



Meaningful youth engagement for online child safety

Learning brief | August 2025

The case for meaningful youth engagement

This learning brief is a primer designed for anyone looking to strengthen meaningful youth engagement (MYE) in their work—whether by leading it directly, supporting it through research or partnerships, or funding it as part of broader digital safety efforts. It aims to help teams in the industry understand what good MYE looks like, and how to recognise meaningful practice even when they're not the ones doing the engagement themselves.

Why meaningful youth engagement?

Young people know what it feels like to grow up online. They understand the risks, the gaps, the workarounds, and what safety actually looks like in practice. Their perspectives offer a direct window into how digital platforms are used, adapted, and experienced on the ground. Engaging them meaningfully in research and design leads to sharper insights, better tools, and outcomes that reflect the realities of their digital lives.

For tech companies, MYE is not a box to check—it's a way to build safer, more effective, and more responsive platforms. Here's why it matters:

Keeps pace with a fast-changing digital landscape

Young people are often the first to spot emerging risks or shifting behaviours. Engagement offers early insight into what's happening on the ground, helping companies stay ahead of harms and respond more effectively.

Improves uptake, usability, and trust

Co-creating with youth makes it more likely that safety tools or features will be understood, accepted, and used sustainably. It also builds trust by showing that companies are listening and that the tools reflect what young people actually need.

Closes the gap between design and real-world experience

What platforms are intended to do doesn't always align with how they're experienced. Youth input helps identify where systems fall short, illuminating misuse of features and/or workarounds.

Strengthens ethical design and reduces risk

Bringing youth perspectives into design helps platforms align with child rights principles and emerging regulation. It reduces the risk of overlooking harmful design choices and supports safer, more inclusive platforms from the outset.



A note on the complementary roles of industry, academia, and civil society

While this brief is intended for the tech industry, it's important to recognise that not all forms of MYE are appropriate or feasible for companies to lead directly. Independent researchers, civil society organisations, and youth-led groups often have the trust, experience, and ethical frameworks needed to engage youth in ways that industry actors may face barriers to do. The tech industry plays a critical complementary role—by **funding and supporting this work, building partnerships, and applying youth insights responsibly into product, policy, or design decisions**. Understanding what good MYE looks like remains essential for industry to engage responsibly, recognise quality practice, and ensure that youth-informed inputs are used effectively.

Frameworks and principles of youth engagement

There are many ways to think about youth engagement, but in this brief we focus on [Treseder's Degrees of Participation](#)—a flexible, non-hierarchical framework that reflects the different forms youth engagement can take in real-world projects. The framework outlines five types of involvement, and emphasizes that what matters most is whether the approach is intentional and appropriate to the context. A summary is included below.

1. **Assigned but informed** – Adults decide the project and youth participate with a clear understanding of the purpose and their role.
2. **Consulted and informed** – Young people are asked for their views, and their input is taken seriously, with feedback on how it's used.
3. **Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people** – Adults start the project, but decision-making is shared with young people throughout.
4. **Youth-initiated and directed** – Young people lead the initiative, setting the agenda and making decisions independently.
5. **Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults** – Youth take the lead but collaborate with adults as equal partners in decision-making.

While this model outlines different forms youth engagement can take, it's also important to understand what makes that engagement meaningful in the first place. The [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#) identifies nine core requirements that define meaningful participation (see below). These principles apply across all forms of engagement and provide a shared standard for what good participation looks like, regardless of the structure or format.

Meaningful Youth Engagement Green Flags

A list of nine basic requirements for meaningful youth engagement:

1. **Transparent and informative** – Youth must be given clear, age-appropriate information about the purpose, scope, and potential impact of their participation.
2. **Voluntary** – Participation should always be a choice; youth must feel free to join or leave at any time without pressure.
3. **Respectful** – Young people's views should be genuinely valued, with space for them to contribute ideas and draw from their own experiences.
4. **Relevant** – Engagement should focus on issues that matter to youth and allow them to highlight what they see as important.
5. **Youth-friendly** – Processes should be adapted to young people's needs and capacities, offering time, support, and confidence-building.
6. **Inclusive** – All young people should have equal opportunities to participate, with extra attention to reaching marginalized groups.
7. **Supported by training** – Adults facilitating engagement need proper training, and youth should be supported to build skills and confidence in participation.
8. **Safe and sensitive to risk** – Participation must be designed to protect youth from harm, with clear safeguarding measures in place.
9. **Accountable** – Youth should be informed about how their input was used and have opportunities to give feedback or challenge interpretations.

