



1

Research to Practice Series

Interventions and practice principles for supporting young people who are homeless

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

The first issue of this series provides an overview of the interventions and practice principles that are effective in supporting young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It draws upon the findings of a research project implemented by the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) in 2011, which examined Reconnect services in Australia.

The content of this issue is based upon the project reports published in 2012: *Reconnect: Working with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness*; and, *Literature Review: Effective interventions for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness*. More information about the research project is provided at the end of the issue.

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Supporting young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

Research indicates that the earlier an intervention, the more likely it is that youth homelessness can be reduced, along with the social, emotional and health issues linked to it. One of the key challenges is to determine how to intervene effectively. Services can draw on a range of evidence informed interventions and strategies, based upon practice principles.

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

Evidence informed interventions and strategies

The following interventions and strategies are highlighted in the evidence as being effective responses to young people who are homeless. Services will select the specific interventions and strategies that are relevant to their mode of service delivery, and the circumstances and the context of the young people they are supporting. In doing so, services should ensure that workers have access to appropriate training and supervision to implement these interventions and strategies effectively.

- **Family Interventions**

Interventions and strategies that aim to reduce conflict and strengthen relationships within a family include family mediation, family counselling, multi-systemic therapy and narrative therapy. It is important to note that conceptualisation of 'family' is very broad and includes supporting relationships with the network of people considered family by the young person.

'Young people exist as a part of a family system and everyone needs to work together to achieve goals.'

- **One-on-One Therapeutic Interventions**

Specific therapeutic models include narrative therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, solution focused brief therapy, and counselling.

'The most common approach for me is providing a non-threatening environment and letting the young person talk and engage with them to draw more out and use a cognitive behavioural approach to work with them.'



- **Practical Support and Stability of Accommodation**

Access to safe and stable accommodation is an important precondition for other interventions and support. Practical support included transport, accessing money, brokerage, health services, and housing and accommodation. Evidence suggests it is important to address practical needs, as well as social and emotional needs, as they are interconnected. Practical support was seen as a valuable component to engage with and create rapport with young people.

'...Providing practical support not only established the foundations and security to address other issues, it also facilitated the development of the relationship and trust that allowed the worker to address the underlying issues that placed the young person at risk.'

- **Outreach**

Outreach was referred to as a component of practice that improved young people's access to the service, facilitated their continued engagement and provided a tangible way to make the client-focus and strengths-based approach evident in their actions, and as a means to provide practical support.

'Time is spent with clients in a variety of ways. Appointments are often in the family home, school, whilst driving or in a public space such as a park or coffee shop. Workers try to ensure a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere, and we often find driving, doing artwork or going for a walk help clients with the difficult conversations that are necessary.'

- **Group Work**

Group work refers to a range of practices that involve engaging groups of people for the purposes of education, recreation, therapy and socialising, for example. Group work with young people can address a range of issues, including anger management, sexual and gender identity, sexual harassment, self-esteem, assertiveness, social skills, domestic violence and recreation, and can present opportunities for peer support. Group work with parents offers information about parenting strategies and developmental information relevant to young people.

'The flexibility to provide group work enhances our capacity to meet the specific support needs of our clients.'

- **Collaboration**

'Collaboration' is commonly used to mean 'working together' to meet the diverse needs of clients. It has been recognised that collaborative practice between young people, schools, youth work services, families and other relevant parties provides better, more sustainable outcomes for young people. Collaboration can provide better responses to complex situations and a better use of resources.

- **Case Management**

Case management includes a range of approaches, practices and processes that seek to coordinate collaboration among the often diverse and complex roles and responsibilities that services have in addressing client needs. Studies suggest that case management is more effective when delivered under certain conditions, involving quality assessment and relationship skills and appropriately coordinated resources, including access to therapeutic interventions as indicated.

Section 2

Practice Principles

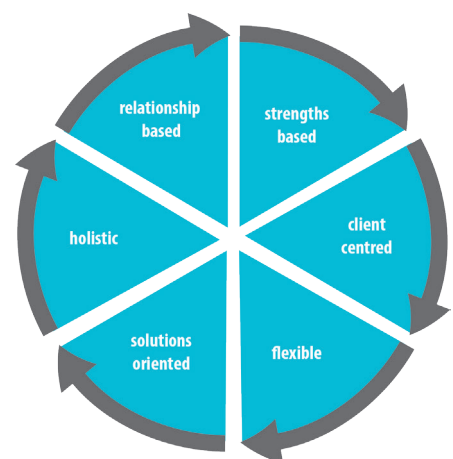
The way in which evidence-informed interventions and strategies are implemented is integral to whether they will achieve positive outcomes for young people.

Practice principles provide a unifying framework from which to make decisions about appropriate techniques and strategies.

These principles do not work in isolation from each other - they are interdependent and mutually supportive.

These principles, outlined below, do not constitute evidence-informed practice on their own. They are central to deciding which interventions, strategies or actions can be used with individual young people. **All principles need to be implemented, but will look different for every young person.**

Underpinning the effective implementation of interventions and practice principles is ensuring that workers and services have access to appropriate training, professional development, supervision, and critical reflection regarding their policies and practices.



- **Relationship-Oriented**

Nearly every aspect of practice principles, and the interventions and strategies, is underscored by the need for a constructive relationship between workers and young people.

'The engagement process is the most important and it is about relationship.'

Examples of being relationship-oriented in service delivery include:

1. Workers and services being provided the time and space to build and maintain responsive relationships with young people
2. Workers and services using client-centred approaches to build trust and rapport with young people (such as engaging young people in environments they are comfortable in, listening to and valuing what young people say, being non-judgmental and treating young people with respect)
3. Workers and services ensuring that young people are connected to others, such as family and community, and supporting the facilitation of positive relationship

'Sometimes all a young person wants is to be listened to in a non-judgemental way, understood, to feel valued and to talk about anything that is on their mind at that particular point in time.'

