

Social Action Guide

Introducing social action to young people – what is it and why does it matter?

Youth social action refers to activities that young people do to make a positive difference to others or the environment. There are lots of ways in which young people can take practical action to make a positive difference. It can take place in a range of contexts and can mean formal or informal activities. These include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning, or supporting peers.

Young people don't have to try and save the world on their own. Taking small positive actions to improve your home, school or local community can all make a big difference. Put simply - it's about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve problems that are facing their communities.

The #iwill campaign have identified a set of six principles which define great youth social action – it can be useful to use these as a check for each project you're planning:

What does great youth social action look like?

The #iwill Campaign has identified a set of six principles which define great youth social action

Embedded

Accessible to all, and well integrated to existing pathways to become a habit for life

Challenging

Stretching and ambitious as well as enjoyable and enabling

Reflective

Recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning

Youth-led

Led, owned and shaped by young people's needs, ideas and decision making

Progressive

Sustained, and providing links to other activities and opportunities

Socially impactful

Have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem

EMPOWERHER

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Activity idea One: Could you help?

- ★ Start by showing this short [Red Cross video](#) about the power of kindness, asking the young people to take notice of everything being done to help others throughout.
- ★ Short group discussion – what kind of helpful acts did you notice? What difference do you think they made? Who was doing them? Have they heard of the term ‘volunteer’?
- ★ You can follow on with this [video](#) about the people who have powered the Red Cross throughout its 150 year history.
- ★ Short group discussion – did you notice any similar acts of help and kindness? Who was doing the helping? Volunteers are people who take action to support others because they want to help. Do you think you could be a volunteer?
- ★ Explore whether young people think they can be volunteers by laying the stand-up-sit-down game – this can be adapted* to suit the space and the group. Stand up if you could help in the following situation, stay sitting down if you don't think you could – take some time after each to discuss the answers:
 - If a friend is upset because they can't do their classwork
 - If someone from a different class falls over in the playground and hurts themselves
 - If you see a stranger fall down in the street
 - If there's a storm and your neighbour's roof collapses
 - If there's a lot of rubbish and litter in town
 - If a neighbour is lonely
 - If a new family move to the area after they've had to leave their country because it wasn't safe. They don't know anyone, or the town, and they might not speak English.
 - If there's a hurricane in the Caribbean and a lot of people are left without homes, food, clean water, or medical supplies?

(*Potential adaptations: for those with mobility issues, you can use waving arms instead of standing, holding up traffic light cards to represent yes or no, or a verbal response. For a more active session, try walking to allocated parts of the room for 'yes' or 'no'. In an online session, thumbs up/down gestures can be used on a video call, or you could use response emojis on screen)

Top tips

Adapting your language

Social action isn't always a phrase young people will be familiar with. Framing it in terms of helping people or making changes in a community – that's something most young people already understand.

Actions speak louder

Showing how voluntary service can make a real impact to those experiencing a crisis can be more effective than just talking about it! It can be useful to demonstrate this through the work of existing organisations and activists (activities 1 and 2) and by jumping straight in with some introductory activities so that young people can experience making change themselves.

★ Potential discussion points:

- Considering your own safety before helping others. If you don't feel safe approaching a stranger who looks like they could need help, can you find someone else to help instead? e.g. finding a parent or teacher, an official if you're at an event, calling an ambulance.
- The 'Bystander Effect' is when people don't approach to help in a situation because they assume someone else will do it who is more qualified or better prepared. It's important to remember that in most cases, trying to do something to help will be better than doing nothing at all.
- Is the support you can give the only or the best help that is needed? Maybe not! What further support might be needed for the people in these situations?
- You could all be volunteers! Helping others doesn't have to be about grand actions or huge campaigns. The first step is just noticing that a person or a group of people need support, and that you can help them.

Activity idea two: Discovering young activists

- ★ Show a selection of photos of young activists (the ones provided here are just suggestions - who do you think the group you're working with might have heard of or look up to?) Question for the group: do you know who they all are?
- ★ Extension idea – challenge the group in pairs to look up an activist each and find out more about them. They can use their phones for ten minutes then share what they've found.
- ★ Share a few details about each activist. Question for the group: what do you have in common with them? (age, gender, where they come from?) They were once just like you and had an idea for change - they found something they were passionate about and they went for it!



