

youth inclusion

A practical guide for
accessible youth work



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SALVA VITA

IMPRESSUM / CREDITS

Title of the publication: **Youth Inclusion – A Practical Guide for Accessible Youth Work**

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Publisher

Salva Vita Foundation

1116 Budapest, Albertfalva utca 3/A

Hungary

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Publication details

Place of publication: Budapest, Hungary
Planned publication date: 31 August 2026
Format: digital publication, PDF e-book

ISBN – Hungarian-language PDF edition: ISBN 978-963-87614-7-7

Other language editions

English-language edition

Youth Inclusion – A Practical Guide for Accessible Youth Work

ISBN – English-language PDF edition: ISBN 978-963-87614-8-4

Croatian-language edition

Inkluzija mladih – praktični vodič za pristupačan rad s mladima

ISBN – Croatian-language PDF edition: ISBN 978-963-87614-9-1

Slovenian-language edition

Vključevanje mladih – Praktični priročnik za dostopno delo z mladimi

ISBN – Slovenian-language PDF edition: ISBN 978-615-83149-0-9

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Author: **Krisztina Zsiday-Galgóczy**

Publisher: **Salva Vita Foundation**

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Editorial note

This publication was developed through a collaborative Erasmus+ partnership process.

European Union funding

Funded by the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and contributors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Project number: **2023-1-HU01-KA220-YOU-000161744**

Methodology for working with young people with additional support needs

Table of content

Foreword and welcome	3
1. INTRODUCTION	4
About the partners	5
2. TARGET GROUP	6
2.1. Definition of "young people with additional support needs"	6
2.2. Main areas of additional support needs	7
2.3. Why are they the focus?	9
2.4 Young adults (18–30) and transition challenges	9
2.5. Invisible subgroups	10
3. BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT	12
3.1. Inclusion gaps and fragmented support systems	12
3.2. Overlapping needs and growing complexity in youth work	14
3.3. Mental health, disability inclusion, and participation	14
3.4. Competences and limitations of youth workers	15
4. THEORETICAL AND LEGAL BACKGROUND	15
4.1 Social and human rights models of disability	15
4.2. Implications for youth work practice	16
4.3. Legal and policy frameworks	17
4.4. The aim of our youth methodology	20
5. PRINCIPLES, ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING	21
5.1 Principles of inclusive youth work	21
5.2. Ethics in practice	28
5.3. Professional boundaries, confidentiality, and accountability	30
5.4. Collaboration and interdisciplinary support	36
5.5. Safeguarding and crisis response	39
5.6. Organisational readiness and accessibility	62
6. BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE YOUTH WORK	63
6.1 Understanding participants and their support needs	63

6.2. Common hidden and less visible conditions	72
6.3. Objectives and guidelines for working with young people with additional support needs	88
6.4 Professionals and skills	93
6.5. Physical and technical conditions	110
6.6 Methodology and programme structure	114
6.7. Recruitment and involvement	124
6.8. Creating and maintaining a welcoming and safe environment	132
7. PROGRAMME PLANNING AND OPERATION	143
7.1. Two main areas of development: Social and emotional development	147
7.2 Typical situations and challenges	151
7.3. Youth participation and empowerment	173
8. EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK	180
9. NETWORKING AND SUSTAINABILITY	196
9.1 Referral systems for unmet needs	191
9.2 Building cross-sector relationships	192
9.3 Knowledge sharing and professional development	192
9.4 Long-term strategy and continuous development	193
10. RESOURCES, EVALUATION AND SUSTAINABILITY	200
11. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE	212
11.1. Recommendations for decision-makers on inclusive youth work	212
11.2. Recommendations for youth workers and professionals	218
ANNEXES AND SUPPORTING RESOURCES	224
Practical examples of professional boundaries in youth work	225
Suicide risk: practical guidance and response	231
Safeguarding & Protection Protocol	233
Organisational self-assessment tool	238
Self-assessment questionnaire for youth workers	249
Practical quick guide for youth workers and mentors	257
Practical feedback tools and adaptation examples	260
Practical measurement and monitoring tools	262
Ethical guidelines and reflective tools for inclusive youth work	265
Positioning of the adapted ETS competence framework	270
GLOSSARY	272
REFERENCES	296

Foreword and welcome

You may remember a child from your early school years who was often left alone in the classroom. Perhaps someone who seemed out of step in social situations—missing jokes, speaking too loudly, or behaving in ways others found unusual. Later in life, it might have been a colleague whose emotions sometimes overwhelmed them, or a young person whose reactions felt unpredictable or difficult to understand.

As youth workers, we meet many young people, each carrying their own personality, style, and story. At times, some may seem difficult to understand or reach. Yet very often, these are the young people who live with accessibility needs—visible or hidden—whose ways of experiencing the world simply do not align with expectations built for the majority.

Without knowledge and practical experience, even the best intentions can falter. Uncertainty may lead to distance, missed opportunities, or quiet exclusion. As professionals, we can prepare ourselves: to understand, to adapt, and to create spaces where every young person can belong. With awareness, reflection, and preparation, we can widen our practice so that every young person has a place—one where they are not merely present, but able to participate, contribute, and grow.

When this understanding begins to take shape, something shifts. The young people who once seemed the most difficult to reach can become those who leave the deepest impression. Their trust, once earned, is wholehearted. Their commitment is sincere. Their perspectives bring new colour and meaning to group life. They may challenge us, stretch us, and occasionally exhaust us—but they also remind us why inclusion is not an obligation, but a gift.

And when that connection happens, it can be profoundly rewarding. Youth work has rarely been a profession chosen for material gain; it is sustained by commitment, relationships, and a sense of purpose. Young people with accessibility needs, in all their diversity, can deepen that purpose. They remind us why inclusion matters—not as an abstract principle, but as a lived practice that enriches both those we support and those who support them.

Many youth workers carry their own differences, sensitivities, or challenges. Without reflection, they can unintentionally shape how we respond to young people; with reflection, they can become a source of empathy, patience, and authentic understanding. When we learn not to project our own struggles onto those we support, our experiences can begin to work as a resource rather than a burden. This shared humanity is not a limitation—it is a bridge.

Yet such a bridge does not build itself. It asks for self-awareness, honesty, and the willingness to engage with one's own vulnerabilities. Youth work often invites us to accompany others through uncertainty, exclusion, or pain; to do so with integrity, we

must also be prepared to recognize and work with our own. From that place, what once felt like a wound can become a source of insight, care, and strength in our practice.

This booklet is an invitation into that work. It offers perspectives, tools, and reflections to help you recognize diverse needs that may otherwise remain unseen, and to respond with confidence, creativity, and care. We invite you to read it with openness—to your practice, to the young people you meet, and to the parts of yourself that make connection possible.

Welcome to this shared journey toward youth work that is more inclusive, more conscious, and more deeply human.

Kriszta Zsiday

Youth worker with relevant lived experience, Salva Vita Foundation

1. INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been created for youth workers and professionals who run youth centres or provide services for young people and who wish to open their work more confidently to those who have additional support needs including young people with disabilities, neurodivergent young people, and those experiencing mental health difficulties. Many practitioners are motivated to create more inclusive environments but lack practical guidance or tools.

The publication offers a practical, accessible, and encouraging resource to help professionals design and deliver inclusive youth programmes. It accompanies readers as they explore new approaches, challenge routines, and broaden their understanding of inclusion, while honestly acknowledging the complexities, uncertainties, and systemic barriers that often arise. Rather than universal solutions, it provides adaptable principles, methods, tools, and real-life case examples grounded in practice.

Readers may use either this booklet or the complementary online platform. The booklet offers a familiar linear format, while the online version provides modular content, multimedia materials, and additional accessibility features. Both formats guide professionals from understanding the needs and realities of young people with additional support needs through planning activities, handling sensitive situations, collaborating with families and partners, and building sustainable inclusive services.

The need for such guidance is increasing across Europe, as a growing number of young people are experiencing mental health issues, are neurodivergent, face disabilities, while support systems remain uneven. Youth workers, educators, family support staff, and community organisations are often the first point of contact yet rarely receive specialised methodological support. This handbook responds with grounded, experience-based guidance suitable for diverse professional contexts. It is intended for

youth workers, community and family service providers, educators, social and special-education professionals, psychologists, and youth-policy decision-makers who believe that inclusive youth work strengthens both programmes and communities.

The methodology was developed by three partner organisations within a three-year Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships project in the youth field (2023–2026). During the project, partners jointly operated an inclusive youth centre for 32 months, engaging young people with additional support needs, including many young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), and tailoring activities to their life situations and development. This sustained pilot practice formed the core of the approach presented here.

Although the formal partnership lasted three years, the knowledge and practices in this booklet draw on longer-term professional experience across multiple countries, cultures, and youth-work settings. The methods have been tested and refined in real-life scenarios with diverse groups of young people and contexts. In short, what you read here has been tried in practice—not only within the project period but beyond it.

We are grateful to the young people and professionals whose trust and contributions shaped this methodology. We hope this guide strengthens confidence and supports the creation of youth spaces where every young person can feel safe, welcome, and valued.

About the partners

Each partner brought extensive and complementary experience in supporting young people, including those living with disabilities, mental health difficulties, neurodivergence, or facing social disadvantages.

Salva Vita Foundation (based in Hungary, Budapest), the project coordinator, has been working for more than 30 years to promote the social inclusion and independent living of people with disabilities. The organisation provides complex, person-centred services to people with disabilities or neurodivergent people, supporting them in developing life skills, preparing for employment, and accessing the labour market. Their work is grounded in values of diversity, equal opportunities, personal autonomy and full accessibility. They also support employers through accessibility audits, disability equality training, specialised recruitment and HR consulting, and they have strong experience in international cooperation through numerous Erasmus+ and other European projects. Salva Vita's professional base includes a diverse team of staff, including job coaches, social workers, youth workers, disability experts, psychologists, and mental health professionals. Their work is often supplemented by external experts and therapists.

Sirius – Centre for Psychological Counselling, Education and Research (based in Croatia, Zagreb) contributes deep expertise in psychosocial support, mental health,

counselling, and education. Since its foundation in 2006, Sirius has focused on improving the well-being and social inclusion of individuals and families by providing psychological counselling, prevention programmes, skill-development trainings, research, and community-based activities. Their interdisciplinary team—psychologists, a social worker, an economist, and over 25 external experts—has extensive experience working with youth at risk, including those with mental health challenges, behavioural difficulties, economic disadvantages, or disabilities. Through a wide range of national and EU-funded projects, Sirius has developed strong competencies in prevention, youth empowerment, employability support and parental education, making their contribution particularly valuable in addressing mental health and complex youth needs.

Andragoški zavod Maribor – Ljudska univerza (AZM) (based in Slovenia, Maribor) is a public adult education centre with a century-long tradition of providing formal and non-formal learning opportunities for adults and young people. As the regional provider of the *Project Learning for Young Adults (PUM-O)* programme, AZM has substantial experience in supporting young people in a NEET situation aged 15–26 through holistic, project-based learning that develops life skills, employability, social-emotional competencies, and motivation. AZM employs around 20 staff members and collaborates with more than 100 external educators. Their services include literacy programmes, guidance centres, language exams, ICT courses, and numerous community learning initiatives. As an experienced partner in European projects and a member of networks promoting inclusion, AZM brings a strong perspective on mentoring, motivation, and community-based youth support.

Although the partners operate in different national contexts, they share a common vision: strengthening inclusion, improving youth work practices, and enabling young people who needs more support to participate fully in community life, education, employment, and European opportunities. Their combined expertise ensures that this methodology is both grounded in real practice and adaptable across diverse youth work settings.

2. TARGET GROUP

2.1. Definition of "young people with additional support needs"

Young people with additional support needs may face long-term physical, intellectual, mental, sensory, or other challenges which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society. According to the human right-based approach informed by the social model of disability, disability is not located solely within the individual, but results from the interaction between the person and social, environmental and attitudinal barriers.

2.2. Main areas of additional support needs

The target group includes a broad and highly diverse range of young people. For the practical purposes of this handbook, the following grouping focuses primarily on the areas in which young people may require additional support in youth work settings. The categories describe possible areas of support rather than clearly separated groups of people.

The framework is informed by the broader obstacle-based approach used in European inclusion practice, but it has been further adapted and divided according to the practical support needs that youth workers may encounter.

This is not a diagnostic classification. The categories are not fixed or mutually exclusive, and one young person may require support in several areas at the same time. A diagnosis or condition does not automatically determine the support needed. Support needs and their intensity may also vary significantly within each area, and young people with the same diagnosis, disability, condition, or life experience may require very different forms and levels of support. Support should therefore always be based on the young person's individual strengths, preferences, experiences, environment, and current situation.

- **Physical access and mobility support needs:** These may include mobility impairments, the use of a wheelchair or other mobility aids, reduced physical stamina, or difficulties with movement, balance, and coordination. Support may involve step-free access, accessible toilets and transport, appropriate seating and space, adapted physical activities, and additional time for movement or transitions.
- **Sensory access and communication support needs:** These may include blindness, low vision, deafness, hearing loss, sensory processing differences, or difficulties accessing spoken, written, or visual information. Support may involve sign language interpretation, captions, transcripts, audio description, tactile or visual information, reduced background noise, accessible materials, assistive technologies, or augmentative and alternative communication.
- **Learning, intellectual, and information-processing support needs:** These may include intellectual disabilities or difficulties with understanding, memory, attention, sequencing, abstract thinking, applying information, or expressing understanding. Some neurodivergent young people may also require support in this area. Support may involve plain language, easy-to-read information, short and concrete instructions, visual prompts, repetition, additional processing time, step-by-step activities, practical demonstrations, and alternative ways to communicate or show understanding.

- **Neurodivergence-related support needs:** Neurodivergence is a broad term that may include autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, developmental coordination differences, Tourette syndrome, and other neurological or neurodevelopmental differences. These differences may affect and overlap across learning, attention, communication, sensory processing, organisation, emotional regulation, movement, and social participation. Support may involve predictable structure, clear expectations, accessible learning methods, sensory adjustments, visual schedules, preparation for changes, movement breaks, flexible communication, support during transitions.
- **Mental health and emotional support needs:** These may include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harming behaviour, emotional distress, and other mental health conditions. Some difficulties may remain unrecognised or unsupported because of stigma, fear of judgement, or barriers to accessing appropriate services. Support may involve psychologically safer environments, predictable and respectful communication, trusted contact persons, flexible participation, opportunities to take breaks, clear professional boundaries, crisis procedures, and referral to appropriate professionals where necessary.
- **Trauma-related safety and relational support needs:** These may be connected to experiences such as abuse, neglect, violence, war, displacement, accidents, natural disasters, adverse childhood experiences, or chronic stress. Trauma may affect trust, relationships, emotional regulation, concentration, communication, and participation. Support may involve trauma-sensitive communication, predictable relationships, opportunities for choice and control, gradual trust-building, avoidance of unnecessary pressure, and clear safeguarding procedures.
- **Chronic health and energy-management support needs:** These may include epilepsy, chronic asthma, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, chronic pain, fatigue-related conditions, severe allergies, and other long-term or fluctuating health conditions. Support may involve flexible scheduling and attendance, rest periods, reduced physical demands, access to food, water, medication, or quiet spaces, emergency planning, and awareness that the young person's capacity may change from day to day.
- **Social and environmental support needs:** These may arise from poverty, unstable housing, foster or residential care, rural isolation, inaccessible transport, limited family or peer support, migration or refugee experiences, discrimination, or exclusion connected to ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other personal and social characteristics. Support may involve transport or financial assistance, accessible outreach, flexible participation conditions, advocacy, help navigating services, building social connections, and cooperation with families, social services, and community organisations.

These areas provide a practical orientation for youth workers, but they should never replace an individual understanding of the young person. The central question is not only what diagnosis, disability, condition, or life experience a young person has, but what barriers they encounter and what support or adjustments would enable their safe and meaningful participation.

