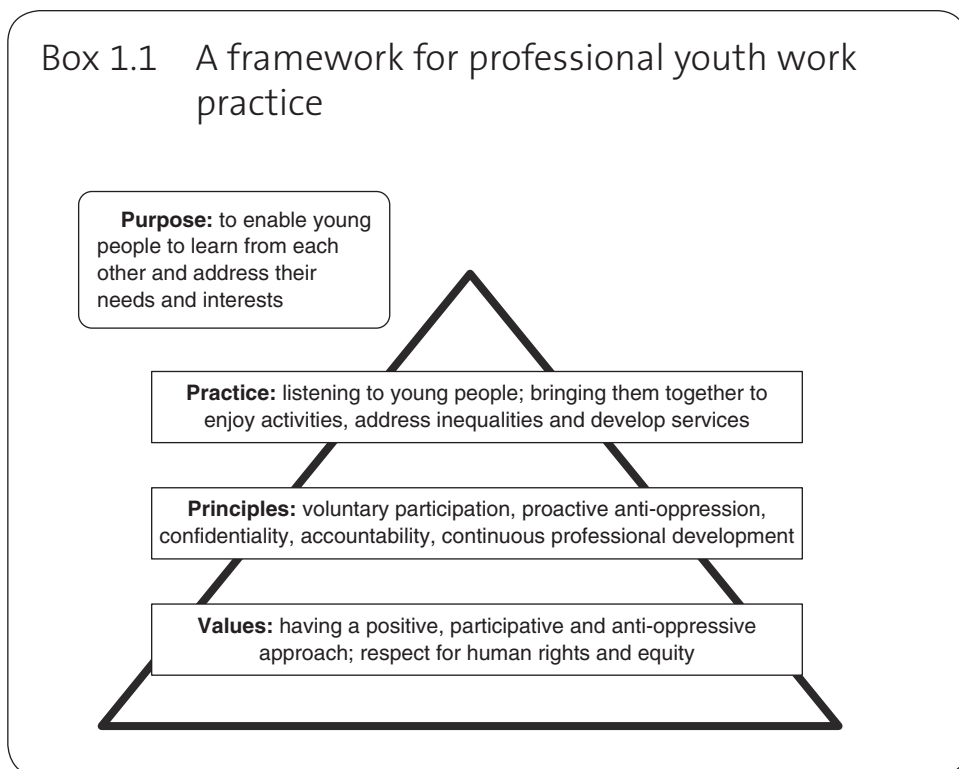# ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

# 1

# UNDERSTANDING YOUTH WORK

This chapter introduces the links between the purpose of youth work, the core values and principles for youth work practice and an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a youth worker, which underpin the first steps in building professional relationships with young people and their communities.

## IDENTIFYING YOUTH WORK VALUES AND PRACTICE

Youth work is professional practice with young people based on certain core values and principles requiring the establishment of voluntary relationships with young people, links with communities and other relevant organisations, and professional supervision from experienced practitioners. Respect for young people is at the heart of youth work values in a profession that works 'where young people are' with a positive, participative and anti-oppressive approach. Through engaging in open and honest dialogue with young people, youth workers aim to value different perspectives and address expressed needs and interests. Attempts are made to recognise young people's rights to be treated with dignity as individuals, reject negative labelling and challenge negative stereotypes, whether based on ageism or other oppressive attitudes, by promoting positive images and examples of young people's lives. The process involves careful listening to young people about their understanding of themselves and their situations.

The values provide an ethical foundation that informs professional principles and practice. The principles apply the general values more directly to youth work practice and define the essential activities of enabling young people's voluntary participation and actively seeking accountability to them and their communities. The significance of this close relationship between values and practice is that youth workers need to be involved in continuous professional reflection and development to ensure that personal experiences and perspectives are used appropriately and that any boundaries and barriers to their role are clarified and addressed. The relationship between youth work practice and professional values and principles is illustrated in Box 1.1, which suggests a framework for youth work that can transform young people's lives and communities.

