

# Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports: A Practice Framework

## Executive Summary

### WHAT

- Natural supports are relationships and associations that are developed in the course of daily living. They are 'natural' in the sense that they are informally and locally developed, and are based on reciprocity or give and take. Natural supports include family, friends, romantic partners, neighbours, coaches, team-mates, and others who comprise our social network.
- While a growing body of research clearly demonstrates the connection between positive natural supports and healthy youth development, the practice of helping youth to identify, strengthen and extend their social networks lags far behind.
- The Change Collective was initiated to address this gap. Representatives from 13 youth- and family-serving agencies in Calgary worked together for two years to identify and test a set of principles and practices to guide this work. Our collective learning has been synthesized in the Practice Framework.

### WHY

- A growing body of research suggests that loneliness is as big a risk factor for premature death as smoking or alcohol consumption. Social isolation is also associated with several physical, cognitive, and psychological issues, including: increased risk to cardiovascular health in young adulthood; reduced executive function, optimism and self-esteem; and increased depression, anger, and anxiety.
- Professional supports, while important, aren't sustainable. Programs end, professionals change jobs and youth age out of services. An over-reliance on professional supports ultimately increases vulnerability.
- Natural supports play a critical role in promoting youth resiliency, social integration, and positive development. They can also contribute to a youth's recovery and growth process, reduce psychological distress and help vulnerable youth successfully transition to adulthood.



# HOW

- The Practice Framework is based on three foundational constructs: 1) Identity & Belonging; 2) Trauma-Informed Practice; and 3) Reflective Practice.
- The principles associated with this approach include:
  - **Connection First:** We treat connection to natural supports with the same urgency as food, shelter and clothing
  - **Seek Out & Scooch Over:** We actively seek out natural supports and create space for them to contribute
  - **Doing With, Not For:** We respect the autonomy of young people and their natural supports
  - **Socio-Emotional Learning:** We support youth to build and maintain meaningful relationships
  - **A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships:** We cultivate a more realistic approach to risk-management and safety
- The Practice Framework outlines a continuum of needs and opportunities that exist when we are working with young people and their natural supports. Distinguishing between the various types of needs and opportunities can help us to focus our efforts and be thoughtful about our objectives. The continuum includes:
  - Helping youth to cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports
  - Working with youth to identify potential supports
  - Helping youth to strengthen relationships with natural supports
  - Supporting healing and restoration among youth and their natural supports
  - Helping youth maintain connections
  - Helping youth transition to other relationships
- If we are successful in implementing this change in practice, youth will be able to rely on – and contribute to – a life-long network of supportive family, community and peer relationships.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS & ORGANIZATIONS

- The idea of enhancing natural supports is so intuitive that it's easy to assume that you're already doing it. However, the Practice Framework suggests that this approach differs significantly from most status quo approaches in our sector (e.g., see *What's Different About A Natural Supports Approach?* on p. 13, and the case studies on pp. 46-49).
- This approach requires a careful examination of our own values and assumptions, including assumptions like “this kid has no one,” “all their supports are toxic,” “relationships are not a valuable outcome,” and “we need to limit their exposure to anyone we think might hurt them.”
- This approach requires change at the organizational and system levels, including changes in: caseloads, reporting, hiring practices, training, funding practices, organizational policies and practices, supervision, risk management and evaluation.
- The full Framework can be found on the websites of the [Burns Memorial Fund](#) and [United Way of Calgary and Area](#). Please feel free to download, copy, use and distribute.