



Youth engaged for **mental health**

A framework for youth participation
under the WHO Pan-European
Mental Health Coalition





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Abstract

The framework was developed to answer a strong and consistent request from WHO pan-European Coalition members that young people be actively engaged in activities undertaken by WHO which impact young people's mental health and well-being across the European Region, whether it be policy or guidance development, research or programming. Young Coalition members initiated development of the framework to ensure that the active participation of young people was carried out in a way that was consistent, meaningful and, most importantly, underpinned by what young people want and need to feel safe and empowered to engage. Successful implementation of this framework requires action and commitment from everyone involved – the WHO Regional Office for Europe, Coalition members and young people themselves.

Keywords: STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION, MENTAL HEALTH, CHILD, ADOLESCENT, HUMAN RIGHTS

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Glossary of terms



Adolescent: a person in the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19 years. It is a stage of human development encompassing rapid physical growth and sexual maturation combined with emotional, social, and cognitive development. It is an important time for laying the foundations of good health (1).

Capacity-building: provision of knowledge, skills, commitment, partnerships, structures, systems, and leadership to enable individual growth and effective actions (2).

Child: in this document, the term “child” refers to young people under the age of 18 years.

Co-creation: active engagement of diverse stakeholders in understanding and solving complex problems in order to design, implement, monitor, and evaluate relevant solutions together (2).

Empowerment: a term that refers to the power and ability of an individual to have choice and control over their life. Empowerment can refer both to an individual and to a community (3).

Lived experience: the term “lived experience” refers to people who experience or have experienced mental health issues (3). Given the wide variety of experiences people go through, this can refer to a broad range of people with differing experiences yet is distinct from the experience and expertise in mental health gained through formal education, research, or employment.

Mental health: is an integral and essential component of health and is broader than the absence of a mental health condition. Mental health is a state of well-being which allows an individual to realize their own abilities and to connect, function, cope and thrive (4).

Safe space: environment that is free of discrimination and stigmatisation, allowing individuals to share their perspectives, experiences, and feelings in an open and supportive manner (2).

Young person: while WHO usually defines young people as between 15 and 24 years of age, this document adopts a broad definition encompassing people under the age of 30 years.

Youth participation: refers to an active process where young people take part in, express views on and have decision-making power about issues that affect them (5). It can refer to a spectrum of intensity of involvement, from participation in consultation and review processes to activities which are initiated and led by young people.

Remuneration: payment and compensation provided in exchange for the work that a person has provided.

Introduction

The framework for youth participation under the WHO pan-European Mental Health Coalition (hereafter, “framework”), co-created by young members of the WHO pan-European Mental Health Coalition (hereafter, “The Coalition”), sets out a **vision and guiding principles** for how the Coalition will involve and engage young people in a way that is meaningful for those involved and has an impact on the work being produced.

The framework was developed in the context of the strong and consistent request from Coalition members that **young people be actively engaged in activities undertaken by WHO which impact young people’s mental health and well-being across the European Region** – whether it be policy or guidance development, research or programming. The idea to develop the framework was initiated by a group of young Coalition members to ensure that the active participation of young people was carried out in a way that was consistent, meaningful and, most importantly, underpinned by **what young people want and need** to feel safe and empowered to engage – and be motivated to continue to engage over time.

“ *This (framework) is needed because we need a different way of doing things. A way where young people feel welcomed to effectively contribute to the work they are co-creating. In order for things to work there needs to be a strategy with steps on how to engage young people. It also has to be inclusive.*” – Inês, young Coalition member

This work also aligns with the **WHO European Region’s Youth4Health initiative** – the special initiative of the WHO Regional Director for Europe
Dr Hans Henri P Kluge, which was launched in 2021. **Youth4Health aims to embed youth voices and perspectives into all areas of work and decisions that affect young people in the Region**, including on the implementation of the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health” (6).

Coordination of the co-creation process has been driven by the **WHO Mental Health Flagship** and the **Athens Office on Quality of Care and Patient Safety**, under the leadership of Dr Ledia Lazeri and Dr Joao Breda and through the respective programmes focused on mental health and well-being of children, adolescents, and young people.

