



# Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA

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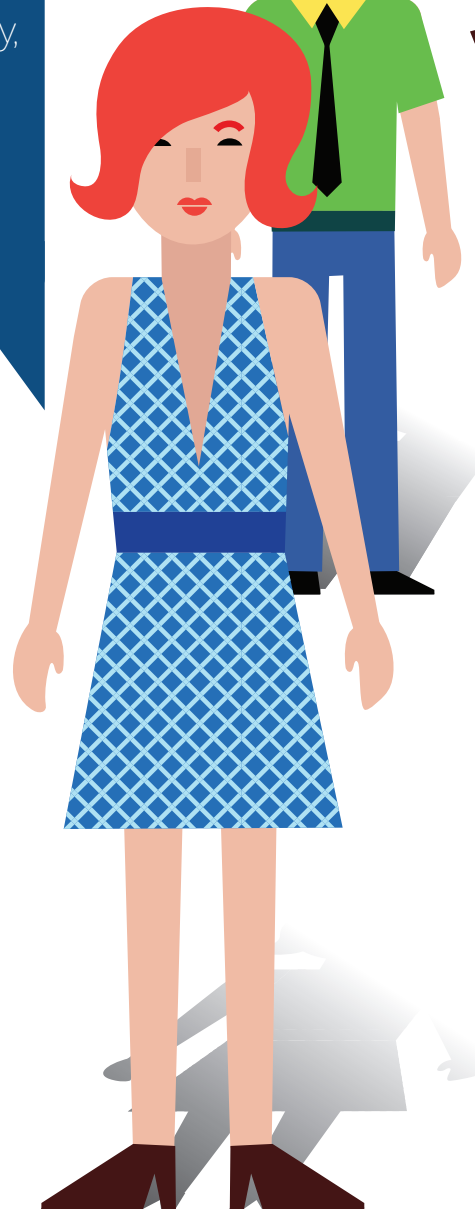
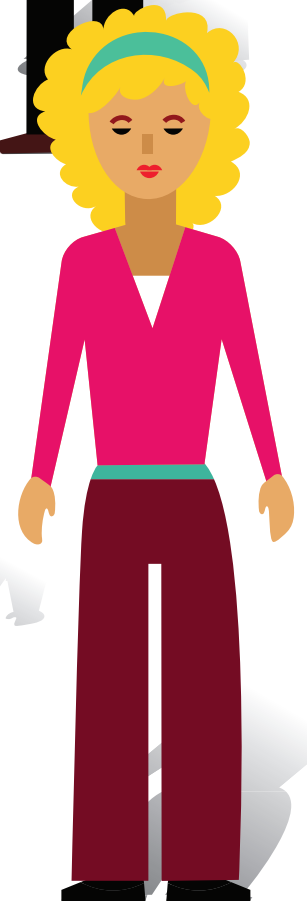
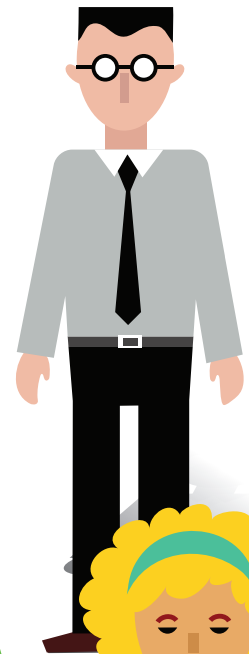
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Workers (WAAW) 2003, revised 2014

“Youth work is a practice that places young people and their interest first.

Youth work is a relational practice, where the youth worker operates alongside the young person in their context.

Youth work is an empowering practice that advocates for and facilitates a young person’s independence, participation in society, connectedness and realisation of their rights.” <sup>(1)</sup>

AYAC National Definition of Youth Work, 2013



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Youth workers are committed to ethical practice in their work with young people. This ethical practice is defined by the following principles:

### 1 Primary Client

Youth workers are clear that the interests of the young people they work with always come first. Where conflict exists between obligations to more than one young person, the youth worker should always try to find solutions that minimise harm, and continue to support the young people involved.

