

Code of Ethics for Youth Work in the ACT

The Youth Coalition of the ACT in consultation with the youth sector developed The Code of Ethics for Youth Work in the ACT. The Code contains the following 14 principles: primary client, ecology, equity, empowerment, duty of care, corruption prevention, transparency, confidentiality, cooperation, knowledge, self-awareness, boundaries, self care and integrity.

Each principle has a written definition, a commentary to give it a context, and case scenarios to illustrate some of the finer points when translated into practice.

The adoption of the Code of Ethics is voluntary at this stage. Youth services are encouraged to incorporate the Code into their policy and procedure manuals to ensure that the principles are adhered to. The Youth Coalition is committed to supporting the Code of Ethics and encourages all youth services to adopt it.

Prologue

In the struggle between survival and recognition, and society's need for order and control, young people can be excluded from full membership of the common wealth. Youth workers exist in the space between the exclusion of young people and the rest of society. The core of youth work practice lies in the relationship with the young person as the primary client, expressed through a commitment to advocacy and healing in their work with the young person and the wider society. The following principles are informed by this core position.

Commentary

The prologue sets up a central position where young people are important contributors to the economic, social and political life of the nation, and have a right to be recognised and included as such. It's about a relationship, not about one party or the other, but it's a relationship in which we take sides. Some people have reacted to the term "healing", and the association it has with the "medical model" of professional practice, but it best describes what needs to happen between young people and society and the relationship between the two. Obviously, much more than physical healing is in mind.

The prologue also makes it clear that youth work is primarily a particular kind of relationship with a young person, rather than a set of skills or practices.

Principle One: Primary Client

The primary client of the youth worker is the young person with whom they engage. Where conflict exists between obligations to one young person and another, it is resolved in ways that avoid harm and continue to support the person least advantaged by the resolution.

Commentary

Youth workers answer to a range of people: funding bodies, peers, management committees, parents, and communities. This clause, which we believe is at the core of the youth work relationship, keeps us mindful of who we are there for. Many people working in the field do not recognise the young person as their primary client, but see them as one of many stakeholders. That's okay - it just means they are not a youth worker. But young people need to know there is at least one player in the game they can rely on to uphold their interests.

Case Example

Will is a youth worker who sometimes provides court support for young people as part of his role. He attends court to support Luke who is charged with truanting. Luke arrives with his mother who is berating him about the charges. Luke's mother sees Will's presence as an opportunity to pressure Luke to change his ways, to 'sort himself out'. She attempts to influence Will to assist her to communicate this message to Luke. Will is clear that Luke is his primary client and that whilst family harmony is important for both Luke and his mother, the mother's interests come secondary to Luke's. With Luke's consent, the two of them instead use this as an opportunity to express Luke's difficulties in his school environment.

Principle Two: Ecology

Youth workers recognise the impact of ecological and structural forces on young people. Their work is not limited to facilitating change within the individual young person, but extends to the social context in which the young person lives.

Commentary

Youth workers are agents of change in a variety of contexts, both with individual young people, but also with the societal systems that can cause the problems in the first instance. As youth workers we need to be very clear that it's of no use dealing with a young person in isolation. Young people (like all of us) are shaped, influenced, contained and to some extent controlled by the contexts in which they live. Young people are part of communities and broader social contexts. This cannot be denied in our approach to working with young people. It would be short sighted to think they can be dealt with in isolation, ignoring the complex myriad of influences all around them.

Case Example

Lots of homeless young people access the service where Joe works as a youth worker. It is a frustration of the staff at the service that young people remain homeless and appear very transient. Joe regularly makes referrals for young people to crisis accommodation services. The youth workers notice that the reason young people are remaining transient is the lack of medium to longer term accommodation options for young people. They see this as an opportunity to facilitate change within the young people's social context and plan a campaign to raise awareness of this issue in the local area.

Principle Three: Equity

Youth worker's practice will be non discriminatory.

