

# Youth Participatory Evaluation

## Practice guide

Prepared by Wilder Research in partnership  
with the Youth Leadership Initiative



# What is Youth Participatory Evaluation (YPE)?

**Youth participatory evaluation (YPE) is an approach that engages young people in evaluating the programs, organizations, and systems designed to serve them.**

Through YPE, young people conduct research on issues and experiences that affect their lives, developing knowledge about their community that can be shared and put to use. There are different models of YPE. Some are completely driven by youth, while others are conducted in partnership with adults (definition from ACT for Youth Center of Excellence).

## What is a YPE practice guide?

**This YPE practice guide is an overview of how to do YPE.**

Its intended audience is youth programs that want to begin their YPE practice. The practice guide describes a general approach to doing YPE, based on what others have written about YPE and what we learned about how the Wilder Foundation's Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) does YPE. By going through this practice guide, YPE teams can create a YPE practice that "works" for them, meaning that their YPE practice is aligned with their values, tailored to their programming, and scaled to fit their capacity.

This practice guide walks through the major steps of doing YPE: 1) Determining your YPE values, 2) Outlining your YPE story, 3) Making program improvements, and 4) Reflecting on your YPE story. Throughout the practice guide, there are examples from YLI's YPE practice to illustrate what we mean by concepts like "YPE values" and "YPE story." There are also suggested questions for YPE teams to discuss together that are helpful for beginning to practice YPE. When using this practice guide for the first time, it may be beneficial to walk through it with someone who has done YPE before.

## Why does YPE matter?

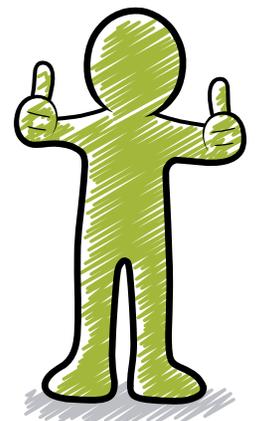
**YPE results in program improvements and individual growth, and is often a more meaningful evaluation approach.**

YLI has been practicing YPE for a number of years because there are important benefits that come with YPE. For programs, YPE improves programming, increases youth voice in program decision-making, and transforms program culture. For individuals, YPE develops evaluation skills and social-emotional competencies. In terms of evaluation, YPE improves data collection, deepens understanding of evaluation findings, and democratizes knowledge (from ACT for Youth Center for Excellence).

## How did we make this practice guide?

**This practice guide is a synthesis of the theory of YPE and the practice of YPE.**

First, we learned about YPE by reading what others have written about YPE, mainly drawing from Kim Sabo Flores's book *Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People*. Next, we attended a number of YLI's YPE meetings to get a sense of how their YPE team worked, as well as to introduce the idea of a YPE practice guide to everyone on the team. Then, we facilitated a conversation with YLI's YPE team to answer the question: "What are the values, practices, and outcomes of YLI's YPE work?" After we gathered this information, we created this practice guide as a synthesis of what has been written about YPE and how YLI does YPE.



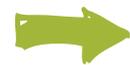
# What is the Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI)?

Throughout this practice guide, we make a lot of references to the Wilder Foundation's Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI), so we thought it would be helpful for you to know a little bit about YLI.

YLI is a multicultural program designed to help youth develop strong, effective leadership skills to work in diverse community settings. The program assists youth in learning about themselves, working with others, and engaging in meaningful action. The six building blocks of YLI are learning, community, action, culture, character, and leadership.

At YLI, youth grades 9-12 participate in a year-long commitment, participating in learning retreats, cultural exploration sessions, action teams, and school support activities:

- » **Learning Retreats:** Youth attend three multicultural learning retreats where they explore concepts of leadership, strengthen cross-cultural relationships, and participate in experiential learning activities that focus on working effectively with others.
- » **Cultural Exploration Sessions:** Youth meet in culturally specific cohorts. Aided by a Cultural Coach, youth explore their culture and heritage and its impact on their leadership style and personal development.
- » **Action Teams:** Youth participate in weekly multicultural teams that focus on providing service to the community.
- » **School Support:** Youth discuss the importance of education, set school improvement goals, learn about higher education, and are provided with structured support based on individual needs.



The Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) is grounded in the belief that  
**youth have tremendous skills and talents, invaluable and  
unique perspectives and passion and commitment**  
– all of which have the potential to benefit our community.

Stemming from this core belief that young people are not problems but part of the solution, YLI provides young people with support and leadership opportunities that are comprehensive, positive, participatory and encourages youth involvement in the community. YLI's strengths-based approach involves youth in decision making at all levels of the program and ensures success by building strong, respectful and committed relationships with youth.

