



NESTED MODEL OF YOUTH WORK

A WORKER'S GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

How did we get here?

The Nested Model of Youth Work is a product of a discussion among youth workers. When piecing together a funding proposal a few years ago, we paused to reflect on how we could best communicate to the prospective funder what it is that we do. As the conversation deepened, we realised that we had a clear, shared understanding of our practice. We had an ethos and engagement process that we collectively embraced and believed in. This led to us putting pen to paper to explain how our thinking relates to the considerable body of research on youth work (see Farquhar & McKenna, 2024). Our hope was, and remains, that the Nested Model proves a useful tool for other workers and supports them when explaining their work to those outside the youth sector.

Overview

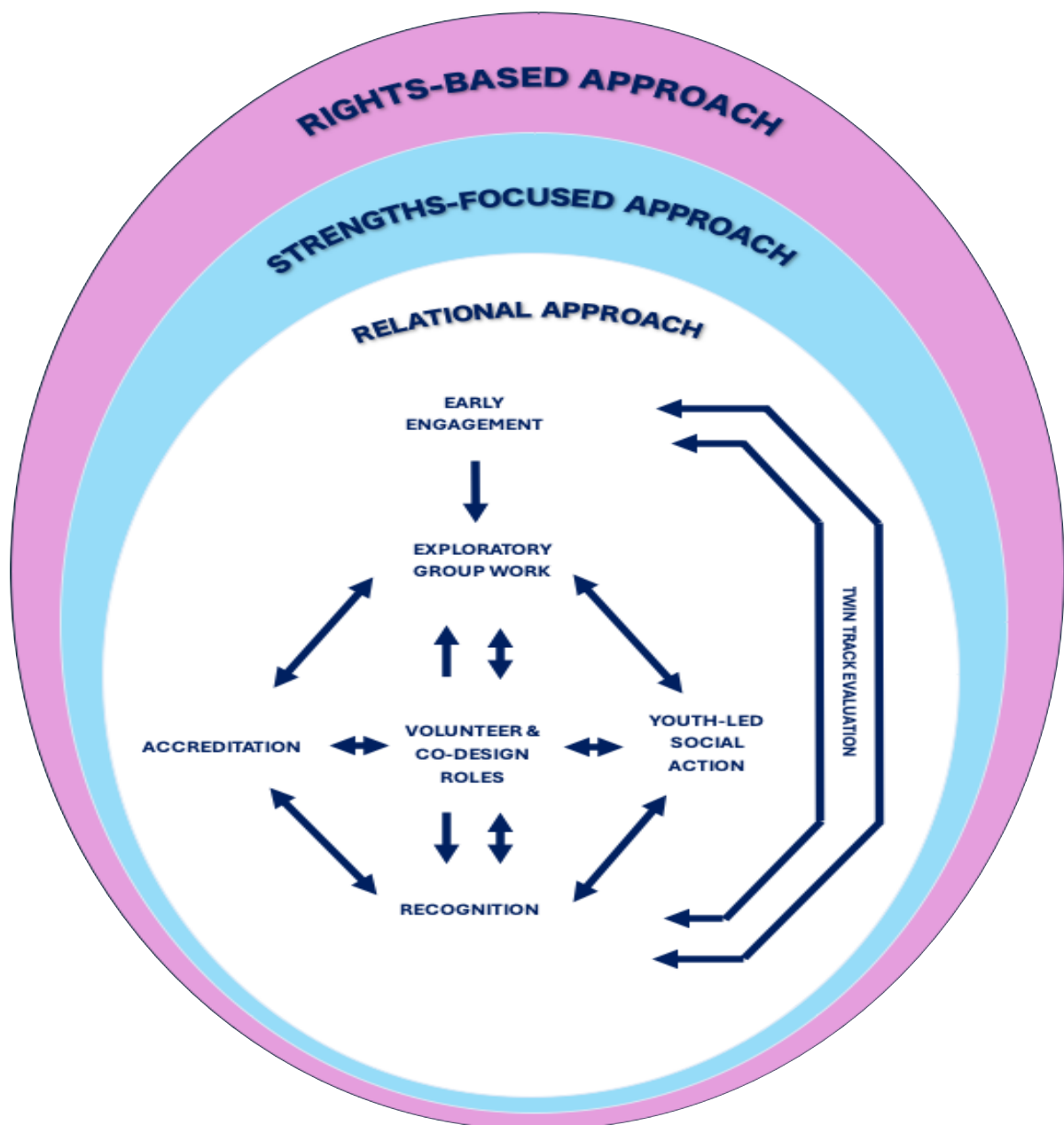
The Nested Model of Youth Work sets out a rights-based, strengths-focused and relational vision of practice. Drawing on over 35 years of insight from the youth sector, the model offers:

