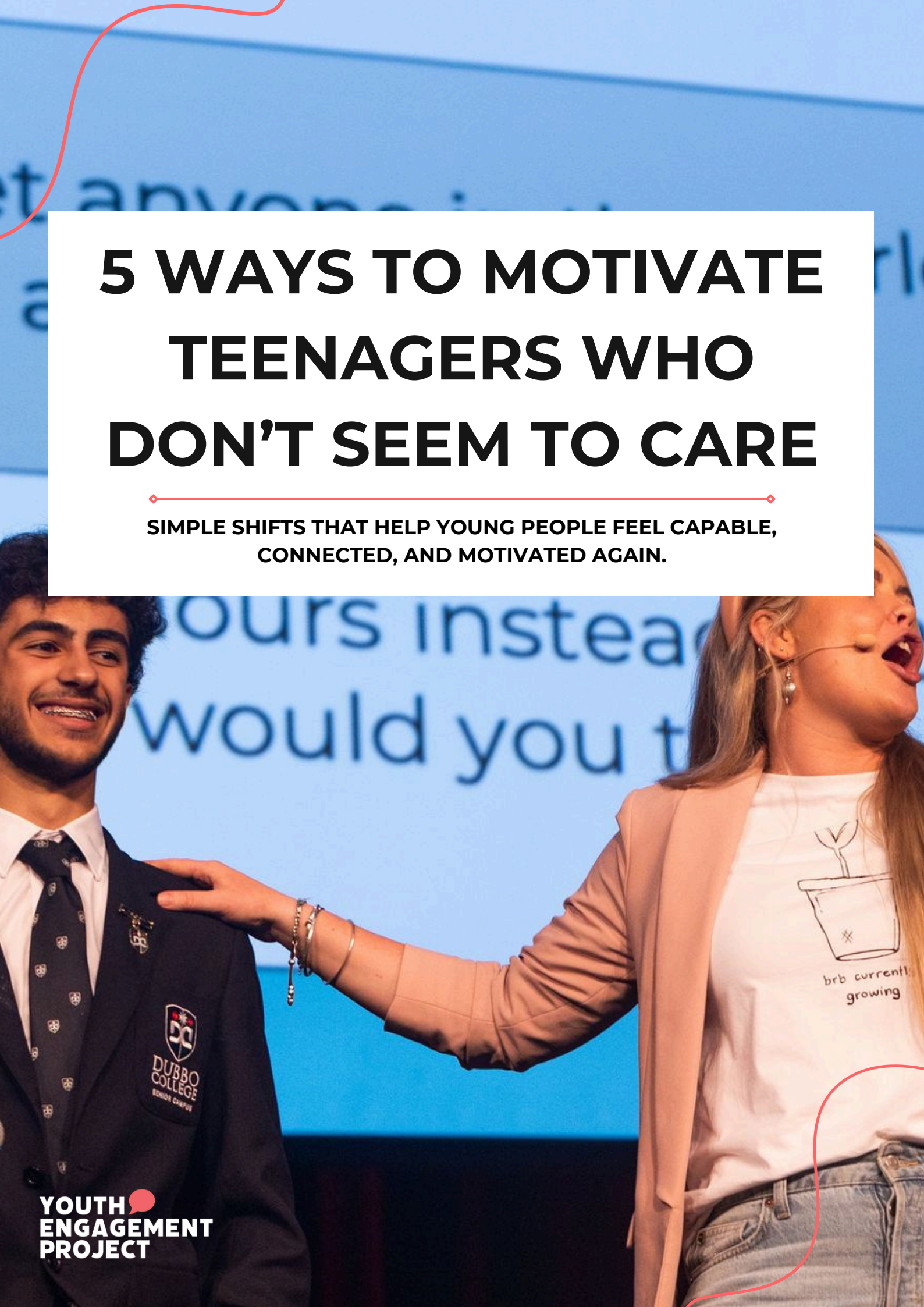
5 WAYS TO MOTIVATE TEENAGERS WHO DON'T SEEM TO CARE

SIMPLE SHIFTS THAT HELP YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL CAPABLE, CONNECTED, AND MOTIVATED AGAIN.