2.3. Why are they the focus?

These groups are the focus because they face systemic and social barriers that can limit their participation and make access to appropriate support more difficult. Many have limited support networks, whether due to family circumstances, social stigma, or the nature of their challenges, which may increase their vulnerability. Exclusion, low self-esteem, and negative attitudes from professionals or peers are common experiences.

“Hidden” disabilities, such as mental health conditions or certain sensory impairments, are particularly at risk because their challenges are not immediately apparent, so their needs may go unnoticed or unaddressed. Without intentional effort, they are more likely to be overlooked in programmes, services, or educational settings.

However, with proper planning and awareness, barriers can be reduced. Providing accessible environments, tailored support, and inclusive activities allows these young people to participate fully and benefit from programmes. Their inclusion is not only possible but can be highly successful when youth workers and organisers intentionally recognise and accommodate their specific needs.

2.4 Young adults (18–30) and transition challenges

Policies often overlook young people transitioning from education to the labour market. This age group is particularly at risk; as this is when they may lose the support network and services they previously had. Many policies and programmes are designed primarily for children or adults, meaning that once a young person leaves school or paediatric services, support can sharply decline.

Young people with additional support needs face a range of difficulties and limitations that distinguish their experiences from peers without such needs. Typical adolescents navigate experimentation, independence, and social learning with some safety nets, youth with additional support needs often experience heightened restrictions, overprotection, and systemic barriers, which can limit personal growth, self-confidence, and social integration.

Adolescents with intellectual disability or specific learning difficulties may need tailored educational support. Without it, they may struggle with literacy, numeracy, or organizational skills, which can affect confidence and future career opportunities. Gaps in support can also make school-related mistakes more consequential.

Young people with additional support needs may have limited access to extracurricular activities, sports, camps, or youth programmes that are readily accessible to peers without disabilities. This reduces opportunities for participation, self-expression, and recognition of strengths. Many of those with disabilities have fewer opportunities to interact with peers in unstructured social settings, such as parties, sports, or community groups. These limited opportunities may reduce their chances to develop friendships, practise social skills and build peer relationships.

Youth with additional support needs may rely more heavily on parents, caregivers, or structured programmes, which may limit their opportunities to make independent choices. Everyday experiences that other young people take for granted—managing money, travelling, or navigating public spaces—may require adult supervision, support or accommodations, which can slow the development of life skills.

Many of them may be at increased risk of depression, anxiety, or social isolation. Experiences such as bullying, discrimination, or being underestimated by adults can further affect self-esteem and motivation.

Supporting them requires intentional planning, accessible programmes, and guidance that balances safety with opportunities for independence and learning from mistakes. For young people with additional support needs, mistakes that are part of typical adolescent development—like minor social missteps, experimenting with independence, or managing failure—can have more severe or long-lasting consequences due to physical, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities. Thus their parents or caretakers might become overprotective. Reduced exposure to everyday risk may also limit opportunities to develop independence and learn from experience.

2.5. Invisible subgroups

Some groups of young people remain invisible because their needs are masked by policy categories, while others are hidden by stigma, cultural factors, or personal circumstances. These groups require targeted exploration and outreach to be effectively reached and supported.

2.5.1. Policy invisibility

Many young people with accessibility needs remain invisible within broader youth support systems. Their difficulties are often not recognized because they are seen only as social or economic problems, instead of being understood as disability-related barriers. As a result, support measures may miss the underlying causes of exclusion.

Across these broad groups, a common issue is that individual support needs are masked by broader categories of marginalisation and exclusion. When policies target only employment status, geography, or schooling background, they risk overlooking disability-related barriers that require adapted approaches. Effective inclusion therefore depends on recognising that many young people described as “hard-to-reach” or “inactive” youth are not disengaged by choice but face barriers and unmet

support needs. Recognising these needs allows programmes to move from generic activation towards accessible services, individualized pathways, and sustained transition support.

A possible example is young people classified as NEET. While policy narratives sometimes attribute NEET status to lack of motivation, a significant proportion of these youth face cognitive, psychological, sensory, or physical barriers that make participation difficult without appropriate support. Their disengagement is therefore often structural rather than voluntary. For example, young people leaving special or remedial education often face abrupt transitions into adult systems. They may lack continued job coaching, workplace accommodations, or life-skills training necessary for independent living. Policies may consider them “qualified,” yet employers and services may not provide the structured support they still require.

A similar invisibility affects young people in rural areas. Limited transport, fewer inclusive services, and reduced anonymity can create additional barriers. Geographic isolation may limit access to education, health care, transport, and youth services, stigma and taboo—particularly around mental health, neurodevelopmental conditions, and learning difficulties—may be stronger in smaller communities. Families may avoid diagnosis or external support, and services may lack specialist expertise. As a result, young people’s developmental and social needs may remain unrecognised and inadequately supported.

2.5.2. Sociocultural invisibility

Some young people with disabilities remain largely within family support networks. While this provides safety, overprotection or low expectations can restrict autonomy, risk-taking, and participation in education, work, or youth programmes. Their absence from public services can mask ongoing dependence and social exclusion.

Young people with undiagnosed or “mild” accessibility needs. Those with less visible learning difficulties, attention difficulties, mental health conditions, or sensory impairments may not meet formal thresholds for specialized services. They often struggle in mainstream systems without adequate support, leading to dropout, inactivity, substance use or underemployment that appears unrelated to disability.

Minority or migrant youth with additional support needs. Cultural stigma, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with support systems can delay identification and access to services. Disabilities may be interpreted through cultural or social lenses rather than educational or health frameworks, increasing invisibility in policy data.

Youth in precarious employment or illegal work. Some young people with accessibility needs cycle through unstable jobs below their skill level because workplaces lack accommodations or understanding. They may not appear in unemployment statistics, yet remain excluded from sustainable career development.

3. BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Across Europe, young people with disabilities, special educational needs, and those who have left the education system without completing formal qualifications represent one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market and in society. Despite existing policy frameworks that promote inclusion, such as the European Youth Strategy (2019–2027) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there is no uniform or comprehensive national system that provides coordinated and sustainable support to these young people once they exit formal education. In Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary but also the wider European region, support is fragmented, short-term, and often dependent on project funding rather than systemic investment.

- Across the EU, 47% of young persons with disabilities (aged 15–29) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) — nearly double the rate of their non-disabled peers (Eurostat, 2024).
- Only 38% of young people with disabilities complete upper secondary education, compared to 69% of those without disabilities.
- Early, individualized support significantly increases participation rates in vocational programmes and sustainable employment.
- Fragmented support systems – poor coordination between education providers, employment services, and social care.
- Limited accessibility – physical, digital, and communication barriers persist despite EU Accessibility Act (Directive 2019/882).
- Low expectations and stigma – institutional biases limit career guidance and exposure to professional pathways.
- Insufficient transition planning – late interventions and absence of personalized educational or employment plans.

3.1. Inclusion gaps and fragmented support systems

At the European level, participation of young people with additional support needs in major youth programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps remains formally possible but structurally constrained. While these programmes emphasise inclusion of “young people with fewer opportunities,” operational focus and targeted measures disproportionately address certain groups—such as rural youth, migrants, or LGBTQ+ young people—while disability inclusion is comparatively underdeveloped and often implicit rather than explicitly prioritised.

In practice, accessibility barriers occur at multiple stages of participation. Application processes for mobility or solidarity projects frequently rely on complex written language, visually dense online forms, and implicit competence assumptions (e.g., autonomous travel, independent living skills, rapid social adaptation). Although programmes are officially described as “low-threshold,” these requirements effectively

exclude many young people with intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, sensory processing differences, or neurodevelopmental conditions. Current guidance and accommodation frameworks tend to conceptualise disability primarily in physical terms—most commonly wheelchair access—while the diversity of functional needs receives limited attention. As a result, many young people with non-visible or intellectual disabilities are de facto excluded from international mobility.

In many cases there is “apparent integration”, where inclusion exists only formally: young people with disabilities or other support needs are placed in mainstream settings without adequate support, which may undermine their self-esteem and reinforce exclusion. If support takes place outside the mainstream programme, running parallel to the main activities, it can unintentionally signal that disabled youth do not belong.

A related systemic gap concerns youth-work capacity. While substantial training resources exist at European level on engaging rural youth, migrant youth, or other disadvantaged groups, there is comparatively little structured support for youth workers and trainers on inclusive practice with young people with disabilities across the full spectrum of needs. Consequently, practitioners often encounter such participants only incidentally and without adequate preparation or tools. Existing EU-level discourse has recently emphasised youth mental health—particularly since the COVID-19 period—but this focus risks conflating psychosocial wellbeing with disability inclusion. Youth workers should not be expected to act as mental-health professionals; rather, they require competencies in inclusive facilitation, reasonable accommodation, and differentiated support for participants with diverse needs.

Overall, the current European youth programme architecture recognises disability inclusion rhetorically but insufficiently operationalises it. Without accessible procedures, diversified accommodation models, and systematic workforce development, participation of young people with disabilities will remain more aspirational than realistic.

National differences

There are also notable differences in the structure and quality of youth work across countries. In Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia, youth work is developing rapidly but unevenly. In Hungary, unrealistic expectations regarding employment outcomes persist, both among young people and employers, leading to frustration and low retention in work programmes. In Slovenia, youth work is more formalized and institutionally supported, while in Croatia, despite progress, there is still a lack of coordination between the education system, social welfare, and youth organizations. These disparities underline the need for common methodological standards and practical tools adaptable to local contexts.

3.2. Overlapping needs and growing complexity in youth work

Youth centres and organisations working with young people increasingly encounter complex cases that go beyond the traditional scope of youth work. Professionals are often faced with individuals who present multiple overlapping needs — mental health challenges, learning difficulties, social isolation, or prolonged unemployment. These issues require interdisciplinary collaboration, specialized knowledge, and ethical frameworks that are still insufficiently developed in practice. In many youth organisations, workers report uncertainty in setting professional boundaries, balancing empathy with responsibility, and responding adequately to crises such as burnout, self-harm, or acute psychological distress among young people.

3.3. Mental health, disability inclusion, and participation

Mental health difficulties are increasingly affecting young people and have become an important topic in youth work. According to the World Health Organization, one in five young people experiences mental health difficulties each year, and many do not receive proper recognition or support (WHO, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges, increasing anxiety, depression, and withdrawal among young people who are in a NEET situation or have disabilities. At the same time, the system of available support — psychological counselling, social services, inclusive education — remains fragmented and under-resourced.

A further limitation of current youth inclusion discourse is the tendency to frame challenges faced by young people predominantly through a mental-health lens. While psychosocial wellbeing is relevant, such a reduction overlooks the multidimensional nature of disability-related disadvantage. For many young people with additional support needs, phenomena such as low self-confidence, social anxiety, or withdrawal should not always be viewed as standalone psychological conditions but may also result from structural and developmental factors, including limited opportunities for autonomy, restricted peer interaction, skill gaps linked to educational trajectories, and limited pathways to employment or independent living.

Addressing these outcomes exclusively through psychological or therapeutic perspectives risks overlooking broader social causes and systemic solutions. Confidence, agency, and participation among young people with additional support needs are also built through experiential learning, peer engagement, competence development, vocational exploration, and gradual expansion of independence in real-life contexts. These are precisely domains where youth work and mobility programmes could have significant positive impact if appropriately designed and supported.

Therefore, an inclusion approach centred primarily on mental health is not an adequate response for young people with accessibility needs. Their situations are inherently interconnected: developmental skills, social belonging, autonomy, and future orientation interact with emotional wellbeing. Effective participation in youth programmes would require holistic support models that combine accessible

environments, differentiated learning opportunities, supported peer interaction, and pathways to competence and independence.

3.4. Competences and limitations of youth workers

An additional concern is that many of the specialised skills required to adequately support young people with certain needs do not traditionally belong to the professional domain of youth workers, trainers, or facilitators. Youth work is grounded in non-formal education, empowerment, participation, and community engagement. It is not designed to replace special education, therapeutic services, occupational therapy, or clinical support systems. Therefore, cooperation between mainstream youth workers, mentors and specialised professionals is essential yet it is often limited and joint planning remains rare.

Youth workers often lack adequate preparation to work with young people with accessibility needs. While empathy and motivation are strong, formal training and reference materials are limited. The absence of standardised ethical protocols and supervision structures contributes to professional burnout and inconsistent quality of support. Consequently, the effectiveness of interventions depends largely on individual commitment rather than institutional capacity.

The systemic employment gap between young people with accessibility needs and their peers remains substantial. According to Eurostat (2023), only about half of persons with disabilities aged 20–34 are employed, compared to more than three-quarters of those without disabilities. This inequality is not only economic but also social — it limits young people’s participation, autonomy, and sense of belonging. Without targeted measures, young people with disabilities those who are in a NEET situation risk long-term exclusion, dependency, and loss of motivation to engage.

The present methodology responds to these systemic gaps by proposing a structured, inclusive, and ethical approach to working with young people with disabilities those who are in a NEET situation. It promotes collaboration between professionals, families, and communities, and supports youth workers in developing the competencies needed to navigate complex, real-life challenges in their daily practice.

4. THEORETICAL AND LEGAL BACKGROUND

4.1 Social and human rights models of disability

This methodology is grounded in the social and human rights models of disability. The social model recognises that barriers to participation arise not only from an individual’s impairment, or support needs but also from societal structures, attitudes, and environments that fail to accommodate diversity. Inaccessible infrastructure, rigid education systems, inflexible working conditions, and discriminatory attitudes can

prevent young people from accessing opportunities and participating fully in community life.

This perspective is particularly relevant for young people in a NEET situation, whose support needs may remain unrecognised. Stigma and limited access to information, guidance, training and accessible services may further restrict their opportunities. Applying the social model helps professionals to understand that these challenges are not only individual shortcomings but may also result from social and institutional barriers. This encourages interventions that support and empower young people rather than treating them as a problem.

This approach stands in contrast to the medical model of disability, which views disability primarily as a health condition or defect located within the individual, requiring medical treatment, rehabilitation, or correction. The medical model assumes that the main goal is to “fix” or “cure” the person to bring them closer to the so-called norm of functioning. While this model can be useful in a healthcare or clinical context, it often leads to the perception that the individual is the problem — rather than the system or environment around them. As a result, interventions based solely on the medical model tend to focus on limitations instead of strengths, and on adaptation of the person instead of transformation of the environment.

The human rights model builds on this perspective by framing dignity, autonomy, participation, education, employment and social inclusion as matters of rights rather than charity or assistance. It also emphasises the responsibility of institutions and society to remove structural barriers, ensure equality of opportunity, and provide the support needed for young people to exercise their rights. Young people should therefore not be viewed as passive recipients of support, but as active participants in defining their own goals and choices. The social and human rights framework is consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027- it provides the theoretical basis for the practical principles presented in the following section.

Example from practice:

„A young person with mobility impairment wanted to join a community gardening workshop organised by a youth centre. From the social model perspective, the focus is placed on to the environment: how can the space be made accessible, what adaptive tools are needed, and how can barriers to participation be removed? A human rights approach also emphasis the young person’s right to make choices, receive appropriate support and participate on an equal basis with others. The result is shared responsibility and equal participation rather than exclusion. “

4.2. Implications for youth work practice

„For youth workers, understanding these models changes how programmes are designed and delivered. Instead of focusing on what young people cannot do, professionals identify what they can do — and what needs to change in the

environment to make participation possible. This includes adapting materials, providing flexible learning methods, ensuring accessible venues, and involving young people in co-creating solutions. The social model thus becomes not only a theoretical lens but a practical framework for designing inclusive youth work activities. “

In practice, youth workers should apply this social and human rights framework throughout programme planning and delivery ensuring that support is accessible, non-paternalistic and developed with young people rather than for them.

“*Nothing about us without us.*” Originating from the global disability rights movement, this principle states that no policy, programme or methodology concerning young people with additional support needs should be developed without their meaningful involvement.

4.3. Legal and policy frameworks

The legal and policy frameworks that guide this methodology include both international and national instruments. At the European level, key references include:

- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006),
- The European Pillar of Social Rights (2017),
- The European Youth Work Agenda (2020), and
- The Council of Europe’s Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2019).

