



Youth Engagement Initiative

Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

Process Outline

The Youth Engagement Initiative trains and coordinates sites throughout California to work with low-resource middle and high school youth (ages 12-18) to conduct youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) projects. These projects provide youth with the opportunity to engage their leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, service learning, and strategizing skills. The youth engage with nutrition and/or physical activity issues that affect their communities which ultimately results in tangible community change.

The Youth Engagement Initiative utilizes a YPAR framework. Participatory Action Research (or PAR) is an inquiry process that includes critical thinking, information gathering, analysis and logical problem solving while building networks and strengthening authentic voice to address an issue.

We use a flexible curriculum originally developed by Youth in Focus. The curriculum is continually updated with emerging best practices from a variety of organizations who engage youth in projects around social change. The curriculum activities are interactive and experiential focus on garnering young people's best thoughts and ideas throughout the entire research process.

Here is a brief summary of the steps included in this process:

Stepping Stone 1 is all about project preparation. Adult facilitators will spend this stepping stone hiring and orienting staff to work directly with youth; developing a structured process - goals, timeline, framework and communication; and beginning the process of recruiting a youth team. This Stepping Stone should not be overlooked or under-emphasized. Full preparation is critical to project success.

In **Stepping Stone 2**, staff will begin to meet the youth team; introduce the project and structure, and gain buy-in from the youth participants. A crucial aspect of this time is that youth and adults collectively are beginning to build a safe space as a group- developing agreements, getting to know each other, and getting excited for their journey ahead. Teambuilding, teambuilding, teambuilding! In order to lead together, teams need to know, understand and trust each other. Use activities to bring people deeper into themselves and with each other, to have fun, to energize and to connect.

Stepping Stone 3 is usually the longest phase in the process. Youth are identifying an issue to research, learning about the issue, selecting and developing research tools, and defining their sample. Take time to understand the issue area, design, review and edit research instruments, and define samples.

Stepping Stone 4 includes many interactive activities that build youth researchers' abilities in note-taking, listening, asking questions, and facilitation. This Stepping Stone is a breather after the arduous work of research design equipped with fun, but critical activities to empower youth perspective in their work.

In **Stepping Stone 5**, teams implement everything they have learned and completed so far. Teams will conduct their research activities to collect and document data. This Stepping Stone starts with developing a strategy to effectively collect data and ends with full data collection. The focus of the project is now external as youth approach their community to collect data. This Stepping Stone takes a lot of self-discipline and accountability by youth team members. Teams should meet to check-in on how data collection is going.

In **Stepping Stone 6**, youth are faced with piles of their newly collected data. Their task is to develop findings and recommendations from all of the information. Youth are not only responsible for their own voices, but now also the voices of all their research participants. Through in-depth analysis, youth attempt to tell the stories found in their data. This Stepping Stone often allows youth to finally feel full ownership over their work.

Stepping Stone 7 focuses on putting it all together. Youth researchers take all their information, analysis and next steps and compile them into a cohesive report. Youth design their report from cover to conclusion, writing their language and using graphics they created or choose. Following up on their report, researchers prepare public presentations to distribute their work and discuss findings with key stakeholders and decision-makers. Practice public speaking skills, presenting data, and answering questions.

Stepping Stone 8 prepares youth to step into the action phase of their project, from organizing their schools and communities to developing multimedia projects. By prioritizing their findings and recommendations the team creates a strategic plan of action to implement change in their communities. This step prepares youth to take their strengthened critical thinking, leadership, research, and planning skills and participate on an ongoing basis in their organization's or community's leadership.

Each of the stepping stones outlined above includes detailed activity instructions, examples, and supplementary resources. In addition the Children and Youth Team is available during every step of the process for technical assistance and guidance along the way.