



UCL

A Toolbox for Youth Participation

A Professional's Guide to Involving Young
People in Mental Health Programming in
School and Community Spaces



Introduction



This toolbox is a practical guide for professionals working with young people in mental health programming. It is designed to build foundational knowledge on how to engage young people meaningfully, offering strategies, tools, and resources to support you along the way.

The toolbox was created from the findings of the HeadStart programme (2016–2022). This programme, funded by a £67.4 million National Lottery grant, aimed to improve mental health and wellbeing in 10–16-year-olds through a system-wide, ecological approach involving families, schools, and communities.

HeadStart focused on personalised support that considered school experiences, community access, family dynamics, and digital influences. It encouraged innovation through flexible, iterative testing of approaches, with the goal of creating sustainable solutions tailored to young people's needs. A core element was involving young people in co-designing and evaluating services through local panels, ensuring their lived experiences shaped programme activities.

This toolbox brings together insights from young people involved in HeadStart, highlighting the elements that made collaboration in mental health programming meaningful and impactful. We hope this practical guidance supports and inspires you in co-creating, delivering, and evaluating your own mental health initiatives in school and community settings alongside young people.

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1. Clarifying your ‘Why’?



Before involving young people, it’s essential to be clear about *why* you want their participation. Your ‘why’ is the foundation that shapes expectations, roles, and outcomes. Without clarity, youth involvement risks becoming tokenistic or superficial.

In school and community mental health programming, your reasons might include:

Improving relevance of programmes/services

– ensuring that supports reflect the real needs and priorities of young people.

Informing design or

evaluation – inviting youth to shape activities, resources, or assessments so they are meaningful and effective.

Promoting equity or systems change

– working toward fairer systems that address power imbalances and structural inequalities.

Centring lived experience

– recognizing young people as experts in their own lives and using their insights to shape decisions.

Clarity about your purpose doesn’t mean choosing only one — often, you’ll find overlap. What matters is being transparent with yourself, your team, and the young people about what participation will look like and what decisions they can genuinely shape.

Before diving into mapping influence, it is helpful to understand the different forms of participation that exist - and aligning this with your ‘why’.

Aligning Forms of Participation with Aims

Forms of participation	Aims	Features
Feedback forms	Consolidation of direct feedback from young people post-development of project/ service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited agency, young person restricted to giving feedback post – development of services and initiatives
Individual surveys/ consultations	Consolidation of young peoples' perspectives and preferences on mental health programming (both post and pre development)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically involves the views of a large number of young people Implemented before creation of services and initiatives to include young people's perspectives Focused on gathering information, not making changes to youth systems
Practice initiatives, time-limited activities	Creation of time-limited youth activities in school or community spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different types of activities can be implemented Capture a larger range of young people as provided activities with different topics of focus Activities are not always sustained or integrated into the youth systems
Peer activities, trainings, research, evaluation	Young people upskilling, knowledge building, or shared own expertise through various means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership roles Learned from their peers Upskilling opportunities Research and evaluation initiatives created resources External funding and/or outside providers involved in some activities
Representation on advisory boards	Serve as representatives to share expertise and lived experience with youth-based organizations and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give direct input into resources needed within the community Most need training to be representatives on advisory boards or shadow groups Are involved in the creation of initiatives from the beginning Some partnerships reported outcomes related to sustained changes within youth systems
Involvement in governance	Influencing policies and decision making on programme creation and delivery alongside key stakeholders in the school or community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have power to influence policies and practices within their communities Outcomes related to systems change for young people within school and community settings Most young people needed training to be involved in governance

2. Mapping Youth Influence



Once you've clarified your *why*, the next step is to map out where young people can have influence. Participation can look very different depending on the stage of a project (planning, implementation, or evaluation) and the type of activity (focus groups, advisory boards, peer-led projects, or governance). Mapping influence helps make visible:

- How much power and influence young people currently have in decision-making
- Where gaps exist in their ability to shape outcomes
- Opportunities to strengthen their role in ways that align with your 'why'

Why Mapping Influence Matters

Without mapping influence, participation efforts can become inconsistent — with young people contributing at one stage (e.g., consultation) but excluded from others (e.g., governance). Visualising influence allows teams to be transparent about decision-making and intentional about creating more meaningful opportunities.