# Before continuing, read this about starting your own YPE practice:

This practice guide assumes that youth programs have the capacity and support to practice YPE. Without this capacity and support, it is unlikely that a program's YPE practice will produce meaningful change for the program. When we say "capacity and support," we are talking about some specific things. Here is a list of capacity and support examples that arose as we went through the process of creating this YPE practice guide:

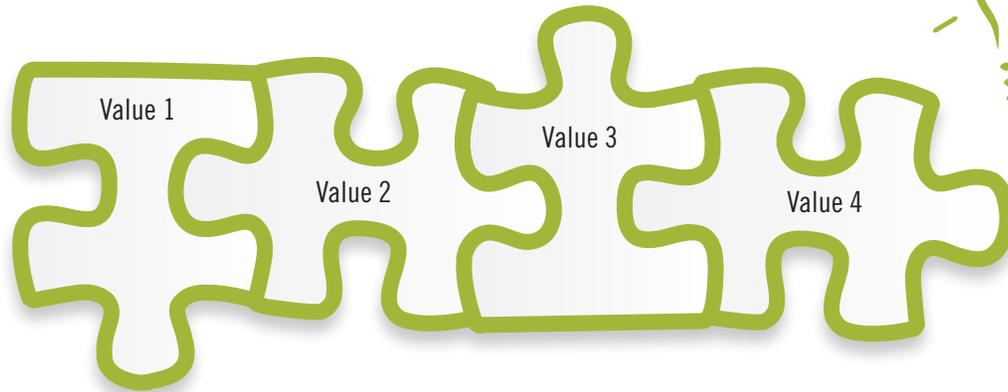
- » **YPE must be the designated responsibility of a program staff person.** For a successful YPE practice, it is recommended that YPE is an explicit part of a program staff person's job.
- » **Youth must want to do YPE.** This is a central tenant of YPE. When YLI builds their YPE team, they tell youth that by doing YPE, they will learn about YLI and youth development, build evaluation and critical thinking skills, and make improvements to YLI based on their YPE work. However, if youth do not want to take part in YPE, then YPE should not be pursued.
- » **Regular time and attention is necessary for YPE.** YLI's YPE practice meets weekly for 1.5 hours. During this time, the program staff who are tasked with YPE are not participating in regular programming; they are doing YPE. The other YPE team members – youth and volunteers – are also not participating in regular programming; they too are doing YPE. A successful YPE practice needs regular time for the YPE team to meet and work together.
- » **Program and organizational leadership must commit to make changes based on YPE findings.** Similar to any evaluation process, the end result of YPE is recommendations about how to improve the youth program. These recommendations are then used to create a program improvement plan. It is critical that program and organizational leadership welcomes these recommendations and changes to the program.



**We hope that this YPE practice guide is useful** for youth programs that want to start their YPE practice; however, if these foundational aspects of doing YPE are not present, this guide will probably not be useful. We recommend that youth programs lay the groundwork for doing YPE by ensuring that they have this kind of capacity and support before beginning their YPE practice.

# An overview for doing YPE

## 1. Determine your YPE values with your YPE team.



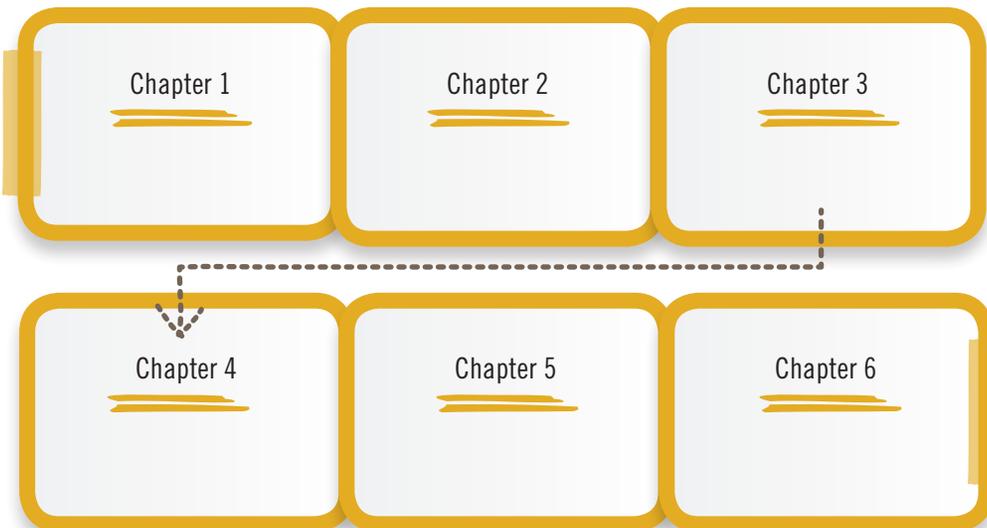
## 3. Make a plan for program improvement



Based on your YPE findings, what recommendations do you have for improving your program?

