

## CHAPTER 4: Voluntary relationships

Youth work is based on building relationships with young people that recognise individuals and respect the reality of their lives. Youth workers foster the independent nature of their relationships with young people through maintaining professional boundaries. This chapter explores the early stages of developing these relationships with young people through establishing dialogue and working together.

### Establishing the voluntary nature of the relationship

Young people choose whether to become involved in youth work. This basic principle affects the nature of the relationship between youth workers and young people as well as the practice of youth work. (See Box 4.1 for a definition of youth work relationships). Youth workers work with young people who decide whether to participate in the activities, discussions and projects. Young people can come or go, accept or reject suggestions or advice, participate fully or refuse to join in. Young people retain a level of power and control and they are encouraged to exert control over decisions about whether and how much to participate. This approach makes youth work unlike most other situations in many young people's lives. Attendance at school is generally obligatory, often a legal requirement and sometimes a costly privilege. Most teachers or parents demand or expect at least a minimal level of compliance. Youth work offers young people options. The activities may be exciting and creative or safe and secure. Through their participation, young people become motivated to undertake more challenging activities.

#### **Box 4.1: A definition of youth work relationships**

'A key aspect of Youth Work is 'to build relationships with young people which enable them to explore and make sense of their experiences, and plan and take action'. From the UK National Occupational Standards for youth work.' (PAULO, 2002: vii)

The approach and skills that youth workers use to build relationships with young people can be useful in a range of situations, including those

which do not correspond with the voluntary nature of youth work (see, for example, Box 4.2). When young people do not participate or are perceived as difficult by other professionals, a youth worker's skills in building relationships may be recognised and valued. Other services which require or coerce young people to participate may call upon youth workers for assistance. Clarity about differences between the voluntary relationships in youth work and other types of work with young people is essential. The distinction needs to be clarified with managers or colleagues from other perspectives or professions. In order to maintain their professional identity and approach, youth workers need to insist that some level of choice be provided for the young people. (See also Chapter 2 about work in different settings).

**Box 4.2: Practice example: Establishing a voluntary relationship in a prison**

*I work as a youth worker in a prison for young offenders. In the evenings when they have 'leisure time', we set up activities in the common room and they can come over and talk to us when they want. We don't invite the young people over. This is their 'free time.' When they do approach the table, I always make sure to acknowledge their approach with a nod or some facial expression. They know that I know they have joined the group, but it is never a big deal.*

*Lots of them don't ever come over. I've never even met some of them. Sometimes someone will join in a few games and not really say anything. Quite a few though have real issues that they need to discuss and the table with the activities provides an excuse for them to come and talk – as well as a distraction from the reality of what is going on around them.*

## Welcoming

When young people make contact with youth workers, a welcome that respects and accepts them as individuals is an important first step. Young people are welcomed to their first youth encounter with a youth worker and any subsequent meetings whether the visit is a regular occurrence, following an unexplained gap or after an enforced absence. The welcome communicates a belief that whatever has happened previously, there is an opportunity to move on from that position. A youth worker should not harbour, or at least, not communicate, ill feelings or negative attitudes towards a young person. If a young person was aggressive or disruptive in a prior meeting, that individual needs to be offered the opportunity for a fresh start in a new session. A youth worker would rarely demand explanations or apologies for prior experiences during a welcome as the new encounter needs to be able to start positively with reasonable expectations for success on both sides.

Welcoming is not always an action. Young people are often welcomed simply by being accepted rather than elaborate greetings or induction procedures. Recognising the barriers that can prevent young people from accessing activities, youth workers attempt to provide positive images and information from a wide range of perspectives to communicate that diverse young people participate, individuals from marginalised groups are welcome and a wide range of issues and questions can be discussed. Box 4.3 provides a practice example from a young person's perspective.

