



VULNERABLE YOUTH STRATEGY CHANGE COLLECTIVE BACKGROUND

INTEGRATING NATURAL SUPPORTS INTO YOUTH WORK

The Vulnerable Youth Strategy is a collaboration with community service providers to improve peer, family and adult social supports for youth (15-24) who struggle to transition successfully into adulthood.

PURPOSE: This backgrounder reviews the academic and gray literature on working with vulnerable youth to examine practitioner perspectives on implementing a natural supports approach.

The research base for work that prioritizes natural supports is quite small, but a set of promising practices is emerging.¹ These promising practices are associated with real-world programs engaging with a variety of high risk youth groups, including youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, youth with mental health concerns, youth dropping out of high school and youth in government care. For summaries of each of the programs reviewed for this backgrounder, see Appendix A.

The remainder of this document presents a synthesis of the available research in order to:

1. Identify guiding principles for practitioners;
2. Discuss the challenges of operationalizing these principles in real-world contexts; and,
3. Raise key questions for the Change Collective to consider in their work together.

The synthesis is organized into four main themes that characterize the research: 1) determining when and how to integrate natural supports; 2) encouraging reflective practice; 3) negotiating the practitioner-youth relationship; and 4) responding effectively to context.

¹ This work generally adheres to the tenets of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach, which promotes an individualized, strengths-based approach that engages youth in setting and achieving personally meaningful goals, and emphasizes the importance of developing self-determination and relationship skills and giving opportunities to build social connections to supportive adults and peers.



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THEME 1: DETERMINING WHEN AND HOW TO INTEGRATE NATURAL SUPPORTS

PRINCIPLE: Understand family and natural supports as an asset rather than a problem.

A foundation for integrating natural supports is recognizing the fundamental significance of family in the lives of most, if not all, vulnerable youth (Winland et al., 2011). Family is a critical and ongoing influence on the development of a youth's identity and sense of belonging (Para, 2008). However, family is often categorized as a "problem" in youth work (e.g. a source of the young person's vulnerability in the first place) and thus not considered part of the solution. In contrast, an enhancing natural supports approach positions family as an asset that can be used to help move a young person forward (Innes, 2015). Research shows that youth want to connect to their natural supports, even when in crisis or before basic needs are met (Innes, 2015; Winland, 2013).

Crane (2009) advocates for taking an appreciative approach to families that positions young people and their families as operating in stressful circumstances rather than being dysfunctional. Practitioners then seek to contextualize the challenges that families face to understand the individual, institutional and structural barriers that need to be addressed in order to better support the young person.

PRINCIPLE: Take time to understand how the young person defines family.

Young people exist in a web of relationships with parents, siblings, friends and other natural supports, some of which may be problematic (Winland et al., 2011). What the term family means within this web of connections is different for every one of us. In youth work, practitioners need to explore what family means for a young person, and revisit the conversation periodically as the meaning can shift over even a short period of time (Winland, 2013; Crane & Kaighin, 2011). Which natural supports should become involved when, and in what capacity, should always be done with the consent of the young person, recognizing that this may also change over time (Crane & Kaighin, 2011). Even if particular family members do not, or cannot, become involved in the work, talking with young people about their family provides insight into their life experience, helping to guide the way the practitioner supports them (Crane & Kaighin, 2011; Winland et al., 2011).

PRINCIPLE: Relationships between youth worker and natural supports are strategic and purposeful.

The literature supports taking a strategic approach to involving natural supports, working with youth to identify specific roles for each support to play. These roles should be clarified from the beginning (Crane & Kaighin, 2011), and should relate to the goals young people have set for themselves (Malloy, 2013). From this perspective, family work acts as a tool for practitioners to help build resources for young people and create more positive options for their future (Crane & Kaighin, 2011).

CHALLENGES: Conventional youth work focuses on the individual young person. In a natural supports approach, the focus shifts to relationships, working with a young person in the context of a network of family, friends and significant others (Crane & Kaighin, 2011). Family work and youth work are often disconnected in practice, making it difficult to find staff that can skillfully bridge the divide (Innes, 2015). Furthermore, this kind of work is much more resource intensive, with many relationships to manage. In some cases, family work may need to precede one-on-one support of the young person, particularly if family members may undermine individual work.