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

HELLO, THERE!

We're Skye and Amanda, and we're stoked to introduce you to ***5 Ways to Motivate Teenagers Who Don't Seem to Care.***

If you work with teenagers, you've probably experienced this moment:

You ask a question… and the room goes quiet.
A few students stare at the desk.
Someone shrugs.
Someone else says, "I don't care."

It can feel like nothing you try is working.

But research into adolescent motivation shows something important:
Most teenagers don't disengage because they're lazy or unmotivated.

They disengage when they feel:

- disconnected
- unsafe to participate
- like they can't succeed
- like they have no real say in what's happening.

When these needs aren't met, motivation drops quickly. The good news is that small changes in how adults structure learning and interaction can rapidly increase motivation.

Here are five strategies that consistently help, we hope you find them useful!

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THE ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES

Motivating teenagers doesn't come from pushing harder - it comes from creating the conditions where young people feel capable, connected, and willing to participate. These five strategies are simple shifts that help rebuild motivation and engagement. Apply each one intentionally and you'll start to see teenagers move from switching off to stepping forward.

01

CONNECTION BEFORE CONTENT

Connection creates the conditions for motivation.

02

MAKE PARTICIPATION FEEL SAFE

Psychological safety increases student participation.

03

GIVE TEENAGERS REAL CHOICE

Ownership increases effort and participation.

04

HELP TEENS EXPERIENCE PROGRESS

Small wins rebuild student motivation.

05

TURN PASSIVE GROUPS INTO ACTIVE ONES

Participation increases when students are actively involved.

These strategies are grounded in well-established research on adolescent motivation and learning, including the work of Ryan & Deci on human motivation, alongside broader research on psychological safety, participation, and adolescent development.

01
CONNECTION BEFORE CONTENT

Connection creates the conditions for motivation.

Motivation grows when teenagers feel known, respected, and safe with the adults around them. It's easy to assume motivation is about the task. But for teenagers, motivation often begins with something much more human: ***relationship.***

Young people are far more willing to participate, try, and persist when they feel the adult in the room genuinely knows them and respects them. When that connection is missing, even the most well-designed activity can fall flat. Connection doesn't mean lowering expectations, it means creating an environment where teenagers feel safe enough to engage.

When young people feel seen and respected, they are much more willing to step forward.

What This Looks Like In Practice:

- Begin your class with a quick check-in question before starting the lesson.
- A youth worker might take two minutes at the beginning of a program to ask what's been happening in participants' week.
- Learn and consistently use students' names to build familiarity and trust.

These small moments of connection create the conditions where motivation can grow.

Key Implementation Tip:
Before starting content, ask yourself:
"Have I created a moment of connection yet?"
Because if it's intentional, even a brief interaction can change the energy of the room.

02
MAKE PARTICIPATION FEEL SAFE

Psychological safety increases student participation.

Teenagers are far more likely to contribute when speaking up doesn't feel risky. Many young people disengage not because they have nothing to say, but because participation feels unsafe - and remember, as humans, we're all wired to look for danger (real or not) and keep ourselves safe.

They may worry about saying the wrong thing, being judged by peers, or being corrected publicly. When those risks feel high, the easiest option is to stay quiet.