At the national level in Croatia, relevant documents include:

- National Youth Strategy 2022–2025
- National Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2027
- National Social Services Development Plan
- National Education System Development Plan until 2027.
- Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion
- Law on Youth Councils, Zakon o savjetima mladih, NN 41/14

These frameworks collectively establish the right of all young people — including those with disabilities and those in a NEET situation — to active participation, accessible environments, and continuous support for social inclusion and independence. Although national frameworks formally guarantee participation and inclusion, youth work practice in Croatia often reveals a significant gap between policy and implementation. For example, local youth councils are legally established as mechanisms for youth

participation, but in practice they rarely include young people with disabilities or those in a NEET situation. Meetings are often not physically accessible, communication is insufficiently adapted (e.g., lack of easy-to-read materials), and outreach towards marginalised youth remains limited. As a result, participation is frequently reduced to formal or symbolic involvement and tends to be dominated by more socially privileged and already active young people.

Additionally, inclusive youth work across the region remains heavily dependent on short-term project funding and civil society initiatives, resulting in discontinuity of services and unequal access to support between urban and rural areas. From a youth work perspective, this often places the responsibility for inclusion primarily on individual youth workers rather than on stable institutional systems. While legal frameworks increasingly promote participation and accessibility, professionals in practice frequently lack adequate training, supervision, methodological guidance, and interdisciplinary support needed when working with young people with complex emotional, behavioural, neurodevelopmental needs or youth with additional accessibility needs. Consequently, inclusion may remain more declarative than structural unless accompanied by long-term investment in accessible infrastructure, professional development, and sustainable support systems.

In Hungary at the national level, relevant documents include:

- the National Youth Strategy 2009–2024,
- Act XXVI of 1998 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,
- the relevant provisions on equality and non-discrimination in the Fundamental Law, and
- social and educational laws, such as Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education, which ensure individual development and support for students with accessibility needs.

These frameworks theoretically guarantee the right of all young people—including those with additional support needs—to active participation, an accessible environment, and ongoing support for social integration and independence.

However, legislation and strategies are often horizontal and not specifically tailored to youth work, so the inclusion of young people with additional support needs in youth services is not guaranteed. Inclusive youth work is primarily project-based and supported by civil society organizations; there is no binding mechanism within the official legal framework that would ensure the participation and support of young people with accessibility needs in all youth organizations.

In Hungary, there is no legislation specifically aimed at the inclusive participation of young people with additional support needs in youth work (e.g., legislation that would require local youth services or youth centres to provide special support to young people with disabilities). Current Hungarian youth policy legislation and strategies do not

contain any such *specific legal obligation* to include young people with disabilities in youth work, but rather take a horizontal approach to prohibiting discrimination and promoting "equal participation for all young people" as a general objective.

The situation can be structured as follows:

- Hungary does not have a youth strategy specifically aimed at the social integration of young people with disabilities; the previous National Youth Strategy (2009–2024) set the goal of supporting equal opportunities and social participation, but did not create a separate inclusion framework for people with disabilities in the field of youth work.
- National social inclusion strategies (such as the Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy 2030) address social inclusion and equal opportunities horizontally, and may therefore also affect young people, but they are not necessarily youth-focused legal documents.
- Hungarian youth policy lacks a clear, legally binding element that would define the content and objectives of youth work, including social diversity and the involvement of people with accessibility needs. Youth work, youth information, and counselling are currently implemented through voluntary, project-based forms of support rather than as a uniformly regulated policy obligation.
- Legislation and calls for proposals (e.g., social or labour market subsidies) exist in frameworks that support the work experience and skills development of young people with special educational needs or disabilities, but these are not specifically linked to the profile of youth work (often as part of social or employment programs).
- Civil, national, and local youth organizations and associations (e.g., organizations for people with disabilities) operate youth groups, clubs, or self-advocacy sections that help young people with disabilities participate in society; however, these are not legal obligations, but operational practices.

In practice, therefore, youth work and disability inclusion are mostly project-based, NGO-led or implemented through grant funding, rather than through legal obligations that would apply to all youth service providers. The professional framework of youth work, training, and diversity issues—including the participation of young people with accessibility needs—are objectives present in official strategies, but they are not detailed in legislation as specific inclusive measures.

Although these challenges are visible across Europe, their specific forms and intensity differ between national contexts.

Together, the social model and human rights-based model form the backbone of this methodology. Grounded in practical experience, this framework can also inform the development of national and European policies. These models shape both the ethical stance and the practical tools available to youth workers, ensuring that the focus

remains not only on alleviating individual challenges but also on transforming the systems and attitudes that perpetuate exclusion.

4.4. The aim of our youth methodology

Towards young people

- Empower young people with additional support needs to recognise their strengths, build self-confidence, and develop essential life and work skills.
- Promote active participation, inclusion, and co-creation in all aspects of youth programmes.
- Provide a safe and accessible environment that supports mental well-being, autonomy, and personal growth.
- Encourage peer support, volunteering, and youth leadership to enhance a sense of belonging and social contribution.

Towards professionals

- Strengthen the competencies of youth workers and professionals for inclusive and ethical practice through training, examples, continuous reflection and opening up for supervision.
- Provide practical tools, methodologies, and self-assessment instruments that improve the quality and consistency of youth work.
- Promote interdisciplinary cooperation between psychologists, educators, social workers, mentors and all needed professionals.
- Develop interdisciplinary teams and promote interdisciplinary cooperation in youth work wherever possible.
- Encourage reflective practice and the development of professional resilience to prevent burnout.

Towards decision-makers

- Raise awareness about the rights, capacities, and contributions of young people with additional support needs
- Promote inclusive policies and the removal of systemic barriers in education, employment, and social life.
- Foster collaboration between institutions, local authorities, civil society, and businesses to create a more equitable society.

- Contribute to long-term cultural change by promoting values of solidarity, accessibility, and participation.

„Inclusion begins not when a young person adapts to the system, but when the system adapts to the young person. “

5. PRINCIPLES, ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING

Inclusive youth work is built on a combination of ethical responsibility, professional competence, accessibility, safeguarding, and reflective practice. Working with young people with additional support needs requires not only practical skills, but also clear values, professional boundaries, and consistent organisational approaches.

This chapter outlines the core principles, ethical foundations, safeguarding approaches, and organisational responsibilities that support safe, respectful, and inclusive youth work practice.

5.1 Principles of inclusive youth work

Principles and ethics in general

Effective youth work with young people with additional support needs requires a strong ethical foundation, clear professional boundaries, and well-defined protocols.

They often face multiple stressors — emotional instability, trauma histories, mental health challenges, social exclusion, or a lack of supportive adults.

For these reasons, youth workers must operate within a framework that guarantees safety, predictability, dignity, and harm prevention.

This chapter outlines the core principles and professional guidelines that underpin all interactions in the youth centre. It also introduces essential practice protocols to ensure consistent, responsible and ethically aligned responses to complex situations such as emotional crises or suicide risk.

The goal is not to turn youth workers into psychologists or clinicians, but to provide them with clear steps, safe boundaries, and procedures that help them respond confidently, remain within the limits of their competence and avoid practices that may unintentionally cause harm.

Principles provide the structural framework for youth work practice, while ethics shape how these principles are applied in respectful, responsible, and human-centred ways. Together, they help ensure that inclusive youth work remains safe, consistent, and responsive to the needs of young people.

In practice, principles and ethics are complementary. Principles provide the scaffolding, making ethical action possible, while ethics ensure that adherence to principles does not become mechanistic or blind to human needs. For example, the principle of equity in youth work creates a framework, but ethical responsibility requires the practitioner to tailor approaches to individual circumstances, honouring personal dignity and fostering trust.

Our fundamental principles

Fundamental principles serve as the **standards, rules, and agreements** that allow an organization to operate consistently. They are externally codified and measurable, answering the core question: "**What should guide our work?**". In inclusive youth work, these principles provide the necessary scaffolding for ethical practice, ensuring that practitioners maintain predictable, respectful, and safe environments for young people with additional support needs.

1. Do no harm

"Do no harm" is the most fundamental principle in youth work. It means that every intervention, activity, conversation or decision must protect the emotional and physical safety of the young person.

Youth workers often act with good intentions. However, even well-intentioned actions can cause harm if they are not handled with sensitivity, respect for privacy, preparation or proper procedure. This is especially important when young people have experienced trauma, exclusion, stigma, bullying, overprotection, discrimination or repeated failure in institutions.

In practice, "do no harm" means that youth workers must avoid:

- re-traumatizing young people
- reinforcing stigma
- forcing participation
- pressuring young people to speak or disclose personal information
- shaming, punishment or public correction
- sarcasm, criticism or humiliation
- exposing private information
- ignoring signs of distress
- unsafe group discussions without emotional containment
- unsupported experimentation with young people's needs
- creating dependency or unhealthy power imbalances
- giving clinical advice without proper training

- taking action that worsens the young person's situation

Examples of harmful practice may include saying “It’s not that bad”, pushing a young person to join an activity when they are clearly overwhelmed, correcting someone publicly, asking personal questions in front of others, or treating distress as “bad behaviour”.

The key message is simple: safety and dignity must come before educational, social or participation goals. An activity cannot be considered successful if it leaves a young person feeling unsafe, ashamed, exposed or harmed.

2. Set and maintain professional boundaries

Professional boundaries are essential in youth work. They protect both young people and youth workers. Boundaries are not a lack of care. They make care safer, clearer and more sustainable.

Youth workers are not therapists, special educators, doctors or clinical specialists. Their role is to support young people while remaining within the boundaries of their professional competence. When specialised support is needed, youth workers should cooperate with other professionals instead of trying to solve everything themselves.

Boundaries should be predictable, respectful and explained in accessible language. They are especially important for young people who have experienced inconsistent care, unclear authority, institutional control, trauma or social exclusion. This topic is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.3.

3. Person-first approach

Inclusive youth work starts with seeing the whole person, rather than defining them by their disability, diagnosis, experience or support need.

Each young person has their own interests, strengths, dreams, fears, relationships, preferences, and goals. A disability, impairment, diagnosis, or support need may be important, and may form part of their identity, but it does not define them as a whole.

A person-first approach means:

- respecting the young person's dignity and worth
- avoiding pity and deficit-based assumptions
- not reducing the young person to a label
- presuming competence
- asking the young person directly about their needs and preferences

- focusing on strengths, interests and goals
- adapting support without making the young person feel “less than”
- recognising that each person is different, even if they share a similar diagnosis or support need

Youth workers should avoid assumptions such as “they cannot do this”, “they will not understand”, “this is too difficult for them”, or “we know what is best”. Instead, they should ask: What does this young person want? What helps them participate? What barriers are in the way? What support would make this possible?

The person-first approach builds trust, empowerment and authentic inclusion.

4. Participation and empowerment

The principle “Nothing about us without us” is central to inclusive youth work. It means that young people with additional support needs should be involved in decisions, programmes and policies that affect them.

Participation should not be understood narrowly. Not every young person communicates in the same way, and not every contribution takes the form of a formal discussion. A young person may participate through speaking, writing, drawing, choosing between options, using gestures, using assistive communication, showing preferences through behaviour, or giving feedback with support.

Every contribution matters.

Youth workers should avoid rigid standards of participation, such as expecting everyone to speak in a group discussion, complete the same task in the same way, or express opinions quickly and verbally.

Empowerment means supporting young people to:

- make choices
- express preferences
- influence activities that affect them
- set their own learning goals
- develop self-confidence
- practise self-advocacy
- take ownership of their development
- become active agents in their own lives

This does not mean leaving young people alone with responsibility they are not ready for. Empowerment must be supported, accessible and realistic. Youth workers should create meaningful choice points and offer the right level of support so that young people can participate with dignity.

Participation is a continuum. A small choice, a simple gesture or a quiet expression of preference can be an important step towards self-determination.

5. Accessibility and equity

Accessibility is not an extra favour. It is a professional responsibility and a matter of rights, fairness and meaningful participation.

Youth work providers have a duty to make reasonable accommodations. These are necessary and appropriate adjustments that help young people participate, without creating undue burden for the organisation.

Reasonable accommodations may include:

- physical modifications
- accessible spaces
- assistive technologies
- adapted communication
- visual supports
- sensory adjustments
- flexible timing
- alternative participation options
- policy adaptations
- additional support during activities

Inclusive youth work should not only react when a young person asks for support. Programmes should be designed as accessibly as possible from the beginning. This is where universal design is important: activities, spaces, information and communication should be planned so that they can be used by as many young people as possible.

Inclusion should be understood through a social justice lens. This means recognising that participation is connected to fairness, rights and power — not only to individual motivation or ability.

Five key principles are especially important:

1. **Access** — young people can enter and use the programme, space, information and communication.
2. **Equity** — support is adapted according to real needs.
3. **Rights** — participation is not charity; it is connected to dignity and equal rights.
4. **Participation** — young people can meaningfully influence what affects them.
5. **Diversity** — different identities, support needs and experiences are respected.

Equity is different from formal equality. Equality means giving everyone the same thing. Equity means giving young people what they need in order to participate fairly.

For youth workers, this means asking not only “Do we offer the same programme to everyone?” but also “Can everyone actually take part in a meaningful way?”

6. Safety and well-being

Safety is a core condition for participation. Young people cannot learn, connect or express themselves meaningfully if they feel unsafe.

Inclusive youth work must protect both physical and psychological safety. Environments should be free from violence, harassment, bullying, discrimination and ableism. Ableism means discrimination, exclusion or negative assumptions based on disability or perceived ability. Safety requires clear expectations, predictable structures, accessible communication to signs of distress.

Absolute safety can never be fully guaranteed. A more realistic professional aim is to create “safer spaces” — environments where risks are actively reduced, identities are respected, and young people’s voices are heard.

A safer space is built through:

- respect
- clear rules
- predictable structure
- emotional containment
- accessible communication
- confidentiality
- transparency
- consent
- anti-bullying practice
- inclusive group culture
- attention to signs of distress

High-quality inclusive youth work should use a trauma-informed approach. This means understanding that some young people may have experienced trauma, exclusion, institutional harm, bullying, family stress, discrimination or repeated failure. Their reactions may be shaped by these experiences.

A trauma-informed approach is guided by:

- safety
- trustworthiness
- transparency
- choice
- empowerment
- collaboration
- cultural sensitivity

Confidentiality is also essential. Information about a young person's disability, diagnosis, support need or personal situation should be protected. It should only be shared when necessary, with consent where possible, and always in line with safeguarding responsibilities. This topic is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.3.

7. Intentional methodology and support

Inclusive youth work does not happen by accident. It requires intentional planning, relational work and cooperation.

Young people with additional support needs often need more than physical access to a programme. They may need trust, predictability, emotional safety, accessible communication, adapted activities, long-term relationships and support to navigate social situations.

Intentional youth work includes:

- active listening
- identifying common interests
- building trust gradually
- maintaining consistent relationships
- using clear and accessible communication
- observing what helps and what creates barriers
- adapting activities without lowering dignity
- offering choices
- supporting independence step by step

- reflecting regularly on practice

Long-term relationships matter. Consistency helps young people feel secure, understand expectations and develop confidence. This is especially important for young people who may have experienced rejection, unstable support, institutional barriers or repeated exclusion.

Inclusion is also a multi-sectoral responsibility. It should not confine to disability-specific programmes. Youth work, education, health, social services, families, caregivers and community organisations all have a role to play.

Youth workers should cooperate with other professionals when needed, especially when support needs go beyond the youth worker's role. This cooperation helps ensure that young people receive appropriate support while youth workers remain within their professional boundaries.

Families and caregivers can also be important partners. They may provide essential knowledge about communication, routines, stress signals, health needs, access requirements or emotional support. At the same time, youth workers should support the young person's autonomy and avoid speaking only through adults around them.

A balanced approach means involving families and caregivers when helpful, while still respecting the young person's voice, privacy and right to self-determination.

