

# Children's Services Engagement Strategy 2025



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# Welcome Message

Children's Services is committed to actively gathering feedback and recommendations directly from the community to help shape the Early Years and Child Care (EYCC) system. This community engagement strategy aims to establish a collaborative and inclusive approach that involves diverse community partners and addresses the specific opportunities and obstacles faced by families and child care providers. The engagement strategy will be used to support ongoing efforts to provide accessible, affordable, high-quality, and inclusive child care services that are essential for children's overall well-being and development.

Historically, Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and marginalized families have been underrepresented and underserved in Children's Services engagement efforts and the EYCC system as a whole. This engagement strategy will take a more human-centered approach focusing on in-person conversations and innovative strategies to reach a broad cross-section of the community. This approach will help the Children's Services Staff better understand the unique circumstances families face when it comes to finding and using Early Years and Child Care services in the Region of Waterloo. This human-centered approach will mobilize grassroots advocacy efforts, amplify community concerns, and encourage policy change that supports equitable child care.

This Engagement Strategy is in response to community feedback and reflects priorities outlined in the [Children's Services Early Years and Child Care Service System Plan](#), [Children's Services Access and Inclusion Plan](#), as well as priorities outlined by [Region of Waterloo's Corporate Strategic Plan 2023-2027](#), Growing with Care, priority three: Equitable Services and Opportunities. Specifically, Children's Services commits to enhancing stakeholder engagement by:

- Developing an Engagement Strategy that outlines a consistent, inclusive, and transparent approach to community and stakeholder engagement
- Conducting ongoing engagement with families and caregivers
- Engaging in ongoing collaborative system planning with Early Years and Child Care operators, caregivers, and community partners

We hope that this engagement process can foster collaboration and partnerships essential for creating sustainable solutions. By working together, community organizations, policymakers, child care providers, families, and caregivers can share their experiences and ideas on how the early years system can better address barriers and implement initiatives that promote equitable child care.

# Glossary

- **Child Care Subsidy:** Region of Waterloo’s government-assisted program to support families in paying for child care.
- **Community:** The whole Region of Waterloo or anything that draws people together to discuss concerns, regardless of what binds them geographically, through similar interests and values, cultures, languages, abilities, affiliations, or identifies them as a group.
- **Community partners:** Early Years and Child Care providers (Centre-based care, Home Child Care, before and after school programs), Special Needs Resourcing, families, caregivers, and Grassroots organizations.
- **CWELCC:** Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care.
- **CYPT:** Children and Youth Planning Table.
- **Diversity:** Individuality defines diversity. It is about the various unique dimensions, qualities, and characteristics that we all possess. These dimensions can include but are not limited to, ethnicity, nationality, culture, ability, birth sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, age, immigration status, socioeconomic status, geographic region in which you live, and many other characteristics.
- **ECE:** Early Childhood Educators.
- **EYCC:** Early Years and Child Care.
- **EYSG:** Early Years Steering Group (One of the working groups in CYPT, dedicated to Early Years development).
- **EYECOP:** Early Years Engagement Community of Practice (EYSG transitioned to EYECOP).
- **HCC:** Home Child Care.
- **IAP2:** International Association for Public Participation.
- **Inclusion:** Inclusion is all about the entire collective. It involves fostering a culture that values equity and embraces, respects, and accepts differences.
- **Sense-making session:** This is a structured approach to collectively make sense of complex information, situations, or challenges. It involves a group of participants coming together to explore, analyze, and interpret data, experiences, or ideas to gain deeper insights and understanding.
- **World Café:** An engagement session set up in a way that encourages small group discussions. Tables are arranged in a café-style layout, with each table having a designated topic or question related to the main theme of the session.

# Our Commitment

To achieve a more equitable system, Children’s Services will engage with community partners in the following ways:

## 1. Consistent engagement:

Conduct ongoing engagement with a broad representation of families and caregivers through a range of strategies, including forums, social media, one-on-one conversations, group conversations, and the Region of Waterloo Children’s Services website.

## 2. Accessible and inclusive engagement:

Engage in ongoing collaborative system planning with community partners, including organizations that represent Indigenous, Black, and Racialized families, 2SLGBTQIA+ families, children with special needs and other under-represented groups, local school boards, and the Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT).