### 2 Context

Youth workers work alongside young people in their social context. A wide range of contexts impact on young people's lives, including culture, family, peer group, community and society. Youth work is not limited to facilitating change within the individual young person, but extends to the context in which the young person lives.

### 3 Promotes Equality

Youth workers' practice promotes equality for all young people, regardless of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability, location or socio-economic status.

### 4 Empowerment

Youth workers presume that young people are competent in assessing and acting on their interests. The youth worker advocates for and empowers young people by making power relations open and clear; by holding accountable those in a position of power over the young person; by avoiding dependency; and by supporting the young person in the pursuit of their legitimate goals, interests and rights.

### 5 Duty of Care

The youth worker avoids exposing young people to the likelihood of further harm or injury, and is aware of the safety of others.

### 6 Preventing Corruption

Youth workers and youth work agencies will not advance themselves and their interests at the expense of young people, and will act to prevent corruption.

### 7 A Transparent Relationship

The role and expectations established between the youth worker and the young person, and the resulting relationship, will be respectful, open and truthful. The interests of other stakeholders will not be hidden from the young person.

### 8 Confidentiality

Information provided by young people will not be used against them, nor will it be shared with others without their permission. Young people should be made aware of the 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 with and for young people. Youth workers will respect the strengths and diversity of roles other than youth work.

### 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 and respect.

### 12 Boundaries

The youth work relationship is a professional relationship, intentionally limited to protect the young person. Youth workers will maintain the integrity of the limitations of their role in the young person's life.

### 13 Self-care

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

### 14 Integrity

Youth workers are loyal to the practice of youth work, not bringing it into disrepute.

## 1 Primary Client

This principle is at the core of the youth work relationship, because it keeps us mindful of who we are there for. Youth workers answer to a range of people: funding bodies, peers, management committees, parents, communities. But youth workers are clear that of all the interests out there, the interests of the young people we work with always come first.

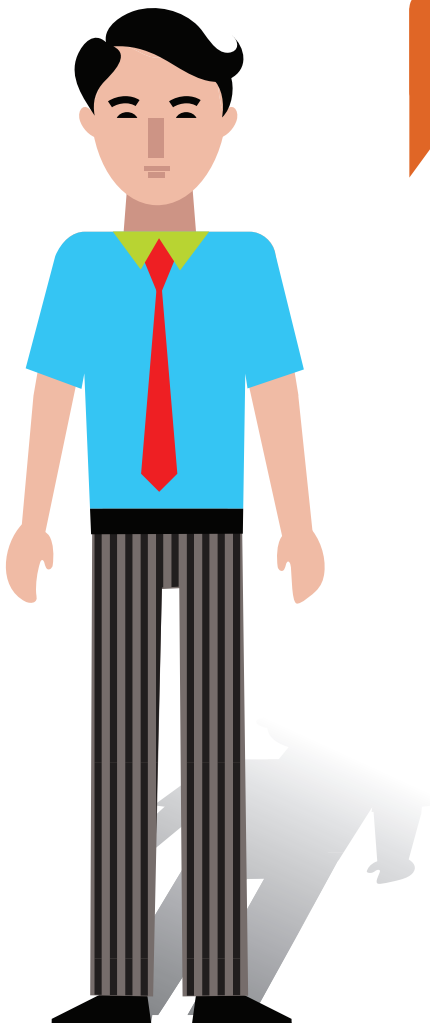
Many professionals that work with young people do not consider the young person as their primary client, but instead see them as one of many stakeholders. That's okay; it just means they are not a youth worker.

For example, a high school teacher's work entirely revolves around young people. Whilst they are concerned with the well-being of young people, the focus of their work is to teach the curriculum. Similarly, a family worker may work with families that have teenage children and be concerned with the needs

and interests of those young people, but they will be equally mindful of the needs and interests of the parents, younger children etc. Their primary concern is not only for the young people with whom they work.

But young people need to know that there is at least one professional role that they can rely on to always put their interests first. This is the space that youth workers fill.

