# Evidence Brief

Six Good Practices for Working with Youth at Drop-In Centres

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "drop-in centres," "drop-in programs," "youth," "youth programs," and "best practices."

### Three Key Findings

1. **Drop-in centres can play a vital role for youth in accessing services** (Joniak, 2005; Pedersen et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2006). Drop-in centres can serve as an accessible gateway to a range of services and referrals, as they provide a space for supervised activities, opportunities for learning and development, and even just somewhere safe for youth to hang out and socialize with their peers (Crammond et al., 2006; dmA Planning & Management Services, 2010; Slesnick et al., 2008; Pederson et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2006).

2. **Ensuring accessibility is critical for drop-in centres wanting to work with youth.** Inaccessibility is one of the most commonly cited reasons for low participation rates at youth programs run by drop-in centres (Slesnick et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006; Aviles & Grigalunas, 2018). Therefore, accessibility should be at the core of any drop-in centre program, which can be "an effective way to engage youth in a low-demand, non-intrusive manner" (Crammond et al., 2006, p. 31).

   Participation at a drop-in centre does not necessarily require paperwork, a regular time commitment, or adhering to strict rules, but can still offer an opportunity for "informal, casual structure appropriately supported with skilled staff" (City of Mississauga, 2008, p. 34; Pedersen et al., 2016). This 'come as you are' approach appeals to youth who may be hesitant to attend more restrictive programs (Pedersen et al., 2016; Mercier et al., 2000). In fact, youth appreciate having access to unstructured activities that provide opportunities for socialization in a safe and supportive environment, in a space with a consistent schedule, where they can spontaneously drop-in (dmA Planning & Management Services, 2010).

   Accessibility, therefore, includes "not only location, but how the actual physical location is

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developed, the level of safety an individual feels within the community, the responsibility individuals feel and believe others feel for that location, [and] the level of 'buy in' the people who inhabit the area have for that location" (Slesnick et al., 2008, *Children and Youth Services Review*, p. 729).

3. **Programs at drop-in centres are particularly important for youth experiencing homelessness**, a group that may have a particularly difficult time accessing services in other ways (Pedersen et al., 2016; Slesnick et al., 2008; Aviles & Grigalunas, 2018). Although much of the literature explores the benefits of drop-in centres for youth experiencing homelessness, we might also understand these benefits for youth who do not have a strong or consistent sense of home or community.

## Summary of Evidence: Six Good Practices

Following the key messages above, we can highlight six good practices for working with youth at drop-in centres:

### 1. Establish trust.

Drop-in centre staff should strive to establish trusting relationships with youth. Many youth accessing services at drop-in centres may have lost trust with adults and service providers, and with the larger system, so it is important that a mutual relationship of trust is developed (Slesnick et al., 2008; Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, 2002; Thompson et al., 2006).

### 2. Foster an inclusive environment.

Youth programs at drop-in centres should always strive to create an environment that is safe and welcoming, inclusive, and free of judgement (Mercier et al., 2000; Slesnick et al., 2008; Pedersen et al., 2016). Staff should continuously remind youth that they are there to support them in reaching their goals, while encouraging and supporting personal development (Pedersen et al., 2016). Facilitating connections with members and organizations is a good way to help youth feel safe in other areas of the community (Mercier et al., 2000; Slesnick et al., 2008; Pedersen et al., 2016).

Make sure youth know they are listened to and taken seriously (Mercier et al., 2000). When possible, consider how to involve youth in decision-making and enable services to be youth-led (City of Mississauga, 2008). Be attuned to the specific needs and concerns of girls and young women (Queiser, 2016) in addressing issues of safety and inclusivity; consider offering services, spaces within the drop-in, or hours of programming that are reserved for girls or young women (Togane & Skeete, 2017).

### 3. Design the space(s) intentionally.

Drop-in centres running programs for youth should be intentional when planning how the centre will be organized (Slesnick et al., 2008). Ideally, the centre should be organized into several rooms, or divided into different spaces, each with its own activity, in order to limit overcrowding and the potential for conflict (Slesnick et al., 2008; Mercier et al., 2000). Quiet spaces should be made available for youth to use for schoolwork or other activities that require concentration.

### 4. Ensure that programs are versatile and flexible.

Programs at drop-in centres should be versatile and flexible (Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, 2002). Youth may be averse to rules and rigid structures, characteristics of systems that have failed them before. Drop-in centre programs should take flexible approaches that do not have unrealistic expectations (Slesnick et al., 2008; Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, 2002). Precarious circumstances may make it difficult for youth to keep track of documents required to access certain services (i.e. identification); drop-in centre staff can make accommodations appropriate to the diverse needs of youth participants.

### 5. Decrease barriers to access.

Structural barriers such as "inconvenient locations, long waiting lists, limited or inconvenient operating hours, inadequate capacity, and age restrictions" (Pedersen et al., 2016, p. 150) limit the opportunity for youth to access drop-in centres. Most of these barriers can be attributed to a lack of funding, but there are some practices that can help to ensure greater accessibility. Ideally, drop-in centres should be located in areas where youth congregate; when this is not possible, staff can provide public transit tickets or tokens, or offer other resources, to help youth get to the centre (Slesnick et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006). Free programming with extended operating hours and without wait times or paperwork can accommodate the needs of youth who may be experiencing crisis, or simply need a place to go (Pedersen et al., 2016; Slesnick et al., 2008; Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, 2002).

### 6. Balance meeting immediate and more complex needs.

In practice, this could include providing food and access to showers, laundry, and clean clothes (Slesnick et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006), as well as programs that focus on mental health or substance use. Youth trying to access these kinds of services from other providers may be discouraged by financial burdens or the amount of paperwork required (Pedersen et al., 2016), so providing access to these services in some capacity can help in the referral and/or transition to more formal services.

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