## 3. Trust and capacity building:

Build trust with the community by implementing new and/or revised policies and strategies supported by ongoing engagement with a diverse range of community partners. Provide knowledge, resources, and education related to the Early Years and Child Care (EYCC) sector to empower the community and create opportunities for robust discussions.



# Guiding Principles

The following engagement principles serve as a broad framework for equitable engagement across all programs and service areas for Children's Services. These guidelines outline how Children's Services staff will assess the effectiveness of our engagement efforts and describe what community partners can anticipate from engagement initiatives.

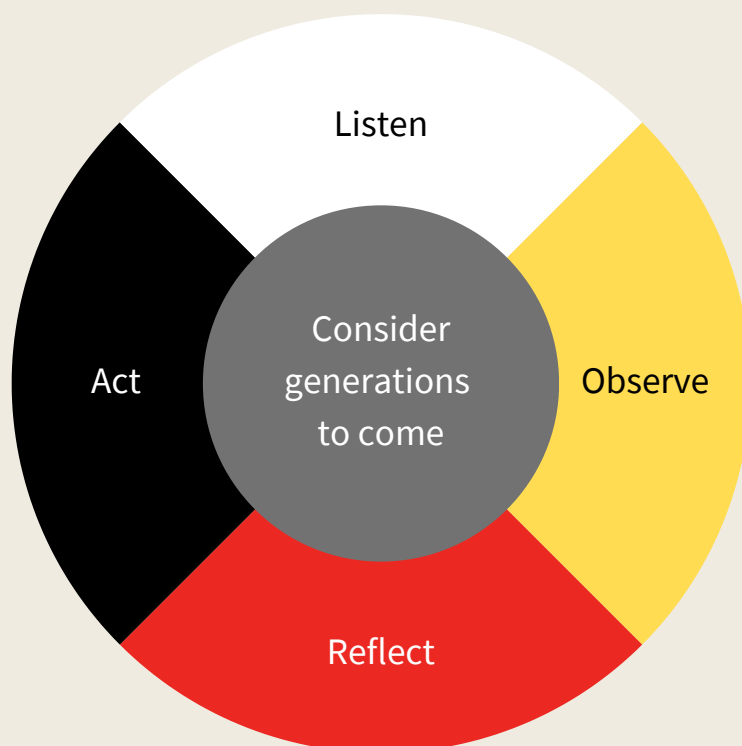


# Our Approach

The issues and challenges in EYCC and EarlyON are often complex. To address these complexities and ensure that we are meeting the needs of our community, we are adopting a non-linear approach that involves a collective and inclusive decision-making process.

Children's Services is becoming intentional about shaping policy and making decisions using a holistic and circular approach. At the core of our engagement strategy, we are drawing from Indigenous teachings and considering the impacts of our decisions for generations to come.

We are embracing the importance of childhood as a time when the lived experiences of children will be impacted for several generations, and following new research that is evolving in this area. We are committed to working in a continuous cycle of listening, observing, reflecting, and acting – each time building on knowledge gained and new insights learned.



Thank you to our friend, James Shawana for his input on the final visual representation of our approach. For more details on Our Approach, visit the [Access and Inclusion Plan](#) on the Region's website.

# Overview of the Engagement Strategy

Feedback and experience with Early Years and Child Care from families, operators, caregivers, and community partners will support the development of future Early Years and Child Care System Plans.

Information including what works well and what needs to be improved will be beneficial in creating plans and policies that better align with community needs. Moving forward, Children's Services is committed to ongoing engagement with the community using a broader range of strategies, as described below.

## Engagement strategies with parents/guardians and the public include:

- One-on-one conversations
- Community-wide surveys
- Focus groups and sense-making sessions
- Seeking feedback at community events and meetings
- World Cafés
- Talking Circles
- Direct engagement requests with [Children's Services staff](#)
- Engagement with non-traditional and grassroots media sources
- An up-to-date and easy-to-navigate website
- Increased social media presence
- Media Engagement



**Engagement strategies with the Early Years and Child Care sector, including staff, child care operators, and contracted service providers include:**

- Information sessions
- Working groups
- Town hall meetings
- One-on-one meetings
- Teleconferences
- Early Years and Child Care site visits
- Professional learning opportunities
- Focus groups
- Children’s Services reports
- Community partners meetings
- Quality Improvement Presentations
- Quality team and Professional Resource Centre pedagogical team visits
- Inter-professional collaboration meetings
- Research and evaluation projects

Children’s Services will do a yearly review of each engagement effort to determine if any changes are needed to make it more effective. Changes will be reflected in updated versions of the Engagement Framework.