As youth workers, we may find ourselves in situations where we are working with two or more young people who are in conflict with each other. In these situations, we should aim to meet the needs of each of the young people involved. If this creates a conflict of interests that cannot be resolved, the youth worker should look for a solution that meets the needs of all of the young people, such as referring one or more of the young people to another youth worker or agency.



Hi, I'm **Will**

**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. Will also provides Luke's mother with contact details for the local family support service, who can assist her with her own support needs.

## 2 Context

Youth workers are agents of change in a variety of ways, both with individual young people, and also with the systems in society that can cause or contribute to the problems that young people face.

Youth workers work alongside young people in their context. This means youth workers recognise the impact of that context when working. Context includes things at all levels: place, culture, family, peer group, community, society.

In working alongside young people, the youth work approach ensures that youth workers play a facilitation role, rather than viewing young people as passive recipients of services.

As youth workers we need to be very clear that there is 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 of the broader social context. This cannot be denied in our approach to working with young people. It would be short sighted to think that young people can be worked with in isolation, ignoring the complex myriad of influences all around them.

Hi, I'm Joe

**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.

Joe raises the matter at the local youth interagency and finds that several other youth services share this concern. They agree to raise the matter with YACWA and Homelessness Australia, and to link their campaign to "Youth Homelessness Matters" Day.



Hi, I'm Kim

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Kim is a youth worker at a youth drop-in centre. She often overhears the young people saying things like "that's so gay" to describe something negative. She wants to challenge their use of the word gay, but not in a way that just berates the young people. So she orders some posters from an anti-homophobia campaign, featuring prominent sports stars making statements about challenging homophobia. Kim puts them up around the youth centre. She then uses the posters as a way to start conversations with the young people when she hears them use the word "gay" in a negative way.



## 3 Promotes Equality

All forms of discrimination have a negative impact on those who experience them, including of course young people. Also, because of their age and social standing, young people's rights are often not protected. This can include their legal, civic, economic, social, cultural, political and human rights. Youth workers work to protect the rights that young people have, and to support them when they experience any form of discrimination. Youth workers also advocate for and facilitate young people receiving the rights they are due.

Under Human Rights and Equal Opportunities legislation, all young people have the right to be treated in a fair and appropriate manner, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, disability or sexual orientation. This impacts directly on the youth worker's approach to young people.

Regardless of a youth worker's personal beliefs, we have a responsibility to treat all young people fairly and equally, and to respond to young people on the basis of their need in the best way possible.

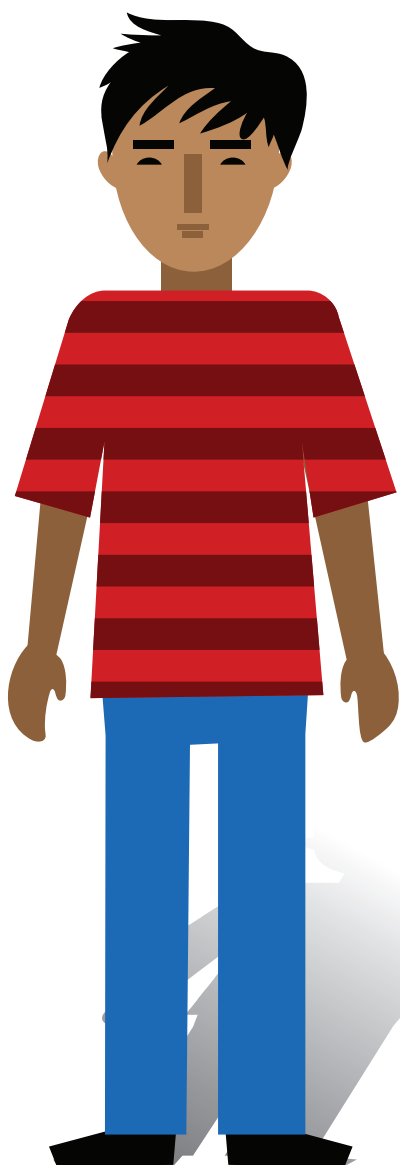
## 4 Empowerment

The term 'empowerment' has become a bit of a buzz word, and as a result its meaning is sometimes not clear. This principle clarifies what empowerment means in ethical terms, and what it means for us as youth workers. It focuses our attention to being accountable to young people. In this context, 'empowerment' also refers to young people's ethical and responsible action.

