



25 Ways To Stop Tokenizing Youth

By Adam Fletcher for The Freechild Project, June 2013

More adults are interested in engaging youth throughout our communities than ever before. Starting programs, making positions, and hosting activities, along the way we are bound to mess up. One of the ways we do that is by tokenizing youth. Over the last decade, I've trained thousands of youth and adults across North America to develop these activities. In my training, I collect their thoughts and ideas. Following is a collection of ways to stop tokenizing youth from these workshops. Contact me to talk about how I can help your organization or community by visiting adamfletcher.net.

1. Don't limit youth to talking and working on single issues that are convenient for adults.
2. Start creating new varieties of activities that engage diverse youth in different ways.
3. Engage as many youth as possible in every possible opportunity.
4. Make your acceptance of diverse young people and diverse opinions constantly and consistently obvious.
5. Treat and tell youth they are experts in their own experience in society.
6. Do activities that reinforce the expertise of young people right now.
7. Train youth and adults on youth voice.
8. Don't assume that simply because participants work with or are youth they understand youth voice or can speak on all issues in their communities.
9. Avoid any representative activities that position youth as officials or representatives on their peer group, instead concentrating on that specific youth as an individual person.
10. Promote equitable and full transparency between youth and adults in all situations.
11. Reach out individually to disengaged youth who aren't traditionally heard in society and not only to youth you personally know and like.
12. Choose different youth who have a range of diverse experiences and opinions.
13. Don't create special and unique youth voice opportunities; instead, infuse youth everyday through regular operations and activities and do the things youth already do.
14. Practice mutual accountability with youth through youth-led evaluations of you and your work, whether you're a youth worker, counselor, executive director, or politician.
15. Invite youth to form youth/adult partnerships by working together with adults in programs, community classes, organizations, or conferences.
16. Get youth active early in the planning cycle and keep them engaged through critical reflection.
17. Engage youth by using a broad array of activities, programs, organizations, and conferences that have fun built into them, but aren't focused solely on having fun.
18. Teach youth about education, the government, how society functions, what the role of social classes are, and what their significance is within a democratic society.
19. Provide opportunities for youth to connect with each other outside traditionally adult-exclusive community activities so they can see that they're not the only youth in the room, and that they have things in common past their age-based identities.
20. When sharing youth voice on a specific topic, provide a variety of perspectives and not just ones you agree with from the easiest youth you could listen to.
21. Make space for each youth as an individual who has their own stories, perspectives, ideas, and knowledge.
22. Build the capacity of youth to lead their own activities and participate as equitable partners with adults throughout the community.
23. Remember that all issues throughout the society are youth issues, because all issues affect youth too.
24. Don't decide for young people what they can decide for themselves, and ask them directly, always.
25. When necessary, explain to youth that not everything they suggest will be acted on, but may inform decisions going forward.