Mentors and professionals with disabilities can also play an important role. They can act as credible messengers and role models. Seeing people with lived experience in professional, leadership or mentoring roles can strengthen confidence, representation and aspiration among young people.

5.2. Ethics in practice

Ethics in inclusive youth work: How professionals should engage

1. Respect vs. pity – Interactions must be grounded in respect rather than pity. Practitioners avoid speaking to young people in a patronising manner or assuming they are incapable, thereby promoting dignity and self-confidence.
2. Maintaining ethical boundaries – Professionals must uphold clear boundaries, avoiding therapeutic roles unless qualified, while remaining empathetic and responsive to emotional needs.
3. Non-judgmental attitude – Inclusive environments require practitioners to model acceptance rather than judgement. Mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, encouraging experimentation and participation.
4. Communication and language ethics
 - Preferred terminology: Young people should guide the use of person-first language, ("person with a disability") or identity-first language ("disabled")

person”) or terms referring to accessibility or support needs rather than a diagnosis.

- Accessible and plain language: Information must be provided in formats that accommodate cognitive or sensory impairments (large print, visual support, easy-to-read text, subtitle).
- Addressing ableism and hate speech: Practitioners actively identify and challenge discrimination, micro aggressions, or harmful language in the group and community.

5. Safety, privacy, and well-being

- Creating safer spaces: Professionals prioritize psychological and physical safety, respect identities, and encourage youth to express emotions freely.
- Confidentiality and disclosure: Youth privacy is respected; information is shared only with consent. Limits of confidentiality (e.g., mandatory reporting, life threatening situations) are communicated clearly.
- Trauma-informed care: Programs adopt a trauma-informed approach emphasizing trust, transparency, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity.

6. Accountability and continuous review

- Self-reflection: Practitioners engage in ongoing reflection to identify biases, assumptions, or unintentional reinforcement of “learned helplessness.”
- Equitable resource allocation: Inclusion is supported with dedicated budgets, accessible planning, and flexible programming to meet diverse needs.
- Feedback mechanisms: Young people have safe, accessible channels to report inappropriate practices, bullying, or discrimination without fear of reprisal.

Practical details on communication as a core component of safe, professional youth work.

Young people, especially youth with additional support needs are highly sensitive to the way adults speak to them. Words can regulate or dysregulate, empower or shame, build trust or destroy it.

Ethical communication ensures that the youth centre remains a space where young people feel heard, respected and understood, even when their behaviour is challenging or emotions are intense.

In youth work, communication is not simply about transferring information; it is a relational tool that shapes the entire atmosphere of the group. For many young people, especially those who previously experienced judgement, neglect or criticism, the way a professional speaks to them may be the first experience of consistent, respectful adult communication. Ethical communication means that youth workers are intentional about their words, tone, timing and body language. It requires slowing down the pace of activity, offering clarity, and responding with empathy rather than reactivity. The goal

is to ensure that interactions never cause shame, fear or confusion, but instead support regulation, confidence and autonomy.

Below are the key principles of ethical communication in youth work:

- **Use clear, non-judgmental language** -Short sentences, simple words, and direct structure reduce anxiety and misunderstanding.
- **Avoid labels and stigma** -Focus on behaviour or needs, not on identity (“*You’re disruptive*”), diagnosis (“*You’re autistic*”), or character judgement.
- **Normalise emotional experiences** - Communicate that strong feelings are human and acceptable (“*It’s okay to feel frustrated, let’s look at what you need right now*”).
- **Validate feelings** -Show understanding and acceptance, even if you do not agree with the behaviour (“*I see that this is really hard for you*”).
- **Avoid giving clinical diagnoses or guarantees** -Youth workers should never give medical interpretations (“*You have depression*”), or false assurances (“*I promise it will be fine*”).

5.3. Professional boundaries, confidentiality, and accountability

Professional boundaries

Professional boundaries are essential for safe, ethical, and predictable youth work practice. They protect both young people and professionals by clearly defining roles, responsibilities, communication limits, and expectations within supportive relationships.

Clear boundaries help young people understand what they can expect from the professional relationship. They also reduce the risk of confusion, favouritism, emotional overload, dependency, and safeguarding concerns.

The main principles and dimensions of professional boundaries, together with some of the specific situations and practical areas in which they apply, include:

1. **Maintaining appropriate communication boundaries**
 - availability and working hours;
 - digital communication.
2. **Avoiding dual relationships**
 - the youth worker’s professional role;
 - cooperation with families and other professionals, while keeping roles and responsibilities clear.
3. **Respecting physical and emotional boundaries**
 - physical contact;
 - emotional support;

- crisis situations.
- 4. **Respecting confidentiality and information-sharing principles**
 - confidentiality;
 - decisions about when, how, and with whom information may be shared;
 - cooperation with families and other professionals.
- 5. **Using appropriate self-disclosure**
 - personal sharing;
 - deciding what personal information is appropriate to disclose within a professional relationship.
- 6. **Balancing support with professional accountability**
 - the youth worker's professional role;
 - decision-making;
 - emotional support;
 - crisis situations;
 - cooperation with families and other professionals.

Why boundaries matter in practice

Area	When boundaries are unclear	When boundaries are clear	Practical guidance for youth workers
Trust and relationship quality	Young people may feel confused, unsafe or unsure what to expect. Over-sharing by the worker can blur roles.	Roles, responsibilities and limits are clear. Young people understand what they can expect.	Explain your role clearly. Avoid over-sharing personal experiences unless it directly supports the young person.
Group dynamics and fairness	Some young people may perceive favouritism or unequal attention. This can lead to jealousy, conflict or exclusion.	Rules and attention are applied consistently. Group cohesion is easier to maintain.	Be consistent. When exceptions are necessary, explain them transparently without exposing private information.
Safety and safeguarding	Unclear rules around touch, private communication or crisis response can increase the risk of harm or abuse.	Safety procedures are transparent and protective for both young people and staff.	Follow safeguarding protocols. Explain confidentiality limits. Act in the young person's safety interest.

Area	When boundaries are unclear	When boundaries are clear	Practical guidance for youth workers
Professional credibility and ethics	Decisions may appear arbitrary or personal. The youth worker's authority and ethical integrity may be questioned.	Consistent professional standards strengthen credibility and ethical practice.	Use agreed procedures and professional guidelines. Be consistent in decision-making.
Emotional and cognitive load	Youth workers may feel responsible for everything, respond outside working hours or become emotionally overloaded.	Clear limits protect staff wellbeing and help workers support the whole group sustainably.	Set limits on availability and responsibility. Encourage appropriate external support when needed.
Consistency of learning and support	Young people may experience unpredictable routines or inconsistent guidance, which can reduce engagement and learning.	Predictable structure and clear guidance support participation, learning and independence.	Keep routines clear and consistent. Adapt approaches based on observation, consultation and real need.
Digital communication	Young people may expect unlimited access through social media, messaging apps or email. This can create dependency or unsafe exchanges.	Professional channels and rules make communication safer and more transparent.	Use work accounts where possible. Communicate working hours, purpose and limits of online contact.
Physical contact and sensory boundaries	Misunderstandings or unwanted touch can cause anxiety, trauma responses or inappropriate dependency.	Physical interaction is based on consent, individual preferences and transparent group norms.	Ask for consent. Respect personal space. Understand each young person's sensory comfort and preferences.

Boundaries are particularly important in inclusive youth work, where emotional dependence, attachment dynamics, crisis situations, or safeguarding concerns may

emerge more frequently. Consistent boundaries help create emotionally safe, more transparent, and more sustainable support environments.

Professionals should remain aware that over-involvement, blurred roles, excessive emotional availability, or inconsistent communication may unintentionally undermine trust, increase dependency, or contribute to burnout.

Additional practical materials related to the topic are provided in the Annexes.

Confidentiality is a central component of trust-building in youth work practice.

Young people, especially those with accessibility needs, often carry experiences of betrayal, gossip, judgement, or inconsistent adults. Therefore, creating a space where they feel safe to speak is essential. However, confidentiality in youth work is not absolute. Youth workers must balance trust with safety, safeguarding, and legal responsibility. Ethical confidentiality requires clear communication about what can remain private, what may need to be shared for safeguarding purposes, and how information is handled within the organisation.

Why confidentiality matters

- encourages young people to open up;
- reduces fear of judgement;
- builds long-term trust;
- supports emotional and psychological safety;
- creates a respectful and predictable environment;
- prevents shame and retraumatization.

Limits of confidentiality

Youth workers must clearly explain from the beginning:

“What you share with me stays private, unless you or someone else may be in danger. If that happens, I will not keep it a secret, but I will tell you what is happening step by step.”

This transparency protects both the young person and the professional.

Situations where confidentiality must be broken

Confidentiality may need to be broken, in accordance with applicable law and organisational safeguarding procedures, in situations involving:

- self-harm or suicide risk;

- risk of harm to another person;
- disclosure of abuse or neglect;
- criminal activity that endangers safety;
- a significant mental health crisis;
- other safeguarding risks.

Confidentiality should never be broken without explanation or behind the young person's back. The youth worker must involve the young person in the process as much as possible, unless doing so would increase the immediate risk.

Practical examples

a) When confidentiality was not handled well

A young person disclosed thoughts of self-harm. The worker panicked and immediately informed the manager without explaining anything to the young person.

The young person felt betrayed and never returned.

b) When confidentiality was handled correctly

A young person said they were having suicidal thoughts. The worker responded:

"Thank you for telling me. I'm glad you trust me. I cannot keep this private because your safety is important. I will stay with you, and we will involve the right people together."

The young person felt respected and safe, rather than punished or exposed.

Accountability and documentation

Documentation supports accountability, safeguarding, continuity of support, and professional transparency. Ethical documentation also requires respect for confidentiality, dignity, informed consent, and data protection principles.

Documentation is a crucial part of ethical and safe youth work. It provides transparency, accountability, and continuity of support, especially when multiple professionals work with the same young person. Good documentation protects young people, protects professionals, and ensures that important details are not lost when staff change or crises escalate.

Why documentation matters

Accurate documentation serves several essential functions:

- ensures that young people receive consistent and coordinated support;
- prevents miscommunication between staff;
- provides formal evidence if safeguarding concerns arise;
- enables the early detection of patterns or escalating risk behaviour;
- protects staff from false allegations through factual record-keeping;
- improves professional accountability and quality assurance.

What should be documented

Youth workers have a duty to record information that has implications for safety, well-being, or professional accountability. This includes:

- crisis incidents, such as panic attacks, aggression, or emotional breakdowns;
- disclosures of harm, including neglect, abuse, self-harm risk, or exploitation;
- safeguarding concerns, even if they are preliminary;
- referrals to a psychologist, social worker, crisis team, or other relevant professional;
- follow-up steps taken after an incident;
- agreements with the young person, such as safety plans, behavioural agreements, or participation adjustments;
- observable patterns of behaviour if they affect safety, inclusion, or participation.

How documentation should be written

Routine documentation should be proportionate. Not every interaction requires recording; only information relevant to support, safety, or accountability should be documented. Ethical documentation requires professionalism and precision.

Documentation should be:

- **objective:** write “The young person said...” rather than “I think...”;
- **fact-based:** avoid assumptions or interpretations;
- **clear and specific:** include dates, times, context, and exact words when relevant;
- **stored securely:** follow organisational policy and applicable data protection regulations, with particular attention to sensitive data;
- **shared strictly on a need-to-know basis:** only authorised personnel should have access to the information.

Further guidance on proper documentation is provided in Chapter 5.5, **Safeguarding and crisis protocols**.

5.4. Collaboration and interdisciplinary support

Collaboration with specialists, services, and community partners is a fundamental component of high-quality inclusive youth work. Young people with additional support needs may require support that extends beyond the competence of a single professional or organisation. Interdisciplinary, trans-sectoral collaboration helps ensure that support remains safe, coordinated, rights-based, and responsive to the young person's developmental, emotional, social, health, safeguarding, and accessibility-related needs.

Why collaboration matters

- helps young people access appropriate specialised support;
- prevents youth workers from operating beyond their professional competence;
- reduces risk in crisis and safeguarding situations;
- supports informed and coordinated decision-making;
- promotes shared professional responsibility;
- reduces gaps, fragmentation, and unnecessary duplication between services;
- supports continuity of care and support;
- connects youth work with wider education, health, social, employment, and community systems.

Professional roles and competence boundaries

Youth workers have an important role in building supportive relationships, promoting participation, facilitating non-formal learning, creating inclusive environments, and recognising emerging needs. However, they are not expected to replace psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, special educators, healthcare professionals, therapists, or safeguarding specialists.

Recognising professional limits and involving appropriate expertise are essential parts of responsible youth work. Cooperation allows youth workers to remain within their professional role while ensuring that the young person can access support that youth work alone cannot provide.

Principles of collaboration

Collaboration should be guided by the following principles:

- **Active participation of the young person:** The young person should be treated as an active partner rather than a passive subject of professional discussion. Their goals, preferences, strengths, experiences, communication needs, and views should guide planning and decision-making.

- **Informed involvement and consent:** Young people should understand why cooperation is being proposed, who may be involved, what their role will be, and what information may need to be shared. Consent should be sought wherever possible, in accordance with safeguarding responsibilities and applicable law.
- **Rights-based and participatory practice:** Cooperation should respect dignity, autonomy, privacy, accessibility, and self-determination. The principle “Nothing about us without us” should guide the planning, implementation, and review of support.
- **Clear professional roles and responsibilities:** Each professional should understand their role, responsibilities, authority, competence boundaries, and expected contribution. Shared responsibility should not result in unclear accountability.
- **Relevant, necessary, and proportionate information sharing:** Information should be shared only when there is a clear professional, safeguarding, or legal reason. Only the minimum information necessary should be shared with authorised people on a need-to-know basis.
- **Continuity and coordination:** Cooperation should reduce gaps between services and prevent young people from having to repeatedly explain their situation or navigate disconnected professional systems alone.
- **Accessibility:** Meetings, communication, information, and decision-making processes should be accessible to the young person and adapted to their communication and participation needs.

Professionals and partners who may be involved

High-quality inclusive youth work relies on coordinated support systems in which different professionals contribute their expertise while working towards goals agreed with the young person.

Depending on the young person’s situation and support needs, cooperation may involve:

- youth workers, mentors, trainers, and educators;
- teachers, special educators, learning-support professionals, and conductors;
- psychologists, counsellors, psychiatrists, and mental health teams;
- social workers, family-support services, and safeguarding professionals;
- occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, and other therapeutic professionals;
- healthcare professionals and emergency or crisis-response services;
- employment services, vocational advisers, job coaches, and employers;
- legal advisers and relevant public authorities;

- families, caregivers, and trusted members of the young person's support network;
- Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, self-advocacy groups, and Centres for Independent Living;
- professionals, mentors, and role models with relevant lived experience;
- local authorities, cultural institutions, sports organisations, community organisations, local businesses, and other community partners.

The composition of the support network should be based on the young person's actual goals and needs rather than on a standard list of professionals.

Collaborative approaches

Different forms of cooperation may be appropriate in different situations.

In **multidisciplinary cooperation**, professionals contribute from their own areas of expertise and exchange relevant information, while their assessments, plans, and interventions may remain relatively separate.

In **interdisciplinary cooperation**, professionals develop a shared understanding of the situation, agree on common goals, coordinate their approaches, and make decisions together with the young person. Interdisciplinary teams and cooperation should be developed wherever possible, particularly when support needs overlap or long-term coordinated support is required.

Inter-agency or cross-sectoral cooperation connects organisations from different systems, such as youth work, education, health, social care, employment, and community services. This is particularly important during transitions or when support would otherwise become fragmented.

Collaboration may also include co-facilitation by professionals with complementary expertise, joint programme development, co-creation with young people, and accessibility reviews conducted with specialists and people with lived experience.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and lived experience

Partnerships with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, self-advocacy groups, Centres for Independent Living, and professionals with relevant lived experience help ensure that services are informed by real experiences rather than professional assumptions alone.