If a young person is empowered, has independence and participates in society, they are able to take control of their experiences and make informed decisions. They can own their identity and pursue the lives they choose. They are able to participate in the decisions that impact their lives, whether that be day to day experiences, or the decisions that are part of being an adult citizen, such as input into services, or who runs the government.

Youth workers work to advocate for and facilitate that empowerment, independence and participation. In the first 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 with this assumption that we go into every situation; we need to regularly assess the assumptions we hold about young people's competency in assessing and acting in their own interests.



Hi, I'm Harry

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Ling, who is 16, approaches her youth worker Harry about her recent mistreatment by a security guard at the local shopping centre. Harry is clear on his ethical commitment to empowering young people. He talks with Ling about what happened and what she would like to do about the situation. When Ling says that she wishes to make a complaint, Harry offers to support and assist her with the complaints process. He presumes that Ling is competent to decide on what course of action she wishes to take.

Harry explains the complaints process clearly, including how to access this process. He encourages Ling by discussing the details with her, emphasising the injustice of the security guard's actions. Harry encourages Ling to do as much as she can in the complaints process for herself, and in the areas where Ling says she feels out of her depth, Harry acts in an advocacy role on Ling's behalf. He regularly checks in with her to make sure she is happy with the actions he is taking.

## 5 Duty of Care

Both legally and ethically, duty of care is a shared responsibility between the youth worker and the agency. "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. As youth workers we can get a bit fired up with our passion to help people, to get things moving, or to use the skills and resources we have at our disposal. Sometimes this might not be the best thing.

When 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 generally safe, and that it is safe for this particular young person. We need to be confident that there will not be further harm resulting from their involvement. Our risk assessment and risk management needs to be thorough. Equipment needs to be well maintained, and staff need to be suitably trained and supported.

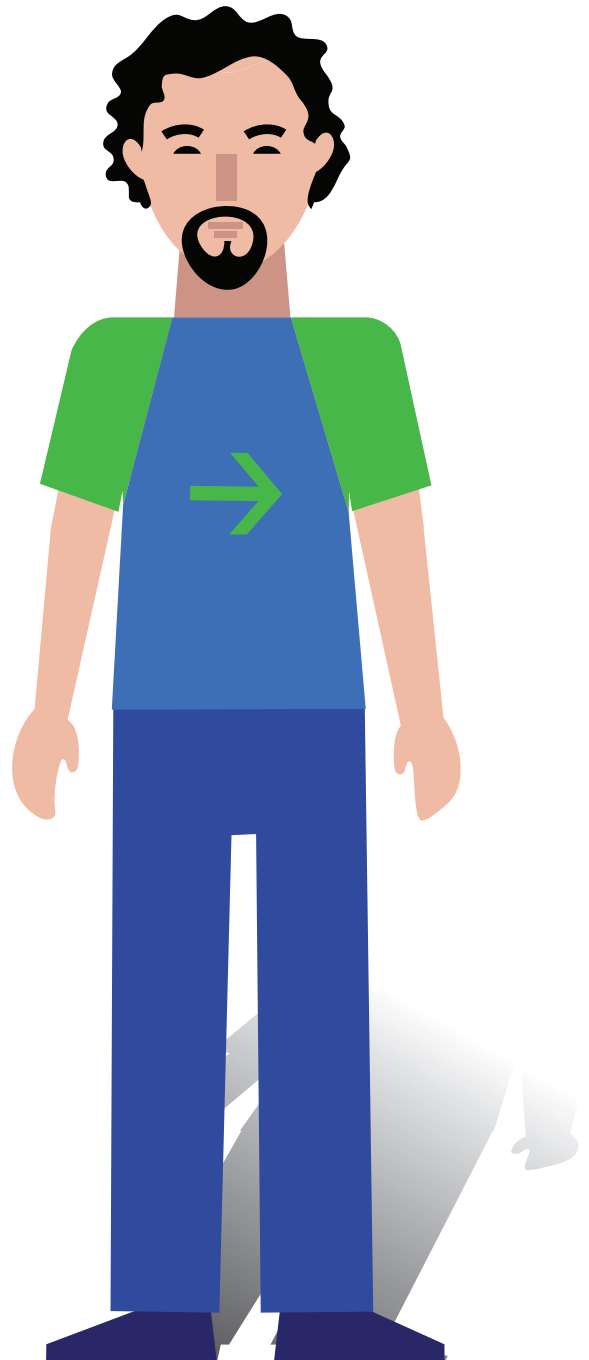
Duty of care also involves being aware of the safety of ourselves and others. If a youth worker has strong reason to believe that a young person may be planning to harm themselves or someone else, we have a duty to act on this information.