Frameworks

There are many different frameworks that support professionals in assessing and strengthening youth influence and participation in systems intended for their care. For the purposes of this guide, we have selected three frameworks that you may find particularly helpful within school and community based mental health programming and services:

- **Davies's Matrix Model (2009)⁸**

Maps activities based on *what the activity is* (e.g., consultation, training, representation on advisory board) and *the level of youth involvement* (e.g., youth consulted, adult-initiated with shared decision making). This model helps teams see whether participation is one-off or sustained, consultative or collaborative, and where it sits on the spectrum of shared decision-making.

- **The Lundy Model of Participation (2007)¹¹**

Emphasizes four dimensions — **Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence**. It ensures that young people not only have a safe space to share their views but also that their voices are listened to and acted upon by decision-makers. This is especially useful in schools and community settings where youth often have space and voice but lack audience and influence.

- **Cyclical Phases of Participation (2025)¹²**

Based on evidence from the HeadStart programme, this model highlights that youth participation is not static but *iterative*. Young people may contribute at different phases — from **information gathering**, to **capacity-building**, to **systems change** — and these phases can overlap or cycle back. This reflects the reality of participation in schools and communities, where young people may engage in short-term initiatives, build skills over time, and later take on leadership or governance roles.

Putting It into Practice

Using these frameworks gives teams a **shared language** to reflect on:

- Where youth involvement currently sits
- What forms of participation are most realistic at this stage
- How influence can grow over time in ways that benefit both young people and the wider system

Practical steps include:

- Plotting current activities on **Davies's Matrix** to identify where youth have shared decision-making opportunities.
- Applying the **Lundy Model** to check whether young people's voices are reaching the right decision-makers.
- Using the **Cyclical Phases** to plan how youth involvement might expand or evolve across different stages of a project.

Frameworks that may be helpful

Davies Matrix of Participation (2009)

Matrix of participation:

This model consists of the original categories from Arnstein’s ladder model (on the vertical axis) and identifies different participation approaches (on the horizontal axis).^{4,8} Unique to the matrix model is its inclusion of both the types of participation and degree of involvement.

Categories from ladder of youth participation

Ladder of participation

Different participation approaches

	A Individual complaint and feedback	B Surveys and one-off events and consultations	C Practice initiatives: time limited, focussed activity	D Peer activity: training, research, evaluation	E Young representatives on advisory groups and shadow boards	F Young people involved in governance - with or without adults
8. Youth initiated - shared decisions with adults						
7. Youth initiated and directed						
6. Adult initiated and shared decisions with CYP						
5. Consulted and informed						
4. Assigned and informed						
3. Tokenism						
2. Decoration						
1. Manipulation						

Review of the matrix model:

- It differentiates between types of stakeholder involvement.
- It encourages those carrying out participation activities to consider the range of engagement opportunities they provide to young people.

Frameworks that may be helpful

Non-categorisation models of participation:

These models do not categorise levels of involvement. However, they bring attention to the roles, power dynamics, and motives for stakeholder involvement that should be explored when developing and maintaining authentic youth participation. Examples of non-categorisation models include White's typology of participation, Jan's de Backer's triangle of youth participation and the three-lens approach of participation.^{9,10}

A popular non-categorisation model is Lundy's model of participation.¹¹ Adults collaborating with young people must ensure that young people are given the right to express their views and that those views are given due weight in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC.² This can be accomplished by bringing attention to the space of collaboration, the support adults provide, the influence young people can have and the audience that may be impacted by this collaboration.

Those involved are asked to continuously reflect on these four key elements by asking themselves questions such as "How do adults create spaces where young people feel safe to express their views?" "How do adults support young people to feel heard and seen?" "How will young people know how much influence they have on a decision?" "Were the young people given feedback, explaining the reasons for a decision that was made?" By engaging in these discussions, the aim is to ensure that young people are involved in authentic and impactful ways throughout the collaboration process.



