

Youth Insights Participatory Research Toolkit

Involving children and
young people in your research

Lead author
Lily Gilder

In collaboration with
Dana Al-Anizi, Rahaf Bashir, Stefania-Ramona Capraru,
Divya Daworaz, Sandra Jemie Foumboua, Mehjabin Islam,
Michelle Javed, Emily Kinzler, Elsie Mahamou, Thurkga Moothathamby,
Nayantara, Jodi Taylor-Nettleton, Prakhar Vats



Queen Mary University of London

This toolkit has been developed by the Centres for Creative Collaboration and Public Engagement at Queen Mary University of London as part of Research England Participatory Research Funding.

Lead author

Lily Gilder, Youth Insight Participatory Research Officer, Queen Mary University of London.

Youth Insight Researchers

Dana Al-Anizi, Rahaf Bashir, Stefania-Ramona Capraru, Divya Daworaz, Sandra Jemie Fouboua, Mehjabin Islam, Michelle Javed, Emily Kinzler, Elsie Mahamou, Thurkga Moothathamby, Nayantara, Rufshana, Jodi Taylor-Nettleton, Prakhar Vats

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to everyone who shared their knowledge and experiences as part of bringing this toolkit together.

Thank you to **Alison Blunt** and **Alex Mehta Brown** for their supervision of this work.

Thank you to our reviewers: **Sarah Gifford, Stephen Thomas, Magdalena Morawska, Aoife Sadlier, Abigail Thompson, Emma Hayashibara.**

We would also like to thank **Abdifatah Said** (Co-founder, YBM Research Collective) and **Ellie Whittle** and **Heather McMullen** (The Heart Project, Queen Mary) for authoring additional resources for this toolkit. Their contributions are clearly indicated in the relevant sections.

Illustrations by **Woven Ink – Jess Harvey & Ada Jusic.**

Design by **Marc Avery Studio.**

Photographs:

AMPLIFY – pages 16, 35, 44, 57, 58 & 87

Big Mouth Tower Hamlets – page 54

Paula Siqueira, The Verbatim Formula – pages 29, 69 & 81

Queen Mary University of London – page 19

The OLA Study – pages 66, 79, 90 & 92

This toolkit can be downloaded from: qmul.ac.uk/centre-creative-collaboration/projects/young-researchers

This toolkit is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 license.

Citation:

Gilder, L., 2026. *Youth Insights Participatory Research Toolkit: Involving children and young people in your research.* Queen Mary University of London

Meet the Team

Lead author

Lily Gilder

Youth Insight Participatory Research Officer

I coordinate the Youth Insight researchers programme and led the development of this toolkit. I am a qualitative and participatory researcher with a background in social work. I'm passionate about working with young people and creating spaces where they feel they matter. My PhD, completed at the University of Oxford, focused on nature and wellbeing for care-experienced young people, and I have since worked on co-produced research about supporting friendships for young people in care at the University of Edinburgh.

Youth Insight Researchers

Mehjabin Islam

I study Medicine at Queen Mary. I became a Youth Insight researcher through my role as a Peer Researcher at Toynbee Hall, as I really enjoy being a part of qualitative research especially surrounded around people like me and our local community! Being a part of this project has been a large but fun learning curve; there have been so many opportunities and challenges which have helped me to develop overall and gain a greater appreciation for research.

Jodi Taylor-Nettleton

I am a Psychology Graduate from Queen Mary with a keen interest in the interception of research and social impact. I wanted to be a Youth Insight researcher because I believe that where there is a deep understanding, there can be meaningful impact across communities and, therefore society. Alongside this project, I have been supporting the delivery of campaigns and policy research at a Public Affairs consultancy firm called Lexington Communications.

Nayantara

I have a background in Global Public Health and Policy (Queen Mary), and I enjoy working on projects that centre young people's voices and real-life experiences. I became a Youth Insight researcher because I care about creating spaces where young people can meaningfully influence decisions that affect them. Being part of this project has helped me learn how powerful co-production can be, and I've really enjoyed turning shared ideas and insights into practical, youth-friendly tools.

Stefania-Ramona Capraru

I am a Politics and Sociology student at Queen Mary and I became a Youth Insight researcher because I believe research should be more inclusive of young people, with researchers providing the right tools, listening to their needs, and facilitating meaningful workshops. I have really enjoyed being part of a supportive team where everyone's ideas were listened to and valued.

Michelle Javed

I'm a Queen Mary biochemistry graduate and Research Impact professional with a strong interest in youth work. Youth Insights sits at the intersection of these passions, particularly community-engaged projects that centre young people's voices. I became a Youth Insight researcher because I believe young people deserve a meaningful role in shaping the futures that directly affect them.

Emily Kinzler

I'm a Queen Mary Master's student in Clinical Psychotherapy. I became a Youth Insight researcher to build my research skills and learn more about participatory approaches. I've especially enjoyed exploring the various participatory projects and exploring what keeps young people involved in research over time, bringing what worked into clear, practical insights.

Thurkga Moothathamby

I'm a final-year medical student from Queen Mary with extensive experience in quantitative research, but a growing recognition of the limits of numbers alone in capturing complex lived realities. I became a Youth Insight researcher because I believe in co-creation and co-production as ethical and epistemic principles; I have since enjoyed just working with young people not just as subjects, but as knowledge producers shaping the questions, methods, and the outcomes of our project.

Divya Daworaz

I am a Learning Support Assistant for adolescent students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. I enjoy helping others in times of trouble and learning about diseases, which was my main reason for studying Biochemistry at Queen Mary. I became a Youth Insight researcher as I found it a good opportunity to learn more about policy research. As part of this project, I have enjoyed working with other young researchers from different fields as well as gaining knowledge from researchers on how to conduct research projects with young people.

Dana al-Azizi

I am a Politics and Sociology graduate and have a strong interest in learning more about the world around me. Becoming a Youth Insight researcher allowed me to combine my interests and my previous knowledge to work on a meaningful project.

Sandra Jemie Foubmoua

I'm a multidisciplinary creative producer and final-year Liberal Arts student at Queen Mary, working across film, theatre, and youth-led facilitation. I became a Youth Insight researcher to actively bridge creative, community-based practices and academic research methods. I've enjoyed learning how trust-building, care and power-awareness are part of the method itself, not just the 'extra' around the research, and I'm excited about how these approaches could shape more sustainable community-university partnerships.

Rahaf Bashir

I am a researcher and I enjoy working in the public health and social research sectors. I was interested in collaborating with other young people and finding out about new research projects and how young people can effectively participate. I enjoyed learning about creative ways research can be done to encourage collaboration as well as contributing my own learnings to the Big Mouth project and toolkit.

Elsie Mahamou

I am a French national who moved to London 3 years ago to study. I have a BA in Politics and International Relations from Queen Mary and began an MA in Peace, Security, and International Law at King's College London in 2025. I became a Youth Insight researcher to delve deeper into diverse perspectives on real life and issues, and to gain valuable skills in writing, data-driving research, participatory methods, and cross-cultural collaboration.

Prakhar Vats

With thanks to the contributions of other youth researchers who informed and shaped this toolkit.

Contents

PART 1

Introduction	8
Defining children and young people	10
How has this toolkit been made?	10
Who is this toolkit for?	11
BOX 1	
Queen Mary Resources	11
BOX 2	
Meet the research projects who contributed	12

Foundations	14
Introduction	16
What is participatory research?	16
Why involve children and young people?	17
CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 1	
Creative Methods for involving young people	17
Models of participation	18
Values that guide this toolkit	19
Respecting lived experience: A manifesto	20

PART 2

Ethics and safeguarding	21
Introduction	23
Power and purpose	24
BOX 3	
Rethinking ethics – YBM Research Collective	24
Informed consent	25
Harms and benefits	27
Privacy and confidentiality	29
Payment, remuneration and compensation	30
CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 2	
Ethics Spotlight	32
Safeguarding and duty of care	33
Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Checks	34
Reflexivity and emotions	35
CASE STUDY	
The HEAL study and the HEART project	36

PART 3

Engaging and involving young people 38

Introduction	40
Initial engagement and relationship-building	41
Recruitment	41
Setting the scene	42
Relationship building	42
Involvement across the research cycle	44
Priority setting	44
BOX 4	
Entry points for young people's involvement in research – PEAR Guidelines	45
Sustaining involvement over time	46
Training for co-researchers	46
Structures for sustained engagement	47

Achieving impact	48
CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 3	
Evaluation Spotlight	49
Inclusion and access	50
BOX 5	
Practical tools for accessible research	53
CASE STUDY	
Big Mouth – Youth-Led Reflection on Oral Health Research	54
CASE STUDY	
AMPLIFY – Sustaining Youth Engagement in Mental Health Research	56

PART 4

Facilitation skills 59

Introduction	61
What is facilitation?	62
CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 4	
Working with artists Spotlight	63
Youth-Led Facilitation Guidelines	64
Facilitation phrases	68
Sensitive topics and trauma-informed research	69
CASE STUDY	
Facilitation in practice: working with difficult conversations	70

PART 5

Working with gatekeepers 73

Introduction 75

Who are gatekeepers? 75

Gatekeepers as collaborators 76

Ethics of working with gatekeepers 77

International contexts 77

Navigating the forest of gatekeepers 78

Working with youth organisations 79

Working with schools 80

CASE STUDY

The Verbatim Formula 81

PART 6

Analysis and dissemination 83

Introduction 85

Data analysis: making sense together 86

Key principles for participatory analysis 86

Dissemination 87

Analysis and dissemination in practice 87

BOX 6

Living Life to the Fullest,
University of Sheffield 88

BOX 7

Creative Collaborative Data Analysis
(Mannion, 2024) 89

CASE STUDY

The OLA Study: Youth-led arts
dissemination project 90**Tools 94**

TOOL 1

Preparing to set the scene 96

TOOL 2

Reflective questions 97

TOOL 3

Ethical Reflection Jenga 98

TOOL 4

A simple priority setting exercise with
children and young people 102

TOOL 5

Navigating the Gatekeeper Forest:
A visualisation exercise 105

Cited references 108

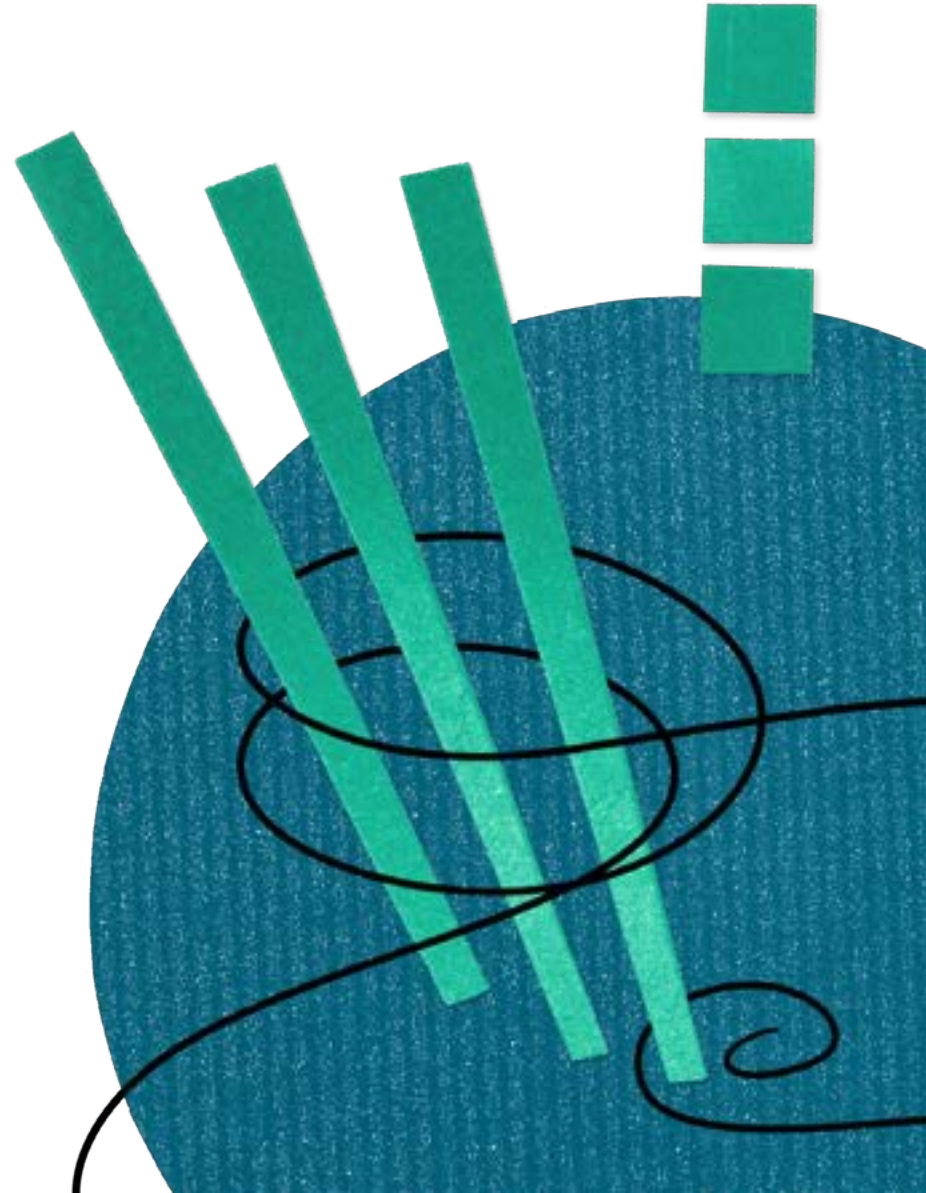
Acronyms 111

Thinking ahead: further resources 112

Key books 113

Toolkits and practical guides 114

Introduction



Introduction

This toolkit is for anyone hoping to conduct research *with* – rather than simply *about* – children and young people. Co-developed with a team of Youth Insight researchers at Queen Mary University of London, it brings together their reflections having observed, participated in, and reflected on, current research projects at Queen Mary, in conversation with the researchers leading the projects. In doing so, it combines multiple perspectives on what meaningful participation looks like in practice.

Working with children and young people presents unique challenges and opportunities. It requires ethical sensitivity, methodological creativity, and an ongoing commitment to addressing power imbalances in your research design and practice. This toolkit is designed to support you in this by offering key concepts, recommendations, case studies from research at Queen Mary, and a range of practical tools and exercises to apply in your own work.

This work also builds on Queen Mary's broader commitment to equitable and inclusive research practice. It is supported by existing resources such as 'Equitable Partnerships for Civic Engagement: a toolkit for civic, community and university partners' and 'Research with East London communities: place-based guidance and resources' (see [Box 1](#)), which provide additional frameworks for ethical and meaningful collaboration.

From preparing ethics applications and developing research questions, through to embedding meaningful participation at all stages, this resource will be an invaluable companion in designing and delivering your research.

“Working with children and young people requires ethical sensitivity, methodological creativity, and an ongoing commitment to addressing power imbalances in your research design and practice.”



Defining children and young people

This toolkit uses the term *children and young people* to refer to people typically under 25 years of age. Children are minors (under the age of 18), whilst young people are generally considered to be aged 15–24. This is in line with the United Nations definitions.

However, it is important to note that definitions of “childhood” and “youth” are biologically, socially and culturally constructed. The range of 0–24 encompasses a diverse range of experiences, and this toolkit cannot address every nuance pertaining to these.

For the purposes of this toolkit, what matters is the social positioning of children and young people in relation to adults. Children are often perceived as vulnerable and young people as at-risk, naïve, or lacking experience and expertise. These assumptions have an impact on if and how their knowledge, perspectives, and expertise are sought and valued. Participatory research tries to address this imbalance.

How has this toolkit been made?

This toolkit was co-developed with a team of 14 Youth Insight researchers, aged 18–25, from a range of backgrounds, from Queen Mary students to members of the [Toynbee Hall peer researcher network](#) based locally in Tower Hamlets.

The Youth Insight researchers received training in participant observation, thick description, facilitation, and conducting interviews and focus groups. With support from Lily, the Youth Insight Participatory Research Officer, they then engaged with active research projects across Queen Mary (see [Box 2](#)) to gather insights, learn about good practice, and provide feedback to the project. As part of this process, they participated in research activities, and interviewed academics, young people, and community partners. They later came together over several sessions to co-develop sections of the toolkit.

While this toolkit draws on insights generated through these collaborative processes, the overall writing, structure, and editorial decisions were led by Lily. The Youth Insight researchers have shaped the content and framing wherever possible. The toolkit has also been reviewed by collaborators.



Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed for researchers new to participatory youth research, including early career researchers and PhD students. But its guidance is relevant to anyone at any stage of their career who wants to involve young people meaningfully in their work – whether in universities, community organisations, the public sector, or elsewhere.

It draws on projects carried out at Queen Mary and with its partners, many of whom are community organisations with strong connections to the young people and communities involved. While the examples come from a particular institutional context, the principles and approaches here can be adapted to a wide range of research and settings.

BOX 1

Queen Mary Resources

Equitable Partnerships for Civic Engagement: a toolkit for civic, community and university partners

This toolkit provides practical exercises, case studies and resources for developing principles for equitable partnership in your place and context. It has been developed by the civic and public engagement teams at Queen Mary University of London as part of the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme led by Sheffield Hallam University.

➤ [Download the toolkit](#)



Research with East London communities: place-based guidance and resources.

A practical guide designed to support more equitable, collaborative research across the seven East London boroughs: Barking and Dagenham, Hackney, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest.

➤ [See the guide](#)



BOX 2

Meet the research projects who contributed

Health Engagement to Avoid interpersonal injury in young Londoners (HEAL)

*Heather McMullen and Richard Roach
(Wolfson Institute of Population Health)*

Examines the public health response to violence affecting young people focused on East London.

Supported by Barts Charity, North Thames NIHR ARC, and the QMUL Centre for Public Engagement.

[View the research](#)

The HeART Project – Health, Art, and Young People in Tower Hamlets

Heather McMullen, Ellie Whittle, and Richard Roach (Wolfson Institute of Population Health)

Explores young people's health experiences in Tower Hamlets using arts-based methods.

In partnership with Spotlight Creative Youth Service, Kazzum Arts, and Arts Council England.

[Find out more](#)

AMPLIFY (A Meaningful Peer-Led Involvement network For Young people)

*Abigail Christina Thomson
(Wolfson Institute of Population Health)*

A youth-led network for young people aged 16–18 from East London to come together and share their ideas, experiences, and opinions on mental health research, contributing to early consultations/planning through to analysis and dissemination.

[View the research](#)

The 'OLA' Study, Youth Ambassador's Program

*Mariana Steffen
(People's Palace Projects)*

A 5-year research project studying factors that prevent or aid recovery from depression and anxiety in urban youth across Bogotá (Colombia), Buenos Aires (Argentina), and Lima (Peru).

Funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC) in the UK. OLA is a collaboration with researchers from Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina), Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia), Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia (Peru), University College London, King's College London (UK) and coordinated by Queen Mary. Also in partnership with local arts organisation in Latin America: Fundación Crear Vale la Pena (Buenos Aires), Fundación Nacional Batuta, Fundación Artística y Social La Familia Ayara (Bogotá) and Teatro La Plaza (Lima).

[View the research](#)

Addressing Mental Health Disparity in Neurodivergent Youth: An Intersectional Approach to Mental Health Assessments

Emma Hayashibara (School of Biological and Behavioural Sciences)

Aims to co-produce a new mental health assessment tool specifically tailored to the needs of neurodivergent individuals, using an intersectional approach.

In partnership with Autistica.

[View the research](#)

Big Mouth Tower Hamlets

Vanessa Muirhead (Institute of Dentistry) and Stephen Taylor (School of Society and Environment)

Aimed to capture the questions, ideas, and topics that local people wanted the future oral health research and teaching at the QMUL dental school to focus on to improve their oral health.

In partnership with Social Action for Health. Funded by QMUL's Centre for Public Engagement.

[View the research](#)

Access Denied (Barts Health NHS Trusts' Addressing Inequalities in Care (AIIC) programme)

YBM Research Collective and Lucy Johnson (Wolfson Institute of Population Health)

Undertook a photovoice service evaluation to help understand why young Black men in East London might miss their hospital appointments, and suggested how services could better meet the needs of this group.

Developed in collaboration with Coffee Afrik and Barts Health NHS Trust.