Duty of care means that youth work agencies 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 must be careful about who is given access to the young people we work with. Proper investigation needs to be made into people's work and criminal histories, even when they are volunteers.

Hi, I'm Brad

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Brad is a youth worker who works at a family and youth support service. He has been working with Jake, who is 15, for a few weeks. When Brad sees Jake today, Jake says that he has been thinking about killing himself, and that at times he is finding it really hard to think of a reason to stay alive. Brad explains that he is very concerned for Jake's safety, and that he will not be able to keep this information secret, because he has a duty of care to make sure that Jake is safe.

Jake becomes upset and tells Brad he doesn't want him to tell anyone, as he is worried what his parents will say. Brad reminds Jake that in the beginning of them working together, Brad had explained that he couldn't keep certain information confidential, such as information about harming himself or someone else. Brad then takes time to explain the steps he will need to take to help keep Jake safe, and reassures him that he will continue to support him through this. Brad also says that he is happy to help Jake explain the situation to his parents if that will help.



## 6 Preventing Corruption

This principle encourages youth workers to keep ourselves honest in terms of our motivations and rewards. This may involve financial gain, but also includes other things such as power, profile, emotional security, personal identity, agency reputation and so on.

This doesn't mean we need to act entirely selflessly with regard to the needs and interests of young people. It doesn't mean that youth workers shouldn't do well out of their youth work roles. But 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, or that their needs are compromised in any way.

## 7 A Transparent Relationship

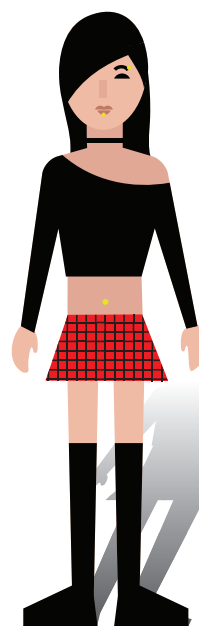
We don't deceive young people, either by saying things that are untrue or by not saying things that they have a right to know. This means that in initial meetings with young people, youth workers must be clear about what they can and can't offer. This applies to various areas of practice, agency policy and the 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:** 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, in order to ensure they have a transparent relationship with the young people attending the centre.

Hi, I'm **Brenda**

**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 explains that she doesn't know anyone who is sleeping out tonight, and the reporter suggests that maybe one of the young people in the hostel might be willing to pretend to be.

Brenda knows the article may give her a 'higher profile' in the youth sector, but recognises that by exposing the young person and the hostel to such an exercise, she may potentially place them more at risk. Brenda explains to the reporter that this approach is likely to be degrading to the young person, and she is concerned that the young person would not be portrayed in a respectful and dignified way. She turns down the offer.





