Youth co-research toolkit

Practical guides and resources for researchers

Co-research toolkit overview

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed to support and guide researchers who wish to meaningfully engage young people as co-researchers to explore and solve real-world problems, together.

The information in this toolkit mainly draws on the experiences and learnings of researchers working in the fields of social and cultural youth studies. However, you can apply the resources in diverse research settings.

Our definitions

Youth researcher: A young person with some research skills and knowledge who is directly engaged in the research process.

Researcher: A professional researcher employed in a research institution, a non-government organisation or the private sector.

Co-research: A research process in which youth researchers and researchers work together to generate and activate knowledge.

Young person: The definition of a young person varies considerably. We developed this toolkit based on our experiences working with young people aged 16 to 25 years. However, the co-research principles and resources in this toolkit can also be applied to work with younger age groups.

What does this toolkit provide?

This toolkit offers guidance, advice, tips and practical tools to support collaborative co-research partnerships between researchers and young people. We hope it inspires positive, sustained change in how young people are involved in research and provides the tools needed to put ideas into action.

The resources help researchers to:

- understand more about co-research and the benefits of working with young people as 'youth researchers'
- navigate challenges, like addressing power imbalances and defining roles and responsibilities
- work with young people safely and ethically
- answer questions about payment and remuneration
- communicate with youth researchers to work together effectively.

How to use this toolkit

Start by reading the *Introduction to youth co-research* guide. It outlines what co-research is in theory and practice, and how it can benefit the research process, outcomes and individuals involved. From there, the *Getting started with youth co-research* guide gives you all you need to know about planning and preparing for co-research. The *Implementation of youth co-research* guide provides information, tips and advice for navigating the co-research process. Within each guide, you will find:

- Case studies

- Tools and templates

- Tips

- Considerations

- Further resources.

How was this toolkit developed?

The need for this toolkit was identified through our research collaborations with young people, researchers and partners as part of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies. Our team conducted an environmental scan of existing guides and toolkits, which identified a gap in practical resources to support researchers to put youth co-research approaches into practice. The toolkit responds to this gap and aims to build effective youth collaboration in research on issues that impact young people's lives.

We have been fortunate to work long-term with youth researchers aged 16 to 25 in the Centre for Multicultural Youth's Explore* program. These experiences in Australia have informed the toolkit resources. The toolkit also draws on evidence from academic literature and existing resources.

It is a work in progress. It will be refined, refreshed and added to over time, and supplemented with resources tailored for specific groups of young people and areas of research.

We have developed a complementary toolkit to support and guide youth researchers in the early stages of their co-research journey, with a focus on social research. That toolkit offers information, advice, training materials and practical tools to build young people's confidence and skills as researchers.

*Explore supports a partnership between young people and researchers to enhance the relevance and responsiveness of research (and post-research responses) with and for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

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Acknowledgements

The Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University deploys youth-centred, participatory co-research and co-design methods to work with young people and communities to inform policies, programs and interventions that can minimise the risks and maximise the benefits of the digital age. The Centre develops innovative, digital tools and methods to support the meaningful involvement of children and young people in social and cultural research.

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) is a not-for-profit organisation providing specialist knowledge and support to young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. CMY links decision-makers and researchers directly with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, supporting youth participation in policy and advocacy.

The development of this toolkit was made possible by funding from the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).

CRIS is an independent think-tank involving university and civil society partners, led by the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) hosted by Deakin University. Researchers across academic institutions with community partners undertake research on some of the trickiest challenges that our society is facing. CRIS is proud to support the development of the next generation of youth researchers and leaders through the Explore program led by the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

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Bottom left. CMY / Sam Biddle.

Acknowledgement of Country

With respect for Aboriginal cultural protocol and out of recognition that we work on their traditional lands, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians on whose Country we are based and pay our respect to their Elders past, present and future.

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Guide 1: Introduction to youth co-research

This guide contains information about co-research theory and practice, benefits of youth co-research and case studies.

Contents

Youth involvement in research

Young people can and have been involved in research in many ways. At least since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stated that children and young people have a right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives, there have been considerable shifts in discourse. These shifts have prompted many disciplines to understand **young people as experts in and of their own lives.** Following this, qualitative methodologies (particularly in social science and health disciplines) understand young people as **more than objects of research**, and frameworks have been designed to support the **meaningful engagement** of young people, for example, as consultants or advisors (such as the Wellbeing Health & Youth Commission Engagement Framework).

Today, young people have opportunities to shape – and to challenge – research processes and outcomes, and to genuinely contribute to knowledge production.[1] [2] Children and young people are progressively taking on more active roles within research projects, such as data collectors, co-researchers, or lead researchers.[3] [4] [5] Involving young people in research roles, who have shared ownership of the research process and outputs, is essential if their **rights are to be truly respected**.[6] [7] However, researchers wishing to work with young people as co-researchers face a number of challenges and barriers. Namely, there is a scarcity of practical, detailed resources to guide researchers through the co-research process with young people.

'Youth' is a social construct which is culturally and contextually specific.[8] Young people's capacities and interests evolve over time, depending on their backgrounds and their diverse life experiences. This means that individuals will engage in co-research in different ways. For example, collaborating with a young person who is still in high school and is passionate about a research topic, but has limited research skills, will mean that their co-research journey (and the researcher's along with it) will be quite different compared to a 25-year-old post-graduate student. This toolkit provides guidance for co-research with young people broadly, but you will need to tailor your approach to meet the specific needs and aspirations of each young person with whom you engage, as this will ultimately define your co-research journey.

1   Fargas-Malet, M., McSherry, D., Larkin, E., and Robinson, C. (2010) Research with children: methodological issues and innovative techniques, *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 8(2), 175–192.

2   Kay, E. and Tisdall, M. (2017) Conceptualising children and young people's participation: examining vulnerability, social accountability and co-production, *The International Journal of Human Rights,* 21, 59–75.

3   Collins, T.M., Jamieson, L., Wright, L.H.V., Rizzini, I., Mayhew, A., Narang, J., Kay, E., Tisdall, M., Ruiz-Casares, M. (2020) Involving child and youth advisors in academic research about child participation: The Child and Youth Advisory Committees of the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 109.

4   Tisdall, E.K.M & Cuevas-Parra, P. (2019) Child-Led Research: From participating in research to leading it. World Vision International.

5   Schäfer, N., and Yarwood, R. (2008) Involving young people as researchers: Uncovering multiple power relations among youths. *Children's geographies*, 6(2), 121-135.

6   Alderson, P. (2008) *Children as researchers.* In: Christensen P and James A (eds) Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices. 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 276–290.

7   Lundy, L. and McEvoy, L. (2009) Developing outcomes for education services: A children's rights-based approach, *Effective Education,* 1(1), 43–60.

8   Wellbeing, Health and Youth (2023) *Introduction to Youth Engagement in Health Research*, Guidebook: Youth Engagement in Health Research.

Youth involvement approaches in research

Young people as consultants
Adults seek young people's views to build knowledge about an issue and may obtain their contributions to the design and direction of the research, then adults conduct the research. Young people may be consulted across multiple stages of the research or at only one stage

Young people as collaborative researchers (co-researchers)
Research that is 'doing with' young people. Young people are involved as collaborative researchers (co-researchers) and are a part of the entire project in partnership with adults. Young people take an active part in shaping, planning and implementing the research and there is a shared generation of knowledge.

Young people as participants
In non-participatory approaches, this is a one-way process where adults conduct the research without any engagement with young people, other than as participants.

Young people as research leaders
Research that is led by young people. Young people initiate their own research, develop their own processes and methods and maintain control of the research at all stages. Adults act as facilitators or advisors.

Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, Young and Resilient Research Centre and Centre for Multicultural Youth (2022) 'What is co-research?'', Youth Co-research Toolkit.

Image credit: Unsplash / Airfocus

What is youth co-research?

In co-research, young people work as collaborative partners, or 'youth researchers' who are fully included and embedded into the research project team, beyond the roles of advisors, co-designers or informants. To contribute meaningfully to the research, young people are equipped with research skills and given support, training and mentoring to build their capacities. Throughout the process, young people and researchers have opportunities to learn from each other.

Youth researchers can be involved across all stages of the research cycle, from conceptualisation of the research aims and design to data collection, analysis, reporting, dissemination, and evaluation. Whilst co-research is based on principles of equity and shared power, it does not give youth researchers independent control or sole decision-making responsibilities (unlike youth-led research, where full control is in the hands of the young person).

The overall goal of co-research is to create spaces and opportunities for **mutually beneficial partnerships** that empower young people and support their **individual capacities and experiences.**[9]
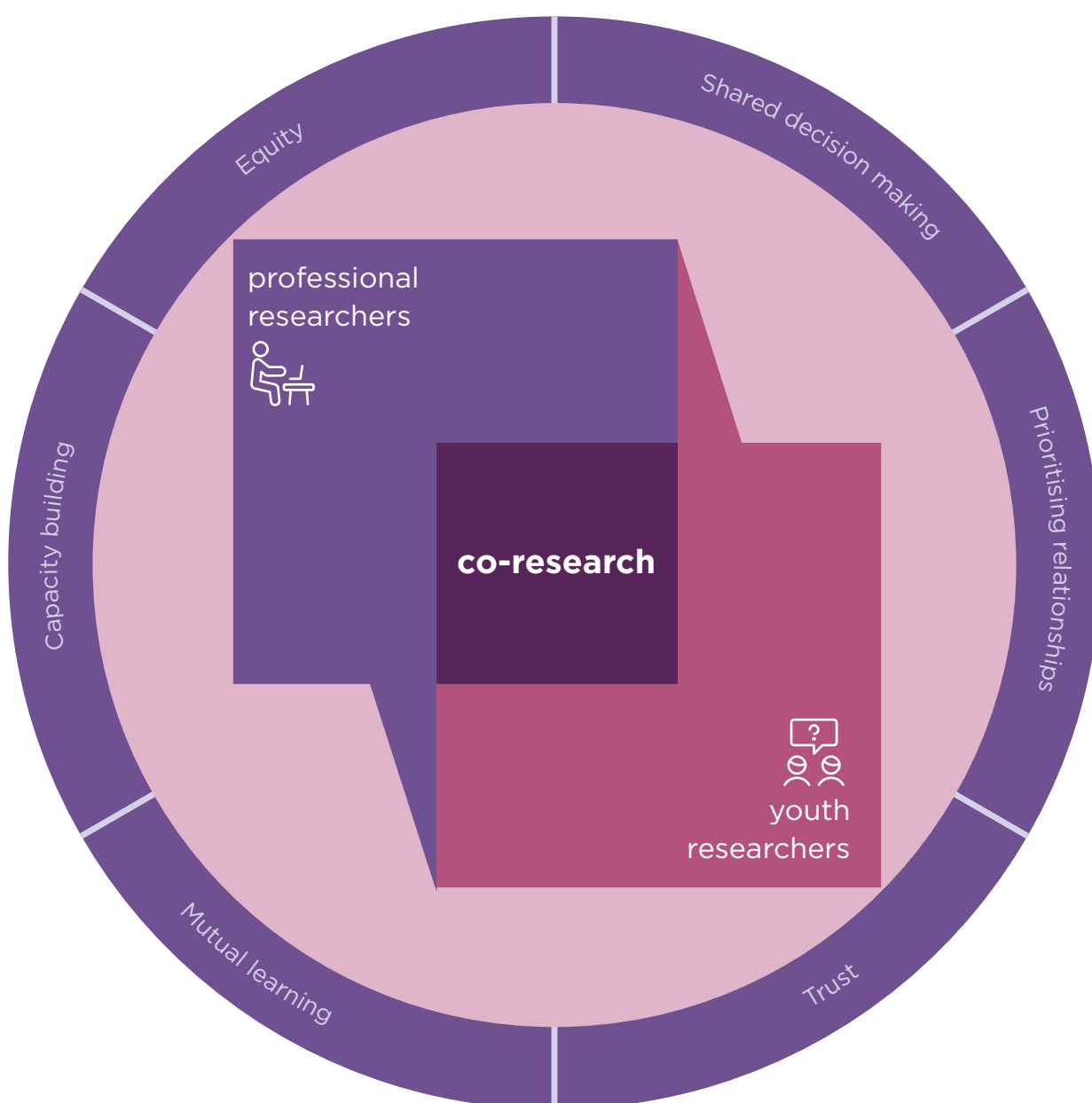
Principles of youth co-research

Existing models[10] propose that co-research is grounded in the following principles:

- shared decision-making
- shared understanding
- diverse knowledge and perspectives
- reciprocity, mutual benefit and learning
- prioritising relationships and trust
- capacity building.

We understand **co-research as a relational, responsive process** that can **unsettle dominant power dynamics**.[11] Co-research is fluid and contextual, and influenced by the individuals that are involved, the power dynamics that are at play, and the context in which the research occurs. For this reason, rather than provide an overarching model or framework, we offer the following principles that we consider fundamental to co-research with young people:

Dialogues and new possibilities

Co-research is much more than giving young people the opportunity to share their ideas and have their perspectives considered. It aims to actively create spaces for shared dialogue, where both adults and young people can explore and enact new relationships and identities.[12] The co-research process can **create the space to activate dialogues and open conversations between researchers and young people that allow us to imagine new possibilities.** Through these dialogues, researchers can find different pathways to **co-produce knowledge** and **influence decision-making and change** in partnership with young people.