Commentary

All young people, regardless of race, gender, religion, disability or sexual orientation, under Human Rights and Equal Opportunity legislation have the right to be treated in a fair and appropriate manner. This impacts directly on the youth worker's approach to young people. Regardless of a youth worker's personal beliefs, a young person has the right to be treated fairly and responded to on the basis of their need. If a youth worker is unable to detach their personal beliefs from the situation, they have the responsibility to ensure the young person is referred to a worker that is able to deal with their needs in a non discriminatory and sensitive manner. The focus here is responding to the young person's needs in the best possible way.

Case Example

Kim and Sandra are school based youth workers. Sandra is uncomfortable with people who are in gay or lesbian relationships. She is approached by Geoff who is seeking assistance resolving a conflict with one of his teachers. Sandra is reluctant to become involved in this situation as she is uncomfortable with Geoff's sexual orientation. Kim discusses the matter with Sandra and together they agree that refusing to assist Geoff would be discriminatory (Geoff's heterosexual brother was assisted with similar problems just last week). After some examination of this issue, Sandra decides that her discomfort is likely to influence her working relationship with Geoff, and as such they decide that Kim will work with Geoff instead.

Principle Four: Empowerment

The youth worker seeks to enhance the power of the young person by making power relations open and clear, by holding power-holders accountable, by facilitating their disengagement from the youth work relationship, and by supporting the young person in the pursuit of their legitimate claims. Youth workers presume young people are competent in assessing and acting on their interests.

Commentary

The term 'empowerment' has become a bit of a buzzword, and as a result its meaning is sometimes not clear. This principle tries to clarify what empowerment might mean in ethical terms, and what it means for us as youth workers. It focuses our accountability to being accountable to young people. In this context, 'empowerment' also refers to young people's ethical and responsible action. In the last sentence, the word "presume" is important: We presume young people are competent in assessing and acting on their interests. It may be that an individual young person is not a good judge of their interests. They may have a mental illness, or be in some emotional distress. We may find out about these sorts of things as we assess the situation, but the presumption at the outset is that young people know what they're doing. It's about the assumption we go into a situation with. We need to assess the assumptions we hold about young people's competency in assessing and acting on their own needs.

Case Example

Ling (16) approaches her youth worker Harry of her recent mistreatment by a security guard at the local shopping centre. Harry is clear on his ethical commitment to empowering young people; he offers to assist with the complaints process and presumes Ling is competent to decide on what course of action to take. Harry explains the process clearly and how to access the process, he encourages Ling by emphasising the injustice of the security guard's actions and act in an advocacy role on behalf of Ling. Harry encourages Ling to do as much as she can in the complaints process for herself.

Principle Five: Duty of Care

The youth worker avoids exposing young people to the likelihood of further harm or injury.

Commentary

A duty of care recognises that sometimes we can do more harm than good by intervening in a situation. Intervention carries some risk with it. We can be over zealous with our passion to help people, get things moving or use the skills and resources we have at our disposal, and this might not be the best thing. If we're running an activity, making a referral, or engaging a young person in a program, we have a responsibility to make sure the activity, referral or program is safe in general and for each particular young person. We must also make sure no further harm results from their involvement. Risk assessment and management needs to be thorough. Equipment needs to be well maintained, and staff need to be properly trained.

It means that we have to exercise care in the employment of staff, whether paid or voluntary, full time or part time. Abuse of young people is not rare, and we are careful about who we give access to the young people we work with. Proper investigation needs to be made of people's work and criminal histories, even if they are volunteers.

Case Example

A community youth work agency is running a personal development camp with a group of young people from the local high school. In one of the exercises, each person has an envelope hung on the wall with their name on them, and the campers are invited to write affirming and encouraging notes to each other and to place their notes in each others' envelopes. Kate is a quieter student, and not part of the "in" group. She has sometimes been subject to quite cruel teasing from some of the more "popular" girls. The organisers consider carefully the risks of someone not receiving affirming notes, and are aware about the possibility of cruelty or violence. As such they monitor the exercise to ensure that young people like Kate will benefit from the affirmations and is not further victimised or alienated.

Principle Six: Corruption Prevention

Youth workers and youth agencies will not advance themselves at the expense of young people.

Commentary

We often think corruption is just about money. This principle encourages us to keep ourselves honest in terms of our motivations and rewards, which may involve financial gain but may also involve other things such as power, profile, emotional security, personal identity and so on.