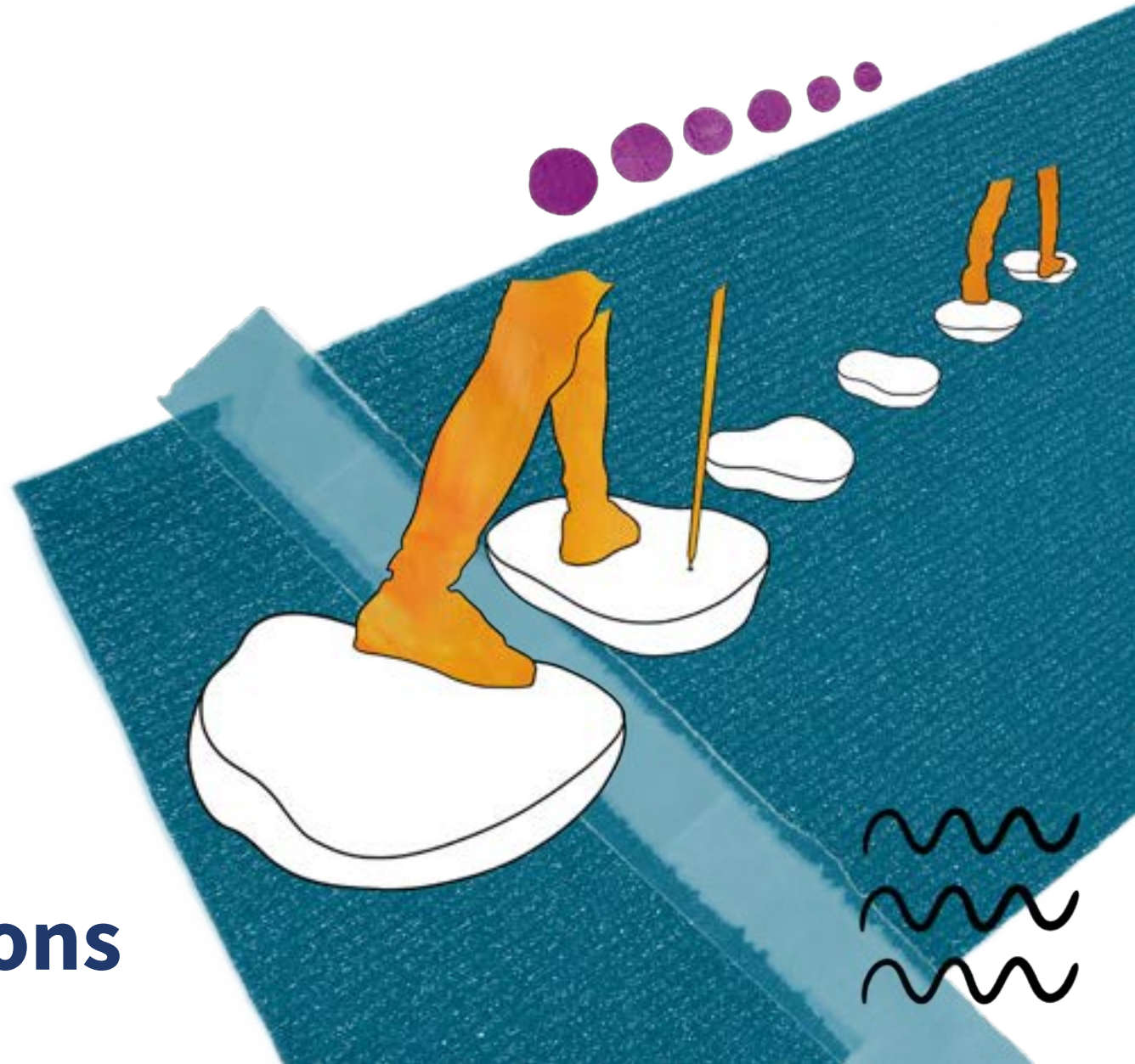
[View the research](#)

We are grateful to the following researchers who were interviewed about their research practice and working with gatekeepers:

- **Paul Heritage**
Professor of Drama and Performance, and Artistic Director of People's Palace Projects at Queen Mary
- **Kiera Vaclavik**
Professor of Children's Literature and Childhood Culture, and Director of the Centre for Childhood Cultures
- **Maggie Inchley**
Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre, and Performance, and Principal Investigator at the Verbatim Formula

1

Foundations



PART 1

Foundations

Introduction	16
What is participatory research?	16
Why involve children and young people?	17
CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 1	
Creative Methods for involving young people	17
Models of participation	18
Values that guide this toolkit	19
Respecting lived experience: A manifesto	20

“To uphold Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), it’s not enough for children to voice their opinions: we must create the conditions for their voices to be genuinely heard and acted upon.”



Introduction

This section sets out some of the principles and assumptions that underpin the approach in this toolkit. It aims to support researchers to reflect on whether, why and how children and young people should be involved in a research project.



What is participatory research?

Participatory research comprises a diverse set of practices and models, like Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR), Participatory Action Research (PAR), peer research, community-led research, citizen science, and co-production, to name a few. Whilst these approaches differ in methods and emphasis, they share a common orientation: researching *with* the people and communities that the research concerns, rather than *about* them.

Broadly, participatory approaches aim to challenge the way research is usually done. They amplify ‘lived experience’ – the knowledge, insight and expertise that comes from having first-hand experience of an issue.¹ Instead of involving the public as research subjects, with academics as the sole experts, people and communities are engaged as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge.

As a result, participatory research aims to share power in decision-making, especially with groups and communities who are often excluded from these processes. Most participatory methodologies link research to action and social change to ensure that research is responding to the priorities and needs of those involved and building their capacity to critically reflect and respond to their lived experiences (Freire Institute, 2026; Institute of Development Studies, 2024).

1 Wellcome, (n.d.) “What do we mean by lived experience in mental health research?”. Accessed 5 March 2026. <https://wellcome.org/research-funding/guidance/prepare-to-apply/embedding-lived-experience-expertise-mental-health-research>

Why involve children and young people?

Children and young people have first-hand perspectives on what matters in research about their lives. They often ask different questions and interpret data differently. This makes research shaped by them more relevant and impactful.

But it's not just that youth-centred research is *useful* in a practical sense. Children and young people also have a *right* to be heard on matters that affect them, and research about their lives is one of those matters. Because of their position in society, children and young people hold less structural power to influence such matters. To uphold Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), it's not enough for children to voice their opinions: we must create the conditions for their voices to be genuinely heard and acted upon.

Creative Methods for involving young people

CREATIVE
METHODS
SPOTLIGHT

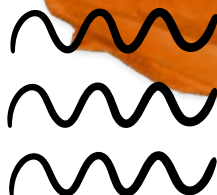
1

Throughout this toolkit, you'll find a series of themed 'spotlights' about creative methods.

In practice, participatory research with young people often includes creative and arts-based approaches. Creative methods can facilitate co-creation, support more inclusive research, and produce more impactful outputs.

At Queen Mary, there are some powerful examples of this work. From participatory drama and verbatim performance to Photovoice and arts-based workshops, creative methods have been used both to generate knowledge and to disseminate it widely.

Keep an eye out for
'Creative Methods Spotlights'
woven throughout this toolkit.



Models of participation

There are many different models and frameworks for thinking about children and young people's participation in research. Some well-known models include Hart's *Ladder of Participation* (1992), Shier's *Pathways to Participation* (2001), and the Lundy model (2007). These models are useful because they draw attention to the risks of tokenism and encourage us to think carefully about the importance of **sharing power in decision-making**.

In practice, research rarely takes place within ideal conditions. Institutional imperatives such as grant-driven agendas, limited budgets, and project timelines, as well as additional factors around funding and ethics processes, can meaningfully limit the scope of participation.

Lundy (2018) reminds us that participation is always imperfect: "there could always be more time, more resources and more children involved" (p.351). Rather than seeing this imperfection as failure, it can be understood as a reflection of the relational, situated, and negotiated nature of participatory research, which requires an ongoing **ethic of care, accountability, and reflexivity**.

Young people have their own priorities, motivations, and pressures – some won't want or be able to be involved at every stage, while others will.

Meaningful participation doesn't have to mean involvement in everything. What's important is that **young people's contributions are visible, taken seriously, and have real influence**, rather than being sought about decisions that have already been made.

The Lundy model of child participation (2007) is particularly helpful. It sets out four conditions for meaningful participation to be achieved: space, voice, audience, and influence. It shifts the focus away from "how much?" participation towards "what conditions enable participation to be meaningful?"

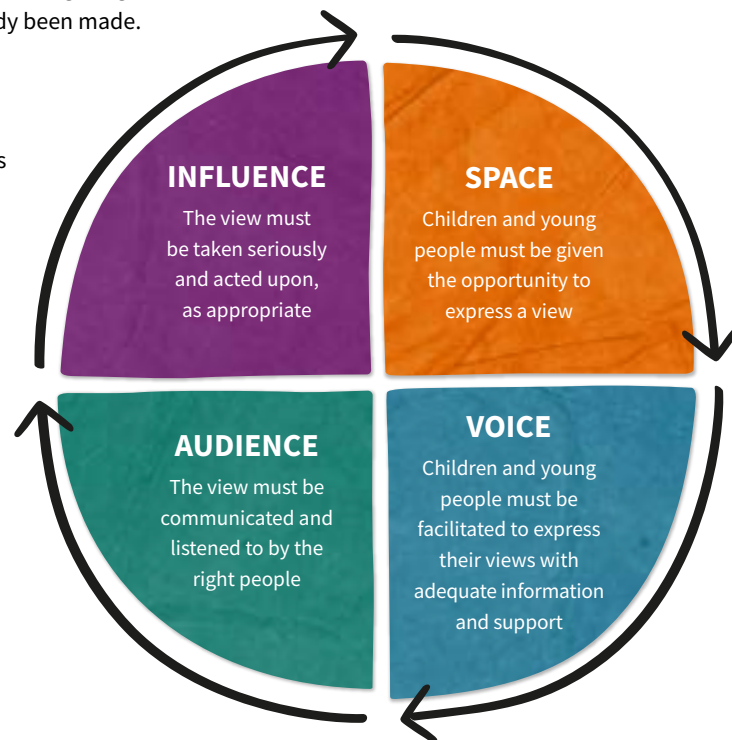


Figure 1.
Adapted from:
Participation People. (2020).
"The Lundy model explained"

Values that guide this toolkit

Queen Mary has a set of core values as outlined in **Strategy 2030** which guide the university's work. The Youth Insight researchers interpreted these values in the context of working with young people as research partners.

Inclusive

Children and young people are not a homogenous group. Like adults, they have intersecting identities in addition to age, including race, ethnicity, disability, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, sexuality, and migration status. Being inclusive means thinking about who isn't in the room, why this is the case, and working to address barriers to their involvement.

Proud

Young people bring knowledge, creativity, and lived experience. Their contribution in research should be visible, and they should be able to see how they've made a difference through their involvement.

Ambitious

We should be ambitious about the potential of children and young people's participation in research. This requires openness to young people steering the process, even when that feels uncomfortable or doesn't follow the original plan.

Collegial

Collaboration with young people requires trust, transparency, and reciprocity. This means treating them as partners instead of as research subjects.

Ethical

Ethics isn't just about filling in a form, but also about how we relate to one another. In youth-led research, it involves care, accountability, and a commitment to children's rights.

These values have implications at every stage of research. Alongside these values, the following manifesto was created by the **YBM Research Collective** (see [page 20](#)) commissioned as part of this toolkit. It sets out principles for research rooted in equity and justice and offers a lived experience perspective on how these values should be enacted in practice.



Respecting lived experience: A manifesto

Abdifatah Said – YBM Research Collective



This manifesto for research with young people has been written and designed by Said, co-founder of the YBM Research Collective. It draws on his experiences and expertise as co-founder of a lived experience research collective, and as a co-researcher on Access Denied, a project which used Photovoice to explore barriers to healthcare access for young Black men.

- 1 **Be willing to learn and unlearn.** Researchers need to be open to learning from young people and confronting previously held assumptions.
- 2 **Lead with kindness and respect.** Youth research begins with how young people are treated, not with what they are asked.
- 3 **Build relationships before collecting insights.** Trust is the foundation of meaningful engagement.
- 4 **Create space for peer support and connection.** Research can be a place where young people build networks, solidarity, and belonging.
- 5 **Allow informal youth organising to emerge.** Researchers should support young people's agency in shaping research and decisions. Young people have unique insight and expertise, and research should create space for their strengths to flourish and emerge.
- 6 **Make participation emotionally and culturally safe.** Young people should never feel judged, stereotyped, or pressured to take part – or produce deliverables for the benefit of researchers.
- 7 **Design research that fits young people's realities.** Be flexible with timing and use accessible language and creative methods.
- 8 **Share power throughout the process.** Young people should be able to influence the whole research process, from shaping the questions to interpreting and disseminating the findings.
- 9 **Dissemination should be collaborative and relevant.** Use accessible formats (e.g. events, reports, art showcases) and language. Think about the audiences that matter to both you and the young people.
- 10 **Support youth-led accountability (structures, frameworks, and ethics).** Young people should have the space to hold universities and researchers accountable.
- 11 **Assist research to lead to action and benefit the community.** Research must produce change or allow young people to drive change, not just reports. Communities and young people should gain lasting value.
- 12 **Recognise and value lived experience as expertise.** Experience is not just an anecdote – it's evidence.

2

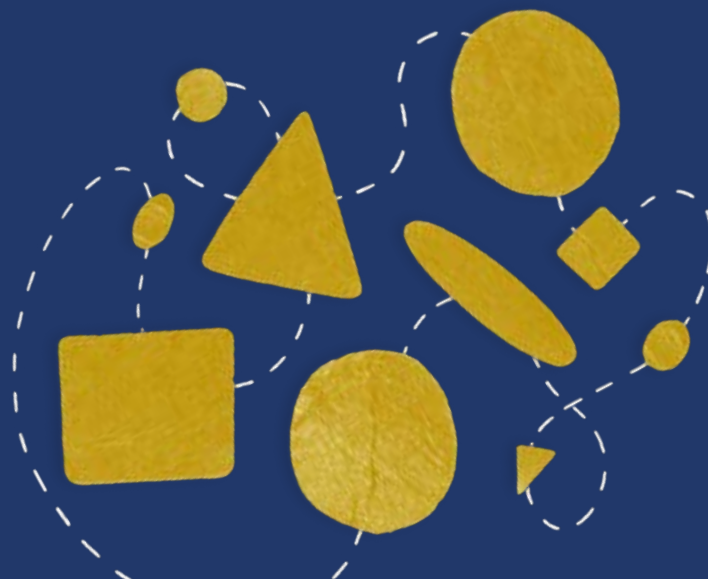
Ethics and safeguarding



PART 2

Ethics and safeguarding

Introduction	23	Safeguarding and duty of care	33
Power and purpose	24	Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Checks	34
BOX 3		Reflexivity and emotions	34
Rethinking ethics – YBM Research Collective	24	CASE STUDY	
Informed consent	25	The HEAL study and the HEART project	36
Harms and benefits	27		
Privacy and confidentiality	29		
Payment, remuneration and compensation	30		
CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 2			
Ethics Spotlight	32		



Introduction

Ethics and safeguarding are the necessary starting point for any research project with children and young people. Children and young people have the right to participate in research that affects them, whilst researchers have a responsibility to identify any risks to their participation and protect their safety, dignity and wellbeing.

This section brings together conversations with young people, researchers, and the ethics team at Queen Mary. If you're new to academic research, the formal ethics review shouldn't be seen as a hurdle – it is a valuable opportunity to think about risk and responsibility with ethics experts.

Involving groups deemed 'vulnerable' (which includes those under 18) or highly vulnerable requires more ethical scrutiny and require a 'moderate' risk panel review in university settings. These groups can be subject to more protective approaches which sometimes sits in tension with efforts to share decision-making power with participants as co-researchers. At Queen Mary, vulnerability is understood in the context of the research, rather than as an inherent characteristic of certain groups. Participants' vulnerability may arise from the research topic, setting, relationships, or timing.

Ethical challenges often emerge unexpectedly, and research rarely unfolds exactly as planned. Ethical research therefore

involves ongoing practices of care, consent, reflection, and adaptation. The values of participatory research – defined by Scott-Barett et al. (2023) as **inclusivity, respect, collaboration, transparency, and reflexivity** – reflect a commitment to ethical practice throughout the research process.

This section draws from **Ethical Research Involving Children** (ERIC)'s four categories of ethical domains – informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, payment and recognition, harms and benefits – as a useful organising framework, including for those preparing an ethics submission. But it also explores additional ethical dimensions such as power dynamics, emotional labour, and authorship.

This section will help you:

- ✓ Understand key ethical considerations when involving children and young people in research.
- ✓ Identify strategies to support informed consent, safety, and wellbeing.
- ✓ Recognise and manage power dynamics.
- ✓ Apply practical tools and case studies to guide ethical practice.

Power and purpose

In research with children and young people, power is shaped by multiple factors. Age is an important factor: younger children's autonomy is still developing, whilst older young people may have more capacity to influence decisions. Researchers tend to retain structural power in relation to funding, timelines, ethics processes and outputs. Ethical practice therefore requires careful consideration of where sharing decision-making power is both possible and appropriate, and transparency about these constraints.

Before designing your project, pause to ask:

- Does this research need to be done?
- Why involve children or young people, and in what role?
- Who benefits?
- Who might be excluded?
- What decisions will young people influence?
- Where is their influence limited?

BOX 3

Rethinking ethics – YBM Research Collective

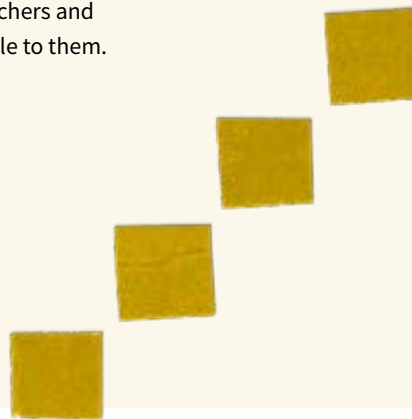
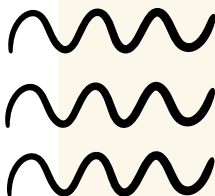
For many young people, university ethics processes can feel distant or imposed from above. Said, co-founder of the YBM Research Collective, described how he and his co-researchers developed their own code of ethics while taking part in the Photovoice project 'Access Denied' in partnership with Queen Mary, Barts Health, and Coffee Afrik CIC. This code set out shared expectations around respect, communication, recognition, and transparency.

This work demonstrates how ethics needs to not only about how researchers protect young people, but how researchers and institutions remain accountable to them.

In your project, ask yourself:

- How will accountability be demonstrated in practice?
- How can young people be involved in creating ethical standards?
- What happens when young people disagree with researchers?

You might try discussing the [YBM Research Collective manifesto](#) with your co-researchers as a starting point for talking about ethics.



Informed consent

Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research practice and is critical to upholding children's rights. Children and young people must:

- Understand what participation involves
- Know how their contribution will be used
- Be aware of any risks and the limits to confidentiality
- Give their consent voluntarily
- Be able to withdraw at any stage of the research process

Meanwhile, researchers must take active steps to check in regularly for ongoing consent, create space for questions, uphold children's right to say no, and be attentive to verbal and non-verbal cues that suggest discomfort or uncertainty (Graham et al., 2013).

Information should also be presented in a way that children can understand. **Sheffield Hallam University** provides some particularly [accessible guidance](#) about seeking consent and assent from children.

Their resources include:

- **Example information sheets and consent forms** written for children
- **Verbal and visual ways to explain the research** to children who are still learning to read, or who can't read
- **Stories and examples from researchers** who have worked with pre- and non-verbal children

Formal consent processes, even when made child-friendly or more accessible, can still feel like something that's done to children and young people, rather than with them. Researcher Lucy Robinson developed the **Research Ethics Tree** as an interactive tool to enable dialogue and deeper engagement. The Tree is a tactile tool where children can take tokens off a physical tree, each token corresponding to something they need to know about taking part in a study. Children can engage at their own pace and on their own terms, whilst the researcher asks additional questions to ensure enough information was shared and understood, making the consent process genuinely interactive.

Should I stay or should I go?

When considering different ethical scenarios in research, Youth Insight researchers, Elsie Mahamou and Michelle Javed, framed the 'right to withdraw' through the question, "Should I stay or should I go?"

This reflects the fact that simply having the right doesn't necessarily create the conditions for withdrawal: the decision carries emotional weight for co-researchers involved in a project.

The decision to step back from a project which people have invested time and energy in is rarely straightforward. It's important to make space for young people to feel they can withdraw without pressure, judgement, or negative consequences.

Our own tool, **Ethical Reflection Jenga**, works in a similar spirit stimulating conversation about ethics between researchers and co-researchers. It can be used and adapted with research teams or directly with young people to surface ethical questions from the beginning and revisit them throughout a project.

Parental/guardian involvement

Children under the age of 18 are considered minors, and typically parental or guardian consent is required for their participation in research. Parents or guardians can be important partners in supporting the meaningful and safe inclusion of their children in your research. They should be fully informed of their rights in relation to the research with clear, accessible information.

In diverse areas like East London – where Queen Mary is located – parents and guardians may not have English as a first language, so it is important to take active steps to ensure language barriers are addressed. This may include budgeting for translating materials and working with interpreters.

When there are no identifiable risks to doing so, direct parental/guardian “opt-in” consent is preferred by ethics committees. “Opt-out” consent – where parents must actively

state if they do not want their child to take part – is common in school-based research, but this must be approached carefully. Parents with limited English or literacy skills may not fully understand materials, or any parent might simply miss the information entirely, meaning they unintentionally consent.

Regardless of the approach taken, consent from a parent or guardian does not replace a child or young person’s own consent/assent.

Schools and community partners can help identify the best methods for engaging families to ensure consent is fully informed and inclusive (see also ‘**Research with East London communities**’).

There are some circumstances in which the requirement for consent from a parent or guardian may exclude certain children/young people or put them at risk. Researchers should consider who might be excluded if parental consent is required – for example, a 16-year-old living independently and estranged from their family – and whether parental involvement might put young people at risk – for example, in research about violence against children, or with LGBTQ+ young people not ‘out’ to their family. In these circumstances, researchers are encouraged to think about a young person’s capacity to fully consent and weigh up the potential harms and benefits to informing parents/guardians.

Our own tool, **Ethical Reflection Jenga**, stimulates conversation about ethics between researchers and co-researchers.



Harms and benefits

Research with children and young people should weigh up the potential harms and benefits to their involvement. In participatory research, there are additional considerations, as co-researchers are likely to be more visible and more emotionally invested.