#### **Box 4.3: Practice example: A young person's first impression**

*When I first came to the youth group, I didn't know what to expect. At first I couldn't even see any adults. It looked like the whole place was just kids. At first it made me nervous. I kept looking around for somebody to tell me off, keep quiet or stop putting my feet on the furniture and I wasn't sure what would happen if some of the scarier-looking kids started giving me a hard time. After a while I noticed a couple of youth workers playing pool with some kids and another one was sitting with some others playing some kind of game with a board and cards. I felt better when I saw one of them break up an almost fight without any shouting or big deal. I also saw some interesting posters – particularly ones about different types of families – including ones with just grandparents and small children. And in the toilets there was a list of emergency phone numbers that included numbers to ring if you were worried about suicide, rape, pregnancy and all sorts. There was some great music going on and next door, kids were playing basketball. It was all very exciting.*

The level of warmth and method of communicating welcome will vary according to individual workers (see Box 4.4 for some examples of different styles of work). The gender, cultural background and individual style of a worker may well affect how they interact with young people. While one youth worker may view another as detached, aloof or aggressive with young people; others, including the young people, may recognise that worker even-handed, clear and genuine. Confidence and individual preferences will clearly influence the ways in which a youth worker builds relationships with young people.

#### **Box 4.4: Different styles of work**

Some youth workers and young people may:

- Find it easy to make themselves heard in a group while others prefer quiet chats in a corner.
- Share personal experiences and opinions while others find that talking about themselves gets in the way of finding out about others

**Box 4.4 - Cont'd**

Same youth workers and young people may: Smile, laugh, tell jokes and stories while others have a calm and receptive exterior

- Join in competitively with all of the activities while others stay in the background
- Get everyone's attention and rally them around to engage in an activity while others watch and observe what is going on.

Ideas about acceptable ways to interact with young people will vary greatly between individual workers and particular organisational cultures. Most youth workers use lighter comments with a sense of humour rather than lectures, thought-provoking questions rather than accusations, and honest expressions of opinion rather than directives. These youth workers would not feel the need to establish their views at the beginning of a relationship. Other youth workers have no difficulty in establishing rapport with young people despite expressing quite opposing views and engaging in robust arguments.

This range of styles can be accommodated because of the flexible nature of youth work. As relationships are voluntary rather than assigned, a young person can approach different youth workers – perhaps at different times – whose styles fit their specific circumstances or needs. Young people's choices can also be informed by the clear definitions of expectations from the organisation (see an example of welcoming in Box 4.5).

**Box 4.5: Practice example: 'Matching the mood'**

A young person had been attending a youth centre for some months without becoming involved in any of the activities. He tended to sit in a quiet corner rather than interact with others or use any of the games or equipment available. A youth worker made a point of welcoming him to the session and spending some time each evening sitting next to him. After a few attempts to make conversation, it seemed clear that the young person did not want to talk. This decision was recognised and the youth worker did not demand responses. However, the young person continued to attend the sessions and the youth worker continued to spend a part of the time in the young person's company. While the young person did not seem interested in conversing, he did not appear to object to sharing the sofa and seemed content to observe the youth worker's interactions with the others. Without pressuring the young person to talk or join in the activities, invitations were always extended to him and his decision not to participate was respected. One evening, the young person began to talk with the youth worker about some of the seriously unhappy feelings he was experiencing.

Following the young person's disclosures, the youth worker explored the approach that he had used with the young person with his supervisor. They agreed that the reason the young person was eventually able to talk with the youth worker was



because he had come to trust that the youth worker would not push him further than he wanted to go. The youth worker was not sure whether more direct questioning at an earlier stage would have enabled the young person to 'open up' more quickly. The process seemed to have taken rather a long time. Subsequent chats with the young person confirmed, however, that he would not have attended the sessions if he had been 'forced' or expected to talk and that he had been unable to discuss his feelings with anyone else up until that point.

## Responding to individuals

Youth workers see young people as individuals and try to avoid labelling, making judgements and identifying solutions to their problems (see, for example, Box 4.6). The role of a youth worker is to encourage a young person to take responsibility for their own actions, to identify their own options for change and development in relation to the choices they make in their lives. Youth work provides opportunities for young people to find their own ways forward. A 'deficit model' perceives young people as needy and often inferior receivers of services, which is not appropriate for youth work. Youth workers tend to have a more positive approach to individuals.

### **Box 4.6: Practice example: Responding to an individual**

A young mother of a young baby came into an Information and Advice service facilitated by youth workers. She said that was having difficulties finding enough money for baby clothes, nappies, a cot and a stroller. The youth worker suggested that he refer her to Social Services who might be able to help. The young woman strenuously rejected the idea saying that she they had been to her house before and that they weren't able to help. The youth worker gave her some leaflets about baby clinics in the area, referred her to a local church that he knew had recycled baby clothes and furniture, said that he would try and find out some more information and asked her to come back in a couple of days. He felt pretty good about what he had been able to do for her.