## 8 Confidentiality

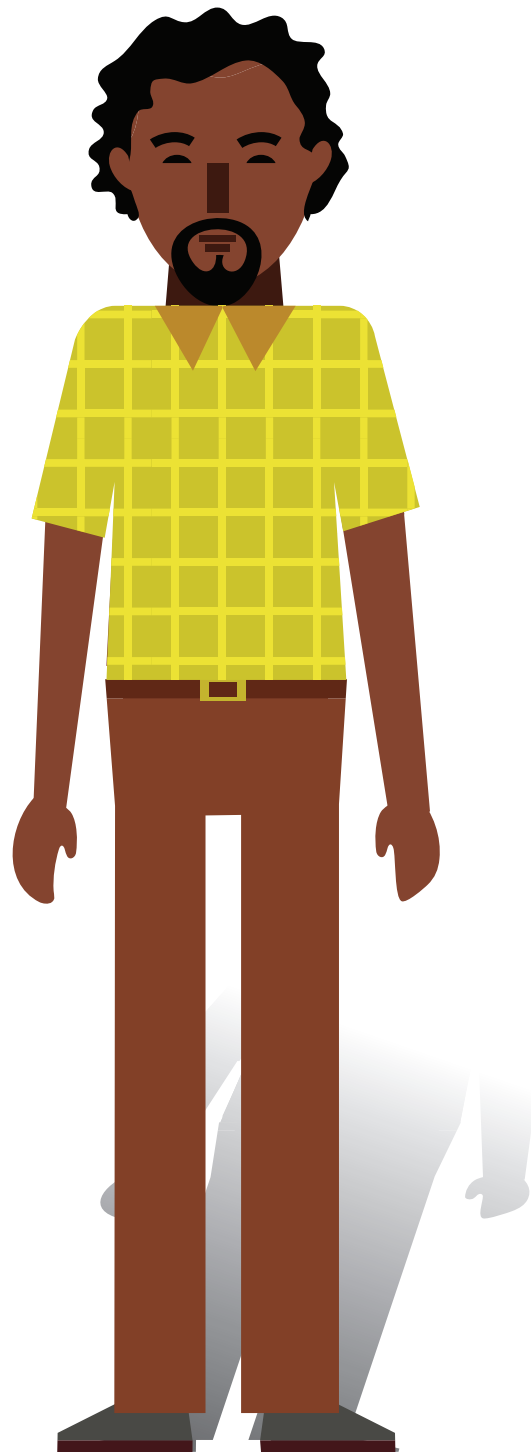
Young people provide youth workers with lots of private information about themselves, including their names, personal stories about themselves, their families and so on. Even where we think it might achieve good outcomes, we don't give the identifying details of the young people we work with to anyone else - including police, schools, Centrelink, or other agencies - because this information is private and given in confidence, and continues to belong to the young person. If a youth worker believes there is a good reason why a young person's private information should be shared, we must first make the young person aware of why we believe it would be useful or important to give their private information to others, and the young person's permission must be sought and 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 or who they were with. Perfect confidentiality is of course not possible or even desirable: there are always limits. One such limit to confidentiality is when we learn that a young person may be at risk of harming themselves or others. We need to know and understand these limits ourselves, and communicate and clarify them to young people at the onset of our relationship with them. This might include organisational policies about sharing information between workers within the one agency.

Hi, I'm Arif

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Arif is a youth worker whose role sometimes involves visiting the local high school. Arif receives a phone call from the school counsellor at the school, asking him about one of the young people he has worked with. The school counsellor says that she noticed the young person speaking with Arif in the playground, and asks Arif if he can provide her with some background information about what's been happening with that young person. He has recently been getting into trouble with several teachers and she is keen to find out what is going on so she can offer him some support.

Whilst Arif understands that the school counsellor has good motives, he is also aware that this would be a breach of confidentiality for the young person concerned. Arif politely explains to the school counsellor that he is unable to give out any private information about the young people he works with.



## 9 Cooperation

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. Collaborative interagency approaches enable 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 a variety of needs. No single program or agency is capable of looking after every need a young person has. Youth workers are one role in a young person's life, but they are not the only one. Other roles are important to ensure young peoples' needs are met holistically.

Collaboration and cooperation also enables us to expand our 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 to their fair share of available resources.



Hi, I'm Sarah

**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.

## 10 Knowledge

It is essential for youth workers to maintain a high level of competence through an ongoing commitment to training and professional development, and to being informed and skilled in relation to 'best practice' in youth work. This is a standard requirement for most professions.

