

Youth Leadership Symposium 2025

EVENT OVERVIEW

In August 2025, the Indigenous Programs team hosted the Youth Leadership Symposium (YLS), at the University of Toronto Scarborough Campus (UTSC).

Bringing together **34** young leaders &

34 youth workers from diverse communities and organizations for an in-person gathering.

Throughout the week, young leaders participated in sessions focused on building youth leadership, exploring play-based learning programs, and engaging in dynamic discussions about their visions for future programming and their communities. Guest organizations led hands-on sessions using arts, sport, and play as tools to build confidence, foster connection, celebrate creativity, and cultural exploration. These sessions aimed to support inclusion, reflection, and problem-solving through collaborative play.

This report highlights the impact of the YLS, as shared by the youth who participated.



The YLS Provides Youth With Meaningful Opportunities

The event created an opportunity for youth to gain new experiences that supported their growth as leaders. Youth valued the opportunity to travel to a new place, many for the first time, and to meet Indigenous youth and professionals from across the country.

Youth reflections demonstrated that the event served as both a resource and a creative space to imagine new opportunities and activities that strengthen themselves and their communities, as well as gain valuable cultural experiences.



“ a lot of Anishinaabe people and youth...don't really have like opportunities like we do in that kind of sense... When an opportunity like this falls on your lap, you kind of have to take it, right? Because not only that, it's like you are working to help other youth around the world to have the same opportunities we do. So I think that's really important. ”

- YLS Participant



Youth Experienced Personal Growth & Development

Youth shared how their experiences led to personal development through a combination of new experiences, self-reflection, and skill development. Many youths described the important impact of stepping outside their comfort zones, whether through travel, new relationships, or participating in new activities. These moments led to an increase in confidence, learning, and skill development.

“I just like I feel more confident going back, like I felt like less confident coming...” - YLS Participant

“you realize that you know a little bit more than you know”
- YLS Participant



“I don't usually like step up and like take initiative or be a leader. But like in the games, you're like kind of forced to...”
- YLS Participant

Participants reflected on their strengthening leadership skills, noting how the event supported them to realize and improve upon their existing skills and strengths as leaders. Youth also recognized the importance in moments of overcoming fear, discomfort, perceived failure, or boredom, as well as teachings that those experiences carry.



Youth Experienced Positive Social Connection

Youth reflected on the new friendships and relationships they built during the week and the strong sense of connection they experienced. Youth shared that the fun and engaging environment helped them to step out of their comfort zones.



“I realize that it's way easier to like meet people and I have more confidence. That's one thing I would gain from this.”

– YLS Participant

“We're like here, it's all about connection... So I think -I think everybody just needs a reminder of that and how it's important because we are a community and like we're all people.” – YLS Participant

Youth also shared the significance of carrying this sense of connection and healthy relationships forward to their communities and share it with community members.



Youths' Inspiration Will Leave a Lasting Impact with Communities

Youth are excited to share their skills, activities, and lessons learned.

“I feel like art would be like good to...help out your community members just like to discover themselves...” - YLS Participant

Youth shared how the types of activities they experienced at the YLS inspired ideas for events and programming for their communities. Creative programming, through arts and sports based activities that provide everyone a "fair chance", resulted in critical reflections and aspirations from youth to drive meaningful change through the types of programming that they will lead in their communities.



“And I'd probably teach him like what you said, the rock, paper, scissors, sort of everyone's a tag. Like everyone's like they're all that a good level. They're all the same. No one's better than anyone.” - YLS Participant

“We did actually do this one like a worksheet paper, like stuff we want in our community... We want to dream big...” YLS Participant

EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODS

Peer interviews were selected as a participatory approach to evaluate the impact of this event. This approach involves youth pairing up or joining into small groups and posing questions to one another. This approach allows youth to have greater control over the process as it puts the youth in the role of interviewer and interviewee.

On the last day of the event, youth were invited to participate in voluntary peer-led interviews. In total, eleven youth that attended the YLS volunteered to participate in the peer interviews. Participants were provided with cue cards that contained a range of sample questions related to their experience at the event and were also encouraged to ask questions of their own. These questions were written in collaboration with youth members of the Indigenous Youth Advisory Council before the event. Each peer interview pair or group completed their interview in a private room and recorded their conversation to be shared with the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning team.

The images below represent some of the questions asked during the peer interviews.





Thank You, Qujannamiit, Miigwech, & Maarsii!

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our generous donors whose support makes the PLAY program and this in-person gathering possible, empowering Indigenous youth workers and creating transformative opportunities for the children and youth in our partner communities through the power of play!



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