

## Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

# Professional Issues : Family-Aware Youth Work Practice

This document is intended as a tool for youth workers and/or organisations to encourage reflection on their level of and commitment to family-aware practice with young people, particularly those with complex needs. The use of the term 'family-aware' highlights the need for comprehensive consideration of the role of family in a young person's life. The young person remains the central client in a family-aware approach, and it is not suggested that a youth worker become a family work expert. Rather, this approach recognises how workers can optimise outcomes for young people by recognising, legitimising and facilitating ongoing family connections.

'Family' is defined broadly in an attempt to capture the full extent of opportunity for positive connections for young people. The use of the term 'family' may include:

- biological parent/s, adoptive parent/s, stepparent/s, siblings, extended relatives
- those providing care eg. foster parents
- those identified by young people as significant providers of care and/or support

This document includes a set of practice principles of family-aware youth work. It also provides examples of how workers can apply these principles in their work with young people.

When workers engage in family-aware practice, there are many benefits for young people and their families.

Benefits for young people include that they are:

- Acknowledged as being in the process of developing a range of skills and abilities that will help move them into adulthood and it is recognised that they need support to do this
- Helped to understand their place within the family, the family's stage of development and how this interacts with their own stages of development
- Helped to improve relationships with family members
- Helped to explore and understand the importance of family connections
- Helped to identify and strengthen meaningful connections
- Helped to maintain continuity of family connections through difficult times
- Assisted to prepare for independent living beyond the duration of the professional relationship with a worker.

Benefits for families include that they are:

- Supported in their efforts to protect and nurture the young person
- Provided with relevant information regarding stages of adolescent development and associated behaviours
- Assisted in maintaining and strengthening their attachment to the young person
- Listened to, respected and communicated with in an open and direct way
- Helped to identify their problems, strengths and solutions with regard to their relationship with the young person
- Helped to access relevant and appropriate supports and resources
- Welcomed as part of the solution, not the source of the problem

Eight principles of family-aware youth work are outlined below. These draw on the literature regarding risk and protective factors, developmental attachment theories and strengths-based practice with young people.

### **1. Physical and psychological safety for young people and their family members takes priority.**

The physical or psychological safety of young people and their families is paramount.

Family-aware youth work practice recognises that under certain circumstances, the family home is an unsafe environment for a young person. It also recognises that a young person's behaviour may place family members at risk.

Workers with young people will need to be able to effectively deal with complex family situations that impact on a young person's health and wellbeing.

In these situations the need for protection from certain individuals or situations should not be at the expense of maintaining other positive family relationships.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Familiarise themselves with effective methods of extensively exploring family relations with young people
- Be able to facilitate the involvement of those family members where the relationship is safe in a young person's life
- Be able to distinguish between manageable and/or developmentally damaging conflict and abusive situations
- Be able to promote safety, and in some cases reduce abusive behaviours, in the context of enduring relationships.

## **2. Early developmental experiences, including attachment relationships and traumatic events, have a significant influence on young people's ongoing development.**

A young person's behaviour needs to be recognised by workers, families and the young person as a 'language' communicating past experience and current needs. Young people with insecure attachment styles or a history of trauma, for example, are prone to behaviours that can lead to conflict, broken relationships and a consequent lack of healthy connections. Behaviour does not always indicate an inherent characteristic of the young person and need not be labelled negatively, e.g. troublemaker, delinquent. Understanding and addressing the function of current behaviour and how it relates to psychological, physical and social needs, as opposed to isolated or reactive responses, is a more effective long-term strategy for enhancing a young person's health and wellbeing.

