



Equity-Centered Youth Co-Creation

Designing Solutions with Young People, Not Just for Them

Equity-centered youth co-creation is a design strategy that empowers young people as active agents and creators of the technologies they use and that impact them most.

Co-creation is the bridge to understanding youth culture, preferences, aspirations, and behaviors – offering insights that spark innovation, enhance relevance, and inform effective strategies. It's more than a process; it's **a commitment to equity-centered design** that empowers young people as problem-solvers and decision-makers. Done thoughtfully, co-creation fosters authentic relationships and builds critical skills like communication, collaboration, and creativity – ultimately leading to solutions and services that are not only effective but deeply aligned with the needs of young people.

This framework is a practical tool for organizations, companies, innovators, policymakers, community leaders, and anyone aiming to build more equitable programs, initiatives, and strategies through youth collaboration. It offers actionable guidance to meaningfully include young people's voices in shaping solutions that directly impact their lives. Whether you're designing community programs, crafting policies, or developing tools and services, this resource equips you with strategies to better understand youth needs and empower them as co-creators of change. If you have any questions or want to work with us to learn more [click here](#) to get in touch.

For more information, visit
www.headstreaminnovation.com



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Mutual Benefits of Youth Co-Creation

Engaging youth in the co-creation process offers numerous benefits for both the young participants and the organizations involved.

Benefits for organizations

Increased Innovation: Young people bring fresh perspectives and creative ideas that can drive innovation.

Improved User Adoption: Products developed with youth input are more likely to be embraced by the target audience, leading to higher adoption rates.

Risk Mitigation: Early involvement of youth can help identify potential issues or concerns before they become costly problems post-launch.

Cost-Effectiveness: While co-creation may require more effort upfront, it can significantly reduce costs associated with major post-launch revisions, failures, or program adjustments.

Marketing Insights and Market Fit:
The process provides valuable insights into youth culture and preferences, informing more effective marketing strategies.

Benefits for youth

Empowerment and Skill Development:
Co-creation empowers young people, particularly those from marginalized communities, to develop crucial business skills.

Career Readiness: The collaborative process helps prepare young people for future careers by giving them valuable real-world experience.

Connectedness: Co-creation builds meaningful connections between young people and the adults they work with, bridging diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Products That Better Meet Their Needs: By positioning young people as experts of their own experiences, co-creation ensures the resulting products and technologies better address their needs and priorities.

Amplified Voice and Influence: Co-creation provides youth with a platform to shape decisions that impact them, fostering a sense of agency and influence in areas that matter to their lives.



The Impact of Youth Co-Creation: Real Results, Real Change

In 2024 alone, Headstream partnered with more than 20 companies and organizations across social tech, edtech, and digital health sectors, helping them create solutions that genuinely address youth needs.

Our approach to co-creation, grounded in authentic youth involvement, drives meaningful outcomes. For example, by integrating youth perspectives into product development, Neolth saw 25x greater retention and 31% higher satisfaction rates – outcomes far exceeding industry standards ([Neolth](#), 2020). Embedding youth ideas into the design process doesn't just enhance product relevance; it significantly improves user engagement and loyalty.

Co-creating with youth drives real value across industries. Headstream has worked with over **150 young people, who've advised 90+ organizations to create solutions that impact over 10 million young people and adults globally.** Youth co-creation offers actionable insights that traditional research often misses, allowing organizations to better understand youth needs and create more relevant, engaging, and impactful solutions.



Headstream has allowed us to connect with fabulous young people across the country who've given us really great insights and POVs about how to meet young people where they are, in terms of addressing their mental health challenges.