Practitioners may be put in the position of becoming a family member's counsellor, too; care must be taken to clarify the roles of the family member, youth and practitioner, as well as being clear about the amount of time available for the youth versus significant others. Crane & Kaighin (2011) recommend that practitioners have a good sense of relevant support services so that they can recommend, or in some cases refer, a young person's natural supports for assistance. Additionally, they suggest that practitioners create a fact sheet with key resources for parents and other significant people in a youth's life. This work is done in order to help natural supports be a positive influence in the young person's life.

QUESTIONS:

- How do you maintain clear boundaries around relationships with natural supports?
- What are some strategies to better connect youth work with family work (individually, organizationally, institutionally)?
- How does your vision of family influence your approach to working with natural supports?

THEME 2: ENCOURAGING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

PRINCIPLE: Practitioners need time for individual and group reflection on their practice.

Involving natural supports is a new way of working for many practitioners. Structured opportunities for reflection allow workers to undertake a systematic inquiry into their practice (Crane et al., 2013). It also helps youth workers to understand what works for whom, and in which contexts. This type of work cannot be conducted with a 'one size fits all' approach, so context-sensitive practice is critical. Furthermore, reflective practice can contribute to developing a credible evidence base, which can help workers to further refine and improve their approaches, and advocate for good practice at an organizational and systems level.

In practice, at an individual level, this might take the form of scheduled self-reflection sessions (built-in time following a session with youth) or arranged debriefs with coworkers before a meeting that is anticipated to be challenging. At an organizational level, it could take the form of training staff and supervisors on the importance and methods of reflective practice, or regularly scheduled group reflective sessions.

CHALLENGES: An obvious challenge for youth workers is incorporating the time for doing reflective practice in an already-busy schedule. While considered valuable to youth workers, time for reflection can often be seen as an extra task on top of their regular work (Crane & Kaighin, 2011). Beyond that, a key challenge is creating and putting in place processes to capture the experiences, challenges and questions that arise from reflective exercises. Crane et al. (2013) advocate for Participatory Action Research as an approach to operationalize reflective practice at an organizational level.

QUESTIONS:

- How do practitioners balance the tension between time for reflection and an already heavy workload?
- What would it take for reflection to not be considered as extra to the regular workload?
- What kinds of processes could be put in place to ensure key experiences, ideas and questions are captured, shared with other practitioners and rolled up to the supervisory or management level?

THEME 3: NEGOTIATING THE PRACTITIONER-YOUTH RELATIONSHIP

PRINCIPLE: Put the young person in the lead, respecting his or her autonomy.

A core foundational principle of an enhancing natural supports approach is ensuring that the perspectives and priorities of the young person drive the work (Walker & Flower, 2015; Innes, 2015; Malloy, 2013; Walker & Gowen, 2011). Practically, this principle suggests that practitioners need to “start where they’re at” (Walker & Flower, 2015), physically as well as emotionally and developmentally. This might mean meeting youth and families outside of normal work hours and in varied settings, such as coffee shops, homes, or libraries (Innes, 2015). It also means being able to assess fairly quickly the levels of knowledge, skill or awareness the young person currently has and how support can best be tailored to suit the youth’s particular context.

PRINCIPLE: Creating and nurturing a high quality relationship between youth worker and young person is crucial to the effectiveness of the work.

Trust-building is a core building block of the relationship between young person and youth worker (Walker & Flower, 2015). In practice this has been described as youth workers genuinely and honestly respecting youth values and choices, including the choice not to receive service. Many attributes are used to describe an effective practitioner, including (Crane, Durham & Kaighlin, 2013; Innes, 2015; Jacobsen, 2007): supportive, respectful, non-judgmental, authentic, honest, persistent, reliable, responsive, patient and curious.

PRINCIPLE: The practitioner-youth relationship is characterized by actions that are strategic and purposeful.