- A framework for working through the relationship between youth work values and the engagement process.
- An alternative to ‘ladders of participation’ that centres meeting young people where they are at and recognising the diversity of their experiences and achievements.
- Insights into reflective practice and evaluation.

Ultimately, the Nested Model is a flexible tool that youth workers can call upon whenever necessary.

Visual Aid

The Nested Model of Youth Work embeds a non-linear, 8-part youth engagement process within 3 distinct values-based approaches.



YOUTH WORK ETHOS

Introduction

Youth work is a situated practice that is understood differently around the world. While there is evidence of shared guiding principles across a variety of contexts, there is no universal model of youth work practice (Cooper 2012; 2018; Corney et al., 2023). In fact, youth workers often call upon a range of models in their practice and may use the same model for different ends. What unites youth workers in their approach to practice is a sense that their work is guided by a distinctive set of values. While the exact framing of these values may be contested, the Nested Model of Youth Work identifies three values-based approaches that form the broad contours of a youth work ethos. The aim of the model is to explain how this ethos can embed an effective engagement process derived from everyday youth work practice.

Rights-Based Approach

The outer sphere of the Nested Model sets out the primacy of a rights-based approach to working with young people. Working within the parameters of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is imperative to upholding the human dignity of young people and supporting them to claim their rights (Corney et al, 2021). Youth workers can be rights-based by situating their work directly in relation to any of the 54 Articles of the Convention when:

- Forming a project proposal.
- Planning a session.
- Reflecting on a session.
- Evaluating a project.

The scope of the Convention is considerable, and it provides a useful frame for thinking about how youth work aims are complimentary to advancing the obligations of the state to young people. You can find examples of how the Convention relates to two key aspects of youth work below:

Youth Work & Youth Voice

Enshrining young people's right to freely express themselves and to have their views given due weight in the decision-making processes affecting them, Article 12 is one of the most cited provisions of the Convention in youth work.

Often supported by the work of Laura Lundy (2007), youth workers have made a robust case for how their ethos and engagement processes advance Article 12 by:

- Providing safe, inclusive spaces for young people to form and express their views.
- Providing accessible information and youth-centred platforms that amplify youth voice.
- Ensuring that the views of young people are shared with a diverse audience of decision-makers.
- Ensuring that young people's views are taken seriously and influence decisions.

Youth Work as Non-Formal Education

As will be described in greater detail below, youth work is non-formal, relational education. This means that youth workers can situate their work in relations to Articles 28 and 29, which set out educational rights. Youth work advances the commitments in these articles by:

- Providing alternative forms of learning, skills development and accreditation that contribute to the development of a young person's personality, talents and abilities.
- Promoting active citizenship and mutual respect among young people.
- Pursuing culturally sensitive, inclusive engagement processes.
- Reconnecting young people to formal education.

While central to communicating the value of youth work, rights-based rhetoric is no guarantee of effective practice. As Farthing (2012) convincingly argues, human rights frameworks are contested, meaning youth workers must push beyond a 'thin' conception of rights by explaining how their work has a strong claim to meaningfully engaging young people. This is where the other aspects of the Nested Model come into play.

Strengths-Focused Approach

The middle sphere of the Nested Model details the importance of a strengths-focused approach in youth work. When confronted with stark social inequalities, it can be tempting for youth workers to primarily focus on perceived problems to be addressed through their practice. A strengths-focused approach seeks to reframe workers' concerns about prevailing inequalities to enable more positively oriented forms of practice.

As Thornton (2019) points out, taking a strengths-focused approach does not mean ignoring the problems that young people experience. Rather, it means focusing on supporting them to identify and build upon their strengths to help them reach their potential. Essentially, what defines a strengths-focused approach is an emphasis on the skills that young people have and what they might achieve (Stuart & Perris, 2017).