After the meeting, the youth worker asked a colleague from another agency who worked in the same building whether she knew anything about the young woman. The colleague said that she had heard a lot about the local Travellers community. There was massive overcrowding and unemployment, very low attendance rates in the school and educational attainment, continuous problems with the Police being called out to settle domestic abuse situations and high rates of crime and recidivism. She also stated that 'most of them are here illegally anyway and shouldn't be entitled to any state benefits.'

Following this conversation, the youth worker reflected on his first session with the young woman and worried that he had given her a leaflet that she may not be able to read, sent her to a church that she might not believe in and

**Box 4.6 - Cont'd**

she had more or less stated that social workers were involved with the family. What about the baby's safety, their housing and food?

His supervisor suggested that he find a way to build a relationship with the young woman that was based on what she asked for rather than labelling her with the prejudices that Travellers tend to encounter. The supervisor advised him to find out where some cheaper baby clothes were available as this was what the young women had requested. Some research about Travellers' communities was also recommended.

The next time the youth worker met with the young mother, he struggled to rid his mind of the picture of her circumstances painted by his colleague and welcomed her back. Although he had managed to learn a lot about Travellers that contradicted what his colleague had said, he still didn't know whether she was from that community. He asked her how she was doing and admired the baby. He waited to hear what she had to say rather than making enquiries about her circumstances.

Youth work practice is based on attempts to hear and understand what young people wish to communicate about their lives. This approach 'starts where the young person is at' and generally requires a great deal of flexibility. Youth workers listen to what young people are saying, discuss their ideas and work on issues related to their expressed needs and interests. (See Box 4.7 for a youth worker's explanation of the importance of listening.) Unlike some other professions, youth work is not governed by restrictive procedures or rules that are sometimes used to maintain authority or security.

Some agencies working with young people do have procedures for practice. Concerns about the safety of equipment, accidents on excursions and potential allegations of sexual or racial harassment can lead to the imposition of extensive rules and procedures. 'Clients' details are recorded. Interactions are monitored and recorded on a computer

**Box 4.7: Practice example: The importance of listening**

*I think that listening is definitely the most important thing that a youth worker can do. Listening and making sure that young people have a good time. Young people have so many things going on in their lives: adolescence and transitions to adult lives – emotional and hormonal swings and changes. They have to adjust to changes in family relationships, things going on in school and friends – all kinds of issues related to sexuality and health, including drugs, HIV/Aids, having babies. They think about leaving home, housing, employment, discrimination, inequality and exclusion. The thing about coming to the youth centre is that they can talk about these things and their views and ideas are taken seriously and sometimes even acted upon – but only when they want them to be.*

that compiles statistical data, which is then made available to a range of agencies. Young people are carefully instructed about regulations, rights and any constraints to confidentiality. Assurances are provided that any information disclosed will be treated in the same way as that of any other young person. Parental and care-provider permissions are sought with great frequency. Checklists ensure that policies cover every eventuality. Some organisations may believe that with these policies in place, young people will be protected from unequal treatment or gaps in information.

The effect of policies that are designed to protect the organisation against litigation and disciplinary action can be detrimental to the aims of youth work. Key aspects of youth work, such as flexibility, spontaneity or informality can be undermined by organisational anxiety. The emphasis on procedures, professional language and competence can also work to devalue the contribution of professional decisions or input from untrained volunteers alike. Dictating too many procedures and an overcautious approach could create barriers to exchanges of views and ideas on a level of equality on the wide range of topics that may concern young people (see Box 4.8 for an example of a youth group with no rules).