## Box 1.1    A framework for professional youth work practice

**Purpose:** to enable young people to learn from each other and address their needs and interests

**Practice:** listening to young people; bringing them together to enjoy activities, address inequalities and develop services

**Principles:** voluntary participation, proactive anti-oppression, confidentiality, accountability, continuous professional development

**Values:** having a positive, participative and anti-oppressive approach; respect for human rights and equity

Clarity about the purpose of youth work and the relationship of values and principles can help youth workers to develop and carry out professional youth work practice. A starting point could be to 'locate' the congruence between youth work values and principles and personal standpoints. The concept of 'location' is commonly used in youth work to refer to the identification of a position in relation to different perspectives, such as a political ideology or social class, and

recognising how this may influence any interpretations of new situations. 'Locating oneself' requires an analysis of experiences and understanding of how things work, perhaps in relation to others' perspectives. A match between personal and professional values will mean that learning how to apply these values to youth work practice will be strongly underpinned. The Free Child Project acknowledge this personal link in their definition of 'community youth development work' as:

> a strategy, philosophy, and personal approach to acknowledging the ability, authority, and knowledge of young people as powerful, purposeful catalysts for personal, social, cultural, and institutional growth and transformation. (Fletcher, 2008)

## APPLYING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

The application of positive, participative and anti-oppressive values has a range of implications for youth work practice, the activities developed and youth workers themselves. A *positive approach*, for example, could include encouraging young people's educational development and promoting equitable social change; an appreciation of young people's needs for fun, warmth and nurture, as well as youth workers' enjoyment of their work. Enjoyable activities not only encourage young people to participate voluntarily, but may also counter some of the effects of individuals' negative experiences or societal oppression. Rather than seeing young people as problems, victims or individuals in need of help, youth workers recognise their strengths and encourage them to undertake activities that make a positive difference. (See also Chapter 6 for examples of how enjoyable activities, such as socialising, arts and games, can enable young people to make changes in their lives.)

The *participative nature* of youth work recognises young people's rights to choose whether to be involved and to make decisions about issues that affect them. Recognising, valuing and building on participants' contributions and experiences means that young people are 'at the centre' of youth work practice. Participative practice brings young people together in groups to gain support and learn from each other, and encourages them to 'keep it real' by exploring genuine and realistic options. Young people develop greater control over their lives whilst learning new skills, taking responsibility and finding out about new opportunities. Rather than simply providing a service, youth work encourages young people to find their own solutions to problems and develop their own plans and projects. (See also Chapter 9 for ideas about opportunities for young people to become involved in decision making.)

Respect for young people and their human rights informs an *anti-oppressive approach*, which is clearly related to equity, whether for individuals, groups of young people or for young people as a whole in society. Youth work acknowledges

and addresses young people's all too frequent exclusion from decision making, as well as the neglect, rejection and denial of opportunities experienced by some young people more than others. Some individuals, due to circumstances related to birth or upbringing, may be denied safety, security, love or a healthy environment. Societal attitudes and practices, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ageism and ableism, benefit a privileged, often minority group and can exclude others from equal access to rights and opportunities as varied as education, employment, housing, health services, legal protection and leisure activities. Youth work can offer alternative opportunities as well as assist young people to make sense of their circumstances and broaden their understanding of their options. (Practice Example 1.1 provides an example of the power of practice underpinned by the professional values that means young people are welcomed with a positive, participative and anti-oppressive approach.) The pervasiveness of oppressive influences on attitudes and behaviour requires youth workers to have an active and positive approach to individuals and groups that are oppressed and an understanding of how societal attitudes may affect their own perceptions. (See also Chapter 7 for some ideas on developing proactive anti-oppressive youth work.)

## PRACTICE EXAMPLE 1.1

## The power of value-based practice

The best thing about going to the youth centre was that I didn't feel like a stranger. Since I started high school, I haven't been able to get on with the people in my class and it never seemed to be the right time to talk with anyone about it. But when I came to the youth centre, we got stuck in straight away to talking about how to decorate the 'quiet room'. No one seemed to care that I didn't have nice clothes or that I didn't know anyone before I got there. (A young member of a youth organisation)

Linking the values to professional practice are ethical principles: voluntary participation, anti-oppressive practice, confidentiality, accountability and continuous professional development, which together help to define professional boundaries. Power, control and autonomy become key issues for reflection on practice. Through debriefs and supervision, youth workers identify how information was shared with young people to 'tip the balance of power' (Davies, 2005) in their favour and how their capacity to make autonomous decisions was achieved. Youth workers should not just provide services to a passive clientele or assert social control. For example, rather than simply providing young people with solutions to problems, a youth worker will involve young people in identifying their own method or plan to address their issues. Levels of participation by

traditionally excluded groups and evidence of oppressive attitudes or practices are identified. Considering how accountability is maintained, such as openness about resource allocations, and how to ensure young people are made aware of any constraints on confidentiality, are also important questions for establishing professional practice. Some examples of applying the principles to practice are listed in the table in Box 1.2.

