

# YOUTH PARTICIPATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MULTICULTURAL BACKGROUNDS



## AT A GLANCE



### THIS RESOURCE AIMS TO:

- consider the role of youth participation with young people from multicultural backgrounds;
- stimulate ideas about how services can adopt youth participation principles at all levels of their organisation;
- support the engagement of young people from multicultural backgrounds, and their families, when it comes to the design, delivery, research and evaluation of youth mental health services; and
- showcase the experiences of a young person and a program manager who have been involved in youth participation activities.

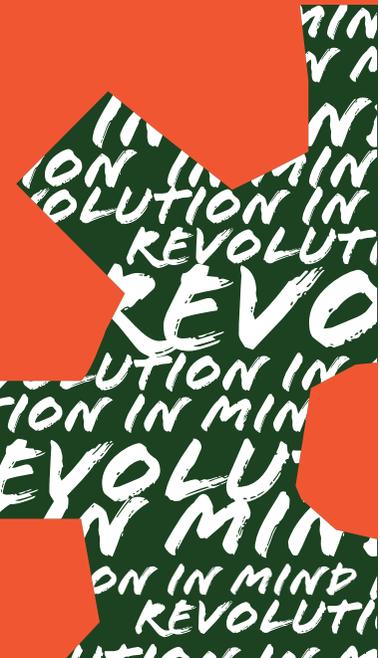
This resource has been co-written with an Orygen youth peer worker, in consultation with young people with lived experience and staff from multicultural youth mental health services. Definitions for multicultural young person, cultural diversity and mental wellbeing can be found in the clinical practice point [Culture 101](#).

## WHY PARTNER WITH YOUNG PEOPLE?

Working in partnership with young people in the development and delivery of mental health services is fundamental to ensuring that youth mental health care is accessible, appropriate and effective.(1) The phrase ‘nothing about us without us’ is often used to express this philosophy. Youth participation empowers young people to advocate for themselves and their peers, and helps to influence positive and meaningful change for the future.

Given the multicultural nature of Australian society, the diverse voices, strengths and experiences of all young people should be reflected within the youth mental health system. Research has shown that people from multicultural backgrounds experience a unique set of barriers in accessing and engaging with mental health services,(2) and that services are often not designed with the needs of multicultural populations at the forefront. Mental health service models are often not culturally appropriate, for example language used by mental health services to describe mental health and wellbeing are not always shared by young people, their family or the community. Services may also fail to acknowledge multicultural

health values or concepts, such as recognising the connection to land, community, family, mental health and spirituality.(3, 4) These barriers are likely to prevent multicultural young people from accessing and receiving appropriate mental health care. Youth participation in mental health can therefore be a significant and effective way to address the barriers often faced by multicultural young people, helping to redress the balance and empower them to share their valuable insights. These contributions help to develop youth mental health services which are inclusive for all.



## WHAT IS YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Youth participation is recognising and nurturing the strengths, interests, and abilities of young people by providing real opportunities for them to become involved in decisions on a systemic level. (5) Types of youth participation activities and how they might be implemented in youth mental health services include but are not limited to:



**YOUTH ADVISORY GROUPS  
OR YOUTH COUNCILS**



**INTERVIEW  
PANELS**



**SITTING ON BOARDS  
AND COMMITTEES**



**CO-DESIGNING NEW  
SERVICES AND PROGRAMS**



**CO-FACILITATING  
WORKSHOPS,  
CONFERENCES  
OR PROGRAMS**



**CONSULTING AND  
PARTNERING ON  
RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**



**YOUTH-LED INITIATIVES,  
for example Orygen's  
'By Young People for Young  
People', a youth-led conference  
sharing experiences of  
youth participation, youth  
engagement and co-design**



**CONSULTING ON A RANGE  
OF ACTIVITIES  
including service delivery,  
service quality improvement,  
the development of resources  
or workforce training**

Youth participation actively avoids 'doing to' activities such as persuading and educating, with a focus on 'doing with' activities such as co-designing and co-producing,(6) where young people can make a choice on how they participate.

