

CODE OF ETHICS



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A CODE OF ETHICS FOR YOUTH WORK

The conceptual development of a code of ethics for the Western Australian youth sector has been explored for more than fifteen years. In 1997, after extensive consultation with the field, a draft code was presented by Dr Howard Sercombe, a youth researcher, to a State Youth Affairs conference for reflection. At this conference the draft was further developed, and after subsequent consultation was revised and re-presented at a 2002 Youth Affairs Conference where further feedback was sought from the youth sector. It was at this time the draft code was recognised as the 'Fairbridge Code'. Throughout this time numerous people have assisted with the process that has enabled the code to reach the point where it is ready for adoption by the youth sector.

It is recognised that youth work is regulated by a number of different frameworks and that these carry certain expectations of a youth worker. These include structural, legal, and ethical frameworks. It is also recognised that elements of these frameworks can, and do at times overlap. For example, in the case of confidentiality, the Privacy Act dictates our legal obligations, yet we are also informed by our agency policy and procedures, as well as agency's and our own personal ethical positions. The material in this publication aims to focus on the ethical foundations on which we perform our practice and interventions with young people.

This publication includes the principles of the code, a written definition of each principle, a commentary and case scenarios developed by youth workers to illustrate some of the finer points of each principle when translated into practice. It is anticipated the material will be interesting, useful, and relevant to current and future practitioners with young people, particularly for those who identify as youth workers.

The adoption of the code of ethics is voluntary at present, this means it is suggested that agencies that wish to sign on review their policy and procedures to ensure that the principles are adhered to. Individual youth workers can use the code of ethics for personal reflection on the nature of the work that they undertake.

The Youth Affairs Council of WA is committed to supporting the Code of Ethics and has set an 18 month period to trial the voluntary code and undertake evaluation of its impact. Individuals and agencies are encouraged to provide feedback on their experiences with the code.

Prologue

Youth workers exist in the space created by young people's exclusion from full membership of the common wealth, in the struggle by young people for survival and recognition on the one hand and the struggle by society for order and control on the other. 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.

1. 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

2. 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.

3. Equity

Youth workers' practice will be non discriminatory.

4. Empowerment

The youth worker seeks to enhance the power of the young person by making power relations open and clear; by holding those with power 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 that young people are competent in assessing and acting on their interests.

5. Duty of Care

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

6. Corruption

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

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. Cooperation

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

10. Knowledge

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

11. Self-awareness

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

12. Boundaries

The youth work relationship is a professional relationship, 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.

13. Self-care

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

14. 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.

PROLOGUE

Youth workers exist in the space created by young people's exclusion from full membership of the common wealth, in the struggle by young people for survival and recognition on the one hand and the struggle by society for order and control on the other. 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 core of youth work practice lies in the relationship with the young person as the primary client”

The prologue sets up a central position: that 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 is about a relationship, not about one party or the other, but it is 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 just a set of skills or practices.

1. 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, 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 youth 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 that there is at least one player in the game that they can rely on to uphold their interests.

CASE EXAMPLE

Will is a youth worker who sometimes provides court support for young people as a 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.

“Young people need to know that there is at least one player in the game that they can rely on to uphold their interests”

2. 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 is 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 that 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.

It would be short sighted to think that they (young people) can be dealt with in isolation, ignoring the complex myriad of influences around them”

3. EQUITY

Youth workers' 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 need 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 last 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.

“Regardless of a youth workers personal beliefs, a young person has the right to be treated fairly and responded to on the basis of their need”

4. EMPOWERMENT

The youth worker seeks to enhance the power of the young person by making power relations open and clear; by holding those with power 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 that 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 that 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 are doing. It is about the assumptions we go into a situation with; we need to assess the assumptions we hold about young people's competency in assessing and acting in their own interests.

“Youth workers presume that young people are competent in assessing and acting on their own interests”

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 emphasizing the injustice of the security guard's actions and acts in an advocacy role on behalf of Ling. Harry encourages Ling to do as much as she can in the complaints process for herself.

5. DUTY OF CARE

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

COMMENTARY

“Duty of Care” recognises that sometimes we can do more harm than good by intervening in a situation: that intervention carries some risk with it. We can get a bit fired up with our passion to help people, or to get things moving, or to use the skills and resources we have at our disposal, and it might not actually be the best thing. If we are running an activity, making a referral, or engaging a young person in a program, we have a responsibility to make sure that the activity, referral or program is safe in general and for this particular young person, and there will not be further harm that results from their involvement. Risk assessment and management needs to be thorough. Equipment needs to be well maintained, 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.

“Abuse of young people is not rare, and we are careful about who we give access to the young people we work with.”

6. CORRUPTION

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

COMMENTARY

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

It is important to realise that this principle does not require altruism; in other words, we don't need to act with an entirely unselfish regard for the needs and interests of young people. It doesn't mean that 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 want 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 that 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 down the offer.

"This principle encourages us to keep ourselves honest in terms of our rewards and motivations"

7. 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 that 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. Whilst 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 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.

“We don't deceive young people, either by saying things that are untrue or by not saying things”

8. 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 that 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 youth workers are coerced by the truancy officer by telling them it is '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 that if they are forced into this practice through their agreement with their funding body, that they will need to explain this to young people as a soon as they have contact with the drop in centre.

"Perfect confidentiality is of course not possible or even desirable; there are always limits"

9. 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 a range of 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 the right to choice and 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.

“An interagency collaborative approach enables a young person a greater range of choices ... and access to a range of information, skills and resources to meet all their needs”

10. KNOWLEDGE

Youth workers have a responsibility to keep up-to-date with the information, resources, knowledges 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 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.

*“Being informed
and skilled in
relation to best
practice in youth
work is essential”*

11. SELF-AWARENESS

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

COMMENTARY

This means that youth workers will take into account the diversity of values and interests that 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, whilst also recognising that 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 that 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.

“Youth workers will take into account the diversity of values and interests that young people may present with, and recognise their own may be different”

12. BOUNDARIES

The Youth Work relationship is a professional relationship, intentionally limited to protect the young person. Youth Workers will maintain their integrity of these limits, especially with respect to sexuality. Youth Workers will not sexualise their clients.

COMMENTARY

This means that Youth Workers will recognise that the relationship between themselves and a young person is a contracted relationship and therefore recognises the need to be non-sexual and limited. This ensures the relationship and subsequent service or intervention is not compromised, a consideration that is particularly important in work with young people who may 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 role as a youth worker.

“The relationship should not be compromised and is intentionally limited to protect the young person”

13. SELF CARE

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

COMMENTARY

This means that youth workers need to prioritise the practice of self-care; of 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 that some of her staff work double or triple shifts, often on their own. Workers are covered by an award which specifies minimum breaks between shifts and provisions for time off. Jan recognizes 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 issue for others at their next team meeting.

“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”

14. 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 that they are self-aware of their own role and the expectations that this places upon them from themselves, other stakeholders, and from young people. Whilst 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 that 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 people. Through showing integrity in her approach, Mary was able to meet Simons 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.

FEEDBACK

YACWA invites your feedback. Some questions to consider are:

- Why did you decide to sign on to the code of ethics?
- How have you implemented the code of ethics?
- Has there been an impact on your agency or for you as an individual worker?
- Will you be maintaining a commitment to the code of ethics?
- Is there anything that YACWA could do to assist?
- Anything else that YACWA should know?

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