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## Box 1.2    Youth work principles and ethical practice

| Principle | Examples of ethical practice |
| --- | --- |
| **Voluntary participation** | Allowing young people to choose whether or not to participate |
| | Creating welcoming and accessible environments, resources and services |
| | Keeping young people informed about opportunities and resources |
| | Providing opportunities for young people to have a voice |
| **Anti-oppressive** | Recognising that youth work is for the benefit of all young people, particularly those whose human rights are at risk |
| | Seeing youth work as an agency for change: taking positive steps to address oppressive language, attitudes, practices and structures, and challenging negative discrimination |
| | Respecting differences and building bridges between different groups and individuals |
| | Identifying and promoting positive role models, images and participation by individuals and groups often excluded from participation or facing societal oppression |
| | Educating self and others about the causes and effects of oppression and the implications and application of anti-oppressive perspectives, such as feminism, a black perspective, a social model of disability, global youth work |
| | Continuously reassessing practice through consultation and evaluation by others directly affected by oppression |
| **Confidentiality** | Being aware that information about individuals should not be recorded or passed on to others without their knowledge except in very exceptional circumstances |

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

| Principle | Examples of ethical practice |
|---|---|
| **Confidentiality** **(Continued)** | Recognising that young people may disclose information to youth workers that they are not ready to tell others |
| | Preferably prior to disclosure, informing individuals about any boundaries to confidentiality, especially information that might require further action or intervention, such as illegal activities or circumstances that endanger individuals, particularly children or young people |
| **Accountability** | Involving young people and other members of the community in developing youth work activities, opportunities and decisions |
| | Ensuring that resources are allocated according to clear criteria |
| | Seeking out feedback and ideas from diverse groups and individuals |
| | Recognising that a youth worker's perspective on appropriate practice may be in conflict with that of other individuals or professions |
| | Prioritising work that benefits young people over work that addresses others' interests or concerns |
| **Continuous professional development** | Seeking out information and training about other perspectives on practice |
| | Developing clarity about the role of a youth worker, use of self and professional boundaries through supervision |
| | Monitoring and evaluating practice, responding to feedback and accepting responsibility for own actions, shortcomings and education |

## RECOGNISING YOUTH WORK ROLES

While the focus of the chapter so far has been on face-to-face work with young people, youth workers' roles vary considerably and can include different types of work with a range of target groups and issues, tasks and duties, sometimes reflected in a job title. Some youth work concentrates more on a developmental, educative or protective role, such as providing support or guidance for young people to become responsible adults, particularly when more standard provision seems to be ineffective. A 'youth development worker' may focus on young people's positive transitions to

adulthood, whilst a 'participation worker' may promote young people's involvement in social and political change. The terms 'enabler'[11], 'facilitator' or 'emancipator' focus on the process of developing young people's understanding of their own and others' power and control. 'Animators' or 'informal educators' work with young people to develop their self-expression through art, drama, poetry or music and may also be known as 'arts development workers'. A focus on particular activities used 'as a vehicle' for informal education may also be highlighted, such as a 'sports development worker' or 'health development worker'. However, these various terms are often interchangeable and may be defined differently by others.

Youth workers who are restricted to work only with young people through organisational targets or duties may find that their perspective and activities are rather limited. Youth workers who are able to allocate time to outreach work and participation in local committees and forums will be able to find out about relevant issues, communicate the value of youth work and involve other members of the community as volunteers and activists. Communities are the context and environment for young people's lives and therefore for youth work. Knowing about the communities that young people come from and live in assists mutual understanding and can provide support for practice. Networking and interaction with parents, neighbours, local shopkeepers and other relevant agencies and societal structures develops links with stakeholders, i.e. others who are interested in or affected by young people. The title 'youth and community worker' may be used in recognition of the value of involving members of the community or of working with young people within the context of their communities. Youth and community workers may also observe and intervene in community and institutional processes and tasks to promote young people's participation, whereas a 'community development worker' would also work with communities to develop their capacity for managing and improving the quality of their lives.