#### **Box 4.8: Practice example: Working without rules**

*I started a football session with a mate of mine on Tuesday nights because we liked football and we knew that the kids around here had nothing to do except get into trouble. I managed to get permission to use some grounds attached to a religious centre nearby. We can't use their toilets and we don't have anywhere to get changed or shower, but they said that we can use their field. So anyway, about a dozen kids show up – not always the same ones, but pretty much. They just found out by word of mouth. Everybody around here knows us anyway. We don't have any club rules; we just have football regulations. Except we don't have teams – they change every week. And we usually don't bother keeping score. Actually, that's not true. We did have one rule. No hitting – or else you can't come back the following week. Then one week one kid hit another kid. We all stood around in the rain shouting about it. Then everyone said, 'See you next week.' So we got rid of that rule.*

In some contexts or situations, a welcome may be quite short-lived. Once a young person's arrival is acknowledged, some organisations or youth workers have certain expectations about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and attitudes, particularly when a youth work activity takes place inside or whilst on a supervised excursion. Rules should, whenever possible, relate to attempts to ensure young people's safety rather than simply to control or for no genuine purpose. Some facilities or organisations ban or eject young people who are clearly

under the influence of mind-altering substances, attempt to bring such substances into premises where youth work is taking place, are physically violent or verbally abusive towards others, engage in risky behaviour or behave in ways that are unsafe or are dangerous to others or bully or intimidate others. Other organisations have very few rules, but manage to convey their expectations of considerate behaviour through example and discussion (see also Chapter 8, which discusses ways to make group agreements).

## Maintaining dialogue

Youth workers engage in dialogue by listening and learning in order to hear what the young person is saying before responding. A dialogue can be initiated by either party; youth workers are responsible for ensuring that the lines of communication are open and conversation is welcomed. Maintaining a dialogue where power rests with the young person means that the youth worker minimises the focus on self. Checking understanding could help dialogue to become more equal and should encourage a full exploration of issues so that each party comes to recognise more about the other's perspective. Youth workers use what is sometimes called 'democratic dialogue' in the fields of community development or conflict resolution (e.g. Pruitt & Thomas, 2007). (See Box 4.9.)

### Box 4.9: Why democratic dialogue?

'The more conceptual frameworks differ, the more the interpretations are likely to be at odds and the greater the challenge of achieving understanding. What is needed in these situations is not necessarily more communication but more understanding.' (Pruitt and Thomas, 2007:16)

While the starting focus of a conversation is on the young person's understanding rather than an analysis from the youth worker's perspective, judging when to interject and help to steer a discussion or offer an opinion is critical to youth work. In certain circumstances, a youth worker can provide an alternative perspective or analysis of a situation, which can be enlightening or useful for the young person. Box 4.10 provides some suggestions for ways to maintain democratic dialogue.

A young person should have the choice whether to ignore, challenge, avoid or circumvent not only what is happening to them outside, but also within the youth work setting. Youth workers provide support for individuals facing unjust treatment in many different ways according to the situation and the youth workers' own experiences, which will inevitably affect their perspectives, analysis of what is going on and ways to handle situations. Youth workers with a range of responses can



#### **Box 4.10: Practice example: Suggestions for maintaining dialogue**

- Focus on the young person
- Provide opportunities to ask questions or find out information rather than always providing the answer
- Approach young people positively rather than prejudging or labelling
- Take time to listen rather than worrying about your own situation, work and schedule
- Attempt to understand the meaning of what someone is saying rather than listening without hearing
- Allow young people to find their own examples and demonstrate their knowledge rather than showing off and scoring points
- Expect to learn from the young people rather than telling them 'like it is'...
- Check understanding of the situation rather than interpret possible meanings
- Acknowledge what the young person says rather than disagree
- Ask about opinions rather than providing them; ask for suggestions rather than giving them
- Check young people's own feelings or responses rather than demonstrating your own
- Allow young people to think 'out of the box'; don't resist new ideas or perspectives
- Design activities with high levels of participation and creativity; don't just control or divert attention and energy
- Invite feedback; don't resist criticism
- Encourage young people to express themselves; don't talk too much
- Allow young people time to explore their ideas; don't move into decisions or actions too soon
- Encourage young people to share their experiences and feelings; don't problem solve.

provide that choice for young people, who will drift towards a youth worker and young people's organisation that suits their needs.