Graham et al. (2013) identify several potential benefits and risks for children and young people taking part in research. Benefits can include:

- Feeling listened to, heard, and respected on matters that impact them
- Building capacity and skills
- Influencing research, services, or policy that affect their lives
- Meeting and connecting with others

At the same time, participation is not automatically protective. Even well-intentioned research can expose children and young people to several intersecting vulnerabilities. There are many potential risks that need to be considered in planning a project with young people ranging from:

- Distress from sensitive topics
- Overburdening
- Stigmatisation
- Power imbalances between adults and children and young people
- Disappointment if expectations or benefits do not materialise
- Conflicting agendas between children and adults
- Online harms associated with digital dissemination
- Exposure through visibility as co-researchers

Knowing how to identify and assess these risks is important. The QM Research Ethics Committee (QM REC) has a [helpful infographic](#) for identifying the potential risks associated with your research. Risk assessments are required for ethics review and any off-site work.

The **QM Research Ethics Committee** (QM REC) has a **helpful infographic** for identifying the potential risks associated with your research.



While important to plan carefully for these risks, it's equally important they don't become an automatic reason for excluding young people from your research. In some cases, involvement may legitimately need to be adapted or limited, especially when participation could cause harm or where adequate safeguarding can't be ensured. But excluding young people should be a considered decision and a genuine last resort.

Involving young people not only makes research, policy and practice better but is protective for them in multiple ways. The **Young Researchers' Advisory Panel (YRAP)** for Research in Practice, a group of young people with lived experience of sexual violence and abuse, developed **Participation as Protective: a model** for this reason. You can listen to them discuss their model in a [podcast](#).

Signposting to support

Researchers must ensure children and young people have access to support or advice in case they are adversely harmed by taking part in research. This could include access to a qualified mental health professional, or a list of organisations they can contact, depending on the nature of the research topic.

Ethics boards will look to see if you have included signposting in your applications, and whether you have ensured that the signposting is tailored to the specific needs of the groups you are working with.



Listen to the **Young Researchers' Advisory Panel** discuss their **Participation is Protective** model in a [podcast](#).



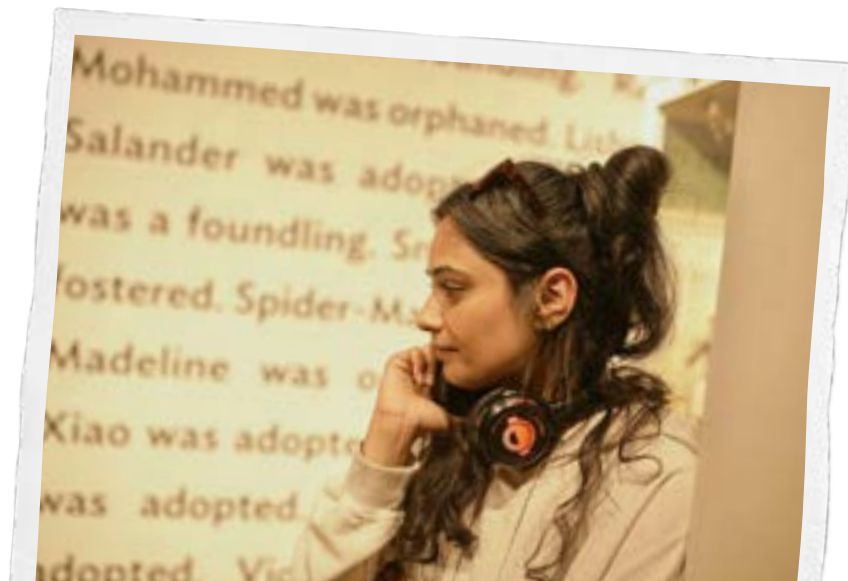
Privacy and confidentiality

Privacy and confidentiality are key principles in research. Confidentiality means any identifiable information about individuals collected through the research process will not be disclosed without their permission (BSA, 2004). Steps must be made to prevent this from happening unintentionally.

Anonymity is one way privacy can be protected, and removing personal identifiers is the common approach. This is not always straightforward – your co-researchers may want to be explicitly named in recognition of their contributions and work. Therefore, this needs to be thought through in the early stages of a project and discussed openly with young people themselves, and where appropriate, their carers. There is a careful balancing of rights and risks.

Consider whether young people will want to be named, and if they prefer their first name or full name to be used. If using pseudonyms, involve them in selecting one for themselves. They may be added as contributors generally or linked to specific contributions: there are different risks involved in both.

In the digital era, there are additional challenges to anonymity and confidentiality – how will you organise your activities and stay in touch, and have you considered any potential privacy issues? Will your co-researchers be made aware of privacy issues related to sharing photos and other information about the research online? These are all important questions that need to be carefully negotiated and boundaries discussed and agreed upon with young people.



Payment, remuneration and compensation

Across the different projects involved in this toolkit, young people consistently shared that being paid went a long way in helping them feel respected and valued. It also made participation more practically possible, particularly when balancing multiple commitments like education, work, and/or caring responsibilities.

If young people are unpaid – whilst adult researchers are salaried – existing hierarchies are reinforced. If adult participants or consultants would be paid for similar work, it is important to carefully consider why young people should be expected to contribute their time and expertise unpaid.

Payment and compensation take different forms. What is appropriate will depend on:

- Age
- Social and cultural context
- Legal status
- The nature, duration and intensity of involvement.

For example:

- Youth co-researchers taking on more regular, sustained roles, may warrant hourly payment recognising this as skilled work
- One-off workshops or interviews may be more appropriately compensated by a voucher

Guidance such as the **NIHR Payment Guidance for Researchers and Professionals** offers useful advice for navigating these questions.

Decisions around payment should be discussed early on, and, where possible, **shaped with children and young people themselves**. This mitigates the risk of disappointment if expectations around payment have been unclear.

“ If adult participants or consultants would be paid for similar work, it is important to carefully consider why young people should be expected to contribute their time and expertise unpaid. ”

If children and young people are involved in your research long term, they may feel emotionally invested. This can lead to them contributing unpaid hours towards the end of a project if it extends beyond their budgeted time. As Lucy Johnson reflected in relation to her work on the Access Denied Photovoice project:

“When costing any grants, budget beyond the core hours expected for participation. It’s important to include your co-researchers throughout the life cycle of the project, and this includes time spent discussing dissemination and planning the sustainability of your work.”

Beyond payment, young people we spoke to shared that there were other forms of recognition that went a long way. These included:

- gestures of appreciation, such as genuinely saying thank you
- acknowledging their contributions during sessions
- providing food and drink
- awarding certificates of participation
- sharing outputs
- organising a celebration at the end of a project.

These don’t replace regular compensation but can be just as important.

Legal and ethical considerations

Receiving payment is not always straightforward or appropriate. Under some circumstances, payment can be seen as coercive – causing participants to agree to take risks they might otherwise avoid, or to continue in a study even if they experience discomfort. This can lead to a violation of the principle that participation must be genuinely voluntary.

What constitutes a ‘high’ payment depends on multiple factors, including age and social and cultural background. Ethics committees look at that benefit to risk ratio very carefully.

When involving minors (under 18), also be aware of legal restrictions on paid work hours. For young people or families in receipt of state benefits, on particular work or student visas, or with insecure immigration status, receiving payment can pose financial or legal risks. In those circumstances, vouchers may be a more appropriate form of remuneration than cash.

Whatever the form of remuneration, no one should be left out of pocket for taking part in research. Consider how you’ll reimburse participants for travel, or whether they’ll have to sacrifice paid employment to take part.

Ethics Spotlight

Creative methods (e.g., Photovoice, body mapping, participatory photography) can support young people to express themselves in alternative ways, creating safer and more accessible spaces to talk about and understand emotions and lived experience. However, they can also be experienced as extractive, uncomfortable, or culturally unfamiliar, whilst privileging particular communication styles.

Before using a creative method, pause to ask:

Co-interpretation

- Who will interpret this work?
- How will participants be involved in shaping its interpretation?

Recognition and anonymity

- Do young people want to be named, credited, or remain anonymous?
- How will you balance the right to recognition with the right to privacy?

Care and emotional labour

- What emotional work might this method involve?
- How will you build in care during activities and after?

Future impact

- How might participants feel about their work being shared now, or years from now?
- What if it contains sensitive material?
- Might they have regrets or want to change the narrative at a later date?

Dissemination

- Where will this work be shown?
- Are there risks to sharing this work with particular or wider audiences?
- What is the appropriate scale and audience?

CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT



For an example of creative approaches to upholding young people's right to privacy alongside amplifying their voices at Queen Mary, see the [Verbatim Formula case study](#), and read about their approach using verbatim theatre techniques [on their website](#).

Further reading:

- Ethical issues in participatory arts methods for young people with adverse childhood experiences, Pavarini et al., 2021. *Health Expect* 24(5):1557–1569. doi: [10.1111/hex.13314](#)
- **Sage Research Methods Community** curated open-access resources on:
 - [Ethical issues in creative and visual research](#)
 - [Analysing and interpreting photographs generated by participants](#): whilst specific to photography, many principles still apply.

Safeguarding and duty of care

Safeguarding refers to the duty of care we have to ensure young people can participate in research safely, without detriment to their wellbeing. The duty to safeguard means that confidentiality isn't absolute. If a child or young person discloses something which indicates that they, or someone else, are at serious risk of harm, you have a responsibility to act and report it.

Best practice guidance suggests children should be informed of the limits to confidentiality early on and kept informed if that right must be waived (Graham et al., 2013). **Being clear about the limits of confidentiality upfront empowers children and young people** by allowing them to decide what they want to share, knowing how that information may be used.

Below is an example script that you can adapt to your context. You might use this early on when you're initially setting up a project, in your participant information sheets, or when you feel a young person is about to disclose something to you.

"Most of what you tell us will stay private. That means we won't share it with other people without your permission. There are a few exceptions. If you tell us something that makes us worried that you or someone else might be at risk of serious harm, we might need to tell someone whose job it is to help keep people safe."

If that ever happens, we'll try to talk to you about it first and explain what we're doing and why – unless that would make things riskier for you. We're not here to judge or to get anyone in trouble. We're here to listen, learn, and make sure people are safe."

If a child or young person does tell you something concerning related to abuse, neglect, or exploitation, it's important to take it seriously – they have trusted you with this information.

You shouldn't deal with safeguarding on your own. If you are based at or working in partnership with Queen Mary, you should familiarise yourself with the [Queen Mary safeguarding policy](#) or the equivalent policy if you are based in a different organisation. Seek out safeguarding training (e.g. "Safeguarding Essentials" on the QM CPD platform). The NSPCC has a [helpful video](#) providing guidance for how to respond to a disclosure in a calm and supportive way. If a child is in immediate danger, you should call the emergency services.



The **NSPCC** has a **helpful video** providing guidance for how to respond to a disclosure in a calm and supportive way.



Not all disclosures require a safeguarding report.

Young people may share experiences that involve risk-taking or illegal activities. These experiences don't necessarily mean confidentiality must be broken – taking risks and everyday rule-breaking is a normal part of growing up. Safeguarding is about protection rather than legal enforcement. Exercise judgement, and if in doubt, discuss with a safeguarding lead.

“Being clear about the limits of confidentiality upfront empowers children and young people by allowing them to decide what they want to share, knowing how that information may be used.”

Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Checks

Most research with children and vulnerable adults will require you to have an Enhanced DBS check. The check will reveal any spent or unspent criminal convictions and, where relevant, barred list information. This enables organisations and institutions to assess someone's suitability to work with vulnerable groups. Read more about DBS checks on [GOV.UK](https://gov.uk).

The DBS check is usually carried out by your institution, although some organisations may require an additional or specific check. DBS also offers an online automatic update service which you can subscribe to for an annual fee (£16 per year as of April 2026). It allows you to keep your certificate up to date and enables organisations to check your DBS clearance online without having to apply for a new certificate. You can register for the update service within 30 days of the DBS certificate being issued. This can be particularly helpful if you are likely to be working with multiple organisations. For further information please see the [UK Government DBS Update Service](https://gov.uk).



Reflexivity and emotions

Participatory research is relational work that can be ethically demanding and emotionally complex (Klocker, 2015). Working alongside children and young people, especially around sensitive topics, can involve a wide range of emotions for everyone involved.

Children and young people are likely become emotionally invested in work that connects to their lived experiences. In the conversations for this toolkit, researchers also named several emotions that come up for them in their work, including empathy, vulnerability, worry, joy, fear, excitement, shame, disappointment, self-doubt, failure, embarrassment, guilt, and pride.

Reflexivity involves paying attention to these responses and reflecting on what they tell us about power and relationships. Our roles, identities, and assumptions, all shape the research process. Social researcher Victoria Jupp Kina (2012) uses the metaphor of an emotional “ocean” to describe how these feelings can stir up the waters and muddy transparency in decision-making. How you feel impacts what you notice, the questions you ask, and the decisions you make.

Emotional labour is therefore an integral part of participatory research. You may find yourself regularly holding space for sensitive conversations, conflict, or navigating safeguarding concerns. Creating space for support, reflection and debriefing is therefore essential.

This reflection can take many forms:

- Building in regular team reflection sessions
- Keeping a reflective research diary
- Seeking supervision or peer support where needed
- Using structured reflection tools with co-researchers

The **Reflective Questions** tool can be used by researchers and/or young people individually (as journal prompts) and/or with a peer, supervisor, team, or co-researcher.



CASE STUDY

The HEAL study and the HEART project

This case study emerges from the reflections of Sandra Jemie Fouboua and Dana Al-Anizi, two Youth Insight researchers who met with Dr Heather McMullen and Richard Roach to discuss their work in collaboration youth organisations. They discussed a range of participatory initiatives that they work on research and engagement related to violence affecting young people, and the newly emerging HEART project, exploring the relationship between creative engagement and health and wellbeing.

Participatory research with children and young people is rarely ethically straightforward. Decisions often involve balancing different values and priorities such as participant safety and wellbeing, data integrity, anonymity, creative ownership, and research outcomes.

“In working with young people, they always come first, not the research.”

HEAL study

Heather acknowledged an important consideration in exploring the topic of violence affecting young people:

“You don’t want to put violence on anyone’s minds if it wasn’t there, but equally we still want to hear from them.”

One way the team decided to approach this topic carefully was through a project they called Hear/Say. They hosted a series of dinners with young people with the aim of discussing quotes and themes that came out of their research interviews about violence affecting young people. These were printed out and put on the tables during dinner. When conversations drifted towards football or everyday life, the researchers did not steer the discussion back towards the themes or topics related to safety or violence. This was an intentional ethical choice that prioritised wellbeing and autonomy over data collection. This approach allowed conversations about sensitive topics to be participant-led, enhancing feelings of control and safety, which is a core principle in trauma-informed practice.

This demonstrates the **ethical restraint** that is needed when conducting research about sensitive topics. Whilst it may have been possible to extract more emotive data, the researchers thought very carefully about how much they should open young people up to talk about their experiences and perspectives on violence.

Richard also emphasises the importance of understanding the settings and contexts in which research is taking place, building relationships in advance and how best to proceed with organisations lend their trust to researchers.

“People need to understand the spaces they are working in. Researchers can feel a bit cold in relational spaces. Building relationships over time is important, saying hello and getting to know people is important. You need to do that work in advance. Safety is relational too – how are people meant to know you are safe?”

Heather and Richard both reiterated that:

“In working with young people, they always come first, not the research.”

HEART project

At the time of our conversation, the HEART project was in the engagement stage, with ethical review underway for formal research. There were many things the research team were considered, including how to enable the project to be flexible and adaptive, while still having clear research plans and ethical processes. They were also considering which parts of the projects would include formal data collection and which would not. This can be of particular importance for arts-based projects where participants want to share and display their artistic outputs while research outputs remain anonymous. Or, if data collection is meant to be creative and engaging, how much can the research instruments be adapted before losing their validity, for example with a survey?

“We need to balance the principles and practices of ethical research with the goals and expectations of the partner organisation and the project itself – sometimes this can feel clunky, or present a tension between procedural ethics and situated ethics in practice.”

In our conversation, we discussed several possible strategies, including creating additional, anonymised material. Critically, Heather and Richard aimed to bring these questions to the young people to share the decision-making with them, within the constraints they were facing.

Key takeaways

This case study highlights several ethical considerations in arts-based participatory projects. Firstly, researchers must prioritise participant safety. As Richard noted, safety is relational and built over time, so researchers need to attend carefully to the contexts and settings in which they work. At the same time, researching sensitive topics such as violence affecting young people requires ethical restraint and knowledge of **trauma-informed ways of working**.

Ethical decision-making in participatory research is often complex, ongoing, and emergent. Prioritising young people’s safety, wellbeing, and agency is paramount. It is important to recognise that decisions may need to be paused, adapted, and

re-negotiated as a project unfolds through dialogue with participants, peers, colleagues, supervisors, and ethics boards. As Heather vividly described in relational to these evolving processes:

“We are swimming in that sea right now.”

These examples underscore the value of peer review, reflective discussion, and shared decision-making as recommended by Ellis et al. (2023, p10):

“Safe research practice, particularly in relation to unanticipated or relational ethical issues, are enhanced by structures of peer review, reflective discussion and shared decision making... researchers working in sensitive spaces should support one another and be reflective in their own practice so that research continues to be a safe space.”



3

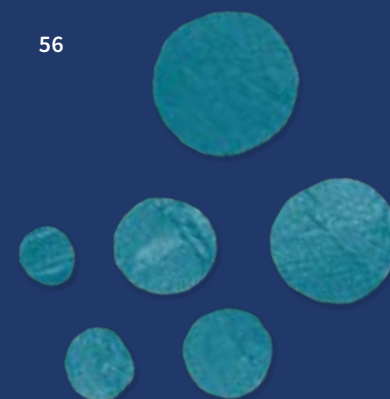
Engaging and involving young people



PART 3

Engaging and involving young people

Introduction	40	CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 3	
		Evaluation Spotlight	49
Initial engagement and relationship-building	41		
Recruitment	41	Inclusion and access	50
Setting the scene	42	BOX 5	
Relationship building	42	Practical tools for accessible research	53
Involvement across the research cycle	44	CASE STUDY	
Priority setting	44	Big Mouth – Youth-Led Reflection on Oral Health Research	54
BOX 4		CASE STUDY	
Entry points for young people's involvement in research – PEAR Guidelines	45	AMPLIFY – Sustaining Youth Engagement in Mental Health Research	56
Sustaining involvement over time	46		
Training for co-researchers	46		
Structures for sustained engagement	47		
Achieving impact	48		



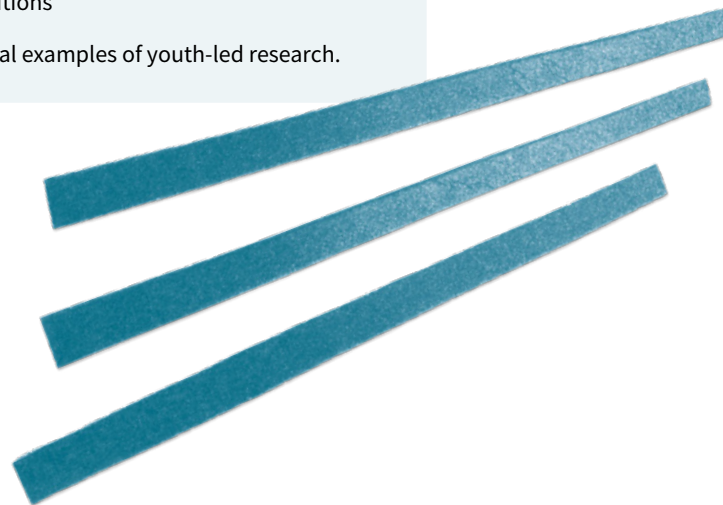
Introduction

In this toolkit, *engagement* refers to the active, meaningful, and sustained involvement of young people in the research process. Engagement with children and young people is not only about recruitment or method, but an ongoing relational process over the course of a research project. The quality of the relationships you build will influence the depth of engagement and collaboration possible, and ultimately, the extent to which knowledge can be co-constructed with young people.

Engagement can take many forms, and not every project will involve children and young people in the same ways. This section therefore moves through a range of practical considerations, including recruitment, setting the scene, involvement across the research cycle, priority setting, training and support for co-researchers, structures for sustained engagement, and inclusion and access.

This section will help you:

- ✓ Identify meaningful ways to involve children and young people in research
- ✓ Set clear expectations and build trust
- ✓ Set research priorities in collaboration with young people
- ✓ Use practical tools to plan participation and support their contributions
- ✓ Learn from real examples of youth-led research.



Initial engagement and relationship-building

Recruitment

Most research with children and young people depends on working with organisations and adults that already have a relationship with them, for example:

- youth clubs
- schools, colleges or universities
- community organisations like sports clubs, faith groups, or libraries
- existing advisory groups and youth councils

You can find further guidance on approaching and working with these partners in the section, [Working with Gatekeepers](#).

Recruitment is never entirely neutral. Partners may put forward the same children and young people, often those who have existing experience or confidence in participation roles. Whilst these young people have valuable contributions to make, this can also unintentionally exclude voices that are less frequently heard.

You might gently challenge this by:

- Being specific about who you're hoping to involve in the research (e.g. "We're particularly keen to hear from young people who haven't done something like this before")
- Asking partner organisations to think beyond the young people they'd typically put forward
- Offering multiple, flexible ways to participate
- Building in time and support for young people who are newer to this kind of work

It can be useful to regularly ask yourself:

- Who isn't in the room?
- Who are we most likely to involve using our current recruitment networks?
- Who might be excluded by those approaches?
- What would need to change for different children and young people to be included?

“Being clear about the limits of confidentiality upfront empowers children and young people by allowing them to decide what they want to share, knowing how that information may be used.”

Setting the scene

Once you've identified a group of young people to involve, it is useful to begin by "setting the scene" (Lloyd et al., 2025) together. Take time at the beginning of a project to build a shared understanding what the research involves, why it matters, and how young people's contributions will shape the research.