Greta Thunberg (Sweden)

- Environmental activist
- Did her first school strike at the age of 15
- Spoke at the UN
- Talks about her superpower being her Asperger's Syndrome



Julieta Martinez (Chile)

"solutions should not be for girls, they should be made with girls"

- Climate and gender equity activist
- Founder of the Tremendas platform
- Participated in the Generation Equality Forum



Sofia Scarlat (Romania)

- Founded a campaign called 'Girl Up', Romania's first ever gender equality organization for teenagers
- Works to advance gender equality through the prevention of domestic violence, sexual violence and trafficking in persons



Malala Yousafzei (Pakistan)

- Equal rights advocate
- Was shot by the Taliban for campaigning that all girls should have education
- Graduated from Oxford
- Spoke at the UN



Amika George (UK)

- Started the #FreePeriod campaign when she was 17. Do you have free period products in your school? If so, it's thanks to her!
- Awarded an MBE (the youngest ever recipient)



Hilda Flavia Nakabuye (Uganda)

- Climate and environmental rights activist
- Founded Uganda's Fridays for Future movement
- Advocates for greater gender equality and racial diversity in the climate change movement

Top tips

Finding your spark

The key to getting young people engaged in social action is finding the thing that sparks a real emotional reaction. What have they noticed around them that doesn't seem right? Have they seen someone in need of support who doesn't seem to be getting it? What have they seen or experienced that they want to change? Often the spark comes from personal experiences, so young people might need additional support to talk about it. Realising that they can take action to change these situations or support others experiencing them can be an empowering moment.

Every group and every young person will have a different social action journey – they'll start at different stages, care about different things, and have different abilities. Don't expect any two youth-led social action projects to be the same!

Here are some activity ideas for finding 'the spark' with a group of young people:



Activity idea three: Myself, my community, my world

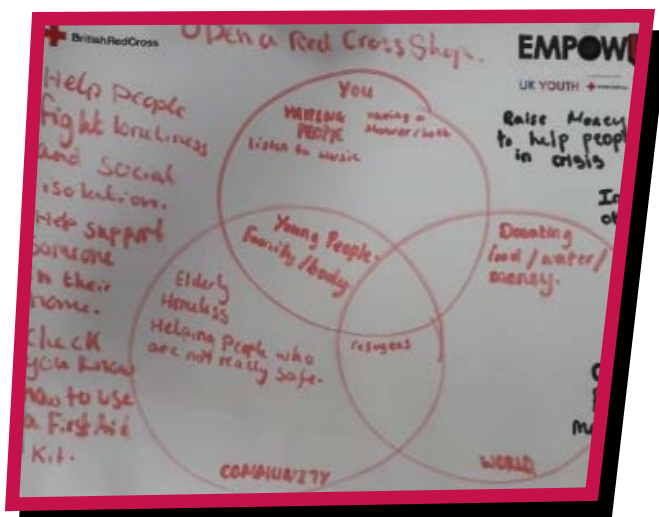
- ★ Ask the group to think about the changes that they think need to be made in their own lives, their community and the world. This can be done in small groups or individually, using a template of three overlapping circles:
 - **You:** Is there something you need help or support with? Something you'd like to change about your access to opportunities or resources, or something that you already use to help in difficult situations?
 - **Your community:** Is there something you see in your street, your school, your town that makes life harder for people in that community?
 - **Your world:** What big issues affect us all? Are there already campaigns or initiatives that are taking action to deal with them that you would like to be part of?



- ★ If people are comfortable, share these ideas as a wider group
- ★ From these ideas, pick an issue that everyone in the group agrees is important. Question for the group: who does this issue impact? Who are the people that need help and support? Starting with this group of people in the centre, create a group mind map of things you could do to help them like in these examples:



- ★ If the group are struggling to think of ideas or are feeling overwhelmed by the problem, try prompting them to imagine they had an unlimited budget – what would they do then? What would they really need to make those things happen? Are there some initial steps that might not need an unlimited budget to get started?




