

KEEPING CHILDREN IN MIND AND IN VIEW

## Practice Guide 4:

# Engaging with young people

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges the past and present traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that this was and always will be Aboriginal land.



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## Foreword

This guide is one in a series of practice guides written by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare to enable practitioners to keep children first and foremost in service system responses. Funding for these guides has been provided by Family Safety Victoria.

The aim of the guides is to support key workforces involved in maintaining child safety and wellbeing to:

- use a child rights lens
- identify and prioritise what is in the child's best interests
- work in ways that promote children's participation in the decision making and processes that affect them
- document what happens to children so that they are kept in mind and in view.

The guides are intended to make sure that children and young people are at the centre of our thinking and our practice. They are not intended to replace leader or manager practice guidance or to replace existing agency protocols; rather, they are aimed at providing practical, simple and accessible information that will increase practitioner understanding of how to work with children and young people and enhance confidence in their ability to do so.

In engaging with children, particular attention needs to be paid to the safety and wellbeing of children who are non-verbal or very young, who have developmental challenges, who have a disability, who are from a non-English speaking background, who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, who have a parent with a disability or mental ill-health, who identify as LGBTIQ+ or who experience (and/or use) violence in the home.

The guides aim to address confidence and knowledge gaps for practitioners across the sector and promote the importance of effective and meaningful observation, communication and empowerment of children and young people. They are intended to be an easy to understand, practical reference tool for new practitioners, or for practitioners who have not had significant experience in working with children or young people.

## Introduction

Practice Guide 4 looks at the different stages of adolescence to support better understanding of, and ability to respond to, what young people say and do. It looks at the particular challenges involved in working with young people, how to engage confidently with them and the benefits for young people when professionals are skilled at listening to and engaging with them.

## Ages and stages of adolescent development

Adolescent development is often categorised in terms of early, middle and late adolescence. However, progression from one stage to another can vary enormously from one young person to another, particularly in relation to psychosocial development.<sup>1</sup> These stages are a general guide in determining a young person's developmental stage. They are based on a young person's chronological age and should not be considered exclusively when determining or considering a young person's capabilities.

### **Early adolescence** (around 10–13 years)

During this stage young people are:

- likely becoming egocentric and centring their thinking primarily on themselves and their own needs with limited regard for others
- generally feeling self-conscious about their appearance and as though they are being judged by others (especially by peers)
- often showing signs of having concrete or black and white thinking and having difficulty understanding middle ground
- starting to demonstrate an increased need for privacy, wanting to explore avenues for independence and pushing boundaries, especially with their parents and caregivers.

### **Middle adolescence** (around 14–17 years)

During this stage young people are:

- experiencing significant physiological and emotional changes
- likely to show greater interest in their sexual identity and possible interest in sexual relationships
- exploring their own views on certain topics, and showing interest in independence which often results in more frequent and intensive arguments with parents, carers and family members
- increasing their capacity to think more abstractly and consider the bigger picture yet continue to lack the ability to make that link in the moment.

### **Late adolescence** (around 17 years and over)

During this stage young people are:

- more likely to be focused on their future and decisions based around future planning
- likely to be involved in more stable relationships
- more likely to gain greater independence from their parents and family members.

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<sup>1</sup> NSW Kids and Families, 2014, Youth health resource kit: An essential guide for workers, p. 16.

## Understanding what young people may be experiencing

Understanding the various challenges that young people experience, which help shape their presentation and behaviours, can assist professionals to engage with them more effectively.

The list of possible influences is extensive but may include:

- navigating complexities and sometimes volatility of peer relationships and social networks
- managing academic and educational challenges
- being exposed to parent alcohol and substance use
- being exposed to peer-related alcohol and substance use, and pressures to experiment or participate in recreational use
- being exposed to family violence, abuse and neglect
- being exposed to peer-related or intimate partner relationship violence and controlling behaviour
- managing possible bullying/scapegoating from peers
- being the target of bullying on social media
- experiencing fractured relationships with parents, caregivers and family members
- being involved in criminal activity or engaging with gangs or known offenders
- being the victim of controlling or coercive behaviours
- suffering from medical or health related issues
- experiencing low self-esteem and possible concerns regarding body image and/or social status
- experiencing accommodation and/or placement issues, leading to homelessness
- having financial concerns
- having responsibility for caring for a parent or sibling.