"Overall, for me, the most satisfying discovery comes from the reflections and conversations with participants of how deeply influential the relationship between young people and researchers can be. This is not only in regard to how this can – and has – changed approaches and systems related to the research process, but also in how it has influenced participants' ideas and attitudes about what research means and how it can, and should, be meaningfully produced." (Edmee Kenny, Youth practitioner, Centre for Multicultural Youth)

Reframing tensions as opportunities

Co-research is not just about collaboration and cooperation. It can involve **conflict, confrontation**, and **confusion**. It is not always straightforward and can involve tensions. However, these tensions or conflicts can be channelled in ways that allow them to shape the process and outcomes in unexpected and fruitful ways.[13] The 'glitches' in our ways of working that come with co-research – the frustrations, awkward silences and misinterpretations – can be made useful. Practising reflection and reflexivity can uncover moments of realisation in the co-research process that can help us to move towards change and new ways of thinking, individually and as a collective. The guides and tools included in this toolkit will help you to take co-research forward as a reflexive, fluid process.

Who really has decision-making power? is there trust in this relationship? Is there mutual benefit in this partnership? Will we meet the deadlines? Did I communicate that well?

"The point is not to resolve these differences (although this may be a positive by-product) but to hold them in tension and allow them to directly inform the research process... [and] as opportunities for mutual learning." (Third, 2016)

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10 Hickey, G., Brearley, S., Coldham, T., Denegri, S., Green, G., Staniszewska, S., Tembo, D., Torok, K., and Turner, K. (2018) *Guidance on co-producing a research project.* INVOLVE, Southampton.

11 Third, A., Welland, L., Kenny, E., Grewal, K., and Collin, P. (forthcoming) What is co-research anyway? Advancing theory and practice.

12 Mannion, G. (2009) *After participation: the socio-spatial performance of intergenerational becoming. In B. Percy-Smith & N. Thomas (Eds) A Handbook of Children's Participation: perspectives from theory and practice*, pp 330-342. London: Taylor and Francis.

13 Third, A. (2016) The Tactical Researcher: *Cultural Studies Research as Pedagogy,* in The Pedagogies of Cultural Studies, pp. 93-115.

Image credit: Unsplash / Priscilla Du Preez

Unsettling dominant power dynamics

Current youth involvement frameworks appear to work towards shared power and control as the 'gold standard'. However, **equality is difficult – if not impossible – to achieve,** especially given senior researchers often oversee the tasks undertaken by youth researchers. Considering the intergenerational dynamics between experienced, older researchers and young people, power imbalances will always likely exist, making the concept of equal control unrealistic. Further, aspirations to equally share power and responsibility assume that young people desire this and have the capacity. This might not always be the case or might shift over time.

Scholars have argued that, when involving young people in research, power imbalances cannot be ignored. [14] [15] In addition, it has been suggested that practitioners need to critically reflect on their roles if they are "*to acknowledge and transform a traditional position of power*".[16] We understand power as **fluid** and **transformative**. If navigated carefully, it can open opportunities for researchers to work differently, rather than reproduce power hierarchies. Co-research needs to be grounded in an awareness of power differentials and committed to the **active reworking and unsettling of dominant power dynamics.** It needs to work with power relations **creatively** and **constructively**, in ways that are attuned to the desires, needs and capacities of the young people involved.

Relational

Ultimately, co-research is a relational practice as it involves individuals **connecting**, forming **relationships** and journeying through a process together to **collectively produce knowledge**. As proposed by others,[17] [18] we see co-research as an opportunity to create spaces for new **relationships and identities to be formed** and expressed, by both adults and young people.

For additional information and insight, explore the **recommended reading list**.

Image credit: Unsplash / DISRUPTIVO

14   Conolly, A. (2008) Challenges of generating qualitative data with socially excluded young people. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 11, 201–214.

15   Kellett, M., Forrest, R., Dent, N., and Ward, S. (2004) 'Just teach us the skills please, we'll do the rest': Empowering ten-year-olds as active researchers. *Children & Society,* 18, 329–343.

16   Cuevas-Parra (2020) Co-Researching With Children in the Time of COVID-19: Shifting the Narrative on Methodologies to Generate Knowledge, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 19, 1–12.

17   Mannion, G. (2009) After participation: the socio-spatial performance of intergenerational becoming. In B. Percy-Smith & N. Thomas (Eds) A Handbook of Children's Participation: perspectives from theory and practice, pp 330-342. London: Taylor and Francis.

18   Egler, C. (2017) Advocating for a More Relational and Dynamic Model of Participation for Child Researchers, *Social Inclusion,* 5, 3, 240–250.

The co-research journey

- Shared understanding
- Respect

Dialogues

Reflexivity

Tensions

Capacity building

Mutual learning

Unsettling power dynamics

Opportunities

Reflexivity

- Co-produced knowledge
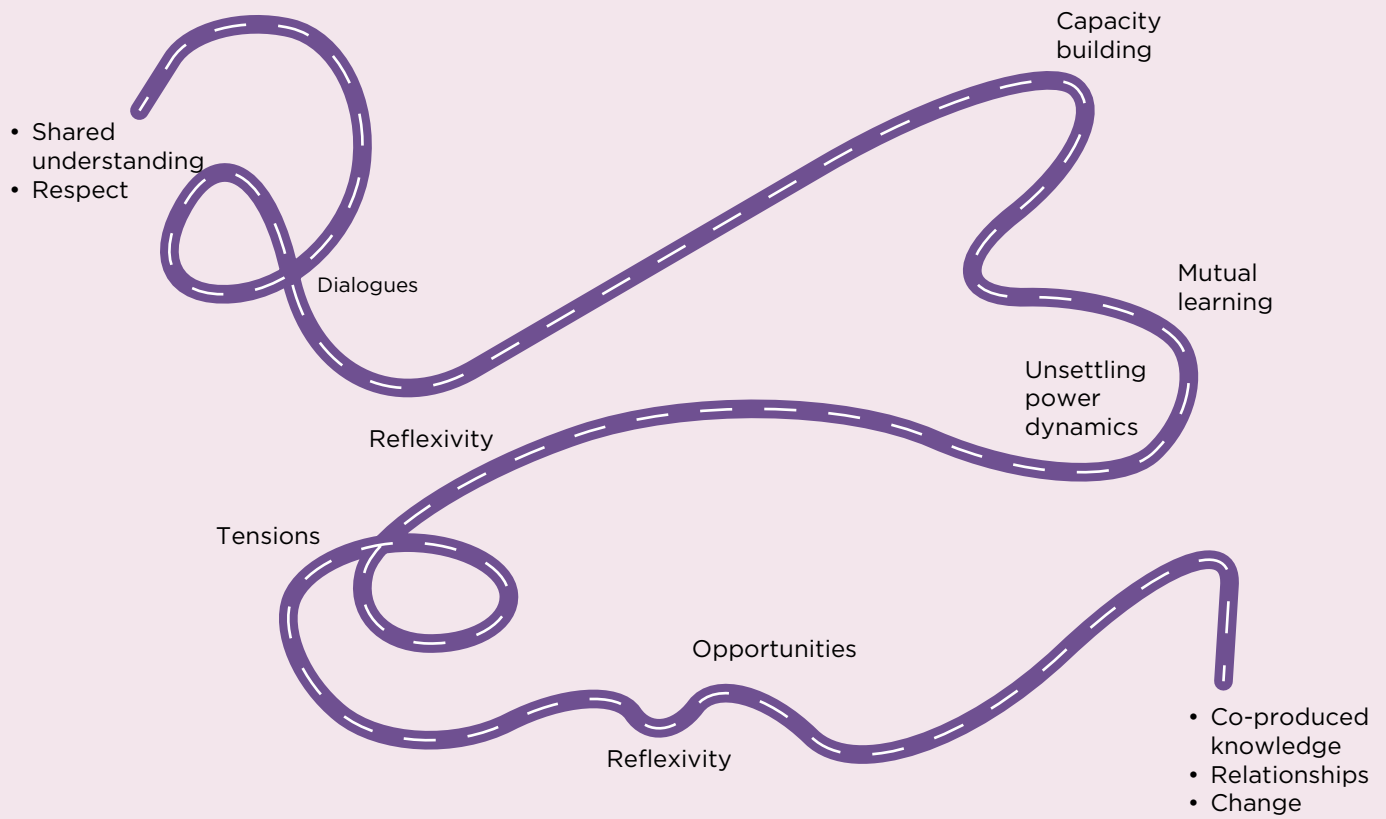- Relationships
- Change

Figure 1: The co-research journey is rarely straightforward. We've found that the nature of responsive, uncertain research can cause challenges, but also opens opportunities for creative workarounds, mutual learning, and ultimately leads to co-produced knowledge, strong relationships and ideally, positive change.

Given that many projects are fast-paced, one of the risks associated with co-research is underestimating the time and care it takes to work meaningfully with young people, resulting in their ad-hoc or tokenistic involvement. Co-research requires careful planning and preparation, continuous reflexivity and flexibility, and dedicated resources (the **Getting started** and **Implementation** guides provide the steps and tools to put this into action).

In the words of youth researchers, co-research is...

Where I can interpret participant responses through my lived experience

Working where I can share my unique experience and guide the research

Being involved in the research early, and later in the evaluation - not just when it's convenient

Having visibility of how my role will make an impact

Being entrusted by senior researchers and given autonomy

Having a stake in the research

Having the support to take ownership

Image credit: CMY / Harjono Djoyobisono

Youth co-research summary

Characteristics of co-research

- A fluid, responsive process
- Activates dialogues for new possibilities
- Reframes tensions as opportunities
- Unsettles dominant power dynamics
- Continuous reflexivity
- Mutual learning
- Trusting, open and honest relationships
- Capacity building

Role of young people

Youth researchers have some pre-existing research skills, or these are developed, so that they can be meaningfully embedded into the project team and collaborate across the research cycle.

Specific roles and responsibilities should be mutually agreed upon at the outset of the project.

Role of adults

Professional researchers take steps to make spaces for collaboration with youth researchers throughout the project and are open to learning and new ways of thinking and working. They provide support and guidance to youth researchers to build their skills and capacities and often oversee project management activities.

Image credit: Unsplash / Brooke Cagle

Co-research in action: Case studies

Objects for everyday resilience (Gerrand and Lam, 2022) [19]

This study investigated the relationships between material resources and mental and physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting a framework of multisystemic resilience[20] and material objects,[21] the project was initially designed using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model. The idea for the study emerged from a Living Lab workshop bringing together young people, academic researchers and key stakeholders.[22] Three young people who participated in research training as part of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies' and Centre for Multicultural Youth's Explore program were involved in designing the project's social media pages, designing and supervising a research exhibition, and developing outputs, including a research exhibition zine and academic journal articles. The academic researchers found that establishing a reading group helped to involve youth researchers in the project's evolving conceptual framework and to sustain momentum. They also found that giving youth researchers a sense of ownership of the project, by adapting the research methodology to better reflect their interests, experiences and existing commitments, helped to sustain engagement over the course of the project.

Youth Health Matters: Co-Researching young people's priorities (Wellbeing Health & Youth, 2022)

The Youth Health Matters project aimed to identify young people's health and wellbeing priorities to directly inform research and policy agendas. Young people were engaged as co-researchers, facilitators and research participants and were given the choice to pick and choose how they would like to be involved in the project. Young people collaborated in all stages of the project from designing the aims and methods to data collection and analysis, reporting and dissemination. This project resulted in a national report disseminated by young people at conferences and to key stakeholders via direct advocacy. Researchers on this project found it helpful to ensure that young people understand ethical procedures when analysing and handling data, and provided regular check-ins to work through concerns as a team. The researchers found it important to provide a lot of reassurance to young people on their progress and continuous feedback. For a deeper dive, see the case study here.

Image credit: Unsplash / Brooke Cagle

19   Gerrand, V. and Lam, K. (2023) 'What got you through lockdown? Objects for Everyday Resilience.' *'Wellbeing' Special Issue of M/C Journal, August (forthcoming)*.

20   Ungar, M. (2020) *Multisystemic Resilience: Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change. Oxford University Press.*

21   Whitlock, G. (2019) 'Objects and things.' In (Douglas, K. and A. Barnwell eds.) *Research Methodologies for Auto/biography Studies. New York: Routledge.*

22   Lam, K., Harris, A., Hartup, M., Collin, P., Third, A. and Quek, S. (2022) *Social issues and diverse young Australians, Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, Melbourne.*

Children's voices in the time of COVID-19: An intergenerational co-research study (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano, 2020)[23]

Two researchers, in collaboration with 12 young people aged 12 to 17, conducted research to explore children and young people's reflections on and perceptions of the COVID-19 outbreak. These 12 young people – from Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mongolia, Romania, and Sierra Leone – were members of World Vision's Young Leaders Advocacy programme which provides skills and tools for young people to conduct their own research. Youth co-researchers interviewed participants (other children and young people) over social media and messaging platforms. The co-researchers felt that their involvement was needed, useful, and rewarding, particularly to help recruit peers to the study in ways that adults did not have access to. Further, the co-researchers expressed that they valued their involvement in the project to use their skills and free time during social isolation for a good cause. They also greatly appreciated the opportunity to connect with other young people during a time when their friendships were restricted.