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## 2. Outline your YPE story, then **GO!**



## 4. Reflect on your YPE story

How could the YPE process be improved for next time? How did the members of the YPE team grow or change throughout your YPE journey?



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# 1. Determine your YPE values with your YPE team.

Your YPE values are the foundation for how your YPE team works together. They serve as a “working agreement” between team members. Because of this, the process of determining your YPE values should include everyone on your YPE team – youth and adults.

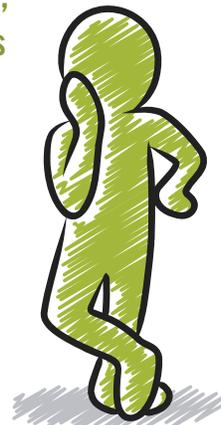
- » Why are you interested in YPE? Why are you choosing to do YPE instead of the standard evaluation model? The standard evaluation model is when an outside evaluator (usually an adult) evaluates a program and then tells the program how they might improve.
- » What are your goals for how the YPE team will work together? Why is it important to you that the YPE team works together in this way?
- » What are the expectations for YPE team members? Are there specific expectations for youth and for adults? What are the expectations for how youth will work with the YPE team? What are the expectations for how adults will work with the YPE team?
- » In what ways do you want your YPE team to operate differently than other places where youth and adults interact with each other? It may help to think of places where youth and adults interact together in ways that you do NOT want to mimic on your YPE team.



After answering these questions with your team, try writing some values. Values should be phrases that are made up of 2-5 words each.



On the next page, you can see YLI’s YPE values as well as the ways that their values show up in their YPE work.



Value 1

Value 2

Value 3

Value 4

# YLI's YPE values



Here are YLI's YPE values and how they show up in YLI's YPE work. We hope that these examples are helpful as you're determining your own YPE values.

YPE value	How it shows up in YLI's YPE work
<b>Program improvement</b> using data to improve the program	The goal of YLI's YPE work is improving YLI based on the YPE's team evaluation findings. At the end of each YPE process, the YPE team compiles a list of recommendations for improving YLI that is then translated into a program improvement plan to implement those recommendations during the following year.
<b>Youth-adult partnership</b> a commitment to co-learning	For YLI's YPE team, this value is seen in youth coming to the YPE as leaders and adults on the YPE team making space for youth to lead. » For youth, this means showing up on time, showing up consistently (and letting others know if they will not be able to show up), doing YPE homework if there is any, sharing their opinions openly and respectfully, bringing a curious and critical mindset to evaluating YLI, and being assertive with their viewpoints and thoughts of how to proceed – especially if their thoughts differ from others on the team. » For adults, this means waiting for youth to speak first, asking questions with curiosity rather than with a “right” answer in mind, doing YPE homework if there is any, sharing their viewpoints openly and respectfully, and being open to other ways of thinking or doing the team's work together.
<b>Youth voice</b> “Nothing about us without us”	Typically, when adults and youth interact, adults have more power. YLI's “youth voice” value is about balancing that power. YLI's YPE team is at minimum comprised of half youth and half adults, decisions are only made when there has been youth input, and youth input is sought out and respected in decision-making processes.
<b>Shared responsibility</b> a commitment to co-doing	For YLI's YPE team, shared responsibility means that doing YPE is everyone's responsibility. Sometimes this means that there are individual assignments for YPE team members, other times this means that the whole team must meet and talk about new insights or how to move forward. You could think of this value as a pie split into equal pieces, with each member of the team being responsible for a piece of the YPE work.
<b>Unique perspectives of shared experience</b> a commitment to listening and honoring each other's perspectives	In order to join the team, YLI's YPE team members – youth and adults – must have at least one year of experience with YLI. In this way, YLI's YPE team is equipped with various lived experiences of YLI. Part of this value is that each team member's perspectives is listened to and respected.



# 2. Outline your YPE story, and then



## Outlining your YPE story

It is critical to outline your YPE story to ensure that you accomplish your goals in the time you have. Here are some questions and examples from YLI'S YPE story that may help you as you outline your own YPE story. On the next page, you can see how YLI outlines their YPE story.