## Benefits of youth engagement for young people

There is a growing body of evidence to show the significant benefits that can come from engaging directly with young people and supporting their participation in decision making that affects their lives. These benefits range from increasing a young person's sense of control over their own lives, increasing their resilience and self-esteem, to decreasing depressive symptoms and the risk of suicide.<sup>2</sup>

## Principles for engaging with young people

Wherever possible professionals should obtain consent from a young person's parent or guardian to be able to engage with them and be prepared for this engagement. Some of the principles for engaging successfully with young people highlighted in the literature include demonstrating respect and compassion, empowering

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, <http://www.excellenceforchildandyouth.ca/>

and supporting agency through provision of information, acting with integrity, showing appreciation and validation and demonstrating patience and flexibility.<sup>3</sup>

## Some practice considerations when engaging with young people

There are a number of practical approaches and strategies that can be used, consistent with each of these principles, to develop a strong working relationship and engagement with young people.

### Responding to disclosures

It is important to be aware of organisational processes and policies relating to possible disclosures of abuse and harm made by a young person. Professionals need to keep in mind responsibilities for mandatory reporting and the immediate need to keep the young person safe and feeling supported.

Is there a documented process in place for dealing with disclosures? Are facilitators aware of what to do if they see or hear something that raises concerns about a young person's safety?

### Understanding what professionals might observe when interacting with a young person

There are many things a professional can learn when interacting and engaging with young people, including:

- their environment and what it means to them
- their individual experiences
- what the young person may have been exposed to
- the young person's ability to self-protect
- the young person's physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills
- the young person's cultural needs as well as their views, wishes and interests.

These observations are based on verbal and non-verbal cues.<sup>4</sup>

### Engaging with young people in their home environment

Meeting young people in their home environment can minimise the power imbalance between professionals and young people and support better engagement. Depending on the home circumstances, the young person might feel more comfortable talking in a familiar environment. However, in a home environment there can be many distractions that might affect a young person's ability to concentrate on the conversation. Professionals will also need to consider whether the young person is likely to feel comfortable to speak freely in the presence of their parents or caregivers, or whether they need to be in a room separate from them.

### Engaging with young people at the office

It is not surprising that young people are likely to be more comfortable and therefore more likely to engage in conversation when they are in surroundings that are familiar to them. Office spaces are not necessarily appealing or comfortable for young people. More recently organisations have turned their mind to

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<sup>3</sup> Harris, P. & Manatakis, H. 2013. Children's voices: A principled framework for children and young people's participation as valued citizens and learners, University of South Australia in partnership with the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development, Adelaide.

<sup>4</sup> Tasmanian Government, Communities Tasmania, Youth at Risk Strategy 2017, *A practical guide to increase youth engagement and participation in Tasmania*, [https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/250984/CYS\\_Youth\\_at\\_Risk\\_Strategy\\_48pp\\_v8\\_LR.pdf](https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/250984/CYS_Youth_at_Risk_Strategy_48pp_v8_LR.pdf)

accommodating families, and children and young people of varying age groups, by providing facilities that are more inviting and facilitate their needs.<sup>5</sup>

### Engaging with young people on the phone

During COVID-19, it has become more common to engage with young people by phone but face-to-face interaction is preferred, if appropriate. The professional will need to ascertain as far as possible that the young person is of an age, with emotional or cognitive capacity, to knowingly engage in and follow a conversation over the telephone; that they have a suitable adult with them to be able to support them through the conversation if required; and that the young person is able to understand who the practitioner is and their role or professional capacity. Professionals also need to be assured that the conversation is not likely to place the young person at risk of harm or jeopardise existing relationships with parents, caregivers or family members. Professionals need to consider possible safety implications before leaving a voicemail, for example, who has access to the message, how it could be interpreted, any worries a young person may have on hearing the message and providing clear instructions about how to be contacted.

### Engaging with young people using technology

Consider whether it is appropriate to engage with the young person via technology, based on their age, stage of development, trauma history, possible language barriers, disability and, if it is safe to do so. Engagement via technology does not always allow the professional to observe the environment and who is with the young person, which impedes the ability to assess risk and ensure safety. It is important to frame the conversation in terms of whether the young person is alone, in a safe environment, can talk freely or whether they need to make a different arrangement to talk to a professional.

### Taking notes

Professional observations and analyses can assist in assessing risk, planning for the young person's short-term and long-term safety, and can influence decisions that impact their wellbeing. Case notes and file recordings of observations and interactions with young people can be useful for:

- building a picture of a young person's life and experience and informing what responses are needed to meet the young person's rights and individual needs.
- showing a pattern and history.
- informing long-term responses and prompting notifications and referrals to other supports.
- informing immediate responses to achieve safety.
- identifying opportunities for prevention and intervention to help reduce the risk of cumulative harm.
- reflecting on practice and looking at alternative methods of response and different perspectives.
- informing future policy directions and service provision
- helping the young person to tell their own story. File notes of interactions, engagement and observations can help young people to reconnect with family members later in life, or piece together memories to assist with therapeutic interventions or in the process of healing.

