Evidence Brief

Seven Promising Practices for Engaging & Supporting NEET Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "NEET," "youth," and "best practices."

Setting the Context: NEET Youth in Ontario

At any given time, there are an estimated 315,556 NEET youth (between the ages of 16-29), which represents 12.1% of Ontario's youth population of 2.6 million (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 2).

A recent survey found that "many NEET youth want to better their lives and connect to meaningful employment," and 96% have aspirations of returning to work or school (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 4). The NEET youth surveyed identified important long-term goals, including building a successful career (76%), gaining financial independence (85%), and learning new things (85%) (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 4).

When compared to all youth in the province, NEET youth in Ontario (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 2):

- are more likely to be older (between the ages of 20-24 or 25-29)
- tend to have lower educational attainment, although a significant proportion of NEET youth have a post-secondary education (48.2%)
- are more likely to be Indigenous
- are more likely to have children

Key Finding: Youth Workers Build Social Capital for NEET Youth

As resource navigators and connectors to services and programs, youth workers play an important role in the wellbeing of youth (Ranahan & Thomas, 2016). When the relationship between a youth worker and a young person is built on "mutual respect, and treating the young person as an equal" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 480), young people can develop a stronger belief in themselves (Miller et al., 2015) and in their "perceived levels of support" (Ryan et al., 2019, p. 13), important factors contributing to positive outcomes in education and employment (Miller et al., 2015). In fact, youth work "can play an important role in helping young people develop social capital across social groups and networks, which they can use to improve their own lives and those of their communities" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 473).

Summary of Evidence:
Seven Promising Practices for Engaging & Supporting NEET Youth

1. Focus on prevention.
The factors "that contribute to youth being NEET are the product of early experiences and risk factors that could be addressed while youth are still in school or employment" (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 98), and keeping young people in education can serve as a pathway to future employment (Mascherini, 2017; Maguire, 2015).

A 2018 report from Ontario's Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services identified the province's Youth Outreach Worker program as an example of early intervention, as it focuses on connecting marginalized and vulnerable youth and their families to services in their communities (Blueprint ADE, 2018). Youth workers and mentors need to be adequately trained and prepared to recognize and support a variety of complex and intersecting needs (VALLEY, 2017). Regular meetings between staff, volunteers, and mentors can provide opportunities to outline youth's individual learning and employment goals, and be attuned to their progress and achievement – and to any barriers or challenges they may encounter (VALLEY, 2017).

As already referenced, perceived support is important for young people to feel connected and engaged, and "perceived teacher support strongly correlates with school engagement" (Ryan et al., 2019, p. 10). Building networks of support – including youth workers, teachers, parents and caregivers, family members, peers, and community leaders – is critical to early intervention and prevention strategies for NEET youth (Ryan et al., 2019). These networks may be of particular importance during transition years, specifically when young people begin high school or post-secondary education (Hanna, 2015; NOISE, 2019).

2. Coordinate and integrate services.
The barriers and challenges facing NEET youth are multiple and complex, and "a significant proportion [of these youth] face considerable challenges in their lives that make it harder for them to achieve their goals" (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 4). As a result, youth workers must engage with schools and other community service providers to share information (with respect for confidentiality) and more effectively coordinate services (Blueprint ADE, 2018; Gardner et al., 2017; ILO, 2017; Big Lottery Fund, n.d.; Simmons et al., 2014). Integrating systems of referral and follow-up can ensure that young people "do not fall through cracks" (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 63; also ILO, 2017); the monitoring of school attendance, for example, can help to identify youth in need of additional supports (OECD, 2016; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012). Harmonized approaches

recognize that "no single organization is able to address all needs" (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 20) and allow for "various different actors to work together … all the parties involved should share their knowledge and expertise" (OECD, 2016, p. 49).

The coordination and integration of services can also serve to better mitigate the diversity of barriers to education, employment or training, which include transportation, housing, language, access to information, stigma/biases, and mental health (Toronto Youth Cabinet, 2018; Gardner et al., 2017; Blueprint ADE, 2018; Mascherini, 2017). This approach prioritizes innovative interventions that are grounded in the realities of local contexts (Mawn et al., 2017).

There is a call for governments to support enhanced collaboration and cooperation between different systems in the youth-serving sector, but there are also existing approaches (Blueprint ADE, 2018) that can serve as examples, including the Collective Impact for Disconnected Youth project in the Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services, and CivicAction in the GTA/Hamilton area.