Where possible, this should be treated as a two-way conversation, ensuring it takes into account young people's views, perspectives, and priorities. Even when some elements are already fixed, 'setting the scene' provides an opportunity to clarify where young people are able to have an influence. You might discuss:

- The aims of the project
- Roles and responsibilities
- How contributions will shape the research
- Practicalities such as time commitments and support
- Consent, confidentiality, and safeguarding
- What will make the experience mutually beneficial: e.g., joint dissemination, co-authorship, or fun activities.

In projects where things are still evolving, it's fine not to have all the answers. You can still 'set the scene' by explaining how young people's contributions will make a difference and establishing how you'll work together.

It can be tempting to overpromise the potential impact of the research to motivate young people to get onboard. However, it's important to not to make promises that you can't keep at the risk of damaging trust and causing disappointment.

Relationship building

For many children and young people, being involved in research may feel risky or unfamiliar (Butti, 2025). Children and young people's previous experiences with institutions, adults, exclusion, or being listened to, can vary widely. Butti (2025) argues that participatory methodologies are not enough in themselves to ensure meaningful involvement. Instead, a **focus on relationships, not specific methodologies**, is what supports **meaningful participation**.

“... a focus on relationships, not specific methodologies, is what supports meaningful participation.”

Below, we share some **top tips for building trusting relationships** with young people:

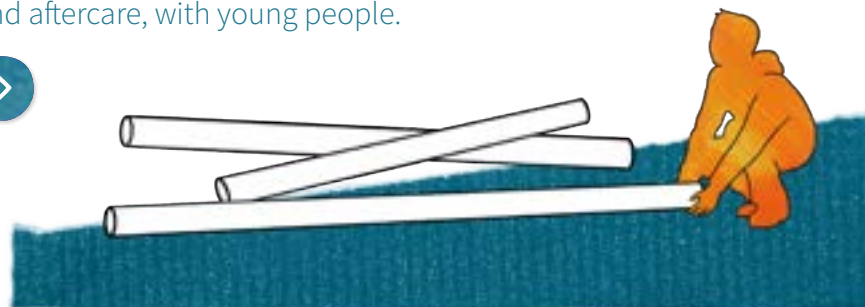
- **Be yourself.** You don't need to present an overly professionalised version of yourself, imitate young people's language or style, or try to act 'younger' than you are. Authenticity is key.
- **Be curious and listen well.** Remembering people's names or things they've said to you the week before can go a long way towards showing you value their contributions.
- **Respect any "no"s, and don't take them personally.** Young people may choose to not take part at all or step back at times. This should be respected without any pressure or judgement.
- **Be honest when you don't know something.** Say you don't know but explain how you will go away and find out. Follow up as soon as you can.
- **Do what you say you're going to do.** Respect and good will can be broken easily by forgetting to do something which might be very important to the young people you're engaging.

Tools to support

Preparing to set the scene takes you through some questions you should have clear before engaging young people.



Ethical Reflection Jenga is a game designed to support conversations about payment, power and voice, recognition and authorship, privacy, and aftercare, with young people.



Involvement across the research cycle

Participatory research considers how young people can contribute at every stage of the research process. Not every project will involve young people at every stage, but considering where their input would add most value is a useful starting point. **Box 4** sets out some entry points for where young people can contribute across the research cycle.



Priority setting

One of the most powerful stages for children and young people to be involved in research is deciding the research priorities and what questions are going to be asked. **Tool 4** sets out guidance for running [A simple priority setting exercise with children and young people](#).

Sometimes, research questions or topics are already defined due to funding applications, ethics processes, or commissioning. It is still possible to seek meaningful involvement even when this is the case. For example, you could invite young people to prioritise:

- Which aspects of a topic matter most to them
- Which questions feel most relevant, urgent or missing
- How issues should be framed or described in young people's own language
- Which groups or experiences should be centred
- What feels safe, appropriate or important to talk about – and what does not



BOX 4

Entry points for young people's involvement in research – PEAR Guidelines

Young people can contribute across the whole research cycle. The entry points below, adapted from guidance developed by the PEAR young people's public health group in *Young People in Research: How to involve us* (NCB, 2010), are a useful place to start. Participatory research involves a series of *choice points* (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020): moments where decisions are made about how much influence young people have at a given stage. Consider how you will pay attention to power, influence, and decision-making across the research cycle.

- **Priority setting**

Identifying issues that matter to them and helping decide which topics should be prioritised within the research.

- **Project development and planning**

Giving feedback on initial research ideas, or being part of funding applications.

- **Reviewing existing evidence**

Helping identify relevant themes, topics, or search terms, and discussing how current evidence reflects their own experiences.

- **Research design**

Working with researchers to develop questionnaires, interview guides, and other tools to make sure they make sense, ask the right things, and don't cause any distress.

- **Recruitment**

Recruiting through peer networks and advising on inclusive, youth-friendly recruitment methods (e.g. sign-up forms or social media) to involve diverse groups of young people.

- **Data collection**

Taking part in interviews, focus groups, or other research activities as peer facilitators or co-researchers, where appropriate.

- **Analysis and interpretation**

Discussing emerging findings, identifying patterns or themes, offering their interpretations and comparing with those of adult researchers.

- **Writing up**

Commenting on or writing sections of reports, papers, or summaries. Deciding on key framing or messages.

- **Dissemination**

Young people can be involved in presenting and sharing research findings through conferences, workshops, training sessions, creative outputs, or community events. They can also help decide who research should be shared with and the most effective and accessible ways to communicate findings.

- **Governance and leadership**

Participating in steering groups, advisory panels, or project meetings to ensure young people's perspectives shape key decisions throughout the project.

Sustaining involvement over time

Training for co-researchers

Once you've identified how and where children and young people will be involved (see [Box 4](#) on PEAR) it's important to develop new or existing skills and knowledge needed to participate meaningfully. Find out what other relevant experience they have – don't underestimate the value and quality of what they already have to offer! Depending on their role, co-researchers may need training in:

- What research is and why it matters
- How to develop research questions
- Practical skills like interviewing, facilitation, or note-taking
- Data analysis, both qualitative and quantitative
- Ethics in practice, including confidentiality, its limits, and responding to disclosures
- Looking after themselves, especially when topics are emotionally demanding

The level and content of training should be proportionate to the activity itself, young people's existing skills and knowledge, and their roles and responsibilities. For example, in this toolkit, our Youth Insight researchers received training in 'thick description' (coined by Clifford Geertz, 1973) and participant observation, as well as interviewing skills and support with preparation. This enabled them to both collect data and help shape its interpretation.

Training doesn't mean young people have to become experts in every aspect of research – what matters is that their insights are supported and are taken seriously.

The **National Youth Agency (NYA)** provides a digital [Young Researchers Toolkit](#) and associated [Portfolio](#) as a starting point to train young researchers to navigate research confidently.

For more guidance on analysing data with children and young people, see the section [Analysis and Dissemination](#).

“ Find out what other relevant experience they have – don't underestimate the value and quality of what they already have to offer! ”

Structures for sustained engagement

Having young people involved over the duration of a project can have several benefits, including deeper insights into research topics, relationship building, and the opportunity to build young people's skills and capacity as co-researchers. Sustaining their engagement over time can be challenging, however, due to a range of practical and structural barriers such as school timetables, limited funding, and changing life circumstances.

One commonly used structure for sustained involvement in research is **Young Person's Advisory Groups**, or YPAGs. These are ongoing panels where young people meet regularly to advise and consult on one or multiple projects. YPAGs provide a mechanism for embedding youth voice and insight across the lifecycle of a research project.

However, YPAGs do not automatically shift decision-making power. Without care, consultation or advisory roles risk becoming tokenistic, with young people's knowledge and perspectives voice being extracted but not structurally empowered. It is therefore important for researchers to reflect critically on the limits of consultation and to consider how power is shared in practice.

At the same time, YPAGs should not be dismissed as inherently tokenistic. They can create meaningful spaces for dialogue and for young people to contribute to research design and dissemination.

For researchers who want practical guidance on setting up and running YPAGs, see the [Generation R Alliance/eYPaGNet toolkit](#).

An example of a Queen Mary YPAG structure is included in [AMPLIFY case study](#), where members shared what kept them engaged.

“It is important for researchers to reflect critically on the limits of consultation and to consider how power is shared in practice.”

Achieving impact

From the very beginning of your project, it's important to start thinking about the kind of impact you hope to achieve and for whom, as well as how you will evaluate and evidence that impact over time. It's important to distinguish **between research dissemination and outputs and impact** – whilst outputs and dissemination can be *pathways* to impact, they are not one and the same.

The Research Excellence Framework 2029 (REF) defines impact as effects on, or benefits to, the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.

Planning early helps ensure that impact pathways are built into your project's design rather than added on at the end.

Useful questions to consider are:

- What change do we want to make?
- What does success look like?

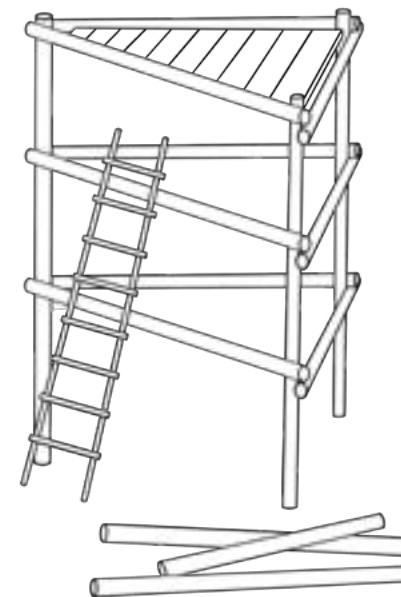
Participatory research often builds capacity and relationships that last beyond the research project itself. These can **deepen and extend impact pathways** ranging from:

- Skills and capacity building for youth co-researchers
- New partnerships and networks
- Resources or outputs that live on (e.g. films, toolkits, trainings)

Resulting impacts can include:

- Young people applying their skills in education, employment, or their communities
- Partnerships and networks influencing changes in policy, practice, or service design and implementation
- Outputs like films or toolkits being adopted by organisations or contributing to shifts in public understanding
- Direct changes to policy and practice

For Queen Mary members, extensive training, resources, and support for knowledge exchange and impact are available through the university's dedicated [Impact Resource Pages](#). Meanwhile, try using the [Fast Track Impact Planning Template](#) for coming up with a strategic plan for impact.



Evaluation Spotlight

Evaluation is an important part of any project to ensure impact is being achieved. However, it can sometimes feel laborious, irrelevant, or inaccessible to the people involved in a research project.

Planning carefully and using creative methods can engage people more collaboratively and meaningfully in the process of evaluation.

CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT

3

Creative Evaluation Toolkit

The Creative Evaluation Toolkit from the Women's Environmental Network shares guidance on the principles for good evaluation, as well as tools and methods to engage people in its co-design, ranging from 'cartooning' to 'audio and vox pops' and 'visual minutes'.

[> See the toolkit](#)

Queen Mary Public Engagement Evaluation Toolkit

This toolkit also shares guidance on a variety of tools for evaluating public engagement, from more traditional forms such as interviews and workshops to creative methods such as photo surveys and 'rich pictures'.

[> See the toolkit](#)

Inclusion and access

All children and young people have the right to have their voices heard and participate in research. However, many face overlapping barriers to taking part (e.g., disability, neurodivergence, minoritised ethnicity, socioeconomic disadvantage).

Dr Tanvir Bush, a disabled activist, writer and academic, coined the term ‘transformational inclusion’ to describe the fundamental mind shift needed to truly embrace an inclusive approach. It involves changing the focus from ‘us and them’ to just ‘us’. This shift requires asking a different question – instead of ‘how can we help you’, it asks ‘how can we help each other?’ This is an important reminder that **inclusive design is beneficial for everyone** and improves the quality of research overall. You can listen to hear Dr Bush talking about inclusion during a [Plenary Session at the NCCPE Engage Summit 2024](#).

Considering universal design for common access needs is very important – but remember that access needs can vary widely between every individual. Sometimes, needs can conflict with each other which requires discussion and compromise. This [helpful resource from Autism AIM](#) – Mental Health Equity Project provides strategies for the management of conflicting access needs.

Building on existing work (Bailey et al., 2015; Liddiard et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2024; McGregor et al., 2024), the following

starting points offer some practical guidance for designing accessible and inclusive research with young people.

Inclusive language and communication

- Use language that respects how children and young people describe themselves. Some people prefer identity first language (e.g. autistic person) whilst others prefer person first (e.g. person with autism).
- Avoid deficit-based or stigmatising terms, like “suffering from”.
- Use clear, concrete, and accessible wording and avoid unnecessary jargon.
- Consider visual supports or alternative formats, like video explanations or [Easy Read](#) which many people with a learning disability say helps (MENCAP, 2024).
- Involve children and young people in reviewing research materials before they’re finalised – they’re best placed to feedback on what is accessible to them.
- Consider people who may not speak English fluently and how to include translation and interpretation and/or co-facilitators from within the community.

“ This shift requires asking a different question – instead of ‘how can we help you’, it asks ‘how can we help each other?’ ”

Preparing people for what to expect

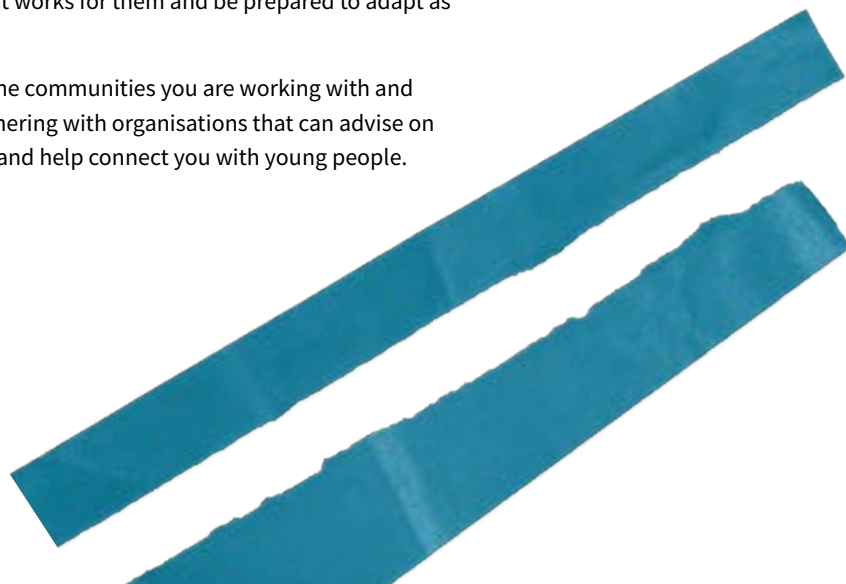
Making sure people know well in advance what to expect can help with any worries around the unknown or unfamiliar – a barrier that may impact some neurodivergent young people more strongly. Many young people find it easier to take part when they know what to expect in advance.

- Share clear information about what will happen, who will be there and how long everything will take.
- Use visual prompts or step-by-step guides where helpful or appropriate.
- Offer opportunities to meet the research team, see materials, or get used to the setting in advance.
- Be flexible and adaptable for each young person – life happens, circumstances can change.

Treat people as individuals, not diagnoses or labels

Two people with the same condition, impairment, or background, may have very different needs.

- Offer lots of choice in terms of ways to respond, access information, and engage.
- Ask young people and where appropriate, their families and/or carers, what works for them and be prepared to adapt as you go along.
- Learn about the communities you are working with and consider partnering with organisations that can advise on access needs and help connect you with young people.



Physical and social environments

- Ensure locations are physically accessible, including step-free access, accessible toilets, and consider parking or proximity to public transport.
- Whenever possible, host activities in locations that are familiar and accessible to young people, and that fit within their everyday lives, such as local community centres, schools, youth clubs, or other non-institutional spaces.
- Consider sensory needs: factors such as noise, lighting, smells, crowding, or unfamiliar people can all affect comfort levels.
- Ask in advance what would help: quiet room to take breaks, smaller groups of people, dietary preferences, fidget toys, comfort objects.

Other inclusion considerations

- **Faith and culture:** accommodate dietary restrictions, prayer needs, holidays, and culturally relevant ways of communicating. Be willing and open to learn about what you don't know, and acknowledge when things haven't gone to plan.
- **Socioeconomic factors:** consider travel, childcare, and costs of participation. Provide reimbursement or flexible participation options. Always provide good quality food and refreshments and food where possible – it's hard to participate if hungry.
- **Digital access:** offer multiple ways to participate both online and offline, acknowledging disparities in technology and internet access.



BOX 5

Practical tools for accessible research

Research passports

Research passports (Ashworth et al., 2024) are documents that allow participants to share information about themselves, their communication preferences, access needs, and what helps them feel comfortable before the research begins. They can help researchers understand how to work with each person in ways that suit them, which supports more comfortable and inclusive research encounters.

Ashworth et al. (2024) co-developed autism-specific research passports to support more empathetic, participant-led research encounters. While this tool has so far been used with autistic adults, they could be adapted for use with many children and young people.

[View the research](#)

Participant Packs

Participant Packs (Barron, 2021) are a flexible, open-ended research method designed to make participation more accessible and engaging. They offer a range of ways for participants to express themselves, including written prompts, drawings, photos, voice notes, creative materials, and digital responses.

They were originally developed in research with older adults and have not, as far as we are aware, been formally evaluated with children and young people. They are included here because they allow people to take part in their own time and in ways that suit their communication styles. This makes them a promising tool for inclusive and accessible research.

[View the Participant Packs](#)



For more methods like ‘Participant Packs’, check out the open access **Methods For Change: Research Method Library** from **Aspect**. It contains 30 accessible ‘how-to’ guides for researchers in any setting.



CASE STUDY

Big Mouth – Youth-Led Reflection on Oral Health Research

This case study is drawn from a reflective workshop that Youth Insight researchers Rahaf Bashir and Stefania Ramona-Capraru facilitated with the Big Mouth Team at Queen Mary, Vanessa Muirhead and Stephen Taylor. This came after they had participated in some of the project's community workshops and team meetings. The Big Mouth team had developed strong methods and materials for community engagement and were curious about how they might build on this work to engage more young people in future.

Context

Big Mouth Tower Hamlets is a community engagement project based at Queen Mary University of London, run in partnership with Social Action for Health. It aims to shift conversations about oral health away from a focus on clinical dental problems towards community assets, through listening to local residents and involving them in shaping research priorities. The project uses creative, participatory methods, such as body mapping and collaborative mural-making, to capture what matters to people in Tower Hamlets, particularly those from seldom heard communities.

Big Mouth had been designed to reach community members across Tower Hamlets, but they noted that few young people had attended their events. There were some practical constraints. Attempts to involve or partner with youth organisations hadn't come to fruition. Although social media had helped the research team connect with their main community partner, Stefania and Rahaf reflected that the channels they primarily used – LinkedIn and X – wouldn't reach young people directly.

The conversation opened up a useful question: what might oral health research look like if it started from young people's priorities? Rahaf and Stefania reflected on what might resonate with their peers:

- aesthetic concerns, like the desire for a “perfect smile”
- anxieties about “Turkey teeth” as promoted on social media
- how clean teeth can function as markers of self-care or social status, with impacts on appearance, self-esteem, and mental health.



Body mapping is an arts-based method for exploring experience through drawing, writing, or collaging on outlines of bodies. To read more about body mapping, check out [this guide](#) from the Institute of Development Studies.



Ideas for future youth engagement

The workshop surfaced several ideas for engaging more young people in research about oral health in future:

- Partnering with youth organisations from the outset to build relationships and recruit participants
- Bringing in youth researchers in from the beginning to shape research priorities
- Designing engagement strategies with young people specifically in mind
- Communicating through trusted channels and peer networks.

Conclusion

This reflective workshop was a reminder of how much youth-led insights can bring to research. The Big Mouth team's openness to this kind of reflection was itself a model for how research teams can learn from young people's perspectives.

“ The conversation opened up a useful question: what might oral health research look like if it started from young people's priorities? ”



Read more about
**Big Mouth
Tower Hamlets**
project



CASE STUDY

AMPLIFY – Sustaining Youth Engagement in Mental Health Research

This case study draws on the insights of two Youth Insight researchers, Mehjabin Islam and Emily Kinzler, who used a combination of observation, interviewing, surveys, and review of materials to understand how AMPLIFY engages young people. Mehjabin also contributed reflective analysis of the interview transcript, helping to identify key themes around sustained engagement and evolving motivation.

AMPLIFY is a youth-led network based at Queen Mary's Centre for Psychiatry and Mental Health, bringing together young people aged 16–25 from North-East London to share their lived experiences and collaborate with peers and researchers to shape mental health research for young people. The network is led by young people and facilitated by Abigail Thomson within the Wolfson Institute of Population Health.

Members meet monthly to contribute to research projects at different stages, from early consultations and planning through to analysis and interpretation of findings. Each session focuses on a different study, with researchers actively seeking young people's perspectives on mental health related issues affecting their peers. AMPLIFY is involved in a diversity of youth mental health research, and members from the wider network are encouraged to join the sessions that are most relevant and meaningful for them, based on their lived experience. Researchers are encouraged to return to AMPLIFY throughout their project, to ensure collaboration throughout the research cycle. Participants receive £25 in vouchers for each one-hour session, recognising both their time and their expertise.

AMPLIFY have also curated Photovoice exhibitions sharing young people's experiences of sharing their voice to shape research, and led a co-designed research study called Co-RISE, which aimed to create resources to support the involvement of underserved young people in mental health research.

What draws young people in?