## PRINCIPLES OF ORYGEN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Below are the principles that underpin Orygen youth participation and an example of how each could be implemented in practice.

PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLE
<p><b>Respectful</b> Young people and staff working collaboratively to share thoughts, ideas and perspectives that challenge each other in a thoughtful manner; services not valuing their own concepts of mental health over those of the young person's community.</p>	<p>A service holding a consultation with community members could have a young person from the local community co-facilitating, with the consultation itself structured to gain insights and feedback in culturally safe ways.</p>
<p><b>Valuing diverse experiences</b> Young people are welcomed to participate and their contributions are acknowledged and respected.</p>	<p>Recruitment processes for youth advisors on a project should acknowledge that work will need to be done to ensure opportunities are inclusive of diverse communities, and that young people who may identify as culturally diverse should not be expected to speak on behalf of their community.</p>
<p><b>Inclusive and accessible</b> Young people have access to the tools they need to meaningfully engage in youth participation activities and the environment is always welcoming.</p>	<p>To support a young person's participation and provide equitable access to opportunities, a service may provide transport vouchers, internet data allowance, reimbursement of childcare costs, access to interpreters and material in accessible formats.</p>
<p><b>Flexible</b> A diverse range of youth participation opportunities are available to meet a diverse range of interests, skills, abilities and availability of young people.</p>	<p>Having more than one way for young people to engage in a particular project (such as through surveys, workshops, advisory roles) to acknowledge that young people may have other commitments, and that they should have the ability to choose what form of participation works best for them at the time.</p>
<p><b>Meaningful</b> Youth participation opportunities have realistic purpose, with a potential for genuine impact. Young people are given opportunities to develop new skills and to influence youth mental health.</p>	<p>Young people are involved in projects early enough that their feedback and ideas are able to be actioned and addressed.</p>
<p><b>Mutually beneficial</b> Benefits both the young person and youth mental health services.</p>	<p>Embedding recognition for young people's time and energy through mechanisms such as reimbursement, training and professional and personal development opportunities.</p>
<p><b>Safe and supportive</b> Young people feel confident they will not be exposed to physical or emotional harm while involved in youth participation. This should include consideration of racial safety and power dynamics within the service.</p>	<p>Ensuring young people know what the expectations are of taking part in a project, are given the opportunity to feedback and they also know what to expect of a service in terms of supports offered. Services provide ongoing cultural capacity training opportunities to staff and staff work closely with young people to develop ways of working that are empowering and safe.</p>
<p><b>Facilitates choice</b> Youth participation opportunities support young people to choose the opportunities and styles of engagement that best suit them, their skills, abilities and interests. They do not make assumptions about a young person's interests.</p>	<p>In considering youth representation on a committee, common group processes should be negotiated so as to not expect young people to have to work within a structure that may not have been formed with young people in mind.</p>

**“Helping to develop, deliver and evaluate a youth mental health program has taught me the value of young people’s voices in implementing change.”**

**PHUONG NGUYEN**

CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL YOUTH AUSTRALIA, YOUTH FACILITATOR

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING IN THIS WAY?

Youth participation has reciprocal benefits for the young person, their family, the community and youth mental health services which include:

- ensuring services are relevant, accessible and responsible for all young people;
- empowering young people to have control and input into services and their delivery;
- prioritising the voice of the young person and recognising the value of lived experience;
- supporting and upskilling young people;
- allowing diverse voices to be represented at all levels within a service, including those voices that have previously been marginalised;
- contributing to the promotion of culturally safe practice when young people share their knowledge and experiences;
- helping young people to develop a sense of social inclusion/social rights and responsibilities to the community;
- encouraging an organisational shift where multicultural young people are viewed as partners not just the recipients of a service;
- building trust through a more unified working partnership with communities and organisations, which is important for ongoing collaboration and engagement;
- forming connections between young people and services in a safe environment; and
- providing initiatives that are designed for young people and are more likely to be effective because young people participated in their development and implementation.(7)