Now that we've outlined the key frameworks and principles behind MYE, the next step is to see how these ideas are brought to life. This learning brief draws on the innovative online child safety research conducted by six of the **Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund** projects seen below. These projects bring key principles and models of youth participation into practice in diverse and grounded ways. While the insights come from research settings, many of the lessons are applicable across other functions, including design, policy, partnerships, and program implementation.



ChildSafeNet's research used a mixed-method approach, including **a cross-sectional online survey of 900 parents of children** aged 6-17, alongside **10 FGDs with parents and 6 FGDs with children aged 13-17**, inclusive of queer children, children with disabilities, child club members and students from community schools. Additionally, **10 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in child protection**. The study used participatory visual methods, such as mapping exercises, to actively engage parents and children.



This study on online sexual exploitation and abuse of children and young adults with intellectual disabilities **in Kenya collected qualitative data from 88 children (aged 14-22 with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities), 48 parents or caregivers, 10 experts**, and various government and community stakeholders. Conducted in schools and community settings in Nairobi and Kiambu counties, the research focused on urban and peri-urban areas with higher connectivity.



This study, conducted in collaboration with Tigo Colombia and Aulas en Paz, used a stratified, two-stage cluster sampling method to collect data from a representative sample of **5,718 students, 990 parents and caregivers, and 616 teachers across six regions in Colombia**. Data was gathered using an adapted version of the **Global Kids Online questionnaire** to assess children's online experiences and the role of adults in mitigating risks and enhancing opportunities.



Save the Children®

Cross-cultural, qualitative, child-centered data to inform grooming prevention and response was gathered from **604 children aged 8-18 across seven countries (Australia, Cambodia, Colombia, Finland, Kenya, Philippines, and South Africa)** in both urban and rural settings, representing high-, middle-, and low-income contexts. The research was conducted in partnership with Western Sydney University.



A cross-regional study on peer-to-peer sexual violence online, social norms, and youth-led prevention recommendations involved **147 young people aged 13-18 from Albania, Canada, and Kenya.**



The DRAGON project, Developing Resistance Against Grooming Online: Stories Strengthened Safeguards by Swansea University, examines **interactional dynamics and child communicative behaviors during online grooming.** Its innovative approach combines linguistic analysis of grooming chat logs with insights from children, lived experience experts and child safeguarding practitioners.

The Research Fund remains committed to supporting meaningful youth engagement in research. One example is the Fund's continued partnership with **Western Sydney University**, whose upcoming project on generative AI will place youth engagement at the centre of its design and implementation.

Turning principles into practice: Meaningful youth engagement in action

Engagement modalities

The continuum below (first proposed by [Davies in 2009](#)) illustrates the range of modalities that engagement can take: from less structured, occasional input on the left to more formal and ongoing participation structures on the right. While modalities that fall toward the right are often seen as more meaningful, the most appropriate modality will always depend on context, purpose, time, and available resources. Each modality has its value, and it's important to consider a mix of approaches depending on the goals of the project and the needs of the young people involved.



Meaningful youth engagement across the research process

Drawing on the research projects funded by the Research Fund, we can break down how youth engagement is conducted and the roles that young people play across different stages of the research process. A key insight is that youth engagement adds value throughout—not just at the point of data collection or dissemination—and should ideally be built in from the start rather than added as an afterthought. This section illustrates how that plays out in practice, using examples from our grantee projects.

1 Design of research questions and objectives

Why it matters:

Engaging young people at the outset helps define the problem in ways that reflect their lived experiences.

Role of young people:

Contribute to scoping the problem, issue prioritization, and shaping the research questions, offering insights into how problems manifest specifically in their communities or age groups.

How:

Youth consultations, co-creation workshops

Example:

In Royal Roads' study, young people challenged the researchers' core assumptions about the violence youth face online and broadened the focus to include a wider range of experiences, which led the team to focus the study on peer-to-peer violence.

Industry corollary:

Involve youth early in user research planning to ensure research questions reflect their real-world experiences and priorities. Use youth consultations to challenge assumptions about behaviours, risks, or feature relevance before commissioning research.

2 Design of research methodology and instruments

Why it matters:

Youth input ensures that data collection instruments are age-appropriate, context-sensitive, and accessible.

Role of young people:

Co-design, testing and refinement of instruments such as interview guides or discussion formats; adaptation based on cultural and cognitive accessibility.