– Alex “Goldy” Goldman
Founding Product Manager
Flourish Labs



83%

of Headstream Accelerator companies applied youth insights

100%

of companies reported improved cultural relevance

87%

of youth increased in confidence



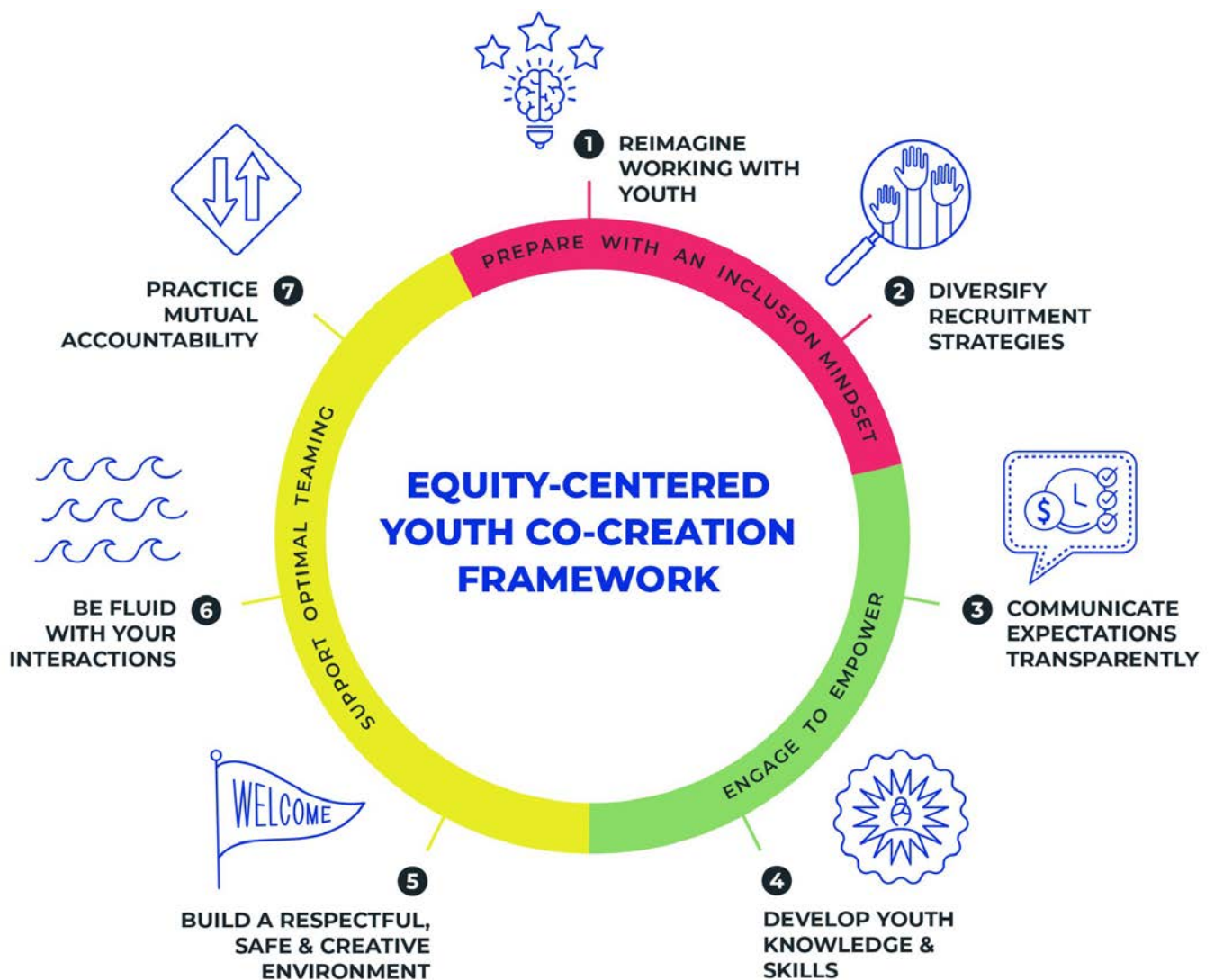
No matter what idea I had, it was never frowned upon... I was consistently reaffirmed that what I say mattered.

– Headstream Youth Professional



Empowering Youth Enabling Change

Headstreams Equity Centered Co-Creation Framework empowers stakeholders to collaborate with youth as co-creators, shifting from designing *for* them to designing *with* them to build impactful and equitable solutions.





REIMAGINE WORKING WITH YOUTH



Before embarking on equity-centered youth co-creation, it's important for all stakeholders - whether designers, policymakers, or other decision-makers - to examine some common misconceptions and missteps in engaging with young people.

Acknowledge Biases

Stakeholders co-creating with youth must be willing to deconstruct and understand the structural barriers and implicit biases that inform how they engage with young people. Taking the time for self-reflection is paramount to the process, and paves the way for genuine and equitable collaboration with youth.