Without strengths-focused thinking the youth work ethos becomes unconvincing, if not hypocritical. The soon to be discussed relational approach favoured by youth workers is based on a belief that young people have the capacity to claim their rights and improve their life skills through non-formal learning. Every aspect of youth work practice should therefore be situated in relation to ideas concerning a strengths-focused approach.

To help maintain a strengths-focused approach, it can be useful to ask yourself the following questions:

- How have I mapped the strengths and needs of young people and the communities they live in?
- Have I involved young people and community stakeholders directly in a mapping exercise?
- Are there any voices or perspectives that I have missed?
- How am I communicating these strengths and needs to external stakeholders?
- Have I avoided generalisations and language that young people and community stakeholders are uncomfortable with when explaining my work?
- Am I challenging negative stereotypes through my work?
- Am I adequately encouraging young people through my work?

Relational Approach

The inner sphere of the Nested Model outlines a distinctive relational approach deployed by youth workers. As mentioned above, youth work is a situated practice that is understood differently around the world. Although the Nested Model is informed by research identifying shared guiding principles across a range of contexts, it is very much a product of distinct youth work traditions in Australia, the UK and Ireland. Much of the practice-informed theorising from which the model draws reflects the cut and thrust of debate across these jurisdictions (see Farquhar & McKenna, 2024). While this does not mean that the model cannot be applied elsewhere, it is important to note that it offers a historically and culturally situated view of practice open to challenge. You can find explanations of the four key aspects of the Model's relational approach below:

Youth Work & Maximising Voluntary Engagement

Voluntary engagement has long been a defining aspect of youth work. However, the voluntary principle has been challenged as youth work has diversified. Efforts have been made to reframe the voluntary principle to permit youth workers greater flexibility to work strategically in mandatory engagement settings, such as schools. Points have also been raised that young people's choice to engage in youth work programs in community settings may be constrained by social pressures outside the worker's control. Yet, maximising voluntary engagement has remained a core value of youth work.

By maximising voluntary engagement, youth workers tip the balance of power in favour of young people as sustained engagement becomes based on whether they find program content relevant and engaging. This means the youth work process becomes a more of an equitable dialogue between workers and young people characterised by mutual respect and compromise.

Youth workers can maximise voluntary engagement by ensuring that young people know that they can opt out of engagement at any time without penalty.

Youth Work & Non-Formal, Relational Learning

Non-formal, relational learning is a core aspect of youth work. Youth workers support young people develop a range of life skills across a variety of capacity building areas, including healthy relationships, emotional resilience, employability, sexuality education, active citizenship, and inter-cultural and inter-generational understanding. They do this by developing strong associational bonds between worker and young person, as well as between young people forming a group.

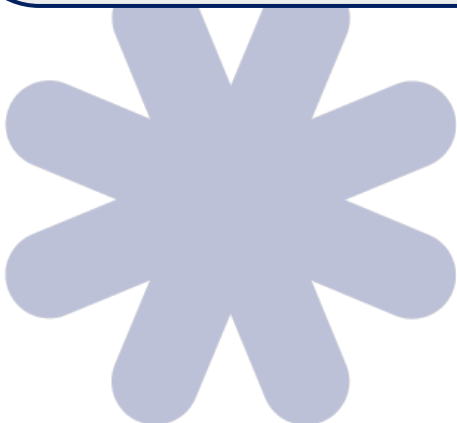
Youth work's focus on non-formal, relational learning gives it a certain distinctiveness:

- Working in partnership with young people to elaborate and work towards learning aims separates youth work from forms of recreation.
- Emphasising non-formal learning methodologies separates youth work from formal education.
- Prioritising non-formal, relational learning in group settings separates youth work from social work, which operates in a more formal case management framework.



Youth Work & Modelling Pro-Social Behaviours

Being friendly, accessible and responsive while acting with integrity are all vital ingredients of successful developmental youth work. Youth Workers must be personable, get to know young people, be flexible and work with them on a basis of give and take that is consistent and morally justifiable. Failure to do so risks reproducing beliefs and practices that sustain the marginalisation of particular groups. Youth workers should seek to challenge such beliefs and practices by cultivating inclusive associational bonds through their approach to relationship building.