**“Too often organisational systems, structures and policies, racism and discrimination, cultural norms and gender-based expectations prevent young people from actively shaping their own future by participating in decisions and actions that impact them.”**

**DURÉ DE WINTER**

CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL YOUTH PROGRAM MANAGER - YOUTH LEADERSHIP



## WHAT IS CO-DESIGN?

Co-design is a form of youth participation and an approach that attempts to actively involve all stakeholders in the design process, working together to help ensure a product or service meets the young person’s needs. Co-design acknowledges that everyone has the right to participate in decisions that impact them and everyone has valuable knowledge to contribute to the design process.(8) Co-design with young people from multicultural backgrounds involves rectifying exclusion and reorienting relationships between multicultural communities and health systems to be more balanced. As such, co-design is tied to principles of social, economic and political equity. Co-design’s core features involve:

- sharing decision-making power, for example young people are partners in shaping the design or delivery of services;
- giving equal value to expertise by lived experience and expertise by profession or education;
- a design-led process consisting of stages where broad ideas are encouraged before they are deliberately narrowed down;(9) and
- using design methods to facilitate active engagement, for example brainstorming, user personas, and scenarios.(10)

Co-design should be the default method used when planning and developing youth mental health services, maximising young people’s participation in the decisions that affect them. However, co-design requires both an investment in time and resources that might not always be possible. A compromise would be for organisations to use a combination of co-design and consultation with young people.

For further information, see Orygen’s

[Co-designing with young people: the fundamentals.](#)

## BUILDING YOUTH PARTICIPATION INTO SERVICES

There are many ways youth participation opportunities with multicultural young people can be built into services. Youth participation does require a commitment from an organisation and its staff members, however the benefits exceed the input and efforts to make changes which may be required.

The following sections explore ways that various employees can take responsibility for reducing barriers and facilitate youth participation principles within their organisation.



### ACTIONS FOR TEAM LEADERS, MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES

**As key decision makers in mental health organisations, team leaders, managers and executives have plenty of opportunities to facilitate effective and inclusive youth participation. Here are some ways they can do so:**



- Reduce organisational barriers to youth participation, for example formality and use of jargon.



- Consider use of language, access to interpreters, and translated documents or resources to explain to young people about participation opportunities.



- Use preferred methods of communication, for example text messages or instant messaging on social media.



- We all have cultural backgrounds that influence how we communicate with others and what we consider to be acceptable forms of communication. Remember that we will have biases and blind spots and that it is important to actively try to decentre our own norms and assumptions so that we can be open to hearing the input of young people whose cultural backgrounds may influence how they share information.



- In certain cultures it would be inappropriate for young people to a) show up to a participation opportunity unaccompanied and b) speak their mind at it. However, sometimes involving young people will not look how we expect - sometimes involving community is most appropriate, therefore services should make time to understand what is most appropriate in a particular context.



- Consider the location of participation activities, making sure they are youth friendly, culturally appropriate and set at a convenient time for young people.



- Make services physically culturally representative, for example with diverse staff representation and appropriate physical spaces.



- Acknowledge the power imbalance for young people especially in predominantly white mental health organisations. Recognise that it may be difficult for them to develop trust with organisations that represent authority, government, or previous sources of trauma or exclusion; relationships may take extra time to develop or rebuild trust.



- Avoid young people feeling as though they are representing their whole community - consider engaging a group of young people rather than an individual. Services can also empower and train young people to consult with their community, helping them to seek wider representation and be the spokesperson to bring ideas back to the service.



- Recognise the potential fear young people may have when it comes to speaking out, for example critiquing a government service, especially in situations where there is uncertainty around the young person's status to remain.



