

Creative Ways to Solicit Youth Input

A Hands-On Guide for Youth Practitioners



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Why Creative Ways?

To understand how our programs are doing, improve the quality of those programs and report to funders and other stakeholders, we collect information from a variety of sources: staff, parents, and the youth themselves.

We often ask youth for input or feedback through surveys. Other common methods to get information on how our programs are doing include observations (such as teacher observations in a classroom) or assessments (such as standardized tests).

These methods are useful, but they do have drawbacks:

Surveys

- Students are over-surveyed.
- They may mark what they think you want to hear.
- There is no chance to vary from the pre-set questions.

Observations

- The program may need a trained assessor.
- These don't provide feedback directly from youth.

Assessments and Tests

- Assessments and tests tell us good information about some things, but limited information about a wide range of other important information.
- The ability to do well on a test is not necessarily the goal of your program or the only goal.

This manual provides ideas for other, creative ways to get input from youth.

Part One outlines a process you can use to plan your evaluation questions: what do you want to know, why you want to know it, and who is going to be able to provide that data to you (youth themselves, their parents, or someone else). Next, we present some key ideas to consider when implementing your evaluation, analyzing the results and reporting them.

Part Two lists detailed instructions for several activities you can use with youth to solicit their feedback. Each activity includes a list of materials you will need, the best age groups and group size for the activity, how long it will take, and any special setting or equipment you will need.

The manual concludes with a listing of additional resources for youth-focused and -led evaluation, for additional activities similar to the ones included here, and for analyzing and reporting your results.

Planning

Before you conduct any evaluation, think about what you want to know and how you'll use it.

As you develop your **plan**, it may be a good idea to review:

- Reporting or funder requirements.
- Goals & objectives stated in grants that fund your program.
- Goals & objectives developed through strategic planning.
- Logic models describing your program.
- Informal goals & objectives held by your program staff, even if not stated elsewhere.

Most programs have at least one or two of these. Gather whatever you have for a **conversation** with your program or evaluation planning team.

Use the following questions to guide your conversation:

1. *What are the 2-3 things we really want to know more about?*
2. *Who else wants to know and how will they use the data? Will this be used to report to funders? For internal monitoring? Or as part of a process for program improvement?*
3. *What do they want to know about? Program quality? Why people come to the program or what they get out of it? What they wanted more or less of in the program? Whether they have mastered certain skills or learned certain content?*
4. *Finally, who is the right person to ask? Youth through self-report? Parents or staff reporting on youth? Or do you want to get this information through an assessment or test?*

Once you know what you want to know, plan your approach:

1. *Are verbal, visual or kinesthetic methods most appropriate for our youth?*
2. *Which activities from this guide would best get the information we want?*
3. *Who should be involved in the analysis of the data?*
4. *How will we use the results? Who should be involved in the analysis of the data? In action planning?*
5. *What are the next steps? What needs to happen this week to get started? This month?*

These planning questions are formatted on the next page as a handout you can print to use during your discussion.

Implementation and Analysis

Before you implement the activities, map out the time you will need. Pick the dates for the activity and backwards plan your implementation steps.

Take about two weeks to **develop and implement** your activity. Remember to plan for unusual circumstances that will extend the time you need, such as the vacations of key staff.

Conduct a test run before implementing. This could be with a small group of staff or another group of youth. Notice what works well. Notice what doesn't work well and make changes to improve it.

Many tools can help you with **analysis**. Use either Microsoft Excel or the spreadsheet that is part of Google Docs to enter your quantitative (numeric or close-ended questions) information and do some basic analysis.

If you are collecting qualitative information (answers to open-ended questions), create categories ahead of time to code young people's responses. This will allow you to objectively determine how often certain concepts or themes appear.

When analyzing your information, look for patterns. Who is saying what and what might be affecting their input? Do any particular responses or themes stand out above the rest? Are any expected responses noticeably absent or low? If using a pre-test and a post-test, are they noticeably different from each other?

As you interpret (analyze) your data, be wary of letting your own expectations creep in. A good rule of thumb is: if someone else looked at the original data, would they be able to draw the same conclusions as you?

Once you have determined the patterns presented in the data, **report** results quickly. Your fellow staff, and the youth themselves and their parents, will appreciate knowing what came out of the evaluation activity.

Newer versions of Excel have pre-formatted charts to report quantitative information. For qualitative information, you can use Wordle (wordle.net) to create a visual display of common words.


Finally, remember to arrange your reporting format to match your purpose and your audience.

Activities

Activities are divided into verbal (talking), visual (seeing) and kinesthetic (moving) activities.