Living life to the fullest: An arts-informed co-produced research project with disabled young people (Liddiard et al., 2019)[24]

This UK study co-produced disability research by forming the Co-Researcher Collective with six young disabled people. The young people were involved in research design, recruiting and interviewing participants, planning the project's impact strategy, building relationships with stakeholders, capturing the research process, and communicating the findings through writing blogs, making films, presenting at conferences and research festivals, and co-authoring articles for publication. In recognition of their work, the youth co-researchers were given a budget to purchase technology of their choice, invited to become members of the university research centre, and provided certificates and references as evidence of their contributions.

Image credit: Unsplash / Mimi Thian

23   Cuevas-Parra, P. and Stephano, M. (2020) *Children's voices in the time of COVID-19: Continued child activism in the face of personal challenges. World Vision International.*

24   Liddiard, K., Runswick-Cole, K., Goodley, D., Whitney, S., Vogelmann, E. and Watts, L. (2019) "I was Excited by the Idea of a Project that Focuses on those Unasked Questions" Co-Producing Disability Research with Disabled Young People. *Children & Society,* 33, 154-167.

Why involve young people as researchers?

It will benefit your research process

Young people have different ways of viewing the world and different priorities and concerns, so can provide valuable insights and original contributions to the creation of research agendas and questions.[25] Youth researchers can identify issues and questions often overlooked by adults and can offer their perspectives on how to prioritise research aims, as well as facilitate recruitment, particularly with groups of young people that may be hard to reach. They can develop research tools and instruments that are more accessible to young people who are study participants, plus more relevant outcome measures. In the dissemination phase, youth researchers can advise and make decisions in terms of how and where research is published, so that it is easily accessible to target audiences.[26]

It will benefit your data

Youth researchers can offer diverse lived experiences and perspectives to provide a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of the data. Data collected by young people, from young people, offers increased reliability and richness due to increased rapport and balanced power dynamics between researchers and participants.

Image credit: CMY / Harjono Djoyobisono

It will build your skills

Through engaging with youth researchers, researchers can learn new skills in how to better work and communicate with young people.

It will enhance your understanding of youth issues

As adults, we come with 'subconscious adult filters' and 'adult baggage' that can colour our understanding of the world.[27] No longer being young people and 'outsiders,' we can never fully understand the lived experiences of youth today. This can narrow our research agendas, methods and interpretations. With the engagement of youth researchers, adults have the opportunity to hear and learn from young people, increasing their knowledge, understanding and empathy, leading to positive youth-adult relationships.

It will build your enthusiasm and encourage transformation

Young people bring new, fresh ideas to the research which can enhance enthusiasm and commitment. With this, researchers can try new ways of thinking and working which can inspire transformative change for individuals and organisations.

25   Kellet, M. (2005) *Children as Active Researchers: A New Research Paradigm for the 21st Century? ERSC, UK.*

26   Kirby P. (2004) *A Guide to Actively Involving Young People in Research: For researchers, research commissioners, and managers. INVOLVE.*

27   Kellet, M. (2005*) Children as Active Researchers: A New Research Paradigm for the 21st Century? ERSC, UK.*

Your research will tap into new and innovative perspectives

Truly youth-centred research is needed now, more than ever. In the context of research in a post-pandemic world, it is particularly timely for researchers to think about how to support the meaningful engagement of young people, as they are often excluded from participation in decision-making during times of crisis, yet we have seen them disproportionately affected by the impacts.[28] It is young people who bring perspectives that can challenge the status quo and contribute to the development of innovative solutions and changes to policy and practice.

It's a rights-based approach

Involving young people as co-researchers, with shared ownership of the research process and outputs, is essential if their rights are to be truly respected and is ultimately necessary to align with a youth-rights approach to research.[29] [30]

It builds and empowers the young person, now and into the future

As researchers, young people can improve their decision-making, confidence, self-esteem and independence. Experience on research projects builds their cooperation, discussion, listening, planning, negotiating and problem-solving skills, which improves their future employability.[31] Further, young people can become more aware of important social issues and this can lead them to advocacy and activism in their communities.[32] Also, young people can contribute meaningfully to the improvement of services, or changes to policy and practice, that affect their lives, and gain recognition for this.[33]

There is appetite from young people

Young people want to be involved and have a say in the issues they care about, like climate change, mental health, equity and discrimination, employment, and education. Young people have expressed frustration and disappointment that they have been excluded from developing solutions for the issues that deeply affect them and their futures. Co-research is a meaningful way to embed young people in projects that have real-world impact.

Image credit: CMY / Harjono Djoyobisono

28   Cuevas-Parra (2020) Co-Researching With Children in the Time of COVID-19: Shifting the Narrative on Methodologies to Generate Knowledge, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19, 1–12.*

29   Alderson, P. (2008) *Children as researchers. In: Christensen P and James A (eds) Research with Children: Perspectives andPractices. 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 276–290.*

30   Lundy, L. and McEvoy, L. (2009) Developing outcomes for education services: A children's rights-based approach, *Effective Education, 1,1, 43–60.*

31   *Tisdall, E. Kay, M., Davis, J. M., and Gallagher, M. (2009) Researching with Children and Young People Research Design, Methods vand Analysis. London: SAGE.*

32   *Rutgers WPF and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (2013) Explore toolkit: involving young people as researchers in sexual and reproductive health programmes, International Planned Parenthood (IPPF) and Rutgers WPF.*

33   Kirby P. (2004) A Guide to Actively Involving Young People in Research: For researchers, research commissioners, and managers. INVOLVE.

Case studies from researchers and youth researchers

Hear from a researcher: Professor Amanda Tattersall's co-research experience

Associate Professor Amanda Tattersall is an urban geographer and community organiser, who is focused on how citizens can craft solutions to complex global issues like climate change, poverty, mental health, inequality, and the politics of refuge. She is an academic leader in transformational and community-led research methods at the University of Sydney and has recently worked with youth researchers to investigate young people's participation in social movements and social change.

What are the benefits of working with young people as co-researchers?

Drawing on her experience, Amanda explains that the youth researchers played an enormous role in getting both high quantity and high quality data for the project, and in record time.

"I wouldn't have got the data! I could have begged and pleaded but I wouldn't have been able to uncover the evidence, questions and information that I found without having these two highly engaged people as my research partners and co-authors. The level of data that we had was remarkable. Especially in that time frame - it only took us a few months to generate all that data".

Amanda also found that the co-researchers were able to establish a level of trust with the young participants that she would not have been able to achieve without them. *"We had this level of trust between the young participants and youth researchers. Young people hold each other accountable because they had long-lasting trusting relationships. Even as a friendly outsider you can't generate that."*

Image credit: CMY / Harjono Djoyobisono

What are some of the challenges?

One of the main challenges Amanda recounts was managing the youth researcher's expectations of timelines, explaining that it can be difficult for those not familiar with academic research processes to be attuned to the timelines of publications. *"We would have had all this flurry of activity, and then it would be two months until I wrote a paper that I'm sure would have seemed unusual to my young research collaborators"*.

Secondly, Amanda reflects that everyone has different strengths, and it can be beneficial to figure out co-researchers' expertise and skills earlier in the journey. *"Some people are good at writing while others are good at... collect[ing] surveys. There's something about getting clear with the co-researchers [and asking them] 'What [do] you think your strengths are?' and 'How can we play to your strengths in the research process?' If I had been more conscious of asking them about what their strengths and skills were, it would have been an even better and stronger experience."*

Image credit: Pexels / Sarah Chai

What makes co-research with young people successful?

Amanda's co-research process started with clear communication at the outset. *"So, it started with one-to-one conversations, where I talked to [the youth researchers] to see if they were interested and to explain the workload [and about the] time to produce the data."* Amanda explains that she had clear conversations about responsibilities, and confirmed their interest in the project, before starting any work.

Amanda encourages researchers, if possible, to not just engage one youth researcher. By involving several youth researchers on a project, you can *"create a community where people can have a different range of experience and they can help each other."* It also attempts to reset (or at least mitigate) a power dynamic that exists between established older academics and younger researchers."

Also, it's always important to put relationships first and to consider what mutual benefit looks like together. *"Relationships preceded research, not the other way around, so if you're wanting to work with anyone – especially with young people – then you need to start building relationships in that space before you think of the research."* Amanda adds that this relationship should be built by bringing everyone's interests onboard and by *"writ[ing] the questions together, so they satisfy their interests as well as mine. It does need to be shared to be powerful."*

Final thoughts...

Amanda further elaborates that, *"the beautiful thing about relationships preceding research is also relationships linger post research. For example, I have helped [my youth research partner with] her podcast...she calls me for advice, and we talk. These relationships are important going forward. For example, if I'm doing a project around a topic that I know interests her, like mental health, [she's] in my mind as a potential future collaborator."*

Hear from a researcher: Professor Anita Harris' co-research experience

Professor Anita Harris is a youth sociologist with an interest in youth identities and cultures, citizenship, participation and multiculturalism. Across her research, she has engaged with young people as researchers in a variety of projects using different design approaches and methods from making zines, maps and digital stories, to interviews, surveys and quizzes.

Why is engaging with youth co-researchers important?

Anita believes that the involvement of young petople as co-researchers helps to shape the research agenda, resulting in more relevant research with real-world impact on the policies, systems and institutions that affect their everyday lives.

"If you've got young people involved, then you're more likely to find out what's important to young people and what's meaningful to them. For a very long time, young people have just been the objects of research. Sometimes that has value, but young people are often excluded from framing the questions that we are trying to research, and yet these questions often have a big impact on them."

Anita's ethos for highlighting youth voices and working with youth researchers is simple. Often, it is the young people who are *"on the ground… who are actually doing the work [in community]."* So, for research to authentically serve the communities it engages with, meaningful youth involvement is key. For Anita, collaborative youth co-research *"always helps to keep you honest as a researcher, too."*

What are the benefits of working with young people as co-researchers?

Anita explains that working *with* young people – rather than talking about young people – brings much more than just a youth perspective.

"Even though we go to engage with young people as 'young people' immediately… you realise that people have complex identities, and so they bring a whole lot of things to the table, beyond this thing of being 'young', whatever that might mean. So, ensuring that researchers are really attentive to the complexities of people's identities, and we don't get too obsessed with the idea that there is a 'youth voice' or a 'young people's point of view'. Young people are very alive to the complexity of identity today so they will bring all those things to the agenda."

From Anita's experience, another key benefit is the opportunity for researchers' assumptions to be challenged, and to learn from these.

"People bring a lot of unconscious ideas about what it is to be young, often from their own experience, and we know that things have really changed enormously, especially with the current generation facing new challenges, and also having opportunities that we probably didn't have when we were young. Being able to challenge some of those assumptions by working with young people is important because some of the most dominant research frameworks and policy perspectives really construct young people as at risk, or as a problem – or alternatively – as the answer to everything."

Anita found co-authoring a methodology paper with youth co-researchers one of the most rewarding parts of the process and something that resulted in meaningful team collaboration, even though this arose opportunistically. *"We hadn't planned it! So, the original project involved young people as peer researchers, and they were doing a lot of the data collection and training in research skills. And at some point, we decided to write a paper not so much on the research findings but to reflect on how we perceived our roles in the project. We had this fun experience! We also had some really good robust discussions about what we all thought we were doing in this research endeavour."*

What are some of the challenges and ways to navigate these?

Anita acknowledges that there sometimes have been challenges around setting expectations for youth researchers. She offers some insights into addressing this, emphasising the importance of being clear and honest about what the research can offer team members. *"Sometimes it's training, sometimes it's an insight into research processes, sometimes it's work experience. It can be a whole lot of things, but sometimes it's not very much at all."*

Explaining why it's worth being involved in research is particularly important, especially when there may not be a clear direct personal benefit for young people.

Another challenge that Anita mentions is accepting that it is reasonable for young people to lack interest in being involved in research for a whole range of reasons – particularly when this isn't expected.

"We sometimes assume that if we go to people and say, 'hey do you want to be involved in x?', they'll be into it, but sometimes there can be less interest than you might hope."

Realistically, not every young person wants to be 100% on board with everything, and that needs to be respected. Anita has found that flexibility is needed to accommodate when and where young people want to be involved, or not.

There can often also be ethical and practical challenges present. Anita explains, *"There's often a gap between a need to respect and protect young people (especially vulnerable young people) and to recognise their capacities. I think our ethics processes sometimes haven't quite got that balance right."*

Institutional timeframes and processes are also not always aligned with young people's everyday lives.

"There are some flexibilities that people need when they've got a bunch of stuff going on and institutions aren't necessarily sensitive to those things. Our bureaucracy can work slowly, but also research timelines can be tight. Young people are often balancing work, family, social life and study... So having flexibility in the ways that you engage with young people is really important and sometimes our institutions are not adaptable enough to be able to do that."

What makes youth co-research successful?

