

# Supporting Ethical Youth Work

A guide for using the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA as a tool for ensuring quality youth work



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# Acknowledgements

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Effort has been made to acknowledge the original sources of the materials used in this guide. However, because of the informal nature of youth work, at times it has not been possible to identify where some materials and ideas have originated. YACWA and WAAYW will happily acknowledge all sources in future editions of this guide if asked to do so.



**waayw** western australian  
association of  
youth workers

# Introduction

The *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA* is a valuable tool for supporting quality youth work practice, and for helping to clarify what youth work is about - both for youth workers themselves, and for those who come into contact with youth workers, such as young people, parents, community members and other professionals.



The Code serves many purposes, including:

- Helping to describe and protect the youth work relationship, and safeguarding the young people in that relationship
- Describing what ethical practice is, and exposing unethical or suspect practice
- Providing guidance to youth workers to help them to navigate new and difficult situations
- Helping to keep ourselves and each other accountable
- Providing a basis for more detailed policy development at the agency level
- Helping to improve the status and profile of youth work
- Clarifying our identity as youth workers, and helping to distinguish youth work from other professions that work with young people

In order to make the most of the Code, it is important to use the Code - and a range of materials that have been developed to support it - in as many different ways as possible. Some of the ways that you can do this include:

- Ensuring that **all youth work staff** - and those whose roles involve supporting youth workers - receive a copy of the Code of Ethics as part of their induction process
- Referring to the Code, and **incorporating specific principles** from the Code, in organisational policies and procedures
- Having the **young person's version of the Code** available in reception areas, waiting rooms etc, and offering a copy to young people when they first engage with your service
- **Displaying posters** promoting the Code in reception areas, offices, waiting rooms etc - this acts as a reminder to staff, as well as promoting the Code to young people, parents, and to other professionals
- Mentioning the Code in **job ads** when recruiting new youth workers
- Using the Code as a basis for questions in **job applications** and **job interviews** for youth work roles
- Exploring ethical dilemmas that arise in our work, through **regular supervision and team meetings**
- Offering opportunities for staff to receive training to better understand and implement the Code
- Using the Code when working with **professionals from other disciplines**. The Code can be used to introduce the role and purpose of youth work, discuss expectations etc.
- Using the Code when **developing MOU's** between organisations

The purpose of this guide is to provide practical tips and resources, in order to help organisations that employ youth workers to put these ideas into practice, and to help you to start thinking about how you can make the best use of the Code.

# The Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA

*“Youth work is a practice that places young people and their interests 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.” (1)*

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.

# Building Awareness of the Code of Ethics

In order to get the greatest benefit from the Code, it is important to build an awareness that the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA* exists, and of the principles within it. This is important for youth workers themselves, but also for other stakeholders who have an interest in youth work - including young people, parents, community members, community organisations, relevant government departments, and other professionals.

There are many things you can do within your organisation to help build a greater awareness of the Code. These include:

- Putting up a poster describing the Code in waiting rooms, reception areas, around your office etc (see the *Further Resources* section of this guide for more information)
- Mentioning the Code of Ethics to young people when they enter your program or organisation
- Offering young people a copy of the Young Person's version of the Code, and making these available for young people to pick up and read, or take to read later
- Introducing the Code of Ethics and the National Definition of Youth Work (2) to your staff team, including staff that are not youth workers
- Utilising the Code in your organisation's Policies and Procedures
- Making sure managers are introduced to the Code, and encouraged to think about how they can use the Code with the staff they supervise
- Including references to the Code in information about your organisation, on your website, and in formal documents such as MOUs with other services

## 1. Using the Code in Policies and Procedures

It's important to include references to the Code in your organisation's Policies and Procedures manual, as well as in documents like a Code of Conduct. This will help to ensure that the work of your organisation, and the expected behaviour and actions of the staff, are grounded in ethical principles.

Below is an example of how the Code has been applied to an organisational policy. This example is taken from *Youth Work Ethics* by Howard Sercombe (3). This book is a great resource and includes a whole chapter on incorporating youth work ethics into organisational policy. For more details see the *Further Resources* section later in this guide.

### Drug Use

The agency aims to help young people to control their drug use, to eliminate high-risk drug use, and to minimise the harm of their drug use. As such, it is important that our own drug use is consistent with these aims.