Each activity in this manual includes information about the best age range for the activity, the best group size, the preparation and materials involved, the length of time the activity takes, and any specific setting or equipment the activity needs.

For each activity, we've also provided what kind of information the activity creates (What it's good for), a detailed description of how to conduct the activity, including suggested variations, and trainer tips and tricks you should review before facilitating the activity.



What it's good for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ To get responses to close-ended questions. ✓ To gather data over time.
Preparation and Materials	<p>Preparation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set of jars each labeled with the response they represent. • Tokens, beads or other small item.
Group Size	Many
Age Levels	This can work well for any age. For younger kids, you may need to read the question aloud, establish this as a routine part of your program, and/or have pictures to indicate the responses.
Time	This activity can take place over a period of time like weeks or months or it can take place in one session or afternoon.
Setting	Best if it's by the exit from the program space so kids participate on their way out the door.
How to conduct the activity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. At the end of each day, give participants respond to a question, or vote for an idea, by dropping their token into the jar that matches their response. <p>Note: this idea came from a grocery store that would give you a wooden token if you brought your own bags. On the way out, you could drop that token into one of three buckets, each labeled with a local charity. The grocery store would then donate \$5 to that charity for each token. The grocery store patrons were, essentially, "voting" for a donation for these charities.</p>

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Things to watch for

- This works particularly well when you only have one question going at a time.
- If the information you are gathering might be considered sensitive, such as certain demographic information, you may want to place the jars where they aren't visible from the main program space, but are still accessible. Or, you may not want to use this method at all.

NOTE: The Candy Survey is similar to the Token Survey activity. In Token Surveys, a token is tossed into one of many buckets to indicate the response and can usually work with only one key question. As written, the Token Surveys can gather information over time.






In the Candy Survey, there is one bucket, into which different colored responses are tossed, and can include a few (3-4) questions. As written, the candy survey happens and is tossed right away (so you can eat the candy).

Example

If you work at a homeless drop-in shelter and it is hard to gather reliable, anonymous demographic data, you may give everyone a token and have them place it in jars labeled "under 14 years old" "14 or 17 years old" and "18 years old and over" so you can gather simple age information keyed to a significant grant report.

Similarly, you can gather an answer to a specific "question of the week" from ~~drop-in~~ drop-in participants, such as at a recreation center.



What it's good for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ To help the group create a creative fun survey that can be eaten. ✓ To design a fairly anonymous survey.
Preparation and Materials 	<p>Preparation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop, ideally with the young people themselves, a set of questions (a protocol) as well as response categories for each question. <i>Note:</i> Limit the number of questions on candy surveys to 5-6. • Code the response categories to match the colors of the candies or candy wrappers you will be using. <i>Note:</i> Use individually wrapped candies that can be safely eaten after handling. <i>Example:</i> The red candy could represent "very true" or "learned a lot"; the green candy could represent "somewhat true" or "learned some"; the yellow candy could represent "not at all true" or "learned nothing." • Place an empty bucket or jar next to or below each posted question.
Group Size 	<p>Many</p>
Age Levels 	<p>This can work well for any age. For younger kids, you may need to read the question aloud, establish this as a routine part of your program, and/or have pictures to indicate the responses.</p>
Time 	<p>10 minutes: 5 to vote and 5 to tally</p>
Setting 	<p>This can happen anywhere you can post a question and place some buckets.</p> <p>If responding to a presentation or a facilitator, you may want to set this up outside the presentation room so the facilitator isn't present for the survey about themselves.</p>

How to conduct the activity



1. Have the group write each question in very large print on a sheet of standard 8½ by 11 paper.
2. The question can be posted outside a classroom, workshop room, or wherever the group meets. This allows the respondents to have some privacy when they are responding to the survey. This is particularly important if the survey is about the quality of the training or program or the facilitator's or program leader's approach.
3. Make bowls of individually colored candy available so that participants can easily select from the bowls.
4. Ask the participants to take the survey using their candy. They should answer each question by taking a piece of candy that matches the answer they've chosen and dropping it into the bucket. For example, if "very true" is color-coded red, and the respondent wants to choose that answer, the person should drop a red candy in that bucket.
5. Once everyone has had the chance to complete the survey, count up the different colored candies per question and record the results.

Variation: You can use different colored or shaped stickers or different kinds of whole fruit (that won't become squashed in a bucket) as your response options.