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell-Lowe, M. & Eggleston, M. 2009, Children as consumer participants of child and adolescent mental health services. *Australia's Psychiatry*, vol. 17, iss. 4, pp. 287–90.



## Opening up the dialogue

Being thoughtful, respectful and genuine are key to having meaningful conversations with young people. This Guide provides examples of what professionals might say to open up or maintain a conversation with a young person. Some professionals might already use these in practice. Regardless of how experienced a practitioner might be in talking with young people, each interaction requires professional judgement and seeking guidance from direct supervisors as per organisational guidelines when working with risk or being uncertain.

It is important to keep in mind that professionals might need to alter their approach, language used, perhaps the pace and tone of voice, and the level of detail in accordance with the age and stage of the young person as there can be great variation developmentally between 12–18 years of age.

The next section addresses professionals directly.

## Introductions and providing information

Start by telling the young person your name and what your job is. Depending on their stage of development, for a young person in this chronological age range you could offer a more sophisticated description of the nature of your role. Give them time to seek clarification about your role or your organisation or the purpose of the conversation.

It is important to explain that you are required to uphold their privacy and confidentiality, but that there may be occasions where you might have to share what they say with other professionals or other adults who can keep them safe when there are serious concerns for their safety and wellbeing.

Try to explain this in a way that allows them to be informed, to uphold their rights, and to preserve a level of trust. If you do need to share information with other family members out of concern for the young person's safety and wellbeing, wherever possible inform them that you are going to do this and include them in planning around this – they are often likely to be aware of safety implications.

Young people need to be encouraged to talk about things that are important to them. If they feel uneasy, validate their feelings and try to provide them with some reassurance.

## Brief engagement

Engagement is essential, whether you are likely to be involved, or working with a young person on a long- or short-term basis. Even in a triage system, you should be able to earn the trust and professional respect of the young person you are working with. Where this is not possible due to the type of service you offer, or the nature of the encounter, there is still an opportunity to ask one or two rapport-building questions.

## Asking questions to assess safety, inform and develop plans

Some questions you can ask when you are seeking to build rapport with a young person can also assist in assessment and planning. Some of these questions will indicate whether or not the young person has other sources of support and can determine the kind of assistance that might be needed.

## Summarising the interaction and providing reassurance

It is important to provide young people with reassurance and clarity around whether or not they will be seeing you again. If further conversations are required, then it would be best practice for you to be part of

those, given you are a familiar person and may have developed a rapport. However, in some instances it might be worthwhile to prepare the young person if it is likely to be somebody else.

In summarising the conversation with the young person, confirm that they have people they can go to for support, if needed.

### Thanking and validating them – closure

It is important to establish that the young person feels supported after your conversations, both immediately and later in the event that your conversation may have triggered any previous trauma or emotions that leaves them feeling vulnerable.

#### Young people in early, middle and late adolescence

##### Introductions and providing information

*My name is ... and I work for an organisation called ... where I work as a ... [tailor to your specific role]. Have you worked with anyone in a similar role before? Would you like me to talk a little about what I do? Or do you think you already know enough about the kind of work I do?*

*I am here to make sure that you and your family are safe, and to offer you any help you might need to feel safe and supported. I can also introduce you to different workers from other organisations who might be able to help you get the things you need.*

*[Depending on the nature of your role you might say] My main (or one of my roles) is to listen to you and your family so that we can understand what you have been through, and what you are going through, so we can work out if you need some extra help, and what that might be, and how we can get that help.*

*Can you tell me your name? and Can you tell me how old you are?*

*What we talk about, and what you tell me, is confidential which means that I can't tell other people. For example, I'm not going to tell your friends or family or other people. But if I'm really worried about your safety, I might need to share what is happening for you with my work manager and, in some cases, I might have to talk to your parents, or adults who can help and support you. I will do my best to make sure you are protected.*

*Is it OK for me to share things with your parents if I am worried about your safety? Are there things that I would need to be aware of before I do that? Could you tell me the safest way to do this?*

*It is really important you get the opportunity to talk about anything you would like to talk about. We could start with that, or if nothing comes to mind right now and it*

