

Ethical Conduct in Youth Work

*a statement of values and
principles from
The National Youth Agency*

Reprinted December 2004



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Background

During Autumn 1999 The National Youth Agency circulated a discussion document, *Ethics in Youth Work*¹. This contained a draft statement of principles of ethical conduct for youth work, and sought responses from the field via a questionnaire and two consultative seminars. The statement has now been revised and can be found in section 5 of this document. It takes into account comments made in the questionnaire returns and the seminars. Whilst there was a variety of opinions about the exact wording of the statement, there was a general consensus of opinion that a statement should be developed and adopted, and that this should remain at the level of general principles, rather than giving detailed guidance on the conduct of practitioners (Banks, 2000)².

While there have been some calls for a longer, more detailed and rule-based code of conduct, this would be difficult to apply to all types of youth workers working in different settings and agencies. It might also be so prescriptive as to curtail the professional freedom and responsibility of the youth worker. Whilst the statement of principles presented here leaves some concepts unexplored (we may well ask, what do we mean by 'justice', when is an interest 'legitimate?'), its aim is primarily to develop ethical awareness and to encourage reflection as the basis for ethical conduct rather than to tell youth workers exactly how to act in particular cases. More detailed documents on certain issues (such as what levels of risk are appropriate, how to handle conflicts of interest), and guidelines on particular aspects of professional practice (such as confidentiality, handling suspected cases of abuse) could be provided to supplement the statement of principles. These would come better from individual employers or organisations to fit particular local circumstances or age groups. And/or some bodies may wish to produce a shorter version of this text.

The statement of principles is in section 5 of this document. Sections 1 to 4 offer some background comments on the nature and purpose of youth work, the importance of ethics in youth work, the purpose of the statement of principles and a short summary of the principles.

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- 1 **The National Youth Agency** (October 1999) *Ethics in Youth Work*, Leicester, The NYA.
 - 2 **Banks, S.** (2000) *Report to The National Youth Agency on Ethics in Youth Work*, Durham, Community and Youth Work Studies Unit, University of Durham.
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The National Youth Agency Statement of Principles

I The nature and purpose of youth work

1.1. The purpose of youth work is to facilitate and support young people's growth through dependence to interdependence, by encouraging their personal and social development and enabling them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and society.

1.2. Youth work is informed by a set of beliefs which include a commitment to equal opportunity, to young people as partners in learning and decision-making and to helping young people to develop their own sets of values. We recognise youth work by these qualities (based on Davies 1996³):

- it offers its services in places where young people can choose to participate;
- it encourages young people to be critical in their responses to their own experience and to the world around them;
- it works with young people to help them make informed choices about their personal responsibilities within their communities;
- it works alongside school and college-based education to encourage young people to achieve and fulfil their potential; and
- it works with other agencies to encourage society to be responsive to young people's needs.

3 **Davies, B.** (1996) 'At your service?' *Young People Now*, August, pp26 to 27.

2 The importance of ethics in youth work

2.1. Ethics is generally regarded as being about the norms of behaviour people follow regarding what is good or bad, right or wrong. Usually ethical issues are about matters of human (and animal) wellbeing or welfare.

2.2. Ethics in the context of professional practice is about:

- developing the ability of practitioners to see the ethical dimensions of problems, to reflect on issues, to take difficult decisions and to be able to justify these decisions; and
- acting with integrity according to one's responsibilities and duties (this may entail behaving in accordance with professional principles, guidelines or agency rules).

2.3. The behaviour of everyone involved in youth work and youth services – political and managerial leaders, managers, trustees, employees, volunteers and participants – must be of a standard that makes it the basis of:

- the effective delivery of services;
- modelling appropriate behaviour to young people;
- trust between workers and young people;
- trust between organisations and services and parents and young people;
- a willingness of various parties to commit resources; and
- a belief in the capacity of youth work to help young people themselves learn to make moral decisions and take effective action.

