

BA Young People, Communities and Youth Work
Foundations of Youth Work Practice
ECYW4013

Contribution to Overall Module Assessment (%):
50%

Discuss the core principles and values that underpin effective Youth Work practice. In your response, examine how these principles are applied in different Youth Work settings, and consider the role and responsibilities of the youth worker in maintaining these values

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In my assignment I will be discussing the core values and principles that underpin effective youth work practice. I will be discussing the importance of each of these values and how these values are applied in different forms of youth work settings.

Effective youth work practice has a core set of values and principles. These values are used to guide youth work professionals to achieve the best practice in order to support and give the young people who they are working with the best from them. Youth work is a vital part of young people's lives, and positive work has a knock on effect from one generation to the next.

The National Occupational Standards for youth work set out competencies for youth professionals working with young people, by setting out clear frameworks describing the skills, knowledge and values required from individuals who work in youth work. The values emphasise the importance of building positive relationships, supporting personal and social development, promoting inclusion, equality and respect. Whilst also guiding youth workers in areas such as safeguarding, planning activities, communication, reflective practice whilst ensuring their work remains ethical, person-centred and responsive to the needs of the young people.

One of the core values in youth work is respect and equality. Youth work is non-discriminative, and values diversity across race, gender, sexuality, ability and backgrounds. Youth work recognises that young people have their own identities, are their own individuals with opinions, experiences and needs. Recognising differences and encouraging individuality promotes anti-discriminatory practise and inclusion in youth settings, making youth settings a safe place for everyone. Making young people feel respected, valued and equal to each other and youth work professionals sets the tone for the settings. It encourages participation, supports the building of positive relationships, boosts confidence and self-esteem, improves outcomes and development.

According to the National Youth Agency, "youth participation involves actively involving young people in decisions that affect them, ensuring their voice influences service design, delivery and evaluation" (NYA, 2026). Youth work is based solely on voluntary participation from the young people, unlike school where attendance is compulsory. This defines youth work as something that the young people want to engage with, that they actively choose to seek out and participate in. By young people choosing to attend youth work settings, attend outreach support, workshops or activities, they are actively seeking out what youth work has to offer. This creates a foundation of trust, authenticity and choice, and supports young people to make active choices in their own lives. Whilst this is a positive, it also means that youth workers must ensure that they make the sessions as meaningful, engaging and purposeful to ensure participation. This involves communicating with the young people on what they would like from and in sessions,

what they would like to do or learn, what they would like to gain or build on for their positive outcomes. This in turn encourages youth participation, as they have an active voice in their outcomes.

Another core value is supporting young people's holistic development. Holistic development is supporting the whole individual, not just education and behaviour, but their emotional, social, physical and personal growth as individuals all together. Holistic development ensures that young people are seen as individuals, with their own feelings, relationships and life experiences. By recognising this, this enables youth workers to identify and support interconnected needs, such as emotional safety, social connection, emotional intelligence and actively reaches out to support and build these interpersonal skills with young people. This aids the development of young people's ability to manage personal and social relationships, encouraging conversations around the different aspects of their health and wellbeing, whilst helping young people build capacity to consider risk, make reasoned decisions and have control in their own life (Pro Touch SA, 2026).

Safeguarding and the promotion of wellbeing are fundamental responsibilities within youth work practice. Every organisation and its individual staff members have a duty of care to ensure the protection of the young people they are working with, from unnecessary risk and/or harm. This is based on principles outlined in the Children's Act 2004 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child and Working Together 2018 guidance (NYA, 2021). Youth workers are required to maintain a strong awareness of safeguarding procedures by undertaking regular training, enabling them to recognise the signs and indicators of potential abuse and neglect. In addition to this, they play a key role in creating a safe and supportive environment where young people feel able to communicate their concerns. Where appropriate, youth workers must also provide effective signposting and facilitate access to further support to ensure the ongoing safety and wellbeing of the young people.

Relationship-centred practice in youth work is based on honesty, consistency and appropriate boundaries between the young person and youth worker. Research shown by Young Minds showed that young people have improved mental health and wellbeing as a result of positive relationships with adults in their community (Young Minds, 2026). Young people may have had repeated changes in family life, carers, professionals, relationships and teachers; this can leave them feeling cautious or self-protective. Youth workers can provide that stability, and be a positive role model in a young person's life. Whilst it is the youth workers responsibility to build positive, person-centred relationships, it is also their responsibility to secure balancing relationship-centred practice whilst setting clear and consistent expectations early on.

Youth work values can and should be applied in any setting with young people. Traditional youth work settings are open access youth centres, but they could be targeted or outreach work, school based youth work, residential or care settings or even online youth work.

Open access youth centres are situated in cities, towns or villages for the young people in the area to visit in the day or evenings where they are consistently open on numerous days a week. Open access youth centres are optional to young people, and they attend by choice in their own time. “Within the centres, staff create an environment and develop relationships characterised by mutual trust, respect and a sense of safety and security” (The Centre for Youth Impact, 2021). In centres, young people are encouraged to get involved with what they would like to get from their time in the centres. Youth centres are youth lead, and this can be through chosen activities or topics of discussion, events or workshop days, day trips and even holidays. This makes young people feel empowered, listened to, whilst encouraging participation and retention.

Outreach work is a different form of youth work, designed for young people who are often vulnerable, disengaged from mainstream services such as education, employment or training, or at risk of social exclusion, exploitation or offending (Pembrokeshire County Council, 2023). Outreach youth work focuses on building trust with young people in the community, providing informal education and connecting them to support whilst ensuring safety. Characterised by purposeful interaction between the youth workers and young people, outreach work is shown to be extremely beneficial for young people to access services designed with them in mind with support, empowerment and encouragement to receive help that they can benefit from (ShapeinSay, 2021). Youth workers have to be adaptable in outreach work, whilst maintaining safeguarding and boundaries, to ensure it is person-centred and beneficial to the young people to secure participation and build a positive relationship.

Another form is school based youth work. School based youth work occurs in primary and secondary schools, often based out of a secure area within a school environment that is open access or appointment based for young people to access. This gives a balance of voluntary engagement but within a structured, safe and secure environment. It can be focused on wellbeing, such as counselling, behavioural support and personal development. It can be used as a safe, optional place for young people to seek support or informal learning on a 1-1 basis. But it can also be used to encourage and enable group work, looking at social skills, team building and relationship management etc (Pembrokeshire County Council, 2024). Although it does come with its own challenges of maintaining voluntary principles in a compulsory setting, the youth work values should be maintained and remain purposeful, young people lead and beneficial to encourage active participation.

At the core of youth work, whether it is open access youth centres, outreach, or in school settings, the values and principles stay the same. Youth work is about supporting young people to grow, develop and have a voice in their lives. To encourage them to be active participants in their life and choices, and to help navigate them through to the next stage of their lives whilst recognising they are their own individuals with feelings and experiences. The values and principles of respect, empowerment, voluntary engagement and safeguarding are vital to the purpose of youth work. Ensuring these are always met, ensures engagement and positive outcomes when working with young people.

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