- **Client-Centred**

Being client-centred prioritises the needs, perspectives and experiences of young people, rather than making assumptions or imposing a set of practices upon them.

'We are young person focused and try to deal with what they want and look at ways in which they can achieve these.'

Examples of being client-centred in service delivery include:

1. Workers and services identifying appropriate interventions and responses based on the needs, perspectives and experiences of young people
2. Workers and services ensuring that young people are involved in decision-making
3. Workers and services using approaches such as outreach, to ensure that young people are comfortable in the environments in which they are engaging with workers
4. Workers and services being responsive, and establishing relationships with young people that are non-judgemental and based on respect

'Choice and self-determination are two principles that facilitate the client-centred, strengths based, solutions focused approach that we employ.'

- **Flexibility**

Flexibility refers to the ability to adapt the response of the service to the needs and circumstances of young people.

Examples of being flexible in service delivery include:

1. Workers and services adapting their responses to the needs of young people; especially as these needs and circumstances change during their engagement with the service
2. Workers and services engaging with, and being accessible to young people; using approaches that are client-centred
3. Workers and services having access to, and utilising, a range of creative ways to engage with young people, including recreational activities
4. Workers and services having access to, and utilising, a range of formal and informal interventions, 'tools' and responses to be used flexibly with young people

- **Holistic**

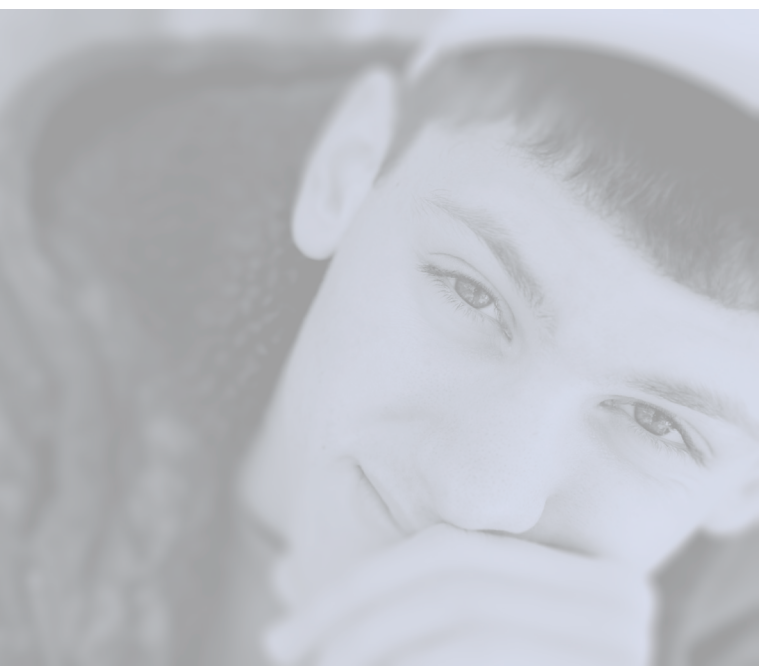
A holistic approach considers the context and conditions that surround and affect young people, and informs collaboration with other services to attend to young people's needs.

'Our practice... looks at all the life domains of each young person, ensuring that we don't just provide a band-aid solution in one area without looking at the underlying causes.'

Examples of a holistic approach in service delivery include:

1. Workers and services understanding the broader context and conditions that surround young people, including social, cultural, family, education, peers and individual factors, and incorporating these into supporting young people
2. Workers and services implementing interventions and responses that stem from a holistic conceptualisation of all of these factors, and address a range of needs
3. Workers and services working together collaboratively (both within and between services) to meet the needs of young people

'We take an all-encompassing view of our clients' situations and support them to engage with family, education, employment and their community.'



- **Strengths-Based**

A strengths-based approach conceptualises young people as knowing, capable and valuable people, and recognises and strengthens their skills.

'We aim to identify client strengths as well as create change by building on the client's existent strengths. A strength can be... anything important and positive that the client is doing, can do, or wants to do.'

Examples of a strengths-based approach in service delivery include:

1. Workers and services conceptualising young people as knowing, capable and valuable people
2. Workers and services focusing on recognising and strengthening skills of young people, and supporting them to develop these in other areas of their lives

- **Solutions-Oriented**

A solutions-oriented approach is often used in combination with 'empowerment' and 'strengths-based' approaches.

'Empowerment is a process of enabling people to gain increased control over their own lives and learn through their experience.'

Examples of a solutions-oriented approach in service delivery include:

1. Workers and services providing young people with information and resources, and supporting them to make decisions about their own lives
2. Workers and services empowering young people to identify creative solutions
3. Workers and services using strengths-based approaches to support young people

About the Reconnect Research Project

Reconnect was established in 1998 by the Australian Government, as a community-based early intervention program for young people aged 12 – 18 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It uses family-focused early intervention strategies to help young people to stabilise and improve their housing, achieve family reconciliation and improve their level of engagement with work, education, training and community.

The research project undertaken by ICPS in 2011 was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. It sought to identify effective responses to, and interventions for, working with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It assessed the appropriateness and effectiveness of interventions and strategies for the specific demographics targeted by Reconnect. The research examined the extent to which Reconnect services implement interventions and strategies that directly help them to achieve their intended objectives.

More information and the reports are available at www.acu.edu.au/icps.

References

Barker, J., Humphries, P., McArthur, M., & Thomson, L. (2012). *Effective interventions for working with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness*. Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

Barker, J., Humphries, P., McArthur, M., & Thomson, L. (2012). *Reconnect: Working with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness*. Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

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