The **pan-European Mental Health Coalition** is a network of experts, organizations and leaders dedicated to strengthening mental health systems across the WHO European Region.

Launched in 2022 to support implementation of the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health 2021-2025, the Coalition aims to harness the collective wisdom and experience of members to:

- improve access to and quality of mental health services for all;
- embed mental health within emergency preparedness and response planning; and
- strengthen Europe's ability to prevent mental health conditions and promote well-being for everyone at all ages.

The Coalition focuses on six working packages, one of which is devoted to **addressing the mental health and well-being of children, adolescents and youth**.

Driving this working package has been a strong collaboration between the WHO Mental Health Flagship and the **WHO Athens Office on Quality of Care and Patient Safety**, which hosts a dedicated Programme to strengthen Quality of Mental health Care for Children and Adolescents. Launched in 2022, the key activities under the Programme are as follows:

- foster and disseminate innovations to improve quality of care (including youth participation);
- strengthen data and knowledge synthesis; and
- provide support to countries within the WHO European Region.

Why co-creation? Co-creating this framework with the young people who initiated its development was important in a variety of ways, both in terms of the document it has produced and the model it provides for a process that others may draw from or replicate.

Co-creation is aligned with a **rights-based approach** (7) to policy and decision-making in areas that impact on children and young people, by allowing space for young people to form and express their views on matters affecting them and having those views acted upon to inform policy and practice.

In addition, we believe that that co-creating this framework with young Coalition members alongside a broader group of mental health stakeholders and WHO Europe staff contributes to a **stronger, more relevant document** by reflecting the diverse experiences, needs and preferences of those involved.

Finally, co-creation provides an opportunity to demonstrate some of the guiding principles of the framework in action, particularly through **building capacity and providing opportunities for enhancing skills and experience** of the young people involved in the development process. At the same time, these opportunities can bring a **sense of ownership** in the Coalition and build **motivation to engage** in an ongoing way.

“ (We want) to help young people around Europe feel listened to and understood by the policy makers, create a safe space where youth can share their experiences without being afraid to do so, without feeling judged, a platform where youth can connect with others, share ideas and views, and have a voice in things that matter to them.” – Cătălina, young Coalition member

Methods

This document was co-created with two youth participation experts and six young experts by experience who were also Coalition members. The methods were developed collaboratively with the participants during the initial phase of co-design work, ensuring that the process was aligned with the needs and preferences of all those involved with a clear and shared understanding of the timeframe and expected outputs.

The work was produced over three months using a combination of online workshops and offline work, with a final hybrid workshop held in Copenhagen. A variety of online collaborative platforms and tools were used to facilitate the participation of all involved. Additionally, a consultation with a broader group of Coalition members was held to gather inputs from those with experience developing and implementing youth participation initiatives across government, academic, clinical, and community-based settings.

The work considered six key co-designed phases: 1. Scope, rationale, vision, and objectives; 2. Overarching principles; 3. Considerations for involvement; 4. Sustained involvement, incentive, and remuneration; 5. Monitoring, evaluation, and feedback; 6. Communication and consultation.

“ Putting young people at the centre of designing a method of working with young people is key to developing an approach that works. Often young people feel unheard and tokenistic, this is a way to reduce that feeling and give them power to make decisions that affect their peers for their benefit with them in mind.” – Anna, young Coalition member

The co-creation process was informed by the **Lundy model of child participation (7)**, a model underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It contains four elements to guide meaningful participation:

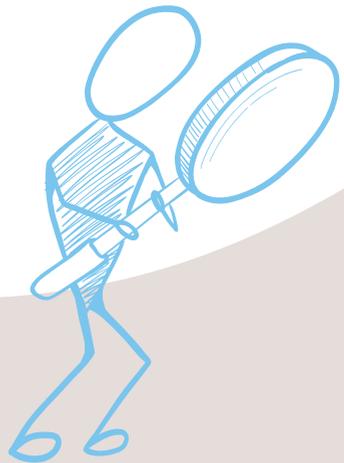


SPACE – Children and young people must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.