They may contribute to:

- programme design and evaluation;

- accessibility reviews;
- staff training and professional development;
- mentoring and peer support;
- organisational decision-making;
- advocacy and community awareness;
- the development of more accessible services and participation opportunities.

Their involvement strengthens the shift from designing services for young people towards developing support with young people.

Consultation, mentoring, and reflective supervision

Professional consultation, mentoring, and reflective supervision are important elements of collaborative practice. They allow youth workers to seek specialist guidance, examine professional dilemmas, recognise unconscious assumptions, manage emotionally demanding situations, and remain within their competence boundaries.

These forms of support also contribute to professional learning, staff well-being, consistent practice, and the prevention of isolated decision-making and burnout. Reflective supervision should provide a safe professional space for examining practice rather than function only as performance monitoring.

The practical implementation of teamwork, professional consultation, supervision, external cooperation, and community partnerships is described in Chapter 6.4.

5.5. Safeguarding and crisis response

Why protocols matter

Working with vulnerable and diverse groups of young people requires clear, consistent, and ethically grounded procedures that guide youth workers in everyday practice as well as in high-risk situations. Protocols ensure that responses are safe, predictable, and aligned with professional standards, regardless of which staff member is present or how complex the situation may be.

Different organizations require different protocols that reflect the characteristics of the young people they support, the risks they face, their staffing profile, organizational mandate and the legal and regulatory requirements that apply them. A small community youth club, a school-based program, a residential facility, and a youth centre linked to clinical services operate in different contexts and therefore cannot follow exactly the same procedure.

Strategic considerations for protocols

The objective is not procedural overload, but structured clarity. Effective protocols reduce ambiguity, distribute responsibility, and create predictable safety structures for both youth and staff. Protocols must be:

1. **Risk-calibrated:** Measures, interventions, or supports should be tailored to the profile of the young persons, accounting for developmental stage, vulnerabilities, and environmental factors. Risk assessments should be evidence-based and proportionate, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches.
2. **Legally compliant:** All processes must adhere to safeguarding laws, child protection regulations, and relevant local legislation. Policies should be regularly reviewed to reflect changes in legal obligations, ensuring clear documentation and reporting channels.
3. **Capacity-aware:** The program or intervention should realistically reflect available resources, staff expertise, and operational constraints. Ambitious targets should be tempered by practical feasibility to avoid systemic failures or burnout.
4. **Regularly reviewed and stress-tested:** Policies, risk assessments, and operational procedures should be subject to periodic review. Scenarios and stress tests should evaluate robustness under exceptional or high-risk conditions, identifying gaps before incidents occur.

Organizations should maintain written escalation trees and on-call procedures, particularly higher-capacity institutions.

Young people rely on youth workers for emotional safety, stability, and responsible decision-making. In moments of crisis, distress, or disclosure, the quality of the adult response can significantly influence the immediate outcome and long-term wellbeing. Because of this, every organisation must have structured protocols that define:

- what youth workers should observe
- what actions they should take
- when they must escalate a situation
- how to communicate ethically
- how to document concerns
- how to collaborate with other professionals
- how to stay within their professional role

These protocols are not meant to replace professional judgement; instead, they provide a framework that supports clarity, reduces uncertainty, and prevents unsafe or inconsistent responses. They help youth workers for example:

- recognise early signs of distress
- manage crises without escalating them
- respond to disclosures transparently and safely
- protect young people from harm, abuse, and exploitation
- maintain healthy professional boundaries
- ensure confidentiality while following safeguarding duties
- document incidents in a professional and legally compliant way

Protocol domains

Youth workers play an important role in supporting emotional safety, stability, and guidance.

Below is a structured synthesis of protocol domains, framed as adaptable modules rather than one-size-fits-all prescriptions.

I. Safety and crisis management protocols

Organizations must adapt crisis pathways to youth risk profiles. Low-risk recreational programs may implement simplified versions, while high-risk settings require formalized pathways.

Examples of needed protocols:

- A) For *response to degrading language, put-down or ableism*, a graduated response model is recommended:
1. Education: Explain what the word means and why it is hurtful.
 2. Redirection: Name the behaviour and redirect the youth to positive language.
 3. Limitation: Limit the opportunities for the youth using such language if it persists.
 4. Consequence: Progress to a direct consequence as per program rules.
 5. Support for the target: Pull the targeted youth aside to ask what they need.
- B) *Suicide safety planning*, where youth present self-harm ideation, a structured safety plan must be implemented:
- Emergency contact mapping (trusted adults, crisis services).
 - Immediate coping strategies (grounding, journaling, sensory tools).
 - Identification of protective factors and upcoming positive events.
 - Mandatory referral to licensed mental health professionals for formal risk assessment.

C) “*Coming out*”, identity disclosure support (e.g., sexual orientation or gender identity)

Staff must:

- Listen without assumption or interrogation.
- Affirm the youth’s stated identity.
- Maintain confidentiality within legal limits. Disclosure to guardians or others must never occur without consent unless safeguarding thresholds are met.
- Inform other professionals of the required pronouns and name to address the individual, **if requested by the youth**.

II. Behavioural management and de-escalation

Behavioural protocols should be proportional to behavioural intensity within the setting and move from punishments to understanding the “why” behind challenging behaviour.

A) *ABC Functional analysis framework*, this model shifts practice from punishment to functional understanding. Staff document:

A — Antecedents (triggers such as sensory overload or peer conflict).

B — Behaviour (observable, measurable actions).

C — Consequences (what followed and whether reinforcement occurred).

B) The “Bringing Youth Back” De-escalation protocol:

1. Notice: Step in before the behaviour escalates.
2. Calm yourself: Take a deep breath to model calm behaviour.
3. Calm the youth: Invite the youth to take a breath and acknowledge their feelings.
4. Connect: Remind them you care by talking about their interests (1–5 minutes).
5. Encourage: Help the youth re-engage with peers and activities.

III. Organizational-level inclusion protocols

To sustain inclusion, organizations are encouraged to follow the “*8 Steps to Inclusive Youth Work*” framework which, can be adapted to their size and capacity. Smaller organizations may implement simplified versions; larger institutions should formalize governance and oversight.

1. Organisational review: Assessing demographics, young people’s needs, and current capacity.
2. Policy and guidelines: Drafting a roadmap that identifies the support needs the organisation aims to address and defines implementation plans.
3. Space and environment: Auditing physical and sensory accessibility.

4. Staff and volunteers: Ensuring training on accessibility needs, accessible youth work, systemic injustice, and providing reflective supervision.
5. Activities: Assessing whether activities should be inclusive or single-identity, based on young people choices and needs.
6. Resources: Ensuring budgets, adequately support inclusion rather than treating it as an “add-on”.
7. Networking: Developing robust referral pathways through an equity lens.
8. Monitoring and evaluation: Establishing baseline measures to track meaningful changes in participation and inclusion outcomes. I

Protocols by common risk areas

Each protocol in this chapter addresses a different area of youth work risk management:

1. **Mental health support protocol**– guiding early recognition, regulation, and supportive conversations
2. **Crisis intervention protocol**– responding to acute distress, panic, meltdowns, or emotional breakdowns
3. **Suicide risk response protocol**– ensuring safety when young people express suicidal thoughts or intentions
4. **Safeguarding & protection protocol**– handling concerns of abuse, neglect, exploitation, or unsafe environments
5. **Confidentiality & information sharing protocol**– defining what can be shared, with whom, when, and how to communicate this to young people

Together, these protocols form a comprehensive safety system within the youth centre. Their purpose is to protect young people, support staff decisions, and promote a culture of responsibility, transparency, and care. All youth workers must be trained in these procedures, review them regularly, and apply them consistently in their daily work.

Protocol 1: Mental health support protocol

Purpose: To guide youth workers in responding safely, ethically, and consistently to mental health concerns in young people. Youth workers are *first-line supporters*, they do not diagnose or treat mental health conditions, but they provide stability, early recognition, emotional containment, and referral when needed.

Steps:

1. Recognise early signs

Mental health difficulties often show up through *behaviour* rather than words. Youth workers should look for visible indicators such as:

- withdrawal or social isolation

- irritability, sudden anger, or sensitivity
- restlessness, pacing, or inability to focus
- crying, tearfulness or emotional shutdown
- low motivation, fatigue, disinterest in activities
- overwhelm during simple tasks
- unusual risk-taking or impulsive acts
- changes in grooming, appetite, or sleepiness
- statements of hopelessness (“*Nothing matters*”, “*I can’t do this anymore*”)

Early recognition prevents escalation and opens the door for timely support.

2. Approach calmly and privately

The way a youth worker approaches the young person sets the tone for safety. Avoid confronting them in front of others or asking intrusive questions. Use a warm, neutral tone and simple invitation:

“I noticed you seem a bit different today. Would you like to talk somewhere quiet?”

Key principles:

- ensure privacy
- avoid pressure — they may need time
- avoid assumptions (“Are you depressed?” is not appropriate)
- This step builds trust and reduces defensiveness.

3. Listen without judgement

The goal is *emotional presence*, not problem-solving.

Do:

- listen more than you speak
- show empathy (“That sounds really hard”)
- use open questions (“How long has this felt this way?”)
- normalise feelings (“Many people feel like this when overwhelmed”)

Avoid:

- minimising (“It’s not that bad”)
- fixing (“You should try...”)
- diagnosing (“This sounds like anxiety disorder”)

- moralising (“Why didn’t you talk to someone earlier?”)

Young people often feel relief simply because someone hears them without judgement.

4. Assess immediate risk

Youth workers are not clinicians, but they must recognise when safety is compromised.

Ask yourself:

- Does the young person feel unsafe right now?
- Have they mentioned hopelessness or giving up?
- Have they expressed suicidal thoughts (directly or indirectly)?
- Are they unable to regulate emotions?
- Are they disoriented, panicking or shut down?

Red flags requiring urgent escalation:

- *“I don’t want to be here anymore.”*
- *“Nothing matters.”*
- *“I think everyone would be better without me.”*
- self-harm marks or physical evidence
- losing control physically or emotionally
- statements about wanting to hurt someone

If any red flag appears → move immediately to safeguarding/crisis protocol.

5. Offer grounding and regulation

Before any problem-solving or decisions, the young person needs to feel *physically and emotionally stabilised*.

Provide tools such as:

- breathing techniques (box breathing, 4–6 breathing)
- grounding exercises (5–4–3–2–1 senses)
- movement break (walk, stretch, fresh air)
- quiet corner with sensory tools
- drawing or writing
- drinking water
- using a weighted object or fidget tool

Script example: *“Let’s take a moment to help your body calm down. We can think together!”* Regulation must happen **before** further conversation.

6. Create a short-term safety step

This is a temporary plan that stabilises the young person in the moment.

Examples:

- *“Let’s check in again in 10 minutes.”*
- *“Would you like someone to sit with you for a bit?”*
- *“Which staff member would you feel safe with right now?”*
- *“Let’s stay in this space until you feel more grounded.”*
- *“Would you like a quiet activity until you’re calmer?”*

The purpose is to give continuity and predictability. Short-term support reduces panic and builds trust.

7. Refer to appropriate professionals

If symptoms persist, escalate, or interfere with functioning, youth workers **must not** manage alone.

Referral may include:

- psychologist (emotional or behavioural concerns)
- psychiatrist (suicidal risk, severe symptoms)
- social worker (neglect, abuse, homelessness, safeguarding)
- crisis intervention team
- school counsellor
- GP or medical professional

Key rule: If there is any sign of risk → consult immediately with the safeguarding or clinical professional. Youth workers support the young person through the process but do not replace specialist roles.

8. Document everything

Documentation must be:

- **Objective** (“The young person said...” not “I think they felt...”)
- **Immediate** (written as soon as possible)

- **Clear and specific** (date, time, exact words if relevant)
- **Stored according to organisational policy**

Record:

- what was observed
- what the young person reported
- actions you took
- who was consulted
- referrals made
- next steps agreed
- safety plan (if created)
- risk level

Good documentation:

- protects the young person
- protects the youth worker
- ensures continuity if another staff member must take over
- provides legal and safeguarding compliance

Protocol 2: Crisis intervention protocol

Purpose: To provide youth workers with a clear, safe, and consistent procedure during situations of acute distress, panic conflict escalation, aggression, emotional shutdown, or overwhelm. Crisis moments require structure, calmness, and containment, not problem-solving or discipline.

Step 1: Ensure physical safety

The first priority is always safety— for the young person, peers, and staff.

Actions may include:

- moving other youth away from the area
- removing objects that could cause harm
- increasing adult presence in the space
- guiding the distressed young person to a quieter part of the room
- using a low, calm tone to de-escalate

Never use physical restraint unless organisational policy explicitly allows it and only as a last resort.

Signs that immediate safety intervention is needed:

- throwing objects
- hitting walls or furniture
- self-harm attempts
- aggressive posture
- rapid hyperventilation
- dissociation (blank stare, unresponsiveness)

Example: *“Let’s move to a safer space so no one gets hurt. I’m coming with you.”*

Step 2: Use calm, grounded presence

During crisis, young people mirror the adult’s emotional state. Your calmness becomes their anchor.

Principles:

- slow your breathing
- reduce facial intensity
- keep your posture open and steady
- speak softly, with minimal words
- avoid rapid movements or sharp gestures

Example: *“I’m here. You’re safe. We’ll take this slowly.”*

Avoid:

- shouting
- long explanations
- blaming
- emotional urgency
- reacting with fear or anger

Step 3: Offer grounding support

The goal is physiological regulation, not conversation.

Use grounding prompts:

- *“Feel your feet on the floor.”*
- *“Place your hand on your chest and breathe slowly with me.”*
- *“Look around and name something you can see.”*
- *“Let’s breathe in for 4 seconds... and out for 6.”*

Examples of grounding tools:

- cold water or wet towel
- weighted objects
- sensory corner
- fidget tools
- slow repetitive movement (walking, rocking)

This step helps the nervous system shift from crisis mode to regulation.

Step 4: Reduce stimulation

Many crises escalate due to sensory overload, especially for:

- autistic young people
- young people with ADHD
- young people who have experienced trauma-affected youth

Actions to reduce stimulation:

- lower lighting
- close doors
- decrease noise
- move away from crowds
- limit verbal input
- avoid physical touch unless explicitly requested

Example: *“Let’s go somewhere quieter where your body can calm down.”*

Step 5: Do NOT lecture or confront

Crisis is not a teaching moment. The thinking part of the brain (prefrontal cortex) is offline.

Avoid:

- *“Why are you doing this?”*
- *“You need to stop acting like this.”*
- *“Calm down right now.”*
- *“This is unacceptable behaviour.”*

This increases shame and escalates distress. Instead focus on:

- safety
- breathing
- grounding
- presence

Learning and reflection happen after regulation — never during crisis.

Step 6: Stabilise before talking

When the young person begins to breathe regularly again, stop shaking, or becomes more responsive, you can gently move to the next phase.

Example: *“Let’s wait until your body feels calmer. We don’t have to talk yet.”*

Signs of stabilisation:

- slower breathing
- less muscle tension
- increased eye contact
- softening of tone
- ability to answer simple questions

If the young person does not stabilise, return to Steps 2–4.

Step 7: After regulation, explore the situation

This step is collaborative, not disciplinary.

Ask simple, open questions:

- *“What do you think triggered this?”*
- *“What was the hardest moment for you?”*
- *“What helped you calm your body?”*
- *“What do you need now to feel safe?”*

- *“Is there anything you want us to do differently next time?”*

Goals:

- help them regain agency
- identify triggers
- develop coping strategies
- strengthen trust
- plan for next time

Avoid interrogation or blame.

Step 8: Activate external support if needed

Escalate when:

- risk of harm persists
- the crisis repeats frequently
- the young person expresses suicidal thoughts
- there is evidence of abuse or neglect
- emotional regulation does not return

Possible external supports:

- caregivers / legal guardians
- psychologist or counsellor
- social worker
- psychiatrist
- crisis intervention team
- emergency services (if high risk)

Important principle: Youth workers are not therapists. When the situation exceeds your professional role, escalate immediately.