Anita elaborates that trust is a big factor in the process of working together, and that time needs to be taken for clear communication about what can be achieved through the research. Be mindful about overpromising to young people, or their communities, about what can be done.

"You've got to trust each other. It's got to be a safe space... to be able to play with [the research process] a bit and talk about what you're all trying to do there. It can be very refreshing because young people are so used to being wheeled on to be 'the youth' – especially young people from particular multicultural communities. They're prepared to do it because there's a lot at stake and because it allows for really important advocacy and there are a lot of benefits to be had. But it's also a little bit tedious having to always fly the flag for some particular aspect of your identity that people want represented. So, when you have those opportunities, when you feel that responsibility, it's also good to have the reciprocity and trust to try to start to unpack that."

When and how should young people be involved as co-researchers?

Whilst Anita is always engaged with young people in some capacity, she emphasises that it's not always necessary to involve young people as researchers in every aspect of the research. Rather, *"it's more about meaningful engagement with young people – where it's relevant and is adding value for them."*

In terms of choosing an appropriate youth involvement model, it ultimately depends on the project and, again, what will most benefit the young people.

"Sometimes it's better to acknowledge the limitations and parameters of the research, rather than trying to plug in some young people or a bit of youth voice that actually doesn't benefit the project or the young people."

When and how to best involve young people should start with questions about how they will benefit and what a meaningful role for a young person could look like. Consider how the research, its outcomes, and the wider community would benefit.

Anita has found that, *"Where young people can be involved in some aspect of design or translation or something that adds a skills component that might be attractive to youth, is always a great idea. Having a process of reciprocity is also helpful in a project."*

Final thoughts...

Anita says that there doesn't need to be just one ideal way for co-research to look. The more opportunities there are for young people and senior researchers, the more likely it is that people will be able to access, and be encouraged to adopt co-research across a range of research settings.

"It's such a flexible process, and it needs to be. There's a whole range of ways of involving young people and representing youth voices. Accommodating both sides – the research and the young researchers – in their diversity is useful. I'd like to see more young people involved in quantitative research and projects using big data. It's not all about just doing qualitative research, intervention and advocacy. That is a big part, but it's got to get bigger than that. And if you're going to get people on board, you've got to give them entry points that are meaningful to them."

Hear from a researcher: Dr Helen Berents' co-research experience

Dr Helen Berents is a feminist scholar centrally concerned with representations of children and youth in contexts of crises and conflict, and with engagements with the lived experience of violence-affected young people. Helen has worked collaboratively with young people across various research projects focusing on youth advocacy and leadership; conflict and peacebuilding; and local-global relations in peace and security governance.

Why is engaging with youth co-researchers important?

Without missing a beat, Helen states, *"Because I believe in it, and I believe it's valuable. Therefore, I want to find out more about it and support it through the kind of work that I do, which is research work and building those relationships. So young people can gain the skills that I have."* She jokes by saying, *"I don't have many skills, other than sitting in front of a computer. But if they are the skills that I have, then how can I use those for the benefit of the communities that I serve? Which are not only academic but our youth and youth-serving communities as well."*

Reflecting on her journey, Helen says, *"When I started doing this, I was in my 20s and that was okay because I also was a youth. Now I am in my mid-30s and I am not a youth anymore. So, what does it mean to create knowledge in this space as I age? Young people are competent narrators of experiences of their world, and they have unique things to contribute not only to improve young people's lives but everyone's lives."*

Helen adds that it can't just be senior researchers interviewing young people and writing an academic article about them. *"It's important to think about, how can we do that better in the research process, so it isn't as extractive."*

What are the benefits of working with young people as co-researchers?

Helen's recent research examines youth advocacy and involvement in leadership. This project has been co-facilitated with three youth researchers who were trained and supported across the course of the research. The youth researchers conducted interviews with youth peacebuilders in Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar, and have co-authored reports, opinion pieces and academic articles. Helen has found that her experience *"was just the best! Honestly, it was my favourite thing I've done in a long time and collaborative work is always enjoyable. I love working with others and I think my work is better when I work with others anyway. It pushes you in new ways."* Helen further mentions that there were unique insights that the youth researchers brought. *"It was just really rich. The youth researchers thought of questions that I wouldn't have thought of because they are coming to it with their perspectives and their own experiences."*

Another clear benefit was the open and honest insights that were gained through the youth-led interviews, which may have overwise been missed. *"I've done quite a lot of interviews with [young people] myself and watching the dynamics of the interview between two young people versus between me and a young person is very different. I'm not that old, but sometimes the doctor title plays a role in power hierarchies and relationships. The dynamics between young people were different which meant that the way the questions were answered and the openness in some of the exchanges between the researcher and the interviewee were different. This absolutely demonstrates why this way of doing research is really important because it shows us what we miss when it's just adults talking to young people, let alone about young people as well."*

Helen has also found that involving youth researchers has helped to build relationships in the project, which has led to wider knowledge sharing and advocacy. *"Everyone got each other's LinkedIn after we spoke. And now they're sharing each other's work. The youth researchers are sharing and amplifying the peacebuilders' work, which is really lovely to see because that distinction between academia and practice is often kind of problematic and it is most productive when we break it down within the bounds of ethics."*

What are some of the challenges and ways to navigate these?

Helen mentions that there were a few challenges, but the one that stands out is the payment of youth researchers based overseas. Payment of youth researchers formally recognised the work that they were doing. However, technical issues and administration barriers made it tricky to process international payments, especially when overseas youth-led organisations did not have bank accounts. *"One of the things that we would really like to do going forward is, support and pay young overseas researchers to collaborate with us as actual researchers in the project."*

What makes youth co-research successful?

Helen has found that a key factor in co-research with young people is to understand what training they need and to plan for this. It's important to find the balance between what the youth researchers already know and what they need to learn, to not throw them in the deep end or patronise them. *"Planning is important in making sure that you've considered and thought about it. That you've built in support and skill, training and capacity building… We did some reflective work where we figured out what knowledge and capacity they have. And then we designed some training workshops for the three youth researchers where we talked about ethics and the research process, and we did interview practice and training."* Helen also found that ensuring clear communication with youth researchers about expectations, roles and credit helped both in terms of academic integrity and in young people's confidence in their ability to do the work.

Helen also explains the need to make sure that youth researchers feel well supported. Helen and another senior researcher were available to sit in on the interviews that the youth researchers led to provide any technical support or backup as needed. Further, Helen points out that the trust they had built with the youth researchers meant that they could reach out to them at any point when they felt overwhelmed or worried. *"The young researchers knew that they could message me and say, 'I'm really freaking out about what's going on and what we should be doing.' Because we had that relationship with these researchers, they felt they could reach out to us immediately. That's something that's often not talked about in the research process. We really focus on things like: this is how you do an interview, and this is the ethics [process]. But thinking about the 'being human' in the research process is something I want to do as a researcher and as I work with others."*

Reflecting on her project has been helpful to identify learnings to improve the co-research process in the future. *"I think we did it as well as we could, but I still think there are ways that we could have done it better. I am very conscious of both institutional and my own limitations as to why we didn't get [other culturally diverse] young people to be co-researchers with us for this project. So, the next kind of research we do wouldn't just be Australian researchers researching overseas, it would be about building capacity in the communities that young people are in themselves."*

To rebalance power differentials on the team, Helen and the other senior researcher had conversations with the youth researchers about the politics of authorship and their representation on the research team. The team decided to do a reverse age order for authorship, leading with the youth researchers first, then the senior researchers. Getting the power dynamics right can be tricky, but, as Helen mentions, is also something that, at the same time, *"isn't very difficult at all"*. Rather, it can be as simple as *"recognis[ing] that someone else knows more about something, which is what happened with these young people by the end of our research."*

Final thoughts…

So, what does co-research with young people mean for senior researchers? For Helen, it's about being committed and comfortable to share power and open up space for meaningful dialogue and collaboration. *"A commitment to including young people as part of building the project and a research agenda often means taking a backseat and asking what the young researchers themselves want out of the project, and what do they want to find in the data, what do they think the data means?"*

Helen states that if we are serious about recognising people's competencies in any space then *"we need to have a conversation about what are the ethics of doing [youth] research if you're not including young people as active researchers and collaborators… So, I am hoping that including youth researchers becomes more of a norm rather than an aberration."*

Outputs from Helen's research, including a report on how researchers can engage more meaningfully with youth peacebuilders to empower their leadership can be accessed here.

Hear from a youth researcher: Varsha's co-research experience

Varsha Yajman is a speaker, podcaster and an advocate for climate justice and mental health awareness. She recently worked as a youth researcher in a qualitative project, investigating the different forms of youth leadership in the student strikes for climate action. Varsha explains what attracted her to working in this way and how she found the process.

Why I wanted to be a youth researcher...

The world of academia is known to be insightful and critical to the development and understanding of social issues. However, academia is also inaccessible to young people, communities of colour and those who do not have the resources for educational institutions. That is why, as a young woman of colour, I knew that being a co-researcher was an opportunity to approach my role in climate justice advocacy from a new and more analytical perspective.

The best bits...

The best part of being a youth researcher was the process of reflection and analysis of my experiences and connecting with other researchers. Being surrounded by such a wealth of knowledge in this supportive environment created a comforting environment to learn and build upon my skills.

The challenging bits...

The biggest challenge for me was working in hindsight. I had written the article two years prior to when it was finally published, and I wanted to change the things I said and add nuance to the discussion. What helped me overcome this was realising that academia is useful but is also a marker of its time. It is difficult for such articles to reflect young people's experiences, especially during the formative years of their lives.

The benefits I experienced...

The project I worked on was enlightening and fulfilling, not only because of the article we wrote, but because of the connections I made with other young people and researchers and the process of reflection I underwent. I learnt a lot of skills when it came to article writing, as well as learning from the research itself, like what other fellow school strikers also found helpful in their experiences.

Changes I experienced...

The most significant change for me is the feeling of community when reading fellow school strikers' responses to our project survey. Despite being spread across different areas, seeing common themes through our responses made me feel like I was part of a community, something bigger than just me. It makes the existential threat of the climate crisis feel like something we can tackle because of the people power we have.

You can read the experiences of other youth researchers here:

Nina's Story

Alex's Story

Dan's Story

Guide 2: Getting started with youth co-research

This guide provides an overview of how to prepare for co-research. Are you questioning whether co-research is right for you? Are you feeling unsure about what you can do within your constraints? Use the information, considerations and tools in this guide to figure out what's appropriate for your context, and to learn about ways to advocate for co-research, prepare your team, and onboard youth researchers.

Contents

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Is co-research suitable for your project?

Co-research is just *one* way to meaningfully engage young people in research (see Table 1). Whilst co-research brings many benefits, it is also important to determine whether co-research is the most appropriate or feasible approach by considering your research purpose, context, duration, and the parameters that you are working within.

Before commencing co-research, understand it as a process that:

- is **relational** – prioritises building relationships to establish honest, transparent communication between collaborators
- is **impactful** but can be **challenging** – demands the **willingness to sit with discomfort and uncertainty** and the ability to reframe tensions as opportunities
- is **reflexive** – requires the capacity to continuously reflect and adapt
- is **committed to unsettling dominant power dynamics** between youth researchers and senior researchers
- **takes time** and **requires resources.**

To enable co-research, researchers and the organisations they are working within need to be committed to core youth engagement principles:

- **Establishing a clear purpose** for young people's involvement.
- **Mutual learning** whereby researchers and young people are both teachers and learners.
- **Trust** in each other as colleagues and partners who bring different strengths and expertise.
- **Capacity building** for both youth researchers and the researchers who work with them.
- **Flexibility** to navigate the many moving parts of a co-research process and openness to unexpected directions and outcomes.
- **Transparency and honesty**.

> The extent to which young people can be involved in research depends on the barriers they may face to participation due to multiple intersectionalities. For example, gender and sexuality, educational attainment, cultural background and socio-economic status.

Focusing on what makes for **meaningful participation** is **non-negotiable** when engaging with young people in research. If you can only consult with young people and seek their advice, listen deeply and take their feedback onboard in a way that genuinely influences outcomes. Thank young people for their input, pay them for their time, report back to them on the outcomes of their involvement and leave the door open for future collaboration.

If you can involve young people in specific phases of the research cycle, brief, train, supervise, and collaborate with them. Make it an experience that is impactful, enjoyable and inspiring – for both young people and the researchers working with them. Make spaces for engaging and rich discussions, with laughter, connection and learning from one another – and for pizza 😊. Ideally you will have the luxury to work slowly, carefully and iteratively with young people. No matter what the circumstances, strive to maximise opportunities for mutual transformation, love of learning, collegiality and exploration.

> Plan to embed young people throughout the project design, rather than only involving them when it is convenient or when you need something from them.

> **What is 'meaningful participation'?** The Nine Basic Requirements, informed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, state that meaningful and ethical participation is: transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, youth-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable.[34] Meaningful involvement in co-research is where young people feel: valued, supported, heard, respected, safe, trusted, and confident to shape the research and contribute to knowledge production, a sense of ownership and responsibility.

There is significant literature and practical guidance on the principles of best practice youth engagement, and this overlaps with how you should approach youth co-research. Refer back to these concepts and principles to continually reassess your practice against the goal of meaningful co-research.