#### Code of Ethics:

##### *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.*

#### Code of Practice:

1. We will not purchase, use or supply any restricted psychotropic drug in the company of young people. This includes alcohol and tobacco as well as illegal drugs. Caffeine is unrestricted.
2. We will not appear in public in an intoxicated state whether on duty or not
3. We will not turn up to work in any way impaired by any restricted psychotropic drug.

# Employing Ethical Youth Workers

The Code is useful in helping to attract a high calibre of youth work staff to your organisation. You can do this by:

- Clearly articulating that your organisation endorses the Code in job ads
- Letting potential staff know that they will be required to follow the Code
- Requiring job applicants to demonstrate a level of understanding of, and commitment to the Code by building this in to the selection criteria
- Including questions about the Code and about specific ethical practices when interviewing for youth worker positions

Each of these gives potential applicants a clear message that your organisation recognises and values the Code, and helps to ensure that youth workers share this commitment.

Publicly endorsing the Code has other positive benefits. It makes it clear that the role of youth workers is taken seriously in your organisation, and that youth workers employed there will be supported to do the best job they can for themselves, the organisation, the young people they work with, and for the profession of youth work as a whole.

## 1. Advertising Youth Worker Positions

Below is an example of a job ad that uses the Code in these ways.

### Youth Support WA

Youth Worker  
SCHCaDS Award Level 4 - 28 hours per week  
Based in Perth CBD

We are seeking a suitably qualified person to take up a position within our Youth Services team. This position provides support services to young people in our early intervention program.

Youth Support WA is a community based not-for-profit organisation established in 1988. We provide a range of services for young people and families that build and enhance relationships across the greater Perth area, based on ethical practices.

Youth Support WA endorses the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA*. Applicants will be required to demonstrate a knowledge of, and commitment to the Code, and to undertake a criminal record check and a working with children check.

For an information pack please go to [www.youthsupportwa.org.au/cooljobs](http://www.youthsupportwa.org.au/cooljobs)

Applications close at 5pm on Monday September 22, 2014.

We are an EEO employer and encourage applications from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from diverse cultures and people with a disability.

## 2. Demonstrating Knowledge of the Code in Job Applications

The Code should also be reflected in your selection criteria. This gives a clear message that your organisation values the ethical behaviour outlined in the Code, and also makes clear that youth workers are expected to be aware of the Code, and to understand the implications of the principles included in the Code.

An example of how to include the Code in the essential criteria is included below:

### Essential Criteria:

1. Possess relevant qualifications and/or experience in youth work
2. Demonstrated capacity to apply current early intervention support models and case management principles to assist at-risk young people
3. Demonstrated ability to work with Aboriginal young people and young people from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds
4. Demonstrated excellence in communication and interpersonal skills including demonstrated experience in liaising with a wide range of stakeholders
5. Demonstrated knowledge of the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA, and an ability to apply these principles to youth work practice
6. Hold a current WA Drivers Licence, Working with Children Check and be willing to undertake a Federal Police Check



### 3. Using the Code in Youth Worker Job Descriptions

It is important to make sure the principles of the Code are reflected in the job descriptions of your organisation's youth workers. This will clearly outline the expectation that your organisation has regarding the behaviour of staff, and help to ensure that the Code is applied in practice by the youth workers your organisation employs.

Whilst the principles in the Code will be reflected in many of the tasks and responsibilities included in a youth worker's job description, it is also useful to clearly state a broad commitment to the Code, and the requirement of youth work staff to work in ways that are consistent with the Code.

**Below is an example of some ways that the Code can be incorporated into a job description.**



#### Youth Support WA

##### JOB DESCRIPTION – Youth Worker

*Position Title:* Youth Worker

*Award:* SCHCADS Award

*Award classification:* Level 4

*Hours of duty:* 28 hours per week

*Reports to:* Manager, Youth Support Services

##### Youth Support WA Objectives:

Our people are informed by Youth Support WA's values and operate within the framework of our policies, practice principles and strategic goals to achieve our goals and mission. Our youth work staff work in accordance with the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA.

##### Responsibilities and Key Duties:

1. Work to achieve the objectives of Youth Support WA by:
  - i) Adhering to the relevant standards, policies and procedures of Youth Support WA
  - ii) Adhering to the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA
  - iii) Modelling and fostering professional work practices, in relation to the health, safety and wellbeing of colleagues and young people
  - iv) Assisting Youth Support WA to develop projects and services which are consistent with its strategic aims and objectives.