Write your answers:

<p>1. What do you want to learn?</p>	<p>YLI wanted to assess the quality of their program as well as how they could improve their program.</p>	<p>1</p>
<p>2. How much time do you have?</p>	<p>YLI had a full program year (i.e., September-May) to accomplish their learning goals.</p>	<p>2</p>
<p>3. What evaluation tools will you use?</p>	<p>YLI chose to use the Youth Program Quality Assessment tool to help them accomplish their learning goals. The Youth Program Quality Assessment tool is a validated instrument designed to measure the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. It is an observational evaluation tool, meaning that the YPE team observed various parts of YLI's programs and took detailed notes about what they saw.</p>	<p>3</p>
<p>4. When do you need to begin collecting data so that you have time to analyze your data and make recommendations?</p>	<p>YLI collected their data in March, entered and analyzed it in April, and made recommendations based on their findings in May (which is when their program ends). You may want to plan more time than you think you need to collect and analyze data.</p>	<p>4</p>
<p>5. What will your YPE team have to do to prepare to collect data? What will you have to learn?</p>	<p>In addition to determining their values and how they would work together, in preparation for collecting data, YLI's YPE team reviewed their previous YPE work and YLI's standard evaluations, learned about evaluation and why it's done, received training to do the YPQA, and practiced observing and taking notes for the YPQA.</p>	<p>5</p>
<p>6. Considering your answer to question 5, when will you have to bring your YPE team together and start your YPE work?</p>	<p>In order to begin collecting data in March (so they could analyze their data and make recommendations by the end of May), YLI brought their YPE team together in November of the previous year – four months before they started collecting data.</p>	<p>6</p>

# YLI's YPE story

This is an overview of YLI's YPE story. It includes seven chapters: Values and planning, Getting grounded, Training, Doing it, Making meaning, Recommendations and making changes, and Reflecting on our YPE story. In each chapter, we have a list summary of what YLI's YPE team did during that chapter of their story.



Chapter 1 Values and planning	Chapter 2 Getting grounded	Chapter 3 Training	Chapter 4 Doing it	Chapter 5 Making meaning	Chapter 6 Recommendations and making changes	Chapter 7 Reflecting on our YPE story
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Determine our values</li><li>» Decide what we wanted to learn and how we would learn it</li><li>» Make a plan and timeline for getting everything done</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Learn about evaluations in general and why they're done</li><li>» Review previous YLI evaluations, both YPE evaluations and standard evaluations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Receive YPQA training</li><li>» Review "how to observe" packets and videos</li><li>» Complete observation practice homework</li><li>» Reflect individually and as a group about doing the homework and how to do observations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Schedule observation dates/times for team members</li><li>» Collect data (observing and taking notes)</li><li>» Enter data into Excel spreadsheets</li><li>» Analyze data (finding evidence for YPQA measures, scoring measures based on evidence)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Assign additional analysis tasks to team members</li><li>» Observe patterns but don't make conclusions</li><li>» Review other YLI evaluation data</li><li>» Bring lived experiences to analysis</li><li>» Make meaning of data (in context of other data and lived experiences)</li><li>» Talk about other factors that influence the data</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Specify recommendations for improvements and reasoning for them</li><li>» Prioritize program improvements</li><li>» Make timeline and action plan for implementing improvements</li><li>» Assign roles for implementing improvements</li><li>» Share program improvement plan with others</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Reflect on understanding of the program</li><li>» Reflect on personal growth</li><li>» Reflect on the YPE process</li></ul>

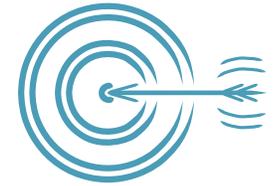


# Outline your own YPE story



<p><u>Chapter 4</u></p> <p>Title:</p> <p>When:</p>	<p><u>Chapter 5</u></p> <p>Title:</p> <p>When:</p>	<p><u>Chapter 6</u></p> <p><b>Recommendations and making changes</b></p> <p>When:</p>	<p><u>Chapter 7</u></p> <p><b>Reflecting on our YPE story</b></p> <p>When:</p>
Tasks:	Tasks:	Tasks:	Tasks:
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# 3. Make a plan for program improvement



After you have analyzed your data, it is important to make a detailed program improvement plan so that your YPE efforts result in real change for your program. For each part of your program that you wish to improve, each of these questions should be answered in detail:

1. Based on your YPE findings, which parts of your program should be improved?

Based on their YPE findings, YLI's YPE team wanted to improve how volunteers give feedback to youth. They recommended that volunteers use specific, non-evaluative language when giving feedback to YLI's youth participants. For example, volunteers should say something like, "That was a helpful contribution to the conversation because you incorporated your personal experience," instead of, "Great contribution!" This is a youth program quality best practice.