- Offer meaningful youth participation opportunities including different types of engagement, for example flexible activities such as project work and more structured opportunities such as youth advisory groups and councils. Where possible, present multiple options and allow young people to choose.



- Recognise the contributions that young people make to youth participation activities, for example a financial reimbursement. Participation is not cost-neutral for young people.



- Avoid tokenism, for example asking young people to be involved when it is too late to make meaningful changes.



- Consider how social aspects of identity intersect for multicultural young people, for example their gender, race, faith and sexuality. Is it appropriate to have young people of different genders in the same room for some conversations? How will the service manage these considerations in ways that do not negatively impact on the young person's voice and contributions?



- Employ staff members who are champions of youth participation, ensuring they have the skills and resources to support them in their role, for example cultural responsiveness training for those staff working closely with multicultural youth advisors.



- Empower staff members to offer more youth participation opportunities by providing training, mentoring, supervision, resources and time.



- Build links with organisations that already support young people from multicultural backgrounds, their families and their communities.



- Ensure there is cultural safety in youth participation processes:
- address how young people and families will raise concerns if necessary;
- address young people's needs in relation to privacy/confidentiality;
- consider what themes or conversations might need to be avoided;
- ensure opt-out structures are in place for young people and their families;
- organise support to be offered to young people as necessary, for example the opportunity to debrief. Consider how this will be provided if the relevant skills do not exist within the team or service, for example if a young person wants to debrief with someone of a similar cultural background and the service has no staff of that background; and
- consider opportunities for consultation from partner organisations to ensure you are working in ways that are safe and respectful.

For more information, see Orygen's [Designing mental health services for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds: good practice framework](#).



## ACTIONS FOR STAFF (CLINICAL AND NON-CLINICAL)

Clinical and non-clinical staff also play an important role in advocating for, promoting and facilitating youth participation. Here are some ways they can do so:



- Advocate for multicultural young people and their families to be engaged in youth participation activities within your organisation.



- Young people and their families may be unfamiliar with youth engagement. Take time to talk with young people, their families and communities about becoming involved and how their ideas will be used.



- Talk with young people who show an interest in youth participation about how they would like to be involved and what they would be interested in rather than making assumptions based on their experiences, family background or your own cultural assumptions.



- Ways of sharing knowledge can differ between cultures. Young people from different cultures may provide their insights in ways that are not direct responses or not what we are familiar with in our own cultural background. It is beneficial to take the time to understand the different ways that knowledge is shared.



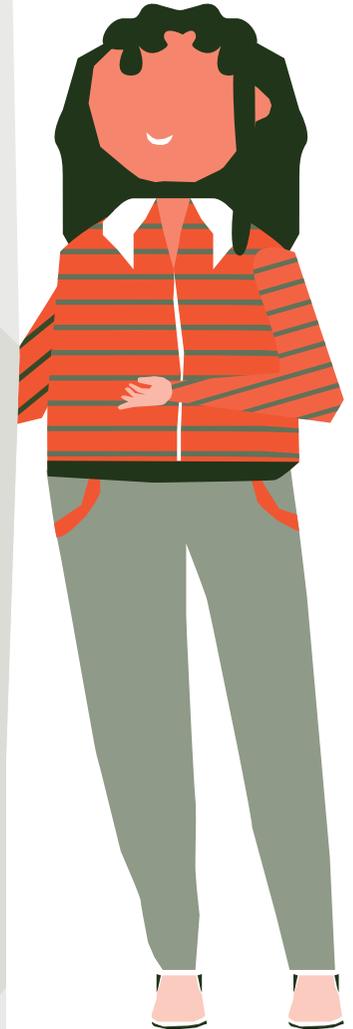
- Avoid only asking about certain experiences, for example migrant or refugee experience, as though that defines the young person.



- Set clear expectations with young people so they know exactly what their participation involves, for example the type of activities that will be involved and the expected time commitment.



- Be ready to offer additional supports to young people engaging with youth participation activities and help them overcome potential barriers, for example by providing access to an interpreter or helping a young person to develop their confidence.