Youth workers undertake a range of tasks and duties, including face-to-face work, linking with other organisations, taking responsibility for managing other staff or volunteers and looking after venues, budgets and resources. Responsibilities may be related to the setting in which the youth work takes place, such as the geographical area, organisation or facility, as much as job title. Access and responsibilities for resources can vary considerably. For example, a centre-based youth worker may be responsible for the workers and activities within and around the centre as well as maintenance and upkeep. A youth warden may have responsibilities for the environment within a garden, playground or sports facility. An area youth worker would probably cover a wider geographical area and may have managerial responsibilities for youth work activities and workers in more than one project or centre. A street-based or detached youth worker may only be responsible for resources that could be easily carried. Some examples of the tasks and duties that a youth worker may be called upon to carry out are listed in Box 1.3.

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[1]Please note that the term 'enabler' is also sometimes applied to an individual who intentionally or unintentionally supports another to continue a destructive habit, such as drug or alcohol abuse.

## Box 1.3   Youth work tasks and duties

**Face-to-face work**

- Establish contact with young people in different settings defined by area and/or target group through outreach work and detached work.
- Build relationships with young people individually and in groups.
- Bring young people together in groups and shared activities.
- Involve young people in assessment of interests, planning, monitoring and developing, as well as participating themselves in relevant activities, projects or services.
- Facilitate discussions, arts-based activities, community/environmental projects, open days, residentials (overnight stays), outdoor education and sports.
- Raise topics related to personal and social education (for example, health, fitness, smoking, drugs, the environment, relationships, bullying, globalism).
- Address issues related to anti-oppressive practice, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, disabilism, classism, ageism, sex trafficking, child labour and domestic abuse.
- Act as an advocate for young people's interests, for example, representation in decision making, improvements in resources and services for young people.

**Links, networks and partnerships**

- Find out about community stakeholders, resources and potential partnerships.
- Carry out research to identify local, regional, national and global community interests, issues and links.
- Develop cross-generational activities and projects.
- Work with other agencies to develop services and facilities across communities.
- Work with parents and other community groups to address issues and improve services and facilities.
- Work with others as a member or leader of a staff team.

**Management and organisation**

- Design and produce information, publicity and recruitment material, such as leaflets, posters and presentations.
- Recruit, induct, supervise and train paid and unpaid staff and volunteers.
- Involve young people and other members of the community in the management of projects and the organisation.
- Develop and implement policies, codes of practice and ways of working.
- Manage and coordinate activities, projects and resources, such as buildings and equipment.
- Deal with administrative and office tasks; maintain records of finance and budget control.
- Identify and procure resources and funding for projects.
- Draw up business plans, write reports and make formal presentations to funding bodies.

**Service-oriented work**

- Advise and guide young people, their parents and other professionals and service providers.
- Provide personal and social education, mentoring, support and careers guidance.
- Provide instruction in skills and knowledge related to sports, outdoor activities, keeping fit, martial arts, drama, art, funding applications and committee management.

# BEING CLEAR ABOUT WHO YOUTH WORK IS FOR

The primary focus of youth work is young people. Youth work is more than a community or societal provider of services to unwilling or passive recipients and is not just a 'helping profession' that defines the problems and controls the solutions. The differences between youth work and other professions lie in how help is defined and offered. In particular, a youth worker allows young people to have a genuine say in whether to accept any help. When youth workers offer specific assistance to an individual who is experiencing difficulties or blocks to progress, and that assistance is accepted as a genuinely useful resource, mutual respect is retained. Services that call into question an individual's independence or ability to make his or her own choices can be humiliating and disempowering (Best, 2000). The practice avoids patronising, irrelevant or over-directive support through young people's participation in identifying interests and defining activities.