Hi, I'm Jesse

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Jesse is youth worker at an after school program in a local youth centre. The centre has recently received some computers for the young people to use. Jesse has noticed many of the young people using Facebook while they are at the program, and has had a couple of conversations with young people who have had experiences of cyber bullying in the past.

Jesse is concerned that the youth centre does not have well developed policies and procedures regarding the use of social media, and has noticed that some of the staff and volunteers have very basic IT skills and knowledge. Jesse raises her concern in a staff meeting and offers to plan a training session with an organisation specialising in cyber bullying, so that the team members can develop their awareness and agree some policies and procedures for the use of the computers at the centre.



## 11 Self-Awareness

As youth workers, we understand that we are people too, with our own histories, beliefs, ideologies and experiences. We understand that these things can impact on our practice. Realising this, youth workers take into account the diversity of values and interests that young people may present with. We recognise that our own values may be different to theirs, and we respond to these differences in non-judgemental ways. Respect and dignity are crucial to being able to accept these differences between ourselves and the young person, whilst also recognising that universally accepted concepts of human rights must not be compromised in doing so.

Building self-awareness is something we must invest time and energy into. This comes through things like self examination and critical reflection, regular supervision, and taking part in training and professional development opportunities that challenge and extend us.

Hi, I'm **Jim**

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Jim is a youth worker at a crisis hostel. As a child he was brought up in a conservative home. Aaron - a young gay man - moves into the hostel. Jim has not had a lot of contact with Same Sex Attracted people before and senses that he has some discomfort when he is around Aaron. Jim works with his supervisor to understand his own reaction to Aaron, and decides to attend a diversity training course to help him to understand how to provide gay friendly and appropriate services.



## 12 Boundaries

Youth work is founded in relationships. It is the strong, respectful, trust-based relationships between youth workers and young people that allows youth workers to do our jobs.

Youth workers must recognise that the relationship between ourselves and a young person is a contracted relationship. Such contracted relationships have boundaries and limits. These boundaries are influenced by a range of factors, such as the law, organisational policies and procedures, as well as being grounded in a thorough understanding of adolescent development.

For example, the relationship between a youth worker and a young person needs to be non-sexual. Furthermore, youth workers should be mindful of how much personal information we share about ourselves, and the way we talk about things like relationships, or drugs and alcohol. It is also not the youth worker's role to rescue a young person from their situation.

These boundaries ensure that the relationships we have with young people, and the subsequent service or intervention provided is not compromised. This consideration is particularly important when we are working with young people who may have less access to knowledge, resources, and skills than we do.



Hi, I'm **Jan**

**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 the staff work double or triple shifts, often on their own. Workers are covered by an award which specifies the minimum length of breaks between shifts, and provisions for time off. Jan recognises her need to engage in 'self care', and the affect it may have on her health and well being if she fails to do so. She is also concerned about the level of support and care she will be able to provide to the young people if she is not well rested. She refuses to work double or triple shifts and raises this as a self care issue for her colleagues at their next team meeting.

Hi, I'm **Kenny**

**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 to begin a more personal relationship. Kenny responds by raising the issue with Michelle when he sees her at the drop-in centre, reinforcing the limits of his role and making it clear that their relationship must be based on and bound by his role and responsibilities as a youth worker.



## 13 Self Care

Youth workers need to prioritise the practice of self-care: of looking after ourselves as a means to ensuring that we have long and positive careers, enabling us to continue to provide high quality services to young people.

There are benefits for the youth worker from practicing appropriate levels of self care; and equally there are benefits for the young people we work with.

The care of a youth worker is a shared responsibility between the youth worker themselves and the organisation they are employed by. Because of this, self care often involves raising relevant issues in supervision, team meetings etc.