It's important to realise we don't need to act with an entirely unselfish regard for the needs and interests of young people. It doesn't mean youth workers shouldn't do well out of their youth work. It is just that this cannot be at the expense of young people, so that young people don't do as well out of the youth work relationship as they would otherwise.

Case Example

Brenda is a youth worker at a crisis accommodation service. She is approached by the local paper who wants to do a story on homelessness. She is asked if she would be willing to be quoted in an 'exclusive' and be part of the main feature article, photographed with a young person sleeping on the street. The reporter implies the young person will need to look 'dirty' and 'sad'. Brenda doesn't know anyone who is sleeping out tonight. The reporter suggests that maybe one of the young people in the hostel might be willing to do it. Brenda knows the article may give her a 'higher profile' in the youth

sector but recognises exposing the young person and the hostel to such an exercise may place them more at risk. She explains this to the reporter and turns the offer down.

Principle Seven: Transparency

The contract established with the young person, and the resulting relationship, will be open and truthful. The interests of other stakeholders will not be hidden from them.

Commentary

We don't deceive young people, either by saying things that are untrue or by not saying things. This means in initial meetings youth workers must be clear about what they can and can't offer. This applies to various areas of practice, agency policy and law. While being open and truthful, workers should be mindful of issues of confidentiality, disclosure, health and safety, who the worker works for and what the agency is funded or contracted to provide. We also have a role in explaining to young people the nature of other stakeholders' relationships to them and the expectations this may place upon them.

Case Example

James is a youth worker in an employment and training program. He has been assisting Shane to look for work for about one month. When they first met, James explained the nature of his role and relationship to the young people who he assists. A few weeks later Shane asks James if he wants to come to his party on the weekend (he thinks James will make a good couple with his sister). James identifies this invitation as being inappropriate for a relationship between a young person and a youth worker, and he explains this to Shane by referring to the conversation they had when they first met.

Principle Eight: Confidentiality

Information provided by young people will not be used against them, nor will it be shared with others who may use it against them. Young people should be made aware of the contextual limits to confidentiality, and their permission sought for disclosure. Until this happens, the presumption of confidentiality must apply.

Commentary

Even where we think it might achieve good outcomes, we don't give names or other details to police, schools, Centrelink, other agencies or anyone else unless young people have been made aware of why there may be a need to give private information to others and their permission has been given. In accordance with National Privacy Principles we presume young people expect us to keep their information confidential, even if that is about where they were and who they were with. Perfect confidentiality is of course not possible or even desirable; there are always limits. We need to know what they are ourselves, and communicate and clarify them to young people at the onset of the relationship.

Case Example

Youth workers at the local drop-in centre have been approached by the district's Truancy Officer and are requested to pass on the names of those school-aged young people who attend the drop in centre during school hours. The truancy officer coerces youth workers by telling them it's for their own good. The youth workers recognise this practice as a breach of confidentiality and do not pass on young people's names. They agree if they're forced into

this practice through their agreement with their funding body, they will need to explain this to young people as soon as they have contact with the drop in centre.

Principle Nine: Cooperation

Youth workers will seek to cooperate with others in order to secure the best possible outcomes for young people.

Commentary

Ethical youth work practice involves a commitment to co-operative partnerships with relevant service providers in order to collectively achieve positive outcomes in the best interests of young people. Interagency collaborative approaches enables a young person a greater range of choices in terms of support networks and access to information, skills and resources to meet all their needs. It also enables a youth worker to expand their networks to current information and available resources. Working in deliberate isolation increases the risk of dependency-based relationships and denies young people choice as an equitable share of available resources.

Case Example

Sarah is a youth worker in a street-work program. She is approached by a Police officer on the street. He is looking for an opportunity to start a 3-on-3 basketball competition with young people on weekends. Although Sarah personally has a bad impression of police she pursues the opportunity to get involved. Her priority is the young people's needs and young people in the area are quite clear that boredom is a big problem for them.

Principle Ten: Knowledge

Youth workers have a responsibility to keep up to date with the information, resources, knowledge and practices needed to meet their obligations to young people.