Step 9: Document and follow up

Documentation must be objective, timely and accurate. Write down:

- what happened (facts only)
- what the young person said (quote if important)
- visible behaviour

- de-escalation methods used
- who was informed
- referrals made
- next steps agreed

After the incident, follow up:

- check on the young person the next day / session
- adjust support strategies if needed
- communicate with the team
- reflect on what worked well and what could improve

Follow-up prevents repeated crises and shows the young person that the relationship remains stable.

Protocol 3: Suicide risk response protocol

Purpose: To provide a clear, safe, and trauma-informed response when a young person expresses suicidal thoughts, plans, or intentions. The aim is to stabilise the young person, keep them safe, and activate the appropriate professional help.

Core response principles include:

- remaining calm and present,
- listening without judgement,
- avoiding minimising or dismissing emotions,
- ensuring immediate safety,
- involving appropriate professionals,

and following organisational safeguarding procedures.

Step 1: Stay calm and create privacy

A calm adult body regulates a distressed young person.

- move to a private, quiet space
- keep voice low and steady
- avoid shock or panic
- do not leave the young person alone

Example statement: *“Thank you for telling me. Let’s sit somewhere quiet so I can support you.”*

Step 2: Take every disclosure seriously

Never minimise or assume the young person *“doesn’t mean it.”*

Avoid:

- *“You’re not serious.”*
- *“You wouldn’t really do that.”*
- *“You just want attention.”*

Use validation instead:

Example: *“Thank you for telling me. I’m here with you.”*

Step 3: Assess risk level

Ask directly and calmly. These questions do NOT increase risk:

- *“Are you thinking about hurting yourself?”*
- *“Do you have a plan?”*
- *“Do you feel safe right now?”*

Risk Levels

- **Low risk:** Passive thoughts (*“I don’t want to exist”*)
- **Medium risk:** Thoughts + unclear method, emotional instability
- **High risk:** Plan, intent, access to means, prior attempt → EMERGENCY

Step 4: Ensure immediate safety

- stay physically present
- remove access to unsafe items
- reduce noise and sensory overload
- ask another staff member to support group supervision
- guide the young person to a safe space

Statement: *“You’re not alone. I’m going to stay with you.”*

Step 5: Activate emergency protocol

If the young person is at high risk:

- call emergency services
- contact crisis mental health team
- notify the safeguarding lead
- follow legal reporting duties

Youth workers must not handle high-risk events alone.

Step 6: Do NOT promise secrecy

Young people often say: “*Don’t tell anyone.*” But safety overrides secrecy.

Safe example: “*I can’t keep this a secret because your safety is important, but I will stay with you through the whole process.*”

Step 7: Contact caregivers or legal guardians

(Unless there is a safeguarding concern)

Communicate with sensitivity and avoid clinical labels.

Step 8: Arrange professional follow-up

Examples:

- psychologist
- psychiatrist
- community mental health team
- social worker
- GP
- crisis intervention programme

Support the young person through the referral process.

Step 9: Document objectively and immediately

Include:

- exact words spoken by the young person
- observable behaviour
- risk assessment details
- actions taken

- people informed
- referrals and follow-up plan

No interpretations. Only facts.

Step 10: Follow up within 24–48 hours

Provide a warm, supportive check-in:

- review emotional state
- revisit safety plan
- ensure engagement with professionals
- rebuild connection and belonging

Example: *“I’m glad to see you today. How have you been since we talked?”*

Responding to suicide risk

Youth workers may occasionally encounter young people expressing suicidal thoughts, hopelessness, or emotional crises. While youth workers are not expected to provide clinical intervention, they must respond calmly, take all expressions of suicide risk seriously. Detailed practical guidance, warning signs, myths and facts, and example response strategies are provided in the Annex.

Responding to self-harm

- take seriously,
- stay calm,
- avoid punishment/shock,
- safeguarding,
- referral.

Additional practical guidance, warning signs, and supportive communication examples related to self-harm are available in Annex.

Confidentiality and information sharing protocol for safeguarding and legal concerns

The general ethical principles of confidentiality, information sharing, and documentation are explained in Chapter 5.3. This protocol focuses specifically on situations in which a youth worker must decide whether information needs to be shared

because of a safeguarding concern, a risk to the young person or another person, an immediate threat to health or safety, or a possible legal duty to report.

Its purpose is to ensure that sensitive information shared by young people is handled ethically, safely, legally, and transparently. The protocol guides youth workers in deciding:

- whether information needs to be shared;
- who should receive the information;
- how much information should be shared;
- how the young person should be informed and involved;
- how the decision and subsequent actions should be documented.

This protocol must be applied together with the organisation's safeguarding procedures and applicable national law.

1. Situations in which the protocol applies

This protocol should be followed when there is a potential:

- risk of self-harm or suicide;
- risk of harm to another person;
- disclosure or suspicion of abuse or neglect;
- serious mental health crisis;
- immediate danger to health or safety;
- safeguarding concern;
- criminal activity that endangers someone's safety;
- legal duty to report or share information.

Youth workers do not investigate disclosures or decide whether the information is true. Their responsibility is to recognise potential risk, listen without judgement, record what was said or observed, and follow the organisational safeguarding procedure.

2. Minimum necessary information

Only the information essential for safeguarding, safety, legal compliance, or coordinated professional support should be shared. Nothing irrelevant, speculative, or unnecessarily personal should be disclosed.

Information should be:

- relevant to the identified concern;

- factual and based on what was said or observed;
- limited to what the receiving professional needs to know;
- shared only for a clear safeguarding, safety, legal, or professional purpose.

Youth workers must not include personal opinions, assumptions, unconfirmed diagnoses, or unnecessary background details.

3. Who may receive the information

Depending on the situation and organisational procedure, information may be shared with authorised professionals such as:

- safeguarding officers;
- supervisors or managers;
- psychologists;
- social workers;
- mental health teams;
- relevant health or crisis professionals;
- emergency services;
- legal or safeguarding authorities, where required.

Information must not be shared with people who have no professional need or authorisation to receive it. This includes:

- other young people;
- volunteers who are not trained or authorised to handle safeguarding information;
- colleagues who are not involved in the situation;
- members of the wider team who want information only “for context” or out of curiosity;
- family members or parents if sharing the information could place the young person at greater risk.

4. Communicating confidentiality limits

The general boundaries of confidentiality should already have been explained to the young person as described in Chapter 5.3. Youth workers must never promise absolute confidentiality by saying:

- “I won’t tell anyone.”
- “This will stay between us no matter what.”

When information needs to be shared, the youth worker should explain:

- why the information cannot remain fully private;
- who needs to receive it;
- what information will be shared;
- what will happen next;
- how the young person will be supported.

Unless informing the young person would increase the immediate risk, the youth worker should involve them in the process and keep them informed at every stage.

5. Decision-making steps for information sharing

Step 1: Identify the concern

Consider whether there is:

- a risk to the young person;
- a risk to another person;
- a safeguarding concern;
- a possible legal duty to report;
- an immediate threat to health or safety.

Step 2: Assess the level of urgency

- **Immediate danger:** contact emergency services or follow the organisation's emergency procedure.
- **Significant safeguarding risk:** contact the safeguarding officer, manager, or relevant professional without unnecessary delay.
- **Lower or uncertain risk:** consult the safeguarding officer or supervisor and consider an appropriate support and monitoring plan.

Youth workers should not attempt to manage high-risk situations alone.

Step 3: Consult

Consult the organisation's safeguarding lead, supervisor, or authorised manager. Where possible, decisions about sharing sensitive information should not be made by one youth worker alone.

Consultation should not delay action where there is an immediate risk to health or safety.

Step 4: Decide whether information must be shared

The decision should consider:

- the nature and seriousness of the concern;
- the likelihood and immediacy of harm;
- the young person's views and wishes;
- the possible consequences of sharing or not sharing;
- organisational policy;
- applicable legal responsibilities.

Step 5: Share only the minimum necessary information

Provide only the factual information needed for the receiving professional to understand and respond to the concern.

Do not provide:

- speculation;
- personal opinions;
- emotional interpretations;
- unconfirmed diagnoses;
- unrelated personal information.

Step 6: Inform and involve the young person

Unless doing so would increase immediate risk, explain:

- what information will be shared;
- with whom;
- why it must be shared;
- what action is likely to follow;
- how the young person can participate in the next steps.

The youth worker should remain supportive and avoid making the young person feel punished, exposed, or blamed for making a disclosure.

Step 7: Document the decision and follow-up

Record:

- the concern or disclosure;
- the young person's exact words when relevant;
- observable behaviour or physical signs;
- the assessed level of risk;
- what information was shared;
- with whom it was shared;
- when and how it was shared;
- the reason for sharing;
- who was consulted;
- how the young person was informed or involved;
- what actions were taken;
- the agreed follow-up plan.

All records must follow the documentation principles described in Chapter 5.3 and the organisation's data protection and record-keeping procedures.

6. Inappropriate information sharing

The following practices are inappropriate and may cause harm:

- sharing the young person's story with other young people;
- sharing sensitive information with untrained or unauthorised volunteers;
- telling colleagues "for context" when they do not need the information;
- discussing confidential cases informally or as workplace gossip;
- sharing a diagnosis more widely than necessary;
- presenting personal speculation as fact, for example, "I think she has depression";
- sharing information with parents or family members when they may be the source of risk;
- providing more personal detail than is necessary for safeguarding or professional support.

7. Documentation requirements in information-sharing cases

Each record related to a safeguarding disclosure or information-sharing decision should include:

- the date, time, and context;
- the young person's exact words where relevant;

- observed behaviour or visible signs;
- the identified concern;
- the assessed level of risk;
- who was informed and when;
- the reason for sharing;
- the information that was shared;
- any immediate actions taken;
- how the young person was informed or involved;
- the follow-up plan.

Documentation must not include:

- unsupported opinions;
- assumptions;
- judgemental language;
- unnecessary emotional descriptions;
- unconfirmed diagnoses;
- irrelevant personal details.

Example of appropriate documentation

“Young person said: ‘I hurt myself last night.’ Small cuts were visible on the left forearm. Safeguarding officer informed at 15:20. The young person was told what information would be shared and why. A follow-up appointment with the psychologist was arranged for the next day.”

8. Practical example of applying the protocol

A young person discloses that they have recently harmed themselves. The youth worker listens calmly and does not investigate or ask leading questions. The worker explains that the information cannot remain fully confidential because the young person’s safety may be at risk.

The youth worker consults the safeguarding officer, shares only the necessary factual information, and involves the young person in the next steps as much as possible. The disclosure, risk assessment, information-sharing decision, actions taken, and follow-up plan are then documented according to organisational procedure.

Additional practical examples related to confidentiality, information sharing, and documentation are provided in the annexes.

Recommended tools may be found in the Annex.

5.6. Organisational readiness and accessibility

Organisational self-assessment tool: Readiness for inclusive youth work with young people with additional support needs.

Purpose

Inclusive youth work requires not only motivated professionals, but also organisational readiness, accessible environments, and supportive institutional practices. In order to support reflection and long-term organisational development, this methodology includes a self-assessment tool designed to help organisations evaluate their current level of inclusion and accessibility in youth work practice.

The tool examines several key domains of organisational readiness, including:

- leadership and organisational commitment,
- policies and safeguarding procedures,
- physical, sensory, and digital accessibility,
- staff competences and organisational learning,
- inclusive programme design,
- youth participation and empowerment,
- partnerships and community collaboration,
- organisational culture, and
- evaluation and continuous improvement.

The self-assessment tool is intended primarily for internal reflection, strategic planning, and identification of areas for further development rather than external evaluation. It may be completed individually or collectively by organisational teams as part of ongoing quality improvement processes.

The framework draws on principles and approaches from the Partners for Youth with Disabilities (PYD) organisational inclusion assessment, the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) “8 Steps to Inclusive Youth Work”, accessibility audit practices promoted by the Council of Europe, and behaviour-change assessment approaches developed by UNICEF.

Additional practical materials related to the topic, such as the organisational self-assessment tool are provided in the Annexes.

Accessibility audit procedures for organisations

Before taking any further steps or implementing actions, a structured Disability Access Audit should be conducted, directly involving young people with additional support needs. This allows organizations to assess whether their planned actions and ideas are realistic and appropriate. The audit should be repeated periodically, as circumstances may change, either for better or worse. If there is any doubt, local or national organizations, such as Access4you in Hungary, can provide guidance and support.

Disability access audit procedure:

1. Conduct walk-throughs with specialists and youth representatives.
2. Categorize findings:
 - Minor working-practice adjustments.
 - Maintenance-level adaptations (e.g., visual markers, Braille signage).
 - Capital investment requirements.
3. Align accommodations with principle of “reasonable accommodation” standards under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The findings from the access audit should be used to develop clear indicators and standards of accessibility

6. BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE YOUTH WORK

Inclusive youth work is built through a combination of relationships, accessibility, flexibility, structure, and responsive support. In practice, this means understanding the diverse realities of young people, recognising barriers to participation, and creating environments that support safety, autonomy, belonging, and meaningful engagement.

This chapter explores how these principles can be applied in practice through needs-based methodologies, interdisciplinary collaboration, environmental and activity adaptations, and flexible pathways for participation and personal development.

6.1 Understanding participants and their support needs

Inclusive youth work begins with understanding who the young people are, what barriers they face, and what kinds of support enable meaningful participation.

Young adults entering support programmes between the ages of 18 and 30 represent a highly heterogeneous vulnerable population. Their experiences are shaped by interactions between structural disadvantages, developmental transitions, family environments, educational experiences, and broader social conditions.

Young people with disabilities and those who are in a NEET (not in education, employment, or training) situation may experience intersecting systemic, economic, social, and individual barriers that limit their opportunities and participation.

The starting point

Many young people entering a youth centre have had negative experiences with “assessments” or “case meetings” in institutional settings and often withhold information about institutions they have interacted with. Most report that previous conversations with counsellors occurred only when they had done something wrong, resulting in disciplinary measures.

Thus, initial individual meetings with youth with additional support needs require sensitivity. The youth worker must first build a trusting relationship and clearly state that nothing will be done without the participant’s permission. The youth worker typically explains that they are not acting as a psychologist or special educator, but are there to work with participant to co-create a plan enabling the participant to achieve what they desire. They also share information about the available support team and their fields of expertise.

Desires must gradually be reformulated into goals, since goals require concrete tasks, timelines, steps, and support resources. The youth worker’s role is to encourage, support, monitor, and evaluate the participant’s progress.

Based on experience, it is helpful if the youth worker and the participant jointly identify the participant’s social support network by listing individuals and institutions that may provide support.

Understanding local and systemic gaps

Identifying local and systemic gaps

This subchapter focuses on identifying local and systemic gaps that hinder the full inclusion of young people with additional support needs. Based on research findings, practical experiences, and work with young people across different contexts, several key challenges can be identified.

It is important to emphasise that identifying gaps is not about assigning blame, but rather about understanding the current situation and recognising areas that require further development. Such analysis provides an important foundation for Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) strategies, professional development planning, and long-term systemic improvement.

Systemic gaps

Systemic barriers often emerge at the level of policies, legislation, funding structures, and institutional organisation.

One of the most common problems is policy fragmentation and compartmentalisation. Education, health, employment, and social sectors frequently operate separately, without sufficiently coordinated strategies or shared approaches. As a result, young people may “fall through the cracks” during critical transition periods.

A particularly significant issue is the invisibility of the transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood. Systems tend to focus primarily on children or adults, while overlooking young people aged approximately 16–30 who are transitioning from education into employment and independent adulthood.

There is also a lack of flexible funding mechanisms capable of covering individual accessibility needs such as interpreters, assistive technologies, or personal support. In many contexts, support remains dependent on short-term project funding, which limits sustainability and continuity.

Disability is still frequently approached primarily as an individual diagnosis or deficit rather than as the result of interaction between individuals and inaccessible social or environmental structures.