Youth Work & Embedding in Community Networks

To fully support young people, workers should seek to become embedded within wider community networks. They should develop an understanding of the surrounding community to better understand where young people are coming from. This might include community mapping exercises with stakeholders or reaching out to a variety of relevant organisations to develop strategic partnerships. If done well, this can help facilitate community capacity building that workers can take pride in contributing towards and record in their outcomes. Although this might occasionally overlap directly with the youth engagement process, community outreach and stakeholder engagement might be best understood as parallel processes. As such, we do not go to much further into this aspect of youth work in this guide.

Keeping each of these aspects in mind will support youth workers tailor their work with young people to make meaningful rights-based, strengths-focused interventions.

However, as the relational approach set out above relies on values, it is likely to be interpreted and applied differently by youth workers. As such, it is necessary to include space for reflection and reason giving into the model. This will be returned to below in the discussion on twin track evaluation.



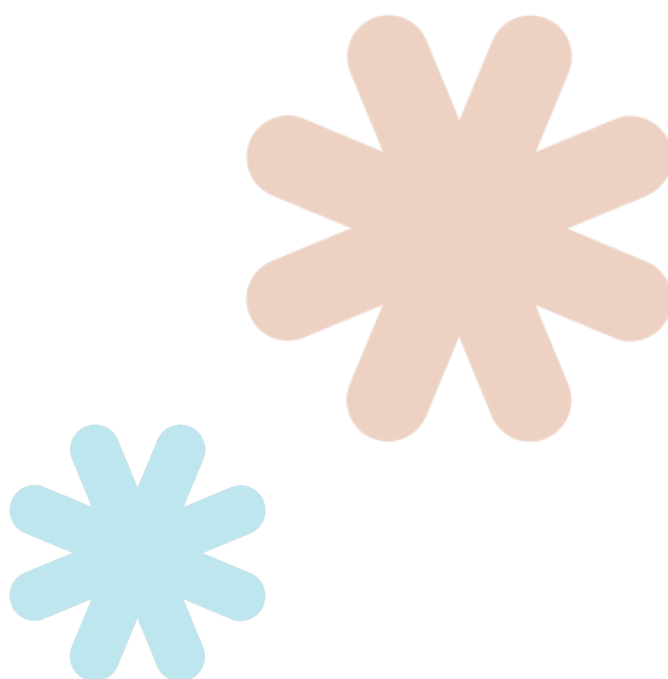
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Introduction

Any model of youth work must advance a meaningful engagement process. The merit of the Nested Model process lies in its grounding in everyday youth work practice and alignment with youth work values. We have applied this process across a range of projects, and it continues to shape our practice.

Reflecting our dedication to meeting young people where they are at and adequately recognising each of their various achievements through their involvement with us, our engagement process is non-linear. Although models offering a 'ladder of participation' might be seen to provide a clearer sense of direction, it is our view that they risk undervaluing important work with young people and the benefits of a more exploratory approach to meeting their needs.

Good youth work is often a messy business that rejects simplistic ideas of progress. As Davies (2021) remarks, youth work is regularly an 'unfinished practice' as there is always more to be explored with young people. Keeping this in mind, the Nested Model offers a flexible 8-part process. After early engagement and exploratory group work, youth workers can move across the different parts of the process in line with the needs and interests of their group.

