



How To Engage Young People

A GUIDE FOR CLUBS

Attracting and retaining young members between the ages of 11 and 17 is crucial to the success of Surf Life Saving Clubs. By creating an engaging environment where youth feel valued, heard, are empowered, clubs can build a stronger, more committed membership base. This guide offers practical strategies to engage young people, increase their attendance, and foster a lasting connection to the club.

1. COMMUNICATION - QUICK TIPS

DO

- ✓ **Talk to young people like adults:** Show respect by treating youth members as mature and capable individuals. This encourages responsibility and engagement.
- ✓ **Explain your decisions:** Instead of simply instructing youth members, explain why certain actions or tasks are important. This helps them understand the rationale and increases buy-in. Outline to them how their involvement increases the value of the activity/action.
- ✓ **Maintain energy and enthusiasm:** Even when faced with uninterested or apathetic faces, bring genuine energy and enthusiasm to your interactions. Eventually, youth members will respond positively.
- ✓ **Be adaptable:** It is good to plan in advance, but if something's not working, change it! Try to read the energy in the group, using different activities or approaches to hype them up when energy's low and calm them down when they have lost focus. One scenario will not work for all Youth so adapting is key – manage expectations.
- ✓ **Ask for their opinions:** Involve youth in decision-making. Often, young people have valuable ideas and opinions that can improve the club or activities on offer. Give them a say and they will be more likely to get invested.
- ✓ **Make yourself approachable:** Many members stop attending simply because they feel they are not known or valued – that they aren't needed or their concerns aren't heard. Ensure that they know who to speak to if they have questions or issues.
- ✓ **Bring out their skills:** utilise their specific SLS skills to assist other members in training – boards, swim, reading the ocean – they have years of experience on your beach.
- ✓ **Ensure you are also talking to their parents as they are still making decisions for them:** and know your comms will be read by the parents - 2 x email addresses one for them one for the parent/guardian – Have a copy of the HSC Schedule and have a Club plan on how to manage patrol attendance during this time.



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COMMUNICATION - QUICK TIPS (CONTINUED)

DON'T

- ✗ Overplay your authority:** Respect is earned through open communication and collaboration, not by issuing commands or dictating what must be done.
- ✗ Be rigid and inflexible:** If your club feels too much like school, youth members will disengage. Allow them to fit their participation into their schedules.
- ✗ Split friendships up:** Friendships and age group connections are strong motivators for young people to stay involved. Keep them together whenever possible, especially during patrols and club activities, to ensure they continue to enjoy their experience at the club.

Of course, this all sounds good when teenagers listen to you, but if they don't it can be hard not lapse into authoritarian leadership styles. There will be occasions where raised voices and hardlines are required, to create clear boundaries of respect and ensure everyone's safety. But this should be a last resort, the more often you engage in this way the less effective it becomes.

Try appealing to reason first, explain that you are all there voluntarily, you don't want to be an angry teacher, and they don't want to be treated like students or kids, but respect needs to go both ways.

2. FLEXIBILITY

Young people's lives are full of competing priorities, including school, extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and social events. This age group is also reliant on family and friends for transport and these demands can make it difficult for them to commit to a fixed schedule, which can lead to disengagement and dropout. Offering flexibility in how they participate is key to improving retention.

Key Strategies

- **Flexible Attendance:** Instead of focusing on strict attendance requirements, prioritise consistent participation. It's better to have youth members attend sporadically but regularly than to have them drop out entirely. Flexibility helps them balance their other commitments with their involvement at the club. This relates to training, patrols, social events and all areas of surf lifesaving they may be involved in. Plan for managing the HSC timetable
- **Create an Escape:** For many young people, the pressures of everyday life can be overwhelming. Make the club a space where they can escape and enjoy themselves, rather than an additional burden. When youth see the club as a fun, relaxing, and supportive environment, they'll be more likely to return year after year.



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3. SHARING OWNERSHIP

Empowering young people by giving them a voice at their club is a powerful way to increase engagement. When youth feel they have a say in club activities or have ownership of decisions, they are more likely to show up, take part and be invested in the success of the club. If they feel overlooked or simply told what to do, they're more likely to disengage.

