

Supporting Youth Wellbeing in the Climate Crisis: Six Key Understandings and Five Promising Practices



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief outlines critical youth work approaches to supporting youth wellbeing in the climate crisis by summarizing six key understandings and five promising practices. Developed by Laura Glover for YouthREX, in collaboration with Kathe Rogers, Knowledge Exchange Director.

CRITICAL YOUTH WORK AND COLLECTIVE LIBERATION

Critical youth work practice is predicated on principles of open-ended engagement, informal education, relationship-building, and flexibility, and resists reproducing harmful and marginalizing power dynamics.¹ In fact, this approach to youth work seeks to redress the socially divisive imbalance of power in society, to embody the fundamental values of democracy, justice, and equality,³ and to decolonize practice.⁴

Youth work, then, is an important site for supporting, bolstering, and amplifying youth-led understandings of wellbeing in relation to the climate crisis, and for promoting agency by engaging youth in global social, political, and environmental issues at the local level.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: SIX KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

01. Climate change is a crisis – and youth are uniquely impacted.

Climate change is an urgent political, social, economic, environmental, and existential issue, with structural roots in colonialism and capitalism.⁵ Youth wellbeing is uniquely impacted by this crisis, as young people have limited access to institutional power to intervene and are set to inherit the worst of its effects – both direct and indirect⁶ – as they age.^{7,8}

Direct effects include experiencing weather events like floods, wildfires, heat waves, or winter storms, while indirect effects include the ongoing threat of unstable futures, biodiversity loss, species extinction, limits on reproductive choices (for example, to parent in a safe and sustainable environment), and uninterrupted access to information about the climate crisis on social media.^{6,8,9,10} Youth experience sadness, helplessness, guilt, distress, anxiety, worry, and feelings of betrayal by governments in positions of power.⁸

02. Climate justice centres reconciliation with Indigenous communities and advances decolonization.

The framework of collective liberation that guides critical youth work acknowledges that responses to the climate crisis must always align with Indigenous-led initiatives and the work of Indigenous knowledge keepers, water protectors, and land defenders. Reconciliation includes renewing healthy relationships that are based on honesty, mutual respect, and an understanding of identity, and youth workers can centre the experiences, perspectives, worldviews, histories, and narratives of Indigenous youth.¹¹

03. Wellbeing is holistic.

Wellbeing is not *one thing*; it is expansive, including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, and is self-defined.¹² Wellbeing is a *process* that youth work is involved in supporting, affirming, and co-creating with youth – a complex, relational interplay between youth, youth workers, the youth work space, and broader social structures and systems. Wellbeing is contextualized on individual, community, and collective levels that are inseparable from the ecosystems of which we are a part, meaning that when land, water, and non-human species are impacted by climate change, so are youth.

04. Youth identities are intersectional.

Youth are not a homogenous group. The effects of the climate crisis on youth wellbeing vary and are disproportionate depending on a young person's *social location* – a combination of identity factors, including, but not limited to, gender, race, ability, class, sexual orientation,

and age. Youth also have various strengths and knowledge in relation to the climate crisis, its effects, and possible solutions.¹³ Recognizing this intersectionality to understand the diversity and complexities of youth relationships to the climate crisis can bolster and amplify strengths and support challenges in nuanced, localized, and specific ways. An intersectional lens also provides youth workers with a tool for critiquing power relations and structural barriers that may impact youth.¹³

05. Youth are the experts of their own experiences.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting youth in the climate crisis. Young people have a particular vantage point of themselves, their communities, and the social and political contexts of which they are a part, and should be engaged with as important stakeholders in both the local and global contexts of the climate crisis.^{14,15} This applies to youth work spaces as well; when youth workers acknowledge and understand youth as experts of their own experiences, young people have more access to defining and advocating for their wellbeing.

06. Youth workers' wellbeing in relation to the climate crisis matters, too.

Youth workers are often overlooked as important contributors to youth wellbeing.¹⁶ Relationships between youth and youth workers are what make youth work such a profound, dynamic, and possibly liberatory space for young people. Youth workers can share their values, concerns, and priorities in relation to the climate crisis, all the while being cautious of inadvertently influencing youth.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FIVE PROMISING PRACTICES

01. Let youth lead.

Youth workers should position and understand themselves as allies, not leaders, alongside youth in relation to the climate crisis. The climate crisis is a relational issue; youth and youth workers are part of complex ecosystems that connect us to land, water, and non-human species, and to each other. By letting youth lead, youth workers can also tap into the liberatory potential of youth work by leveraging their power, positions, and resources in allyship.¹

02. Connect a young person's experience to the broader social issues of the climate crisis.

Invite youth to have a voice in the climate crisis at the local level by engaging them emotionally, intellectually, creatively, politically, and environmentally. For example, develop programming aimed at exploring and affirming youth's emotions related to the climate crisis, get involved in local climate justice advocacy initiatives, create youth governance structures (such as a youth council) to redistribute power in youth work spaces, or build a community garden and integrate climate education into programs.

03. Develop programming that is reflective of, and responsive to, youth climate values.

Youth should see themselves reflected in youth work programming, policy, and practice. Engage youth in program design, facilitation, and evaluation, and in policy development. Youth-led programs that include an exploration of, and/or response to, the climate crisis and peer-led discussion groups can create opportunity for youth to enact their agency.

04. Affirm and validate youth responses to the climate crisis.

Relationships between youth and youth workers are distinct from relationships youth may have with the other adults in their lives (including parents/caregivers, teachers, counsellors, etc.) because of the potential for establishing nonhierarchical, genuine connections.¹⁶ Youth workers are uniquely positioned to sincerely affirm young people's worries, concerns, emotions, thoughts, priorities, and values relating to the climate crisis.

It is not necessarily the youth worker's role to ease these concerns, however; by actively listening and validating young people's experiences and perspectives, youth workers can cultivate spaces in which youth feel safe expressing themselves.

05. Facilitate arts-based programming.

Engaging in art can support many positive outcomes related to youth wellbeing, and can encourage exploration, reflection, and dialogue.¹⁷ When youth engage in art-making, they may experience deeper connectedness to sustainability issues and engagement with multiple ways of knowing about themselves and their communities, and they may identify new and/or evolved social and political values and priorities.^{18,19} Arts-based programming can support the myriad ways youth relate to, are impacted by, and care about the climate crisis, amplify youth voices, and bolster youth agency.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, York University Libraries, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "climate crisis", "climate change", "climate justice", "youth mental health", and "youth wellbeing".

ENDNOTES

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