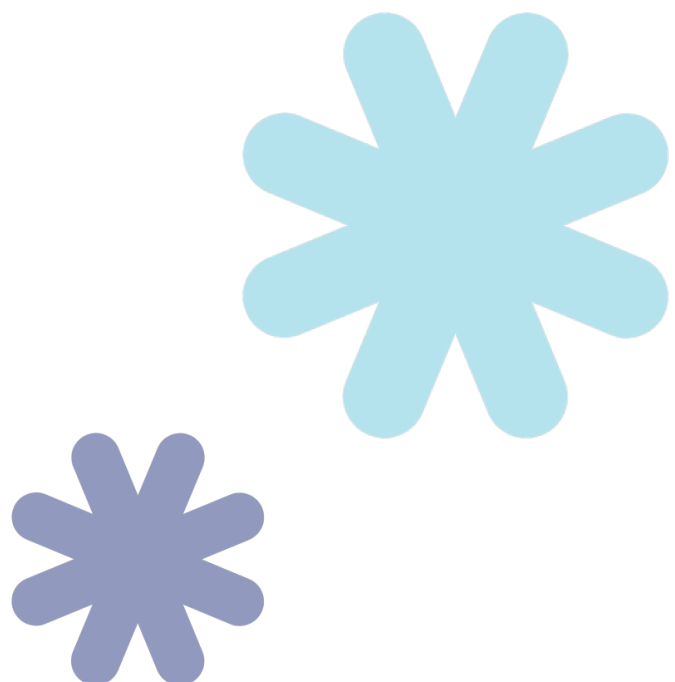


Early Engagement

This initial engagement introduces young people to the youth work setting. As the starting point of the process, it should have a strong emphasis on relationship building through icebreakers, games and informal discussions. This phase should also be used to establish some basic guidelines with the group through the formulation of a flexible contract that is open to revision. To give young people some autonomy and tip the balance of power in their favour, workers should also seek to elicit their hopes and fears for the group. This will help them better structure programming to ensure it is relevant to the group.

Worker Objectives in Early Engagement

- Maximise voluntary engagement.
- Model pro-social behaviours.
- Build positive group dynamics.
- Set some realistic expectations of behaviour in the group.
- Initiate the dialogue on what young people want to get out of their participation.
- Provide encouragement whenever possible.



Exploratory Group Work

When the group has got to know each other and feels comfortable with the worker, attention can turn to exploratory group work. This work can have a range of delivery methods. It can be discussion-based, games-based or based around other forms of creative expression. What matters most is that the group work promotes reflection on important social issues that are relevant to the lives of the young people in the group. To ensure the work remains relevant, workers must be flexible in terms of pursuing envisaged learning outcomes and allow the group some scope to stray off topic and address issues they believe are more pressing.

Worker Objectives

- Maximise voluntary engagement.
- Model pro-social behaviours.
- Build positive group dynamics.
- Ensure that young people have been given a safe, inclusive space to speak to their issues.
- Provide encouragement whenever possible.
- Experiment with a mix of dialogue, creative expression and games-based methodologies.



Youth-Led Social Action

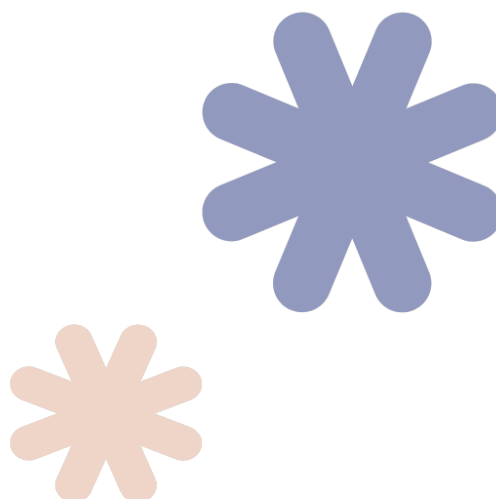
Having spent some time exploring social issues with the group, the worker may offer them an opportunity to participate in a social action project aimed at addressing a pertinent issue. By working together to pick the issue and putting a plan in place regarding how they intend to address the issue, the young people will build their leadership and communications skills, as well as learn more about the benefits of civic participation.

The role of the worker in this phase is to take a step back and give the young people as much autonomy as possible. To support the group, the worker may provide:

- Resources, relevant information, planning materials and templates.
- Constructive feedback when asked or pitched ideas from young people.
- Organisational support to help them turn their ideas into reality.

Worker Objectives

- Maximise voluntary engagement.
- Model pro-social behaviours.
- Build positive group dynamics.
- Ensure that young people are given the space and resources they need to develop their social action initiative.
- Provide encouragement whenever possible
- Keep feedback constructive and targeted.
- Maximise youth autonomy and leadership.



Volunteer and Co-Design Roles

As young people become enmeshed in the youth work process, they may wish to become involved in more leadership-oriented roles. This might include becoming a volunteer in the group, taking on additional responsibilities in helping the worker facilitate sessions. Alternatively, they may become more actively involved in program delivery through co-design processes.