Youth workers are often called upon to become involved in providing services to young people, their parents or other professionals, or in addressing issues of concern to social institutions, such as the government or a housing association. Youth workers are well placed to offer advice and support for work with young people deemed by others to be 'hard to reach' or 'detached' and can become quite knowledgeable about young people's interests, issues and needs. Their understanding of how to provide appropriate services and existing networks of support and information can be very useful in the design, provision and management of a range of services related to young people, such as education, health and leisure. Other 'stakeholders' in young people's lives may also be able to offer different types of support and contribute their perspectives to youth work. Care needs to be taken that tackling specific issues related to young people's lives according to others' agendas does not take over from a youth work role.

Although youth workers are interested in developing more than 'quick-fix' solutions, a range of services for young people are often offered in response to the expressed interests of young people themselves. Some examples of relevant services for young people that youth workers may offer, sometimes in partnership with others, can be found in the table in Box 1.4. Youth workers' involvement here is generally

to ensure that services are responsive to young people's concerns and are flexible, attractive and accessible. Identifying young people's levels of interest and control over service provision and access may indicate whether or not a youth worker should become involved. Most youth workers would not engage in services where the main purpose is to control or curtail young people's activities against their will.

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## Box 1.4    Services and facilities for young people

| Type of service | Possible relevant activities |
| --- | --- |
| **Educational** | Alternative education, mentoring, training in outdoor pursuits, sports and social facilities, homework clubs |
| **Advice and guidance** | Sexual health, information about drug use, mental health counselling, careers advice, housing assistance, signposting to relevant services and support |
| **Caring** | Holiday play schemes, camps and after school clubs, crèches, playgroups, breakfast clubs |
| **Support** | Young mothers'/parents'/fathers' groups, young carers' groups, mental health groups, identity-specific groups |
| **Housing** | Refuges, sheltered accommodation, emergency housing, half-way housing |
| **Environmental** | Gardening and clean-up projects, park and playground design, mural creation, recycling, sustainability efforts |
| **Media** | Internet cafés, radio stations, DJ facilities, local newsletters, drama, music and art studios, social networks |
| **Leisure** | Cafés, youth centres, sports activities, indoor games, social networks |
| **Health** | Counselling services, multi-agency health clinics, health promotion, condom distribution, needle exchange, keep fit classes, healthy eating groups |
| **Social control?** | Diversionary or preventative activities, surveillance and supervision. |

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Youth work carries a more profound purpose than simply providing leisure and recreation-based activities, care or diversionary services. The facilitation of

diversionary and preventative activities related to young people's experimentation with risky activities or anti-social behaviour can only be described as youth work if the activities build on young people's interests and stated needs and they have a say in how the programme is designed and carried out. The presentation of interesting activities for young people, such as sports, crafts and music can form part of youth work in many settings within schools, youth centres, churches, enterprises, and so forth – but the service needs to be designed, evaluated and developed through dialogue with young people. The goals should be to involve young people in facilitating or managing the activities and to promote their ownership and control of any plans or strategies (see Practice Example 1.2). Otherwise, the 'service' can become an exercise in social control.

## A service becomes participative

An after-school club run by youth workers provided a service for local parents and carers by looking after children and young people whilst their carers were at work, busy elsewhere or simply needing respite. The youth workers' aims were to develop self-esteem and confidence amongst the members accessing the club. The members were asked how the club could be improved, and they started by stating which activities they preferred. Soon they were designing the programme and publicity. Before long, they became involved in the management of the club. The members realised that young disabled people had few opportunities to socialise with others in the neighbourhood and arranged for a partial merger with a local disabled young people's project. The members successfully challenged the notion that the club was just a service for parents and carers. They changed the aims of the after-school club to make it a service for all young people in the community and tackled issues such as access, integration and independence by listening to other young people's ideas on what kind of service they wanted.

PRACTICE EXAMPLE 1.2

## RECOGNISING ROLE CONFLICT

Conflicts in role can arise when activities or services are designed to control young people rather than enable their self-expression and autonomy. Youth workers need to recognise the difference so that they can decide when to 'take a stand' and to define and defend their professional boundaries, and when flexibility and cooperation can work for the benefit of young people. Compatibility or conflict in roles may not always be straightforward or consistent, as Practice Example 1.3 demonstrates. A project that was funded to divert young people from crime was developed into a youth work project through participative practice.