How:

Youth consultations, co-creation workshops, pilot testing

Example:

In ZanaAfrica's research, young people advised changing methodology from individual interviews to group discussions for mutual support. They also encouraged using non-verbal tools like art and paper-based expressions.

Industry corollary:

Co-design user testing protocols with young people to ensure language, instructions, and scenarios are age-appropriate and relevant. Adapt feedback tools (e.g., surveys, in-app prompts) to account for literacy levels, device types, and cultural contexts.

3 Data collection

Why it matters:

Young people may feel more comfortable sharing their views when they see relatable peers involved in the process.

Role of young people:

Support outreach, help with participant recruitment, or act as co-facilitators, particularly in peer-based or peer-led data collection.

How:

Partnering with youth networks for outreach, involving trained youth facilitators during data collection

Example:

ChildSafeNet formed a Youth Advisory Committee, who helped the team connect with more youth participants.

Industry corollary:

Involve youth as peer moderators or facilitators to gather candid feedback on product features, reporting tools, or community guidelines to improve comfort and authenticity of responses. Partner with youth networks for targeted outreach in trust and safety consultations.

4 Data analysis

Why it matters:

Youth can help interpret data through their own lens, identify overlooked themes, and validate conclusions.

Role of young people:

Contribute to identifying themes and interpretation, provide feedback and validation to ensure findings reflect their realities.

How:

Analysis workshops, validation workshops with youth to validate findings

Example:

Save the Children and Western Sydney University made sure to communicate findings back to children in a child-friendly format through hands-on workshops, to ensure validation.

Industry corollary:

Host youth validation sessions to check whether analysis and insights reflect their realities before acting on changes. Use youth review panels to sense-check conclusions from data collection efforts, policy changes, or product impact studies.

5 Dissemination and application

Why it matters:

Sharing findings with and through youth strengthens relevance, legitimacy, and impact, especially for advocacy and solution-building.

Role of young people:

Co-create recommendations and solutions, present findings to key stakeholders, participate in advocacy, and support implementation.

How:

Co-creation workshops, partnerships with youth networks, youth-led panels and forums

Example:

At Swansea University, children tested prototypes of solutions and offered feedback that led to multiple revisions. Their input shifted assumptions and helped make resources more practical and usable in real-world contexts.

Industry corollary:

Co-create safety guidelines, community standards explanations, and educational resources with young people so they are relevant, clear, and accessible. Run feature brainstorming and design sprints with youth to develop or refine tools that promote online safety and well-being. Involve youth in post-launch review sessions to assess whether new policies or features are working as intended and identify areas for improvement.

Enablers of meaningful youth engagement: What to keep front of mind

This section outlines key considerations identified by grantees as essential to enabling MYE. While often overlooked, addressed informally or considered on an ad hoc basis, they are consistently what made engagement efforts work in practice.

Trust and relationships

Strong, trusted relationships—with young people, their communities, and those who already work with them—are foundational to MYE. This was a consistent finding across projects. Royal Roads, for example, faced significant challenges engaging youth in Canada due to cold outreach and the absence of prior relationships, while youth in Kenya and Albania engaged more openly due to existing partnerships. Los Andes built trust over time with schools by showing reliability and responsiveness. Save the Children, Western Sydney University and Swansea University relied on local youth-focused organisations and facilitators who already had deep, ongoing relationships with the young people involved. They also emphasized the value of giving autonomy to local partners to make decisions on behalf of the project.

→ **If companies do not already have trusted relationships with young people or youth communities, the single most important step is to partner with organizations that do.** Prioritise working with partners who bring not just access, but deep understanding, contextual knowledge, and safeguarding experience.

Diversity and representation

Most projects were intentional in reaching young people across different genders, age groups, geographies, abilities, and social backgrounds. Teams conducted strategic outreach to ensure a mix of perspectives (especially from underrepresented groups) and were transparent about the limits of their sample and scope. In addition to these common factors, other dimensions of diversity may also be valuable to consider, especially in digital safety contexts. For instance, ZanaAfrica included considerations of parental dynamics in their sampling strategy. Other dimensions may include:

- **Digital access** (e.g., whether participants have consistent internet connectivity)
- **Device type and ownership** (e.g., whether they use a phone or laptop; whether they own or share a device)
- **Access environments** (e.g., whether young people access content at school, home, internet cafés, or public spaces)
- **Family structure and caregiving responsibilities** (e.g., living with one or both parents)

Planning and adaptability

Even with a clear plan, MYE requires a high degree of flexibility. Grantees repeatedly emphasised that things rarely go exactly as expected, especially when working with diverse youth groups across varied contexts.

