

National Youth Work Curriculum: Health

Non-Acute



The national youth work curriculum

The first of its kind for 30 years, the national youth work curriculum is a go-to resource for health focused organisations who want to create the best possible outcomes for young people within integrated health systems and local places and neighbourhoods, helping young people to make the transition to adulthood and reach their full potential.

The curriculum sets out what youth work is and what it does. If you are a policy maker, service commissioner or senior leader, the curriculum will be an important point of reference for you. It will help you to meet your strategic and operational objectives, and to plan, coordinate, commission, oversee and support youth work related outcomes and provision in your area.

As the diagram on the front cover shows, the curriculum provides a learning framework based on the practice and process of youth work. It also takes account of national occupational standards, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the youth work outcomes framework, and associated quality standards.

Youth work: In at the deep end

The transition from childhood to adulthood is not always a smooth path. Tricky transitions to adulthood can contribute to poor mental health and poor emotional well-being, especially if a young person is also living with a long-term health condition like diabetes, arthritis, spina bifida or epilepsy. Navigating a health system in transition whilst young people are going through huge changes themselves can feel like being thrown in at the deep end. All too often, chronic stress from the isolation that illness creates can leave a young person feeling even more vulnerable and alone.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Whether it's finding support in relation to a diagnosis or treatment, developing a transition plan, or talking to other young people who have successfully made the jump from child to adult-focused health services, youth work has the power to reach out and help young people in a pivotal way.

At a time when the right clinical care is crucial, and access to advice and information is important, what also matters to young people is the relationships they are able to build whilst moving from childhood to adulthood. Sustained and meaningful relationships with young people form the bedrock of all youth work. These relationships are always entirely voluntary and they cannot be fashioned or forced by adults, however well intended. It is the young people who choose whether to become involved, when to open up or to shut down, and, even when the health risks are serious, when to walk away. Such relationships are not easily built within the confines of a clinic; where the situation allows, they develop best in flexible and sociable environments where young people can relax, have fun and feel safe.

Nonetheless, countless stories from clinical settings highlight the extraordinary power and effect youth work can have in healthcare related environments too. Youth work's ingredients for success include actively listening to what young people say, building on their aspirations and ideas, responding to their interests, needs and concerns, and dissipating cycles of anxiety and frustration by devising interesting and thought-provoking ways in which young people can be part of something. Activities are far-ranging and numerous and include: walks and talks with the youth work team; 'guts and glory' groups with the gastro team; outward bound trips; carbohydrate counting cooking courses; youth club sessions during inpatient stays; and 'Zoom in the Rheum' support groups for Rheumatology patients.



By doing all these things and more, youth workers are able to co-create a safe jumping-off point from which young people can start to see themselves and their future differently. They learn new skills, develop confidence, discover how to make and act on decisions and, crucially, how to make their voices heard in relation to decisions made by others that affect their everyday lives.

Youth work makes an invaluable and unique contribution to young people's health, well-being and personal development. As many clinical staff would attest, the magic of youth work is a vital ingredient in young people's care.

The benefits of the youth work curriculum in healthcare settings

Youth Work works because at its very heart is the relationship between the young person and the youth worker. The relationship is voluntary and never begins from a deficit position. This means that the strengths of the young person are valued and developed from the outset no matter the situation or environment which has brought the youth worker and young person together.

The skilled delivery of youth work and its ability to change outcomes for young people does not of course happen in a vacuum. It is supported by, and based on, a new national curriculum produced by the NYA.

The curriculum offers a flexible learning framework developed by youth workers for youth workers and other people and organisations who want to deliver effective youth work. For policy makers, service commissioners and senior leaders who wish to know more about what youth work is and how it can help, the curriculum is an invaluable resource that will provide them with the necessary tools and understanding to transform how youth work is perceived and rolled out within the systems and organisations they lead.

Research consistently shows that adopting youth work principles and methodologies promotes good physical, mental and sexual health and leads to better outcomes for young people. In this context, the curriculum offers an informal education process where learning grows through conversation, exploration and enhanced shared experience – the best learning methodology for unlocking young people's potential.

The role of youth work is not to treat disease or to alleviate symptoms. In youth work, young people are treated as young people first, not as patients. By adopting the youth work principles that are central to the curriculum, practitioners can develop a positive narrative around young people, start from a young person's own position, and establish appropriate boundaries within which healthy behaviours and relationships can be explored and developed. It is within these relationships that youth work operates in a complementary way alongside clinical interventions, helping young people to access sometimes hard-to-navigate systems in order to meet their mental and physical health needs.

Yet the benefits of youth work extend beyond the young person. The youth work curriculum also seeks to address other key issues in healthcare settings such as racial disparity and health inequalities, as well as helping to better meet the needs of neurodiverse and LGBTQIA+ populations. As the curriculum shows, it is the skills, knowledge and integrity of youth workers, together with the unique cultural understanding they bring from lived experience and far-reaching engagement with different communities, that enables them to build strong, healthy, diverse and sustained relationships that are the prerequisite for a fairer, more culturally sensitive healthcare system.

The youth work curriculum: an exciting opportunity

The development and roll-out of the curriculum presents a significant opportunity for senior leaders in healthcare to further improve the ways in which they envision, plan, coordinate, commission and deliver health services relevant to young people. That process of alignment is already underway. Relationship building, a central tenet of youth work, already features in many healthcare settings. But more needs to be done especially in light of well-documented reports on the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on many young people's health and well-being.



We believe that the youth work curriculum, which offers the framework within which relationships may be developed most effectively, could be applied in numerous different healthcare settings, including those relating to:

- Long-term health conditions
- Young people who experience mental health and/or substance misuse issues and those dealing with the consequences of adverse childhood experiences
- Youth to adult transitions within the health system
- Self-harm, suicide and other risk-related issues.

About the NYA

We are the national standards body and the professional statutory regulatory body for youth work in England. Our mission is to raise awareness of what youth work is, why it is important, the benefits it offers, and how to do youth work well and effectively. This includes offering strategic and practical support to youth work organisations, as well as to those that commission, fund and partner with them. We showcase great youth work practice, work on finding new ways of making youth work ever more effective through research and innovation, and set occupational standards for youth work. We also train and support youth workers, and give advice on youth work to organisations in higher education.

www.nya.org.uk

Published by National Youth Agency
e. nya@nya.org.uk | t. 0116 242 7350

Registration No. 2912597 | Charity No. 1035804
National Youth Agency, 9 Newarke Street, Leicester LE1 5SN

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National Youth Agency