## SUCCESS STORIES

### REVERB

Facilitated by the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), the REVERB project is a mental health initiative co-designed with young people from migrant and refugee families. It aims to address the stigma around mental health in multicultural communities.



#### PHUONG NGUYEN. YOUTH FACILITATOR, REVERB, CMY

“As a person of colour, I recognise the large stigma around mental health in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

Growing up, I did not come across any mental health concepts and support due to the lack of awareness in my cultural communities. I started learning more about emotional wellbeing in Western educational workshops and was intrigued by how mental wellbeing affects individuals' and communities' quality of life. As a CMY volunteer I got introduced to the REVERB program – mental health initiative co-facilitated and designed by CMY staff and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to share their lived experiences, address mental health stigma and encourage young people to seek help. Research has shown CALD groups are likely to have poor mental health outcomes due to self and public stigma. It discourages CALD young people and families from accessing services. For this reason, engaging in mental health services can assist in normalising the experience and improving mental health literacy among CALD communities. Helping to develop, deliver and evaluate a mental health program has taught me the value of young people's voices in implementing change.”

#### DURÉ DE WINTER. PROGRAM MANAGER, YOUTH LEADERSHIP CMY

“CMY's Youth Leadership program area frames participation through three key approaches – youth-informed, youth-led and co-designed.

The REVERB project has elements of all three approaches and is a great example of an organisation and young people working in partnership to make positive change in the community on an issue that affects us all. The REVERB project was designed by CMY's Youth Advisory Group in 2018 and then co-developed by young people and CMY in 2019 before securing two years' funding through Gandel Philanthropic for delivery from 2020–21. REVERB's project activities are now designed, developed and led by young people with the support of a steering group made up of young people, mental health services providers and CMY staff who oversee their implementation and review. Too often organisational systems, structures and policies, racism and discrimination, cultural norms and gender-based expectations prevent young people from actively shaping their own future by participating in decisions and actions that impact them. REVERB is an example of how young people can, and should, be included at all levels of decision making, implementation and review.”

For more information on REVERB, and training events for individuals and organisations on building cultural responsiveness, visit the [Centre for Multicultural Youth](#).

## CONCLUSION

This is not an exhaustive document but a starting point for the mental health workforce to better understand how working collaboratively with young people from multicultural backgrounds benefits all, including the young person, their family, the community, staff members and the organisation.

For a comprehensive guide written in conjunction with young people, see the multicultural youth advocacy network publication [Not just “ticking a box”: youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds](#).<sup>(11)</sup>



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### YOUTH PARTICIPATION IS ESSENTIAL IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY OF YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.

This is especially true for young people from multicultural backgrounds, who are often marginalised in society and locked out of decision making (due to a range of factors) around the development and implementation of mental health services.

### THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO OFFER MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES.

Ways this might work in practice include inviting young people to take part in projects, research activities, or to sit on interview panels or committees.

### YOUTH PARTICIPATION HAS RECIPROCAL BENEFITS FOR THE YOUNG PERSON, THEIR FAMILY, THE COMMUNITY AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.

Incorporating the diverse voices and experiences of multicultural young people enables services to better meet the needs of the people using them and empowers young people to have control and direct input into services that affect them. Youth participation also helps to develop young people's skills in communication and working in diverse teams.

## RELATED ORYGEN RESOURCES

[Designing mental health services for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds: good practice framework.](#)

[Intersectionality and youth mental health: fact sheet.](#)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australian. [Not just “ticking a box”: youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.](#)

NSW Advocate for Children and Young People. [Understanding and supporting children and young people's participation.](#)



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Duré de Winter, Centre for Multicultural Youth  
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Phuong Nguyen, Centre for Multicultural Youth

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**Suggested citation** Youth participation with young people from multicultural backgrounds: toolkit. Melbourne: Orygen; 2021.

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Orygen is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health.

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