The literature identifies three key areas of activity for practitioners (Crane & Kaigin, 2011; Crane, Durham & Kaighin, 2013; Walker & Gowen, 2011): modeling and teaching skills; identifying, creating and nurturing relationships with natural supports; and working with and advocating around institutional and systemic barriers. Practitioners model and teach a wide variety of skills, for example self-determination (goal-setting, seeking help, self-motivation, planning), practical life skills (budgeting, studying), managing emotions, and building interpersonal connections. Managing relationships with natural supports was discussed above, but relationship-building with other service providers and stakeholders is also important as having these groups onside improves the chances of youth success (Walker & Flower, 2015).

CHALLENGES: Truly putting young people in the lead means working on their timeline, which may be unpredictable, and is generally longer or more disjointed than practitioners would hope. In the beginning, young people may go through a process of trial and error, trying something short-term and then changing their minds (Crane & Kaighin, 2011). During this time, practitioners need to resist the urge to jump in and problem-solve for youth. This trial and error process may take a lot of time, and requires considerable patience. By respecting the youth’s autonomy, practitioners enable youth to build skills in a safe environment and provide space for natural supports to assist them (Innes, 2015).

As well, ambivalence on the part of youth to be doing this kind of work is to be expected, though resistance may not mean they don’t want to do the work (Jacobsen 2007; Innes 2015). Many vulnerable youth have lost connection with those they may have at one time been close to, and may not currently have a consistent social group to rely on.

Persistence, but not pressure, on the part of practitioners is important as many of these youth may be starting with a belief that they do not deserve or are not able to have healthy relationships. They may be dealing with trauma and/or grief that takes time to process. Practitioners should intermittently contact the youth to let them know there is always an open door to reconnect (Innes, 2015).

QUESTIONS:

- Which practitioner qualities (supportive, respectful, etc.) are most important? Are there other qualities that are missing?
- How are these qualities developed?
- What strategies do you use to maintain contact over long periods of time?

THEME 4: RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY TO CONTEXT

PRINCIPLE: Integrating natural supports into youth work requires a shift in philosophy or approach. Common in the literature is the importance of thinking about youth work with natural supports as an overarching philosophy or approach, rather than as a set of models or tools that can be replicated in diverse settings (Crane, 2009; Innes, 2015). The guiding principles described in this backgrounder will be applied in different ways in different contexts, leading to highly individualized and flexible relationships between young people and practitioners.

CHALLENGES: Practitioners know the complex and multilayered nature of enhancing natural supports for youth; there may be individual, family, school or community barriers for a young person, each requiring different combinations of skill-building, relationship-building and action. However, practitioners are also situated within particular funding contexts that have outcome reporting requirements. Practitioners must negotiate the tension between providing quality service while at the same time generating measurable outcomes. For example, many programs for vulnerable youth focus on a particular at-risk characteristic, such as homelessness or disengagement from school, and may specify indicators around that characteristic. However, it is likely that other issues such as poverty, abuse or neglect, or mental health concerns may have precipitated a young person's current situation, and that practitioners will spend significant time offering support in those areas. Crane & Kaighin (2011) raise concern over how data recording systems can adequately capture the complexity of the work being done.

Furthermore, the types of support provided are fluid, responsive and flexible, making it difficult to track changes for youth over time. The uncertain timelines for natural supports work also suggest the need to determine shorter-term outcomes that can be tracked. Youth may not be meeting the outcomes of successfully transitioning to adulthood demonstrated by such things as stable housing, employment, education, and network of positive supports in their time working with a practitioner, but they may still be making progress towards those outcomes.

QUESTION:

How do you ensure that the work is guided by the youth's perspective and priorities while meeting the expected outcomes of the overarching program?