The following insight came from a Headstream workshop in response to this question: “What should young people and adults keep in mind when working together?”:



Our key insight is that everyone is an expert at something. We thought that this could apply to both what young people can remember when working with adults and what adults can remember when working with young people and some of our reasoning behind this is because it validates everyone’s experiences and it gives a title to that experience as an expert. And it just levels the playing field when it comes to peer knowledge being what we are all striving for when working with one another.

– Primo Lagaso Goldberg
Youth Professional



REIMAGINE WORKING WITH YOUTH

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Check Your Language

The way we describe and refer to young people reveals a lot about our assumptions and expectations. Terms like "disrespectful," "naive," "surprisingly articulate," or "informed" can indicate an adult-centric perspective. It's important to hold high expectations for young people's work and treat them with respect; this should be reflected in the language used with them.

Have a Learning Mindset

Approach co-creation with a willingness to learn from the diverse perspectives of young people. Recognize that they are invaluable teachers, offering insights that can transform the way we design new products, programs, and systems. Stakeholders should embrace a stance of humility and openness to learning.

**bold tech for
bright youth**

I had a couple innovators that I really like talking to, because I feel like they really treated us as equals, rather than like children...

– Ariana Walcott
Youth Professional

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Co-creation is supposed to be like a two way deal, and I think sometimes it can feel like an interview if you're not necessarily doing it right. [For example,] 'I'm trying to build this, what do you think?' versus... 'let's talk about how you cope today...if you're not feeling great, what do you do? Here's what I do...' I'm a person just like you; I'm trying to relate and remind you that even if I'm working at a startup, it doesn't mean I'm fancy or smarter than you... We are not experts in being teenagers in 2024...we know nothing about it. So we need them to feel comfortable opening up to us.

– Alex “Goldy” Goldman
Founding Product Manager
Flourish Labs

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DIVERSIFY RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES



To engage a diverse group of young people, stakeholders should use recruitment strategies that align with youth experiences and networks. Begin by considering the physical and digital spaces where youth naturally gather, such as community centers, libraries, skate parks, or online platforms. Then, reach out to trusted connections who can share these opportunities there and within their own circles. Focusing on familiar and accessible environments helps create an inclusive and respectful recruitment process.



When kicking off outreach for Headstream’s Co-Creator Club, we reached out to about 100 youth organizations, and several schools, and inserted ourselves into as many graduating high school Facebook and Slack groups as possible. It wasn’t until we took our outreach to Instagram & TikTok that application numbers skyrocketed. We wanted to be able to show and explain the value of our program to youth directly and in the digital places they frequent the most.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when recruiting. You should:

- Work with multiple young people to get varying perspectives.
- Support multiple voices rather than extracting from just one person. Don’t tokenize young people.
- Aim to attract youth who are passionate about the topic and want to learn about and contribute to their mission.
- Consider a mix of youth that will feel deeply empowered in their sense of self with a new experience under their belt. It is important to remember that while there are stellar students with 4.0 GPAs and five extracurriculars, many other young people have valuable perspectives, too.
- Think about youth in different geographic areas – urban, suburban, rural – that could benefit from working with you.

COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS TRANSPARENTLY



To ensure effective youth co-creation, partners should clearly communicate expectations to youth collaborators and be transparent about needs, constraints, and capacity. Regularly revisit agreements to address any changes in program needs or priorities.

Provide Parameters for Alignment

Collaborators should outline compensation arrangements for youth collaborators upfront. Headstream strongly recommends compensating young people fairly for their time and contributions.

As part of setting program expectations, partners should clearly define their co-creation process, similar to how they would for other collaborators or contractors. This includes:

Intended Outcomes

Clearly state the organization's goals for the engagement and the benefits for the young people involved. Include a detailed scope of work and deliverables expected from youth collaborators.

Timeline

Provide a clear timeline outlining how and when the organization will engage with youth, including deadlines and milestones

Provide Context

Any resources available for the project such as research and contextual information. Providing these items upfront allows youth time to build their knowledge and come in prepared and more comfortable.