2.4. This requires all involved to be capable of appropriate thinking about ethics in practical situations.

3 Purpose of the statement of principles

- 3.1. The statement in section 5 outlines the basic principles underpinning the work with the aim of guiding the conduct of youth workers and managers and to serve as a focus for debate and discussion about ethical issues in practice. It is not a rulebook prescribing exactly what youth workers should do in every situation. This would be impossible to achieve, due to the variety of practice settings, age groups and types of work. Rather the statement is intended to be used as a starting point for outlining the broad principles of ethical conduct; raising awareness of the multiple responsibilities of youth workers (paid and voluntary) and their managers and the potential for conflict or at least tension between these responsibilities; and for encouraging and stimulating ethical reflection and debate.
- 3.2. The first part of the statement covers 'ethical principles' which include the way that youth workers should treat the young people they work with (for example, with respect for their rights to make choices, without discrimination) and the kinds of values that youth workers are working towards (such as a just society). The second part of the statement covers 'professional principles' which relate more particularly to how the youth worker should act in the role of a practitioner with certain types of responsibility and accountability. The practice principles listed under each general principle are more specific, suggesting how youth workers would apply the broader ethical and professional principles. They are not exhaustive.
- 3.3. Note: the term 'youth worker' in this statement is intended to include those who work in youth work directly with young people and people who manage those working directly with young people. The phrase 'professional' is to denote acceptance of a particular role within the 'profession' of youthwork, not necessarily the employment status of the individual who may well, for example, be a volunteer.

4 Summary of the statement of principles of ethical conduct for youth work

Ethical principles

Youth workers have a commitment to:

1. **Treat young people with respect**, valuing each individual and avoiding negative discrimination.
2. **Respect and promote young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices**, unless the welfare or legitimate interests of themselves or others are seriously threatened.
3. **Promote and ensure the welfare and safety of young people**, while permitting them to learn through undertaking challenging educational activities.
4. **Contribute towards the promotion of social justice** for young people and in society generally, through encouraging respect for difference and diversity and challenging discrimination.

Professional principles

Youth workers have a commitment to:

5. **Recognise the boundaries between personal and professional life** and be aware of the need to balance a caring and supportive relationship with young people with appropriate professional distance.
6. **Recognise the need to be accountable to young people**, their parents or guardians, colleagues, funders, wider society and others with a relevant interest in the work, and that these accountabilities may be in conflict.
7. **Develop and maintain the required skills and competence** to do the job.
8. **Work for conditions in employing agencies where these principles are discussed, evaluated and upheld.**

5 Statement of principles of ethical conduct for youth work

5.1. **Ethical principles.** *Youth workers have a commitment to:*

5.1.1. **Treat young people with respect**

Practice principles would include:

- valuing each young person and acting in a way that does not exploit or negatively discriminate against certain young people on irrelevant grounds such as 'race', religion, gender, ability or sexual orientation; and
- explaining the nature and limits of confidentiality and recognising that confidential information clearly entrusted for one purpose should not be used for another purpose without the agreement of the young person – except where there is clear evidence of danger to the young person, worker, other persons or the community.

5.1.2. **Respect and promote young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices**

Practice principles would include:

- raising young people's awareness of the range of decisions and choices open to them and offering opportunities for discussion and debate on the implications of particular choices;
- offering learning opportunities for young people to develop their capacities and confidence in making decisions and choices through participation in decision-making bodies and working in partnership with youth workers in planning activities; and
- respecting young people's own choices and views, unless the welfare or legitimate interests of themselves or other people are seriously threatened.

5.1.3. **Promote and ensure the welfare and safety of young people**

Practice principles would include:

- taking responsibility for assessing risk and managing the safety of work and activities involving young people;
- ensuring their own competence, and that of employees and volunteers for whom they are responsible, to undertake areas of work and activities;
- warning the appropriate authority, and taking action, if there are thought to be risks or dangers attached to the work;
- drawing to the attention of their employer and, if this proves ineffective, bringing to the attention of those in power or, finally, the general public, ways in which activities or policies of employers may be seriously harmful to the interests and safety of young people; and
- being aware of the need to strike a balance between avoiding unnecessary risk and permitting and encouraging young people to partake in challenging educational activities.

