



# Engaging Youth in Your Community Programs

*Youth bring energy, creativity, and additional helping hands to community groups and projects. Understanding how best to engage these vital members of your community will result in a better experience for everyone involved.*

## The Importance of Working with Youth

- Youth can help invigorate and sustain community forestry groups by bringing fresh and different perspectives.
- Many schools and youth organizations have a service requirement, so youth are looking for opportunities to get involved.
- Youth involved in community forestry groups and projects will become the next generation of environmental leaders.
- By mentoring youth and involving them in the **planning** aspects of your community projects, adult leaders help youth develop important lifelong skills and experience.

## Understanding Generational Dynamics

Trees Forever conducted focus groups and surveys of youth ages 12 to 25 to understand what motivates youth to volunteer, the best means of communicating with and among them, and what you can do to make volunteering an enjoyable and learning experience for them. Though not a random or scientific survey, the input from the 84 respondents provides a valuable guide for how to effectively engage youth.

## Getting Youth Involved

Most of the surveyed youth want to be involved in environmental projects: 75 percent of 12- to 25-year-olds surveyed were interested or very interested in volunteering, and 86 percent generally enjoy participating in planting and care projects.



Below are the volunteer activities listed by our survey respondents. Note that youth volunteers want to be involved in more than just being the “labor” that plants trees:

- Planting – 71%
- Planning and design – 44%
- Care for plantings – 39%
- Think of project ideas – 35%
- Get the word out – 31%
- Be a member of a group – 28%
- Raise money - 23%

## What Keeps Youth from Getting Involved?

- Time – I’m too busy - 55%
- Don’t know about projects - 29%
- 6% or less said that the following were their biggest barriers to participation: No transportation (6%); No experience with environmental projects (4%); Friends aren’t interested (2%); I’d rather be indoors (1%).

## Biggest Motivators for Youth Involvement

The *positive outcome* of the project and the *type* of project were the two top motivators for young people interested in getting involved in community tree plantings. Besides the project itself, respondents shared the other factors that motivate them:

- **Working-age young people** – friends' participation, food at project, and clothing giveaways
- **College-age young people** – friends' participation, clothing giveaways, and work experience
- **High School-age youth** – school/volunteer credit, friends' participation, and work experience
- **Junior High-age youth** – work experience and clothing giveaways

## Communication: Inviting Young Volunteers to Participate

As is true for all ages, communication is key to recruiting volunteers to get involved in projects. Communication preferences often differ by generation, although multiple forms of communication are usually needed. Our survey participants listed these preferred methods of communication:

- **E-mail** – 54% of survey participants preferred learning about volunteer opportunities via e-mail.
- **Facebook** – 23% preferred Facebook (though 91% percent have Facebook accounts).
- **Club or school** - Only 14% preferred club or school communication- but those allow you to reach *groups* of young people this way and therefore shouldn't be undervalued.
- **Texting** – 8% preferred text messages.
- **Peers** - Personal invitations from peers are also powerful.

## POSITIVE Volunteer Experiences

Our respondents provided some valuable input on what older generations can do to make volunteering a positive experience:

*"Engage in conversation, enjoy what they're doing, appreciate the interest of the younger generation."*

*"Thoroughly EXPLAIN the project and its goals, treat younger generations with as much respect as their own."*

*"Be a strong leader providing useful direction so that volunteer time is efficiently used."*

*"Be excited to work with younger people and treat them nice instead of just as the 'work horses' for the project."*

*"Let some of the younger people help with running the project and listen to their ideas."*

*"Be encouraging, let us know we're doing a good job/ proud of us, positive feedback, and constructive criticism."*

## What Makes a NEGATIVE Experience

Young people also shared what makes an experience negative for them:

*"Adults can be bossy sometimes... even if they only think they know what they are doing but they aren't sure."*

*"(When they) just tell young people what to do instead of asking our opinions or explaining things to us."*

*"Not ceding enough responsibility to the youth and young adults, dictating the projects too much."*

*"(When they) explain things to me like I'm five years old."*

*"(When they) work with other experienced peers and have the younger, inexperienced, work together."*

*"(When they are) critical of our ideas/lifestyles/dress/decisions."*

*"(Plan projects that are) routine, monotonous, or boring."*

*"They schedule (something) when young people are working, which excludes us from participating."*

To learn more about getting youth involved in your community group, contact your Trees Forever field coordinator or the Trees Forever office.

Join Trees Forever on its mission to plant and care for trees and the environment by empowering people, building community and promoting stewardship.

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