There also needs to be clear recognition by all parties of the level and nature of hurt and pain that has occurred in some families. Appropriate responses can validate the young person's experience. In some circumstances, this may involve accepting and moving on from irretrievably damaged family relationships and dealing with the associated grief and loss, or creating a therapeutic psychological or physical 'distancing' from some family members for a period of time. Alternative, functional connections should be facilitated as a matter of priority.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Conduct assessments that provide the basis for understanding current needs and behaviours rather than make assumptions and apportion blame
- Respond to the behaviour and the young person separately, and work on the underlying reasons for the behaviour
- Help families understand the 'language' of young people's behaviour
- Integrate where possible systemic responses to behaviours with crisis responses

- Help young people express and respond to grief and loss related to their past and present family connections
- Act as a conduit between young people and their families in times of separation, as appropriate.

## **3. There are key protective factors in the family domain that help to promote a young person's health and wellbeing that need to be considered within the context of effective youth work.**

Work with young people, particularly those who have complex needs, has often focused on minimising family risk factors at the expense of efforts to identify and/or enhance family protective factors and/or strengths. **One key protective factor for health and wellbeing in young people is a sense of belonging or connectedness to family. A warm relationship with at least one parent or other family member is integral to a young person's development and functioning. Where relationships with the immediate family are poor, supportive relationships with an extended family member or another caring responsible adult who is prepared to play an on-going role in the young person's life has been found to be protective.**<sup>1</sup>

Strengths-based practice is a positive and empowering way to assess individuals and families and to promote change. Families have a unique set of strengths and values, and building on these strengths assists families to develop the capacity to create positive changes. Without minimising the impact of trauma and/or risk, strengths-based practice allows the exploration of alternative explanations and reasons for behaviours that may help young people make the most constructive sense of their experiences.

Young people may also be assisted to identify the limits to their parents' or families' capacities, and this may enable them to accept their situation, grieve losses, and find positive ways to meet their needs in other relationships.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Identify and assist the maintenance and/or enhancement of connections to as many extended family members as possible
- Build an understanding of the nature of positive experiences and strengths within families, and develop methods of reframing that may allow the young person to see parental efforts in a more positive light.
- Develop strategies to help a young person come to terms with family difficulties and facilitate connections with other significant people
- Familiarise themselves with strategies for dealing with the young person's feelings and emotions regarding family background
- Have effective contingency strategies in place if the young person needs further help with dealing with complex issues regarding family.

1. Rayner, M. & Montague, M (2000) Resilient Children and Young People, Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, Melbourne.

#### **4. Relationships between family members and a young person need to be considered within the scope of age-appropriate developmental behaviour.**

Adolescence is renowned as a developmental stage where conflict is common between young people and their families, particularly parents. Conflict may occur as part of a number of changes associated with the young person's efforts at separation and individuation.

A critical component of identity development in adolescence is the need for a secure base from which to physically and psychologically explore new identities. This secure base is instrumental in the creation of an adult identity, and needs to exist in some form even in the most extreme cases of disconnection. In the case of young people with complex needs, it needs to be remembered that they still have development-related needs and difficulties, and their cognitive, moral, emotional, social and identity development needs should be taken into consideration when developing interventions.

Individuation of the young people in the context of continuity of relationships should be a key long-term goal of youth work.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Have a comprehensive understanding of youth development and the types of supports that young people require to successfully negotiate this stage
- Develop the capacity to identify the difference between behaviour that can be understood in the context of development, and behaviour that signals more entrenched difficulties
- Develop an understanding of youth and family development and their interaction, including the interplay between a young person's cognitive capacity/temperament/attachment experiences and the quality of their family relationships.

#### **5. Workers have an important but relatively brief role in the lives of young people and families, and as such have a responsibility to identify and/or facilitate more enduring relationships.**

Building a trusting and valued relationship with a young person is an important aspect of youth work. Youth workers need to genuinely care about young people, but also have clear professional boundaries around their work. These boundaries include not only practical strategies but also a shared understanding of the time-limited and professionally-bound nature of a youth worker's role. Thus, the importance of more enduring connections beyond the young person-worker relationship is highlighted.