## Diversion or participation?

A football project was funded as a 'diversion from crime' initiative. The youth workers involved the team members in managing the project. The young people developed the funding application, recruited and inducted new members, handled the finance, trained volunteers and organised the travel arrangements, tournament participation and sponsorship deals. They also set up a support group for volunteers amongst previous members, parents/carers and local members of the community who became coaches and referees. Using youth work methods, the football project developed from being a 'take care of our badly behaved young people' service for the community into a community-based initiative where the young people took a leading role.

Increased bureaucratisation or efforts to control individuals or groups can lead to excessive monitoring and oppressive surveillance of young people's activities. Through partnership work with other agencies or funding that becomes available for particular projects, some workers have been drawn into a surveillance role without questioning or necessarily recognising the changes and their implications for youth work practice. Records of contacts, hard outcomes and working to a pre-planned programme are procedures often expected and required by funders, but detailed record keeping, particularly when information can be accessed by others, does not usually comply with youth work principles of accountability and confidentiality. For example, assessed alternative education, prevention training and probation services can require information sharing with far-reaching effects, such as failure, withdrawal from a programme or imprisonment. When recording and maintaining detailed records turns into judging young people's behaviour or becomes a punitive intervention, most youth workers would no longer describe the practice as youth work. Youth workers aim to identify and address discrimination and injustice rather than contribute to further oppression. Attempting to encourage socially acceptable behaviour or respect for others with young people who are being treated unacceptably and disrespectfully could be seen as collusion with oppression.

Youth workers may be asked to work on a one-to-one basis with young people and to target 'interventions' with named individuals or a caseload of 'clients'. Individuals may be identified as in need of intervention to promote their involvement in education, training or employment, with 'youth workers' acting as learning mentors or personal advisors. Action programmes may be devised and implemented to address these aims with little involvement of the young people. Programmes are then assessed on whether these named individuals return to learning or enter employment rather than on any contribution made to the quality of community life, personal flourishing or social relationships that may arise out of the process.

Such intervention work is an example of one of the many ways in which adults retain and demonstrate care, protection and control of young people as they move from childhood needs for protection to undertaking adult responsibilities. A youth

work approach would be to provide young people with the opportunity to make considered and informed decisions based on a better understanding of situations and consequences. While most young people progress towards adulthood taking on new or different responsibilities for financial, economic, social, career and domestic matters, some experience more difficulties in making these transitions than others, sometimes due to their particular circumstances or make-up. Youth workers need to be aware that undertaking a protective rather than an interactive relationship can lead to role conflict.

Bernard Davies' (2005) manifesto for youth work sets out some criteria to identify whether practice clearly relates to the principles of youth work. Applying this checklist (in Box 1.5) can assist in the identification of role conflict and compatibility, particularly when working within an organisation that may have a very different approach to working with young people.

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### Box 1.5    Davies' (2005) checklist for youth work practice

- Is this really youth work?
- Do the young people choose to become involved? Is their engagement voluntary?
- Is the practice seeking to tip the balance of power to young people? Are the young people viewed and welcomed as young people?
- Are young people's contributions respected and valued?
- Is the practice starting where young people are? Is the expectation that young people will be able to relax, meet friends and have fun?
- Is the practice focused on young people as individuals?
- Is the practice respectful of young people's peer networks and actively responsive to them?
- Is the practice respectful of young people's wider community and cultural identities and actively responsive to them?
- Where young people choose, is the practice seeking to help them strengthen their community and cultural identities?
- Is the practice seeking to go beyond where young people start? Is it encouraging them to be outward looking, critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them?
- Is the practice concerned with how young people feel, as well as with what they know and can do? (Davies, 2005: 7)

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## BEING CLEAR ABOUT ONE'S OWN MOTIVATION

Youth workers often have a specific motivation for work with young people that can form part of a desire to improve the world and/or the people living in it.