Be Honest About Limitations And Potential Challenges That May Arise

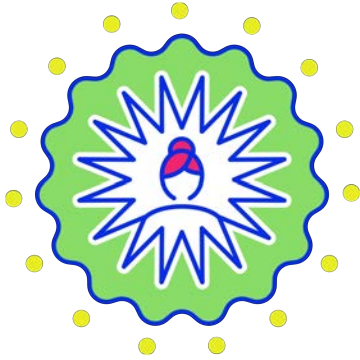
From the start of the engagement and throughout, partners should communicate transparently about organizational context and constraints like:

- Limitations that may affect the implementation of feedback. This context enables stronger empowerment and leads to more meaningful co-creation.
- Various factors that could change and hinder the ability to meaningfully engage with youth, for instance, time or funding constraints or the need to pass off the co-creation program to colleagues in their organization. Being upfront about these realities can make for a better co-creation experience.
- Challenges that may affect program continuation. Communicating this will prevent young people from being uncomfortably surprised if the engagement ends.





DEVELOP YOUTH SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE



Young people have their own passions, goals, and ideas that need to be nurtured and harnessed, not only to benefit an innovation or company but to benefit the world. Youth may not have the answers at their fingertips, but they are eager to contribute.

A mutually beneficial partnership means young people are motivated to develop new skills, evolve, and hone in on their passions. They should feel a sense of empowerment and leadership as they take part in co-creation. Prioritizing the growth and professional development of the youth you collaborate with will help you set up a sustainable co-creation process where participants feel valued and will be eager to return and recommend their peers to participate.

The following are some ways in which partners can support youth development.

Broaden Youth Business Knowledge

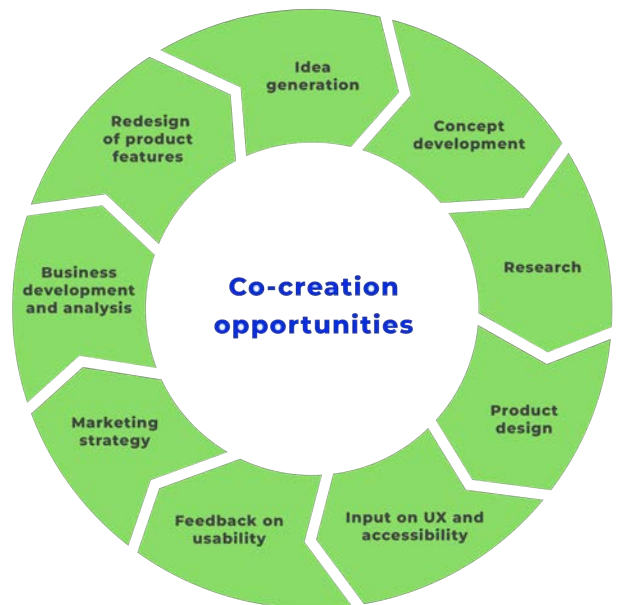
Provide educational opportunities about the inner workings of a business, the product development process, and the specific department with which they are collaborating.

Expand Youth Contributions Across the Organization

Expose young people to different areas of the business where their input can create value. From product innovation to operational strategy and policy development, their perspectives can unlock new opportunities and inform impactful decisions.

Embrace the Full Product Development Cycle

Co-creation opportunities at every stage of the product lifecycle. From early ideation and prototyping to refinement, launch, and beyond, youth collaboration helps craft solutions that are not only innovative but also genuinely reflective of their lived experiences and aspirations.



DEVELOP YOUTH SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE

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Encourage Leadership

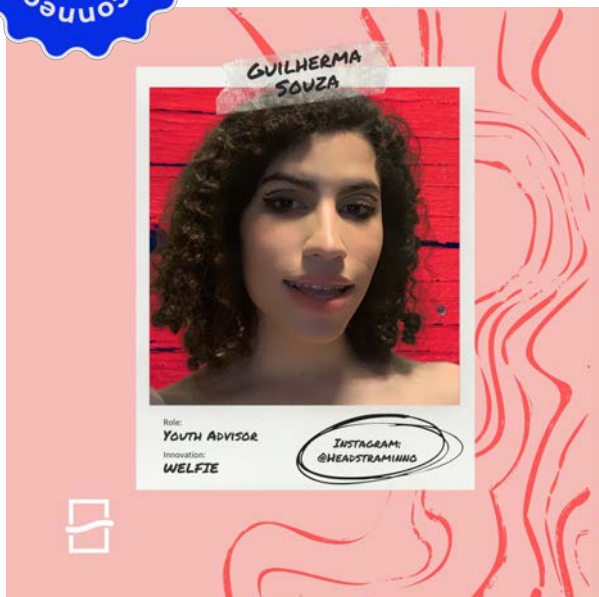
Have young people lead a portion of the work and trust them with the responsibility.