In order to better understand barriers, impacts, and outcomes, there is a need to **collect better data** that is accurately representative (Mascherini, 2017; Blueprint ADE, 2018; Maguire, 2015) and "that can be used to develop evidence-informed policy and programming that more effectively and efficiently serves NEET youth" (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 99). Coordinated and integrated services might better position the sector to collect and share such data.

3. Implement holistic, individualized responses.
NEET youth are not homogeneous and "it is important to recognize that support mechanisms for young people outside education and work need to be flexible and tailored to their specific needs and circumstances" (Simmons et al., 2014, p. 11). Because the barriers faced by NEET youth are often multiple and intersecting, it is "critical that service responses adopt a holistic lens including wrap-around supports that focus on addressing the complex range of challenges experienced by individual youth" (Blueprint ADE, 2018, p. 98; also OECD, 2016, and Mascherini, 2017). By being attentive to individual needs, youth workers can "increase the likelihood of continued engagement and sustainable improvements" (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 20).

Services should be tailored "to individual characteristics and the specific barriers to be overcome… organized along a continuum of assistance that accompanies the young person from initial contact to re-integration" (ILO, 2017, p. 11). Responses must be culturally-relevant (Blueprint ADE, 2018) and culturally-appropriate (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 41). Support from youth workers that is "high-quality, sustained, one-to-one" (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 4) is most effective (also Big Lottery Fund, n.d.). Within programs, youth workers can consider the use of complementary approaches

and diverse types of activities, collaborating with young people in determining the most effective types of engagement attuned to their needs and interests (VALLEY, 2017).

4. Use a strength-based approach.
There is much criticism of the term 'NEET,' which can be read as a "deficit label … constructed to demonize many young people who have been unable for a variety of reasons to find employment" (Stoten, 2014, p. 477). This categorization "lumps together a wide range of individuals from diverse backgrounds and circumstances under one grouping and, in doing so, defines young people by what they are not, rather than who they are" (Simmons et al., 2014, p. 7). Referring to a young person as 'NEET' places the focus on individual deficits, erasing systemic barriers and limiting opportunities for highlighting strengths, assets, and possibilities.

Using a strength-based approach can help youth workers acknowledge young people's aspirations, instill confidence, and support youth in their motivation to succeed by setting measurable and achievable goals (Blueprint ADE, 2018; Big Lottery Fund, n.d.). Recommendations for activities that emphasize a strength-based approach include those with an artistic or creative dimension – enabling the young person to value and affirm their individuality to themselves and others (VALLEY, 2017) – and those that confer responsibility or leadership with minimal supervision – enabling the young person to acquire new skills, enhance their self-esteem, and develop relationships with peers (VALLEY, 2017).

5. Prioritize relationship building.
As already referenced, a young person's positive self-regard, sense of their own capacity, and perceived supports are critical to their wellbeing and engagement (Ryan et al., 2019). Therefore, youth workers should prioritize building a trusting relationship without "negative or stigmatizing implications" (ILO, 2017, p. 10). Key attributes to ensure success include authenticity, understanding, empathy, non-judgement, and patience (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 36). Young people not engaged in education, employment or training often experience "overwhelming feelings of negativity that [are] directed at them from more formal and traditional structures within the community" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 473). Youth workers can serve to diminish these feelings, giving "young people a sense of empowerment, and [creating] spaces to allow them to create relationships through positive engagement with other members of their communities" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 473).

6. Strengthen mental health supports / facilitate access to mental health supports.
Mental health has been cited as a barrier for young people wanting to engage in education, employment or training (Blueprint ADE, 2018), and is often an issue for young people that is left unspoken. Organizations and programs that work with and for youth should strive to integrate

mental health supports with other services (Blueprint ADE, 2018), or be positioned to offer "well-thought-out and monitored referrals" (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 61) that can meet the needs of young people.

7. Engage youth in program design, development, and evaluation.
Youth workers can ensure that programs meet the needs of the young people in their communities, contribute to building the social capital of youth, *and* create opportunities to foster young people's skills, capacity, and confidence by engaging youth in the design, development, and evaluation of programs (Gardner et al., 2017; St. Stephen's, 2016). It is critical that "youth have ownership of the plan that you collaborate in developing to address their needs and meet their goals" (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 23). As a result, youth will also be more engaged in programming, allowing for ongoing relationship-building and long-term, intensive support that is "more likely to be successful" (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 20).

In addition to youth, remember to engage and consult with their networks of support, which could include parents and other caregivers, family members, friends and peers, or other professionals, including teachers and support workers (Gardner et al., 2017; Big Lottery Fund, n.d.; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012; Mascherini, 2017); their support and involvement is critical to ensuring positive outcomes for youth (Ryan et al., 2019).

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