obligation, just like you do with any employee; if you aren't doing that with your employees, you're not being a great manager. So why wouldn't we do the same thing with young people? Any young person…young people in care require additional support because of their experiences in their day-to-day life—perhaps with old or ongoing trauma and other barriers….From one meeting to the next, a young person may have changed homes, may be on a new medication. Sometimes these needs don't show up the way we think they're going to. This requires spending time to check in and get to know that young person. Just like when any employee runs into an obstacle that gets in the way of their work, you would support them to work around the things in their life that allow them to do the work. Why wouldn't we do that for youth who likely have fewer resources?

Why are we obligated to provide support? Shouldn't we just find youth in a better place, for their sake and for the work?
It's unethical to ask young people to be engaged in the work you're doing, and not give something back. It's not acceptable…. Say an employee is an alcoholic, and they come to work with booze breath, it's not acceptable, but we have an obligation to connect them with resources and provide that support so they can heal, before you get to the place where you let them go.

With young people, the level and extent of support may be different for some, but it's still the same thing. Let them know it's okay that they're at where they're at, but if it starts to impact the work, then we need to have conversations to see if they're willing to pause and connect with resources to contain the behaviour in such a way that it doesn't bleed and impact into the work. If they can do that, then we keep them in the role.

With young people, there may be more chances and allowances and support, but they still need to do their role. If we start to spend too much time managing the behaviour that we can't do the work, maybe it's about them taking a break or finding them a different role. If they don't follow through with the support and resources, then you may need to let them go or find a less [involved] role. If the impact on the group of youth engaged or the organization is too great, then reassess. But you still need to create the time and space to provide the support, like with a weekly check-in, just like with regular staff. Check in around their role and tasks and work dynamics, but also if anything's going on outside their role in their lives.

With whomever we work with, we need to build a connection with the person. If they're in a good place, that's great. And when they're not, you learn about it sooner and can help troubleshoot and mitigate. Even if you don't care about them—it's a sustainability thing. It costs a lot of money to fire and hire and retrain new volunteers.

Should we avoid engaging young people who aren't in a really strong place?
Good god no! But it's about opportunity and capacity. Don't engage someone who doesn't have the interest and capacity in the role, and you have to match them to the right role. Are you going to ask someone who is struggling with addiction to lead an event? Probably not, but maybe you could get them to help decorate or take video footage at the event. Find the connection with the work and where the young person is at and their passion, interests, and strengths. If they can't be in a leadership role, find another role for them to participate and engage.

What were some of the practices that made you feel engaged respectfully and sustainably?
I could just tell when someone has taken the time to be present with you and connect with you. That for me was when I felt engaged. That's when I felt like what I was doing was worthwhile, that I was respected as a person, that my work was valued. It's almost like a spiritual thing. Helping you to see that you're valued and that you matter. That you have something to contribute.

Storytelling is a critical part of educating the public and mobilizing them to take action and push for greater supports for any cause, including improving the lives of youth in and from care. How do we ask and support the young people who want to share their stories?
It is okay for young people to share stories, and sometimes they're ready to do that. It's about the impact it's going to have, so you need to be a person to support them to identify when they're overly raw, or if they're overly detached—neither of those are healthy experiences. Detached is an issue because if you're detached, you're not okay yet with that experience, it's shoved down or unprocessed. You haven't actually processed that experience. You're not owning your story. It is not empowering to not own your story. If you're not in a place where you've owned your story (either stepping outside of it because it's too painful to be disassociated or it's too raw), and you haven't dealt with it, then that's not healthy. So, support them to share the pieces of their stories they've owned, processed. Help them figure out which pieces of their story they're empowered by and craft strategic messages with them on those.

Is that paternalistic?
The irony that young people never get asked their opinion growing up and then all of a sudden we care what they have to say when we need them is interesting. You can find ways to be able to support people to share things and the details that aren't raw. Perhaps find spaces for them to share in safer places as a first step. You can literally go through the draft of what they want to say to identify the pieces that are healed and those that are still raw. When we see someone on a Ted talk share a hard experience, do you think that speaker hasn't first told their partner, their best friends, their counselor, their colleagues before they're sharing that in public? The public shouldn't be the first to hear. You can visibly see when their body language changes around the pieces that are raw. We all have details about our lives we've processed more than theirs. If there's a piece that makes them anxious, you can say, "Okay maybe we don't share this piece now, we can take that out if you want." You have to provide young people with an opportunity to make real choices. It's not about whether they share their story, it's about how. That's where we have the responsibility to support them. Ask them how do they want to feel after? What pieces do they want to share? Given that conversation and given the choice, they're probably not going to want to share certain pieces of their story.

You also have a responsibility to the people in the audience and the triggers to the audience to. My opinion is that it's not healthy for that young person to share raw, unprocessed stories. There's still ways for young people to share impactful stories without it being raw. Without the audience going, "Ooh god. Whoa." Go with the challenging and inspiring stuff, you can still share hard things that hit you in the gut, but it should inspire change without feeling fear. We need find that line between where it mobilizes people to take action and where it's so raw and difficult that they shut down or get worried about that particular person.

vii. REFERENCES & RECOMMENDED READING:
This resource draws upon the following sources throughout; these are also excellent youth engagement resources for anyone who wants to deepen their understanding of youth engagement.

BC Ministry of Children and Family Development. (2009). *Youth Engagement Toolkit Resource Guide.*

Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., and Van Bockem, S. (1990). *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future.* **Bloomington, Indiana: National Educational Services.**

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Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship.* **Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.**

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Ure, J. (2007). *The Youth Engagement Spectrum.* **The Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development.**