AMPLIFY members emphasised the opportunities to learn new things, gain experience, and meet other young people. Members described gaining insight into how research works, understanding mental health issues affecting their generation, and getting experience and skills which might help their future education and career. As one member said:

“My mum recommended that I look for research opportunities, and [that's how I] came across AMPLIFY to help build my experience for my university application.”

The payment was also important. It reinforces that young people's contributions and time are valued.

One member shared that the signing up process was easy because it involved filling in a form instead of having to send an email. Writing to people you've not met can be intimidating, and finding the right words can be hard.

What keeps them coming back?

Members shared that their motivation to be involved changed over time, from initially wanting to gain experience and get paid to later getting enjoyment from the project itself and feeling invested in its future. This was partly down to relationships within the network. We heard that members feel genuinely welcomed and respected by Abi and the researchers and investigators bringing their work to the group. Meanwhile, members valued the opportunity to meet other young people and feel part of a community.



Members told us that what keeps them coming back is partly that AMPLIFY isn't like school. School and exams already place significant demands on young people's time and energy. Adding another obligation on top of that pressure can put people off. AMPLIFY avoids duplicating this pressure by offering flexibility. Meetings are monthly rather than weekly, participation is voluntary, and there is no expectation to attend regularly, 'perform', or be assessed. Young people can step back during exam periods and return later when they are ready – without feeling bad. As one member put it:

"You know, it makes you feel better about being inconsistent because you know you can pick and choose what you want to go to".

Another shared how this flexibility worked in practice:

"When I was busy with exams, part-time work, and starting university, it got harder to commit. But I received support from AMPLIFY to access sessions more flexibly, either online, or at different dates and times."

Creating a safe and supportive space

AMPLIFY's sessions are supported by a set of group agreements that were co-created by members of the network. They set out expectations about confidentiality, respect, and participation, and help to create a safe supportive space. As one member said:

"Amplify has ensured the young people's voices are always heard [and] safeguarding criteria are met for a safe and comfortable atmosphere, and [that] experiences benefit participants long term – either [through the] skills they learn, or their contributions last and remain for others to learn and experience from. [It's a] very rewarding opportunity!"



Young people's suggestions

We also heard practical suggestions from young people about how AMPLIFY, and other projects doing similar work, could strengthen engagement:

- **Hybrid participation:** Travelling to meetings after school or work can be tiring, especially when the location is far away. One member suggested hosting in different locations or running hybrid sessions.
- **Fun and variety:** Organising occasional days out or fun activities outside of research activities could help strengthen the relationships in the network and make participation more enjoyable.
- **Inviting friends:** One member wanted guidance for how to recruit/involve her peers/friends.

Lessons for sustaining engagement

- **Resist** the “school-ification” of research participation. Try not to replicate the pressures young people are already face in education. It’s important that participation feels low-pressure so young people can keep coming back on their own terms.
- **Recognise and respect** the realities of young people’s lives. School, exams, family responsibilities, and social lives all compete for limited time and energy. Be flexible – being involved in research needs to fit around these realities.
- **Relationships** matter alongside the research activities. The relationships young people build with each other and facilitators are just as important as the content of sessions. Belonging to a community keeps people engaged – AMPLIFY’s ‘not something that you leave’. Keeping in touch even when young people have less capacity to participate helps sustain a sense of community.

Together, these insights show how respect, care, and flexibility are foundational to creating safe and supportive environments for young people to participate, and to supporting their participation to thrive over a sustained project.



4

Facilitation skills



PART 4

Facilitation skills

Introduction 61

What is facilitation? 62

CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT 4

Working with artists Spotlight 63

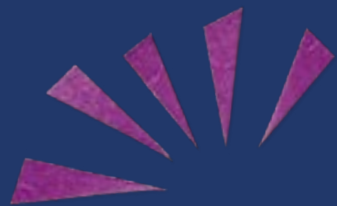
Youth-Led Facilitation Guidelines 64

Facilitation phrases 68

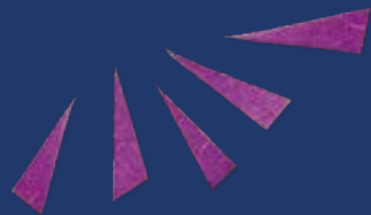
Sensitive topics and trauma-informed research 69

CASE STUDY

Facilitation in practice: working with difficult conversations 70



66 Facilitators play a key role in creating a space in which children and young people feel safe to share, reflect, manage disagreement, and take part. 99



Introduction

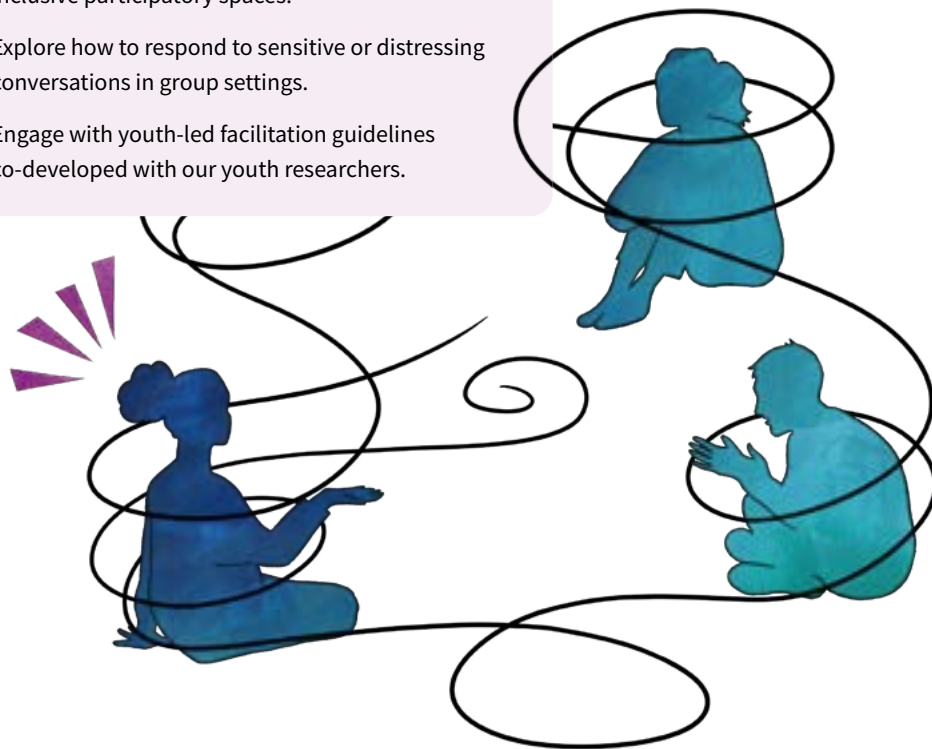
Facilitation is an important, and often neglected, research skill in participatory research. Being able to hold a room, listen to several people at a time, guide conversations, ensure quieter voices are heard, and support decision-making effectively, creates more safe, accessible, and enjoyable spaces for everyone involved.

Participatory research often involves working with personal stories and sensitive topics. Facilitators play a key role in creating a space in which children and young people feel safe to share, reflect, manage disagreement, and take part. This is especially important when working with issues like health, discrimination, or trauma, where emotional safety is crucial.

Things don't always go to plan, however, so be kind to yourself! It's not about being perfect, but reflexive and willing to adapt.

This section will help you:

- ✓ Understand the role of facilitation in creating safe, inclusive participatory spaces.
- ✓ Explore how to respond to sensitive or distressing conversations in group settings.
- ✓ Engage with youth-led facilitation guidelines co-developed with our youth researchers.



What is facilitation?

Facilitation has different purposes in different contexts. Broadly, facilitators help guide and organise people who have come together around a shared purpose. A facilitator helps remove obstacles to everyone's participation and create the conditions for effective collaboration.² This is particularly important in participatory research, where co-researchers are not just being consulted but are actively participating in decision-making.

Good facilitation involves preparation, timekeeping, managing group dynamics, navigating conflict, and designing processes that enable people to collaborate. It also requires several skills in listening, self-awareness, emotional sensitivity, and organisation.

Many qualitative researchers will be familiar with facilitating focus groups in research context which are often structured around a pre-defined set of questions. In participatory research, however, facilitation also supports shared decision-making and collaboration. The facilitator's job is not to gather data about a pre-determined set of themes, but to create space where young people can take the lead in reframing research questions, responding to findings, or making decisions about dissemination. The next pages include a set of **Youth-Led Facilitation Guidelines**, written by the Youth Insight researchers

to highlight what helps them feel safe and included. You may also find the **Reflective Questions tool** useful for preparing for the emotional dimensions for this work.

Alongside these, here are some additional helpful resources:

- **SessionLab Library:** SessionLab are a company that sells their product, an agenda-planning tool for facilitators. They have several free resources including blogs about facilitation as well as a library of practical facilitation tools.
- **The Facilitator's Toolkit, NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement:** A guide with exercises and top tips for facilitating events.
- **A short guide to Facilitating Meetings:** A guide with principles, skills, and practical resources for supporting collaborative decision-making from Seeds for Change: an organisation that supports groups organising for social and environmental justice.
- **Leading Groups Online** by Jeanne Rewa and Daniel Hunter: an open access eBook developed during the Covid-19 pandemic to support people facilitating meetings, trainings and workshops online.

2 Rim Moise, D., (2024). "What is Group Facilitation? 12 tips for better group management". SessionLab. Accessed 5 March 2026. <https://www.sessionlab.com/blog/group-facilitation/>

Working with artists Spotlight

CREATIVE METHODS SPOTLIGHT

4

If you're thinking of using arts-based or creative methods in your research, but don't have an arts background, consider working with professional artists. They can bring:

- **Facilitation expertise** – holding space, working with uncertainty
- **Technical skills** – in specific media, materials, processes
- **Different ways of thinking** about knowledge, meaning, and form
- **Aesthetic expertise** in crafting stories, images, representation

Working with artists can also facilitate better collaboration between you and your co-researchers: when you're all being facilitated together, it can level the playing field.

People's Palace Projects are an independent arts research centre based at Queen Mary University of London. They work with a range of artists, activists, academics and audiences to engage with questions of social justice through the power of the arts.

“Working with artists can also facilitate better collaboration between you and your co-researchers.”

If you're considering working with artists, check out these two useful guides:

- **NCCPE (2021). What Works Guide: Artists and Researcher Collaborations** – a practical guide to building, facilitating, and learning from collaborations between researchers and artists.
- **University of Warwick (2021). Artist-Researcher Collaborations with Coventry Creates** – a reflective guide documenting artist-researcher partnerships and their impacts.

Youth-Led Facilitation Guidelines

Written by the Youth Insight researchers

We created these guidelines to help researchers understand what it feels like to take part in a session as a young person, and what really helps us feel comfortable, included, and able to contribute.

Sometimes not everything goes to plan, but not everything goes wrong either! Even the little efforts you make can go a long way to promoting and increasing the quality of our engagement.

Use this guide to reflect on your practice and what you already do well, and to identify small changes that could make your sessions more enjoyable, meaningful, and accessible for young people.

1

Foundations: Respect and Boundaries

Everything else in this guide rests on the foundation of treating us as equals, not as research subjects.

We notice when you make the effort, like when you listen carefully, show interest, and take our contributions seriously. These things help us feel valued. Your body language, tone, facial expressions, and reactions shape how comfortable we feel, often more than you might realise. Try to be reflexive and self-aware about how you're coming across – authenticity is key.

Stay open-minded about who we are and what we might bring. Don't assume what we will or won't understand. Stay curious. Knowing one thing about us (like a diagnosis, label, or characteristic) doesn't define how we'll think, feel, or behave. We all have different experiences, and it feels good when that's recognised.

Be friendly *and* professional. It's important to get the balance right between friendliness, warmth, and appropriate boundaries to help us connect with you, without it feeling too formal.

Respect our time and space – avoid emailing at late hours or sending multiple follow-up emails.



2 Communication and Clarity

We feel more confident when we know what to expect.

Be clear about the purpose of a session, what our role is, and how our contributions will be used. This helps us feel prepared and valued.

Share agendas in advance, especially if sensitive topics may come up. Send one clear email with all key information, then a reminder the day before. Let us know how to contact you with any questions or concerns.

After a session, stay in touch and update us on project progress. Tell us what happened next and how our contributions made a difference.

3 Accessibility and Inclusion

It helps when you ask about our needs and preferences. This shows you see us as individuals with different circumstances and value our time.

Speaking isn't the only way to contribute. Some of us are shy, some prefer writing, others might not want cameras on. Give us options for how we can take part – speaking, writing, chat, drawing, collaborative boards, as well as anonymous options.

- Ask us about our access needs and adjust accordingly (e.g. timing, format, language, pronouns).
- Build in breaks so we don't feel we have to ask.
- Use icebreakers and creative activities to help us feel comfortable.

For in-person:

- Provide water, snacks, and refreshments.
- Use name badges or table cards to help everyone learn names.
- Allow settling-in time and build in buffer time for transport delays.

For online:

- Try test tech ahead of time to make sure things run smoothly.
- Use interactive tools like Microsoft Whiteboard, Canva, Miro, Padlet. But also check our preferences.

4 Safety and Trust

**We need to feel safe before we can open up.
That means knowing you'll handle things if they
get difficult.**

Trust takes time, so don't rush it – especially in longer projects.

- Co-create group agreements with us and refer back to them if tensions arise.
- Start with a short check-in to read the room.
- Be clear about consent before recording or taking photos and how they will be used.
- Signpost to support early, not only at the end of sessions.
- Be clear about the limits of confidentiality
- Try agreeing a simple 'time-out' signal so anyone can step back or take a break.

When conversations get heavy, don't rush us on. That often comes from your discomfort. Name what's hard, stay grounded, and check if we need a pause or a breath together.

- Listen with empathy without making assumptions or giving advice.
- Challenge harmful comments or behaviour calmly and early.
- Where possible, have a second facilitator to manage unexpected situations.



5 Participation and Power

We often want to contribute, but can be too shy to jump in, cut in during an already rich conversation, or raise our voice. Part of your role is to actively manage participation.

Show us you're listening. Make space for all our voices and contributions and stay patient and adaptable. Keep things conversational: we don't want to feel like we're being tested, otherwise it could feel too much like school. Be open-minded – you might learn something new.

And remember – small things help more than you think.

- Notice who is quieter and create space for them to contribute.
- Redirect dominant voices gently, without embarrassing anyone.
- Make it clear there are no wrong or silly answers.
- Never talk over us.
- Acknowledge our contributions so we know we've been heard.
- Assume best intentions in discussions.
- If our responses aren't what you expected, don't act disappointed.
- Don't disagree with our experience just because you haven't heard it before.
- Rotate facilitation roles (note-taking, summarising) to increase engagement.

A Note on Online vs In-Person

Both have their place. Online sessions offer flexibility and can feel lower pressure for some of us, but it's harder to read the room and some people may not want their cameras on. In-person sessions make connection and communication easier, but transport costs, travel time, tiredness, and stress about arriving late can all create barriers.

There's no single right answer. Think about what will work best for your group, consider offering a mix where possible, and ask us if you're unsure.

Key Reminder

We are all different and lead complex lives. Many of us are passionate, motivated, and have a lot to offer. When you take the time to make us feel comfortable, respected and valued, you'll get the best from us.

Facilitation phrases

It can be helpful to have simple responses to draw on in the moment that help people feel heard, included, and supported when facilitating group discussions. Below are some suggested simple phrases to help you in creating supportive spaces in you research.

Demonstrating active listening

- *Thank you for sharing that with us.*
- *That sounds really important to you.*
- *It sounds like that was quite a hard experience.*
- *Can I check I've understood you properly?*

Inviting quieter voices

- *Let's pause and hear from someone we haven't heard from yet.*
- *Would anyone like to build on that from a different angle?*
- *I'm noticing some people haven't spoken yet – would you like space to add anything?*
- *Let's take it in turns to go round and hear from everyone on this without interruption or comment.*
- *That's an interesting perspective. Let's explore another point as well.*

Inviting different participation styles

- *What would make it easier for you to participate?*
- *Feel free to contribute by speaking, writing drawing, or in the chat.*
- *You can pass – there's no pressure to answer the question out loud.*

Supporting divergence and difference

- *It sounds like people are seeing this in different ways – that's helpful.*
- *Let's name where we agree, and where we're hearing different opinions or experiences.*
- *It seems like we've reached agreement on this topic [...] but we still need to explore [...] to address everyone's concerns and perspectives.*

Re-centring shared purpose:

- *What feels important for us to focus on next?*
- *Is there something we're missing or haven't covered that feels important to you?*



Sensitive topics and trauma-informed research

Research can often involve talking about sensitive topics such as mental health, trauma, discrimination, or violence.

Trauma-informed practice recognises that many participants may carry traumatic experiences or feelings of being unheard or unsafe which shape how they experience research.

Embedding trauma-informed principles can help researchers to create environments that minimise the risk of causing distress or re-traumatisation, and instead support participation that is enjoyable, ethical and inclusive. At its core, trauma-informed practice centres:

- **Choice**
- **Voice**
- **Transparency**
- **Safety**
- **Collaboration**

These lenses shape how you might apply the practices discussed in this section, from offering multiple ways to participate, to preparing for disclosures. For further practical guidance, see Fulfilling Lives South East's [Trauma-Informed Social Research: A Practical Guide](#). It offers clear, actionable advice on creating emotionally safe research environments.

“ Embedding trauma-informed principles can help researchers to create environments that ... support participation that is enjoyable, ethical and inclusive. ”



CASE STUDY

Facilitation in practice: working with difficult conversations

This case study draws on a reflective workshop between Emma Hayashibara, a PhD researcher, and three Youth Insight researchers, including Prakhar Vats, Divya Diworaz, and another who wished to remain anonymous, who reviewed her focus group plans, agendas, and transcripts. It explores the practical and ethical challenges of facilitating sensitive online group discussions with young people through a series of facilitation moments.

Context and purpose

Emma's research explores how neurodivergent young people experience mental health, particularly those from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds. Existing mental health assessments are often designed for neurotypical people, which can lead to misdiagnosis or underdiagnosis for neurodivergent young people. The project aims to co-produce a new mental health assessment tool with young people and is being carried out in partnership with Autistica.

In the early stages of this research, Emma facilitated online workshops which aimed to co-create research questions and data collection tools with young people. The workshops involved discussions about mental health, neurodivergence, and race, requiring sensitive facilitation and careful ethical decision-making.

Preparation for facilitation

Emma took several steps in advance to prepare the workshops, including planning agendas, having 1:1 conversations with participants before the workshops to understand needs and expectations, sharing materials in advance, and establishing group agreements around confidentiality, respect, and listening.

These preparations proved valuable when challenges arose during the sessions and shaped how later moments were handled.

Facilitation moments

1. Language and reflexivity

During one of the workshops, one participant said they did not identify with the term “neurodivergent”. This surprised Emma who had assumed that this term was broadly inclusive. In sessions that followed, Emma decided to:

- Check language preferences at the start of discussions
- Explain the rationale for using particular terms, while acknowledging people may feel differently about them
- Adapt language to reflect participants' preferences where possible

2. Creating safety in online spaces

Emma found that participants were more open than she expected about their mental health. The online setting appeared to create a sense of safety which encouraged candid discussion about personal experiences of mental health.

At the same time, this openness meant it was more likely for people to share sensitive or distressing experiences. Emma reflected that responding appropriately when someone shared something upsetting, while also keeping the whole group safe and supported, was one of the most demanding aspects of facilitation.

She found it helpful to have a small repertoire of responses prepared in advance, so that she could acknowledge what someone had shared with confidence (see [page 68](#) for some helpful phrases).

3. Participation, power, and group dynamics

One challenge was redirecting conversations when the group discussion started to go off-topic or if one participant dominated the discussion. This can easily happen when people feel passionately about a subject.

Emma wanted to make sure people felt safe to express themselves without making anyone feel cut off or judged. The Youth Insight researchers suggested:

- Acknowledging people's contributions before redirecting them
- Offering alternative spaces if something can't be addressed in the session, such as staying on the call at the end, offering a 1:1 follow-up at a later date, or contacting by email
- Having more than one facilitator, with one facilitator managing the group flow while another supports individual participant requests in the chat

4. Boundary-setting and safety

During one session, a participant's behaviour became increasingly disruptive, and one member of the group expressed it made them feel uncomfortable. Emma initially hesitated; she wanted to accommodate different communication styles, which was something she felt was especially important when working with neurodivergent young people. However, she also recognised her responsibility to protect the safety and privacy of the group. When the participant brought an uninvited person into the online meeting, Emma acted decisively to remove them, explaining that this breached the group agreement on confidentiality.

Reflections

Emma reflected that whilst she had expected people to have different opinions, she had not anticipated how personally challenging facilitation could feel at times. Some participants felt very strongly about the topics and directed their frustration or disagreement towards her as the facilitator.

In conversation with the Youth Insight researchers, Emma reflected that part of facilitation involves recognising that people's anger, frustration, or disagreement is often about the topic or the system, and their experiences of feeling disempowered or marginalised, rather than about the facilitator personally.

Reflecting afterwards, Emma described removing someone from the meeting as one of the most difficult moments of the project. While she felt confident that protecting confidentiality and group safety was the right decision, she was also aware of the risk that the participant might feel excluded or misunderstood. Whilst Emma did follow up with the person who had been made to feel uncomfortable,

she later reflected if she should have done the same with the participant who had been removed. To support the other participants, Emma explained in a follow up email:

“I also wanted to acknowledge that some parts of the session/conversations on Tuesday might have felt uncomfortable – I want to assure you that we are taking steps to ensure future meetings are safe, welcoming, and follow our agreed rules.”