VOICE – Children and young people must be facilitated to express their views.

AUDIENCE – The views must be listened to.

INFLUENCE – The views must be acted upon, as appropriate.



Vision statement

Our vision statement captures our long-term goal for what we hope to achieve by engaging meaningfully with young people in delivering the work of the Coalition. It answers the question of **how we would like things to be different if we're successful in our efforts** and reflects why we believe meaningful youth participation is an integral component of improving mental health outcomes for young people.



Our vision is for **active, meaningful engagement** of a **broad and diverse range of young people** in all activities;

Where the process of co-creation leads to **better informed and more impactful responses** to youth mental health that consider the **reality and experience** of young people;

To improve the **environments and systems** young people navigate, and ultimately **improve young people's mental health and wellbeing** across the European Region.

Guiding principles

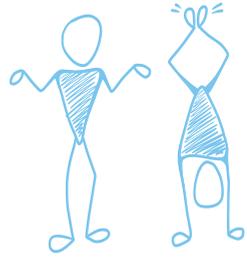
The work that we deliver under the pan-European Mental Health Coalition to improve mental health and well-being for young people is **diverse and dynamic**, reflecting the priorities of our Coalition members, our WHO Europe Member States and other stakeholders. As such, our framework for youth participation needs to be **flexible** and **relevant** to the range of activities that young people might be involved in across different modalities and across levels of participation- from consultation to leadership. These could be knowledge sharing activities, advocacy opportunities, communication campaigns or the development of guidelines or resources. They might require small amounts of time or extended commitment and might be in-person or online.

To be relevant to this context we have developed **five guiding principles** which will underpin our activities and help us to make decisions about how we work with young people in order to achieve our vision.



Diverse, inclusive and accessible

We will work in ways which enable the diversity of needs, experiences, and preferences of young people across Europe to inform the work of the Coalition, acknowledging that significant and inequitable barriers to engagement exist for many young individuals and particular groups.



We will do this by:

- providing flexible ways for young people to be involved, accounting for differences in skillsets, abilities, resources, and interests;
- facilitating multiple forms of participation at different levels of intensity – including for example verbal, written, art, music, virtual, in-person or anonymous methods;
- providing easy to read, and accessible documents free of jargon and overly technical language;
- providing fair and transparent remuneration for young people’s time and expenses for travel, accommodation, and food costs;
- implementing less formal, inclusive dress codes for in-person activities to reduce access barriers; and
- actively seeking the input of young people from diverse backgrounds, from hard-to-reach groups and from groups of young people that are under-represented in the membership of the Coalition.
 - » This may be through direct engagement of individual young people in Coalition activities, through engagement with organisations working with or representing particular populations of young people, or by drawing on existing research or data capturing the needs and preferences of under-represented groups of young people.

“ *Participation needs to consider diversity in terms of formats (online, in person, anonymously), commitment and availability (regular and continuously, one-time feedback), area of expertise, background, and language (translation, sign language).” – Ana, young Coalition member*

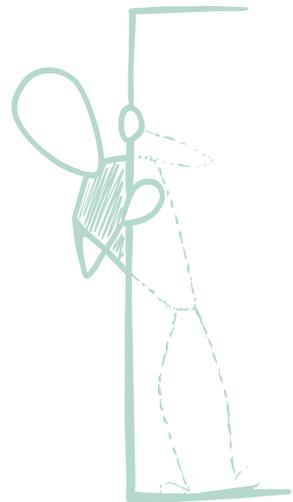
Transparent

Work with young people will be open, honest, and realistic, providing clear information regarding purpose, expectations, and outcomes of their involvement so they can make informed decisions about their participation and potential support needs.

