



## PLANNING FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES: ISSUE BRIEF

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# Reaching Out: Youth and Family Participation

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## WHY FOSTER PARTICIPATION?

Public participation in the planning process has long been recognized by the American Planning Association (APA) as a vital part of community development. Yet families are often not included within this process. According to the national APA/ Cornell survey of planners, while 48% of planners note the *need* to have parents actively involved in the planning process, less than half regularly hold public meetings at times and places convenient for parents; a mere 2% “often” provide childcare (Israel and Warner, 2008). Children, for whom these communities are being planned, are similarly left out; only 39% of communities encourage youth participation in the planning process. Planners that do not engage families in the planning process are less likely to make substantive, productive changes within their communities.

Participation ensures that development serves the actual interests of community members, those with the greatest stake in its outcomes, while also allowing planners to get access to information from those most knowledgeable and familiar with the area. Families, however, often go unheard, held back by time, mobility, and geographic constraints, to the detriment of communities across the country.

## RESULTS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Many programs have been designed to encourage youth participation on both the local and international levels. Locally, many community planners have used methods of “photo elicitation” or “photo voice” with children, bringing them into the planning process by asking them to simply take pictures of aspects of the community they like and don’t like. Planners then use these observations to better plan a community from

the child’s viewpoint. Internationally, organizations like Growing Up in Cities (GUIC) aim to create friendlier cities for youth and children on a broader scale. GUIC, founded out of a research project with UNESCO in the 1970s, strives to engage children in the planning process, partnering them with adults to jointly evaluate local environments and to plan and implement change.

David Driskell, formerly with GUIC and now the Director of Community Planning in Boulder, CO has recorded some of the more frequently observed youth desires in his book “Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth.” Three of these often cited community-youth concerns are: the desire for social integration, free access to diverse and engaging activities and settings, and the establishment of a cohesive community identity (Driskell, 2002).

## Social Integration

Youth do not want to feel segregated from the greater



Kids work with planners to redesign their neighborhood. Photo courtesy of the APA’s Kids & Community Program ([www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity/moreplanning/index.htm](http://www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity/moreplanning/index.htm))

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community, pushed into separate spaces or demarcated territories. They want a “sense of belonging” and a freedom to use environments where individuals of all ages congregate while still feeling at ease and welcome.

### **Free Access to Diverse, Engaging Activities and Settings**

Youth need to have access to areas that specifically feel like their own: places where congregation is allowed and encouraged, where peer meeting can occur, “third places.” Green areas are also highly desired, providing access to fields and courts for recreational and group activities. These areas allow growing adults to feel comfortable, stimulated, and safe, while providing them outlets for social interaction and sport.

### **Cohesive Community Identity**

Youth also desire communities that have a coherent identity. Such coherence can revolve around downtown city centers, high school or college sporting events, or residential identities. They like the feeling of place.

Driskell also notes youth dislikes within his book. Some of these recurring complaints youth have about their community include: stigma and social exclusion, lack of activities, fear of harassment and crime, racial and ethnic tension, heavy traffic, dirty public spaces, lack of provision of basic services, and a sense of political powerlessness.

### **HOW CAN YOUTH AND FAMILIES BE INCLUDED IN THE PLANNING PROCESS?**

Parents and children have valuable, unique insights into how a community can be enhanced, but they also face barriers. Planners can overcome them by using some of the techniques and resources mentioned here.

#### **Parents**

##### **Information Available**

Parents/ guardians know how long it takes them to get their children to and from school, whether there are appropriate child care resources available, and whether the environment is a good one for raising children. They also know whether a community enables them to simultaneously be parents *and* independent individuals, capable of socializing, shopping, and working without undue stress or worry.

##### **Restraints**

Parents, especially those with young children, are bound by significant time and mobility constraints, making attendance at regularly scheduled evening meetings difficult. As parents have little room to adjust for the purposes of planning, it is up to the planner to evolve to meet the needs of the parents. CitySmiles, a non-profit in Trenton, NJ, recognized this need and arranged for baby-sitting during city meetings.

##### **Actions Necessary**

- Arrange focus groups and meetings during “family friendly” hours
- Choose central locations
- Include provision of child care if later in the day
- Use in-home multimedia tools (DVDs/CDs with text and/ or video presentations)
- Use online forums (chat rooms, website message boards)

#### **Children/ Youth**

##### **Information Available**

Children are among the most vulnerable members of a community, have little to no voice in community affairs, and are often dismissed during the planning process. However, children often have deeper and more intimate relations with their environments than even their parents. Their reactions are honest. Children can relate their needs and wants, form a consensus, and rationally weigh options. For communities with large foreign populations, children may be a particularly valuable resource – free to be open and honest without immigration concerns.

##### **Restraints**

Children are constrained by school and working hours, and have limited independent mobility. Permission slips and other approvals may be necessary. Children, especially those younger than high school aged, also have more limited attention spans and communicative abilities.