##### Skills, Knowledge, Attitudes & Attributes:

###### a) Skills:

*Practice Framework* - Demonstrates ability to incorporate theoretical concepts from the practice framework into youth work practice

*Ethical Framework* - Demonstrates ability to apply ethical principles outlined in the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA

*Practice* - Demonstrates skills in developing positive and ethical youth work relationships with young people in their context, displaying empathy, respect, support and strengths-based approaches.

###### b) Knowledge:

*Tertiary Qualification* - Possess a tertiary qualification relevant to the position

*Adolescent Development* - Demonstrate knowledge of adolescent development and its impact on interpersonal relationships

*Practice Framework* - Demonstrate a clear understanding of current best practice in working with young people.

*Ethical Framework* - Demonstrate a clear understanding of ethical practice as outlined in the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA.

# Using the Code in Job Interviews

When it comes to interviewing youth workers to fill vacant positions, the Code is useful in asking potential youth workers about ethical practice. When using the Code as a basis for interview questions, it is a good idea to ask general questions about the applicant's awareness and knowledge of the code, as well as more probing questions, such as asking for an example of ethical dilemmas they have faced, and how they resolved these. You can also use each of

the principles in the Code as the basis for questions about specific skills and attributes, such as how they promote equality and empowerment, or their knowledge of key issues such as duty of care and confidentiality.

**Below is an example of some questions you could ask in job interviews for youth workers which utilise the Code of Ethics:**

## Key Areas

## Example questions

### Key knowledge:

Has a clear understanding of ethical practice, as outlined in the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA*.

Our organisation endorses the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA*. Can you please tell us about your knowledge of the Code of Ethics.

Why do you believe that ethical practice is important in the role of a youth worker?

### Key skills:

Demonstrated ability to apply ethical principles as outlined in the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA*.

Think about a situation in the past when you have faced an ethical dilemma in your role as a youth worker. Can you tell us about the dilemma and answer the following questions:

Which principle or principles in the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA* were challenged in that situation?

How did you deal with the situation in order to overcome that particular ethical dilemma?

### Key attributes:

Demonstrates key attributes of an ethical youth worker, as outlined in the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA*.

**1.** Youth workers promote equality for all young people, regardless of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability, location or socio-economic status. Can you tell us about a situation where you believed a young person was not being treated equally, and how you addressed this situation?

**2.** Youth workers are committed to confidentiality in their work with young people. Can you tell us what this means to you, and how you apply this in your work?

**3.** Youth workers maintain appropriate boundaries when working with young people. Can you tell us about a time when these boundaries were challenged in your work, and how you resolved this?



The Code also provides a great basis for designing case studies and scenarios for use in job interviews. They provide an important opportunity to “go deeper” into ethical issues, in order to learn more about the applicant, and the way they apply ethical principles in their youth work practice.

When used in job interviews, case studies and scenarios should be as close as possible to “real life” situations that a youth worker might face in the role that you are interviewing them for. The commentary that accompanies the Code provides a case study for each of the principles in the Code. These are a good starting point for developing case studies that fit the types of youth work programs and services that your organisation provides. WAAYW has also developed a number of case studies that align with the Code. See the *Further Resources* section at the end of this guide for more details.

**An example of a case study developed from the Code is provided below. This is based on the case example on *Duty of Care* which is provided in the commentary to the Code.**

### Job interview scenario - Duty of Care

You are a youth worker who works at a family and youth support service. You have been working with a 15 year old young man named Jake for a few weeks. When you see Jake today, he 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. Jake is noticeably upset and tells you that he doesn't want you to tell anyone, as he is really worried about what his parents will say.