Be a Mentor

Understand young people’s personal and professional goals and support them in their endeavors.

Acknowledge Contributions

Celebrate young people’s achievements and contributions, ensuring their efforts are recognized and valued within the organization and beyond.



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Me and Susan [Chief Marketing Officer for Welfie] co-created on various projects week after week. It mostly consisted of her asking me and Kheira [another youth professional] questions, but once we answered those questions Susan would bounce back ideas so we could elaborate more on these projects to integrate Welfie into schools and how Welfie could be a major part of certain kids’ lives. Something else I really liked is how Susan would share surveys and other information with us in which we could analyze and discuss how we could integrate these things onto their programs/services. Nowadays, Susan assured me that I can contact her for whatever I may need and if they need a micro-influencer they can count on me!

– Guilherma Souza
Youth Professional

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BUILD A RESPECTFUL, SAFE, AND CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT



Break Down Adult/Youth Power Dynamics

Sharing power with youth will drive a more equitable co-creation process. The ability to build authentic and genuine spaces starts with adults entering those spaces as their authentic selves and allowing young people to be themselves. With many of Headstream’s youth, we broke down traditional boundaries around “professionalism” by simply asking each young person how they were feeling that day. It’s much simpler than people often think, but it truly starts with breaking down binaries around adults and youth.

Foster Connection

The relationship between youth and adult professionals is crucial to successful co-creation. Partners should take the time to build relationships and cultivate connections with the young people they work with.

Cultivate a Sense of Belonging by Honoring Youth Cultural Knowledge

Young people need to take up space! When we don’t give them the platform, we risk focusing on the wrong thing and working through an adult-centric framework that can cause more harm.

Partners should welcome all thoughts and validate youth participation. Powerful stories and transformative ideas exist within each person. Organizations need to ask the right questions and listen intently. Youth have a plethora of experiences that should be centered, honored, and amplified while co-creating.

Creating Space for Authentic Co-Creation

Co-creation requires intentional practices to ensure that youth feel empowered to share their true perspectives, especially in environments where power dynamics may feel imbalanced. When young people—or even adults—default to agreement, they may be telling organizations what they think they want to hear rather than offering genuine feedback or alternatives.

To foster authentic input, frame discussions in ways that encourage a range of perspectives:

- Present ideas as “under consideration” rather than finalized concepts. Instead of binary questions like “Do you like this?” ask open-ended ones such as, “How might this be useful?” or “Can you think of ways this might be harmful?”
- Invite youth to share stories or examples: “Who do you imagine would like this idea and why? Who might not like it, and why?”
- Shift the focus from reactions to co-creating solutions. Explain the problem or challenge and ask youth to brainstorm ideas, offering their unique insights into potential approaches.

BUILD A RESPECTFUL, SAFE, AND CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT

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Practice Respectful Listening

Young people need to be treated with the utmost respect. Respectful behavior encompasses active listening when youth share vulnerable experiences—giving space in conversations for youth to comfortably speak up. This includes creating a respectful environment for all, regardless of gender, disability, physical appearance, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, age, or religion.



Be mindful of how we might listen to some young people differently from others and how certain young people may communicate differently than others. Work to listen equitably.

It is critical for adults not to dismiss or shut down a suggestion or answer from youth co-creators, making sure young people don't feel self-conscious about sharing. Young people should know that there are no "mistakes" and that in addition to their input, their questions are also valuable pieces of information.

Partners should be gracious even if what a young person says is off the mark. The next thing they share could be the piece of wisdom an organization has been waiting for.