Lack of systemic coordination between education providers, social services, employment services, and rehabilitation agencies further contributes to gaps during important transition periods. Without integrated support systems or cross-sector cooperation, young people frequently lose access to essential services while moving towards vocational education, employment, or independent living. Schools, youth organisations, and support services often lack sufficient resources, time, and institutional support for systematic professional development. Even when training opportunities exist, participation is inconsistent and long-term implementation is rarely monitored. In many countries, inclusive youth work remains insufficiently recognised, strategically supported, and professionally structured, which limits both visibility and motivation for long-term engagement in this field.

Lack of support protocols

In practice, the absence of clear procedures often creates uncertainty among professionals.

Cross-sector cooperation protocols and holistic support models are frequently underdeveloped. Many systems lack clearly established procedures defining how schools, health institutions, social services, and youth organisations should cooperate in the interests of young people.

Many institutions also lack safe and accessible mechanisms through which young people can report discrimination, bullying, exclusion, or inappropriate professional practices. The absence of reporting and feedback procedures increases vulnerability and reduces trust in institutions.

Specific protocols for responding to self-harming behaviour, emotional escalation, trauma-related responses, or mental health crises are also frequently missing. The absence of clear crisis-management procedures creates additional risk both for young people and for professionals.

Formalised inter-institutional procedures for early identification, coordinated assessment, transition planning, follow-up, and accountability are often either missing or inconsistently implemented. As a result, professionals frequently rely on ad-hoc practices, leading to unequal service quality, delayed interventions, inconsistent monitoring, and weak communication between institutions.

Transition planning is often insufficient and initiated too late, frequently only during the final year of schooling. This leaves limited time for vocational exploration, work-based learning, skill development, or preparation for independent living.

In addition, many programmes focus narrowly on isolated topics such as CV writing or job fairs while neglecting broader life skills, emotional regulation, communication skills, and other transversal competences necessary for employment and independent adulthood.

Lack of professional competences

Professional preparedness is one of the most important factors influencing the quality of inclusive youth work.

Many youth workers, trainers, and professionals feel insecure about working with young people with disabilities due to limited experience, insufficient training opportunities, and lack of practical methodological guidance.

Methodological shortcomings remain highly visible in practice. Many professionals are unfamiliar with principles such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or lack confidence in adapting programmes through the use of accessible communication, visual supports, sensory-sensitive approaches, or flexible facilitation methods.

Attitudinal barriers and unconscious biases also remain part of the problem. Professionals may unintentionally maintain low expectations or paternalistic attitudes that limit young people's autonomy and participation.

Institutional leaders themselves often lack the competences necessary for building inclusive organisational cultures. Without inclusive leadership, long-term organisational change is difficult to achieve.

Across sectors—including education, youth work, employment services, social care, and rehabilitation—professionals frequently lack disability-specific knowledge and confidence in providing accessible support. Shortages of specialised professionals additionally reduce opportunities for meaningful participation among young people with more complex support needs.

There is also a significant lack of practical educational materials, resources, and methodological guidelines specifically designed for inclusive youth work. This publication aims to contribute to addressing that gap by providing practical guidance grounded in real-life experience.

Local and community gaps

Stigma, low expectations, and accessibility barriers remain strongly present at community level.

Physical, digital, and communication barriers continue to limit participation despite existing legislative frameworks such as the European Accessibility Act (Directive 2019/882). These barriers affect access to education, transport, employment services, digital learning environments, and community participation.

Transportation barriers remain particularly significant, especially in rural or less developed areas. Lack of accessible public transportation can make participation impossible for many young people—not only wheelchair users, but also individuals with chronic health conditions, sensory impairments, neurodevelopmental conditions, or anxiety-related difficulties.

Information about youth opportunities is often unavailable in accessible formats such as Easy-to-Read materials, Braille, or screen-reader-compatible digital content.

Community support structures are frequently weak. Many young people lack supportive peer networks, role models, mentors, or inclusive community spaces. Families themselves may also feel exhausted, isolated, or unsupported.

Employers continue to report uncertainty regarding workplace accommodations and perceived productivity limitations, contributing to underemployment and exclusion of young people with disabilities. Studies consistently identify stigma as one of the major barriers to employment and internship opportunities for young people with disabilities.

Understanding young people in a NEET situation and transition challenges

This group faces significantly increased risks of social exclusion, long-term unemployment, poverty, and reduced life opportunities.

According to Eurostat, approximately 11–12% of young people aged 15–29 across the European Union fall into the NEET category, although rates differ considerably between countries. The European Union has set a long-term goal of reducing this proportion below 9% by 2030, recognising that prolonged inactivity in early adulthood often has lasting social and economic consequences.

Slovenia consistently performs below the EU average and demonstrates relatively strong educational participation and support structures that help prevent long-term youth inactivity. Croatia, on the other hand, continues to face higher levels of young people in a NEET situation connected to labour-market instability, regional disparities,

and broader socioeconomic challenges. Hungary appears to occupy a middle position within the European context, although recent publicly available data remain less comprehensive.

Despite differences between countries, the broader pattern remains similar across Europe: young people who experience exclusion during transitional periods often struggle to reconnect with education, employment, or community life without targeted support.

Structural and personal dimensions of NEET status

NEET status should not be understood simply as inactivity. In many cases, it reflects a combination of structural exclusion and personal vulnerability.

Young people may become NEET due to:

- Early school leaving,
- Chronic health conditions,
- Disability or neurodivergence,
- Mental health difficulties,
- Caregiving responsibilities,
- Migration-related barriers,
- Discrimination,
- Long-term unemployment,
- Or repeated institutional exclusion.

For many young people, NEET status becomes prolonged and increasingly difficult to leave over time.

Consequences of long-term of NEET status

Extended periods outside education, employment, or training are associated with:

- Declining mental health,
- Reduced self-confidence,
- Erosion of social skills,
- Increased dependency,
- Poverty and financial insecurity,
- Risk of homelessness,
- And reduced future employability.

Repeated experiences of failure, exclusion, or rejection may eventually lead to learned helplessness, where young people lose confidence in their ability to influence their future.

Developmental characteristics of young adulthood

Young adults between 18 and 29 pass through one of the most unstable and formative developmental periods of life. Contemporary transitions into adulthood are increasingly prolonged, while traditional markers of adulthood—stable employment, independent living, long-term relationships, and financial stability—are often delayed or disrupted.

Many young people participating in programmes have experienced:

- Disrupted or inaccessible education,
- Unstable family environments,
- Social isolation,
- Repeated experiences of failure,
- Poverty and exclusion,
- Limited access to opportunities,
- And lack of supportive adult relationships.

As a result, many experience a prolonged or interrupted transition into adulthood characterised by uncertainty, low self-efficacy, emotional vulnerability, and difficulty making long-term plans.

The key to the solution: Youth work and mentoring

Non-formal education, youth work, and mentoring emerge as crucial pathways out of marginalization. Programs that develop self-determination, confidence, and practical life skills can help bridge the gap to employment. Targeted vocational, employment training initiatives, provide direct links between education and the labour market. Because some of these young people may not engage with these opportunities or apply independently, proactive outreach—through street work, social media, or family networks—is essential. Supportive environments, including safe spaces and mentors with disabilities, are critical to sustaining motivation and engagement.

The inclusion of young people with additional support needs and who are in a NEET situation is not only a moral imperative but also an economic one, as their exclusion entails substantial long-term social and economic costs. Addressing their needs effectively promises both greater social equity and a more productive society.

Realities of young people with additional support needs

Young people with additional support needs often experience multiple overlapping barriers affecting education, employment, relationships, participation, independence,

and emotional well-being. These challenges are rarely isolated. Difficulties connected to disability, neurodivergence, mental health, chronic illness, or learning differences are frequently shaped and intensified by broader social, economic, and environmental factors.

Cumulative disadvantages and exclusion

Many young people experience not only functional or educational barriers, but also stigma, exclusion, reduced opportunities for participation, unstable support systems, and limited access to services adapted to their needs. As a result, experiences of frustration, dependency, withdrawal, anxiety, low self-confidence, or interrupted educational and career pathways are common.

Barriers to education and labour-market participation

Young people with accessibility needs frequently encounter difficulties accessing inclusive education, vocational opportunities, employment pathways, and long-term career development. Inaccessible environments, stigma, lack of accommodations, low expectations, fragmented support systems, and insufficient professional guidance may significantly reduce opportunities for meaningful participation and independence.

Increased responsibility without adequate resources

The transition from adolescence into adulthood may be particularly demanding for young people with accessibility needs. While expectations related to independence, employment, decision-making, and self-management increase, support systems often become fragmented or disappear entirely after formal schooling ends. Young people may therefore face increased responsibility without adequate emotional, practical, or institutional support.

Intersecting barriers in young adulthood

Barriers in young adulthood are often cumulative and interconnected. A young person may experience additional support needs alongside financial insecurity, social isolation, inaccessible transport, unstable housing, family stress, discrimination, or limited access to appropriate services. These overlapping factors significantly affect participation, consistency, motivation, and long-term inclusion.

These factors do not automatically lead to exclusion or NEET status. Participation barriers emerge through the interaction between personal circumstances, social environments, institutional systems, and community accessibility. Understanding this complexity is essential for designing meaningful, sustainable, and genuinely inclusive youth work programmes.

Inclusive youth work therefore requires a holistic understanding of young people's lived realities rather than focusing exclusively on diagnoses or visible conditions. Youth workers need to consider not only individual support needs, but also the broader contexts shaping participation, belonging, autonomy, and emotional safety.

Family and environmental context

Young people's participation and development are strongly influenced by their family, economic, and community environments. Family relationships, financial insecurity, transportation, housing stability, caregiving responsibilities, social support networks, and local community resources all shape how young people engage in programmes and whether participation can be sustained over time.

Family stress and emotional exhaustion

Many young people with additional support needs grow up in environments marked by chronic stress, instability, exhaustion, or limited support. Their families may also experience emotional burnout, financial pressure, uncertainty about available services, or difficulties navigating fragmented support systems. In some cases, parents or caregivers become overwhelmed by ongoing advocacy responsibilities, financial strain, or long-term caregiving demands.

Unstable family environments and social isolation

Some young people live in unstable family situations characterised by conflict, separation, neglect, inconsistent support, or emotional unavailability. Others may experience loneliness, social isolation, or weak peer connections, particularly when disability, neurodivergence, poverty, or mental health difficulties limit opportunities for participation and belonging.

Environmental and community barriers

Environmental barriers also significantly affect inclusion. Transportation difficulties, inaccessible public spaces, lack of local services, digital exclusion, rural isolation, and weak community infrastructure may reduce participation opportunities even when motivation exists. In many communities, inclusive activities or specialised support services remain unavailable, difficult to access, or financially unattainable.

Caregiving roles and hidden responsibilities

Young people may also take on significant caregiving roles within their families, particularly in households affected by illness, disability, addiction, poverty, or mental health difficulties. These responsibilities may limit time, emotional energy, flexibility, and opportunities for education, employment, social participation, and personal development.

Invisible pressures behind participation difficulties

Importantly, these challenges often remain invisible to professionals unless they are actively explored through conversation, observation, and relationship-building. Young people may appear disengaged, inconsistent, tired, withdrawn, or unmotivated when they are in fact coping with complex environmental pressures outside the youth work setting.

Ecological perspective in inclusive youth work

Inclusive youth work therefore requires an ecological perspective that recognises how family systems, economic realities, community accessibility, and social environments influence participation, behaviour, emotional regulation, confidence, and long-term engagement. Understanding these broader contexts allows youth workers to respond with greater flexibility, empathy, realism, and effectiveness.

6.2. Common hidden and less visible conditions

When working with young people with additional support needs, many conditions and developmental realities remain **“invisible”** because they lack clear physical manifestations, are socially stigmatized, or fall into institutional and policy gaps. These hidden factors may significantly influence a young person’s behaviour, participation, and long-term educational or employment outcomes. Without adequate awareness, professionals may misinterpret behaviours or overlook necessary support needs.

Many young people live with conditions and support needs that may not be disclosed or recognized. In some cases, they or their families choose not to disclose these conditions due to fear of stigma, discrimination, or labelling. The following descriptions provide an overview of some of the conditions, experiences, and support needs that youth workers may encounter. The groups are highly diverse. The characteristics, experiences, and support needs presented below are illustrative and do not apply to every individual. A young person may experience characteristics associated with more than one of the groups described and may have multiple support needs. In line with the handbook’s human rights-based approach, these descriptions are intended to support understanding rather than categorisation. The focus should remain on each young person’s individual strengths, participation barriers, lived experiences, and support needs, rather than on assumptions based on diagnosis, condition, or group membership.

Specific learning difficulties disabilities (SpLDs). are neurodevelopmental differences that may affect how a person learns and processes information, particularly in areas such as reading, writing, spelling and mathematics. These difficulties can occur across a range of intellectual abilities.

The most common specific learning difficulties s include:

- dyslexia (difficulty with reading and decoding words),
- dysgraphia (difficulty with writing and spelling), dyscalculia (difficulty understanding numbers and mathematical concepts),
- Developmental coordination disorder (DCD) often referred to as dyspraxia may co-occur with specific learning difficulties and can affect coordination, motor planning, organisation and participation.

Because these difficulties are related support needs may not be immediately recognised, young people's behaviour or performance may be misinterpreted as carelessness, lack of effort or low motivation.

Possible experience and support needs.

This may include:

- Persistent difficulties in reading, writing, or mathematics that are not explained by a lack of effort and do not necessarily reflect the young person's overall competences.
- Slower or more effortful reading, frequent spelling errors, or challenges in copying text.
- Trouble following written or complex verbal instructions.
- Differences or difficulties in short-term or working memory such as retaining instructions or sequences.
- Challenges in time management, organization, and task completion.
- . Frustration, anxiety or task avoidance, particularly when learning environments do not provide appropriate support.
- Individual strengths may be found in areas such as verbal communication, practical problem solving, or creativity.

Young people with specific learning difficulties may have an uneven skill profile — for example, being creative and articulate verbally but struggling with writing, or excelling in hands-on tasks while struggling with theoretical ones. Individual strengths and support needs are varying considerably.

Possible indicators in youth work setting may include

In group or informal education settings, youth workers may notice:

- avoidance of reading aloud or completing written forms;

- giving up quickly on new or complex tasks;
- reliance on peers for written instructions;
- anxiety before tests, assignments, or administrative paperwork;
- frequent late or incomplete submissions;
- appearing embarrassed or withdrawal during literacy-based activities.

These behaviours are often misunderstood as disinterest, but in reality, they reflect fear of failure or previous negative experiences with learning.

What to do – supportive approach

A **learning-difference-informed approach** focuses on adapting teaching and communication styles, building confidence, and providing multiple ways to participate and show competence. Youth workers can support young people by:

1. Using clear, simple, and concrete language

Avoid jargon and long explanations. Present one task at a time and check for understanding. Explain unfamiliar words and concepts, or rephrase them in simpler language when needed

2. Offering multimodal learning options

Combine visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements — e.g., diagrams, role play, and real-life practice. Provide both written and verbal instructions.

3. Providing assistive tools

Encourage the use of text-to-speech apps, coloured overlays, or digital organizers. Technology helps young people compensate for specific challenges.

4. Creating supportive environments

Allow extra time for reading or writing. Avoid putting individuals on the spot to read aloud. Celebrate progress, not just accuracy.

5. Focusing on strengths

Identify what the young person *can* do well — creativity, oral expression, problem solving — and integrate these strengths into activities.

6. Collaborating with professionals

If learning difficulties significantly affect daily functioning, coordinate with special educators, psychologists, or vocational counsellors for assessment and tailored support.

What to avoid

- Correcting or criticizing spelling or writing errors in public.
- Overloading with written materials or long forms.
- Comparing performance with others.
- Mistaking literacy difficulties for low intelligence.
- Ignoring emotional reactions such as shame, frustration, or withdrawal.

Example from practice

A 19-year-old participant avoids filling out registration forms during a youth programme. The facilitator later learns he has dyslexia. The youth worker adapts by reading forms aloud, allowing him to respond verbally. As a result, the participant's engagement and confidence grow significantly, showing that small adjustments can make learning accessible.