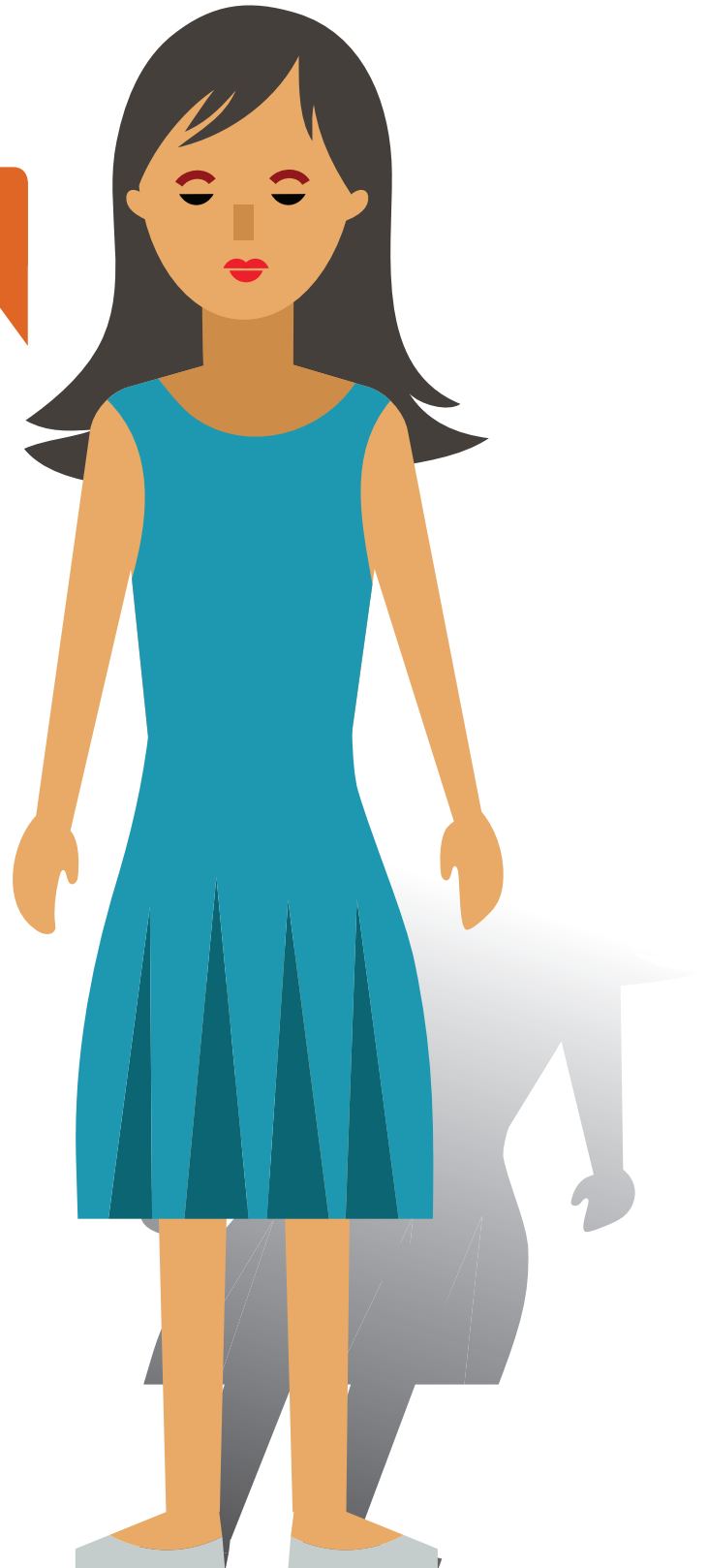
## 14 Integrity

By continuing to portray youth work in a professional manner, youth workers will be mindful not to act in ways that can bring our roles and profession into disrepute.

Youth work is an essential role in the community, and its continued support by the community is dependent on the conduct of its practitioners. Youth workers are aware of our own roles and the expectations that this places upon us from ourselves, other stakeholders, and from young people.

Hi, I'm **Mary**

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Mary completed her degree in youth work a few months ago and recently started in her first full time youth work role. Mary is keen to ensure that she carries out her new role to the best of her ability, mindful of the things she learned whilst undertaking her degree. She regularly attends interagency meetings, looks for professional development opportunities, and regularly reads the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA. When a conflict or uncertainty arises in her role, she discusses it with more experienced team mates, or raises it in supervision with her manager.









# Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA



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