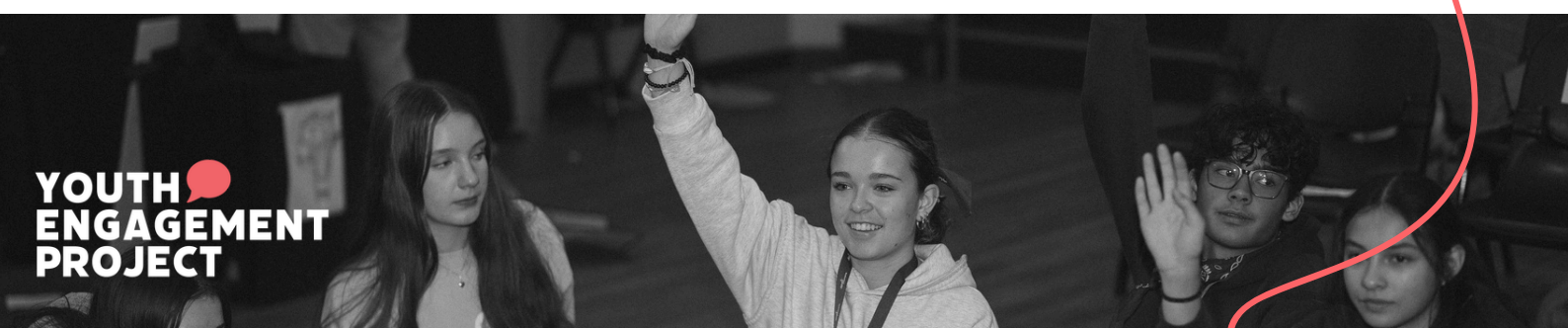
Motivation rises when the environment signals something different - that curiosity is welcome, mistakes are normal, and contributions are valued. When young people feel safe enough to try, participation increases naturally.

What This Looks Like in Practice:

- Allow students time to think when asking a question rather than expecting an immediate response.
- A facilitator might invite small pair discussions before asking for ideas from the whole group.
- Respond to answers with curiosity rather than judgement.

Remember: *We cannot sit in curiosity and judgement at the same time, and rarely, if ever, does an empathetic response begin with, "At least..."*

Key Implementation Tip:
Before asking students to contribute, ask:
"Does this feel safe enough for someone to risk speaking?"
If not, lower the pressure first... and if you are getting crickets, this is feedback for the leader of the space - the gradient might be too high.



03

GIVE TEENAGERS REAL CHOICE

Ownership increases effort and participation.

Motivation increases when young people feel they have a genuine say in what they're doing. Teenagers are navigating a stage of life where independence and identity matter deeply. When every decision is made for them, motivation can quickly disappear. But when young people feel their voice has influence, their willingness to engage will grow alongside this volition.

Choice doesn't require giving up structure or expectations (in fact, these things are essential for safety). Often, even small opportunities for input can make a significant difference.

Importantly, choice works best within clear boundaries. Structure provides predictability and safety, while choice creates ownership within that structure. When young people know the expectations but still have room to contribute their ideas or shape how something happens, motivation begins to grow. ***The goal is not to remove guidance, but to shift young people from feeling controlled to feeling involved.***

What This Looks Like in Practice:

- Students are given a choice between two discussion topics related to the same lesson.
- A group is invited to vote on which activity they would like to begin with.
- Young people are asked for input on how they would like to present their ideas.

Key Implementation Tip:
Look for moments where you can ask:
"How would you like to approach this?"
Even small choices can increase ownership and autonomy.

04
HELP TEENS EXPERIENCE PROGRESS

Small wins rebuild student motivation.

Young people are far more likely to stay motivated when they can see that their effort is leading somewhere.

One of the fastest ways for motivation to disappear is when young people feel they can't succeed.

If tasks feel overwhelming or progress feels invisible, many teenagers stop trying altogether. It's not always a lack of motivation; sometimes it's a lack of belief that effort will make a difference.