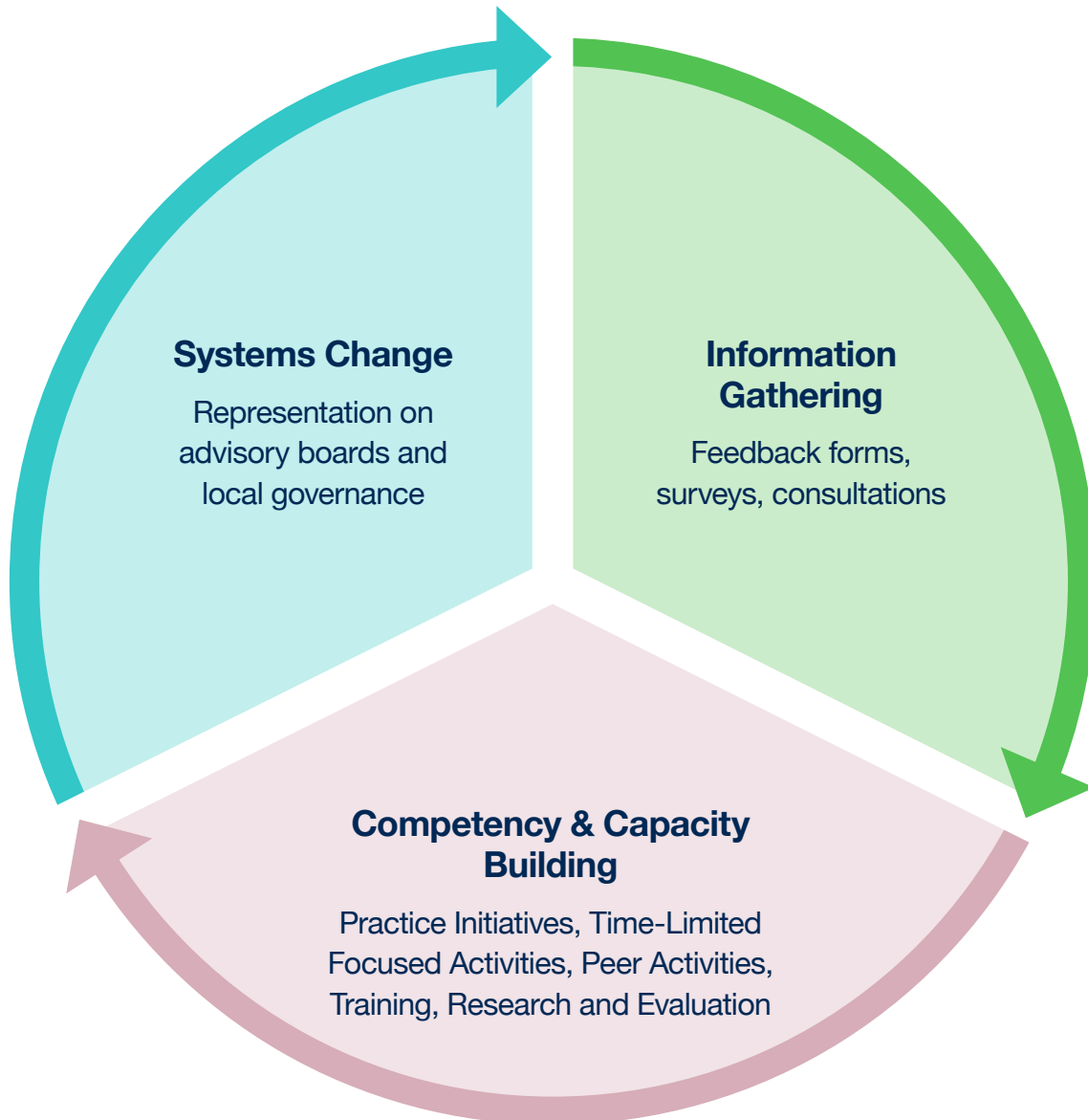
Lundy's Model of Participation (2007)

Review of non-categorisation models:

- These models do not provide categorisations or levels associated with participation. It may, at times, be difficult to assess the degree of youth involvement.
- They bring attention to underlying factors including the sharing of power, the voice or role of young people, the aims of initiatives, and the context in which young people are involved in participation efforts.

Frameworks that may be helpful

The Cyclical Phases of Participation (2025)



Review of the matrix model:

This model frames participation as an ongoing cycle rather than a one-time event. It highlights distinct but interconnected phases through which young people and professionals move together. It emphasizes that participation is iterative, with opportunities to revisit earlier stages as relationships, needs, and projects evolve. By viewing participation as cyclical, it normalises the “messiness” of collaboration and encourages continuous co-learning and adaptation.

3. Fostering the Relationship



At the heart of meaningful youth participation is the quality of relationships. Frameworks and tools can help map influence, but without trust and genuine connection, participation risks becoming tokenistic or superficial. Young people involved in the HeadStart programme consistently emphasized that they cannot engage meaningfully with adults they do not trust. The strength of their relationships with staff was often what kept them coming back, encouraged them to share feedback, and motivated them to continue participating. One young person summed it up:



Mine would 100% be working with the staff. I feel like that played a major factor within HeadStart... without these staff doing their job correctly and being so kind and welcoming, we wouldn't have the outcomes that we did.