Activity idea four: Island visualisation

- ★ Using this choose-your-own-adventure style [Island Visualisation map activity](#) can help younger participants explore the range of different ways they could help others in an imaginative setting.
- ★ The activity sheet linked above includes a story you can read out to the group, with points throughout where they can choose which action to take. Whether the group are interested in helping in a particular scenario, or not, can be a great conversation starter for why and how they think they could help in that situation. You can explore some of the recommended links to learn more about each topic or get social action ideas!
- ★ You can give each member of the group their own 'map' ([colour map](#) or [black and white map](#)) and ask them to plot their journey and ideas as you talk through the activity. Or the group could get active and move around their 'island' in real life! All you need is to assign different parts of the room the locations on the map.

Activity idea five: What would you change?

- ★ Explore what themes motivate the group to take action or make change, using either this [online tool](#) that randomly selects an idea for the group to talk about (great for a whole group discussion) or these [social action motivation cards](#) (great if you want to split into smaller groups)
- ★ Start with a quickfire round – spin the wheel or pick a random card and have the group list as many ideas or thoughts about the topic as they can in 30 seconds.
- ★ Then ask the group to vote for the two themes that inspired the most interest. Give the group five minutes to create a mind map for each of these themes (individually or together) considering the questions:
 - Why does this issue matter to me?
 - What change do I want to see?
 - What could I do to make that happen?



A starburst graphic with a jagged, multi-pointed border in shades of orange and red. Inside the starburst, the text "Making change happen" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font.

Making
change
happen

Social action idea one: Positivity jars

Making a positivity jar is simple – all you need is a jar (or any box or container with a lid) and some slips of paper.

★ Write or draw messages on the slips of paper that will inspire love and kindness. You could use uplifting quotes, ideas that will make people smile, positive affirmations, suggestions of kind acts – it's up to you! Here are some suggestions:

- "You can do anything but not everything. Be kind to yourself"
- "Think of someone you love – now take out your phone and message them to let them know"
- Your favourite poem
- A happy memory
- Lyrics from your favourite song

★ Once your jar is full of slips of paper, put on the lid and decorate it any way you like.

★ Every day take out a piece of paper and see how it makes you feel!

The great things about positivity jars is that it doesn't stop with you – why not make two jars, add a label to one with these instructions, and pass the positivity on to a friend?

Social action idea two: Cleaning up a community

Community spaces are areas like parks, bus stops, roads, or town centres that everyone in the community has access to. When these spaces are clean and cheerful it really give the people who use them a positive boost, as well as being better for wildlife and the environment. You could:

- ★ Do a litter pick with your youth group, family or friends to clean up a local area. Check your local council's website or campaigns like The Great British Spring Clean to see if they can support you with equipment or guidance.
- ★ Brighten up a community space with chalk drawings or positive messages.
- ★ Go guerrilla gardening and fill a community space with plants or flowers! You could get involved with a scheme like Incredible Edible, or create seed bombs with wildflower seeds that are native to your local area to help encourage support bees and other insects.

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Making
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Social action idea three: Spreading the Power of Kindness

Messages of kindness can help us to feel less alone and more connected to other people. You can spread the power of kindness in hundreds of small ways, sometimes to people you don't even know! Why not try:

- ★ Making posters with positive affirmations display in your front window, or on a community notice board
- ★ Decorating 'positivity pebbles' with kind messages and bright colours. Leave these for people to find in local parks, or along a popular dog-walking route – you could even turn them into a kindness trail for people to follow!
- ★ Create kindness bookmarks featuring a positive message, a cheerful picture, or links to a kindness campaign like the one run by the **British Red Cross**. Leave these for people to find inside books in your school or local library, or include them when you lend books to others.
- ★ Reach out to somebody who might be lonely and say hello (it could be a friend, a family member, or neighbour you see walking). It can seem like such a simple thing, but every kind act makes a difference.

Social action idea four: Donation drive

There are lots of established charities and organisations helping other right on your doorstep, and they need the support of people like you to continue the great work they're doing.

