

Ten Top Tips for researchers working with young people

This document was developed by the NIHR ARC-GM Young Person's Advisory Group (YPAG), a group of individuals aged 16–24 established in 2022. Using their lived experience of involvement in research, they have provided guidance on effective way to engage and support young people in research.

1. Prepare and Support

To helpfully support young people getting involved in research, preparing us should be the project and PPIE leaders' priority. Provide us with support and advice so we can get fully involved and fully understand what we will be working on. Some examples of this are; offer a catch-up meeting before busier meeting so we feel comfortable communicating our opinions, ensure there will be a someone we recognize in meetings; maybe another young person or member of staff we know well, keep in touch throughout long breaks in a project even if nothing new has come up, and send recap emails to explain and remind us of the details before and after meetings. Offer one-to-one support meetings for young people if they want further explanations or understanding.

2. Let us learn

Involve us in as many parts of the research as possible, from as early as possible and throughout the process. As young people we want to learn and gain skills, such as how to lead and manage projects, develop teamwork, communication and public speaking skills. Being involved in research is a great opportunity for us to gain insight and skills, whilst you are learning from us, we want to learn from you too. Ask us what we want to get from this, let's make it mutually beneficial!

3. Break the ice

For a new young person joining a discussion group or getting involved in research it can be daunting when you don't know anyone or anything about research, therefore it's important to make them feel welcomed and comfortable. To initially break the ice within a new(ish) young person group, have a fun, in-person meeting, with a vague theme of research so people are introduced to the topic and each other in a casual space to build a comfortable environment that promotes discussion. Another way to make sure a new young person feels comfortable is to introduce a buddy system, this involves a one-to-one so that the

new young person has someone that can support them, they can join meetings with and is a point of call if they have any questions. A meeting with the leader of the group is also encouraged to introduce how everything works; payment systems/frequency of meetings/introduce the buddy/purpose and aim of the group/how to get involved with different projects/any questions. The first ten minutes of the first meeting can make or break the young person's involvement with the project and affect the contributions you may get out of them. Even beginning a meeting with on off topic and casual conversation whilst people join and get settled can affect the flow the rest of the meeting.

4. Attract our attention

Present any information in an appropriate, interesting and accessible manner with text formatted as comprehensibly as possible and with pictures, images and colours to present information in an engaging and interactive way. Visual aids and videos can provide context and understanding more directly than a block of text can and are more likely to keep young people engaged and interested. Communication methods in meetings should be catered towards the group attending; use a coloured background and visually friendly font when a meeting is centred around dyslexia or visual processing disorders, have all information and questions written and visible when you are communicating with people that are hard of hearing. Communication can be the difference between a meeting being a fail or a success, and not all young people will process information given in meetings the same way, so make sure there are multiple styles; a speaker presenting with slides on a screen is often effective when it's done right. Some people understand more effectively if they have slides or documents ahead of the session, so make sure this can be organised prior to meetings.

5. Respect any contribution

Every contribution in a discussion group is important, however some people may not realize that, therefore, it is important to emphasize to young people that no question or contribution is silly. Young people may be extremely nervous sharing our experience and thoughts on a topic so it's key to listen, understand and show respect to what we have shared as this will encourage more contributions and discussion. Things such as being dismissive or saying an opinion is wrong can put people off from sharing again. Another way to encourage more discussion and opinions is by giving the young people feedback and updates on what has happened with the research after our involvement to show us what a difference we are making.

6. Avoid making assumptions

Young people are capable of such a wide variety of tasks, and a group will contain people with a huge range of individual experiences. Try to avoid making any assumptions about what we're interested in or what we're capable of, there is no harm in asking us questions about what we can achieve within a project or piece of research! Explain in detail the process of conducting the specific research or project, the method and the possible results, break down the acronyms for us and if jargon can't be avoided, explain it to us. If young people are involved in research, it's because it interests us and we want it to succeed, we will help in any way we can.

7. Reimburse our time

Our involvement in research should benefit us. Being paid for our work is important and young people's time should be budgeted in as part of the research plan as per the NIHR involve payment guild, however gaining work experience and opportunities can be super helpful to young people too. Learning new transferable skills, having references for a CV or proof of work to put on a LinkedIn page is just as necessary for young people as having our Wi-Fi, travel expenses, and food being paid for. Be as open as possible when discussing payments with us; knowing how and when we will get reimbursed can go a long way in maintaining trust between researchers and young people.

8. Acknowledge individual needs

Accessibility is crucial when interacting with any public contributors, however young people often revolve around different factors. Planning meetings around school/work/university/social activities, as well as cultural or religious considerations like Eid and Lent are vital for maintaining a varied and successful group of young public contributors. We have found for our group that online meetings on weekdays between 5:30pm to 7:00pm are best attended, and in-person meetings that have multiple accessible public transport options to the venue during school/university holidays are easiest for us to get to. Venues should be considered carefully before a meeting is arranged so that all accessibility needs can be accommodated; wheelchair access and disabled bathrooms, as well as prayer rooms and "chill-out" rooms. Communication outside of meetings in emails or a WhatsApp group to remind everyone of upcoming plans will be helpful for young people with busy schedules.

9. Relaxed work environment

As young people, it can be challenging to commit to various responsibilities, especially when balancing education, jobs, family and other engagements. To get the most involvement from us, emphasize that it is a relaxed work environment. Assure us that if our availability changes it's completely fine, that it is not obligatory to attend every meeting, it's ok to join from a car/bus/sofa/walking and you can accommodate us leaving early or attending late if required. It's a completely flexible group. It's also important to note that some people have different comfort levels in terms of having their microphone/camera on or off, offer the solution of typing in the chat and avoid a classroom environment.

10. Leading youth engagement

Designate one person as PPIE Group Leader, this is a member of the research team or member of staff that the young people trust and can communicate with. Ensure the young people know this is their main contact point and let them know how and when to contact them. The Leader should strive to stay informed about current issues and challenges to better understand the everyday stigmas and struggles. Ideally, this person will have experience working with public contributors and/or young adults. Encouragement is key; this role should actively foster a supportive environment where members feel comfortable sharing questions and contribution. The Leader should always be available to listen, offer guidance and maintain an enjoyable and engaging atmosphere as this will create the most open discussions.

Lastly, all groups and individuals are different, this is a starting point for getting young people involved in your research. Talk to your group of contributors or young people and work together to accomplish what everyone needs.