# Who We Engage

Children's Services continues to engage with parents, families, caregivers and other groups to understand their evolving needs, foster trust, and ensure resources are effectively allocated to support children's well-being. By gathering insights and encouraging collaboration, the goal is to create a more responsive and inclusive child care system that meets the diverse needs of the community.

The following is a list of groups that Children's Services continues to engage with to achieve its objectives:

- Parents, caregivers, and families
- Community service providers
- Grassroots organizations
- Early Years and Child Care Professionals (EYCC)
- Early Childhood Educators (ECEs)
- Regional and municipal levels of government
- School boards
- EarlyON
- Special Needs Resourcing (SNR)
- Businesses
- Post-Secondary institutions

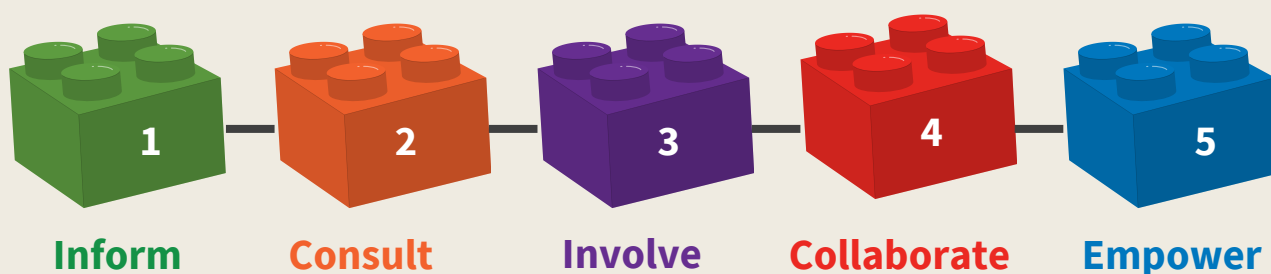


# Engagement Spectrum

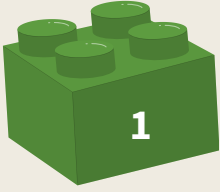
An Engagement Spectrum helps Children’s Services choose the appropriate level of engagement based on factors, such as project complexity and public interest, fostering transparency and meaningful public involvement in decision-making processes.

Children’s Services will be adopting the Engagement Spectrum below, which is modeled after the [International Association for Public Participation \(IAP2\) Model of Engagement](#).

It categorizes types of engagement into five levels:



# Engagement Spectrum



**Inform:** One-way communications to provide information to the community.

## **Purpose**

- To build awareness by disseminating information.

## **Our Action**

- To present the community with accurate information that is both balanced and objective.
- To support understanding of policies, projects, changes or issues, as well as prospective solutions and decisions that have been made.

## **Most appropriate when?**

- A decision has been made and needs to be communicated.
- We want to inspire curiosity and later involvement.
- The community must be informed of the outcomes of a process when a new policy or program needs to be described.



**Consult:** Seeking community feedback on analysis, alternatives, and decisions.

## **Purpose**

- To engage in community discussions through active communication.

## **Our Action**

- To obtain community input about options or decisions, as well as ensure their concerns are understood and considered.
- Evaluate issues, develop solutions, and test ideas.

## **Most appropriate when?**

- During project scoping, when parameters are still being determined.
- When looking for knowledgeable guidance from specialized target groups.

# Engagement Spectrum



**Involve:** Collaborating with the community in the decision-making process.

## **Purpose**

- To work directly with the community throughout to ensure that their concerns, hopes, and ideas are consistently understood and considered.

## **Our Action**

- To ensure community input is understood and taken into consideration, use a continuous cycle of listening, observing, and reflecting - each time building on knowledge gained and new insights learned.