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34   Save the Children (2021) The nine basic requirements for meaningful and ethical children's participation. Save the Children.

Approach	Consultancy/ advisory	Participatory	Co-research	Youth-led
Involvement in research cycle	Often at early and late stages (i.e research conception, instrument design, and analysis/ dissemination).	Often during data collection and sometimes during analysis.	In all stages.	In all stages.
Role of young people	**Contribute**: Young people are invited to respond to ideas developed and initiated by researchers.	**Participate**: Young people are involved in research roles to a certain extent, and only in some stages of the research.	**Partner**: Young people have training or research skills that mean they are and integral part of the project team and collaborate with the team across the research cycle and have defined responsibility in project activities.	**Lead**: Young people conceptualise and lead the projects.
Role of adults	**Lead**: Conceptualise and lead the project. They secure the resources, hold decision-making power and are responsible for delivery.	**Lead**: Lead all aspects of the research projects, whilst engaging with young people as equals int he data collection and/or design process.	**Partner**: Collaborate with youth researchers and provide support and guidance to build skills and capacities, whilst retaining project management responsibilities.	**Support**: Support, enable and strengthen initiatives led by young people and help amplify youth voice and influence.
Example models	Youth advisory groups.	Youth co-designers or peer researchers.	Cohort of trained youth researchers.	Small scale initiatives programs, campaigns.

Table 1: The roles of young people and adults across different youth involvement approaches in research.

Further resources

- Wellbeing Health & Youth guidebook: Youth engagement in health research
- Youth Affairs Council Victoria youth involvement toolkit
- Orygen youth partnerships in research toolkit
- Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds guide
- Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People youth participation resources

Tool

- **Recommended reading list**

⛉ Co-research barriers

To decide which approach (see Table 1) might best suit your context, consider the parameters you need to work within and assess the factors that may constrain or enable youth involvement.

Barriers might include:

- gaps in researchers' knowledge and skills about youth involvement principles
- attitudes that reinforce traditional power dynamics or are resistant to new ways of collaborating
- perceived difficulties associated with the ethical requirements to work with young people
- rigid funding application requirements
- time, staffing and money constraints
- systemic inequality and or/discrimination barriers that prevent some groups of young people from accessing opportunities to participate
- lack of flexibility to customise processes to accommodate young people's involvement
- unrealistic expectations of young people's contributions.

Challenges, some of which are unique to the co-research process, can also create barriers to successful co-research (see 'Navigating challenges' in the **Implementation** guide for more detail)

Image credit: Pexels / Cottonbro Studio

⊘ Co-research enablers

Alongside the fundamental concepts of co-research (creating spaces for shared dialogues and new possibilities, reframing tensions as opportunities, unsettling dominant power dynamics, and prioritising relationships), **enablers of co-research include:**

- dedicated time upfront in the project, which allows young people to be involved in the initial agenda-setting and design phase
- sufficient budget to allow for appropriate remuneration for youth researchers and for training and support time
- opportunities to build professional researcher capacity (youth engagement and mentoring skills, time, support, etc.)
- prior and continual opportunities for youth researcher capacity building
- can-do attitudes that embrace the uncertainties and fluidity of the co-research process and an openness to new ways of working
- guidance from more senior or experienced researchers with youth co-research experience
- guidance and support from youth engagement practitioners who can play a bridging and supporting role between youth researchers and researchers
- agreed mechanisms for continual communication.

In practice, the ways young people are involved in a project may shift along a continuum of participation (see Figure 2). There is not necessarily a right or wrong way to involve young people, and the approach is dependent on the research aims and goals, the age and capacity of the young people, young people's priorities, the supervisor's capacity and skills to support and mentor, and the context in which research takes place. Research projects may chop and change or blend approaches at different moments. For example, a project may start by consulting young people but later involve collaboration and co-research, or vice versa.

Figure 2: The different ways that young people can be involved in research can blur. Generally, the more enablers that are in place, the greater the ability to implement collaborative approaches where young people have more ownership.

Image credit: Unsplash / Headway

Readiness for co-research

As well as considering barriers and enablers, when thinking about whether co-research is most appropriate or feasible, consider the following from the perspectives of all involved.

Young people

- Are young people interested in contributing their lived experience to the research?
- Do young people have research skills or an interest in developing these?
- Do young people have the capacity and interest to be involved across the entire research cycle? Or only in certain phases?

Researchers

- Do I have the skills to engage with young people, or the capacity to upskill?
- Do I have the capacity to support and mentor?
- Do I have the support of my team/organisation?

Organisations/ institutions

- Is there resourcing and commitment to support co-research?
- Is there scope for young people to influence the research agenda?
- Does the culture value shared decision-making and is there an openness to challenge traditional power dynamics?

A helpful exercise to undertake before deciding whether to pursue co-research, or what this might look like in your context, is to map the parameters you are working within. Figure 3 can act as a prompt to help you to understand what you can do.

Even if you don't have all the co-research enablers in place, there are still many meaningful ways that you can engage young people (for example, youth advisory groups, peer research or as collaborators in co-design research). Tailor co-research to work for your context; be clear with your collaborators how you are working within your constraints and document your learnings for future projects.

You may find that when you reflect on your process, co-research may have been achieved during some parts, but you cannot honestly say it was always practiced as planned. This is okay, and documenting your evolving methodology is part of the process. Be honest and careful about how you apply the term 'co-research' and what it looks like in your context, so that co-research practice is not misrepresented or reported in a tokenistic way.

Tool

- **Self-assessment tool**

Use this self-assessment tool to gauge your level of readiness to commence co-research with young people.

Further resources

- Orygen co-designing with young people guide
- Save the Children child- and youth-friendly participatory action research toolkit
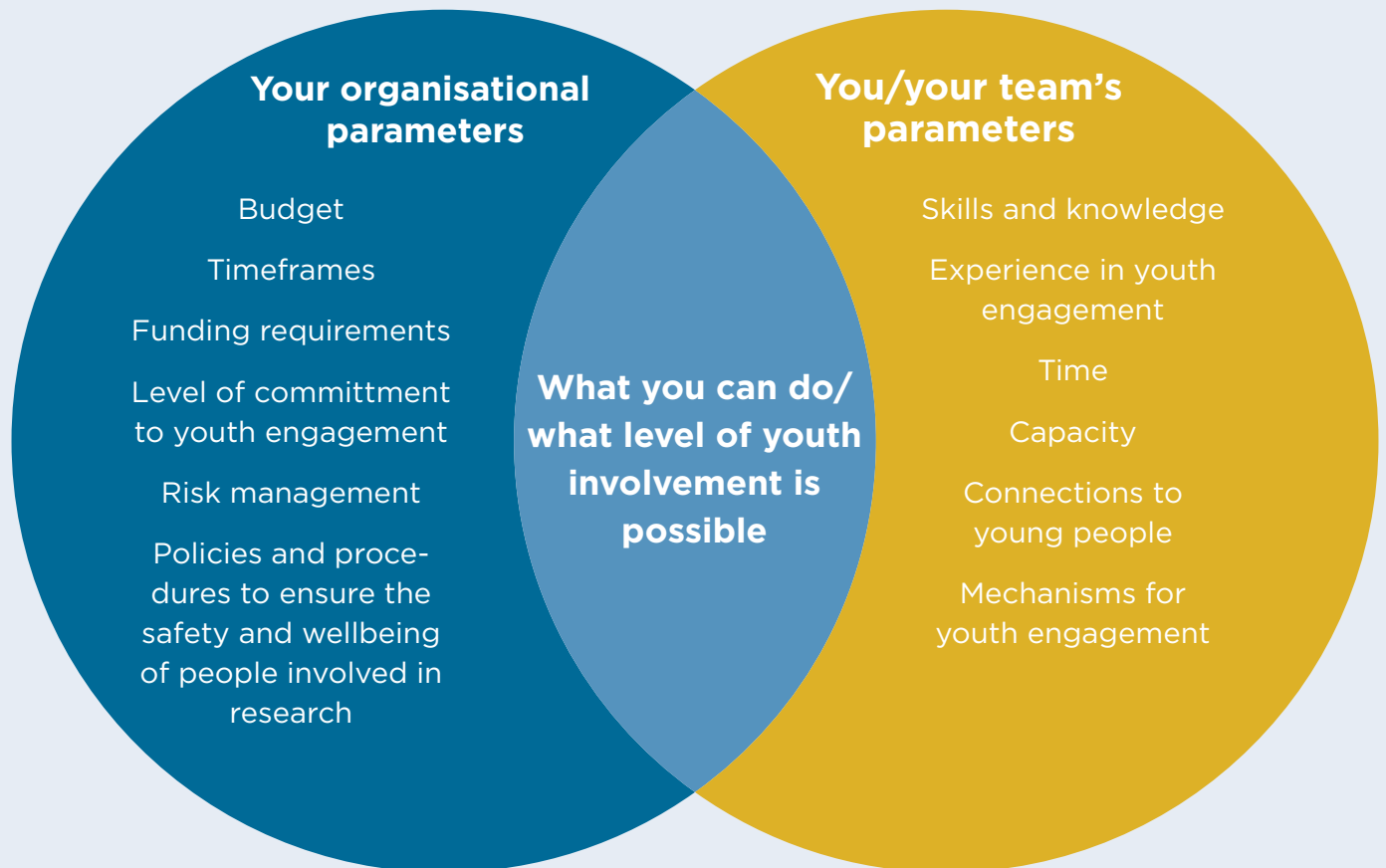- Young and Well enabling participation guide

Your organisational parameters

Budget

Timeframes

Funding requirements

Level of committment to youth engagement

Risk management

Policies and procedures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people involved in research

What you can do/ what level of youth involvement is possible

You/your team's parameters

Skills and knowledge

Experience in youth engagement

Time

Capacity

Connections to young people

Mechanisms for youth engagement

Figure 3: Consider the parameters you are working within when thinking about what level of youth involvement is possible in your context.

How to advocate for co-research in funding and ethics applications

You may be faced with issues when submitting ethics applications or funding bids that question the practicalities and ethical considerations associated with youth co-research. Whilst every project is different, below are some common questions that might be asked by reviewers and example responses that can be tailored to your context.

Question	Example response
How will youth researchers be trained and mentored?	Youth researchers will be recruited, trained and mentored in robust ethical research practice using a cohort model (see the **Implementation** guide for more detail). Training will draw on the support of additional resources, such as the Youth Co-research Toolkit (Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, 2022). Youth researchers will work in pairs to enable peer mentoring and support. The cohort will meet fortnightly to share learnings, insights and any challenges throughout the research process. Youth researchers will be employed for [x time period], and each supervised by an experienced researcher.
How will youth researchers benefit from their involvement?	Youth researchers will benefit from the practical experience and research training opportunity of being embedded in an intergenerational research team, alongside experienced researchers. Youth researchers will have the opportunity to develop strong research skills and interpersonal skills, and new expertise in [research topic]; and nurture their confidence and interest in pursuing careers with a research dimension. They can contribute meaningfully to the improvement of services, or to changes to policy and practice that affect their lives, and gain recognition for this. Working closely with the team, youth researchers will develop meaningful relationships with research professionals, potentially helping their career prospects. As co-researchers, young people can become more aware of important social issues, and this can lead them to advocacy and activism in their communities.
How will the research process benefit from youth co-research?	Youth researchers can identify issues and questions often overlooked by adults and can offer their perspectives on how to prioritise research aims, as well as to facilitate recruitment, particularly with groups of young people that may be hard to reach. Youth researchers can develop research tools and instruments that are more accessible to the study participants, plus more relevant outcome measures. Youth researchers can offer diverse lived experiences and perspectives to provide a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of the data. Data collected by young people from young people offers increased reliability and richness due to increased rapport and balanced power dynamics between researchers and participants. In the dissemination phase, youth researchers can advise and make decisions about how and where research is published, so that it is easily accessible to target audiences. Involving young people as co-researchers, with shared ownership of the research process and outputs, is essential if their rights are to be truly respected and is ultimately necessary to align with a youth-rights approach to research.

Question	Example response
How will children or young people participate in this research?	A team of x young people will be employed to work alongside the researchers to collaborate on the project design and deliverables, and [insert methods/activities]. Youth researchers are not research participants and no data will be collected from them. Rather, they are paid research assistants to the research team. They will be aged [age range] and have received extensive research training, including [insert training activities].
How is young people's participation indispensable to the conduct of the research?	Young people's involvement as youth researchers will ensure that the research activities and deliverables are age-appropriate and will help to minimise the power imbalance that often characterises research with young people.
How will any ethical risks be mitigated and managed?	Risks associated with youth researchers experiencing distress through interviews: Youth researchers will be provided with training to ensure they can conduct safe, ethical research. The academic researchers on the team are experienced and will seek to minimise any risk and oversee and support the youth researchers to manage risks. They will fully train the youth researchers in preparation for interviews. Experienced researchers will co-interview alongside the youth researchers [where/when this is required in your context]. The collaborative nature of the project will ensure that all researchers know where and when their colleagues will be conducting research, ensuring their safety. Mechanisms will be in place for youth researchers to check in with the research team before and after interviews, including advising where and when interviews are taking place, and to debrief afterwards. All researchers will provide scholarly and emotional support for one another, to minimise stress, with a specific focus on the needs of the youth researchers, such as dedicated meetings to provide training and support. All researchers are aware that they can seek out additional support through recommended, local counselling services.