What Young People Told Us Matters Most

- **Ability to Build Rapport**

Building rapport takes time, consistency, and genuine curiosity. HeadStart youth described how staff made them feel welcome, checked in on them outside formal sessions, and adapted their communication to meet individual needs. Sometimes humor worked, sometimes it didn't—what mattered was that adults noticed and adjusted. As one young person explained:

“In building rapport, they recognise that, ‘Oh, okay, my approach of making them laugh a lot at first might work for some, but then with a different young person I need to try something else.’”

For professionals in schools and community spaces, this means investing in relationships beyond the task at hand—small, personal moments of care and recognition build the foundation for deeper collaboration.

- **Championing Young People's Ideas**

Young people notice when their contributions are taken seriously and championed in wider decision-making spaces. HeadStart participants described staff as people who “went to bat” for them—advocating to senior leaders and external partners until their ideas became reality.

“Because usually, in other groups, it would be a case of, “Oh, we tried one time. They said no. But no, they [staff] were saying, “We’ll listen to the young people, and we’ll make this happen,” you know. That’s what they did; they always made sure whatever we suggested would happen.”

Practically, this means adults need to be advocates as well as facilitators: creating space for youth voices *and* making sure those voices carry weight in rooms where decisions are made.

- **Being Seen as Trustworthy**

Trust was earned when staff followed through, communicated openly (including about limitations), and provided support for young people’s wellbeing. For some, having a trusted adult who understood their mental health needs was transformative:

“I think it was making sure my mental health was supported... in order to do these programmes I needed someone to support me and listen to me.”

Young people also valued honesty. When staff were transparent about what could or couldn’t change, it showed respect and strengthened trust.

Relationships as the Golden Thread

Relational work is not a separate step—it underpins every stage of youth participation. Strong, trusting relationships:

- Make early-stage activities (like consultation) safe and engaging.
- Sustain involvement in longer-term initiatives (like advisory boards).
- Enable authentic power-sharing in governance and systems change roles.

Young people also reported that strong relationships with staff helped them develop confidence, professional skills, and a sense of purpose, while creating a safe space for healing. For some, these collaborations became communities of belonging that supported both personal growth and collective change.

4. Creating a Culture of Participation



Building meaningful youth participation is less about any single tool or activity and more about fostering a *culture* where young people feel safe, supported, and valued as partners. In HeadStart, young people consistently described this culture as ‘different’ from other systems — open, inclusive, non-judgmental, and rooted in equality. Unlike traditional environments where hierarchies often silenced their feedback, HeadStart created spaces where young people felt heard, could make mistakes, and show up as themselves.



It makes us feel heard. That’s definitely the first thing. It makes us feel like we don’t have any stupid thoughts.

Key Ingredients of a Collaborative Culture

- **Safe & supportive environments**

Youth participation flourishes when young people trust that their voices will be respected. This requires spaces that are both physically and emotionally safe, with clear boundaries, consistency, and adult allies who listen and respond. Young people described how taking time upfront to agree on communication styles and group boundaries and norms made them feel secure sharing openly.

- **Judgment-free & Inclusive Spaces**

HeadStart was described as ‘very safe to make mistakes’ — a place where young people felt accepted regardless of background or ability. Diversity across ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and life experience was valued, not hidden, and created opportunities to learn from one another.

- **Co-learning & Co-creating**

Participation was most powerful when adults and young people defined collaboration *together*. Rather than importing top-down definitions, groups co-created what participation meant in their context — whether through designing campaigns, leading conferences, or testing new services. This shared ownership helped balance power and made processes meaningful.

- **Flexibility & Fluid roles**

One size does not fit all. Young people appreciated being able to dip in and out depending on their interests, capacity, and wellbeing needs, without losing their place in the group. For some, this meant taking on leadership roles; for others, contributing when and how they could. This fluidity made participation more accessible and sustainable.

- **Joy, Play & Connection**

Culture was strengthened when participation didn't feel like 'just work'. Games, social time, and trips helped young people build relationships, trust, and belonging. This light-heartedness supported their willingness to take risks, share honestly, and remain engaged over the long term.

