Code of Ethics for Youth Work, with commentary

Background to the code of ethics

The Code of Ethics for Youth Work was originally developed by Dr Howard Sercombe in conjunction with the youth sector in Western Australia.

The ACT youth sector has adopted this code, and YAPA endorsed the code in 2004. We are working towards it being adopted as a national code of ethics for youth work.

Commentary by Howard Sercombe, in consultation with the Western Australian Youth Affairs field, 2002 workshop redraft. The commentary is not part of the Code of Ethics itself.

Code of Ethics

Prologue

Youth workers exist because of 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 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", finding a connotation of “the medical model” of professional practice, but we found it the best word to describe what needs to happen with young people, the 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.*

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 have a lot of people to answer to: funding bodies, peers, management committees, parents, communities. This clause, which we believe is at the core of the youth work relationship, keeps us in mind of who we are there for. Lots of people working in the field don’t have the young person as their primary client, but see them as one of many stakeholders. That’s OK: 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*.

1. **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****: This is what distinguishes youth workers from psychologists and counsellors, and also from evangelists. It means that there is an obligation to understand what is happening at a social level for your young people as well as the individual, how they fit into peer, family, community and national social systems, and to work with that social context as well as case management. Using the term “ecology” in this context might be unfamiliar (it comes from the work of social psychologist Ulrich Bronfenbrenner) but it is a useful way to talk about the way that young people are part of social systems which shape their action.*

1. **Non-discrimination**

Youth workers' practice will be equitable.

***Commentary****: The general point about offering a professional service which deals with people with respect, regardless of things like race and gender, is well accepted. British sources use the term "antidiscriminatory". The point is that resources should be distributed on the basis of relevant criteria (like need) rather than irrelevant ones (like appearance). There is the slightly more tricky question of positive discrimination, which is about allocating resources in favour of groups that have generally been disadvantaged by social arrangements, rather than individually on the basis of need. While the arguments aren’t easy, the principle does allow for positive discrimination if it is carefully thought through.*

1. **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 that young people are competent in assessing and acting on their interests.

***Commentary****: The term “empowerment” has become a bit of a buzzword, and the meaning is not often clear. This clause tries to clarify what empowerment might mean in ethical terms, and what it means for us as youth workers. It focuses on our accountability to young people, and puts empowerment in the context of their ethical and responsible action as well.*

*In the last sentence, the word “presume” is important. 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 is that young people know what they are doing. It is about the assumptions that we go into a situation with.*

1. **Non-corruption**

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 clause encourages us to keep ourselves honest in terms of our motivations and rewards, which might be about a whole lot of other things than money: like power, profile, emotional security, personal identity...*

*It is important to realise that this clause does not require altruism. It doesn’t mean that youth workers shouldn’t do well out of their youth work. It’s 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.*

1. **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. It may be tempting to, and it might get good outcomes, but we don’t do it. We are open about where our funding comes from, who we are working for, and what we are trying to achieve.*

1. **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****: Again, even where it might achieve good outcomes, we don’t give names or other details to police, schools, Centrelink or anyone else. 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 them to young people early.*

1. **Cooperation**

Youth workers will recognise the limits of their role. Youth workers, in consultation with young people, seek to cooperate with others in order to secure the best possible outcomes for young people.

***Commentary****: There has been a bit of a history of youth workers seeing themselves as the only people who can really meet a young person’s needs: a bit of moral superiority over other professions, which we see as conservative and bureaucratic, perhaps. This clause says: get over it. Other professionals may need help to connect with young people and develop rapport, but if they do, help them. There are lots of things we are not competent to do, things we don’t know, and careful collaboration is something you owe to your client. At the other end of the scale, the cooperation needs to secure the best outcome for young people, not the best outcome for the professionals. You don’t build your professional network by selling young people out. As always, a self-critical and self-reflective stance is paramount.*

1. **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****: This a standard requirement for professional practice. Lifelong education isn’t optional.*

1. **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 tries to get past the problems with the notion of not being judgemental, but needing to make judgements and communicate them to young people. Clients do come from different cultures, and what can look bad in our culture is OK is theirs and vice versa. It is sometimes important however to speak up about some practice even if it is “cultural”. Just because something is accepted practice doesn’t mean that it is OK, in our or any other culture. But we should avoid making hasty judgements, be conscious of our own standpoint, and a bit of humility goes a long way.*

1. **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.

***Commentary****: There is a lot in this one. A professional relationship is a special kind of relationship which is designed to be a safe place for vulnerable people. People can give you things there (secrets, information, emotion, weakness) that they can’t give in any other relationship. It is safe because there are limits: places we won’t go and things we won’t take. We need to be clear with ourselves and with each other what they are. Some of them are a matter of personal position (like giving home phone numbers). On others, like sexuality and accepting expensive gifts, there is more consensus. This code sets a limit on sexuality that says a lot of lines have already been crossed by the time a youth worker goes to bed with a young person. Notwithstanding that we are all sexual beings, we control the way that we think about a client so that we avoid constructing them as a sexual object or as the subject of our desire. We definitely do not sit around discussing which of our clients has the best body, or which one we would like to have sex with. In the future, we might try and define how much time should pass after a professional relationship has ceased before a sexual relationship is acceptable: other professions set it at two years.*

1. **Self-care**

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

***Commentary****: There is a long history of exploitation of youth workers, and of youth workers not taking enough care of themselves. At times, it has felt like peers would think that you weren’t working hard enough if you weren’t burning out! This clause is about justice for workers as well as clients, but also about how difficult it is to deliver a quality service to young people when you are stretched to breaking point. And about how good quality professional practice takes time to develop, and is not well-served by people burning out and leaving the field after eighteen months. Look after yourself and your family, and still be here doing a good job in ten years.*

1. **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.*

1. **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.*