- ★ Charity shops rely on your donations of clothes, books, and bric-a-brac to help raise funds for the amazing work of their organisations. Plus recycling your unwanted items can help save the planet. It's a win-win.
- ★ Food banks help support people who are in a difficult situation and need a helping hand. You can find food bank near you, and what specific food donations they're in need of at the Trussell Trust's website.
- ★ Some organisations run specialist versions of food banks for non-food essentials that people might need when they're going through a hard time – is there a Beauty Bank or Baby Bank near you that needs donations?
- ★ Women's refuges and homeless shelters also often ask for specific donations to benefit the people they support – why not get in touch with one near you and ask what they need?

Taking practical action to help others is such an empowering step, and it doesn't have to be something you do alone. Can you arrange with your friends or family to collect a few items each that are needed by a local charity or organisation? Once you group together, you'll find you can collect more than you would have expected on your own!


 Top
tips
Have a clear aim

It can be easy to get distracted once the brilliant ideas start flowing! Dedicate a good chunk of time to exploring ideas, and then once the group have picked something they'd like to achieve, encourage them to stick to it until it's completed.

Is that ultimate goal something tangible that everyone in the group understands? How will the group know when they've succeeded? Try setting a concrete target that is clearly linked to the cause they want to support, e.g. fundraising £XX so that the organisation we're supporting can do XX; holding a community learning event for XX people where we will teach them how to cope in a heatwave.

Young people will probably continue to think of new things to add as they go along – encourage them to discuss whether their new ideas will help towards the clear aim they've decided on. If it doesn't, maybe that's an idea for a whole different project! Encourage them to keep a note of those ideas in a collective space – a journal, whiteboard, or 'ideas box' that you can come back to later.

Think big, start small

It can be tempting to doubt what we can achieve with social action, and limit ourselves to easy, quick wins. But don't be afraid to think big – what would need to happen to solve the problem you're trying to address? You might not be able to achieve that immediately, or on your own, but keep that aim in mind and think about how every smaller action you take is building towards it.

A great way to visualise this with young people is to think of social action or any type of campaigning as a staircase... you have to start at the bottom, but you're climbing towards a definite destination. And every step counts!

Connect with your community

Make sure you connect with the community you want to help. Have a load of ideas and not sure which of them will help the most? Reach out and get members of that community involved in your decisions-making and planning. That could be by inviting those with lived experience to come and speak with your group, working with an existing community organisation, consulting with the community using feedback forms or a town-hall meeting.

Building community connection will help increase the impact and reach of your social action. Try making an influence map:

- ★ Start with your project idea in the centre
- ★ Use one colour to surround it with what you need to make it happen: Resources? Space to work in? Publicity? Additional volunteers? Funding? Transport?
- ★ In another colour, add all of the people or organisations that you know of who might be able to help with each thing: Community groups? Council members? Local MPs? Local businesses? A friend with a car? A local Scout group looking for a project? Get creative!
- ★ Decide on the best person to try and contact for each point and reach out! If you're writing to businesses or organisations, try and find a named person to contact (rather than a general customer email). Be clear and concise about your project aim and how you think they can help – remember that the worst thing that can happen is they say no!

Top
tips**Take time to reflect, celebrate every success, and have fun**

Social action can feel like a serious business, and it can sometimes get overwhelming or disheartening – especially if young people have big plans and don't feel like they're making progress. Change can be really slow to happen! Try to keep in mind that this is about sharing a passion for something that young people really care about, and every step towards that is worth celebrating.

- ★ Break up planning and campaigning sessions with time to chat, have fun, and play some silly games to keep everyone's energy up
- ★ Build in time for reflection as you go along. Talking about how the project is going and what is or isn't going well can be a great way to spot if plans need adjusting or if a new approach is needed.
- ★ Don't wait until the end to celebrate! Look for milestones and personal achievements to highlight and acknowledge as a group throughout the project.

Closing the loop – feedback matters

Take time to think about how you're going to find out if your project has been a success. Can you collect quotes and reactions from the people you're working with, or ask people from the community how they feel about the project? Get young people involved in this step too, so they can see and hear directly what impact they've made!



**WELL
BEING**