What Helps Build This Culture

Professionals can actively nurture this culture by:

- Ensuring **consistency and stability** (regular meeting times, reliable staff).
- Providing **resources and training** so young people feel confident contributing.
- Bringing in **creative supports** (artists, filmmakers, social media tools) to help young people bring ideas to life.
- Using **flexible structures** that adapt to young people's needs rather than binding them to rigid processes.

Barriers to Watch Out For

Even strong cultures face challenges. Young people identified barriers such as:

- **Structural barriers:** Bureaucracy, lack of funding, rigid timelines, restrictions on numbers.
- **Tokenism:** Being consulted without follow-up, or partners seeking youth input only to 'tick a box'.
- **Pre-set agendas:** Projects shaped before youth input, reducing motivation.
- **Communication gaps:** Jargon-heavy resources, not seeing the impact of their work.
- **Individual challenges:** Academic pressures, mental health struggles, or feeling like an 'outsider' when joining established groups.

Professionals can mitigate these barriers by being transparent about limits, avoiding tokenistic practices, investing in youth-friendly communication, and creating flexible entry points for involvement.

Embracing the Messiness

Youth participation is rarely linear. Projects evolve, power-sharing can feel uncomfortable, and renegotiation is often necessary. But this 'messiness' is not failure — it is part of authentic collaboration. Young people themselves highlighted that flexibility, honesty, and a willingness to adapt are what made their experiences in HeadStart so different and so impactful.

Culture Checklist:

Are You Creating the Right Conditions for Youth Participation?

Use this quick self-assessment to reflect on whether your school or community programme is building a culture where youth participation can thrive.

Environment & Safety

- ☐ Have we created clear group norms and boundaries with young people?
- ☐ Do young people feel safe to share openly without fear of judgment?
- ☐ Do we address confidentiality, trust, and psychological safety upfront?

Relationships & Trust

- ☐ Do adults consistently show up, follow through, and communicate transparently?
- ☐ Are young people's contributions championed and visibly integrated into decisions?
- ☐ Do we intentionally create time for connection, fun, and joy alongside the work?

Inclusion & Accessibility


- ☐ Are diverse voices (across gender, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, experience) actively included?
- ☐ Do we provide multiple ways to engage, respecting different comfort levels and capacities?
- ☐ Are resources and supports (training, transport, stipends, tech) in place to reduce barriers?

Collaboration & Power-Sharing

- ☐ Do young people have a say in defining what participation looks like in this setting?
- ☐ Is there flexibility for roles to shift and evolve based on young people's interests?
- ☐ Do adults step back when needed, allowing young people to lead?

Learning & Reflection

- ☐ Do we build in regular reflection points to adapt our approach with youth input?
- ☐ Is 'messiness' seen as part of authentic collaboration rather than a failure?
- ☐ Do young people see tangible outcomes from their contributions?



The more boxes you tick, the closer you are to fostering a culture where youth participation is meaningful, safe, and impactful.

5. Using Tools to Bring Youth Participation to Life



Creating a culture is the foundation, but without practical tools, participation risks remaining abstract. Tools provide structure, make contributions visible, and help ensure that young people's voices lead to real impact. In schools and community programmes, these tools don't need to be resource-heavy; simple, intentional practices can go a long way in building trust and preventing tokenism.

Core Participation Tools

- **'You Said, We Did' Feedback Loops**

This tool closes the communication gap by showing exactly how youth input has shaped action. It can be as simple as a poster, a digital update, or a few minutes at the start of a meeting. What matters is the clarity: you said this → here's what we did. This transparency prevents young people from feeling ignored and builds trust over time.

- **Menu of Roles**

Not every young person wants to be a leader or a public speaker. Offering a menu of roles — such as co-researcher, peer mentor, evaluator, campaign designer, or advisory panel member — allows young people to engage in ways that fit their skills, interests, and availability. A flexible menu honours diverse contributions and helps avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

- **Charters or Collaboration Agreements**

Co-created charters set out shared values, expectations, and commitments between young people and professionals. These agreements help balance power by clarifying what each side can expect, how conflicts will be handled, and how decisions will be made. They also act as an accountability tool, ensuring that participation is guided by respect, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility.

- **Pre–During–Post Reflections**

Participation isn't a one-off — it evolves. Short reflective check-ins before, during, and after projects can help young people process their experiences and provide real-time feedback to professionals. These can take the form of quick surveys, creative exercises (e.g., drawing, storytelling), or group debriefs of the framework you selected. They not only ensure participation is meaningful but also document learning for future improvements.