Key Strategies

- **Pre-season:** Hold a pre-season welcome planning meeting that includes youth members. Present a youth engagement calendar for the season and ask for their thoughts, ideas, and feedback. Encourage them to suggest activities or events they'd like to participate in or see added. This inclusive approach ensures they feel involved from the start. Ask youth to nominate a Youth Captain to communicate their ideas and concerns and represent youth at committee meetings. Ensure you are also communicating with Parents so they also know the Patrol schedule and patrol requirements.
- **During-season:** Set up clear communication channels for both youth members and parents. Let everyone know who they can go to with questions, concerns, or suggestions, and specify the best ways to communicate. Welcome feedback and be open to making changes based on the needs of your members. Club Youth captain should be engaged with Club Management and leadership in any relevant discussions.
- **Post-season:** End-of-season surveys and check ins provide valuable insights for improvement. They allow you to gather actionable data that can inform future activities. Consider either a mid-season or end of season survey, or both, to ensure you are constantly in touch with youth satisfaction and aware of how to improve their experience. Tools like Microsoft Forms, Google Forms, and SurveyMonkey are effective for this purpose. If you need assistance, reach out to the SLSNSW membership team.

4. TURNING PHONES INTO POSITIVES

While many adults may see teenagers on their phones as a sign of disengagement, phones can be powerful tools when used purposefully. Instead of viewing them as a distraction, embrace the opportunities they offer.

Key Strategies

- **Use Phones for Productive Tasks:** Assign youth members tasks like researching information for the club, planning social events, or creating social media content. Have them produce TikTok's or Instagram Reels showcasing the club's activities or capturing amazing photos of everyday club life to share on socials and in newsletters. This gives them a sense of ownership over the club's digital presence and enhances their creativity.
- **Leverage Social Media Expertise:** Teenagers are often experts at creating engaging content online. By involving them in the club's social media strategy, they can contribute to the club's visibility and reach while also gaining valuable skills for their future job prospects.



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5. PATROLLING

Patrolling duties can often be an area of uncertainty, boredom and dissatisfaction for youth members. However, with some thoughtful planning, clubs can make patrols more engaging and enjoyable, ensuring that youth members remain committed and involved.

Key Strategies

- **Keep Youth Together:** Whenever possible, schedule youth members on patrols with their peers. If you have limited numbers, consider forming a youth-specific patrol to maintain the social element and prevent isolation. The friendships young people form at the club can be a powerful motivator for continued participation.
- **Pair with Skilled Patrol Captains:** Assign Patrol Captains who are skilled at engaging youth and creating a positive, inclusive atmosphere. These captains should understand the importance of making patrols enjoyable, and they should know how to motivate and connect with young members.
- **Transition mentors:** Pair all first-year patrollers with an experienced mentor to show them the ropes, answer their questions, and encourage their development.
- **Upskill Patrol Captains:** Train Patrol Captains on how to engage youth members, offering strategies for keeping patrols fun and interactive. The Youth Patrol Playbook is a great resource for guidance and support for Patrol Captains and youth members.
- **Provide Flexibility:** Provide youth members with the flexibility to choose their patrol schedules, understanding the challenges they face with commitments such as HSC, part-time work, club transportation, and pre-booked family vacations. Youth members may be uncertain about how to handle situations where they cannot attend a patrol or arrange for a swap.
- **Provide Food:** Offering snacks or meals during patrols is a small but effective way to create a positive experience. Consider providing lunches or light refreshments to make patrols feel more enjoyable and communal.
- **Patrol Swaps:** Take the youth to Patrol a different beach for the day – this adds variety to their experience, helps them practice skills in an unfamiliar environment, and build connections with within the SLS community, preferably meeting other people their own age to be shown around.

By adopting these strategies and maintaining a flexible, supportive approach, Clubs can build stronger connections with their youth members. Empowering them with ownership, utilising their skills, and creating a positive and flexible environment will increase engagement and retention. Keep in mind, the more youth members feel valued and respected, the more likely they are to stay committed and contribute to the club's success.

For additional assistance or guidance, don't hesitate to reach out to the SLSNSW membership team at memberservices@surflifesaving.com.au