Most youth workers listen to young people's experiences of injustice so that the young person can find ways to deal or cope with what happens. Some however, place more emphasis on the positive effects of pursuing diversionary interests and not dwelling on life's inequities. A youth worker may demonstrate an understanding of the context in order to assist a young person to outline the options. Another youth worker may not react. Not only because situations are familiar and therefore un-shocking, but because this youth worker feels that the focus should be on young people's experience of the issues. One youth worker may have a more emotional response, showing warmth and compassion. Whilst another will be more intellectual – encouraging the young person to consider options and consequences. Finding the appropriate level of support will enable a young person to identify what

is going on in a situation and make choices in relation to any action, reaction or coping mechanism (see Box 4.11 for an example).

A youth worker's relationship with young people is not simply responsive. Youth work has a positive and proactive role in promoting social justice, recognising discrimination and addressing barriers to equality of opportunity. A youth worker raises and discusses issues such as racism, sexism, disabilism, heterosexism, class oppression, ageism and unfair treatment of individuals. The attitudes and practices of young people, colleagues and other agencies working with young people may provide barriers to participation that need to be addressed. Through positive images, supporting individuals experiencing discrimination and challenging oppressive attitudes and practices, a youth worker encourages young people and colleagues to have an active approach to addressing inequality (see also Chapter 7 on Anti-oppressive Practice).

#### **Box 4.11: Practice example: Providing appropriate support**

A young man told a youth worker about the 'bullying' he received from a teacher at school. The young person said that no matter how hard he tried, he could not understand the course work. He was constantly in trouble for not completing his assignments and the teacher was always 'going on' at him. The youth worker, who was experienced in working with excluded young people, wondered whether the young man had undiagnosed learning difficulties. Although the youth worker thought that the young man might well have been unfairly treated, he did not reveal any anger about the situation. He provided the young man with the opportunity to express his feelings, describe his learning experiences and explore his options. The focus of the discussion was on what the young man could do to change the situation that he was in and what the consequences of different choices might be. Possible options included making a complaint, asking for help or ignoring his teacher. During this discussion, the teacher's apparent unfair treatment became less of a concern than the possibility of being able to find a way to complete his school work. The youth worker provided the young man with information about dyslexia. They talked about the possibility of being screened and discussed his feelings about this – as well as the advantages and disadvantages of this process. Decisions about his first steps, such as talking with his parents, asking the Head of Year for an appointment and talking with his teacher, were also discussed. Through this process, the youth worker provided support for the young person to make his own decisions so that he could take more control of his situation.

## **Respecting young people**

Respect plays an important role in youth work and relates to the young people, the youth worker and their relationships. The process of building

a relationship based on respect starts with 'respect for the person' rather than the person's status, beliefs, opinions or history. To do this, youth workers separate the young people from their reputation and previous actions to provide them with opportunities to express themselves. In general, youth workers do not expect instant respect from young people as this respect may need to be earned. Most youth workers recognise the value of having respect for themselves, their professional value base and boundaries rather than demanding this from others.

Youth work respects others' potential for change and development and recognises their achievements. Demonstrating a respect for others' basic human rights to dignity, privacy and equality of opportunity is the first step. Youth workers are often involved in encouraging young people to recognise the rights of individuals to free speech and assisting them to see a distinction between respect for the person and respect for what they have to say. A youth worker does this by supporting young people's rights to say something even when others strongly disagree. Through a range of responses and activities, youth workers foster young people's abilities to respect themselves, each other and other people in their lives, including the youth workers.

The level and degree of respect demonstrated and demanded between a youth worker and young people should be mutual and even-handed. Most youth workers do not expect or demand respect for their own achievements, knowledge or strengths; the emphasis is to pass these on to young people if they are interested or want them. Attempts to provide a positive role model, for example, can be based on a perception of a young person's current role models as immoral or operating on an inferior value-base, which is not a respectful approach. Demanding respect from young people as an older, wiser, more mature or successful individual can be counter-productive to establishing a youth work relationship, which is generally on a more equal level (see Box 4.12 for some examples of these varied approaches to practice).