## **Most appropriate when?**

- The community partner's expertise and actions are essential components of the solution.
- Early assurance that the final output has local relevance and is necessary.
- Long-term commitment and sustainability are key considerations.



**Collaborate:** Partnering with the community in developing alternatives and making decisions.

## **Purpose**

- To work closely with the community to create solutions and proposals.

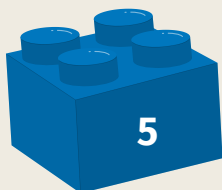
## **Our Action**

- To collaborate with the community on all aspects of decision-making, such as the creation of options and the selection of the preferred options.

## **Most appropriate when?**

- Developing a program and implementing calls for support and participation from various community partners.
- The solution requires system-level changes across various institutions and organizations.

# Engagement Spectrum



**Empower:** Placing final decision-making in the hands of community members.

## Purpose

- To place final decision-making in the hands of the community members.

## Our Action

- To assess the readiness of organizational leadership and the community for this level of engagement, as it requires a significant commitment from all parties involved.

## Most appropriate when?

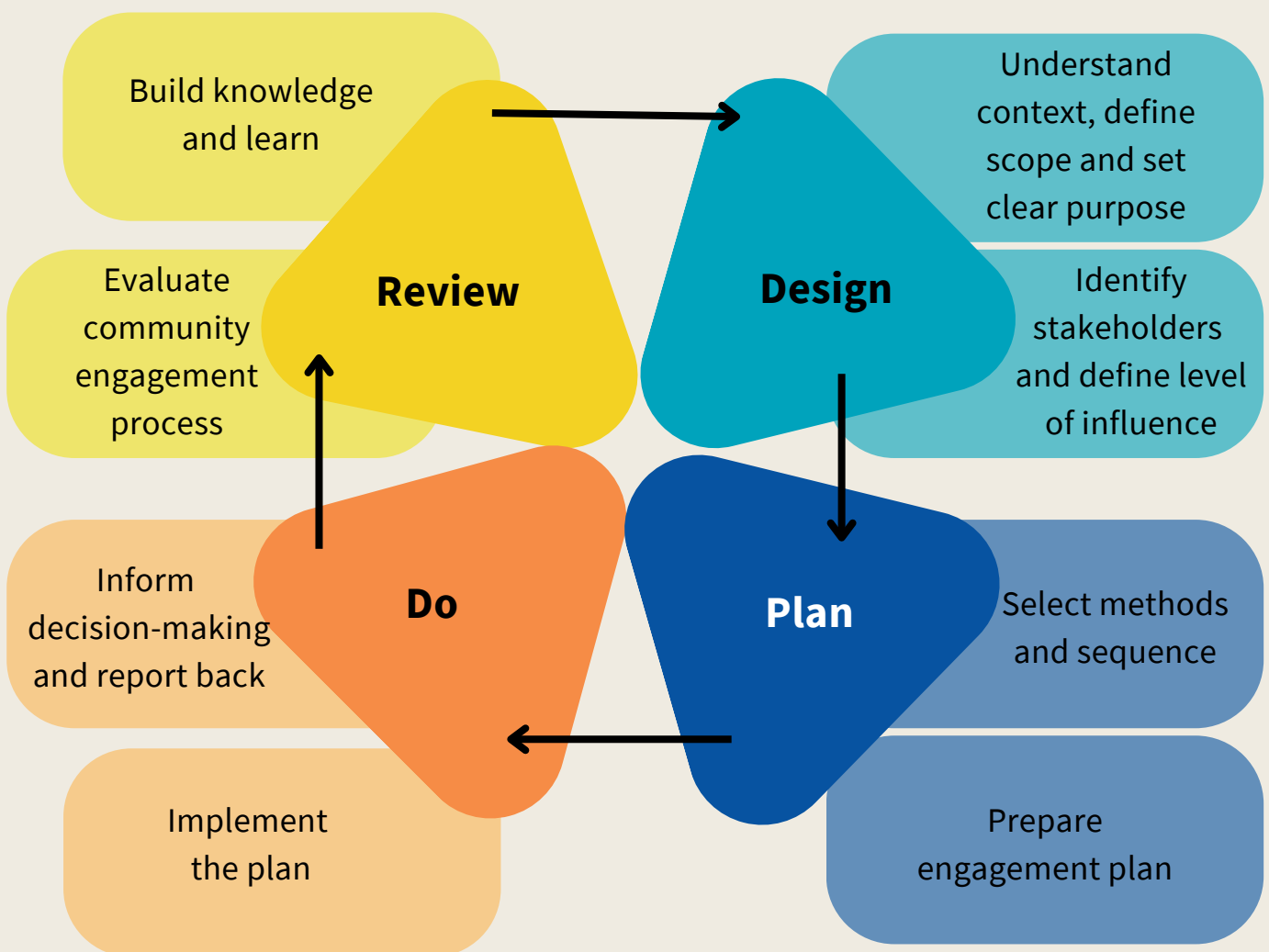
- For initiatives aimed at long-term sustainability where community engagement and commitment are crucial for success and continuity.
- When the goal is to build community cohesion, collaboration, and social capital, as well as decision-making.