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APPENDIX A: SUMMARIES OF PROMISING PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Family Reconnect Program (Eva's Initiatives)	
Location	Toronto
Target Group	Youth who are homeless or precariously housed (aged 16 to 24).
Approach	"[F]amily is important to everyone and that a truly effective response to youth homelessness must consider the role that family – and the potential of reconciling damaged relationships – can play in helping street youth move forward with their lives" (p. 9, Winland et al., 2011).
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to work with youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to re-engage with their families and communities and move them off the streets. • Recognize the fundamental importance of families in the lives of most, if not all, young people. • For many street youth, the solution to their homelessness requires that attention be paid not only to their individual struggles, but also those facing family members. • Understanding that obtaining – and maintaining – stable housing and family connections may require ongoing supports. • Access to counseling that is oriented towards reconciling family relationships, building life skills, obtaining life goals, engaging in activities, and involvement in community is important in helping street youth move forward with their lives. • Effective counseling and casework should be client-centred and driven, and focus on a whole person approach. Strengths and assets should be built upon, and solutions should be integrated into a range of issues and challenges identified by the youth. • Family reconnection most successfully operates from an anti-discriminatory framework. The service delivery model must be sensitive to and accommodating of differences based on gender, sexual orientation, ethno-cultural and religious backgrounds.
Program Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client-centered case management model that involves individual counseling, family counseling, and facilitating access to mental health supports. • Considers re-engagement with families and communities as integral.
For more information	Winland, D., S. Gaetz, & T. Patton (2011). Family Matters: Homeless Youth & Eva's Initiative's Family Reconnect Program. Access from: www.homelesshub.ca/ResourceFiles/FamilyMatters_April2011.pdf

Project RENEW (Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural Supports, Education and Work)	
Location	New Hampshire
Target Group	Youth with emotional and behavioural challenges at high risk of dropping out of school.
Approach	A trained facilitator and support team work with the youth to design and pursue a school-to-career transition plan using a personalized, community-based approach that takes into consideration available adult support systems.
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An emphasis on self-determination such as choice making, problem solving, planning, self-knowledge, and help seeking. • Community inclusion focusing on the belief that youth should be supported to live in the community of their choice with an emphasis on developing natural supports. • Unconditional care with an emphasis on supporting the youth to work toward their goals at their own pace and to their own expectations and capabilities. • Strengths-based planning so that youth are focused on the development of their assets in order to build self-efficacy. • Flexible resources based on the belief that supports should be designed according to what the youth needs, not according to what is available.
Program Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and future planning. • Developing support team and plan. • Implementing support plan. • Transition phase (natural supports key to this phase).
For more information	<p>Malloy, J. (2013). The RENEW Model: Supporting Transition-Age Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Challenges. Report on Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in Youth. 13(2), 38-46. Access from: http://www.iod.unh.edu/RENEW%20tools/RENEW%20Implementation%20Manual/Section%205%20Readings/5.%20The%20RENEW%20Model.pdf</p>

Vulnerable Youth Strategy – Learning Strategy for Social Supports

Location	Calgary
Target Group	Vulnerable youth (aged 15 to 24).
Lessons Learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframe family and natural supports: rather than seeing family as the problem, consider it an asset. • Family work and youth work are disconnected: difficult to find staff that are able to bridge divide. • Vulnerable youth want to connect to their natural supports: they want to connect even when in crisis or before basic needs are met. The extent, severity or longevity of neglect or abuse is not correlated with interest in reconnecting. • Engaging takes time: resistance to engagement doesn't necessarily mean they are not ready or interested in the supports. • Supports should be unconditional: engagement needs to be barrier-free (minimal intake requirements, youth don't need to meet conditions to access supports; staff work without judgement, programming will include "whatever it takes" supports and case management). • Create space and don't rescue: being too central to youth's life means there is little room for the youth to do things for themselves or have non-professional supports help them. • LGBT vulnerability is different and the same. • Professional systems create and reinforce disconnection • Natural supports is an overarching approach and a specific intervention.
Changes in Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relentless and barrier-free engagement: resistance not necessarily sign that youth is not ready or willing. Team members reach out on an ongoing basis. • Meet youth where they are at: physically and in terms of skills/ goals/values. • Surrendering the expert position: support youth in finding their own solution, rather than thinking we, as professionals, know the solution. • Ask more questions and different questions: bringing in questions about the family. • Whatever it takes and the gentlest touch: encouraging youth to do things for themselves (or space for natural supports to provide advice, etc.). • Get the right people: humility and curiosity, non-judgemental, patient and persistent, experienced and discerning, responsive, reflective and adaptive. • Help youth build relationship skills and capacity for reciprocity: coaching and opportunities to practice conflict resolution, communication, boundary setting and decision-making. Also opportunities to 'fail safely'. • Principle-based approach: shifted from development of tools, strategies, and procedures to focus on articulation and operationalization of principles to guide them in their work. • Supervision is about reflective practice not abiding by rules: supervision has become about asking more questions rather than giving direction to staff. Supporting staff in reflective practice.
For more information	Contact Melissa Innes, Developmental Evaluator for the Change Collective

