

Centre of Excellence: young people & disasters - Youth Participation



Youth participation is the underpinning principle of the **Centre of Excellence: young people & disasters**, with an aspirational goal to actively involve young people, aged 12 – 24 years-old, that acknowledges, enables and promotes the rights and citizenship of young people.

The United Nations state clearly that participation is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and for young people under the age of 18 this is reiterated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to UNICEF, participation enables young people to “play a vital role in their own development as well as in that of their communities, helping them to learn vital life-skills, develop knowledge on human rights and citizenship and to promote positive civic action.”ⁱ

Young people under the legal age of enfranchisement and majority (18 years) are excluded from the formal democratic process of electing governments based on their age. In addition, young people (and young adults over 18 years) are also often excluded from community decision making based on the false assumption that based on their age young people lack the knowledge, experience or capability to be

involved in decision making. However, the UN recognises young people as “key agents for social change, economic growth and technological innovation.”ⁱⁱ

Children and young people are disproportionately affected by disaster, yet they are stakeholders in disaster risk reduction practices and an integral part of any ‘people-centred preventive approach to disaster risk’.ⁱⁱⁱ Traditionally they have been managed under a vulnerability and risk discourse in disaster response and planning.^{iv} Acknowledging young people’s strengths and capabilities, enables the active involvement of young people in disaster management and shifts the vulnerability discourse.

The active involvement of young people in disasters is reflected in a range of language and approaches that include concepts such as, engagement, empowerment, youth voices, and youth participation, as described above. However, the active involvement of young people has largely been used as a broad concept without definition in the specific context of disasters.^v

The Centre of Excellence: Young People and Disasters acknowledges the principles of youth participation, as recommended by the Victorian State Government, they include:

1. Children and young people have human rights, including the right to make decisions and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.
2. Hearing and acting on the voices of children and young people is essential to their safety and for the quality and safety of services.
3. Children and young people have experience and expertise to share.
4. Seeking, listening to and acting on the voices of children and young people is part of everyone's role.
5. The voices of children and young people are diverse. All children and young people are valued and respected, and their differences appreciated.
6. The voices of children and young people lead to positive action.
7. Children and young people know how they can participate and are engaged in ways that make sense to them.
8. Participation promotes a strong voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
9. Children and young people are informed and understand what it means to participate and how their participation will link to outcomes.

10. Child and youth participation is ethical, accessible, inclusive, safe and culturally, linguistically and religiously appropriate.
11. Participation is sought from children and young people with lived experience of disadvantage.

We also acknowledge the Code of Ethical Practice^{vi} developed by the Victorian Youth Sector for working with young people to enable their participation which includes the following principles that reflect values that inform youth work:

- **Empowerment.** The Code acknowledges that young people under the age of 18 lack power because of their age. The Code advocates for and promotes the voices, experiences and agency of young people. It supports young people to achieve their rights and best interests.
- **Participation.** The Code promotes opportunities for young people to take part in decisions that affect them.
- **Social justice.** The Code highlights the role of youth workers as social justice educators and advocates. It prioritises young people's human rights, equity, participation, diversity and justice.
- **Climate justice.** The Code promotes care for, and connection with, the environment that youth workers and young people live and work in. This includes waterways, air, land and ecosystems.

- **Respect for human dignity and worth.** The Code advocates respect for young people's dignity and worth and their right to make their own choices.
- **Respect for diversity.** The Code respects the intersecting identities, cultures, abilities and backgrounds of young people.
- **Connectedness to friends, family, community and culture.** The Code highlights the importance of social and cultural connection for young people. This helps build their sense of belonging, identity, independence and wellbeing.
- **Positive health and wellbeing.** The Code highlights the importance of supporting young people's abilities to thrive. It does this through caring for their physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing.
- **Safety.** The Code prioritises creating environments that are physically, psychologically and culturally safe. Cultural safety is particularly important for young people with specific religious and spiritual connections and beliefs.

The above principles and values inform the Centre of Excellence's definition of youth participation. In summary, youth participation is about enabling young people as active citizens, involving young people in a range of activities, organisations, government and community structures and ultimately in decision making on issues that directly affect them.

ⁱ United Nations Youth. (2013). *Youth participation* [Fact sheet]. United Nations.

<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-participation.pdf>

ⁱⁱ United Nations Youth. (2013). *Youth participation* [Fact sheet]. United Nations.

<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-participation.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). (2020). *Words into Action: Engaging children and youth in disaster risk reduction and resilience building* (p. 10). https://www.undrr.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/Resource-Guide-WiAChildren_0.pdf

^{iv} MacDonald, F., Woods, B., Hall, C., Corney, T., & Ryan, D. (2023). Joining the dots to reimagine community resilience: Empowering young people in disasters. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 38(4), 85–89. <https://doi.org/10.47389/38.4.85>

^v MacDonald, F., Woods, B. & Corney, T. (2025). *Future Proof: Young People, Disaster Recovery and (Re)building Communities Research Report*, Victoria University Research Repository.

^{vi} Corney, T., Wotherspoon, N., & Champion, S. (Eds.). (2025). *The Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector* (Revised edition). Youth Affairs Council Victoria.