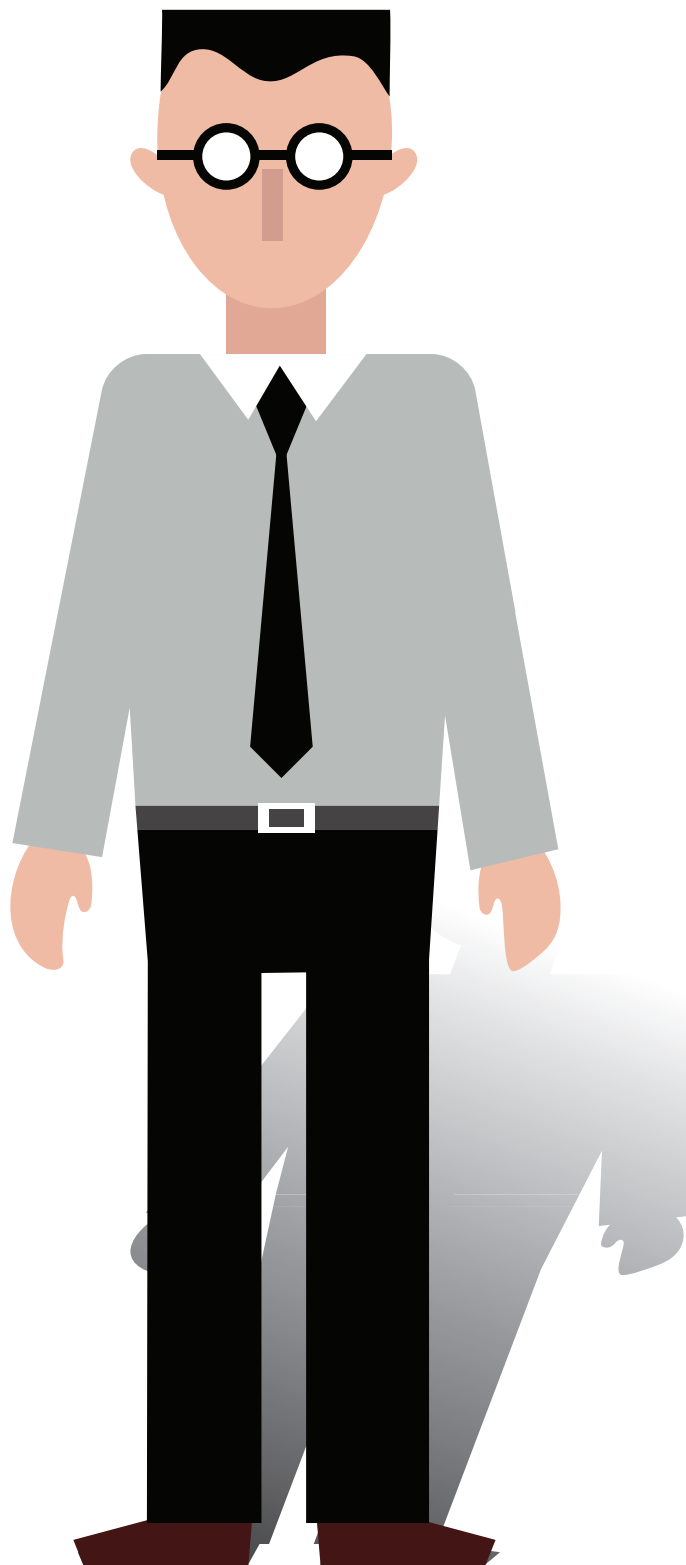
Explain how you would deal with this situation, answering the following questions:

*\*What would you be thinking about and why?*

*\*What ethical dilemmas does this raises for you as a youth worker?*

*\*What would you say to Jake and why?*

*\*What other steps would you take in response to your conversation with Jake?*



# Supporting Ethical Youth Workers

Once you have chosen the right youth worker for the job through the recruitment process, it is important to reinforce the importance of ethical practice as soon as the youth worker begins their role, and to continue to support and reinforce this message throughout their time with your organisation.

This can be done in a number of ways, such as:

- Including the Code as part of the staff induction process
- Using the Code as a tool for ongoing individual and group supervision sessions
- Utilising the Code in staff development during team meetings and events
- Offering opportunities for staff to attend training in the Code and in issues of ethical practice
- Providing access to other resources such as self assessment tools

## 1. Using the Code in Staff Induction

There are many ways you can incorporate the Code into your staff induction program for youth workers, such as:

- Including a copy of the Code in your organisation's induction pack for new staff
- Having the youth worker's manager or supervisor explain your organisation's commitment to the Code, including why it is important, and how the agency uses the Code to support quality youth work practice through supervision, discussions in team meetings, by offering training in ethical practice, by including the Code in the organisation's policies etc
- Taking the new worker on a tour of the workplace, and showing them where and how the Code is used and displayed, including:
  - Where printed and electronic copies of the Code are kept
  - Where posters are displayed which explain the Code
  - Where the young person's version of the Code are kept and displayed - such as in reception areas and waiting rooms - and how these are introduced to young people
  - Introducing other tools such as the Ethics Cards and self assessment tools, and explaining how they are used

## 2. Using the Code in Staff Supervision and Staff Development

The Code provides a really useful basis for important discussions about ethical youth work practice through regular supervision and support, in team meetings, and during professional development events. Below are three activities that utilise the Code as a basis for supervision and professional development, that can be used in one-to-one and group sessions.