The Youth Insight researchers reflected that being inclusive sometimes means acting for the good of the group. This is something that is likely to feel uncomfortable for everyone, bringing up feelings of guilt and responsibility. As one Youth Insight researcher reminded us:

“You’re allowed to feel uncomfortable. That other person is allowed to feel uncomfortable too.”

Emma reflected that more time for settling in, connection, and getting comfortable with one another – through activities like icebreakers – might have supported the group further. At the time, this

felt difficult due to time pressures and needing to cover planned material. This highlights a common facilitation challenge – balancing group flow with the need for progress.

Key takeaways

This case study highlights several key aspects of facilitation in research with young people:

- **Online spaces can facilitate openness, which also comes with risk.** Facilitators need to be prepared for potentially sensitive disclosures and emotionally charged discussions in group settings.
- **Building in time for connection at the start of sessions,** for example through icebreaker activities, can help participants feel more comfortable and support engagement throughout the workshop.
- **Preparation matters.** Setting the scene with shared agendas and clear group agreements provide a foundation for managing difficult moments later.
- **Language is important.** Checking in about terminology is an ongoing part of reflexive facilitation.
- **Inclusion and safety sometimes sit in tension.** Acting to protect the group may feel uncomfortable but is sometimes necessary to uphold confidentiality and group wellbeing.
- **Facilitation is emotional work.** Feeling uncertain, guilty, or conflicted is normal when holding responsibility for group safety and inclusion.



5

Working with gatekeepers

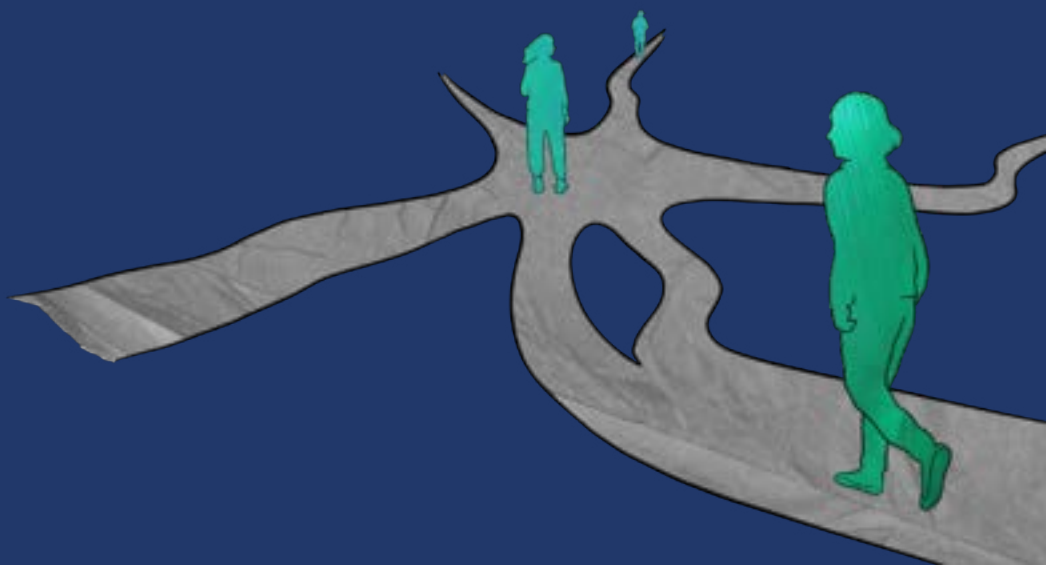


PART 5

Working with gatekeepers

Introduction	75
Who are gatekeepers?	75
Gatekeepers as collaborators	76
Ethics of working with gatekeepers	77
International contexts	77
Navigating the forest of gatekeepers	78
Working with youth organisations	79
Working with schools	80
CASE STUDY	
The Verbatim Formula	81

66 Researchers we spoke to emphasised the importance of approaching gatekeepers as collaborators and partners, not just gateways to ‘access’. 99



Introduction

Gatekeepers are individuals, institutions, or communities, who hold power, both formally and informally. In the context of this toolkit, the focus is on gatekeepers who hold power over relationships with children and young people. They can shape the research at multiple points, including reviewing your research plans, supporting recruitment, and/or advising on safeguarding. They often determine whether, when, and how engagement happens, and which young people are included.

This section will help you:

- ✓ Learn about gatekeepers' roles and influence.
- ✓ Understand ethical and relational considerations in working with them.
- ✓ See real-world examples from case studies and insights from youth organisations that illustrate these principles in action.

Who are gatekeepers?

The literature distinguishes between **formal gatekeepers** (those in recognised positions of authority within organisations) and **informal gatekeepers** (those with day-to-day relationships with young people) (Aaltonen & Kivijärvi, 2018). In practice, roles are often layered, and responsibilities are dispersed:

“... Often you will have one point of contact, but actually, the people with the power that you need for a given activity or whatever might be somebody else, some might be somewhere else entirely.”

Kiera Vaclavik, Professor of Children's Literature and Childhood Cultures

A headteacher may grant permission to enter a school, while classroom teachers facilitate recruitment. A youth organisation's director may approve your project, but youth workers shape how young people hear about it, and how they might feel about you.

Gatekeeping is shaped by institutional logics (such as safeguarding, reputational risk, bureaucracy), the gatekeepers' capacity, how they perceive your research, and social and cultural ideas about youth, vulnerability, and consent (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016). Granting access is rarely a one-off event. Instead, it's relational and often requires negotiation with multiple people simultaneously – what Turner and Almack (2015) describe as “wheels within wheels”.

Gatekeepers as collaborators

Researchers we spoke to emphasised the importance of approaching gatekeepers as collaborators and partners, not just gateways to ‘access’. Reciprocity is key: they need to see benefits for their communities, organisations, or institutions, particularly in contexts when resources are stretched.

“You think of them as your gatekeepers, but they might also be gatekeepers for others ... they are often doing a lot.”

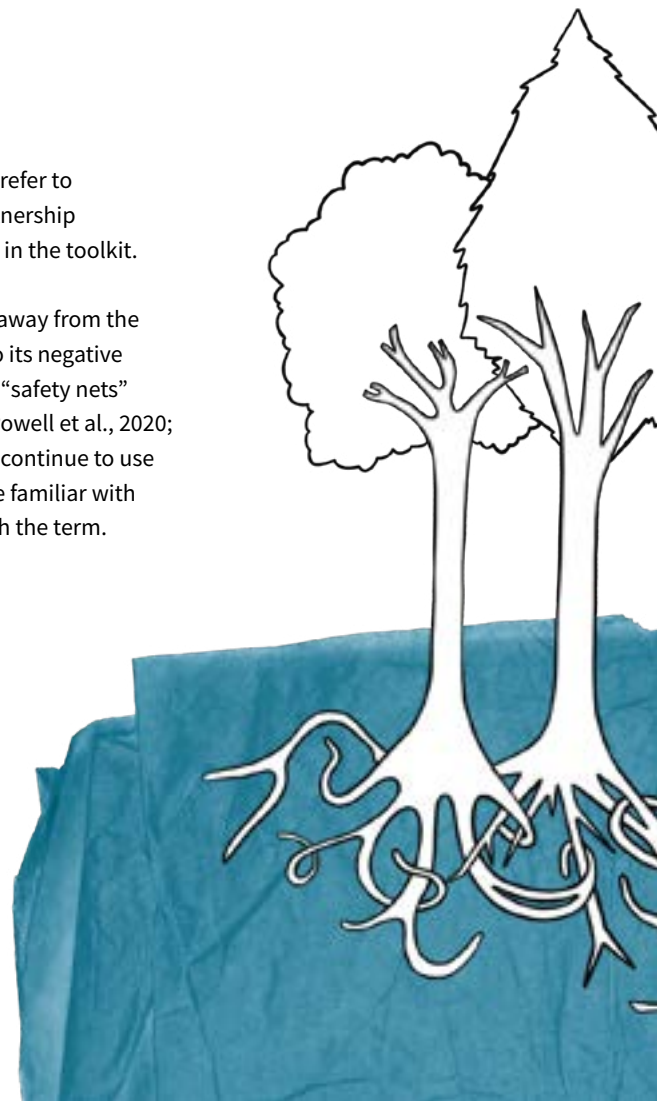
Kiera Vaclavik

Many organisations are **already involved in forms of research** and knowledge creation through consultation, evaluation, reflective practice, and listening to young people. Approaching them with an awareness of this existing expertise can help shift a relationship away from permission-seeking towards mutual learning and benefit.

Ultimately, working in partnership makes research more accountable, inclusive, and meaningful. The *Equitable Partnerships for Civic Engagement* toolkit (refer to [Box 1](#)) developed by Queen Mary as part of the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme, encourages researchers to reflect on how power, resources, and decision-making are shared across such partnerships, and provides practical tools and case studies

for working in equitable partnership. Also refer to Queen Mary’s principles for equitable partnership in public engagement, which are included in the toolkit.

Some researchers have called for moving away from the language of gatekeeping altogether due to its negative connotations. Alternative phrases include “safety nets” or “stakeholder” (see: Notko et al., 2013; Powell et al., 2020; Turner & Almack, 2016). In this toolkit, we continue to use the term gatekeeper as it is one people are familiar with but encourage you to engage critically with the term.



Ethics of working with gatekeepers

Gatekeepers carry responsibility for young people's safety and wellbeing, sometimes in contexts where young people have already experienced harm. Their role is to protect the children and young people work with. At the same time, protective measures can sometimes unintentionally exclude children and young people from participating (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014) restricting whose voices are heard.

The task is to work with gatekeepers to think through risks together, and to find ways to balance safeguarding with meaningful involvement. Sometimes, this means adapting your methods or recognising when the timing isn't right. It can also mean advocating for young people's right to be heard, while respecting the gatekeeper's knowledge and responsibilities.

Remember: gatekeeper approval does not replace participant consent, and/or consent from parents/guardians if under 18 (refer to [Ethics](#) section for further information). Seek consent actively from the children and young people you're recruiting.

International contexts

International research tends to involve additional layers of gatekeeping dynamics shaped by local governance structures, culture, and power dynamics.

Paul Heritage, Professor of Drama and Performance and Artistic Director of People's Palace Projects at Queen Mary, described how when conducting research in Indigenous territories in Brazil, "official" access granted by governments to certain areas of the rainforest wasn't sufficient. Permission was also sought from the community or Indigenous leaders who reside in those areas. This approach recognised existing power structures and demonstrated humility and respect for local context.

Meanwhile, cultural norms around adult authority and children's participation can also vary. In some contexts, if adults agree to children's participation and think it is a good idea, children may feel less able to decline to take part. Kiera Vaclavik reflected that these dynamics required careful ethical reflection when her team conducted research with children in Zimbabwe. Ideas about children's autonomy, decision-making and respect for elders were different from their own context. This meant attending carefully to how consent was sought and understood and not imposing assumptions.



Where possible, we recommend working with local partners who understand the context. Be prepared to adapt your methods to local norms while holding onto core ethical principles.

Navigating the forest of gatekeepers

When we spoke with researchers for this toolkit, Paul Heritage described gatekeepers as **crossroads**: places where plans change and paths diverge. Whilst gatekeepers can limit participation, this was also an important reminder that they are not obstacles, but collaborators.

Building on that idea, the Youth Insight researchers developed a **forest metaphor** to represent the complex landscape of gatekeeping.

*“In the centre of a forest is a **crossroads**. A researcher stands there, considering the directions they might take. The crossroads represents the decisions researchers make when encountering different gatekeepers. There is no single route through the forest; the paths overlap and diverge.*

Around the clearing stand several distinct trees, each representing a different type of “gatekeeper”: youth organisations, schools, parents and carers, local authorities, community and cultural leaders. These trees are not obstacles; they shape the routes available because they are part of the environment young people move through every day. Their trunks represent their individual strengths and capacities.

*Beneath the ground, the roots of the trees form an interconnected network. Larger roots carry words such as **trust, respect, reciprocity, and communication**. Building a relationship with one tree influences the whole ecosystem, because their roots are linked below the surface.*

Some of these roots have existed for a long time, long before researchers entered the forest. Youth workers already know families; schools are connected to local authorities; community leaders have relationships with young people. Researchers are joining an established ecosystem. Recognising these existing roots, and the relationships already present, is key.

Above the canopy, the weather and seasons shift. The seasons represent the cyclical timescales that affect the gatekeepers’ capacity and priorities: the school terms, exam seasons, holidays, funding cycles. Storms, sunshine, and wind represent other external pressures – funding cuts, new funding, policy changes, staff turnover – that affect every gatekeeper.

Scattered across the forest floor are seeds (new ideas), fruit (long-term outcomes), and wildlife (unexpected opportunities or challenges). These elements show that the forest is active and continually changing.”



To apply the forest metaphor to your own research, see **Tool 5: Navigating the Gatekeeper Forest.**

This tool guides you through drawing your own forest, helping you plan ethical and collaborative engagement.

Working with youth organisations

Here, we signpost to a resource written by **Ellie Whittle and Heather McMullen** from **The Heart Project, Queen Mary University of London**. This short guide offers specific considerations for researchers to hold in mind when planning a project which involves young people, youth organisations and their staff.

This guidance draws on Ellie and Heather's combined knowledge and experience in both **youth work** and **academic research**, and reflective learning about collaborations in between these spaces.

You can find this website on the [toolkit page](#).



Working with schools

Schools are often key partners in research with children and young people. They tend to be juggling busy timetables, relationships with parents, and safeguarding responsibilities. Recognising these realities when approaching them can make it much easier to build positive working relationships. The following guidance is adapted from the [Social Research Association](#) blog post “*Tackling the challenges of conducting research in schools*”:

- **Education comes first**

Engaging schools is more likely to be successful if research aligns with teaching priorities and minimises disruption to young people's education.

- **Identify a key contact**

Sometimes, you need to contact a headteacher or another senior leader directly, other times a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) facilitates the partnership.

- **Consider the school timetable**

September is likely to be very busy with the start of term, as is exam time, so design your research accordingly in collaboration with the school.

- **Establish your credibility early**

Clear documentation (ethics approval, safeguarding procedures, consent processes, evidence of [DBS](#) if you already have one, institutional affiliation/logos) can help build trust. Having this information available in one place (e.g. on a project website) is recommended.

- **Be specific and realistic**

Clearly state the time commitment, number of pupils involved, and what support is required from staff. Allow extra time for internal approval processes.

- **Keep it low burden**

Provide ready-to-use materials (information sheets, consent forms, template letters) and be flexible around scheduling.

- **Access is mediated**

Work in collaboration with schools to identify participants and distribute information to parents/guardians to ensure informed consent. Schools are unlikely to share direct contact details for pupils or parents.

- **Demonstrate relevance and mutual benefit**

Outline how the research aligns with school priorities or current policy concerns. Share findings and offer outputs that are meaningful to the school community.

CASE STUDY

The Verbatim Formula

This case study is based on an interview conducted by Youth Insight researchers, Nayantara, Jodi Taylor-Nettleton, and Thurkga Moothathamby with Maggie Inchley, Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre, and Performance, and Principal Investigator at the Verbatim Formula.

The Verbatim Formula (TVF) is a long-running participatory research project for care experienced young people that works with them as co-researchers and creates opportunities for their voices to be heard. *Care experienced* refers to anyone who has spent time in the care of, or “looked after” by, the local authority as a child, whether that be with a foster family or in a residential home. In practice, TVF also works with people who have become estranged from their families. The project uses verbatim theatre techniques to work with young people, care leavers, social workers, and universities, in order to create spaces in which young people’s voices can be heard meaningfully.

A key part of TVF’s approach is what they call *making listening visible*. The project invites young people to record and shape their own testimonies, which are

then spoken aloud by another member of the group who listens through headphones. This anonymous, verbatim relay allows sensitive experiences to be shared safely while creating space for careful listening, reflection, and dialogue.

A gatekeeping landscape

Working with care experienced young people inevitably involves navigating what can be a complex network of gatekeepers. As Maggie Inchley, the principal investigator involved in TVF, explained, the project regularly interacts with:

- **Children in Care and Care Leavers’ Councils (CICCs):** forums for care experienced children and young people to influence services.
- **Virtual Schools:** bodies that support education, training and employment access for care-experienced children and young people.
- **Participation officers: youth workers or facilitators** who work with young people in the CICCs



- **Foster carers:** people, certified by the state, who provide a home for children who cannot live with their birth families
- **Social workers:** adults working in children’s care services **to ensure children are protected and families are supported**

Each gatekeeper has a different set of priorities, preferences, and responsibilities. For all of them, safeguarding is paramount; but interpretations of what constitutes risk can vary significantly. In the excerpt below, Maggie reflects on how this played out in one project.

Sometimes a Hug

“... There was one project we did in particular called, Sometimes a Hug, that was very interesting in this respect. It was an idea that had come out of the research and what the young people had been talking about. And we’d been talking about this difficulty of touch; in care, there’s a lot of safeguarding as you can imagine ... it’s a very difficult, complex and sensitive theme.

But for Drama, of course, the ways we can touch each other are incredibly important in in a, in a sort of beneficial way: you can be touched in ways that make you think, or feel, and so on. And what the young person had said is: just the experience of going into care and never being able to get a hug from your foster carer because your foster carer thinks that they can’t touch you [because of safeguarding]... is a hugely difficult area of experience for young people and foster carers. So we had to talk about that with the participation officer. At first she was saying, “No, you can’t do that. It’s a safeguarding issue.” And we kept saying, “We’re not going to be talking about or asking about young people’s experiences of being touched. We’re going to be exploring, you know, feeling through dramatic methods and how important the whole issue feels to young people.”

So that was one where it was quite a difficult thing, because trying to explain the different places we were coming from, was quite hard. And I mean in the end we – I mean it was bizarre because that particular participation officer really liked drama – so she joined in! She ended up joining in our movement explorations of feeling, and around the idea of feeling touched and so on. So we – I don’t know, we talked about those – that word, I suppose and what we meant by it.”

This example that Maggie shared offers a vivid example of navigating the different positions sometimes held by researchers, young people, and gatekeepers. For the young people, touch was an important theme that they wanted to explore. Touch was also a key part of the research’s methodology, which used embodied methods such as drama and movement to explore emotional experiences that might be hard to explore only through words.

For the participation officer, touch triggered concerns about safeguarding and risk. This created a moment of tension which required careful negotiation and clarity about the research aims. Instead of dismissing their concerns, the TVF team invited the officer to take part. Once the participation officer could feel the method in practice, they came to more of a mutual understanding.

Key takeaway for researchers

Participation officers, and other gatekeepers who work with young people, are deeply committed to keeping the young people they work with safe. They also often have shared goals and values with participatory research. These might include:

- Empowering young people to voice their views on issues that matter to them
- Co-producing services and programs to ensure they align with interests and priorities of young people
- Improving access to education and training through enrichment activities

In this case, drama was not just a research method but a form of active listening. This approach resonated with the participation officer’s role around giving young people a voice and supporting their development. Inviting the participation officer to join in helped her to experience these benefits.

This highlights a key strategy for researchers: frame your methods as an opportunity for collaboration around shared goals. Participatory research is fundamentally about listening and acting together.

6

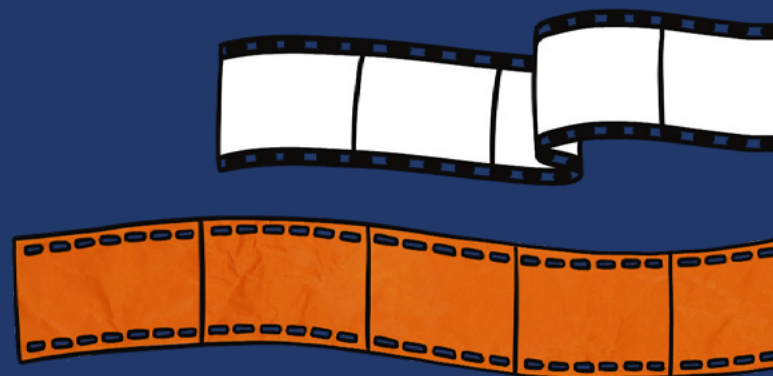
Analysis and dissemination



PART 6

Analysis and dissemination

Introduction	85
Data analysis: making sense together	86
Key principles for participatory analysis	86
Dissemination	87
Analysis and dissemination in practice	87
BOX 6	
Living Life to the Fullest, University of Sheffield	88
BOX 7	
Creative Collaborative Data Analysis (Mannion, 2024)	89
CASE STUDY	
The OLA Study: Youth-led arts dissemination project	90



“ There is no one size fits all approach to participatory analysis and dissemination. Methods should be adapted to your context, participants, and research study. ”

Introduction

Involving young people in analysis and dissemination raises important questions about voice, ownership, and power.

- Who decides what the data means?
- Whose interpretations are privileged?
- Who decides which audiences matter?
- Who benefits from the research?

Young people are often involved in shaping questions or collecting data, whilst analysis and dissemination remain led by adults. This dynamic risks undermining the participatory aims of sharing power and decision-making with young people. Children and young people should have opportunities to contribute to both analysis and dissemination.

This section will help you:

- ✓ Explore how to involve children and young people in making meaning from data
- ✓ Learn about practical approaches to collaborative analysis
- ✓ Understand ethical and emotional considerations
- ✓ Find out more about creative and youth-led dissemination strategies
- ✓ Consider questions of ownership, authorship, and impact



Data analysis: making sense together

Researchers often say analysis is one of the hardest stages of research to make inclusive. For participants, it can also feel the least transparent: How did researchers come to findings? Why was data interpreted in one way and not another?