#### **Box 4.12: Practice examples: Different styles of work on respect issues**

**Challenging disrespect:** *If I overhear a young person disrespecting another or if someone disrespects me, I point this out. I might ask them how they would feel if someone treated them like that or tell them that the particular behaviour is offensive or explain how it makes someone feel. I don't think you can ignore it when someone is rude or uses offensive language or puts someone else down. We have to pass on an understanding of basic human rights and the need to treat others' fairly and humanely. I show respect to them so they show respect to me.*

**Box 4.12 - Cont'd**

**Showing respect:** *I know that many of the young people's experiences are about not being respected – so I don't expect them to show me respect. I try to demonstrate respect to them. I hope that over time this will 'rub off.' I think that young people have so many authority figures telling them how to behave all the time and I'd rather try something different. It may take time, but I respect where they are coming from and take it from there. Eventually they respect themselves. Eventually, they come to respect me.*

**Analysing respect:** *Sometimes young people don't realise how their own behaviour contributes to the situations. So we talk about rights and responsibilities – choices and consequences – and try to link these themes into how respect can be earned. We talk about what goes on in their interactions with teachers, parents and the police and talk about their reactions, unfair treatment and being ignored and how they can handle it.*

Respect for young people as individuals is generally linked to an understanding that young people are capable of making choices and taking some control over the decisions that they make. Some interventions or interactions may be more useful with specific groups or situations – and most youth workers will use a variety of 'standing by' approaches as well as 'getting involved'. Young people often ignore frequent challenges, which can communicate a negative stance. Appropriate encouragement and praise can help to counterbalance interventions that point out mistakes. Deciding when, how, why and where to intervene may require a number of factors to be analysed. An individual's confidence and responsiveness, the potential effect on the individual and others, and whether alternative actions may prove more effective, may all determine what might be said or whether to say anything at all.

Youth work practice is contextual, based on the realities of the particular young people with whom the youth worker comes in contact. While different youth workers may use their own individual strengths in quite varying ways to engage with young people, build credibility and/or provide alternative perspectives, the relationships start with the specific young people and their experience, preferences and realities.

### Use of self

Youth workers tend to be cautious when utilising their own experience, opinions and personalities in their interactions with young people. Being honest and open with the young people with whom they work does not mean telling the young people everything about themselves. Clearly not everyone thinks in identical ways, has the same experiences, learns through similar methods, has comparable interests or shares perspectives.





experience of privilege or oppression can help youth workers to recognise how they are perceived by others. Individual personal histories can provide experiences that may be significant. Relevant experiences could range from a secure or a chaotic upbringing, religious and political ideologies or unstructured hedonism, the safety of a family or domestic violence, serial or long-term relationships or poverty, war, gangs and riots. Identifying a personal standpoint in relation to such social constructs as class and 'race' or prejudices, such as sexism, disabilism and heterosexism, can enhance a youth worker's understanding of similarity or difference with the young people who join in the youth work activities. Supervisors, colleagues, family members, reading and reflection can be used to 'locate self'. Considering identity, strengths and weaknesses and developing self-knowledge is a part of professional development. Taking time to reflect on identity and practice can help youth workers to analyse their assumptions and the context of their beliefs (see Box 4.14 for some examples of ways to 'locate self').

#### **Box 4.14: Some suggestions for 'locating self'**

Youth workers can 'locate self' by identifying and evaluating:

- Their experiences, identities, abilities, skills knowledge and values and how this shapes or affects their perspective and reactions to young people, issues and colleagues
- Their strengths
- Their weaknesses or gaps
- Their identity in relation to age, gender, race, class, ability, religion, politics
- How they might be perceived by others
- The differences between their own experiences and perceptions and those of the young people
- Their role as a youth worker
- How their role relates to the young people, the organisation, the community, the society
- Self-disclosure and how much information about themselves is necessary to pass on or reveal
- The core values of youth work and their anti-oppressive perspectives, including feminism, a black perspective, a social model of disability
- How the core values of youth work and own personal values or perspectives relate to each other
- How they would define appropriate relationships with individuals and groups of young people

**Box 4.14 - Cont'd**

- How they perceive professional behaviour with other workers
- Their own power – whether personal (due to their experience), locational (due to their identity) or positional (due to their job status)
- How they can be clear about the above without remaining stagnant.

A youth worker's previous experiences can affect reactions to situations, understanding of issues and relationships so that location of self in relation to experience can be useful for professional development. Self knowledge and clarity about any similarities or differences between their own and others' identities can assist a youth worker to understand how this can affect relationships. This self-knowledge comes about through considering one's own identity and how this relates to others.

