

VOICES & CHOICES

Youth Empowerment Experience

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We must be the change we want to see happen in the world.
-- Gandhi

OVERVIEW

Voices & Choices (V&C) is a caring and empowering space where youth gather to ask the question, “What future do we want to inhabit?” and to take action to make those futures happen.

V&C is a high energy, playful, and transformative “playshop” that supports teens in becoming conscious, responsible, and creative agents of change in their families, schools, communities and beyond.

V&C teaches teens to work as a team, to help manifest each other’s goals, and to create an “ethical community” of mutual respect and support, nonviolence, and FUN.

GOALS

The primary goal of **V&C** is to empower youth (typically, ages 14-18) to become active co-creators in all areas of their lives. To accomplish this, **V&C** helps teens develop a broad range of internal and external assets, including:

- **Life Purpose** – Deeper awareness of and connection to life purpose
- **Self-determination** – Self-directed learning and motivation
- **Positive values development** – responsibility, proactivity, authenticity, empathy, self-restraint, integrity, perseverance, trust
- **Social competencies** – constructive conversation, conflict resolution, honesty, diversity, teamwork, citizenship
- **Critical and creative thinking** and doing skills, decision-making, and ethical judgment
- **Self-Identity** – realistic self-assessment, positive self-concept, ability to self-empower, internal sense of control, transformation of fear and negative emotions
- **Support** – ability to ask for support from adults and peers when needed, and to offer support in kind
- **Belonging** – holding valued, trusted, and meaningful roles within the family, school, and community
- **Respect** – the ability to discern and appropriately manage one’s own and others’ boundaries, both physically and psychologically, and to abide by social agreements
- **Empowerment** – standing for the highest in ourselves and others, and acting in ways that enhance the quality of love and unlimited possibility in our world.

Within this context of self-development, youth are supported in manifesting their goals through concrete actions. This could involve, for example, creating a community garden, performing a song or play, starting a business venture, creating a school- or town-wide program on violence awareness, engaging in random acts of kindness, or innumerable other projects, all chosen by the participants themselves.

It is also the intention of **V&C** to support the establishment of **youth councils** in cooperation with local schools and community groups, to explore issues that concern youth, to communicate their visions of a positive future, and to engage them in decision making and actions within the larger community of school, business and government.

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STRUCTURE & ACTIVITIES

The focus of each V&C program is generally open-ended and evolves as the youth deepen their trust and begin to address issues and goals that are current and vital to them. V&C program activities consist primarily of life-based role-playing games. Interactive theatre helps teens connect to important personal and social issues in a more robust way than discussion alone can provide. Theatre also makes it easy to experiment with new behaviors because of the playful, non-judgmental atmosphere that is created. Solutions to life problems are generated by the group itself, which not only greatly facilitates the acceptance of new behaviors, but helps everyone develop a broader repertoire of healthy choices to meet the challenges of growing up. Other activities that may occur in V&C sessions include: Socratic dialogue, drawing, writing, music, drumming, and specific activities, either related to the development of a skill or value (for example, nonviolent communication), or to the concrete goals the group has chosen (for example, creating a video).

Because safety is so important to developing the trust necessary for growth, the initial session emphasizes ground rules – confidentiality, physical safety, personal choice, interpersonal boundaries, and self-responsibility in communicating and taking part in exercises.

V&C typically takes place in a school, church, or community organization-based environment, in a large room with lots of space to move around. Sessions typically last between 90 minutes and 2 hours. Programs can vary in length. The standard V&C program takes place over 10 consecutive weekly sessions. Programs lasting a semester are also possible. Organizations may also choose to run a V&C **Intensive (V&C-I)** over a full day, weekend, or longer.

RANGE OF ISSUES

Each V&C group is unique and will raise unique issues and learn in unique ways. New issues may suddenly become vitally important, either because of world events, because a group member is going through a change or crises, or because the group itself is encountering an obstacle. Whether fortuitously or by design, V&C programs may address such issues as:

- domestic or school violence
- drug abuse vs. getting high naturally
- health and healing
- sexuality, teen pregnancy
- ethics, morality
- race, diversity
- gender and generational differences
- law and politics
- the commercialization of youth culture
- the media
- history and current world events
- money, commerce, entrepreneurship
- culture and society
- memory and learning
- self-regulation of thoughts and emotions
- community organizing

About the Facilitator

John-Michael Dumais is a native of Keene NH and a graduate of Harvard University, where he majored in Psychology and Social Relations. He has been a counselor and trainer for youth and adults on a variety of empowerment, creativity, and communication topics. In Amherst Virginia, John-Michael was the force behind *The Future Options Project*, a comprehensive community program for youth empowerment through adult-youth partnerships. John-Michael has been Director of Oak Meadow School in Putney VT, a teacher, author of *Straight from the Heart* (parent-youth communication), and a consultant to IQLI's Youth-Centered Community Movement (Illinois). Currently John-Michael works as a personal coach and facilitator, is president of Monadnock Freedom Forum and host/DJ of Oasis radio programs on WKNH 91.3FM, Keene.