A key part of this adaptability is having multiple engagement modalities ready. At Swansea, the team developed multiple versions of facilitation briefs (e.g., Option A, B, C) and adapted their methods depending on how young people responded in real time. ZanaAfrica used a wide range of expression tools—cue cards, drawing, writing, group discussion. Save the Children and Western Sydney University adjusted workshop formats to reflect participants' literacy levels, cultural norms, physical ability, and language needs.

→ **With young people, you often won't know what will resonate until you're in the room. Having a flexible toolkit, and being equally comfortable using any part of it, is essential.**

Closing the loop

Many grantees reflected on the need to improve follow-through after youth participation. While validation workshops were common, long project cycles often meant that young people had moved on before outcomes were shared. Save the Children and Western Sydney University raised the challenge of tracking whether and how children actually benefited, and how to analyse feedback in real time.

Several projects noted the lack of visible mechanisms to show how youth input made a difference. Ideas for possible solutions included simple, visual repositories that track changes resulting from youth feedback. Others highlighted the importance of offering opportunities for ongoing engagement for youth who are interested, in addition to one-time consultations (think back to the [modalities continuum](#)).

ZanaAfrica pointed to research fatigue: “We collect data—then what?” They emphasised that unless youth recommendations are taken forward by stakeholders, participation can feel extractive.

→ **This is a key opportunity for the tech sector, where youth input can directly inform design, policy, or safety features, allowing for quicker, more visible forms of accountability.**

Current practices in the industry: Learning from TikTok, Meta, Roblox and Snap’s Youth Councils

These Youth Councils typically bring together 15-20 teens aged 14-18 for structured engagement periods (5-18 months), featuring monthly meetings, direct leadership access, and collaborative project work. Companies partner with specialized organizations—such as TikTok’s collaboration with Praesidio Safeguarding or Meta’s partnership with ThinkYoung—to ensure professional facilitation and meaningful youth participation. Youth contribute through reviewing safety tools and upcoming features, providing policy input, testing new products, informing research initiatives, and creating peer education content.



TikTok’s Global Youth Council provides both focused consultations on existing products (Family Pairing, screen time features, Teen Safety Center) and broader perspectives on online safety trends. This balance of specific and broad feedback enables TikTok to address immediate platform concerns while anticipating future youth safety needs.



Meta runs **Our Feed Our Future**, a youth advisory network on how digital regulations should be in Europe. In addition, Meta embeds youth voices within their broader **Safety Advisory Council** structure. This approach ensures teen perspectives inform decisions across all Meta platforms and prevents youth engagement from being siloed within the company.



Snapchat integrates young people directly into research initiatives, particularly their annual **Digital Well-Being Index** covering teens’ cross-platform experiences in six countries. Teen council members contribute to wellbeing metrics that inform not just Snapchat’s features but industry-wide understanding of teen experiences. Snap also runs a **Teen Council for Digital Well-Being**, a pilot program in the U.S. designed to hear from teens on the state of life online today.



Roblox works on empowering young people to create safety content for their peers, emphasizing digital well-being education through **youth-led content creation**. Youth collaborate directly with internal Roblox teams on platform features, policies, and resources, leveraging this “by youth, for youth” approach where teens communicate safety and digital citizenship concepts in ways their peers understand.

Examples are not exhaustive - other industry members may have similar initiatives.

Sources

This learning brief is based on evidence and interviews from six research projects funded by the **Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund**. More information on each grantee's research is available below.



Publications:

Full report linked [here](#)

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Publications:

Full report linked [here](#)
Executive summary linked [here](#)

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Full report linked [here](#)

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Publications:

DRAGON- Shield Report [here](#)

Children's Online Communication report [here](#)

Lorenzo-dus, N., Evans, C. and Mullineux-Morgan, R. (September 2023). Online Child Sexual Grooming Discourse. Cambridge Elements (Forensic Linguistics). Cambridge University Press.

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The Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund is investing in knowledge and research to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). The Tech Coalition and Safe Online joined hands in 2020 to collectively work to support knowledge and research towards ending digital harms against children. The Fund is continuing its focus on innovative research that produces actionable insights to impact product and policy development, with a priority given to research that can help inform the technology industry's approach to combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse.