

Working With Young People

Adolescence is a time of development when a young person is working out their identity, where they fit into their family and world, their future and what they want out of life. It can be a really tough, lonely and worrying time, especially for young people in care.

Young people need you to understand their stories, feelings and reactions and what it is they are really trying to tell you. **Your work with a young person can shape the rest of their life.**

‘For me identity is about safety and it's about being able to feel comfortable and feel confident within yourself and also those around you. Social identity is very important, it's very special, but also cultural identity. Being able to understand where you're from, you know, who your mob is, things like that. Spirituality, religion, you know all those sorts of things are definitely really important. Also having a place of identity so you know whether that's the beach, whether that's your home. Somewhere where you know that you can go that's safe and that's important for you.’ - Emily, young person.

Building Quality Relationships

One of the best predictors of good outcomes and positive change for adolescents is the quality of the relationship between you and them (Ashley & Nixon, 2007).

The [Care Leavers Charter of Rights](#) should guide the way you work with young people and support them to develop the skills they need to become confident young adults who feel in charge of their own lives.

Try the following approaches to help build relationships with young people.

- Always be **honest, accountable and transparent** in your work. Ask the young person what this looks like for them. This will help young people to feel valued and build trust.
- Show the young person they are important by **getting to know them**. Be curious about what they enjoy, what they like, and the people who are important to them.
- Take the time to **understand their perspective**. You do not have to agree with them but if you respect where they are coming from, and are curious about their perspectives, this validates their experience and teaches them to respect others.
- Support them to be **part of decision making**. Give them opportunities to practise speaking up and making choices in a safe and supported environment.



- **Do what you say you will do.** If you can't, be honest and apologise. Be transparent and let the young person know why. Also, let them know how you will make it up to them or how it will be different next time.
- **Be consistent** in the way you respond to the young person, so they know what to expect and what is expected of them. This creates a sense of safety in the relationship.
- **Expect the young person to succeed.** When you show young people you believe in them, they are more likely to believe in themselves and achieve better outcomes as a result (Halvorsen 2009).
- **Have realistic expectations** of the young people you work with. Understand their story. Young people who have experienced violence, abuse or neglect may need extra support to build their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Because of their history they may not think, feel and behave like others their age.
- **Be prepared** in advance for the milestones in the young person's life as they transition to adolescence such as transitioning to high school and leaving care. Work collaboratively with the young person and their caregiver as decisions are required about meeting the milestones as well as in updating their case plan for example, changing the case plan goal, commencing a leaving care plan.
- **Draw on their strengths** and **give them choices** so they feel a sense of control and that their thoughts and feelings matter.
- **Be patient** when it takes longer than expected to **help a young person reach their goals.** You need to have ongoing conversations about goals. Help **identify any barriers** the young person may be having. Let them know setbacks are normal. Help them move forward when they are ready.
- **Understand the young person's family connections and networks.** Who are the important people in their life that they can depend on? Partner with these people to help build support for the young person. Reassure the young person these people love them and are there for them.
- **Ask for feedback.** What do they need from you? If there is anything you could be doing differently? Ask them what other caseworkers have done, that they liked or didn't like in the past.

See [Relationship-Based Practice](#), [Talking with Children and Young People](#) and [Family Connections and Networks Overview](#) and [Family Connections and Networks Practice Tips](#) for more information.

“When Jess became my caseworker, I thought she was really nice and easy to talk to. I don’t know what it was exactly, but she just seemed really warm and kind. I felt like I could talk to her about anything. She made visits fun and would bring all this colour-coordinated stuff so we could make bracelets. It made it easier to talk to her”. - Lexi, young person

Brain Development

Because the brain is still developing, young people can struggle to plan for and understand the impact of their decisions. They may behave impulsively, make poor decisions and engage in **risk taking behaviour**. This is all part of the normal teenage experience (Siegel 2014). This time of growth is a time of great opportunity for young people to learn lifelong skills, particularly in planning, making decisions, reasoning, managing emotions and controlling impulses. You and their caregiver have an enormous opportunity to provide support and guidance that facilitates growth in these areas. If the behaviour begins to raise safety concerns speak to your supervisor to discuss whether clinical support maybe required.

Watch: [The mysterious workings of the adolescent brain](#) (Blakemore 2012). Learn how typical teenage behaviour is driven by the growing and developing brain. You could show this to young people, parents, or carers to help them better understand teenager’s behaviour.

Understanding a Young Person’s Behaviour

A young person is moving towards adulthood and they start to discover their own identity that comes with a strong need for privacy. Although they are finding their way, they still need adult guidance whilst they want their voice heard and understood. Often young people struggle to make their voice heard and they may yell, swear or are silent is their way of surviving in a world that has hurt them many times. During this time, their caregiver may require support to understand how to handle and understand this behaviour.

It takes time to build trust with a young person, especially if they have been let down in the past or had lots of different workers. It might seem like they don’t want to work with you. It can be helpful to acknowledge this and how hard or frustrating that must be for them. If a young person is behaving in ways that are challenging, frustrating and difficult to manage, take some time to reflect on what might be going on for them?

Consider the following:

- Is this just ‘normal’ teenage behaviour?
- How can I adjust my expectations and show empathy to this young person?

- How has this young person's early experiences of violence, abuse and neglect shaped their development and the way they react and respond to the world?
- What is their behaviour telling me about how they see and experience the world?

Taking the time to understand a young person's history and experiences will mean that you can better support them, and the people around them to make sense of their experiences, feelings, and reactions.

Early, ongoing, or persistent experiences of being frightened, hurt, cold, hungry, and lonely can stay with people throughout their lives. A young person might smell, see, hear, touch, taste or feel something and suddenly feel scared, anxious, angry, sad, or lonely. Often, they will not understand why or what triggered the feeling. This can be confusing, confronting, overwhelming and terrifying for them. Sometimes they will respond to these feelings in ways that are frightening for others or harmful to themselves. You can help young people understand and make sense of their responses by:

- noticing their responses
- supporting them to reflect on what was happening in the lead up to that response so they can begin to understand their triggers.

Helping young people link their feelings and behaviours to a trigger can be empowering. Once they recognise the trigger, you can help them think about what they or those around them could do differently to help them better manage their feeling and responses so they can take control.

Watch: [Does lack of truth telling destabilise a child's life journey?](#) (Oakwater's 2016). A powerful talk that will help you understand what triggers behaviour and why it is so important you know their story.

That became my mantra with Alison – no matter what she said or did, I just needed to keep turning up. I could not give up on her even when she pushed me away, literally. - Jackie, caseworker

Support Young People to Work Through Strong Emotions

Young people can experience intense emotions. They are still developing the skills and coping strategies they need to manage them. It's important to understand that when a young person is having a strong emotional reaction, their emotional brain is in control and

their thinking brain has gone offline. When this happens, it isn't helpful to rationalise or reason with them by saying things like 'this behaviour is not okay'.

Instead try talking to the emotional brain. This strategy also helps bring the thinking brain back online. The act of talking about feelings involves thinking. Validate the young person's experience and help them name their feelings.

Example

'I can see you are feeling really angry right now, I would be too'.

'This is really unfair. I can see you are really frustrated and fed up'.

When you can see that the thinking brain is back online you might be able to help or encourage the young person to problem solve.

Example

'What do you think would make you feel better?', 'What might you, we, be able to do to address the issue?', 'How can I, or others, support you to do this?'

Encourage the young person to reflect on how they felt and why they had such a strong emotional reaction. Talk to the young person about their emotions when they are calm.

Together come up with some strategies the young person can use to self-regulate.

Partner with other important people in the child's life e.g. carers, family and significant others that can help support the young person in applying strategies to manage emotion and self-regulate.

"She never puts her voice in front of mine. Emma always lets me speak first. She gets that this is my life she is dealing with and my family's. She has a respect for my family that many people don't and so I give her that respect back. Emma would always ask, 'Are you alright? Are you okay with this? Do you feel this way or that way?' I'm grateful that I have a caseworker like Emma. I could tell she was there for the right reasons and not just because her boss told her she had to be." - Jayda, 12 years old

Education For Young People in Care

Young people in care deserve the best education. The trauma and disruption in their lives means they are likely to need extra support to help them succeed and stay engaged at school. Your support and belief in their abilities is key.

All young people (and children) in care should be part of the **Education Pathway**, designed to help young people reach their full learning potential. When a young person enters care or starts a new school, you need to start to work with the school on their personalised learning and support plan. You do this by sending the [notice to school](#) form and then calling to organise a planning meeting. Develop the plan with the child and their carer, you, teachers and principal and other relevant significant persons in the young person's life.

Before a young person changes schools, you need to give them written information about enrolment and significant past and emerging issues that affect their safety, welfare or well-being. Include the name and contact details of clinicians (including mental health practitioners) as appropriate. See [Education Pathway: Casework Process for children and young people in OOHC](#) for more information.

Health for Young People in Care

Young people in care are more likely to experience physical, mental and developmental health problems compared to their peers. As their caseworker you need to help respond to health issues and promote their health and wellbeing. This has the potential to help them now, and into their future.

The **OOHC Health Pathway** provides health screening, assessment, targeted service intervention, monitoring and reviews. All young people (and children) who enter care are part of the health pathway. As part of the OOHC Health Pathway you will need to develop a health management plan. This will form part of a young person's case plan or leaving care plan. The young person, carer and school should have copies of the plan. For more information see [OOHC Health resources and tools](#)

For young people getting ready to leave care the pathway focuses on helping them understand health and the health system, linking them with important people and organisations in the health system and obtaining access to personal medical records. Visit the [DCJ website](#) for more information on your role in the OOHC Health Pathway.

Sharing Information with Health Professionals

It's essential that when a child receives an appointment for a new clinician that you provide them with written information about the young person including, whether they're currently seeing or have previously seen other clinicians. This will help them provide an accurate diagnosis. Similarly, it's essential that you obtain the clinicians diagnosis and recommendations in writing. This information should be shared and discussed with the carer and the young person in an age appropriate way. Help them to

understand what the clinician has said, what it means for them and what the carer and young person need to do to meet the recommendations. Listen to their worries and help normalise any health issues.

Other Key Messages When it comes to Working with Young People

The [Raising Children](#) website has some great resources on adolescence if you are looking to better understand this stage of development.

Remember:

- **body image** becomes very significant to young people
- **sleep and nutrition** are also very important during teen years due to rapid development
- **sexuality** is a key aspect of identity, sexual health is a topic for ongoing discussion throughout teen years
- **social changes** occur in adolescence. Young people are building an independent identity, testing their values, building relationships and skills for adulthood. Young people may want to try new experiences, take risks, they may become influenced by others
- **peer relationships** and acceptance are very important for many. Sometimes this can result in stress due to mounting **peer pressure**
- **media and digital platforms** play a strong role in teen relationships and building identity, how young people see themselves, communicate and learn about the world.
- leaving care will start to become a reality for young people during adolescence and may be quite frightening for some. Talk about their hopes and worries for their future. Help young people develop skills and make plans for their future through leaving care planning. Let them know that ongoing support is available after they leave care, as needed, until they are 25. Remember to include the young person's family and other important people in leaving care planning.

Create has developed a **best practice guide on participation** between casework staff and young people as decision-makers if you are looking for more ways to achieve best outcomes for young people.

Share Useful Resources with Young People

Young people often value privacy, they may want to explore digital information on their own. Tell them about:

- **YOU website** provides a range of information targeted at young people 12-18 years, including information on young people's experiences of leaving care
- **Bite Back** is a free, self-guided online wellbeing and resilience program for young people aged 13 - 16 years old, designed by the Black Dog Institute
- **MoodGym** a free, anonymous, fun, interactive program that helps you identify and overcome problem emotions and supports good coping skills for the future
- **Headspace** the National Youth Mental Health Foundation has resources to help young people and to help caseworkers, parents and carers support young people
- **Reach Out** has resources for young people and carers, it also hosts a range of online forums.

Supporting Carers and Parents to Care for a Young Person

The **Raising Children** website has information for carers and parents, including to help with **having difficult conversations** with young people. **Building resilience** and encouraging mindfulness in young people will help them manage big emotions and make considered decisions.

Puberty is a time of big changes for teens, it is marked by **physical growth, maturity of sexual organs** and changes in **brain development**. In turn physical growth causes social and emotional change. Help families access information about these topics and speak with them about any worries they have.

Discipline during the teen years can be challenging and it is about guiding teenagers towards appropriate behaviour through setting clear boundaries and helping them make positive choices. Help carers understand why a young person might be behaving in a particular way. Encourage parents and carers to practice open and warm communication. Offer extra support for young people and their parents or carers if needed.

Share with parents and carers information about **cyberbullying and online safety**, and the associated risks to adolescents.

Encourage parents and carers to stay alert to emerging **mental illness** during adolescence. Help them to access supports. A strong and loving relationship with a parent or carer can have a direct and positive impact on a child's mental health.

Support parents and carers to encourage young people to choose positive behaviour and **healthy lifestyle choices**. 'Healthy lifestyle choices' means positive decision making related to health care, managing mental health, drugs and alcohol, nutrition, sleep and physical activity.

Remember it's important you partner with everyone in a child's network to help them understand what they can do to help support a young person through adolescence, not just carers and parents.

Carers may also find these resources or services helpful:

- **OoHC Toolbox** provides easily accessible and effective information for carers of young people aged 12 to 18 in care
- **Caring for Kids** a comprehensive guide on a range of topics for carers
- **Raising Teens and Tweens** looks at the different things carers and caseworkers can do to support young people through the tough teenage years.

For more information see:

[Tips For Talking With Children And Young People](#)
[Relationship-Based Practice](#)
[Family Connections and Networks](#)
[Family Connections and Networks Practice Tips](#)

References:

Ashley & Nixon. (2007). Family Group Conferences - where next? Policies and practices for the future. Family Rights Group, the Print House, London.

Blakemore, S. (2012, September 17). The mysterious workings of the adolescent brain. YouTube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zVS8HIPUng>

Halvorsen, A., Lee, V., Andrade, F. (2009) A mixed-method study of teachers' attitudes about teaching in urban and low-income schools. Urban Education, 44(2), 181-224.

Oakwater, H. (2016, January 26). Does lack of truth telling destabilise a child's life journey? YouTube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2EX3G1-XOs>

Raising Children Network (2006-2020). Teens (12-18 years). Available: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens>

Siegel, D. (2014). The Amazing Tumultuous Wild Wonderful Teenage Brain. Retrieved from Mindful.org.