Take Feedback With Grace

Before asking for feedback, collaborators should reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers. Always assume good intentions when youth provide their thoughts. Ultimately, their input will help create more effective outcomes, whether in products, strategies, or policies—even if the feedback challenges initial assumptions or expectations.



I had the best conversation with [Daniel]. We were just discussing... the product and talking about what my peers go through when it comes to, like, 21st century type stuff and like everything we're going through and our times and stuff like that... he was just such an open ear, very open minded and yeah, it was just really good to have a conversation with him. It was just a very, very safe space.

– Denver Humphrey
Youth Professional



BUILD A RESPECTFUL, SAFE, AND CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT

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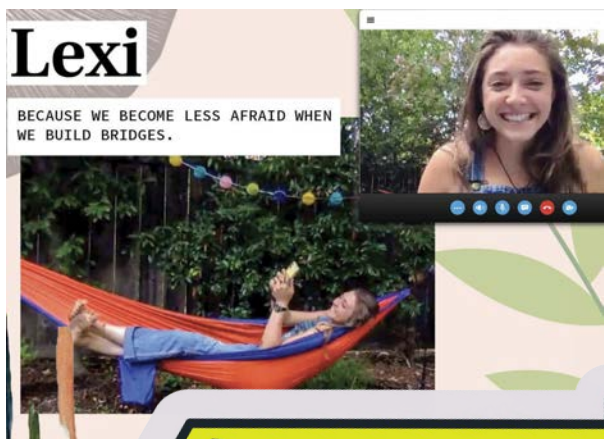


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What young people have to say may not always be delivered in a way that adults are used to. The language is different but the ideas are still valuable. Recognizing what causes a barrier between youth and adults is important because we can then create a bridge.

– Lexi G.
Youth Professional

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⚡ IMAGINE WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Minimize Jargon

Partners should ensure their language is clear and accessible. Explain technical terms, define acronyms, and minimize jargon whenever possible. Encourage young people to seek clarity if something is unclear.

Bring Your Empathy

Remember that young people are navigating complex emotions and experiences. Approach interactions with understanding and compassion.

Unleash Creativity

Foster an environment where fun and experimentation are encouraged. A playful, open space can spark fresh ideas and drive innovative thinking.

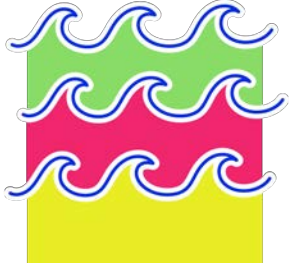
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I was listening. I wasn't overlooking them. I wasn't taking what they were saying for granted. And so when they feel seen and they feel heard, I think it just builds trust, but also it really is gonna give you some great insight.

– Roy Scott
Founder
Healthy Hip Hop

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BE FLUID WITH YOUR INTERACTIONS



Due to the structural and cultural infrastructures of our time, young people are often unable to participate in activities that take place during the daytime on weekdays. They have school obligations and extra-curricular activities or take college classes in the morning and work in the afternoon. When working with young people, partners need to be fluid and flexible to maximize their time with them.

- Provide flexible meeting times based on youth availability.
- Consider accessible meeting spaces and technologies.
- Don't police their bodies by telling them to sit up straight or sit in a chair. Young people may not want to have their cameras on in a virtual meeting, or they may want to sit on their bed. They may prefer one-on-one engagements instead of whole group brainstorming sessions. Respect their mode of expression and engagement. Vary the way you engage with youth to understand what might be the most comfortable setting and mode for them.

- Provide structure, but be prepared to flex. Let young people “color outside the lines.” It is in this creative, collaborative spirit that unexpected ideas emerge
- Be open to various communication styles. Some youth may prefer written feedback over verbal responses or feel more comfortable expressing ideas through visuals, text, or other media.

Respecting how young people express themselves and engage allows for deeper, more meaningful participation. Vary your approaches to find what works best for each individual, fostering an environment where they feel comfortable and heard.



