



## What is Tokenism and How to Avoid It

We don't like talking about it, but we have to. Tokenism happens, and it sucks for everyone involved. The result is frustration and disappointment both for the organizations involved and for the youth they're trying to engage.

Understanding what tokenism looks like is the first step to avoiding it in your youth engagement efforts. The tips below will help you steer clear of tokenism and develop true opportunities for youth to impact decision making in your organization.

### What is Tokenism?

**The apparent involvement of a group that hides a lack of real change or real impact on the work we are involved in.**

In the context of youth engagement, tokenism has **three different outcomes**:

1. **For adults** it often satisfies the need to “feel good” by doing something to engage youth, but without taking on the real challenges or adjustments involved in a meaningful initiative it won't create lasting impacts or improvements on your work.
2. **For youth** it is both stifling and belittling. Tokenistic involvement not only fails to develop true leadership capacities among youth, but causes frustration and may lead to future disengagement.
3. **For organizations** it means that an intergenerational partnership will have few lasting benefits. A token young person may look good at a press conference, but they probably won't become a lasting supporter or promote your organization among friends.

### How to Avoid It

**To keep your youth-friendly initiatives free of tokenistic involvement, keep these points in mind:**

- **Be specific about the structures and results your organization wants to create.** Fuzzy ideas about involving youth are most likely to be satisfied by easy, tokenistic approaches.
- **One young person doesn't represent youth at large.** If your organization wants real representation from a group as diverse as youth, you have to reach outside your usual contacts and make space for new faces.
- **Be careful about consultations.** It's fine to use the consultation model for some projects, as long as there is **accountability and transparency** about how young people's ideas are being considered and implemented.



Otherwise, youth may feel that we're just being used to justify existing plans.

- **Hire multiple young people to expand the scope of your engagement program and strengthen retention.** Young volunteers are most likely to stick around when they share a social experience with people of their own age.<sup>1</sup>
- **Keep track of retention.** Consistently record how long staff and volunteers stay with your organization, and conduct exit interviews or surveys when they leave. This will help you identify your organization's strengths and weaknesses in terms of lasting youth engagement.
- **Ask questions.** Take the time to ask youth what works, what doesn't, and what we need from you—and let us know how we're performing. Regular, quality feedback in both directions can spell the difference between a fizzling one-off project and a self-correcting, transformative shift within your organization.
- **Provide preparation and training *before* meetings.** Give youth background information and explain acronyms or complicated terms before we arrive in the room. Of course, it's still important for us to know we can ask for clarification at any time.
- **Actively encourage participation and make room specifically for youth in meetings.** An "open floor" or "open door" policy isn't necessarily equally open to everyone. Without a proactive approach, many people—including youth—may feel intimidated or that they have less of a right to speak.
- **Be aware of who speaks in meetings.** It's a general best practice for meetings to keep track of who has already spoken in a meeting and encourage less vocal participants to contribute. You can assign a facilitator to manage the list of speakers and count the contributions from different participants.
- **Involve youth as early as possible,** ideally at the very beginning of budgeting and program design. Not only does this help prepare youth for leadership roles, but their input also makes for better programs and services. Your goal should be to involve people in a **bottom-up planning process** rather than present them with already made plans.
- **Check if your decision making process has changed.** When you genuinely engage new voices and perspectives in discussions, you will inevitably have to work more dynamically, creatively, and collaboratively. Expect to receive questions and experience some challenges—they're a sign that your organization is adapting.

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<sup>1</sup> Hientz et al., "Bridging the Gap: Enriching the Volunteer Experience to Build a Better Future for our Communities - Summary of Findings of a Pan-Canadian Research Study." 11.

- **It's never too late to involve youth in an organization or program.** Just remember that rather than a quick fix, you need to evaluate how your organization works and be open to new ideas from the youth you engage. You'll be glad you did.

## Remember:

We've all seen skin-deep youth engagement projects. You know the kind: an organization commits a hundred dollars to dragging a few young people to a press conference. Tough questions about youth involvement are deflected by pointing to this youth engagement fund, but without addressing things like organizational renewal, innovation, or transition planning.

**Tokenism is hard to recognize from the majority perspective.** Tokenistic practices are rarely intentional and you can't rely on gut instinct. Instead, carefully reflect on your youth engagement process and ask for outside perspectives if needed. Getting honest feedback is the best way to make sure you're on the right track.