##### **Actions Necessary**

- Approach School Boards and community organizations to garner additional support
  - Find out about local rules and laws that may limit or prohibit youth participation
  - Promote as an educational activity – you will be teaching civic engagement, communication skills, and team building while increasing youth attachment to the community
  - For younger ages, use more graphics, maps, and interactive, playful activities to solicit information (e.g. photography)
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- For older ages, use focus groups, consultations, and one-on-one discussions
- For more mature youth, data gathering, community interaction, and shared decision making techniques can be explored

Those individuals who regularly work with families also hold a great deal of information of use to planners. These professionals may include child care providers, teachers, or recreational coaches. They can help address issues of child care, crime, family abuse, transportation, and recreational needs. However, they may not necessarily live in the community studied, thus focus groups and meetings should be arranged around working hours and locations. Multimedia tools and online forums, similar to those used with parents, may also be useful.

Planners should also check out the APA's website for further ideas on planning family and youth engagement. Articles such as "Youth Engagement in Planning," which notes methods and cases where youth have been successfully engaged in planning (Mullahey, 2008), are frequently posted, and not only provide valuable information, but also lead to other, useful resources for practicing planners.

### **WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION LOOK LIKE IN FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES?**

#### **Participation is Local**

Participation is about engaging individuals who have intimate knowledge of issues. This intimacy comes from daily-interaction with problems and thoughts about possible solutions. Participation should be focused and tailored to discuss and address these needs and concerns.

In Burleson, TX, the mayor and city council members determined that, with over one-third of the City's population under the age of 18, they were not garnering enough input from this local population in their day-to-day decision making. They established the "Mayor's Youth Council" to represent these underrepresented voices. Youth were nominated by teachers, parents, principals, pastors, and neighbors from the local community and thirteen became part of the advisory committee. These students, aged 13 to 19, were charged with representing the youth of Burleson, identifying key issues facing this group, and advising the city council on local teen-related matters.

Local needs can also result in forms of participation revolving around specific issues. In 2004, in response to the growing Hispanic/ Latino community in largely white Cobb County, GA, the Cobb Hispanic/ Latino Initiative was set up by the Atlanta Regional

Commission (ARC) and government of Cobb County. The Initiative was designed to "put into practice the philosophy that Cobb County is for all residents" and to publicize diversity as "a strength, not an obstacle." The Initiative has engaged citizens alongside business and government leaders via open forums, a job and health fair, a leadership program, and monthly chamber meetings revolving around Latino-specific issues. This engagement has resulted in a long-term strategic vision for a diverse Cobb County.



Photo courtesy of [www.roundhouse.co.uk](http://www.roundhouse.co.uk)

#### **Participation is Open and Transparent**

Participation should aim to bring volunteers from all sections of a community together to address common concerns on an equal basis in an open-minded environment. Times and forms of meetings/ discussions should be designed accordingly. Planners should always ask: who is *not* participating and identify ways to involve these underrepresented community voices.

The City Council of Huntsville, TX, through a program called the "Huntsville Promise," laid out a mission of supporting and caring for the "children, youth, and families of Huntsville" through awareness and engagement. They resolved to: 1. Identify the needs and priorities of families and youth; 2. Promote developmental assets within their community; 3. Promote effective collaboration between governmental agencies; and 4. Assist and support community organizations dedicated to improving and advancing the needs of families and youth in Huntsville. Their open-minded efforts have been met with great enthusiasm and local engagement.

## Participation is a Value-Added Process

Participation needs to be responsive, but also flexible. It is a process that cannot be rushed, especially for youth.

Participation needs to be relevant, interactive, and encouraging (especially for children), designed to bring in information from participants. It should also provide background facts and statistics on which discussions can proceed. Participation should be an educational opportunity for all. For youth, it can allow them to engage local issues and express their opinions in a constructive manner. Reflection should also be incorporated in the process to identify areas for further exploration.



*Photo courtesy of dss.sd.gov*

The Village of Weston, WI, in 2008, founded the “New Generations Initiative” to reach Weston’s younger residents. They reached out to the “two click” generation by making their Village “web accessible,” implementing a state-of-the-art website. They also actively sought out teenagers by visiting “third places” and local hangouts to gather their opinions. Based upon this data, the Village’s standing policy committees then evaluated each program’s “efficacy on [their] younger population.” They also began to actively promote “generational involvement” on Village boards and committees and address the four key issues that arose from discussions: housing affordability, safety, business development, and the development of green neighborhoods.

## Participation should be a Means to an End

Participation should be transformative. Actions taken should result in more sustainable projects, creating a sense of investment for participants in implementation and on-going stewardship.

In Everett, WA, a suburb of Seattle, a “neighborhood matching fund” program was developed between the

neighborhoods and the larger City of Everett. The program fostered a process of bottom-up engagement, allowing for the ideas of local projects to come from citizens. Based upon local enthusiasm, engagement, and most importantly, monetary pledges, the City has then agreed to match contributions to make these projects, ranging from parks to playgrounds, a reality. The program has demonstrated the leverage (both financial and organizational) of community participation.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Effective planning requires the pursuit of a “multi-tiered” generational approach to development. Planners and policy-makers need to identify the specific interest groups they are aiming to impact, and adjust their participation processes to best reach these individuals. When planning for “family friendly” communities, these adjustments are vital to acquire access to parents and children, whose lives are often split between work and childcare or between school and recreation. The local examples highlighted here point out a few ways planners and policy-makers have attempted to reach families.

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