Preparing your team

Preparing your team to undertake the co-research process is vital.

What is needed from you and your team to enable co-research?

Soft skills

- excellent communication
- active listening
- open-mindedness
- approachability
- creativity
- flexibility
- awareness of dynamics and behaviours associated with power and privilege.

Supervision responsibilities

- setting clear shared expectations
- inducting youth researchers
- training / up-skilling youth researchers
- briefing and developing work plans/tasks (where relevant)
- undertaking regular check-ins, meetings and supervision
- providing and receiving robust feedback.

Time for

- relationship building with youth researchers
- relationship building and management with project partners
- youth researcher supervision/mentoring and management of expectations
- collaborative design of research questions and methodologies
- finding creative solutions to overcome challenges and explore possibilities along the way
- reflexivity and reflection.

> You will need longer than you think. However much time you think you need to undertake co-research, triple it.

Partnership management (if you are working with a stakeholder who brings youth engagement expertise, access to networks of young people and/or subject matter expertise)

- setting clear shared expectations
- negotiating roles and responsibilities throughout
- agreeing on roles when engaging with youth researchers
- agreeing on appropriate modes for communicating/engaging with youth researchers.

> We recommend a ratio of, minimum 1 researcher: maximum of 3 youth researchers. Consider this as you build your team and recruit young people.

> Co-research with young people can allow you to build many different professional skills, and your experience as a mentor and supervisor.

Further resources

- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Getting the right team

Recruiting youth researchers

When reaching out to young people about co-research opportunities, consider partnering with a local or national youth-facing organisation with networks of young people or who have established youth advisory groups or consultants. This pathway can be helpful to reach young people who may have a research interest, or those with experience working with adults in different ways.

When seeking out a youth engagement partner, consider what kind of young people you are seeking to work with (that is, a certain age, lived experience, skills, location) and approach an organisation with relevant expertise and experience.

For more ideas on how to approach recruitment and potential partners, see the further resources.

The practical considerations you will need to make before starting discussions with a partner about involving young people as co-researchers include:

- What is the purpose of involving young people?
- Specifically, what activities will you ask young people to do?
- How long will young people be involved?
- How many young people will be involved?
- How will young people's contributions be used?
- What will young people gain from the co-research experience?
- What training, mentoring or other capacity-building will your team provide?
- How will young people be remunerated and recognised for their time and contributions?
- Who will be responsible for direct liaison with young people?
- What formal agreements need to be in place to manage this partnership?
- What insurance and other HR requirements need to be in place?
- How will your research team and the partner organisation communicate regularly, and resolve any challenges along the way?
- Who are the lead team members/key contact points from both parties?
- Do you require young people to have specific prior knowledge or skillsets?
- At what stage of the research process are you engaging young people? How will this impact how much young people are informed about the project? Is there a project brief that young people can consider before confirming their involvement?

When recruiting, some practical things you may need to prepare include:

- a Memorandum of Understanding/Partnership Agreement (if partnering with a youth organisation)
- a brief detailing tasks and due dates
- a role description
- consent forms for under 18s and parental consent, depending on what permissions the partner organisations have in place
- a high-level project plan and timeline / key milestones
- information on your youth safeguarding policies and procedures (including Working with Children Checks if involving young people under 18 years of age)
- research ethics approval, if applicable.

If you are seeking to partner with a youth organisation, it is best to start the conversation as early as possible. Do not underestimate the length of time it takes to build and formalise partnerships.

If you are recruiting young people via a youth organisation, be mindful that young people's prior experiences with this organisation may shape their expectations of involvement in your project. Early on, be very clear about how you expect to work together about communication, professionalism, and responsibilities. Think about how you can clarify and check these expectations with young people. Where possible, co-creating roles with young people can help to ensure that your expectations are realistic and suitable.

Tools

- **Youth researcher brief**
- **Youth researcher role description / expression of interest**

Further resources

- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Recruiting young people to partner in research
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Safeguarding and duty of care

Roles and responsibilities of youth researchers

Why are you asking young people to be involved? How will they contribute? Be clear on this at the outset and acknowledge that your motivations for engaging youth researchers may be different at different phases or change along the way.

Clear roles and responsibilities help young people to make informed decisions about what they are signing up for; can help avoid disappointment; clarify what parts of their identity they bring to the process; and get everyone on the same page. Before assuming what a young person can bring to the process, consider why young people say they want to be involved, and their interests, preferences, time commitment, age, experiences, capabilities, skills and goals.

> What expertise do young people want to contribute? How can I amplify this through the project?

Young people may bring:

- prior experience engaging with other young people and/or participating in youth engagement activities
- youth networks
- innovative, relevant strategies to engage young people
- lived experience as a young person, which informs the overall approach to engaging other young people in the research project
- fresh perspectives or different ways of looking at things (for example, developing research questions you may not have thought of, and analysing the data using a different lens).

> Young people won't always have access to young participants for your research. If this is something you are looking for, seek this from a strategically identified partner organisation.

> Do you wish to work with a youth researcher who brings certain skills or lived experience? Communicate this with young people so that they are clear about what they are bringing to the process.

Young people might play a key role in a wide range of tasks in the research cycle. Next are some suggestions about how they can take responsibility in the research process. Bear in mind that youth researchers might blend multiple roles and tasks, depending on the focus, scope and needs of the project.

> Young people don't just have to be involved in projects about young people. Co-research can apply in various settings beyond social research, including quantitative studies, big data research and analytics.

Image credit: CMY / Sam Biddle

Research phase	Possible tasks for youth researchers
Conceptualisation	Co-create, revise and prioritise research questions Conduct environmental scans and literature reviews Contribute to developing funding bids Attend project kick-off meeting
Project planning	Set up a team communication channel Schedule meetings for the research team Provide feedback on research timelines Identify suitable locations for research activities Consult on reimbursements for participants Co-create impact tracking maps for evaluation purposes
Research design	Co-create research methods and data collection instruments Review research tools and provide feedback (e.g., interview discussion guides, workshop agendas, surveys) Lead youth feedback on research tools Support the development of participant sample attributes and recruitment methods
Ethical approval	Contribute to and/or review ethics applications Develop materials (e.g., consent forms, participant information sheets)
Participant recruitment	Create recruitment materials and social media collateral Communicate with participants (e.g., scheduling interview times/locations)
Data collection	Conduct fieldwork, for example, interviews (with support from the research team as required) and workshops Note-taking Transcription Desk research / mapping exercises
Stakeholder/partner engagement	Identify potential partners Communicate with stakeholders
Analysis and interpretation	Co-produce coding framework Enter and code data Develop data dashboards Statistical analysis Identify preliminary findings Participate in collaborative analysis sessions with the team Communicate findings back to participants
Reporting	Draft or review/feedback on sections of the report Co-author publications (e.g., journal articles)

Research phase	Possible tasks for youth researchers
Translation and dissemination	Create research translation materials that are engaging, relevant and relatable to young people Be involved in planning and presenting at events (e.g., webinars, exhibitions, conferences)
Evaluation	Attend retrospective meetings at the end of projects/milestones to reflect on successes, challenges, and learnings Provide feedback on the process Co-create evaluation tools Collect impact data throughout the project

Image credit: Pexels / Zen Chung

Youth co-research payment guidelines

Formal payment helps to recognise and value young people's time and expertise and to foster a constructive co-research environment that is equitable and respectful.

Activities that require payment can include when young people:

- have an ongoing contribution to the development of research design, ethics, methods, tools, data collection and analysis, literature reviewing and report writing
- are involved in recruitment and engagement of youth participants for specific projects
- facilitate or co-facilitate data collection.

At universities, youth researchers can be employed on a casual basis as research assistants. Whilst pay rates differ between institutions, this payment rate can be decided upon based on the following considerations:

- What is their level of responsibility?
- What is their level of skill and experience?
- What tasks will they be carrying out? What level of skill is required?
- Are those tasks critical to the research that is being conducted?
- Are they also bringing their lived experience / other expertise to the project?
- Is the payment country, culture and context-sensitive?
- Is the payment in line with the current cost of living and comparable to similar award rates?

Industry awards

For an ongoing role, the best place to find information on current hourly rates for research, facilitation or engagement roles is either the Higher Education Industry Award or the Social and Community Services Pay Rates. Once you have developed the position description and responsibilities, we suggest you refer to the Fair Work Ombudsman award rates below in consultation with your Human Resources department. Alternatively, your university, institution or organisation may have an internal pay rate based on these awards.

Short-term/one-off engagement

If you are engaging young people in short-term or one-off research activities, the below pay rate guides can help you to determine fair remuneration, as well as non-financial ways to acknowledge their contribution.

Further resources

- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guide: Package of thanks, value & remuneration
- Wellbeing Health & Youth: Remuneration tool
- Centre for Multicultural Youth: Youth researcher engagement guidelines and reimbursement guidelines

Example of budget justification for funding applications:

Each youth researcher will be employed at HEW4.1 for a period of 3 months, to cover 0.5 months of intensive research training, drawing on training resources such as [insert materials that will be used] and 2.5 months of research work. When appointing youth researchers we consulted with youth organisations who advised that HEW4.1 is appropriate compensation relative to the training and experience level of an 18–21-year-old.

Induction

Beyond the standard induction and orientation to your organisation, set a time for kick-off meetings to brief youth researchers and establish introductions with your team, and any other stakeholders. As part of your induction, make time for conversations to align expectations and get on the same page.

Getting to know each other

Before you start, take some time to get to know each other as a whole team, and one-to-one. An intentional conversation can be meaningful, illuminating and a great way to start building trust.

Conversation starters:

- What is one superpower you bring that will help you and the team in this project?
- If you think back on the journey that has led you to work on this project, what would be the significant events that have brought you here?
- What are three important things you want your colleagues to know about you?
- What are your greatest strengths in a team?
- What skills would you like to improve? Or things you are interested in learning?
- What motivated you to get into this particular role/area of interest?
- What are you hoping to achieve through this project?
- What are your expectations of yourself? Of each other?
- What are you most excited about?
- What do you feel nervous or uncertain about?
- What questions do you have for each other at the start of this project?

> For inclusive and respectful practice, identify whether young people have any access or inclusion adjustments/considerations, and work with them to find out how they are best supported (for example, young people with a physical or cognitive disability; young people who may have cultural considerations; young people's preferred pronouns; or young people who face transport disadvantage).

Discussing the project

Be prepared to share as much information as you can about the project – without being too overwhelming. Consider sharing a project plan or excerpt of a funding proposal.

Set up an onboarding meeting with youth researchers to discuss:

- project aims, objectives and a timeline
- who is involved and who youth researchers will be engaging with specifically
- who youth researchers will be reporting to
- funding source and funder expectations/deliverables
- any constraints that you are working within that can't be changed
- reporting requirements
- any challenges you anticipate along the way
- who has decision-making power, and what level of decisions the project team can make
- processes which may take time, and anticipated timeframes (such as ethics approval/sign-off).

Invite feedback, ideas and suggestions in the areas where there is scope to influence. This could include:

- developing research aims and questions
- designing methodology
- creating impact-tracking tools / evaluation process
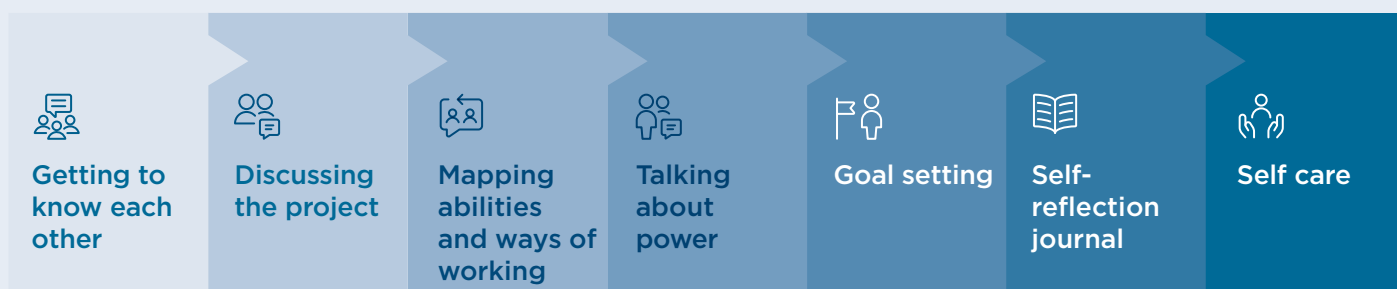- plans for engaging a wider group of young people, as advisors, peer researchers or participants.

Templates

- **Youth researcher brief template** (use this as a starting point for induction discussions)
- **Onboarding meeting template** (use this to help structure your meeting)

Youth co-research induction steps

| Getting to know each other | Discussing the project | Mapping abilities and ways of working | Talking about power | Goal setting | Self-reflection journal | Self care |

Mapping abilities and ways of working

We have developed a simple and interactive **mapping abilities and roles tool** to help you and the youth researcher/s discuss your respective strengths, skills and abilities, roles, responsibilities, questions, communication, and preferred ways of working.