In relation to volunteers, youth workers can support young people by:

- Involving them in session planning, reflection and evaluation.
- Giving them autonomy to lead aspects of the group work.
- Ensuring that they are aware of available training opportunities to develop their practice.
- Informing them of organisational policies and ensuring they are aware of their child safe obligations.

With regards to co-design processes, youth workers can deploy the ideas from the previously discussed Lundy Model by:

- Providing safe, inclusive spaces for young people to form and express their views.
- Providing accessible information and youth-centred platforms that amplify youth voice in the co-design process.
- Ensuring that young people are sharing their views and working with those with the power to influence change.
- Ensuring that young people's views are taken seriously and influence decisions.

Through volunteer and co-design roles youth work can support young people develop a range of important leadership skills.

Worker Objectives

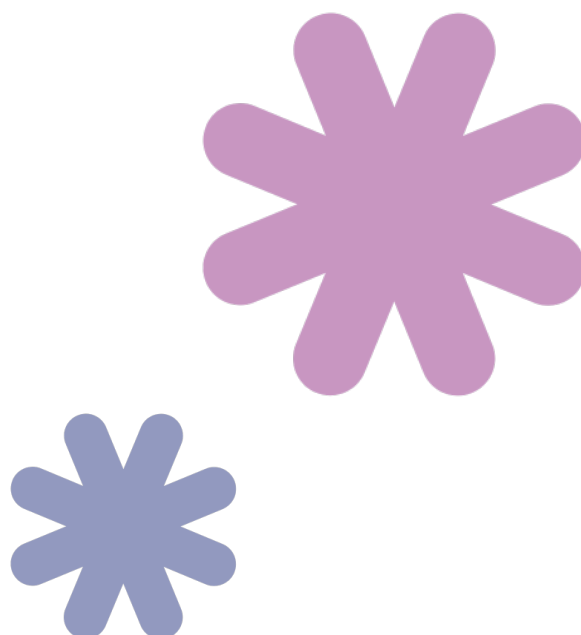
- Maximise voluntary engagement.
- Model pro-social behaviours.
- Build positive group dynamics.
- Ensure that young people are given the space and resources they need to undertake the role.
- Provide encouragement whenever possible
- Keep feedback constructive and targeted.
- Maximise youth autonomy and leadership.

Accreditation

As the group grows in confidence, they *may* wish to undertake an accredited course with the worker. This introduces a greater element of formality into the youth work process that some youth workers *might* feel uncomfortable with. However, there is strong evidence within the youth sector that accreditations can be incorporated into the youth work offering in a meaningful way, while maintaining a strong emphasis on dialogue, creative expression and games-based methodologies (see YouthStart, 2022; 2025). Supporting young people achieve an accreditation need not mean an abandonment of informality.

Worker Objectives

- Maximise voluntary engagement.
- Model pro-social behaviours.
- Build positive group dynamics.
- Ensure that young people are given the space and resources they need to undertake the qualification.
- Provide encouragement whenever possible.
- Keep feedback constructive and targeted.
- Maximise the use on dialogue, creative expression and games-based methodologies.



Recognition

Groups should always be recognised for the work they do on a youth work project. Recognition can include trips, celebration events, honoraria etc. By adequately recognising the contribution and achievements of young people, youth workers can thank them for their time, build their confidence and sustain their interest in youth work programs. As shown in the visual on page 3, recognition can take place at any time during the engagement process.

Worker Objectives

- Thank young people for their contributions.
- Build young people's confidence by recognising their achievements and providing encouragement.
- Sustain young people's interest in youth work programs.



Twin Track Evaluation – Part 1

The twin track evaluation components of the Nested Model are included to ensure continuous reflection and evaluation. The inner track of the twin track process deals with evaluation for external funders. We recognise that the content of this track will necessarily be context dependent. Youth workers occupy different roles across a variety of projects. As such, they must respond to situated demands. However, you can find some general principles that we have found helpful when approaching these types of evaluations below:

Time Over Numbers

The quality of engagement should be prioritised over the numbers engaged. The relationship building process aspired to in the Nested Model requires time and commitment to be effective. Positive, trusting relationships between worker and young person, as well as between young people forming a group, are unlikely to flourish through short-term engagement.