5.1.4. **Contribute towards the promotion of social justice for young people and in society generally**

Practice principles would include:

- promoting just and fair behaviour, and challenging discriminatory actions and attitudes on the part of young people, colleagues and others;
- encouraging young people to respect and value difference and diversity, particularly in the context of a multi-cultural society;
- drawing attention to unjust policies and practices and actively seeking to change them;
- promoting the participation of all young people, and particularly those who have traditionally been discriminated against, in youth work, in public structures and in society generally; and
- encouraging young people and others to work together collectively on issues of common concern.

5.2. **Professional principles.** *Youth workers have a commitment to:*

5.2.1. **Recognise the boundaries between personal and professional life**

Practice principles would include:

- recognising the tensions between developing supportive and caring relationships with young people and the need to maintain an appropriate professional distance;
- taking care not to develop close personal, particularly sexual, relationships with the young people they are working with as this may be against the law, exploitative or result in preferential treatment. If such a relationship does develop, the youth worker concerned should report this to the line manager to decide on appropriate action;
- not engaging in work-related activities for personal gain, or accepting gifts or favours from young people or local people that may compromise the professional integrity of the work; and
- taking care that behaviour outside work does not undermine the confidence of young people and the public in youth work.

5.2.2. **Recognise the need to be accountable to young people, their parents or guardians, employers, funders, wider society and other people with a relevant interest in the work**

Practice principles would include:

- recognising that accountabilities to different groups may conflict and taking responsibility for seeking appropriate advice and making decisions in cases of conflict;
- being open and honest in all dealings with young people, enabling them to access information to make choices and decisions in their lives generally and in relation to participation in youth work activities;
- ensuring that actions as a youth worker are in accordance with the law;
- ensuring that resources under youth workers' control are distributed fairly, according to criteria for which youth workers are accountable, and that work undertaken is as effective as possible;
- reporting to the appropriate authority any suspicions relating to a

young person being at risk of serious harm or danger, particularly of sexual or physical abuse; and

- actively seeking opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and professionals from other agencies.

5.2.3. **Develop and maintain the skills and competence required to do the job**

Practice principles would include:

- only undertaking work or taking on responsibilities for which workers have the necessary skills, knowledge and support;
- seeking feedback from service users and colleagues on the quality of their work and constantly updating skills and knowledge; and
- recognising when new skills and knowledge are required and seeking relevant education and training.

5.2.4. **Foster and engage in ethical debate in youth work**

Practice principles would include:

- developing awareness of youth workers' own personal values and how these relate to the ethical principles of youth work as stated in section 5.1;
- re-examining these principles, engaging in reflection and discussion with colleagues and contributing to the learning of the organisation where they work;
- developing awareness of the potential for conflict between personal and professional values, as well as between the interests and rights of different individuals and between the ethical principles in this statement; and
- recognising the importance of continuing reflection and debate and seeing this statement of ethical principles as a working document which should be constantly under discussion.

5.2.5. Work for conditions in employing agencies where these principles are discussed, evaluated and upheld

Practice principles would include:

- ensuring that colleagues, employers and young people are aware of the statement of principles;
- being prepared to discuss difficult ethical issues in the light of these principles and contributing towards interpreting and elaborating on the practice principles; and
- being prepared to challenge colleagues or employing agencies whose actions or policies are contrary to the principles in this statement.

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'Youth workers are employed increasingly in a range of different settings and it is important that they can operate confidently within a clear set of ethical principles. This text provides exactly that. It is based on wide consultation and consideration within the youth work field, including The National Youth Agency's Executive Board – the most representative body for youth work in all its forms. We now have a clear, consensual and strongly supported statement of youth work's values and principles which will serve the profession well.'

Tom Wylie, Chief Executive, The National Youth Agency

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