We will do this by:

- providing clarity through written and verbal communication – using accessible language – of roles, deliverables, and responsibilities and expectations related to any activities being undertaken;
- providing clarity regarding the scope and purpose of activities, ways that information/inputs will be used, and the ways that contributors will be acknowledged;
- providing opportunities (appropriate to the context) for feedback both during and after activities, and providing updates to those involved in activities on the work progress;
- recognizing the contributions of those involved in participation activities; and
- creating transparent, fair processes for communicating opportunities for youth participation both internal and external to WHO.

“ *A feeling of impact is primarily felt through knowing your work is acknowledged, transformed, built upon, or addressed with feedback or approval.* ” – Dion, young Coalition member



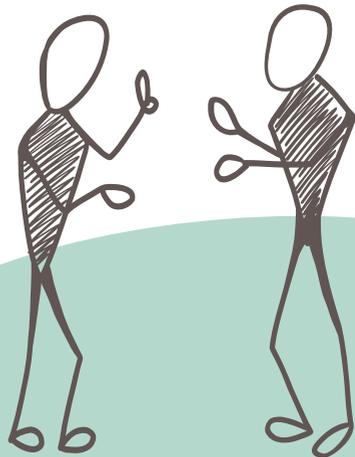
Engaging

Participation will be responsive to individuals' strengths, needs and interests in order to build and sustain young people's motivation to participate. Activities will provide young people with a positive experience and encourage ongoing involvement.

We will do this by:

- leveraging social media and other communication platforms to maintain regular and dynamic communications with young people;
- using interactive formats and approaches for meetings, workshops, or other group activities, including art-based and creative approaches for participation;
- providing documents, resources, and materials in easy-to-read formats which avoid jargon; and
- being flexible, regularly reviewing progress and adapting to the needs of young people as required.

“ *Active engagement requires motivation. Motivation will come with authenticity and vulnerability, allowing for creativity and free expression of views and experiences.*” – Cătălina and Dion, young Coalition members



Safe and supportive

We will create spaces for young people that prioritize the safety and well-being of all participants to encourage authentic participation, where young people feel supported and confident to share their experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities. This will be especially important in participation activities where young people are drawing on and sharing their lived experience of mental health difficulties.

We will do this by:

- seeking guidance from young people regarding what they need to feel safe and supported to participate in activities they're involved in;
- providing advance notice regarding potentially triggering content or discussion topics;
- providing age- and developmentally appropriate facilitation for meetings or workshops in which young people are involved;
- providing opportunities (appropriate to the context) for briefing and debriefing before, during and after activities involving young people;
- providing mechanisms for anonymous feedback;
- ensuring that facilitators and others engaged to support young participation activities – particularly where children and/or young people with lived experience of mental health conditions are involved – are suitably qualified, competent and in sufficient numbers to manage the support needs of those young people;
- creating equitable and inclusive spaces for young people to seek comfort or take a break during in-person activities; and
- providing clear guidance that young people can decide to withdraw from or take a break from activities at any time.

Safeguarding guidelines for youth participants at WHO events



What young people can expect from the WHO Regional Office for Europe

WHO Regional Office for Europe will work to prevent harassment, including sexual harassment, at WHO events, to make sure that spaces where young people are engaged are inclusive, respectful and safe for all, including those with vulnerabilities related to their age, gender, ethnicity, background, sexuality or religion.

A safe person should be assigned for WHO events to act as an additional referral mechanism for youth participants. Safe persons should be easy to identify, trained in youth safeguarding, briefed on how to help and guide participants on how they can report and submit complaints, and listen to youth participants' complaints and assist them in referring these to the appropriate team at the event.

What WHO Regional Office for Europe expects from young people

WHO events are guided by the highest ethical and professional standards, and all participants are expected to behave with integrity and respect towards all participants attending or involved with such events. WHO Regional Office for Europe similarly expects young people to behave with integrity and respect towards all participants attending or involved in WHO events. Young people also must abide by WHO policies to **prevent harassment, including sexual harassment**.

Empowering

Our work with young people will aim to be “win-win”, empowering and building capacity in young people to participate in ways which feel meaningful and influential, enhancing existing skills and knowledge, and inspiring sustained engagement over time.