Pre-During-Post Evaluation

Guidance on the use of Davies' matrix of participation

Before participation:	During participation:	After participation:
<p>Identify where you fall on the matrix</p> <p><i>“What form(s) of participation will this project take on?”</i></p>	<p>Reassess your location on the matrix</p> <p><i>“Have we implemented participation the way we said we would?”</i></p>	<p>Evaluate and plan next steps using the matrix</p> <p><i>“What did we do well and what can we improve on in the future?”</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be transparent about how youth participation will be implemented in your activity or project. • Set expectations between staff and young people for the ways young people will be involved and roles young people will play in the project or activity. • Discuss any limitations of participation that may exist within current form(s) of participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider whether the project or activity has evolved and whether it falls in a different area of the matrix. • Use the matrix as a tool for checks and balances; have ways of involvement and roles of professionals and young people been honoured? If not, why? • Have ongoing conversations with young people about perceptions of their involvement and satisfaction with their role(s) within the project or activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss challenges and facilitators of collaboration within area of matrix. (i.e., what limitations or strengths existed within the form[s] of participation implemented?) • Feed back and follow up on the participation activity or project that took place and of the roles that those involved played. • Plan future participation projects: acknowledge the ‘blank spaces’ in the matrix and outline how to expand on depth and breadth of participation activities.

Throughout participation activity:

- Consider the diversity of provision of opportunities for children and young people to engage.
- Consider that children and young people have a range of preferences, skills, abilities and commitments.

Why These Tools Matter

Each of these tools acts as scaffolding: they give shape to collaboration while leaving space for flexibility and creativity. Together, they:

- Build **trust** by making young people's input visible.
- Support **equity** by honouring diverse roles and capacities.
- Increase **accountability** by embedding commitments and follow-up.
- Encourage **learning and adaptation** through real-time feedback.

With a clear 'why', an understanding of influence, strong relationships, and a culture of collaboration, these tools become more than techniques — they become living practices. Taken together, they make youth participation *practical, concrete, and sustainable* in schools and community programmes.

Summary

Youth participation in mental health programming requires more than inviting young people into the room — it calls for intentional design, shared purpose, and strong relationships.

This guide outlined:



Clarifying your ‘why’ – Defining the purpose of participation (relevance, design, equity, lived experience).



Mapping influence – Using frameworks to make visible where youth can shape decisions and where influence can grow.



Relational work at the core – Championing young people’s ideas, being consistent, and showing trustworthiness throughout.



Creating a culture – Safe, supportive environments that embrace co-learning, flexibility, and the ‘messiness’ of evolving collaboration.



Using tools – From ‘You said, we did’ feedback loops to charters and evaluations, tools make participation transparent and sustainable.



Outcomes of Youth Participation

From the HeadStart programme, young people described the impact of participation as both personal and systemic:

- **Personal development** – Increased their confidence, professional skills (public speaking, teamwork, leadership), and allowed for greater self-awareness.
- **Healing & reciprocity** – Helped make meaning of and gave purpose to their lived experiences of mental health struggles.
- **Agency & Voice** – Facilitated in feeling heard, valued, and influential; stepping into leadership roles and decision-making spaces.
- **Improved Services** – Programmes were seen as more relevant, youth-friendly, and engaging when young people shaped them.
- **Community impact** – Participation fostered pride, connection, and a stronger sense of belonging among peers.



Key Takeaway

Youth participation is not an ‘add-on’ but a driver of better outcomes. young people grow in confidence, resilience, and skills, while services become more relevant, creative, and impactful. When professionals in schools and communities intentionally invest in trust, tools, and power-sharing, participation transforms both young people and the systems that serve them. We hope this guide will be a starting point for you to begin fostering a culture of youth participation, as well as integrating collaboration activities into your school and community!

Thank you

A heartfelt thank you to **Anna Freud**, the **HeadStart team members**, and most importantly the **young people who shared their lived experiences of mental health collaboration**. Their insights, honesty, and willingness to partner in this work made this report possible and continue to inspire meaningful change.

Want to learn more about youth participation in action? Check out our article exploring how young people and professionals collaborated in the HeadStart programme — scan the QR code to read more.



Let's connect

If you are interested in learning more, collaborating, or being part of future workshops and projects around youth participation and mental health, please contact me:

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