# Engagement Process

In addition to the IAP2 Design described above, a ‘Design, Plan, Do, and Review’ process provides a more specific description of our approach to community engagement. Children’s Services will be adopting the model developed by Skillseeds Operations.

This cyclical and ongoing model ensures that Children’s Services continuously reflect and refine our approach to community engagement, adapting to changing circumstances, emerging issues, and evolving stakeholder dynamics. It also allows for a more responsive and effective engagement process over time.



([Skillseed Operations, Community Engagement is not just to have, It’s a must have!](#), 2021)

# Engagement Process

## **Design:**

At the “**Design**” phase, we will determine what type of engagement is appropriate.

If engagement is deemed relevant, we will:

- State the degree of influence that community partners have regarding decision-making
- Clearly define the purpose of the engagement and how the results will be used
- Identify the community partners involved, as well as their needs, interests, and concerns
- Determine the appropriate engagement methods tailored to meet the needs of community partners
- Develop a detailed plan outlining the steps, timeline, resources, and appropriate communication channels

## **Plan:**

In the “**Plan**” phase, we will:

- Execute the engagement plan using the appropriate engagement strategy
- Implement the chosen methods to engage community partners
- Establish effective communication channels
- Facilitate engagement activities ensuring an inclusive and safe environment
- Identify and allocate the necessary resources such as personnel, materials, and technology to support the engagement process

## **Do:**

At the “**Do**” phase, we will:

- Make necessary adjustments to the engagement strategy
- Use findings to inform decision-making
- Implement changes to enhance quality and address identified gaps
- Report back to the community the outcomes of engagement and how their participation influenced decision-making, if any, and share publicly on our website at intervals
- Implement the revised strategy, incorporating improvements and modifications to further engage community partners effectively

# Engagement Process

## Review:

In the “**Review**” phase, we will:

- Assess the effectiveness of the engagement strategy and appraise each element to determine best practices and areas for improvement
- Listen and collect feedback, data, and insights from community partners
- Analyze collected data and feedback to understand the impact, strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement
- Reflect on the outcomes and the extent to which objectives were achieved, and identify lessons learned and successful practices


By adopting this iterative process of "Design, Plan, Do, and Review", we recognize and acknowledge that engagement is an ongoing process. It also ensures that engagement strategies are dynamic, responsive, and adaptable to the changing needs and dynamics of community partners. It emphasizes the importance of continuous learning, flexibility, and improvement in fostering meaningful and impactful engagement.



# Planning Engagement


Our approach to engagement is adaptable and responsive, aiming to cultivate trust and enhance our relationship with the community. However, we acknowledge that some engagements may benefit from a more structured approach, necessitating deliberate planning and execution.

As part of the planning phase within the Design, Plan, Do, and Review model, we may use the [tool](#) below provided by the Tamarack Institute. This canvas serves as a valuable resource to delve into the essential aspects of an engagement process, enabling the organization and presentation of key information in a centralized manner for discussion and improvement.



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLANNING CANVAS

This planning tool will help you work through the main considerations you need when planning to engage your community. Use this as a space to reflect, generate ideas, and refine your thinking.