Motivations can vary, ranging from a desire to right wrongs and resolve social and political problems to ensuring that others do not have to suffer through similar personal difficulties. Belton, for example, defines 'radical youth work' practice as 'being informed by political and moral values: opposition to capitalism and authoritarianism, belief in equality and respect for the environment' (2010: 69). The Development Education Association also provides a relevant example with a definition of 'global youth work' as:

> informal education with young people [that] encourages a critical understanding of the links between personal, local and global issues. It seeks their active participation in bringing about change towards greater equity and justice. (Williams and Edelston, 2010: 10)

An organisation may have a focus on non-violence or community spirit, concerns which are clearly compatible with young people's well-being and interests. Box 1.6 provides some further examples of youth work as a 'mission'.

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### Box 1.6    Youth work as a 'mission'

Some youth workers and organisations may have specific motivations for involvement in youth work, for example:

- a religious community that provides opportunities for young people to form relationships with others, sharing their beliefs to preserve a culture or faith
- a philanthropic organisation that feeds homeless young people or offers shelter or mentoring
- a political party that has a youth wing to support the development of future leaders
- a campaigning organisation that recruits young people to projects aiming to improve society or the environment, including involvement in clean-up tasks, volunteering opportunities and befriending schemes
- a uniformed organisation with value-based aims, such as the Scouts and Guides who aim to create a better world or the Air and Sea Cadets who aim to foster good citizenship.

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Clarity about whether individual motivation is compatible with the values and principles of youth work can assist youth workers to address young people's interests rather than impose a particular agenda. Youth work motivated by strong ideological beliefs can provide interesting options for young people; whereas beliefs in the superiority of particular groups or life choices and the imposition of belief systems onto young people are inappropriate. A youth work organisation should not be

involved in indoctrination, coercion or exploitation of young people, or involve them in destructive or exclusive groups (except perhaps some targeted provision). An awareness of organisational or individual motivations can increase young people's control over participation or opt out.

## IDENTIFYING UNACCEPTABLE YOUTH WORKER BEHAVIOUR

As youth workers hold privileged positions in the lives of young people, clarity about professional boundaries and respecting young people's rights are important factors in youth work relationships. Youth workers have a high level of responsibility for the care and safety of young people, particularly when working with younger age groups or in residential settings. Reliability and trustworthiness are important traits to evidence and promote. Young people could be vulnerable or at risk from violent, exploitative or otherwise inappropriate relationships or behaviour, and should not encounter this in their relationships with youth workers. The values and principles of youth work that define good practice are intended to protect young people from physical or verbal abuse, being unfairly blamed or 'scape-goated' and from receiving inaccurate or inappropriate information and advice.

Specific definitions or expectations of acceptable professional behaviour can vary in different situations and organisations. Recognition of an individual's suitability for youth work usually depends on standpoints that could include legal, moral or political standards as well as professional ethics. Legislation may determine whether individuals with particular histories, such as sexual exploitation or violence, are allowed to be in the company of young people, much less work with them. Evidence of certain illegal or risky behaviour, specific judicial sentences or particular mental health diagnoses will preclude involvement in some youth work organisations or in some countries, for example some organisations will not use volunteers or employ individuals with a history of drug use or violence. (See Box 1.7 for some further examples of unacceptable youth worker behaviour.)

While youth work organisations and youth workers need to take serious and sensible precautions when recruiting staff to ensure the safety of young people in their care, youth workers who have relevant negative experiences may have a lot to offer young people facing similar difficulties and choices in their lives. Youth workers often draw on past experiences to inform their youth work practice, particularly in relation to some of the more challenging issues such as addiction or anger management and abusive or violent relationships. Individuals who have been involved in 'anti-social' activities or crime and have been able to turn around their lives can provide valuable insights for young people. For these reasons, a criminal record does not necessarily preclude involvement in youth work. First-hand experience of the criminal justice system can also provide a deep awareness of some of the implications and consequences of certain life choices and circumstances, which can inform youth work practice.

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### Box 1.7    Unacceptable youth worker behaviour

Most organisations would find the following activities to be unacceptable during working hours:

- wilful, knowing or negligent failure to comply with relevant legislation or organisational policy
- exercising undue influence on young people or other members of the community for personal or financial gain
- carrying out youth work activities whilst under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- flirtatious behaviour, sexually provocative dress or sexual intimacy
- preferential treatment or attention for individual young people.

