Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Best Practices from The Beam Center
At Beam, we intend for learning to be an active, physical process of "figuring it out" and taking creative risks within a supportive environment that promotes agency and growth. This approach is described in our Learning Productions framework published by the Susan Crown Exchange in the Reclaiming Digital Futures Toolkit in 2019. We approached youth participatory action research (YPAR) as we would any other skillset: by collaborating with youth to create spectacular projects that can be shared and celebrated with their communities.

In the past, research about youth was mostly done by adults. A key contribution of YPAR is to identify the centrality of youth voice in research regarding the lived experiences and perspectives of youth. In other words, practicing YPAR means to center youth voice. This means literally listening to young people, giving them roles that respect and elevate their perspectives, and supporting them as they ground their inquiries in a customized approach to gathering and interpreting information and communicating their findings.

We accomplished this by collaborating with ICI - the Intergenerational Change Initiative - to teach formal research practices to youth researchers. With ICI’s support, our research team learned to formulate research questions and to design and implement their own surveys using a tool called AmplifyApp. The research team then brought the information they gathered into project design and prototyping sessions at Beam Center to identify the ideal methods of communicating their findings, crafting their knowledge into a variety of forms including a podcast, a collection of data visualization websites, and a digitally-integrated quilt.
Youth-led research projects should be tied to real-world situations identified by the youth conducting the research and should be relevant to their lived experiences and perspectives. Identifying research topics and questions will require a mixture of exploratory conversations and the learning of formal research concepts and methods. Together, these efforts work toward the generation of research questions and a description of the data collection process. Youth researchers at Beam investigated screen time, mental health, bias in news media, and their own personal histories and experiences with the internet.

It is important to have conversations with youth researchers about who they seek to communicate with. The research project should be geared toward an act of sharing knowledge that responds to the needs and goals of the youth researchers and their communities. This will influence both the structure of the data collection process and the type of information sought, which may include a combination of formal research methods and expressive or interpretive processes.

Participants in Beam’s Digital Futures program were paid for their time. It is essential to respect the time and labor of youth who take on roles in a research project. We also created new expanded roles for researchers who committed to the program across multiple sessions, structurally acknowledging the significance of their contributions.

Learn more about the Beam Center’s Research Projects Here.