

Children and Teens

Who They Are

Children and teens are people below age 18 (sometimes referred to as Generation Z). Children are not likely to engage with public issues without strong encouragement from adults, but increasingly as they become teenagers they may begin to identify what is important to them and look for ways to give back. While underage participants are often overlooked in the participation process, agencies are starting to find ways to engage their youngest constituents, often through partnerships with schools or community-based organizations. Due to their wide range of ages, children and teens use different forms of technology but generally use it at high rates.



Best Practices

Outreach should be:

- **Inviting:** Teens may feel intimidated about lending their voice to a process when older, more experienced adults dominate. Be clear that young peoples' opinions are sought and valued, and that no professional experience or knowledge is necessary to participate. Also ensure that all ideas are acknowledged and recorded. Don't shy away from discussing their "big ideas" but clearly explain if an idea cannot be implemented; look for opportunities to teach as well as listen.
- **Done in Partnership:** Partnering with schools can be an effective way to reach large numbers of young people, but partnering with youth groups, scouts, or sports leagues can make participation seem more fun and credible. Additionally, outreach should reflect the ethnic diversity of the children being reached.
- **Appealing:** Young people may be attracted to an engagement opportunity because they are looking to strengthen college applications, their friends are going, there will be pizza, or there is a fun component like a competition or game. Make it clear what the appeal is from the beginning.
- **Close to Home:** Most children and teens cannot drive themselves to an event, so outreach should meet them where they are at: schools, parks, movie theaters, etc. Providing transportation for teens and youth can be complicated because of legal restrictions and liability.

Recommended Strategies:

- **Youth Leadership Programs:** Youth leadership programs can teach local youth about the roles of planners and the issues that the field of planning addresses. They also allow participants an opportunity to gain a realistic understanding of the problems their communities face and encourage them to take an active role in helping to alleviate those problems.
- **Pop-up kiosks at museums and other key locations:** High school football games, street fairs, museums, zoos, skate parks, and other locations where teens gather or kids take field trips provide opportunities for engaging this population without needing to market an event ahead of time. Activities used at pop-up events should be simple and easy to understand. Visual preference surveys, art projects, visualization exercises, short competitions, or posing for photos with “I want to see ___ in my neighborhood” signs are all quick, inexpensive, and fun ways for groups of children or teens to participate together.
- **Web Portals:** Creating a simple, child-friendly website is an effective way to educate, inform, and even gather input from young people. Websites could include virtual children’s books, short quizzes, fun games, movies, a coloring/painting page, or puzzles.
- **Student Contests:** Hold a contest in local high schools to solicit ideas from students for solving a transportation problem. The contest will engage students who might not otherwise participate, and help them learn about planning issues pertinent to their community.
- **Instagram:** Agencies wishing to engage users can start campaigns using hashtags that encourage users to submit photos around that theme. Agencies can also use it as a way to post flyers or visually convey information about current projects, from construction updates to renderings of options for a new corridor or station design.
- **Activity Books:** Simple books or pamphlets using cartoon humor and characters to engage children in learning about a project through coloring, matching, or other activities.
- **Transportation Field Trips:** Offer students trip to transit facilities or on a bus ride for the first time to inspire students to get interested in transportation issues from a young age and teach them how to use transit.



Generation Z’s Social Media Usage*



88% Snapchat



88% Instagram



81% Facebook



66% Twitter

*from a study by SCG
<http://bit.ly/2sRMVP7>

Example:

The Mid-America Transportation Center, a research center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, hosts regular K-12 tours, field trips, and outreach activities to spark interest in transportation careers. Activities include building structures and testing them on an earthquake “shake table,” measuring traffic speeds with a LiDAR gun, or watching a concrete cylinder crack under the weight of a stress test. The Center partners with schools to host annual summer engineering camps as well as a “Roads, Rails, and Race Cars” after school club, and has reached 679 students since 2008.

<http://matc.unl.edu/education/tours.php>