# Activity 1 - Code of Ethics Self-Assessment Tool

Read through each of the principles outlined in the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA*, and rate yourself by placing a “X” in the appropriate box, according to how well you feel you meet each principle on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “very poor” and 10 being “excellent”.

Principle:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Primary Client										
2. Context										
3. Promotes Equality										
4. Empowerment										
5. Duty of Care										
6. Preventing Corruption										
7. A Transparent Relationship										
8. Confidentiality										
9. Cooperation										
10. Knowledge										
11. Self-awareness										
12. Boundaries										
13. Self-care										
14. Integrity										

Spend some time reflecting on the following questions, or discussing them with a colleague or supervisor:

1. Which three principles are your strongest? Why?
2. Which three principles are your weakest? Why?
3. What steps could you take to begin strengthening the areas you are weaker in?



# Activity 3 - Dealing with Ethical Dilemmas

Read through the following scenario and then discuss the questions that follow.

## Scenario:

Two young women you have not seen before enter the youth centre that you work at. They look a little bit uncomfortable and you plan to go over and introduce yourself and offer to show them around, but are just finishing doing something else important. One of the girls kisses the other girl on the lips and rubs her arm. You notice another youth worker shoot a disapproving look at the young women, rolling her eyes and muttering something under her breath. The young women clearly notice the youth worker's reaction, and before you are able to respond they have quickly walked out of the youth centre. You are concerned about the actions of the other youth worker, but she is a friend of yours and you are worried about getting her into trouble.

## Questions:

1. Which principles in the Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA are challenged in this scenario?

*Give reasons for your answers.*

2. What immediate actions would you take to address the situation in this scenario? Why?

3. What else could you do to try to ensure that this situation did not happen again?

4. What challenges or conflicts would there be for you in trying to resolve this situation?

*How would you overcome these?*

# Further Resources

There are a number of resources available to help you to make the best use the *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA*, in order to provide quality youth work programs and services.

\*The following resources have been developed by YACWA and WAAYW:

- The *Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in WA* and a commentary explaining the Code
- A young person's guide to the Code
- A poster promoting the Code aimed at youth workers
- A poster promoting the Code aimed at young people

You can download these for free from [www.yacwa.org.au](http://www.yacwa.org.au) or [www.waayw.org](http://www.waayw.org)

\*A set of *Ethics Cards* were developed by WAAYW, Anglicare WA and YACWA, and are a great tool for exploring the Code, and for use as a discussion starter on ethical issues. The cards are available for purchase from <http://www.waayw.org/r4.html>

\*WAAYW has also developed ten *Ethics Scenarios*, which can be downloaded for free from their website.

Go to <http://www.waayw.org/docs/A5%20Ethics%20Scenarios.pdf>

\*Youth Action NSW has developed a blog for youth workers to discuss ethical dilemmas. You can find the blog at <http://youthworkethics.blogspot.com.au/>

\**Youth Work Ethics* by Howard Sercombe is the definitive text on the topic of ethics in youth work. You can purchase this online at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/books/9781446206003>

\*The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition has developed *The National Definition of Youth Work in Australia* following a thorough consultation with the youth sector. For more information go to [www.ayac.org.au](http://www.ayac.org.au)

\*The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria has developed a *Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector* and *A Guide to the Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector*. To find out more about these go to [www.yacvic.org.au](http://www.yacvic.org.au)

\*The website of the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (ACYS) has a page dedicated to ethics in youth work, including links to numerous websites, details of journal articles etc. You can find this at [http://www.acys.info/topics/youth\\_work/ethics](http://www.acys.info/topics/youth_work/ethics)

\**Concepts and Methods of Youth Work*, edited by Rob White, is a comprehensive text, including a section on youth work as a profession which looks at professionalism and ethics, multi-skilling and future prospects for youth work. You can order this from ACYS at [http://www.acys.info/books/acys/concepts\\_and\\_methods\\_of\\_youth\\_work](http://www.acys.info/books/acys/concepts_and_methods_of_youth_work)

## References:

1, 2. *The National Definition of Youth Work in Australia* - developed by the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, 2013. See [www.ayac.org.au](http://www.ayac.org.au)

3. Sercombe, H (2010) *Youth Work Ethics*, Sage Publications, London.







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