We will do this by:

- facilitating connections with and opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing between young people and the broader Coalition membership, including consideration of networks around specific areas of interest;
- creating paid and voluntary opportunities for young people to take roles in Coalition and other events which build a diverse set of skills (e.g., leadership skills), confidence and experience;
- creating opportunities for young people to directly advocate to policy makers and leaders in areas of importance for them; and
- advocating for children and young people’s mental health and well-being as a core policy priority.

“ *Learning and the feeling of evolving throughout the participation can be powerful drivers to maintain interest and motivation.*” – young Coalition member

“ *Good youth participation encourages the growth of young people, as opposed to keeping them stagnant for systemic reasons, and not for reasons relating to their own motivation, competencies or preparedness.*” – Dion, Coalition member



Actions for implementation

Successful implementation of this framework requires action and commitment from everyone involved, including WHO Regional Office for Europe, Coalition members and young people themselves. Actions need to occur not only at the **individual level** but also at the **organization** and **systems levels** and require a system for monitoring and feedback to inform improvement activities (Table 1).

“ *The world is constantly changing, and we need (the framework) to change with it. It would be an inefficient use of resources to create a rigid or non-adaptive youth participation strategy which becomes outdated within years to come.* ” –
Dion, young Coalition member

We acknowledge that **actioning meaningful youth participation requires work**, and we may not always get it right. However, we are committed to working together as a Coalition to **break down barriers, learn from our experiences** and build a **strong and sustainable model of youth participation** that can motivate others. We expect that this framework will serve as a living document that can be expanded and updated over time, in a continued process of co-creation.



Table 1. Stakeholders roles in implementing the youth participation framework

What role can young people play?

- Actively contribute to the creation of participation spaces, processes, and outputs.
- Help to expand Coalition membership by communicating about the Coalition in their networks and online spaces.
- Provide peer support to other young Coalition members.
- Share their experiences and ideas for services and policies in mental health.
- Share feedback and inputs from their own communities and spaces where appropriate.
- Give feedback on how youth participation activities are experienced and how they could be improved.
- Co-develop resources/research resources ideas.
- Challenge professionals.

What role can Coalition members play?

- Listen to what young people have to say.
- Be respectful of young people and the experience they bring.
- Be curious – ask young people what they think.
- Include and invite young people into discussions, try to engage those who are quiet by asking if they want to share their opinion.
- Advocate for youth engagement and participation in their own organisations and networks.

What role can WHO play?

- Be accountable for implementing and updating the framework as required.
- Create mechanisms for monitoring implementation, gathering feedback on youth participation processes and activities, and evaluating outcomes.
- Advocate internally for greater investment in meaningful youth participation across all programme areas.
- Assess and take steps to reduce any potential harms for those who participate.
- Identify and address the organisational barriers that exist to implementing youth participation activities.

Get in touch

For more information on the WHO pan-European Mental Health Coalition, the Athens Office on Quality of Care and Patient Safety and how to become involved in youth participation and mental health activities at the WHO Regional Office for Europe, please visit our **website** (8) or write to **EUROMHCoalition@who.int**.

The Youth4Health network is a platform that facilitates youth focused partnership through ensuring meaningful youth participation and engagement in all areas of work across the WHO European Region. For more information about the Youth4Health network, please visit the section for the initiative on the WHO Regional Office for Europe website (9) or write to **euroyouth@who.int**.



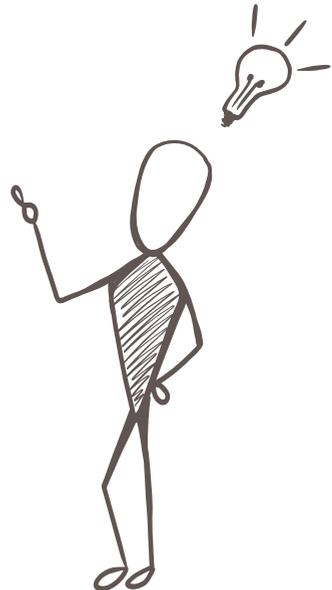
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