Participatory analysis makes analysis a shared activity, so that young people contribute to understanding the data and shaping the conclusions made from it. Some participatory researchers conceive of analysis as **relational and ongoing** – ‘sense-making’ begins in every interaction, workshop, or research activity (e.g. Rix et al., 2020). In practice, this blurs the traditional distinctions between **data collection, analysis, and dissemination**.

Like any methodology, participatory analysis still needs to be **rigorous**: this is achieved by **transparency and reflexivity** about interpretative decisions. Analysing data together means there may be disagreements or non-consensus about findings. **PROX (Participatory Research Oxford)** emphasises that non-consensus is normal – documenting the process, including multiple perspectives, recording differences and decisions, and creating novel syntheses, all strengthen transparency and credibility.

Although much participatory analysis happens in qualitative studies, young people can be involved in **quantitative studies**

without needing complex statistical expertise. The **Partnership for Young London** toolkit, *Involving Young People: A Toolkit for Peer Research*, encourages researchers to support young people to interpret data and apply findings to their lived experience, providing useful guidance about how to approach quantitative analysis together whilst ensuring that adult perspectives don’t override youth voice.

Key principles for participatory analysis

- **Flexibility:** Adapt methods to participants’ needs, skills, capacities
- **Accessibility:** Prepare materials, visualisations and training, plan sufficient time, and consider using creative methods to ensure analysis is accessible to everyone
- **Co-construction:** Actively involve young people in the interpretation of data.
- **Ethical and relational:** Recognise the care, relational dynamics, and emotional labour of analysis
- **Transparency and ownership:** Make methods, decisions, and contributions visible.

Dissemination

Dissemination is often treated as the final stage of a research project. It is the point where the findings of the research are shared with the world. But when collaborating with young people, it's worth considering:

- Who is dissemination for?
- What could it offer beyond communicating results?
- What are the best methods for disseminating?

Dissemination is an amazing opportunity to involve young people and give them a chance to:

- Shape how their experiences and insights are represented
- Develop skills in facilitation, public speaking, presenting, and creative production
- Build confidence and a sense of agency
- Connect with new networks and platforms
- Influence how their findings are received and acted upon

Analysis and dissemination in practice

There is no one size fits all approach to participatory analysis and dissemination. Methods should be adapted to your context, participants, and research study. What follows are some examples to show how participatory principles have been applied in different research projects.



BOX 6

Living Life to the Fullest, University of Sheffield

This project (ESRC, 2017–2020) at the University of Sheffield explored the lives of children and young people living with life-limiting and life-threatening illnesses (LL/LTIs). They established a Co-Researcher Collective, a group of young adults living with LL/LTI, who contributed to running the project from contributing to the research design, recruitment, carrying out interviews, planning the project's knowledge exchange and impact strategy.

Approach to analysis

The approach to analysis started from the assumption that social theory can be generated through meaningful engagement with co-researchers. They saw their co-researchers as **theorists in their own right**.

To analyse the narrate and creative data that had been generated, the project hosted a 3-day accessible Analysis Retreat (hybrid). To prepare, they:

- Prepared and shared transcripts in a Google folder months in advance.
- Hosted online workshops and 1:1 discussions for those unable to read large volumes of data.

- Built a draft coding framework collaboratively in a shared document.
- Refined and affirmed themes together during the Analysis Retreat.
- Co-wrote key findings word by word.

Co-researchers' own engagement with the stories that they had collected was centred. Rather than focusing only on technical coding, co-researchers were invited to reflect on:

- What stayed with you?
- What surprised you?
- What felt familiar?
- What angered, moved, or resonated?

The process took time and involved physical and emotional labour. They built in breaks and prioritised flexibility to ensure that co-researchers could contribute meaningfully and comfortably.

Reflective questions

- What assumptions does this approach make about who can generate insight or theory in research?
- How were co-researchers supported to engage with analysis in ways that worked for them?
- What kinds of care, time, or flexibility were needed to make this analysis possible?
- Where do you see power being shared during the analysis process?
- Which elements of this approach could you realistically adapt for your own project?

Find out **more information** about this project's approach to analysis.

BOX 7

Creative Collaborative Data Analysis (Mannion, 2024)

This project was a study at the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin. The research team was made up of doctoral student Jess Mannion and a team of co-inquirers with intellectual disabilities called the R&S (Relationships and Sexuality) Research Team.

Approach to analysis

The approach to analysis combined different analytical techniques which were adapted to be engaging and accessible to participants who were unfamiliar with research. It involved a six-step approach that integrated:

- **Visual analysis:** Participants explored topics using creative methods like drawing, poetry, and performance. Group discussion followed to interpret meanings.
- **Member checking:** Participants engaged with video summaries of the discussions and responded to guiding questions.
- **Content analysis:** The researcher identified frequent words and themes from the transcripts to create manageable entry points into the data.
- **Arts-based analysis:** These words were written on cards and placed on large sheets of paper. Co-researchers selected the words that were most meaningful to them and were invited to creatively express their responses in a poster. The posters were then discussed collaboratively, with researchers checking their interpretations.
- **Embodied data analysis:** Participants physically interacted with the data (e.g. arranging materials on a table), selected what felt important and grouped ideas.
- **Creative collaborative reflections:** Participants reflected on their learning and impact using creative prompts, such as LEGO and sandboxing. This included identifying personal change, key insights, and hopes for the future.

Reflective questions

- How do you currently involve participants in data analysis, if at all?
- What assumptions are you making about who can “do” analysis?
- Who might be excluded by text-heavy or technical approaches to analysis?
- What might be some practical and ethical challenges to applying this approach?
- How might you adapt these methods for different ages, abilities, or group dynamics?

Mannion, J. (2024). *Creative collaborative data analysis: co-constructing and co-analysing the data together*. In: Kara H, Mannay D, Roy A, eds. *The Handbook of Creative Data Analysis*. Bristol University Press, pp. 372–388.

[Podcast discussion](#)



CASE STUDY

The OLA Study: Youth-led arts dissemination project

This case study is based on reflective conversations between two Youth Insight researchers, Elsie Mahamou and Michelle Javed, Mariana Steffen from **People's Palace Projects (PPP)**, and Young Ambassadors involved in the OLA Study.

The **OLA Study** is a 5-year research project studying youth mental health across Bogotá (Colombia), Buenos Aires (Argentina), and Lima (Peru). PPP led the arts-based dissemination phase in partnership with Latin American arts organisations – **Fundación Nacional Batuta** (Bogotá), **Fundación Crear Vale la Pena** (Buenos Aires), and **Teatro La Plaza** (Lima).

To share their initial findings, PPP launched the Young Ambassadors programme in 2024 to extend the impact of the project. They recruited nine young artists to communicate the findings to wider audiences.

From findings to manifesto

Although initially invited to communicate the findings, the Young Ambassadors wanted to *respond* to them and connect them to their own lived experience and contexts. Out of this, they created their own manifesto. The team adapted, working to weave the research findings with youth-led insights. The five key messages they aimed to communicate were:

- Community spaces and organisations matter.
- Anxiety and depression episodes are very common.
- Stressful life events, substance use, and extensive internet use increase distress; social support reduces it.
- Most young people with mental distress remain distressed a year later.
- Activities that help include sports, arts, and spending time with others.

Each group of young ambassadors went on to develop a piece of work that was rooted in their own artistic practice and local context.

Bogotá, Colombia

Young musicians held participatory music concerts to generate conversation around mental health. The orchestra formed a circle in the centre of the room, with the audience were positioned around them and able to walk around. While moving, they heard research statistics being spoken over the music, creating a space for listening, conversation and reflection on a topic usually considered taboo.



Lima, Peru

The group held workshops exploring the impacts of alcohol and substance misuse on young people. They heard that young people want access to safe public space for expressing themselves creatively. They created *Gris* (Grey), a theatre piece exploring how the city's grey skies affect young people's mental health. Each performance was followed by a Q&A where audiences shared their responses to the themes in the show.

Buenos Aires, Argentina

This group combined theatre with games and co-created poetry. Young people responded to prompts about creating safe spaces for discussing difficult topics. Their responses were turned into poetry performed at the end of the session. The approach emphasised collective participation with the audience participants. Several exercises were used in the London workshops when they visited.

Together, the groups reached over 2000 young people and co-created an award-winning documentary, *Walking Our Way / Caminar Distinto*, which won an award at the Toronto International Short Film Awards.

In 2025, the nine ambassadors visited London to deliver workshops with UK organisations and present alongside the research team, demonstrating how dissemination can also be an opportunity for co-creation, exchange, and empowerment.

What made this approach work

- **Valuing artistic expertise:** The young ambassadors were recruited for their existing artistic practice, allowing for new interdisciplinary insights beyond conventional research methods. As Elsie commented:

“... Creative interventions can challenge stigma, raise awareness about mental health issues, and open the door to much-needed community conversations.”

- **Holding plans lightly:** When the young ambassadors decided that they wanted to take the work in a different direction, the team asked, “Is this good?”, rather than, “Is this what we planned?”

- **Championing, not controlling:** The approach was appreciative and strengths-based. The team welcomed what young people proposed and saw their role as championing their voices. As Mariana said,

“They have such powerful voices, but sometimes they don't have access to the resources ... It's nice to see yourself as a catalyst”.

- **Allow space for experimentation.** Through framing the youth-led work as something different from the main research that the young people had ownership over, everyone had more freedom.
- **Supporting communication through shared language:** All PPP staff spoke Spanish and in London, translators with arts expertise were hired to support inclusive, appropriate participation.

Safeguarding internationally

Working through partner organisations in different countries was a critical part of the success of this project, but at times meant it wasn't always possible to have the same level of oversight. As the project evolved, the young ambassadors sometimes found themselves unexpectedly facilitating distressing conversations with other young people. In response, the team arranged mental health support through a university partnership.

In all research projects, things happen unexpectedly, and it's about how you manage the unforeseen!

The learning

Negotiate safeguarding explicitly at the start of partnerships and ensure appropriate emotional support is available for co-researchers. Have contingency plans and prepare for the unforeseen.

Impact

During the dissemination phase, the team conducted interviews with audience members and focus groups with the young ambassadors. Beyond asking "does this improve young people's mental health?", they were interested in what kinds of conversations and dialogue that became possible through these activities.

Elsie:

“Tell us about the different ways young people have been engaged in OLA.”

Young Ambassador:

“I think the most important thing was to make workshops **done by young people for young people**, being very close between ages, that makes the people feel confident to talk. They also have the opportunity to have space to talk about mental health without feeling judged, and to learn that even if we are from different contexts we all share the same feelings.”



The arts-based dissemination project has also created other outputs to extend the impact and legacy of the research. The art groups created a toolkit documenting their workshop approach, which is now being combined into a resource for youth workers in Brazilian favelas. The documentary has continued to be screened as a catalyst for discussion. The young ambassadors told our Youth Insight researchers that the process was empowering and motivating:

Michelle:

“Next, we’re going to ask you about your trip to London, how does it feel to be here? Do you feel like you’ve changed after coming here?”

Young Ambassador:

“Oh I’m loving it here [...] And with all the things that we’ve been talking about these days, in the workshop, with the people from Spotlight, it has given me – and I need more time to reflect on that and to process it – but I think valuing more what I can do with this experience. I think I’m going back to Peru really motivated.”

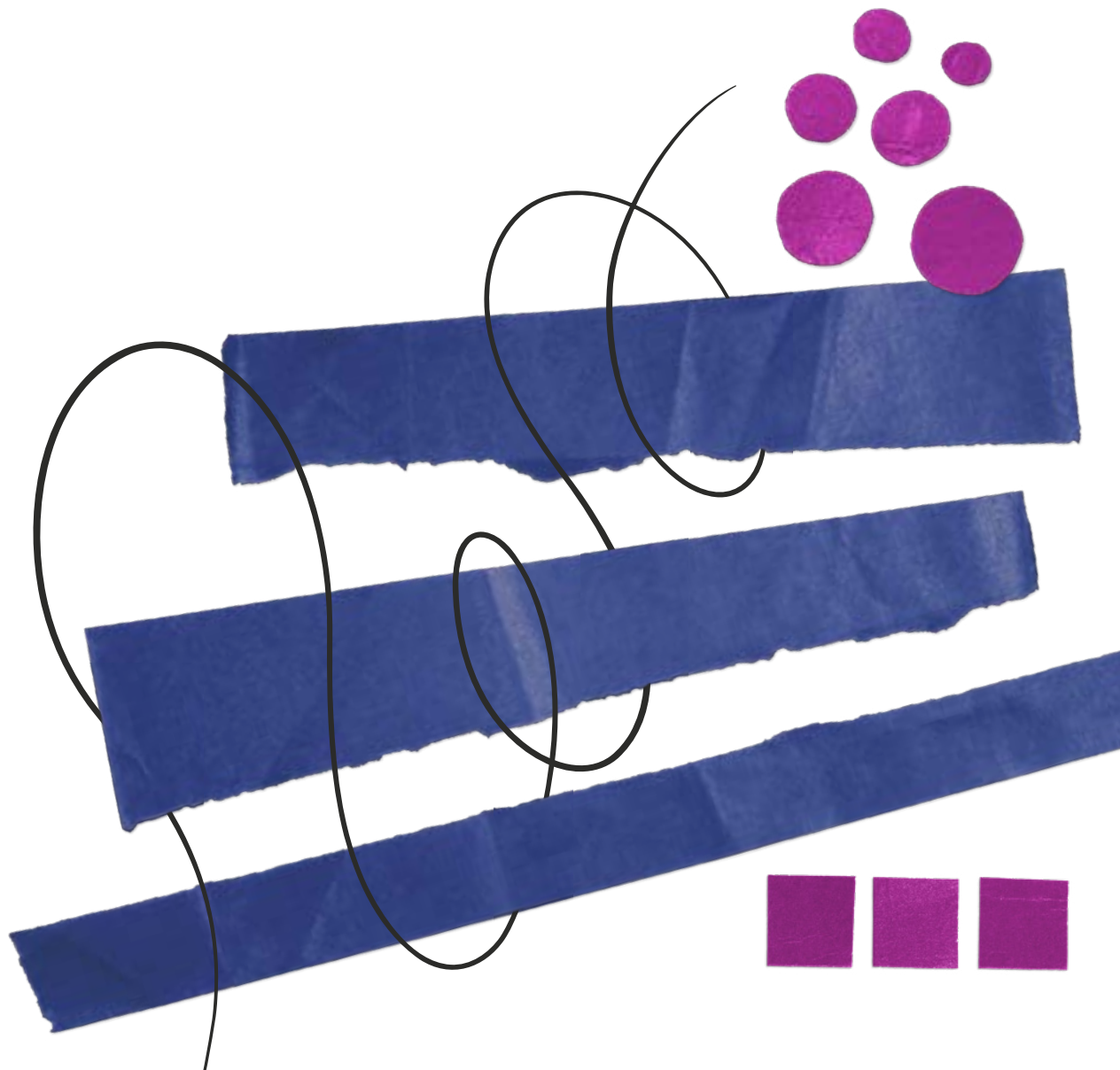
At smaller scales

Many projects start on a smaller scale than the OLA Study. But there are many learnings that still apply:

- Involve young people in dissemination activities.
- Document what dialogue is made possible, not just the measurable outcomes.
- Collaborate with local organisations that have existing networks and relationships.
- Create accessible, context-specific resources developed by young people for their own communities.

When young people take ownership of the findings, they might make them their own. What emerges could look different from what you imagined – which is the strength of ambitious, youth-led dissemination. Are you ready for that?

Tools



Tools

TOOL 1
Preparing to set the scene 96

TOOL 2
Reflective questions 97

TOOL 3
Ethical Reflection Jenga 98

TOOL 4
A simple priority setting exercise with children
and young people 102

TOOL 5
Navigating the Gatekeeper Forest:
A visualisation exercise 105



TOOL 1

Preparing to set the scene

Use this list of questions to help you prepare to work with young co-researchers. Working through these questions in your team before you engage any young people can help you communicate clearly and honestly from the start.

About the project

- What is this project about, in plain language?
- Who is it for, and why does it matter?
- What will happen with the findings?
- What can the research realistically achieve, and what can't it?

About their role

- What will young people actually be doing?
- How much time will it involve, and over what period?
- What skills or support will they need?
- What decisions have already been made, and what can they help shape?

About the relationship

- What are we asking from them?
- What can they ask from us in return? (e.g. skills, references, accreditation, updates, payment)
- How will we communicate about progress and outcomes?

About support and safety

- What support is available during the project?
- What are the limits of confidentiality?
- What happens if something difficult comes up?
- Who can they contact if they have concerns?

If things are uncertain

- What do we know, and what don't we know yet?
- How will decisions be made as the project develops?
- How will we communicate changes along the way?

TOOL 2

Reflective questions

These questions can be used by researchers and/or young people individually and/or with a peer, supervisor, team, or co-researcher. They can be used to reflect on your research activities through 1:1 conversations, group reflection, or individual journalling. Use them at any stage of your project.

- How am I feeling about the research currently?
Is there anything on my mind?
- What feelings come up for me during this work?
How might they be shaping decisions?
- Thinking back to my most recent research activities, has there been anything I avoided because it felt uncomfortable?
- What did I notice about the children or young people's energy or engagement? Was there anything unsaid?
- What assumptions might I be making about this child/young person and their behaviour?
- How might my role or position be shaping this interaction?
- Is there anything I need to raise with a supervisor, colleague, or the young people themselves?
- Who could I talk things through with?
- What other support do I need, practically and emotionally?
- What's working well that I want to keep doing?
- What's one thing I could try differently next time?
- What's the smallest constructive step I could take right now?

TOOL 3

Ethical Reflection Jenga

Purpose

This Jenga game is a participatory, playful way to explore research ethics with children and young people, and therefore a useful process in ensuring consent is informed.

Each Jenga block corresponds to a question about ethical dilemmas, issues and themes. The blocks can be colour coded (each colour = theme, and each number = question from that theme) to avoid too many similar questions coming up at once. Not all questions need to be answered. The aim is to encourage reflection and discussion around ethics in an accessible format, and to help young people understand their choices and adults' responsibilities. The conversations can also support groups in co-creating group agreements.

Materials

- Jenga tower or similar stacking blocks
- Marker or labels to write numbers on each block
- Stickers to colour code the blocks
- A numbered list of questions/scenarios.

How to play

- 1 Take turns pulling a block.
- 2 Read the question aloud and discuss individually or as a group.
- 3 If needed, participants can pass on a question.
- 4 Place the block on top of the tower.
- 5 If the tower falls, reflect on what that might teach about the messiness of ethics.

Facilitator Tips

- Emphasise there are no right or wrong answers.
- Participants can pass on questions they don't want to answer.
- Use the conversation as an opportunity to discuss your ethical obligations and any agreements in place with your ethics board.
- Finish the activity with a closing discussion, noting what has been discussed and anything to return to later.

Other ways you could use this tool

This game doesn't just have to be a Q&A. You can adapt it to suit different ages, group sizes, and stages of a project.

Adapting for younger children

When using this game for younger children, you may want to simplify the language. Instead of abstract questions, each brick could also correspond to a simple, short story about a child taking part in research. After hearing the story, the group can discuss questions about how that child might be feeling, what would make them feel better, and what adults should do next.

Ethical scenarios alongside/ instead of questions

You can also use this tool to explore ethical scenarios with groups of young people. Each Jenga block corresponds to a hypothetical ethical scenario. When a brick is pulled, the player reads out an ethical scenario and the group considers:

- What ethical issues are happening here?
- What options are available, and what is at stake for different people?
- How might different people in the scenario might feel?

Scenarios could be hypothetical or adapted from real research situations.

Check-ins

Instead of exploring complex ethical decisions, this activity could be used as a light check in activity. The questions might focus on how people are doing today, how the project's going, or anything else that needs bringing to attention at the beginning of a session.

Example questions

Purpose, roles, and support

1. Why are you being involved in this project, and what is your role?
2. What does your role involve in practice?
3. What support or training will be needed to feel confident in your role?
4. Who can you go to if you have questions, need help, or want to change your level of involvement?

Consent

5. What would help you feel comfortable taking part in this project?
6. How should we check in about consent as the project goes on?
7. What would make it easier for you to say no, take a pause, or change your mind about being involved?
8. Who else (if anyone) should know you're taking part?

Power, roles, and decision-making

9. What decisions should young people be involved in?
10. What responsibilities do adults in this project have to keep everyone safe and supported?
11. How should we handle disagreements or different perspectives so that everyone feels heard?

Safety and sensitive topics

12. What helps you feel safe in group discussions?
13. How should we approach talking about difficult or sensitive topics together?
14. What support should be available if a topic feels heavy, upsetting, or triggering?

Privacy, confidentiality, and sharing

15. What feels okay to keep private, and what feels okay to share?
16. When does confidentiality need to be broken, and why?
17. How do you feel about your contributions being used in reports, exhibitions, presentations, or online?

Authorship and creative outputs

18. How would you like to be credited for your contributions?
19. How do you want to be named – pseudonyms, first names, or first names and last names – if at all?
20. Who should own creative work made during the project, and is it okay to change your mind later about being named or credited?

Example questions – continued

Representation and inclusion

21. Who is represented in this project, and who might be missing?
22. Are there barriers that might stop some people from taking part?
23. How can we avoid reinforcing any negative stereotypes in what we create or share?

Harms, risks, and benefits

24. What could make participation difficult, uncomfortable, or harmful?
25. What might be positive, enjoyable, or meaningful about taking part?
26. What support or resources would make participation safer or easier?

Payment, recognition, and accessibility

27. How would you like to be thanked or recognised for your time and contributions?
28. Are there any rules or circumstances (e.g. benefits, visas, family considerations) that affect how you can be paid?
29. Beyond payment, what other gestures of appreciation matter to you (e.g. certificates, celebration, acknowledgment in reports)?
30. Are there ways we can make participation more accessible (e.g. covering travel, providing food, flexible timing)?