Commentary

Maintaining a level of competence through an ongoing commitment to being informed and skilled in relation to 'best practice' in youth work is essential. This is a standard requirement of most professions.

Case Example

Peter is a youth worker who works alone at nights in a drug rehabilitation residential program. He is due to complete a refresher course for his first aid qualification. He has a responsibility to keep up to date his knowledge and practices needed to perform first aid as provision of first aid is an important part of his role.

Principle Eleven: Self-awareness

Youth workers are conscious of their own values and interests, and approach difference in those with who they work with respect.

Commentary

This means youth workers will take into account the diversity of values and interests young people may present with, and recognise their own may be different in comparison. Respect and dignity are crucial to being able to accept these differences

between self and the young person, while also recognising universally accepted concepts of human rights cannot be compromised in doing so.

Case Example

Jim is a youth worker who is opposed to abortion. The health service where he works is regularly approached by young women who are seeking termination of their pregnancies. Jim's co-workers believe young women have the right to choose this as an option. Jim is very uncomfortable with passing on this advice to the young women. He raises this as an issue with his colleagues in a team meeting, affirming his respect for their differing values on this matter. This provides the team with an opportunity to resolve the matter in the best interests of the young people who access the health service.

Principle Twelve: Boundaries

The youth work relationship is a professional relationship that's intentionally limited to protect the young person. Youth workers will maintain the integrity of these limits, especially with respect to sexuality. Youth workers will not sexualise their clients.

Commentary

This means youth workers will recognise the relationship between themselves and a young person is a contracted relationship recognises the need to be non-sexual and limited. This ensures the relationship and subsequent service or intervention is not compromised, a consideration is particularly important in work with young people who have less access to knowledge, resources, and skills than we do.

Case Example

Kenny is a youth worker in a rural area. He meets Michelle at the local drop in centre where she has come for assistance with a domestic violence situation. Kenny has also seen Michelle at the local pub a few times. Kenny becomes aware that Michelle is attracted to him - her suggestive comments make it clear she wants more from the relationship. Kenny responds by reinforcing the limits of his role and makes it clear that their relationship is based on his roles as a youth worker.

Principle Thirteen: Self Care

Ethical youth work practice is consistent with preserving the health of youth workers.

Commentary

This means youth workers need to prioritise the practice of self care - looking after the self as a means to assure longevity of career and continued high quality service provision to young people. The level of benefits to the worker from adequate self care practice will be congruent with the level of benefits to the young people we work with.

Case Example

Jan is a worker at a crisis accommodation service. The service is short of relief/casual staff and so the coordinator has requested some of her staff work double or triple shifts, often on their own time. Workers are covered by an award which specifies minimum breaks between shifts and provisions for time off. Jan recognises her need to engage in 'self care' and the affect it may have on her health if she fails to do so. She refuses double or triple shifts and raises this as a self care issues for others at their next team meeting.

Principle Fourteen: Integrity

Youth workers are loyal to the practice of youth work, not bringing it into disrepute. Youth workers will respect the strengths and diversity of roles other than youth work.

Commentary

For youth workers, this means they're self aware of their role and the expectations this places upon them from themselves, other stakeholders, and from young people. While undertaking a role that may be different from others, youth workers will value and respect difference in others approaches. Through continuing to portray youth work in a professional manner, youth workers will be mindful to not act in a way that can bring their role into disrepute.

Case Study

Mary, a youth worker, is approached by a young person named Simon, with his concerns over the lack of follow up from his government agency case worker. Mary has had run-ins with workers from this agency before and feels they don't care about young people very much. Mary feels like saying to the young person that she agrees, they are a bunch of losers and they care more about their comfy pay-packets than their work. But she also realises there are two sides to each story, and she needs to put aside her reaction for the time being. She supports Simon to make contact with the case worker to clarify his follow up plan, then has a personal chat to the worker later to raise her concerns and finds out the agency is struggling with high caseloads and a lack of resources but the worker is committed to her work with young people. Through showing integrity in her approach, Mary was able to meet Simon's needs and resolve her concerns in a way that left a positive impression upon the other worker, thus opening doors for further communications, and better outcomes for young people.

For information about the *Ethics of Youth Work Project*, visit www.youthcoalition.net.