	<p><i>does later, feel free to ask, or just tell me. This is, after all, about you, and how you feel, and about meeting your needs.</i></p> <p><i>It is normal to feel a little bit nervous or uncomfortable when you are talking to people you don't know, and I realise that you don't know me, but I am here to help. It's important for you to know that you are not in trouble and haven't done anything wrong.</i></p> <p><i>It's important for you to know that you can say whatever you want to say. I won't be shocked and I will believe you when you tell me that you are telling the truth.</i></p> <p><i>If you don't understand what I'm saying or if I've misunderstood you, it's important that you tell me.</i></p> <p><i>It is important for you to know that if you don't want to talk anymore, you can tell me.</i></p> <p><i>If you want to say something but you don't feel comfortable talking to me and would feel more comfortable with a different worker, then that is OK. You can tell me and we can make arrangements for you to speak with somebody else.</i></p>
<p><b>Brief engagement</b></p>	<p><i>Can you tell me something that you really like to do?</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me something that you are really good at? or Can you tell me something that you have done that you are proud of? or Can you tell me something about yourself that you are proud of?</i></p> <p><i>Who are some people that you enjoy spending time with?</i></p> <p><i>What are some things that you enjoy doing with your friends? With your family?</i></p>
<p><b>Asking questions to assess safety and inform and develop plans</b></p>	<p><i>Can you tell me about some of things that you don't like doing? or Are there things that you have to do that make you feel unhappy?</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me about the people who live in your house? or Who do you get along well with, or relate to the best in your family? or Are there members of your family who you don't get on so well with?</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me about some things that you like doing with your family? or Are there things about your family that make you feel happy or proud?</i></p> <p><i>[If necessary] Can you tell me about some things that you don't like about what happens in your family? or Are there things about your family that make you feel worried or uncomfortable, or that don't feel fair?</i></p> <p><i>What could you do when you feel unsafe, angry or afraid? or What do you do if you feel unsafe or angry or afraid?</i></p> <p><i>If you had the power to change things about your life, is there anything that you would change? or Could you tell me about some things that you would like to change, or that you would like to be different?</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me what are some things that you would <u>not</u> change and that make you feel safe?</i></p> <p><i>Are there any people who make you feel safe?</i></p>

	<p><i>Can you tell me what makes you feel unsafe?</i></p> <p><i>Can you remind me of what you can do to make you feel safe? And who you might feel safe with?</i></p> <p><i>Can you also remind me of some things that you enjoy doing that make you feel happy?</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me who you may be able to talk to if you are feeling unsafe, or if you have any worries?</i></p>
<b>Summarising the interaction and providing reassurance</b>	<p><i>I really appreciate you meeting with me today and your honesty. I realise it can be hard to talk with people who you don't know.</i></p> <p><i>[If appropriate] There are some extra things that I need to do to help you and your family, so if you are OK with this, I will arrange to meet with you again ... or I work with some kind people, who also support young people and their families. How would you feel about chatting to one of them? Would you be OK to do that without me being there?</i></p> <p><i>Can you remind me of what you can do to make you feel safe, or that makes you feel comfortable?</i></p> <p><i>Are there people you can turn to if you feel unsafe or feel anxious or sad? Are you confident that these people could help you?</i></p> <p><i>Do you know how to get in touch with these people quickly or in an emergency?</i></p> <p><i>Have you got access to safe transport if you need to get somewhere quickly?</i></p>
<b>Closing – thanking and validating them</b>	<p><i>Thanks for talking with me. I imagine that it isn't easy and am glad that you could tell me about yourself and your family. It's important that you know there are people you can talk to when you're feeling threatened or worried or low. Do you feel comfortable about raising things with them, or do you want to run through anything with me now?</i></p>

## Providing care and support

Engagement with young people is likely to involve discussions regarding instances of trauma, or trauma-related experiences and the feelings associated with these experiences.

Professionals have responsibilities to provide care and support to young people and their families. There is an expectation that practitioners will give the young person access to the support needed to keep them physically and emotionally safe. Appropriate formal supports may involve therapeutic interventions or specialised family services programs, while informal supports may involve ensuring that the young person's caregivers and family members can provide the care they need. In some cases, professionals may also be responsible for helping to locate support for the parents and caregivers of the young person.

There may be times when information will need to be shared with other Information Sharing Entities involved with providing support to the family to maintain the wellbeing and safety needs of the young person. Where there are concerns for the safety and wellbeing of the young person, a report to Child Protection may be required. Under such circumstances, it is advisable to consult with a supervisor and refer to guidelines and legislation regarding information sharing and mandatory reporting.

## In summary

Practice is not easy. There are time constraints, environmental constraints, public health challenges, and resource and staff shortages. Additionally, the complexity of work that practitioners undertake continues to increase, and the people who require support become increasingly vulnerable, their challenges more complex or urgent.

However, thoughtful and effective practice can be achieved, and in order to capture the voices of young people and to prioritise their needs, we need to speak with them, and hear what they have to say.

It is hoped that the principles and techniques discussed in this guide support professionals to engage directly with young people and respond in ways that give them agency over their lives.