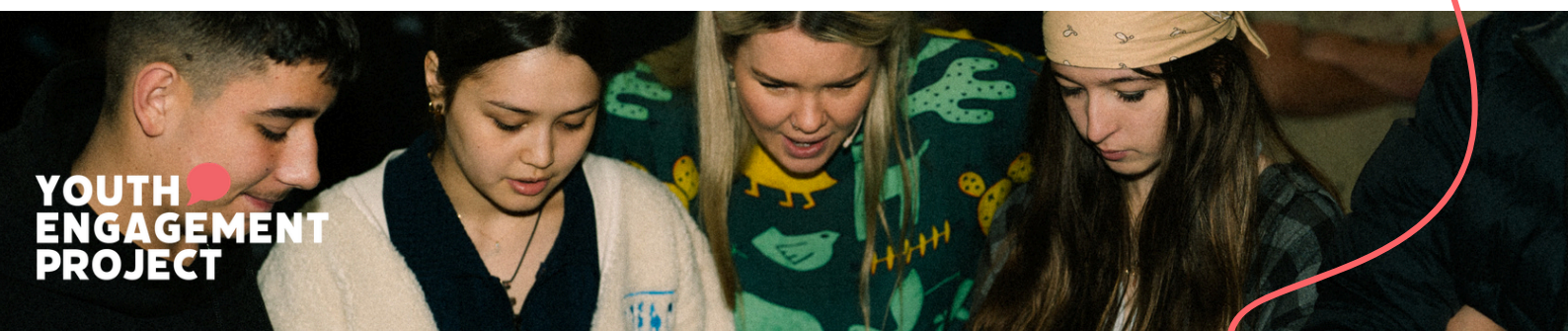
When young people begin to notice their improvement, however small, motivation often returns.

Seeing progress reminds teenagers that **their effort** matters. Let's remember, we want to praise and focus on effort rather than the outcome.

What This Looks Like in Practice:

- An educator highlights how a student's explanation has become clearer since their previous attempt.
- Break a complex task into smaller steps so participants can experience success earlier.
- Acknowledges persistence when a young person keeps working through a challenge.

Key Implementation Tip:
Instead of only highlighting outcomes, reflect on whether you are guiding students to consider their progress.



05
TURN PASSIVE GROUPS INTO ACTIVE ONES

Participation increases when students are actively involved.

Long periods of passive listening often lead to disengagement. When young people are only expected to absorb information, attention naturally fades.

Participation changes this dynamic. When teenagers are invited to contribute, discuss, and explore ideas together, energy in the room shifts.

Active environments create opportunities for young people to think, speak, and interact - all of which increase motivation and involvement. Research consistently shows that when young people are actively involved in discussing ideas or solving problems together, they are more likely to stay focused and retain what they learn.

Participation also signals that young people's perspectives matter. When teenagers feel their voice has a place in the room, they are far more likely to stay engaged and contribute their effort.

What This Looks Like in Practice:

- Invite students to briefly discuss a question with a partner before sharing ideas with the whole group.
- A facilitator could introduce a short debate and invite young people to adopt different perspectives.
- Use quick interactive activities to reset energy in the room.

Key Implementation Tip:
Before planning an activity, ask:
"Where will young people get to contribute?"
Small moments of participation can dramatically change engagement.

WHERE TO, FROM HERE?

You've just explored five practical ways to help motivate teenagers who don't seem to care. But like any meaningful change in practice, the real impact doesn't come from reading strategies, it comes from applying them.

Start small. Think about the next class, program, meeting, or session you're facilitating and ask yourself:

- Where could I build a moment of connection before starting content?
- How could I make participation feel safer for young people?
- Where might I offer small choices to increase ownership?
- How can I help young people notice their progress?
- Where could I invite more active participation?

Often, small shifts in how we structure environments and interactions can make a significant difference to motivation.

How We Can Support

If you're ready to go deeper, we provide training and development in the following areas:

For adults and organisations:

- Building psychological safety in youth-facing spaces
- Understanding the current youth landscape and what young people need today
- Reading and responding to behaviour through connection and regulation
- Facilitation and engagement training for youth teams

For young people:

- Public speaking workshops grounded in our 4C Framework - Courage, Clarity, Connection and Communication

Whether you're strengthening your internal team or empowering young people directly, we're here to support the next step.

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