Things to watch for



- This is mostly an anonymous survey, especially if a lot of kids are doing it all at once and no one is paying attention to the others or kids can hide the color in their hand and drop it in without anyone really seeing it.
- Ask the participants to refrain from eating the candy until after they have taken the survey. Also, make sure they do not eat candy from the buckets that are holding the survey responses.

Notes: The Candy Surveys is similar to the Token Survey activity. This one has one bucket, into which different colored responses are tossed, and can include a few (5-6) questions. As written, the candy survey happens and is tallied right away (so you can eat the candy).

In the Token Surveys, a token is tossed into one of many buckets to indicate the response and can usually work with only one key question. As written, the Token Surveys can gather information over time.

Example



If you have a series of presentations to a group, you can have them rate each presentation. Using the example above where the colors indicate "learned a lot", "learned some" and "learned nothing"; you could ask how much you learned about the topic or about each of 3-4 specific, clear sub-topics covered in each presentation.


You could then ask a few additional questions to evaluate the presentation itself (red = very true, green = somewhat true, and yellow = not true at all), such as:





- Did the facilitator have fun presenting?
- Was this topic interesting to me?
- Will I use this information in my life/our project/school work (whatever context seems appropriate)?

Source

Kim Sabo Flores. (2008). *Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People* (pp. 127). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



<p>What it's good for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Getting descriptive (qualitative) information from participants. ✓ Uncovering unexpected information. ✓ Finding differences within an otherwise similar group. ✓ Exploring the range of opinions or reactions.
<p>Preparation and Materials</p> 	<p>Preparation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare in advance the focus group questions (protocol), including prompts to encourage participants to expand or clarify their answer. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with concrete and specific questions. Use the language of the participants in the program ("ambassadors" instead of "peer leaders" for example). • Then, move into more general and abstract questions as you proceed. • Use prompts or examples to encourage additional information. For example, if you are asking about their exposure to new experiences, you might list the field trips the program has been on or a few of the guest speakers that have visited the program. • Be careful to not ask leading questions. For example, "Think about some of the field trips we've taken, like that great day we went to the zoo and the baboon spit at us and you all said it was the best field trip ever, or when we went to the park." • Outline of the question "path": <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Opening question: Gets everyone talking; asking for factual information, is easy to answer. b. Introductory question: Introduces the topic and gets people thinking. c. Transition Question(s): Moves the group toward the Key Questions. d. Key Questions: 2-5 questions, the heart of the focus group, where most of the time is spent, allow for plenty of conversation on these questions. e. Ending Question(s): Allows for last thoughts and feedback on the process.

	<p>See also: "Crafting Interview Questions" starting on page 25 for more tips on how to create good questions.</p> <p>Prepare a facilitator (who asks questions) and a notetaker (who writes everything down): Make sure they are familiar with the questions and the themes you might be expecting. One of these roles may be you, or it may be two other people who you feel are better suited to the task.</p> <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pen, paper or computer and a notetaker for writing/typing responses. • Tape recorder for recording responses (serves as a back up to the notetaker).
<p>Group Size</p> 	<p>A good focus group will be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5-8 participants. • Youth who are somewhat alike. • Youth you have access to (in other words, not "people who don't come to our program"). • Youth who are unlikely to defer to others in the group (in other words, you probably don't want to mix teenage girls and boys, or 6th graders and 8th graders). <p>For example: Invite 5th graders who regularly attended your after school program this past year or teenage boys who come to the rec center but don't participate in the leadership program.</p>
<p>Age Levels</p> 	<p>You can do this with 4th/5th graders and older.</p> <p>A focus group differs from a group interview in the hope youth will build on each other's responses. So, you want youth who can listen to others in the room and build ideas from what has been said by others. Generally, this will work better if youth have had practice with group process skills or with facilitated discussions in the program already.</p>
<p>Time</p> 	<p>1 – 1 ½ hours, depending on the age and attention span</p>
<p>Setting</p> 	<p>A quiet place with seating so participants can see and hear each other</p>

How to conduct the activity



Instructions for the facilitator:

1. Gather your group into a comfortable setting with some privacy so participants feel they can speak their opinions freely.
2. Introduce yourself and the notetaker, even if everyone knows you already, and explain your roles: the facilitator will ask the questions and the notetaker will record everything that is said.
3. Explain any guidelines related to confidentiality and anonymity. Make sure you have any permission slips you need from everyone in the group.
4. Then, move into the focus group itself:
 - Ask the young people your prepared questions.
 - Encourage them to build off and expand on each other's responses. The purpose of a focus group is to generate cross-talk and new ideas among participants.
5. When you are done, thank the participants and hand out any small incentive you've planned.