Many organisations would also find evidence of 'moral unfitness' outside of working hours unacceptable, for example:

- involvement in illegal activities, particularly any sexual activity with a legally defined 'minor'
- drunkenness or other risky behaviour carried out in public, particularly if posted on a social networking site accessible to young people.

(See also Chapter 12 for examples of staff misconduct.)

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Individuals applying to work with young people on a paid or unpaid basis can expect potential employers to check criminal records. While record systems vary in relation to accuracy, relevance and ease of access, many employers will be required by organisational policy and/or law to check the criminal records of anyone applying to work with children and young people, whether on a paid or voluntary basis. Others will insist on doing so. Applicants need to be prepared to discuss their past experiences with potential employers. Appropriate policies about employing ex-offenders generally take into account factors such as the severity and circumstances of the offence, how long ago it was committed and evidence of learning from the experience.

## KEEPING UP TO DATE WITH LEGAL CONSTRAINTS

Youth workers need to be aware of relevant legislation and legal boundaries to inform their own choices about action to take, as well as any advice given to young people. While most individuals are clear about what constitutes theft, assault, road traffic violations and use of illegal substances, additional knowledge of their application and relevance to youth work is useful. Many youth work organisations require youth workers to have specific training in issues and legal

responsibilities related to safeguarding, health and safety, physical restraint and sexual harassment prior to any physical contact with young people. Other relevant information could include laws related to human rights, crime and disorder and any specific rights and protection afforded to different groups. Mental health, immigration, trafficking and forced marriage: awareness may also be relevant areas of study, and knowledge of legislation related to employment would be essential for posts with responsibility for selecting or managing staff. As legislation is subject to change, maintaining currency and relevance about legal constraints, rights and responsibilities through relevant training is a requirement of professional youth work practice.

The values and principles of youth work are not always compatible with changing legal requirements or organisational policies and practice. Like other 'people-oriented' occupations and professions, youth work requires individual and flexible responses to situations that depend on individuals rather than stock answers. To maintain clarity of purpose and awareness of possible conflicts in role, youth workers need to be involved in continuous professional development to keep up to date with legal, political and moral issues that may affect the information and views that they hold and sometimes pass on to young people. The identification of appropriate responses requires discussion with young people and colleagues in relation to ethical and professional values and evaluation and planning through supervision.

## RECOGNISING AND USING SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION

Appropriate support can help a youth worker to plan and engage in best practice, define professional boundaries and handle role conflicts that may arise. Such support may be provided within the organisation from a manager or colleagues, and may also be available from experienced individuals and groups external to the organisation who can provide advice or guidance from diverse perspectives. The availability and need for external support will vary greatly depending on individuals, their employment arrangements and their organisational setting. Young people and colleagues within the organisation may provide sufficient direction, challenge and encouragement, and the culture and approach of the organisation may comply with professional youth work practice. However, some youth workers work to restrictive job descriptions, policies, procedures and codes of practice that would mean external support would be necessary to find ways to function professionally. Attempting to change attitudes and practices within an organisation requires support, a strategy and a will to engage in challenging activities. Many youth workers need to seek additional support with external supervision (see also Chapter 12) and networking with other agencies to ensure that professional values and principles are upheld in practice.

## ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUTH WORK ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Identifying youth work values and practice
- Applying values and principles to practice
- Recognising youth work roles
- Being clear about who youth work is for
- Recognising role conflict
- Being clear about one's own motivation(s)
- Identifying unacceptable youth worker behaviour
- Keeping up to date with legal constraints
- Recognising and using support and supervision

## FURTHER READING

For further reading about ethical youth work practice, Banks (2010) discusses ethics and youth work as well as some of the dilemmas faced in professional practice. Davies (2005) also provides some examples of how the checklist in Box 1.5 might apply to an analysis of ethical youth work practice.

For further reading about safeguarding, see Cleaver et al. (2009) which explores the principles and process of having 'children at the heart of safeguarding practice'. Munro (2008) suggests ways to assess risk. The Charity Commission (2009) provides some useful guidance on the web for developing relevant polices with legal compliance for the UK. Alderson (2008) provides a context for practice with Young Children's Rights. The NSPCC's (2011) Safe Network website collects together some very useful guides for safe practice, including information about recommended numbers of staff, online safety checks and sample forms for attendance, excursions and photographs.