<p><b>WHAT IS OUR ROLE?</b> What's your relationship with the community for this work?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">PROVIDED TO THE COMMUNITY (without their input)</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">PROVIDED FOR THE COMMUNITY (with consultation)</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">PROVIDED WITH THE COMMUNITY (with their involvement)</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">PROVIDED BY THE COMMUNITY (with their leadership)</td> </tr> </table> <p>What's important to keep in mind as we're engaging? (context, prior relationship, etc.)</p>	PROVIDED TO THE COMMUNITY (without their input)	PROVIDED FOR THE COMMUNITY (with consultation)	PROVIDED WITH THE COMMUNITY (with their involvement)	PROVIDED BY THE COMMUNITY (with their leadership)	<p><b>WHY ENGAGE?</b> <b>PURPOSE</b> Shade the appropriate segment of the triangle</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p><b>ENGAGEMENT GOALS</b> What are the main reasons for wanting to engage the community? What do we hope to learn? What are the beneficial outcomes for the community?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <input style="width: 100%; height: 20px;" type="text"/></li> <li>2. <input style="width: 100%; height: 20px;" type="text"/></li> <li>3. <input style="width: 100%; height: 20px;" type="text"/></li> </ol>	<p><b>HOW ARE YOU ENGAGING?</b> <b>LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT</b> Circle the appropriate level of engagement based on your purpose and goals.</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center;"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>INFORM</th> <th>CONSULT</th> <th>INVOLVE</th> <th>COLLABORATE</th> <th>EMPOWER</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="font-size: x-small; vertical-align: middle;">GOAL</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">To provide stakeholders with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions.</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">To obtain stakeholder feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">To work directly with stakeholders throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood.</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">To partner with stakeholders in each aspect of the decision from development to solution.</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">Shared leadership of community-led projects with trust and decision-making at the community level.</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="font-size: x-small; vertical-align: middle;">STYLE</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">"Here's what's happening."</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">"Here are some options, what do you think?"</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">"Here's a problem, what ideas do you have?"</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">"Let's work together to solve this problem."</td> <td style="font-size: x-small;">"You care about this issue and are leading an initiative, how can we support you?"</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p><b>METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT</b> What methods will you use to engage people?</p>		INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER	GOAL	To provide stakeholders with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions.	To obtain stakeholder feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with stakeholders throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood.	To partner with stakeholders in each aspect of the decision from development to solution.	Shared leadership of community-led projects with trust and decision-making at the community level.	STYLE	"Here's what's happening."	"Here are some options, what do you think?"	"Here's a problem, what ideas do you have?"	"Let's work together to solve this problem."	"You care about this issue and are leading an initiative, how can we support you?"	<p><b>GUTCHECK</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Context expertise</b> – Is context expertise, or lived experience, amplified and integrated into the work?</li> <li>2. <b>Power</b> – How are the people who are closest to issues able to shape outcomes?</li> <li>3. <b>Inclusion</b> – Are we truly listening, learning, and reducing barriers?</li> <li>4. <b>Meaningful contribution</b> – Does our 'what' and 'why' have co-benefit to the community? Are we inviting people to contribute in meaningful ways?</li> <li>5. <b>Strengths</b> – How can we learn about and leverage community strengths and assets?</li> <li>6. <b>Accountability</b> – Are we demonstrating that we listened and that community contributions shaped the outcome?</li> </ol>
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Source: [Tamarack Institute website](#)

# Moving Forward

Our engagement strategy reflects our deep commitment to fostering meaningful partnerships with diverse community partners. Through proactive communication, collaboration, and mutual respect, we strive to understand and address the unique needs, perspectives, and priorities of each community partner.

Whether it's engaging with parents/caregivers, community organizations, businesses, post-secondary institutions, or policymakers, our approach is centered on transparency, inclusivity, and continuous improvement. We value feedback, seek input, and commit to working collaboratively to co-create solutions that positively impact the well-being and development of our youngest citizens and families in our community.



# References

Skillseed Operations. (2021, May 11). [Community Engagement is a not just to have, It's a must have!](#) Retrieved from Skillseed.

Skillseed Operations. (2021, May 11). [Community Engagement is not a good to have, it's a must have!](#) Retrieved from Skillseed.

TOOL | [Community Engagement Planning Canvas](#). (2020, Feb 27). Retrieved from Tamarack Institute.

Updated April 2025