2. What did your data say about why this part of your program should be improved? What data is the recommendation responding to?

Based on YLI's YPE data, their volunteers were not consistently using specific, non-evaluative language when giving feedback. Often this feedback was non-specific or evaluative, (e.g., "Good job!").

3. How will this recommendation improve your program? When will this improvement be accomplished?

Based on this recommendation, YLI's YPE team made the goal that volunteers will be aware of this youth program quality best practice and consistently use it within three months of their new program year.

4. What are the specific steps you will take to improve this part of your program?

YLI's YPE team decided that a program staff person will conduct a workshop for volunteers about using specific, non-evaluative language and how to incorporate this best practice when they're at YLI.

5. Who is responsible for ensuring that these steps are taken and that they are resulting in the improvement you expected to see?

To ensure this goal is met, a specific YLI staff person was tasked with developing and giving the workshop, as well as assessing whether volunteers are incorporating these best practices

6. How will you assess whether you accomplished the improvement?

As part of their plan, YLI's YPE team specified that YLI program staff will meet one month after the workshop and discuss their informal observations of whether volunteers are incorporating this best practice while at YLI. Based on this conversation, future action steps will be developed, if necessary, to ensure that this best practice is occurring.



# 4. Reflecting on your YPE journey



It is important to both reflect on how the YPE process could be improved for next time, and how YPE team members have changed or grown by practicing YPE.

Here are some suggested questions for the YPE team to talk about together when reflecting on their YPE story:

REFLECT ON THE PROCESS	» What parts of your YPE process worked well? Why do you think they worked well?	Parts of the YPE process that worked well	YLI's YPE team said that they did a good job of holding true to their values throughout their YPE journey.
	» What parts of your YPE process could be improved for next time? How would you improve it?	Parts of the YPE process that could be improved	YLI's YPE team spent more time than they initially planned preparing to collect data. This resulted in a very busy and tight timeline to collect data, analyze data, and make their program improvement plan.
REFLECT ON YOURSELF	» What new skills, if any, did you learn from being on the YPE team?	Skills you developed	YLI's YPE team said that they learned how to take objective and detailed notes, and how to do observations for the purposes of evaluation. Additionally, they said they learned about how to facilitate group processes more effectively.
	» What did you learn about yourself by being a part of the YPE team?	Insights about yourself	YLI's YPE team members said they learned more about how they think and process – and now feel better equipped to work with others because they have a better understanding of themselves.
	» How did being on the YPE team change how you think about your youth program?	Changes in how you think about your program	YLI's YPE team said they learned that everyone has a role to play in the quality of their youth program – staff, youth, volunteers; it's all inter-connected.
	» How did being on the YPE team change how you think about other parts of your life?	Changes in how you think about other parts of your life	YLI's YPE team talked about how they now are better at assessing the quality of other experiences in their lives – such as going to the doctor or going to school.



After answering these questions with your team, document your responses. Feel free to add more categories when you do this if your responses do not fit in just these categories.







# More resources for practicing YPE

We hope that this YPE practice guide is useful for you as you start your YPE practice. However, we expect some questions will arise when you start practicing YPE that this practice guide does not answer.

Like we said earlier, when going through this practice guide for the first time, it may be beneficial to work with someone who has done YPE before. If you want to do that, the Youth Leadership Initiative would be happy to talk with you about starting your YPE practice. You can contact YLI program director Nou Yang at [nou.yang@wilder.org](mailto:nou.yang@wilder.org). Otherwise, here are some other resources that may be helpful as you start your YPE practice:

- » Kim Sabo Flores's book *Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People*.
- » ACT for Youth Center of Excellence's Youth Participatory Evaluation overview.
- » The Center for Youth Program Quality's Youth Program Quality Assessment tool.
- » The Center for Youth Program Quality's Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning website and field guide.
- » University of California – Berkeley's Youth Participatory Action Research Hub website.
- » Ignite Afterschool's M3: Making Meaning with Multiple Data Sets



**If you have questions** about how this practice guide was made or the research behind it, contact Ryan Evans, research associate at Wilder Research, at [ryan.evans@wilder.org](mailto:ryan.evans@wilder.org).