Built in Flexibility

Although youth workers might target specific issues or areas of practice, they should ensure their work is reasonably broadly based, encompassing learning objectives around the cultivation of life skills, emotional resilience and inter-personal relationships. This should give workers the flexibility they need to be responsive to the needs of young people and give them greater autonomy over deciding the terms of their engagement.

Get Specific

Spending around 2 hours a week on a youth work project makes up just 1 per cent of a young person's week. This should be reflected in the measurement of outcomes. Evaluative techniques should tap into young people's experiences of the project and whether they perceive gains in knowledge, well-being and skills. Evaluations that seek to chart general changes in mood through pre- and post- surveys should be avoided.

Simplify Surveys

Surveys should be short, quick to administer and easy for young people to understand.

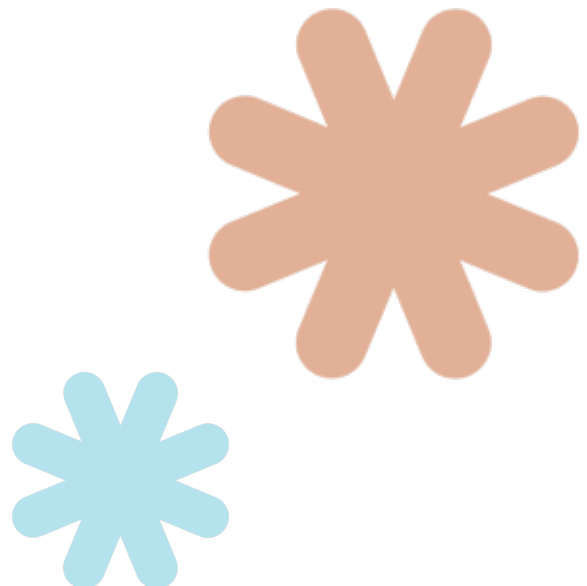
Value Narrative Evidence

Narrative evidence should be gathered throughout the program. This can entail keeping bits of flip chart or a record of memorable quotes from group work. It may also include administering the following simple three question evaluation during a closing circle:

1. What did you enjoy?
2. Did you learn anything new?
3. What would you change?

This body of evidence can then be complimented with some check-in case studies at the end of the project where young people are afforded the opportunity to feedback to the worker what the project meant to them and whether it matched their expectations.

Although these principles may not be to everyone's liking, we hope that they at least shine some light on how evaluation can centre the voices of young people, while allowing workers flexibility to respond to their needs and communicate how specific learning outcomes are being achieved.



Twin Track Evaluation – Part 2

The outer track of the twin track evaluation process concerns a personal element of self-evaluation through reflective practice. As alluded to above, youth work is a values-based practice that is open to interpretation. Youth workers are not a homogenous group after all. We all have intersecting identities and differing sets of lived experiences. It is therefore crucial that we reflect on any biases or taken-for-granted assumptions that we may have. If left unchecked, these might lead to a reproduction of beliefs and practices that marginalise certain social groups.

There are many ways to engage in reflective practice:

- Through sessional reflections.
- Through chats with individual colleagues.
- Through team dialogues.
- Through conversations with your line manager.
- Through end of program reflections.

Reflective practice can be undertaken at all stages of the youth work process.

While there are many templates for reflective practice, we find the following steps helpful for opening up reflection:

1. **Observe** – Take a mental note of what is going on during the session and keep sessional materials that contain relevant contributions from young people.
2. **Identify** – Note down what you thought were the key themes or talking points of the session, as well as what you thought worked well and what could have gone better.
3. **Reflect** – Note down any actions that you could take next time to improve the session or build on what has been achieved.
4. **Review** – Note down any progress you think you have made in future reflections.

CONCLUSION

A Few Final Words

The Nested Model is one of many models of practice in youth work. We have found it a useful framework for communicating the relationship between our ethos and youth engagement process. However, we acknowledge that the model is very much a product of distinct youth work traditions in Australia, the UK and Ireland. The model is historically and culturally situated and may not be relevant to everyone. We nevertheless hope that it proves a useful tool to those youth workers who share our vision of practice.

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