You can revisit this documentation if your roles and responsibilities evolve throughout the project, or if you encounter challenges along the way.

If you are employed by different organisations, you may want to formally write up your respective roles and responsibilities in a Memorandum of Understanding.

Talking about power

As part of the activity above, or as part of your induction for youth researchers, reflect individually, and then come together as a team, on questions to critically examine power using the questions on these **positionality cards**.

See the Power and Privilege Training Guide included in the Youth Co-research Toolkit to revisit issues of power and privilege in social research and for guidance on exploring your positionality.

Goal setting

Just like other team members, youth researchers will bring a unique set of skills, knowledge and experience to the project team. Given that this might be an early or formative research experience, this is a chance to support their, and your, professional skills and experience. Appropriate support can help youth researchers to meaningfully contribute to the project and provide invaluable experience that furthers their personal and professional development. Use this **goal-setting template** to discuss and document youth researchers' goals.

Self-reflection journal

A self-reflection journal enables critical reflection during the research process.

For researchers working with young people: This **self-reflection journal** prompts questions for researchers to carefully consider their positionality, power, privilege and biases, as well as ways of working and communicating, before, during and after the research process.

For youth researchers: This **self-reflection journal** is designed to support youth researchers to reflect on their goals, achievements, thoughts, feelings and challenges throughout the co-research process. This can help youth researchers to identify their experiences, strengths, and areas for development.

Self-care

Discussing self-care with youth researchers is a way to enable safe, ethical and respectful co-research, especially if their role asks them to draw on their lived experiences or to work directly with the lived experiences of others.

Consider how you will identify and respond to any potential impacts of the research project on youth researchers' wellbeing, especially if the subject matter is personal or sensitive, or if other people involved in the research may share experiences that could be triggering.

Tools and templates

- Onboarding meeting agenda
- Mapping abilities and roles tool
- Positionality question cards
- Goal-setting template
- Self-reflection journal for researchers

Further resources

- Self-care resources in the youth co-research toolkit for young people
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Induction checklist
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Induction presentation template
- Self-reflection journal for youth researchers
- Power and Privilege Training Guide

Guide 3: Implementation of youth co-research

This guide provides information and practical tips to support you in putting co-research into action. Use it to explore how to build the capacities of all involved, nurture relationships, and navigate challenges.

Co-research can look different depending on who is involved, the research questions, the methods and the research context. As such, rather than being prescriptive, this guide provides ideas, inspiration, and considerations to think about when implementing co-research.

Contents

What can co-research with young people look like?

Possible models of co-research include:

Cohort model

A group of young people are recruited to be part of a longer-term co-research program, which will give them experience working across multiple different projects over a longer time (for example, 1 year). They are provided with research skills training and are supervised by a team of experienced researchers. The young people can work together in pairs or small groups to enable peer mentoring and support, and meet regularly to share learnings, insights, and challenges.

See, for example, the Explore program and the Wellbeing Health & Youth Commission.

Works best when:

- there is ample resourcing to support training, supervision, mentoring and remuneration
- you are working with young people of a similar age
- you are partnered with a youth-facing organisation that could support the engagement of this cohort
- there are multiple projects that youth researchers can be involved in.

Group model

A group of young people are recruited and trained to work on one specific project. Like the cohort model, young people can work together and learn from each other.

Works best when:

- there is moderate resourcing available
- the research project and the young people would benefit from a co-research approach.

One-to-one

One young person is embedded into the research team and provided with skills training, supervision and mentorship from one experienced researcher.

Works best when:

- there is limited resourcing and time
- you are recruiting a young person who brings some specific expertise – either lived experience and/or some pre-existing skills/knowledge
- there is a young person, who may have been involved initially as a participant, who has an interest in further collaboration as a researcher, or who is passionate about the project.

Image credit: Pexels / Anna Shvets

Possible forms of engagement with youth researchers:

Youth researcher is involved across the entire research project – from inception to dissemination.

Pros: Young people feel a sense of ownership; there is time to build relationships/rapport; young people can contribute to shaping the research agenda and knowledge production.

Cons: Young people's availability may fluctuate throughout the project; sustained engagement may be challenging with competing priorities; requires greater resources.

Youth researcher is involved during particular project phases.

Co-research doesn't necessarily have to involve large-scale, long-term projects to be meaningful. Young people may have the capacity to dip in and out of projects at certain time points to support certain phases or tasks, which can be just as valuable.

Pros: Young people can still be involved as collaborative research partners if they have reduced capacity for longer-term commitments; requires less resourcing.

Cons: Can slide into tokenism without careful consideration of how young people will collaborate as research partners; can be harder to build trust and rapport; requires careful management of one another's expectations so that no one feels let down at any stage in the process.

Image credit: CMY / Sam Biddle

Capacity-building for researchers working with young people

Co-research is an opportunity for researchers to develop skills in youth engagement, project management, supervision, and mentoring, as well as learn new ways of flexible and adaptive working. Co-research works best when researchers have the practical skills to enable collaboration and align expectations (see the **Getting started** guide for more information).

> 💡 Be mindful that those involved in co-research are on a mutual learning curve and that many of the skills required come with learning as we go. Make room for mistakes, be ready to navigate bumps in the road, and be prepared to give and receive kindness.

Before engaging with young people, take time to prepare with those who will be working with youth researchers to decide what training, or refresher training, would be helpful and how you will support each other through the process.

Capacity-building will look different for different teams, depending upon levels of experience and expertise. Skill-building sessions can be formal and informal, for example:

- chats with colleagues about their experiences
- self-guided (putting aside some time to read resources and toolkits, or watch 'how to' videos)
- within your organisation, such as a skill-building workshop led by an experienced team member
- formal professional development courses in youth engagement
- reaching out to and meeting with other researchers or youth engagement practitioners to seek their advice and experience around similar projects to the one you are planning to undertake
- mentoring from experienced youth researchers.

> 💡 After a co-research project, ask youth researchers to provide you with robust feedback about how you might further develop your skills or knowledge.

Image credit: Pexels / Thisisengineering

Capacity-building steps for researchers:

Clarify the purpose of young people's involvement.

Conduct a rapid audit of your team's youth engagement skills and experience. Where are the gaps? What training would be helpful? For example, do you need additional training to work with young people from a specific cultural background or with lived experience?

Arrange any necessary training for your team. This might include:

› models, principles and methods for youth participation and engagement in research

› ethical research practice with young people, particularly those with any specific lived experiences relevant to your project (for example, young people with disability or chronic illness, LGBITQA+ young people, young people from refugee backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people)

› youth safeguarding (and additional requirements if engaging with young people under 18)

› if possible, identify someone experienced in your network and outside the research team who can provide troubleshooting, mentoring and support about involving young people as co-researchers.

> For any training needs raised by your team, identify who can provide the training. Is there a youth-facing organisation with expertise in this area? Is there someone in your organisation who has expertise in this area? Could a young person provide this training?

Be prepared to identify and offer additional training if team members change.

Further resources:

- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Capacity building
- Youth Affairs Council Victoria youth involvement toolkit
- Orygen youth partnerships in research toolkit
- Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds guide
- Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People youth participation resources
- Berry Street youth engagement training

Image credit: Pexels / Keira Burton

Capacity-building for youth researchers

To enable meaningful collaboration, youth researchers will likely need a blend of formal and informal training and mentoring. Formal training, such as skills-building workshops, may be required to learn about research methods and ethics. Informal training and mentoring, such as one-to-one sessions or fortnightly group discussions, can support the development of professional skills in time management, communication and teamwork.

Capacity-building steps for youth researchers:

Understand young people's perceptions of their current capabilities and skills, and how they would like to upskill.

Design and offer training sessions for youth researchers that meet both their needs and the requirements of the project.

Consider how to embed peer-to-peer learning opportunities across the project. For example, youth researchers could work in pairs to collect or analyse data.

Plan for how youth researchers will be supported to learn new skills and develop expertise throughout the project (for example, regular check-in meetings and access to training programs/resources).

Templates

- **Youth researcher training workshop agenda template** (to structure a group training session)
- **Youth researcher training workshop presentation** (to deliver a group training session)

Further resources

- **Youth Co-research Toolkit: Social research training guides** (Introduction to social research, research ethics, power and privilege, project management)
- Barnardo's Young Researcher's Toolkit

Image credit: Pexels / Mikael Blomkvist

Building relationships

Co-research works best when there are positive relationships between collaborators. Strong relationships can allow young people to feel able to speak up when they need support managing challenges, to feel confident to fully contribute to the research and can enable lead researchers to also feel supported by their team. Building strong relationships is about all collaborators putting in effort, time and commitment to meeting each other where they are at.

Everyone is different. Consider diverse needs and preferences when building trust and rapport.

Unsettling traditional power dynamics can be tricky (they will likely always exist). But, at the same time, can be as simple as recognising that a young person knows more about something, or has ideas about how to do something better.

Strategies for building and maintaining relationships with youth researchers include:

- One-to-one conversations that build rapport and enable communication about changes, challenges and successes.
- Discussions about your and the youth researcher's strengths, interests, motivations, preferred ways of working and support needed.
- Communicate when and where you are available.
- Learn to be comfortable with awkwardness – at least for a bit. If young people are unsure how to contribute, provide them with explanations, choices or examples when asking for their input.
- Create safe spaces where young people and researchers feel able to speak up. For example:
  › Have a discussion as a group at the start of your project where everyone can share what helps them to feel comfortable (for example, respect, inclusivity, non-judgment, willingness to share and listen). You could write this up into a 'group agreement'.
  › Have a 'safe space' check-in at any regular meetings you hold, where you can revisit what you've agreed to and use it as a tool for continuing these conversations.
  › Ask young people for their ideas and opinions, but don't expect them to have all the answers.
  › Routinely reflect on the research process together and invite feedback on how to strengthen it.
- Challenge traditional power dynamics – experiment with setting aside your title.
- Ensure that you debrief after any challenges are met by the youth researcher, yourself or the whole team.

Strategies for building and maintaining relationships with other project collaborators include:

Relationships with youth-facing partner organisations

- Identify what each partner wants from this relationship, and where there are mutual benefits and aligned objectives.
- Agree on how and what decisions should be made together.
- Agree on responsibilities and develop practical strategies for sharing the workload in ways that maximise the available expertise and work within resource constraints.
- Have mechanisms for routine consultation and communication throughout the project.

Relationships with other researchers

- Reflect both individually and as a team on the co-research journey to identify lessons learned and respond to emerging opportunities and challenges.
- Keep each other accountable by calling out power dynamics.
- Reach out to those with co-research experience to seek mentoring and advice.

Tools

- **Conversation starters**
- **Self-reflection journal**

Navigating challenges in co-research

Supporting youth involvement in any research context can be complex, but some unique challenges can arise in co-research. These challenges should be expected – not feared.

In the co-research process, if acknowledged, challenges and tensions can be reframed as opportunities for creativity, learning and innovation. Openly discussing challenges with those involved can help to explore ways to circumvent them together. Being upfront about challenges, particularly when research is fast-paced and decisions need to be made quickly, helps to improve transparency, honesty and trust between collaborators.

Overall, the involvement of young people in co-research should be pragmatic, flexible and suited to the setting and focus of the study. Crucially, it should be shaped by young people's preferences, choices, abilities and interests, and should respect their time, skills and commitment. Practically, co-research needs to account for sufficient planning, time and funding. Establishing regular rhythms and mechanisms for communication between all parties, having space for reflection, asking and not assuming, re-checking and negotiating expectations can help to navigate challenges as and when they arise.

All these things are strengthened by building relationships, which enable honest and open communication.

Challenge	Tips
Unclear or shifting roles and responsibilities **Different expectations**	• Early in the project, clearly define roles and responsibilities together to ensure that young people are aware of the expectations of them. Discuss with youth researchers what they want to achieve through the project, and what their skills, strengths and areas for improvement are (see the **Getting started** guide for more detail). • Be upfront about any limitations that the research project has, such as timelines and budget. This can provide important context around priorities and decision-making throughout the research cycle. • Hold regular project meetings with the whole team. Once a fortnight, have a standing item on the agenda to revisit roles and responsibilities. • If young people are promised certain responsibilities (e.g., data collection), ensure that there are opportunities and support for this to happen. If things change, communicate this and explain why. • Provide young people with a written brief about the role, including time commitments, frequency and schedule of meetings, hours of work and remuneration information. • Reflect on the assumptions that you may have about youth researchers (i.e., professionalism, communication methods, experience), and raise these together to get on the same page. • Agree on a protocol for youth researchers to provide feedback about their experience.