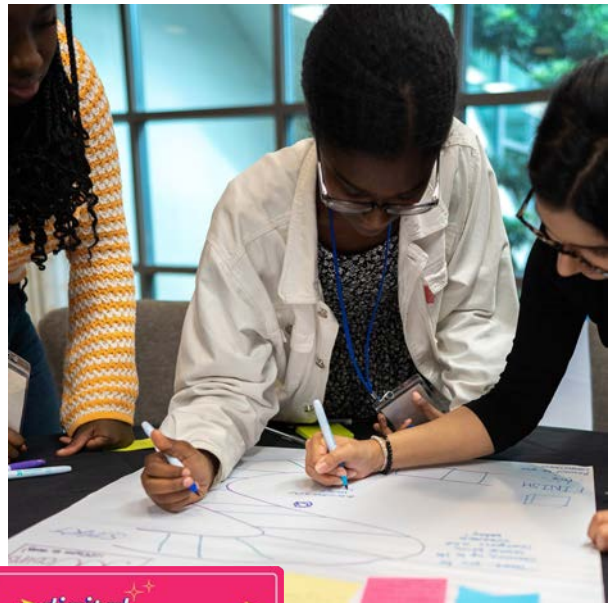
PRACTICE MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY



The Importance of Accountability in Co-Creation

Young people respect adults more when they are held accountable. Accountability fosters trust and helps young individuals grow. When a partner notices a lack of participation or consistent absences, it's important to reach out with care. A thoughtful check-in, such as a one-on-one conversation, can provide insight into the reasons behind their behavior and demonstrate genuine concern. Partners should ensure the co-creation process doesn't become an added burden, offering support to help the young person meet their commitments without unnecessary stress.

Similarly, accountability must flow both ways in the partnership. Adults and organizations also need to be accountable to the youth they collaborate with. Partners should transparently communicate how youth contributions will be used, making it clear that their input is valued and actively implemented. When a youth's idea is incorporated—whether into a product, strategy, or policy—follow-up is essential to acknowledge their impact and express appreciation. If, for any reason, youth ideas cannot be implemented, partners should be honest about the limitations or reasons why, reinforcing trust and respect in the process.



Accountability to Youth as Colleagues

Partners should treat young people with the same level of accountability and respect as employees or colleagues. This includes honoring compensation agreements and ensuring that youth are recognized for their time and contributions. Treating youth as equal collaborators fosters a sense of value and professionalism, encouraging their continued engagement and investment in the co-creation process. By maintaining these commitments, partners demonstrate integrity and strengthen the trust that is crucial for successful collaboration.





Resources that inspired our best practices

[California Youth Advocacy Network](#) provides multiple, informative PDFs on recruiting young people.

[Orygen's Co-designing With Young People](#). This resource for mental health initiatives can be applied to youth digital wellbeing.

[Participatory Design of Online Youth Mental Health Promotion, Prevention, Early Intervention and Treatment: an Innovative Methodologies Guide](#) from the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre.

[The Positive Youth Development Framework](#). Positive Youth Development (PYD) is both a philosophy and a programmatic approach, across all sectors, to support healthy, productive, and engaged youth as they grow into adulthood.

[Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation](#) presents eight levels of youth participation that start from manipulation and tokenism at the lower rungs, to full participation at the top.

[Youth Centered Design Toolkit](#) from One Youth provides helpful guidelines and best practices for working with young people.

[Equity-Centered Community Design™](#), created by Creative Reaction Lab, is a unique creative problem solving process based on equity, humility-building, integrating history and healing practices, addressing power dynamics, and co-creating with the community.

[Yosso's \(2005\) Cultural Wealth framework](#), rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT), challenges deficit perspectives by highlighting the cultural knowledge, skills, and networks that marginalized communities possess, urging educators to recognize and leverage these strengths to promote social and racial justice.



Headstream, an innovation program by SecondMuse, is dedicated to radically improving adolescent mental well-being with a focus on BIPOC, Latino, and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Our initiatives drive systemic change in health, education, and social tech systems, prioritizing mental health and fostering inclusive environments where changemakers collaborate to address the needs of young people. Through these efforts, we support the development of more inclusive digital tools and catalyze systemic changes in youth mental health. Our **Youth Collective is an integral part** of this mission, bringing together a diverse group of young people to engage in co-creation and innovation.

We're here to collaborate, share insights, and answer any questions you may have about Headstream and our Youth Collective. Whether you're curious about our programs, interested in partnerships, or simply want to learn more, don't hesitate to reach out.

Headstream Youth Collective Team

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