Compilation Study: Provider Perspectives on Youth with Mental Health Conditions	
Location	Across the United States
Target Group	Youth with serious mental health conditions.
Approach	Qualitative study of eleven service provider perspectives on key principles guiding their work with youth. First draft of principles were created through review of the literature and consultation with 10 expert stakeholders (researchers and administrators of programs). Service provider interviews examined what principles were most important to their work, how they implemented them, and the challenges that come with that.
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put the young person in the lead: Elicit and clarify the young person’s perspectives and priorities, and ensure that these drive the work. • Build trust: Have, and demonstrate, a genuine appreciation for the young person and his or her thoughts and ideas, as well as a genuine commitment to the idea that the young person has the ability to take charge of his own life and move it in a positive direction. • Guide without leading: Support a young person’s positive development and movement toward personally meaningful goals, without attempting to dictate decisions or outcomes • Model and teach skills: including skills for self-determination, daily living, building interpersonal connections • Build positive connections: Assist the young person in building and using connections to supportive people and contexts. • Start where they’re at: Promote learning, growth and development by understanding “where they’re at” and/or helping to create the conditions so that the young person takes new steps to gain knowledge, skills or awareness. • Recognize and work with strengths: Provide opportunities for the young person to develop an appreciation of his/her existing strengths and capacities, and to use and further develop these in the pursuit of personally meaningful goals. • Encourage discovery: Model and encourage young people to engage in exploration of new knowledge, ideas and experiences.
For more information	Walker, J. & K. Flower (2015). Provider Perspectives on Principle-Adherent Practice in Empirically-Supported Interventions for Emerging Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions, <i>Journal of Behavioural Health Service & Research</i> . Published online May 2015 and available at http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11414-015-9465-8

Reconnect program, Australian national government	
Location	Australia
Target Group	Homeless youth or youth at risk of being homeless (aged 12 to 18).
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt an approach, not specific models: while there is appeal in finding successful models to roll out across a diversity of contexts, success of Reconnect is in part due to its resistance to overdo this. • An appreciative approach to families: seeing families as operating in stressful circumstances rather than as dysfunctional. Perspectives of both young people and parents needs to be appreciated. • Systems approach: doing this work requires substantial collaboration, cooperation and networking between a wide range of service providers (local and regional), for example schools, non-profit youth and family services, child protection agencies, and police. • The use of action-reflection processes: processes such as action research, together with substantial staff support, are essential for programs to be responsive to the context in which they are delivered. • Individualized, tailored service: a wide range of service models could be used and intervention should be tailored to the particular youth or family situation. • Culturally appropriate services: the importance of culturally appropriate services for indigenous people and people from non-English backgrounds.
For more information	Crane, P. (2009). Developing the Practice of Early Intervention into Youth Homelessness. Parity, Volume 22(2), 2 pages. Access from: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/41439/1/41439.pdf

Emancipated Youth Connections Project	
Location	California
Target Group	Youth leaving foster care.
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth in control of the process: provide the opportunity for the youth to be directing permanency process. • Balanced approach between persistence and flexibility • Consider a variety of natural support connections: requires careful listening and attention on the part of the youth worker. • Flexible process: be flexible about time frames; the grief and loss that youth have already experienced takes time to move through. • Expect ambivalence on the part of the youth: there may be resistance, and workers continue to follow up. • Model and teach relationship and attachment skills.



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