Challenge	Tips
Miscommunication or lack of communication	• Decide with youth researchers the best channel for communication and conduct regular review sessions so that you can address issues as the project progresses. • Set up specific channels via Slack, Discord, WhatsApp or Microsoft Teams where frequent communication can take place between team members. • Make time and space for honest check-ins. Even if nothing has progressed with the project, communicating this is still important. • Be mindful that young people might communicate their priorities in a different style from what researchers are used to (e.g., not showing up, non-verbal communication, actions as well as words). • Clarify terms and acronyms and check for understanding. Avoid jargon and take the opportunity to introduce youth researchers to terminology that is relevant to the research project. • Agree on who will ultimately take responsibility for decisions and how these will be shared with the whole team.
Disengagement	• Communicate any changes to project timelines. • Throughout a project, arrange regular check-ins so that you can discuss progress. • Run group brainstorming sessions to reflect on ideas, solutions, what is working well and what can be improved. Encourage young people that no idea is a bad idea. • Consider setting up reading groups to sustain momentum. • Give youth researchers a sense of ownership by allocating tasks and responsibility for activities they are passionate about. • Prioritise social time to build relationships. Allow time for the team to get to know each other personally and professionally, to build trust. Provide opportunities for youth researchers to develop relationships with different team members, so that young people have networks of support they can access when needed. • Identify and support training needs and provide examples of what you could offer (e.g., conducting interviews together, stepping through how budgets are developed, peer mentoring, and professional development courses). • Create opportunities for meaningful collaboration by ensuring that spaces are safe and welcoming. Start your project or any one-off activities with a discussion around what helps everyone to feel comfortable, able to speak up, and empowered to bring their best to the project. You could also do some fun activities that encourage the team members to share their skills, strengths, weak points and preferred ways of working and communication. • Use creative and engaging methods to work together (e.g., icebreakers, breakouts, mind mapping, drawing, workshops, brainstorming, games, polling) and online collaborative tools (e.g., video meeting platforms, Miro) if working remotely.

Challenge	Tips
Power imbalances	• Experiment with setting aside titles. Have everyone in the team know each other on a first-name basis. • Insist that young people take the lead on key project activities, such as chairing meetings or reviewing outputs. • Give young people a sense of ownership by assigning responsibilities for tasks they are passionate about or interested in. • Make time and room for continual reflexivity. Carefully consider your positionality, power, privilege, and biases, as well as ways of working and communicating, at the outset and throughout the research process. For power imbalances to be redressed, those in positions of power must constantly question whether they are imposing their views or perspectives. • Pay attention to small things, like who is doing most of the talking or who talks first. • Genuinely appreciate young people's suggestions, ideas and feedback. • Ensure that young people know that their contributions are valuable for the research process and wider outcomes.

Image credit: Pexels / Ivan Samkov

Case study: Nina's challenges

Nina has been involved as a youth researcher on several co-research projects, where she has had experience facilitating participatory workshops and designing evaluation tools.

Nina says that one of the biggest challenges that she has had to face was a lack of clear expectations. There were a few times when Nina's expectations of her role did not align with the senior researchers.

"I felt like I got dropped into the deep end with the fact that I was required to make a lot of decisions that I didn't expect were going to be my decisions to make. Their expectations of me were really high, but I hadn't expected it to be that high."

There was another instance of miscommunication and unclear expectations: *"I ended up dropping out of that project because [of] the way that it was pitched to us, the time commitment and responsibilities weren't made clear. We had to do tasks like recruiting participants, which was something that has always been done for us. We also had to sort out the physical space where we would need to hold the workshop and organise the timing and logistics. All these tasks meant that the role required a lot more work than I expected, and I didn't have that time. Having made those expectations clear at the start would have been helpful."*

Nina emphasises that she liked having that responsibility, but it would have been good to know about it beforehand and have clearer expectations before starting. *"The thing that helped was having the other young researchers in the youth program to talk to and also reaching out to people on the research team and clarifying the expectations."*

Concerns, thoughts and feelings from the perspectives of those involved in co-research

From the perspective of researchers working with young people...	From the perspective of youth researchers...
"We are falling behind and are missing deadlines..."	"What hat am I wearing? What part of my identity/ experience should I be bringing?"
"We're working too slowly..."	"This role isn't what I had expected..."
"I don't have enough time to provide enough support."	"This is requiring way more hours than I thought it would..."
"I don't have enough time to stop, think, and reflect."	"I can't keep up with all these tasks..."
"Why don't the youth researchers want to stay involved?"	"I'm feeling like I'm not being taken seriously."
"This is new to me – I'm not sure how to delegate."	"I feel like I'm not being told about the bigger picture."
"I haven't heard back from the youth researcher in a while..."	"I don't feel like I can say what I really think."
"I'm feeling stressed about how much is on my plate..."	"I haven't been told what is going on with the project."
"I'm not sure how much time the youth researcher will need to give because the process is uncertain."	"I don't feel like I can ask for help..."
"What level of support should I provide without over- or under-estimating?"	"I can't speak on behalf of all young people."
"When can I meet with the youth researcher? Their availabilities are constantly changing..."	"Am I the right person for this job?"

Advice from youth researchers

Alex recommends that researchers can be supportive by:

"Being approachable, honest and asking youth researchers what would be helpful."

"Regularly checking in with young people and referring them to others that can provide support."

Dan says:

"Just listen and communicate. Many young people come into research projects without having many ideas. Let the youth researchers know they're still very important to the projects, including their views and opinions. Actively give opportunities for youth researchers to upskill."

Nina shares two pieces of advice for adult researchers:

"Firstly, be clear. Have as many of the expectations set out beforehand as possible and communicate that in a clear way to young people. This includes logistical and practical things like time commitment or tasks they will be doing. That information should be made available to anyone you want to recruit."

"Secondly, try to make researchers available for questions, especially when busy periods come up. This is based on what I liked about the people who worked with us. The fact that they made themselves available when things were tricky. There is a lot of value having things like being supported and not having to work alone on things especially when things don't make sense."

Quick tips for working together

Planning phase

- **Adopt and advocate for a co-research mindset.** Genuinely welcome, accept and incorporate young people's input, even if this challenges your own or strays from standard approaches.

- **Consider *why* you want to engage young people as co-researchers.**

- **Be prepared for a messy, complex reality**. It's not co-research if it turns out the way you expected or imagined. It's a non-linear, experimental and fluid process where the power, control and identities of those involved are constantly renegotiated. Being prepared for this and being flexible to and planning for adaptation is key.

- **Consider what skills, processes and resources your team and organisation need to support young people's engagement.** Are you confident in supporting and mentoring young people in the research process? Is your organisation or institution able to onboard and pay young people for their contributions? Consider what training, support, processes or resources you may need to ensure it is a positive experience for both youth researchers and your team, and who can help.

- **Work with youth researchers through established programs.** Inviting young people to be involved through established training programs can be a particularly helpful first step, as these young people receive training and have an established trusting relationship with the program leaders.

- **Consider youth researchers' goals, preferences and capabilities.** What do young people want to get out of the co-research process? Make time to understand this to make the experience as rewarding as possible.

- **Prioritise social time to build relationships.** Having strong relationships helps to overcome challenges that may occur.

- **Set clear expectations and be honest and transparent about young people's contributions.** Get on the same page at the outset and communicate this in any paperwork.

- **Identify and support training needs** to ensure young people are equipped to meaningfully contribute.

Throughout

- **Communicate consistently and accessibly.** Be honest and upfront about changes and challenges.

- **Regularly debrief** and provide supportive, constructive feedback.

- **Be flexible** to re-negotiate workloads or revise deadlines.

- **Showcase youth researchers' contributions and diverse strengths.** Provide a range of opportunities for youth researchers to be involved that play to their existing strengths and celebrate the project's achievements, big and small, along the way.

- **Give youth researchers a sense of ownership.**

- **Evaluate your practice.** Build regular feedback loops to understand how your process is going and what can be improved for the youth researchers involved.

- **Make time and room for continued reflexivity.**

- **Recognise and celebrate achievements.** Build a regular 'highlights' agenda item at your regular project meetings or in communication channels. Take the time to recognise specific achievements and contributions of youth researchers, verbally and/or in writing. For exceptional contributions, consider nominating a youth researcher for a state or territory youth award. Provide a letter of reference or be a referee. Acknowledge their collaboration in publications, reports, and via dissemination channels (for example, project website, social media posts, news articles).

Templates

- **Mid-project review meeting template**

How to manage ethical issues when working with youth researchers

There are some unique challenges to consider when involving young people as researchers. The following guide provides some suggestions on how to mitigate against potential ethical risks.

Ethical risk/challenge	Mitigation strategies
Youth researchers experience distress from exposure to distressing or triggering information (e.g., when conducting interviews).	• Provide formal and informal support to youth researchers (e.g., through structured training workshops, debriefings, check-ins). • Before data collection, ensure youth researchers are fully across the research topic, and have the option to choose when they are involved, and withdraw their involvement if they choose to. • Encourage researchers to develop self-care plans to respond to questions such as, "What activities or strategies can you do when feeling stressed?" "What might get in the way and how could you overcome these barriers?" "Who can you talk to about something on your mind?" • Provide contact information for relevant support services, if required. • Consider hiring a small group of youth researchers, who can work together and provide peer-to-peer support.
Youth researchers do not maintain ethical conduct during the research.	• Provide adequate training to youth researchers so that they understand the power and responsibilities that come with being a researcher, and how their actions have the potential to cause harm to participants. • Provide training so that they are aware of the ethical implications involved in participant recruitment and informed consent. • It may be appropriate to monitor or co-lead data collection activities in the first instances, as youth researchers build their experience and skills.
Adult participants may doubt a youth researcher's abilities and refuse to participate.	• Ensure participants understand the purpose and plan of the research, the role of the young people, and why they are being involved as researchers (particularly if the research subject is sensitive).
Power differentials between youth researchers cause tensions.	• Ensure every researcher receives the same level of training and support. • Provide private channels of communication to check in with youth researchers about any issues that may arise between the team.
Youth researchers experience discomfort due to power differentials between themselves and adult participants.	• Before data collection, build youth researchers' knowledge about the participants and subject matter. • Embed critical-reflexive conversations with co-researchers before, during, and after data collection, to collaboratively identify issues and find solutions. • Provide close guidance and support during data collection activities involving adults.
Obtaining parental consent for youth researchers who are under 18 years of age.	• Create an open dialogue with parents/legal guardians about the roles, responsibilities and benefits of being a co-researcher. • Develop a process if parents/guardians have concerns or questions, for example, by providing a senior researcher contact number or email.

Feedback and evaluation

At the start of your project, think about how you can monitor and evaluate the impact the co-research process has on the overall outcomes of the research and for those involved. Ideally, doing this process together with your team (including youth researchers) means that you can embed regular opportunities for gathering feedback throughout the whole process.

By mapping impacts throughout the lifecycle of a project, and even after, you can see the change that is being made. This process can be undertaken together with stakeholders, including young people. Check out this **impact mapping tool** developed by the Young and Resilient Research Centre, based on learnings, sources, and expert guidance from **Matter of Focus.** It can help you to see what data, information and feedback you need to collect to help understand the progress towards the change you are hoping to make.

Learn more about the impact mapping framework developed by Matter of Focus here:

- **What is impact mapping?**
- **A simple framework to help you understand change**

Image credit: Pexels / Andrea Piacquadio

At the end of your project, you could conduct an exit interview to collect feedback and reflections from youth researchers on their experience in the role. This can help to identify and document what has worked well and what hasn't, and to use this feedback to continually improve your practice. An exit interview is not compulsory but could be offered as an option to provide reflection and constructive feedback if the youth researcher would like to do this.

Template

- **Exit interview template**

Further resources

- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Monitoring & evaluating youth engagement
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Template feedback form
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Tool – Reflective impact log
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Tool – Monitoring and evaluating youth engagement using a theory of change

Implementation checklist

☐ Involve young people in determining their roles and responsibilities.

☐ Develop a project plan and a timeline (acknowledging that it will likely change through the co-research process). Build in time buffers to allow for upskilling young people and reviewing and revising tasks.

☐ Ensure youth researchers are aware of the time commitment required and the project timeline.

☐ Prepare a project initiation and planning session for the whole team, including youth researchers, so that everyone can get on the same page at the start.

☐ Encourage youth researchers to ask questions and clarify any tasks.

☐ Agree on how you are going to communicate, make decisions, feedback on one another's work, feedback process improvements, and manage the research project.

☐ Get to know the individual youth researchers. What are their unique strengths, interests and abilities? What support do they need?

☐ Ensure that each youth researcher has one person they are checking in with if they have any questions – someone who understands the project and can provide ongoing guidance and support.

☐ Create a shared glossary of key terms to enable everyone in the project to speak a common language.

☐ Consider how you will evaluate the co-research process and how this affects the outcomes of the research. Develop a plan to monitor and evaluate the co-research process as early on in your project as you can.

☐ Provided necessary information about your organisation (for example, HR processes, policies, mandatory training).

☐ Agree upon working arrangements (for example, working from home and office requirements).

☐ Provide skill-building opportunities as required.

☐ Arrange regular, informal check-ins.

☐ Provide opportunities for youth researchers to showcase their strengths and reflect on their achievements.

☐ Encourage youth researchers to communicate and support each other (if working in pairs/groups).

☐ Ask for youth researchers' feedback about being part of the co-research process.

☐ Reflect on whether you are imposing views or perspectives.

☐ Reflect on your ways of working – what is going well and what could be improved?

Further resources

- Wellbeing Health & Youth respectful practice cards
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook: Implementing and sustaining youth engagement
- Wellbeing Health & Youth Guidebook Tips: Sustaining youth engagement