Instructions for the Notetaker: Make sure the tape-recorder is working ahead of time. During the focus group, write down everything that is said to the best of your ability. Plan not to rely on the tape-recording.

Things to watch for



- Invite a few more participants than you will actually need. Not everyone you've asked will agree or show up.
- If you have the budget, try to do 3 or even 4 focus groups with the same kinds of people until you stop hearing something new.
- Watch out for opening a focus group to people who will defer to others in the group, such as 3rd graders with 5th graders, newcomers to your program and established leaders or mixed gender groups.
- About 10 questions, with prompts, is about the right number of questions.
- For the shy or young kids, be prepared with additional general, opening questions and/or activities such as drawing or a game to give them time to warm up.
- For more information, we recommend reading *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research, 4th edition*, the source for this activity. It provides a detailed, easy to follow, and yes, practical, guide to this way of soliciting input.

Example



For a program with a goal around increasing student's exposure to cultural resources in their community, the questions could start off as more concrete and specific such as: "Where did you take field trips this summer?" or "What was your favorite field trip this semester?"






They can then expand into additional questions like, "What do you remember most about it?" or "What did you like about the field trip?"

You can then encourage the participants to respond to and build off each other with questions such as: "Of the things your friends have said here today, which do you agree with and why?" or "Do any of you feel differently?"

Source

Krueger, R.A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research (4th ed)*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.



What it's good for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ To collect information from very young children, youth who speak English as a second language, or youth with developmental differences. ✓ As a post-test.
Preparation and Materials 	<p>Preparation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare the guiding question(s) for the drawing or collage in advance. Link the question(s) to your objectives, goals, logic model or evaluation questions. For this activity, use a very limited number of questions (1 is best, 2-3 might also work, depending on your group and time). • Write the question on the board in front of the room or on a large flip chart page. • (Optional) Prepare sheets of clip art images that relate to your evaluation questions if you are doing a collage. <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sheet(s) of paper for each participant • Pens, markers, crayons, paints (drawing) • Old magazines, scissors, glue (collage) • (Optional) Sheets of prepared clip art icons (collage)
Group Size 	Many
Age Levels 	This can work well for any age
Time 	30-45 minutes
Setting 	Anywhere (windy outdoors not recommended)

How to conduct the activity



1. Ask students to draw a picture (or create a collage) about a particular aspect of your program per your prepared question(s). Write the question on the board or a large flipchart paper so everyone can see it.
2. Give the group plenty of time to draw or collage their response. You may want to remind them of the question(s) periodically and/or display it on the board so they stay on task.
3. After students have had a chance to draw or collage their response, ask students to present their drawings, display them on a bulletin board or simply turn them in to you. If they are presenting them, take notes during the presentation on what their drawing/collage is and why.

Things to watch for



- You can offer both drawing and collage simultaneously.
- You may want to set up a pre-set list of things you are looking for so you can simply tally the number of pictures that show that.

Example



Ask students to draw a picture (or create a collage) of all the people they are close to at your program, including both youth and other adults. For analysis, you can count up the number of kids and youth in each picture.

Ask students to draw one of their favorite moments in the program. Analyze evidence of peer relationships, relationships with adults, skill-building and/or youth engagement.

Source

The Improve Group. (2008). "Using Pictorial Survey Methods in Program Evaluation." Presented at the American Evaluation Association Conference.

Further Resources

We recommend the following additional resources if you want to explore these ideas further:

Belinsky, M. (2009, August 1). Forty Interesting Ways to Use Your Pocket Video Camera in the Classroom [presentation]. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/mbelinsky/forty-interesting-ways-to-use-your-pocket-video-camera-in-the-classroom>.

Gray, D., Brown, S., & Macanuso, J. (2010). *Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media.

Harder + Co. (2011, November). Using Visual Data to Engage Stakeholders in a Community Assessment of a Placed-based Initiative [presentation]. Retrieved from <http://harderco.com/wp-content/uploads/Data-Visualization-AEA-2011.pdf>

Kim Sabo Flores. (2008). *Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People* (pp. 127). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Krueger, R.A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (4th ed). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

The Improve Group. (2008). "Using Pictorial Survey Methods in Program Evaluation." Presented at the American Evaluation Association Conference.

University of Wisconsin Extension. Tip sheets on evaluation, including analysis and making sense of answers to open-ended questions (i.e. qualitative data). Available: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/resources/index.html>

About Public Profit

We help public service organizations measure and manage what matters. Public Profit provides high quality evaluation services to groups that serve children and youth, including nonprofits, grant makers, and school districts.

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