Endings, aftercare, and what comes next

31. What should happen at the end of the project?
32. How do we want to say goodbye or stay in touch?
33. How should the work be used, shared, or remembered in the future?
34. What follow-up support might participants need after the project ends?

TOOL 4

A simple priority setting exercise with children and young people

There are various methods for participatory priority setting, such as the James Lind Alliance *Priority Setting Partnerships*. The following exercise is adapted from their case studies of priority setting with children and young people in health research (Postma et al., 2025).

This exercise helps children and young people shape what a research project should focus on based on what matters to them. It can be used at the start of a co-produced study, PhD, PPIE process, or funding application to make sure the questions reflect what really matters to young people.

This can happen in one session, or over the course of several. Consideration should be given to how much time is needed, especially if it's not possible or appropriate to reach a consensus.

STEP 1

Ask what matters to them

Choose some initial questions to get young people talking about their experiences, hopes, and concerns. Don't worry about turning these into research questions yet. Focus on listening.

Some examples (adapt to your area of study):

- What matters to you?
- What do you wish someone would study about the world?
- If you had three wishes about how this [service / school / system / research] could change, what would they be?"
- If you had three minutes to rant to someone in charge of this [service / school / system / research], what would you say?

STEP 2

Group the ideas into topics

Work with the group to look at everything that's been mentioned and start grouping ideas into clusters of similar ideas. Name each cluster using language that makes sense to participants. Some examples could be:

- School and learning
- Stigma and feeling different
- Treatments and side effects
- Family and home life

STEP 3

Add adult perspectives if relevant

If adults such as parents, carers, and/or other professionals are involved, also seek their views about what they think the research should focus on. You can do this during a breakout room in the same session or beforehand. Separate young people and the adults into different breakout groups, so that young people feel able to express themselves freely.

Have young people go first, then invite adults to add anything they feel is missing. Ask adults to listen before responding. Add their ideas to the list of topics but make sure young people's topics are visible and not replaced or reframed.

STEP 4

Explore what feels important to whom and why

Ask young people which topics matter most to them. You can do this in different ways, for example:

- **Dot voting:** Give each person five coloured dot stickers to place next to their top choices
- **Sorting:** Ask them to place topics in areas labelled “important now”, “important later”, “always important” (One project in the JLA review used red, orange, and green tablecloths to represent these areas).
- **Diamond ranking:** Arrange topics in a diamond shape, with the most important topic at the top and the least important at the bottom.

Whichever method you use, leave time for discussion. Encourage young people to explain their choices – this is often where a lot of rich insights happen. Disagreement, uncertainty, and different perspectives are expected and valuable.

N.B. Record adults' priorities separately – they can supplement, but not replace, young people's.

STEP 5

Agree next steps

Use young people's input to guide what the project will focus on. This may include agreeing a small number of priorities (for example, a top 5).

Check:

- Do these priorities reflect young people's everyday lives, priorities, and needs?
- Is there anything that only a few people raised but still feels important to include?

What to do if consensus isn't possible?

In some groups, young people may have very different views on what issues are most important and the language used to describe them. In these circumstances, it's important that minority views aren't dismissed or erased.

Some useful questions to discuss together include:

- What might happen if this issue wasn't included at all?
- What common ground, if any, can we agree on?
- How will we explain the decision we make, given these differences?

When views do differ, it's important to record these differences clearly and explain how decisions were made.

Facilitators looking for more support in supporting group decision-making may find consensus-based approaches helpful. Guides such as a [Short guide to consensus decision making \(Seeds for Change\)](#) offer practical tools for handling disagreement and protecting minority needs.

TOOL 5

Navigating the Gatekeeper Forest: A visualisation exercise

This is an activity designed to help you visualise the ecosystem of people, institutions, relationships, timings, pressures, and priorities that shape your work with young people. We recommend using this before embarking on a research project and regularly updating it as you discover more of the ecosystem.

STEP 1

Map the forest

On your page, start sketching trees – one tree per gatekeeper. Think broadly – formal and informal, individuals and organisations.

- You might use different tree species to represent different types of gatekeepers.
- On each trunk, write words describing the strengths and expertise of the gatekeeper – what do they know? What skills do they bring when working with young people? How do they benefit or protect them?

Tip: For shorter term engagements, focus on the most critical “trees and roots” – you don’t need to map the whole forest, just enough to navigate the forest effectively and ethically.

STEP 2

Trace the roots

Under the soil, draw roots extending from each tree.

- Connect roots between gatekeepers that already work together or share responsibilities.
- Label the roots with words describing the nature of the relationships: *trust, tension, shared responsibilities, longstanding partnership, occasional contact*

You’re joining an existing ecosystem, not starting from scratch!

STEP 3

Read the seasons

Above your forest, add weather and seasonal markers to show the conditions each gatekeeper is operating within. This is about understanding their rhythms, cycles, and normal pressures.

Consider **seasonal cycles**, like school terms, exam periods, and holiday schedules, as well as **routine pressures**, like funding rounds and reporting deadlines.

Add symbols such as:

- **Snow on the branches** = high workload or exam term
- **Wind** = instability
- **Bright sun** = a moment of collaboration or energy

Next to each tree, note what this means in practice, including a realistic timescale for working together.

STEP 4

Plan your approach and route

Draw a small figure representing you (or your team) at the edge of the forest.

From your figure, sketch pathways leading towards the trees you intend to approach.

Along each pathway, note:

- What are the gatekeeper's priorities?
- Who or what do they protect?
- What might they need from you?
- What can you offer them?
- Who you should contact first?

You might draw stepping stones, bridges, or signposts along the way.

STEP 5

Choose your path

Draw a **crossroads** at an important point in your forest. Use it to reflect on:

- In what order will you approach gatekeepers?
- Who might open doors to others?
- What you might change if you listened fully to each gatekeeper?
- Which directions might strengthen existing roots rather than cutting across it?

You can annotate the crossroads with notes, arrows, or alternative routes.



STEP 6

Prepare for stormy weather

Sometimes storms arrive unexpectedly, and it's good to prepare or make alternative plans. Around the edges of your forest, sketch the kinds of weather that could appear unexpectedly – things that blow in without warning. This is about contingency planning and flexibility.

Add elements like:

- **Storm clouds**
- **Lightning bolts**
- **Fog**
- **Disease or blight**

Label each one: what could it represent? (e.g., sudden policy changes, partner pulling out, funding cuts, organisational restructuring, young person becoming ill).

Reflect on:

- What can be paused, simplified, or postponed if conditions get difficult?
- What alternative routes could keep the work moving?
- What would young people prioritise – continuing or waiting for calmer conditions?

STEP 7

Tend the roots

Finally, draw new roots, leaves, or fruits, growing around the forest to represent your contribution.

Ask yourself:

- What are you contributing to the network, not just taking from it?
- If you stepped away in six months, what would remain helpful for gatekeepers and young people?
- How can you nurture reciprocity, collaboration, and sustainability?

Add symbols like sunlight, compost, creatures, or insects, to show how the ecosystem is thriving.

Cited references

Aaltonen, S., & Kivijärvi, A. (2018). Disrupting professional practices with research-driven intervention: Researcher–gatekeeper negotiations in targeted youth services. *Qualitative Social Work*, 18(4), 621–637.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325018757080>

Ashworth, M., Crane, L., Steward, R., Bovis, M., & Pellicano, E. (2021). Toward empathetic autism research: Developing an autism-specific research passport. *Autism in Adulthood*, 3(3), 280–288. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0026>

Bailey, S., Boddy, K., Briscoe, S., & Morris, C. (2015). Involving disabled children and young people as partners in research: a systematic review. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 41(5), 505–514. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12197>

Barron, A. (2021). ‘Participant Packs: A Flexible, Inclusive and Accessible Method’ in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*.

<https://aspect.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Participant-Amy-Barron-2-A4-Guide-1.pdf>

Blunt, A., McCarthy, K., Gifford, S., & Jones, M. (2026). *Research with East London communities: place-based guidance and resources*. Queen Mary University of London. www.qmul.ac.uk/about/for-east-london/place-based-resources

BSA (2004). *Statement of Ethical Practice*. British Sociological Association.

Butti, E. (2025). Youth Are Not All the Same: On the Appropriateness and Limits of Participatory Methods in Youth Research. *Social Sciences*, 14(2), 83.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14020083>

Davidson, E. (2025). *The Art of Slow Research: Why Taking Our Time Matters* [Blog]. The Binks Hub.

<https://binks-hub.ed.ac.uk/the-art-of-slow-research-why-taking-our-time-matters/>

Ellis, K., Hickie, K., & Warrington, C. (2023). Researching Sensitive Topics With Children and Young People: Ethical Practice and Blurry Boundaries. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231207011>

eYPAGnet. (2026). *Toolkit archive*.

<https://eypagnet.eu/toolkit/>

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Gifford, S., Blunt, A., Payling, D., and Freeman, K. (2025). *Equitable Partnerships for Civic Engagement: A toolkit for civic, community, and university partners*. NCIA and Queen Mary University of London

Graham, A., Powell, M. A., Taylor, N., Anderson, D., & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti.

Graham, A., Powell, M. A., & Taylor, N. (2015). Ethical research involving children: Putting the evidence into practice.

Family Matters, 96, 23–28. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/family-matters/no-96/ethical-research-involving-children>

Groundwater-Smith, S., Dockett, S., & Bottrell, D. (2014). *Participatory Research with Children and Young People*. SAGE Publications.

Hart, R. (1992). *Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. UNICEF.

Hodgson, J., & Dunford, E. (2021). *Artist-researcher collaborations with Coventry Creates: Sharing knowledge and inspiring innovation*. University of Warwick.

https://warwick.ac.uk/research/partnerships/place-based-research/artist-researcher-collaborations/94663_artist-researcher_collaborations.pdf

Institute of Development Studies (2024). *What are participatory methods?*

<https://www.participatorymethods.org/what-are-participatory-methods/>

Jupp Kina, V. (2012). What we say and what we do: Reflexivity, emotions and power in children and young people's participation. *Children's Geographies*, 10(2), 201–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2012.667920>

Klocker, N. (2015). Participatory action research: The distress of (not) making a difference. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 17, 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.06.006>

Leeds Autism AIM. (2024). *Strategies and resources: Management of conflicting needs*. <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2024/05/MHEP-Strategies-and-Resources-Management-of-Conflicting-Needs-January-2024.pdf>

Lewis, K., Hamilton, L. G., & Vincent, J. (2024). Exploring the experiences of autistic pupils through creative research methods: Reflections on a participatory approach. *Infant and Child Development*, 33(3), e2467. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.2467>

Liddiard, K., Runswick-Cole, K., Goodley, D., Whitney, S., Vogelmann, E., & 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(2), 154–167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12308>

Lundy, L. (2007). ‘Voice’ is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>

Lundy, L. (2018). In defence of tokenism? Implementing children's right to participate in collective decision-making. *Childhood*, 25(3), 340–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218777292>

McGregor, C., von dem Hagen, E., Wallbridge, C., Dobbs, J., Svenson-Tree, C., & Jones, C. R. G. (2025). Supporting autistic children's participation in research studies: A mixed-methods study of familiarizing autistic children with a humanoid robot. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 10, 23969415251332486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415251332486>

MENCAP (2024). *Easy Read*. <https://www.mencap.org.uk/easy-read>

National Youth Agency. (n.d.). *Young researcher's toolkit*. <https://nya.org.uk/national-youth-work-curriculum/young-researchers-toolkit/>

NCB (2020). *Young People in Research: How to involve us. Guidance for researchers from the PEAR young people's public health group*. <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/PEAR%2520guidelines.pdf>

NCCPE (2022) *What Works Guide: Artist and Researcher Collaborations*. <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/guide/what-works-guide-artist-and-researcher-collaborations/>

NCCPE. (2024). *Engage 2024: Plenary 2 – Creative Working Practices*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/live/czIpgZ3GTbY?t=711s>

Neumeister, E., Jones, N., Guglielmi, S., Othman, S., & Youssef, S. (2024). *Participatory Research with Young People (GAGE)*. Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence; Adolescent Girls Investment Plan

NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement. (2009). *The Facilitator's Toolkit: Tools, techniques, and tips for effective facilitation*. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/improvement-hub/wp-content/uploads/sites/44/2017/11/Facilitator-Toolkit.pdf>

NIHR (2024). *Payment guidance for researchers and professionals* (Version 1.9; updated December 2025). <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/about-us/who-we-are/policies-and-guidelines/payment-guidance-researchers-and-professionals>

Nind, M. (2011). Participatory data analysis: A step too far? *Qualitative Research*, 11(4), 349–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404310>

Notko, M., Jokinen, K., Kuronen, M., Pirsanen, H., Malinen, K., & Harju-Veijola, M. (2013). Encountering ethics in studying challenging family relations. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 2(3), 395–408. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674313X665085>

NSPCC Learning. (2020). *Responding to a child's disclosure of abuse* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvJ5uBlGYgE>

Participation People (2020). *The Lundy model explained*. https://participationpeople.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Compressed-PP_-_Lundy-Model-Explained-2.pdf

Pavarini, G., Smith, L.M., Shaughnessy, N., Mankee-Williams, A., Thirumalai, J.K., Russell, N., & Bhui, K. (2021). Ethical issues in participatory arts methods for young people with adverse childhood experiences. *Health Expect*, 24(5):1557–1569. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13314>

Postma, L., Gibson, F., Jagt, J. Z., Aussems, K., Barrett, H., Luchtenberg, M., Schoemaker, C. G., Temple, R. K., & Aldiss, S. (2024). *Involving children and young people in James Lind Alliance Priority Setting Partnerships*. James Lind Alliance. <https://www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/documents/involving-children-and-young-people-james-lind-alliance-priority-setting-partnerships>

Powell, M. A., Graham, A., McArthur, M., Moore, T., Chalmers, J., & Taplin, S. (2020). Children's participation in research on sensitive topics: Addressing concerns of decision-makers. *Children's Geographies*, 18(3), 325–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1639623>

Queen Mary University of London. (2024). *Safeguarding policy*. <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/governance-and-legal-services/media/dgls-media/policy/current-policies/Queen-Mary-Safeguarding-Policy---Revision-May-2024.pdf>

Reed, R. (2019). *Fast Track Impact Planning Template* [Blog]. Fast Track Impact. <https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/post/2019/03/18/research-impact-planning>

Research in Practice. (2023). *Participation as protection* [Podcast]. <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/participation-as-protection/>

Research in Practice. (2023). *Participation as protection*. <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/participation-as-protection/>

Rix, J., Carrizosa, H. G., Sheehy, K., Seale, J., & Hayhoe, S. (2022). Taking risks to enable participatory data analysis and dissemination: a research note. *Qualitative Research*, 22(1), 143–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120965356>

Robinson, L. (2025). The Research Ethics Tree: engaging children and young people with research ethics using an interactive tool. *Journal of Creative Research Methods*, 1(1), 158–166. <https://doi.org/10.1332/30502969Y2025D000000006>

Sage Research Methods Community. (2022). *Ethical Issues in Creative and Visual research*. <https://researchmethodscommunity.sagepub.com/blog/ethics-and-visual-research>

Salmons, J. (2023). *Analyzing Photos in Photovoice Studies*. Sage Research Methods Community. <https://researchmethodscommunity.sagepub.com/blog/analyzing-photos-as-data>

Scott-Barrett, J., Marshall-Brown, A., Livingstone-Banks, M., Chrisinger, B., Scher, B., Hickman, M. (2023). *Participatory Research: Researcher Insights*. University of Oxford. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/research/using-research-engage/public-engagement/participatory-research/introduction>

Seeds for Change. (2022). *A short guide to facilitating meetings* (2nd ed.). <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/shortfacilitation>

SessionLab. (n.d.). *SessionLab library*. <https://www.sessionlab.com/library>

Sheffield Hallam University. (n.d.). *Guidance on gaining children's consent* (Version 4). <https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity/guidance>

Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1002/chi.617>

Turner, N., & Almack, K. (2015). Recruiting young people to sensitive research: Turning the 'wheels within wheels.' *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(5), 485–497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1207943>

UNCRC. Article 12. *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244>

Walsham, M. (2025). *Involving Young People: A Toolkit for Peer Research*. Partnership for Young London. <https://www.partnershipforyounglondon.org.uk/post/involving-young-people-a-toolkit-for-peer-research>

Why Can't We Dream (2026) *Living Life to the Fullest Co-Production Toolkit*. University of Sheffield. <https://whycantwedream.co.uk>

Women's Environmental Network. (2024). *Creative Evaluation Toolkit*. <https://www.wen.org.uk/2024/03/27/creative-evaluation-toolkit>

Acronyms

AMPLIFY	A Meaningful Peer-Led Involvement network For Young people
CIC	Community Interest Company
CPAR	Community Participatory Action Research
CPE	Centre for Public Engagement, Queen Mary University of London
DBS	Disclosure and Barring Service
ERIC	Ethical Research Involving Children
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
NCB	National Children's Bureau
NCCPE	National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement
NIHR	National Institute for Health and Care Research
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PEAR	Public Health, Education, Awareness, Research
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
YBM Research Collective	Young Black Men's Research Collective
YPAG	Young Person's Advisory Group

Thinking ahead: further resources

Across this toolkit, we have explored what it means to meaningfully involve children and young people in research – from building trusting relationships with young people, relational approaches to ethics, working in partnership with gatekeepers, through to developing facilitation skills grounded in reflexivity and care.

Each of these areas highlights the promise and potential of participatory research. Co-creation can require more time, resources, and emotional labour than conventional approaches, but it also creates opportunities for richer relationships, deeper insights, and research that is closer to children and young people's lived experiences.

Within an increasingly precarious academic system that tends to reward productivity and pace, it can feel harder to justify 'slower' approaches that centre process, collaboration, and relationships (Davidson, 2025). This raises important questions about what is required for sustaining participatory ways of working, and what needs to change for children and young people to be properly supported as active and valued contributors within research.

This toolkit should be seen as an ongoing conversation rather than a strict guide, and as an invitation to keep pushing for research that works with children and young people in creative, ethical and inclusive ways, and for systems that properly support these ways of working.

Going forward, this section highlights a small number of accessible and useful resources for readers who would like to explore themes in more depth. These have been selected from the sources referenced throughout the toolkit.



“ This toolkit should be seen as an ongoing conversation rather than a strict guide, and as an invitation to keep pushing for research that works with children and young people in creative, ethical and inclusive ways, and for systems that properly support these ways of working. ”

Key books

Howard, F., Hanckel, B., Moore, K., Atherton, S., & Suppers, J. (2025).

Researching with Young People: An Introduction to Youth-Centred Research Methods.
Bloomsbury Academic.

Introduces practical methods for youth-centred research, including case studies on coproduction, ethics, and power dynamics.

Brady, L., & Graham, B. (2024).
Social Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Guide.
Bristol University Press.

Provides clear guidance on ethical, methodological, and practical aspects of research with children and young people.

Clark, A. (2017).

Listening to Young Children: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach. (3rd ed).
National Children's Bureau.

Provides a creative framework for listening to younger children's perspectives.

Groundwater-Smith, S., Dockett, S., & Bottrell, D. (2014).

Participatory Research with Children and Young People.
SAGE Publications.

Combines theory and practice for participatory research, with frameworks and examples from diverse contexts.

Coyne, I., & Carter, B. (Eds.) (2024).

Being Participatory: Researching with Children and Young People: Co-constructing Knowledge Using Creative, Digital and Innovative Techniques (2nd ed.).
Springer.

Showcases creative and digital participatory techniques, centring children and young people as coresearchers.

Kara, H. (2020).

Creative Research Methods: A Practical Guide (2nd ed.).
Policy Press.

Offers practical guidance on arts-based and creative approaches to enrich research design and data collection.

Kara, H., Mannay, D., & Roy, A. (Eds.) (2024).

The Handbook of Creative Data Analysis.
Policy Press.

Focuses on collaborative and creative techniques for analysing research data in participatory and inclusive ways.

Toolkits and practical guides

> **Research with East London Communities: place-based guidance and resources**

Queen Mary University of London

Inclusive and ethical guidance for diverse community research.

> **Equitable Partnerships for Civic Engagement: A toolkit for civic, community, and university partners**

Queen Mary University of London as part of the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme

Toolkit for fostering collaborative partnerships between civic, community, and university stakeholders.

> **Participatory Methods**

Institute of Development Studies

Practical guidance on applying participatory approaches in research.

> **Research Methodologies Library**

Aspect

How-to guides from Methods for Change series. Lots of examples of worked creative methods.

> **ERIC – Ethical Research Involving Children**

Hub of international evidence-informed ethics guidance for research involving children covering consent, confidentiality, payment, recognition, and harms/benefits.

> **eYPaGNet toolkit**

Generation R Alliance

Support for running youth advisory groups in research and engagement activities.

> **Participatory Action Research: A Toolkit**

University of Reading

Practical PAR guidance.

> **Participatory Research with Young People: A Toolkit (2024)**

Gender and Adolescence Global Evidence (GAGE)

Comprehensive PAR toolkit for project design, facilitation, reflection, and impact.

> **Involving Young People: A Toolkit for Peer Research**

Partnership for Young London

Resources and guidance for involving young people as peer researchers.

> **Trauma-Informed Social Research: A Practical Guide**

Fulfilling Lives South East

Embedding trauma-informed principles in research.

> **Payment Guidance for Researchers and Professionals**

NIHR

Payment, reimbursement, and recognition framework.