Exploring family relationships is done in acknowledgement that no one is expected to negotiate difficult times without support. Workers may intuitively recognise the importance of enduring connections but feel they lack the appropriate skills to address family issues with

a young person. Further professional training or educational supervision may assist them to develop the skills and confidence to undertake this work.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Provide a respectful, predictable and consistent relationship for the young person over the duration of their involvement
- Ensure there are clear boundaries to their relationship with young people
- Facilitate, help maintain or encourage more enduring connections that may include supporting family members to manage a consistent and supportive relationship with the young person
- Familiarise themselves with effective methods of exploring family relations with young people
- Facilitate the young person's understanding of the characteristics of a positive connection and how to explore this over their lifespan
- Identify and address areas for their skill development in providing family-aware practice.

#### **6. Family-aware practice communicates the message that families can and should be part of the solution in most circumstances.**

Historically, the focus of youth work on the rights of young people has meant that often family has been seen as irrelevant or, in many cases, the cause of a young person's predicament. Families are often not engaged in providing relevant information to services, involved in their adolescent's care or supported to care for their young person.

Resilience research highlights the benefits of connectedness between young people and their families. There is a growing realisation that concentrating solely on the young person is an ineffective method for producing lasting change.

Workers can support families to understand the stages of adolescent development and the tasks associated with each stage. When a young person has complex needs the navigation of these tasks can be more difficult and family members may experience feelings of grief, shame, guilt and hopelessness as a result of the decisions the young person is making. New roles may need to be negotiated that help families deal with these feelings while supporting the young person. Secondary consultation or referral to a family worker may be appropriate.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Understand family members may have different and equally valid perceptions of experiences and that sharing perceptions can build understanding and connection
- Understand that parents often develop their capacities over time and may be able to provide appropriate care when given support and information

- Start from the presumption that family members have the young person's best interests at heart and have done their best with the resources available to them
- Help young people to understand the limits to what a family may provide, and explore alternative supports where family relationships are irretrievably damaged or dysfunctional.

**7. The right to privacy and confidentiality must be treated with the utmost respect for both families and young people, while recognising that communication between young people and their families is an important component of connectedness.**

Young people have the legal right to privacy and confidentiality when working with community services and may provide verbal or written consent for a worker to obtain/release information from/to other people, including family members.

Often workers do not seek consent to have contact with family members for fear of damaging trust and rapport built with the young person, or out of concern for the young person's need for empowerment and independence. These concerns are often unwarranted and, if approached, young people understand the benefits of the worker's approach to family members. Concerns about having contact with families may also relate to a worker's lack of confidence in dealing with families, perceived lack of organisational support for such an approach, workload constraints or constraints associated with program funding guidelines.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Consider asking young people for consent to receive information from parents/family if they contact the service, for consent to involve parents/family in the assessment process and for consent to provide parents with general information and referral where appropriate.
- Provide timely, respectful, non-judgmental and supportive responses to parents/families who make contact with the service, even where consent to discuss the young person is not provided. This may involve providing general information or referring to another worker or service.
- Coach young people to develop communication and other relationship skills.

**8. A family's cultural background is a valuable aspect of its identity, and cultural sensitivity and understanding are paramount when working with young people and their families.**

It is a worker's responsibility to explore and gain understanding and to take a stance of respect towards families' experiences. Different issues may arise for young people in newly arrived families<sup>2</sup>, as these young people are often exposed to different social norms and expectations in Australia than those that accord with their families cultural or religious traditions. Intergenerational conflict over financial issues, independence and sexual issues is common amongst migrant and refugee families. It is important to gain an understanding of the attitudes and beliefs of all family members in these situations and to be sensitive to cultural issues and family traditions.

To apply this principle in their work, youth workers could:

- Explore family background and dynamics with young people and families in a manner which demonstrates interest and respect for cultural diversity
- Offer information about contemporary Australian viewpoints on adolescent development and parenting practices where appropriate, and assist the young person and family to integrate this knowledge
- Provide information regarding current laws and legal issues where appropriate.

2. Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, <http://www.cmyi.net.au/FamilyandCommunity>, 2005.