### Maintaining professional boundaries

Professional boundaries in youth work relationship include concerns about power and autonomy. Youth workers must maintain a strict boundary between actions taken in youth work practice and any actions intended to gratify their own sexual desires. A sexual relationship, even if the young person becomes the age of a consenting adult, will interfere with the youth worker's relationship not only with the individual, but other members of the group. Developing a close relationship with a former member of a youth group or a close relative of a current or former member is also ill advised. Youth workers can be friendly and listen; in some instances they may be supportive or caring, but the relationship should not overstep into a friendship. Young people should be allowed to make their own mistakes and to take control of their lives. A worker provides guidance and 'detached' support rather than becoming embroiled in a situation as another 'player'. In order to maintain these boundaries, youth workers need to reflect on their practice in the light of youth work principles and make use of supervision to discuss any situations where dependency, sexual desires, or friendship are impacting on the youth work relationships.

The boundaries for appropriate youth work practice are established by youth work principles and defined by youth workers through reflection on practice with experienced supervisors. Inappropriate relationships with young people abuse the trust that they, other youth workers and society as a whole should be able to expect. If a young person seeks an inappropriate relationship with a youth worker, the youth worker must tell the young person that such a relationship is not

possible. In addition, the youth worker will need to consider ways to distance themselves from the situation without making the young person feel rejected or worse about themselves. In these situations clarity of role as a youth worker is important to explain why it would be unethical to continue such an association. (See Box 4.15 for some suggestions about professional boundaries.)

#### **Box 4.15: Some ways to define professional boundaries**

The boundaries of youth work practice require a youth worker to:

- Be aware of the position of power and responsibility that they have in young people's lives and not abuse this
- Steer clear of exploitative or preferential treatment for individual young people
- Avoid close, dependent or emotional relationships with young people
- Not engage in work-related activities for personal gain
- Understand the difference between an inappropriate gift and a token acknowledgement
- Not accept gifts that would lead to preferential treatment or compromise integrity
- Take care that behaviour (inside and outside of work) does not undermine the confidence of the young people in the profession
- Be aware that individuals may wish to discuss personal and private matters that they are unable to discuss with others
- Recognise the difference between a professional approach that is based on developing a positive independent relationship and emotional involvement
- Take care not to develop close personal, particularly sexual, relationships with the young people they are working with
- Alert a supervisor about any concerns over relationships which may breach professional boundaries.

### **Letting go**

Enabling a young person to move on from youth work into other arenas is an essential skill and helps to define an appropriate youth work relationship. If a relationship has not been co-dependent or overly emotional, letting go will usually be a natural and easy progression. Some youth work organisations have more formal leaving strategies, such as identifying skills for the next stage via exit interviews. The process of disengaging with young people could also include an exit strategy. Some youth workers find Tuckman's (1965) definition of stages of groups a useful tool for recognising the need to celebrate or mourn at the end of a relationship to enhance the ability of the individuals to move on. (See also Chapter 5: Bringing young people together.)

A youth worker respects and promotes the right of an individual and group to make decisions and choices about their lives based on their



own understanding of their own needs. This does not mean that youth workers have a passive role or that they watch others endanger others or themselves without comment or intervention. Youth workers are involved in raising young people's awareness of the range of decisions and choices open to them and offering opportunities for discussion and debate on the implications of particular choices.

### Essential skills for developing appropriate relationships with young people

- Establishing the voluntary nature of the relationship
- Responding to individuals
- Respecting young people
- Use of self
- Locating self
- Maintaining professional boundaries
- Welcoming
- Maintaining dialogue
- Letting go

### Further reading about youth work relationships

Banks (2006); NCVYS (2007); Rogers and Farson (1988); Smith (1994); Thompson (2006).

## PART B Working Together

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*Working Together* has four chapters examining group work practice with young people. Chapter 5, *Bringing Young People Together*, looks at forming groups that address basic needs and stated interests and enable young people to learn from each other. Chapter 6, *Having Fun*, examines examples of enjoyable group activities and the importance of developing positive experiences in young people's lives. Chapter 7, *Issue-based Practice*, focuses on a planned approach to working with young people in addressing some of the issues that they face through individual circumstances, their development needs and societal discrimination. Chapter 8, *Working it Out*, explores working with groups to address any differences and relationships within those groups.