With empathy, flexibility, and accessible materials, youth workers can help young people rediscover their confidence in learning. When the environment adapts to individual learning styles, every young person can succeed.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects the regulation of attention, impulses, and activity levels. It is not a matter of laziness or poor discipline — rather, it reflects differences in how the brain processes information, motivation, and external stimuli. ADHD typically appears in childhood but often persists into adolescence and adulthood, influencing academic performance, work behaviour, emotional regulation, and relationships. In youth work, ADHD may not be immediately recognised or misinterpreted as disinterest, defiance, or poor motivation, especially among NEET youth or young people with co-occurring mental health challenges.

Possible experiences and support needs

ADHD affect individuals in different ways. However, the core features usually include difficulties with attention, impulse control, and hyperactivity.

The condition is often divided into three subtypes:

1. **Predominantly inattentive presentation** – difficulty focusing, organizing tasks, or following instructions.
2. **Predominantly hyperactive-impulsive presentation** – restlessness, excessive talking, impulsive decisions, interrupting others.

3. **Combined presentation** – a mixture of both inattentive and hyperactive symptoms.

For many young people, ADHD also affects executive functioning — the set of cognitive processes responsible for planning, prioritizing, time management, and emotional control. These differences may contribute to frustration, academic struggles, and negative feedback from adults, which in turn may lower self-esteem and increase anxiety.

Possible indicators in youth work settings

Youth workers may observe the following characteristics in young people with ADHD:

- appearing forgetful or frequent loss of materials;
- trouble completing tasks or following through with instructions;
- difficulty sustaining attention during group discussions or repetitive activities;
- acting before considering possible consequences or interrupt others;
- restlessness, fidgeting, or frequent movement;
- emotional reactivity, irritability, or quick frustration;
- inconsistent performance — being highly capable one day and disengaged the next;
- avoidance of tasks that require sustained mental effort;
- low tolerance for boredom or waiting.

It is important to remember that these behaviours should not automatically be interpreted as intentional or oppositional, but may reflect differences in attention regulation, impulse control and information processing.

What to do – supportive approach

Youth workers can play a vital role in helping young people with ADHD manage their environment and develop coping strategies. Key principles include:

1. Structure and predictability

Establish clear, consistent routines. Start sessions on time, provide short agendas, and explain transitions in advance. Predictability helps reduce anxiety and impulsivity.

2. Short, engaging, and varied activities

Break long tasks into smaller steps. Use hands-on, interactive, or movement-based activities to sustain attention. Alternate between active and calm periods.

3. Positive reinforcement

Acknowledge effort rather than just results. Immediate, specific praise (“You focused well for the last 10 minutes”) reinforces motivation.

4. Visual supports

Use visual cues such as timers, checklists, or colour-coded materials. These external structures support attention and time management.

5. Individual flexibility

Allow for short movement breaks and flexibility in how tasks are completed (e.g., verbal rather than written responses).

6. Collaborate and refer

When attention or behaviour difficulties are persistent and significantly impair daily functioning, collaborate with counsellors, psychologists, or medical professionals. An interdisciplinary approach ensures accurate understanding and appropriate support.

What to avoid

- Labelling young people as “lazy” or “unmotivated”.
- Overloading them with long instructions or multiple tasks at once.
- Using punitive discipline for inattentive behaviour.
- Forcing prolonged stillness or silence.
- Expecting constant self-control without environmental adaptation.

Example from practice

During a youth skills workshop, one participant frequently interrupts and struggles to stay seated. Instead of reprimanding him, the facilitator adjusts the setting: group discussions are limited to 10-minute segments, activities include movement, and clear visual goals are provided. Within weeks, participation improves — the young person feels successful rather than disruptive.

ADHD does not reflect a lack of ability but a difference in how the brain works. With structure, encouragement, and small adaptations, young people with ADHD can thrive, learn effectively, and develop meaningful relationships. Youth workers who understand ADHD are better able to create supportive, inclusive environments in which young people can participate and succeed.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that may influence how a person perceives, processes, communicates, and interacts with

the world. Autism is not an illness or something that needs to be cured. It represents part of the natural diversity of human experience.

Autistic people are highly diverse. They may experience differences in social communication, sensory processing, information processing, emotional regulation, movement, or adaptation to their environment, but these differences appear in highly individual ways. No single communication style, behaviour, preference, strength, or support need applies to all autistic people.

Like all young people, autistic young people have individual strengths, interests, support needs, personalities, and goals. These may include, but are not limited to, strong memory, attention to detail, creative or systematic thinking, persistence, honesty, or extensive knowledge in particular areas. Strengths should not be assumed on the basis of autism, but recognised through getting to know the individual young person.

The term “spectrum” reflects the diversity of autistic experiences and support needs. Some autistic people require substantial support in several areas of daily life, while others live independently but may still encounter misunderstanding, sensory barriers, inaccessible communication, or environments that do not accommodate their needs.

In youth work, autism may remain unnoticed, particularly among girls and young women, young people whose characteristics do not match common stereotypes, and those who have learned to mask or suppress their natural responses in order to meet social expectations.

Masking may require significant effort and can contribute to stress, exhaustion, and anxiety for the young person, while also leading to unmet needs or the misinterpretation of their behaviour by others as “withdrawn” or “uncooperative.”

Possible experiences and support needs

Autism presents differently in every person. The following experiences may occur in different forms, combinations, and degrees, and should never be treated as a checklist that defines all autistic young people.

- **Communication differences:** A young person may find it difficult to interpret spoken language, indirect communication, irony, figurative expressions, emotional cues, or non-verbal communication, or may use these forms of communication differently. Some may prefer clear and direct language, while others communicate comfortably in more flexible or figurative ways. Communication preferences should be explored individually.
- **Different ways of experiencing social interaction:** Many autistic young people actively want friendships, relationships, and group participation. Some

may find it difficult to initiate interaction, interpret unspoken social expectations, navigate group dynamics, or maintain relationships. Others may prefer fewer, more predictable, or interest-based interactions. Eye contact and other forms of non-verbal communication may be experienced and used differently and should not be treated as measures of attention, honesty, or interest.

- **Focused interests and repeated patterns:** Particular interests, routines, movements, hobbies, or repeated activities may provide enjoyment, expertise, emotional regulation, identity, or predictability. Their meaning and importance vary between individuals.
- **Sensory processing differences:** A young person may be more or less sensitive to sound, light, touch, movement, taste, smell, temperature, pain, or internal bodily signals. Sensory input that is comfortable for one person may be distracting, painful, or overwhelming for another.
- **Different needs regarding predictability:** Some autistic young people benefit from clear plans, routines, or advance information, while others may be comfortable with greater flexibility. Unexpected changes may create uncertainty or distress for some, but the level and type of predictability required should always be identified individually.
- **Different ways of expressing and regulating emotions:** Emotions, stress, discomfort, or enthusiasm may be communicated in ways that other people do not immediately recognise. These may include changes in speech, movement, facial expression, interaction, activity level, or need for space. A young person's emotional expression should not be judged against a single expected social norm.

Autistic young people often develop strong interests and talents when given the right environment — they flourish in settings that respect their communication style and sensory needs. Autistic young people may be better able to pursue their interests and develop and express their skills and talents in environments that respect their individual sensory profiles, communication styles, preferences and support needs.

How support needs may become visible in youth work

The following observations may indicate that a young person is experiencing a barrier, uncertainty, sensory overload, communication difficulty, or unmet support need. They are not diagnostic signs, and they may also occur for many other reasons.

A youth worker may observe that a young person:

- prefers particular activities, interaction formats, roles, or social settings;
- interprets body language, tone of voice, humour, or indirect instructions differently;

- uses routines, familiar patterns, movements, or particular objects to support predictability or self-regulation;
- shows sustained or highly focused engagement with particular topics or activities;
- experiences discomfort or overload in noisy, bright, crowded, unpredictable, or highly stimulating environments;
- participates less, becomes quieter, communicates differently, or needs time away during demanding situations;
- becomes distressed when expectations, activities, or environments change without sufficient information or preparation;
- experiences a meltdown or shutdown when sensory, emotional, cognitive, or social demands exceed their current capacity.

A meltdown or shutdown is not deliberate misbehaviour or a “tantrum”. It may occur when a person becomes overwhelmed and temporarily has less capacity to communicate, process information, make decisions, or regulate their responses.

None of these behaviours should automatically be interpreted as rudeness, resistance, lack of motivation, lack of interest, or unwillingness to cooperate. Youth workers should explore what the young person may be experiencing and what changes could reduce barriers.

Supportive approaches

A neurodiversity-affirming approach recognises autism as a natural form of human diversity. The aim is not to make the young person appear less autistic, but to understand their experience, remove barriers, and provide support that enables safe and meaningful participation.

1. Identify individual communication preferences

Ask the young person how they prefer to receive information and express themselves. Where helpful, use clear, direct, and concrete language, allow additional processing time, and offer written, visual, spoken, or alternative communication options.

Do not assume that every autistic young person has difficulty with irony, abstract language, or verbal communication. Adapt communication according to the individual rather than according to the label.

2. Offer appropriate structure and preparation

Provide clear information about the activity, including what will happen, who will be present, how long it may last, and what choices are available. Written agendas, visual

schedules, reminders, or preparation for changes may be helpful for some young people.

Structure should be offered as support, not imposed as a universal requirement. Some young people may need detailed preparation, while others may prefer more flexibility.

3. Explore and reduce sensory barriers

Ask about individual sensory preferences and possible sources of discomfort. Where possible, reduce unnecessary noise, strong scents, glare, flashing lights, crowding, or other overwhelming input.

Offer access to quieter spaces, breaks, movement, sensory tools, or alternative ways of participating without requiring the young person to justify or publicly explain their needs.

4. Build on interests and strengths

1. Individual interests can provide meaningful routes into participation, relationships, learning, responsibility, and leadership. Youth workers can offer opportunities to use these interests without reducing the young person to a single topic or expecting them to share their expertise.

5. Support social participation without pressure

Offer different ways to join activities, communicate, collaborate, observe, or take breaks. Do not assume that reduced verbal participation or a preference for smaller groups means that the young person does not want connection.

Support peer understanding and address ableist language, exclusion, bullying, or pressure to conform. Promote respect and curiosity rather than pity or forced socialisation.

6. Collaborate with the young person and relevant supporters

The young person should be the primary partner in identifying what helps, what creates barriers, and what support is acceptable. Where appropriate and with their involvement, youth workers may also cooperate with trusted supporters, families, educators, psychologists, or other professionals.

Information should be shared only when relevant, necessary, and proportionate. Cooperation should support the young person's autonomy rather than allow other people to make decisions in their place.

7. Review and adapt support regularly

Preferences and support needs may vary across activities, environments, relationships, and periods of life. Youth workers should not assume that an adjustment that worked once will always be necessary or effective.

Regularly ask the young person what is working, what is difficult, and what should be changed.

What to avoid

Youth workers should avoid:

- forcing eye contact, physical contact, verbal communication, or social participation;
- treating eye contact as evidence of attention, respect, honesty, or engagement;
- using vague instructions without checking whether expectations are clear;
- punishing or suppressing harmless repetitive movements or stimming used for self-regulation;
- interpreting silence, withdrawal, delayed responses, or different emotional expression as defiance;
- assuming that all autistic young people need the same level of structure, sensory adjustment, or social support;
- making unnecessary changes without information or preparation when predictability is important to the young person;
- using rewards or pressure to make the young person hide natural autistic behaviours;
- discussing the young person's diagnosis or support needs without their involvement or a clear professional reason;
- focusing only on changing the young person instead of identifying barriers in the activity, communication, group, or environment.

Example from practice

During a youth leadership workshop, an autistic participant struggles when the group changes activities unexpectedly. Instead of insisting on immediate participation, the facilitator explains briefly the reason for the change, offers a written agenda, and allows a short break. The young person later re-engages and successfully presents their project — showing that inclusion depends more on adaptation than correction.

Autistic young people do not form a homogeneous group. Inclusive youth work therefore cannot rely on a standard set of autism-specific responses. It requires

attention to the individual young person's communication, sensory experiences, strengths, preferences, environment, and current support needs.

When youth workers listen, remove barriers, provide meaningful choices, and respect autistic ways of experiencing and communicating, young people have greater opportunities to participate, develop, and express their individuality.

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

Trauma represents a frequently undisclosed yet powerful influence on behaviour and functioning.

In this case there are hidden drivers of behaviour. Behaviour that professionals may interpret as “defiance,” “rule-breaking,” or “lack of cooperation” can actually be adaptive survival responses developed in response to earlier trauma.

The risk of re-traumatization is significant. Without awareness of a young person's trauma history, seemingly neutral environmental triggers—such as loud voices, certain topics of discussion, specific smells, or bright lighting—can activate traumatic stress responses.

Some young people with disabilities may have experienced repeated negative encounters with schools, medical systems, or social services. It is called institutional trauma. These experiences may create deep mistrust of institutions and authority figures.

For these reasons being informed of trauma responses is key to youth work in general.

Possible experience and support needs

Trauma is a psychological and emotional response to an event or series of events that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. It may result from experiences such as neglect, violence, sexual abuse, loss, war, forced migration, bullying, or chronic stress.

Trauma can be:

- acute (resulting from a single event),
- chronic (repeated or ongoing),
- or complex (arising from prolonged exposure to multiple traumatic circumstances, often beginning in childhood).

For many young people, especially those who are in a NEET situation and/or living with disabilities, trauma is an *unseen barrier* that affects motivation, concentration, social relationships, and trust in institutions.

In youth work, trauma often remains hidden because its symptoms can mimic other behavioural or emotional difficulties, such as apathy, aggression, or withdrawal. Understanding trauma is therefore essential for creating safe and supportive spaces where young people feel accepted, rather than judged or “managed”.

- Trauma is not defined by the event itself, but by the individual’s perception and emotional response to it.
- Young people who have experienced trauma often struggle with emotional regulation, trust, and a sense of safety.
- Reactions can vary widely depending on age, personality, past experiences and support networks.
- Trauma affects both body and mind: the stress response (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) becomes over activated and influences behaviour, learning, and relationships.
- In group or educational settings, trauma can lead to difficulties in concentration, frequent absenteeism, or conflicts with peers and authority figures.

Possible indicators in youth work setting may include

Trauma may manifest through emotional, behavioural, cognitive, or physical signs such as:

- emotional outbursts or mood changes,
- avoidance of certain people, situations, or topics,
- withdrawal, isolation, or loss of motivation,
- hypervigilance or constant feelings of unsafety,
- low self-esteem, hopelessness, or risk-taking behaviour,
- difficulties with concentration, participation, or task completion.

These reactions are often misunderstood as laziness, defiance, or disinterest, which may further increase stigma and exclusion if professionals are not trauma-informed.

What to do – trauma-informed approach

Youth workers can play an important role in creating environments that support safety, trust, participation, and wellbeing. A trauma-informed approach does not involve diagnosing trauma or asking young people to disclose traumatic experiences. It means recognising that past or ongoing adversity may influence how a young person responds to particular situations and adapting practice without making assumptions about the cause of their behaviour.

Key principles include:

Safety – Help create a calm, predictable, and respectful safe environment. Avoid judgement, pressure, or confrontation, especially when a young person appears during moments of distressed or overwhelmed.

Trust - Build trust gradually through consistency, respectful communication, and clear boundaries. Listen respectfully and take young people seriously.

Empowerment - Focus on strengths, choice, and participation. Support young people to express preferences, make decisions, and engage at their own pace.

Referral and support - Youth workers are not therapists. Youth workers should work within the scope of their role and competence. When a young person may need specialised mental health, medical, safeguarding, or social support, youth workers should follow the relevant referral procedures and, where appropriate, collaborate with qualified professionals.

What to avoid

- Asking intrusive or detailed questions about traumatic experiences.
- Assuming that a particular behaviour is necessarily caused by trauma.
- Minimising or comparing experiences (“Others had it worse”).
- Forcing disclosure, participation or emotional expression.
- Making promises that cannot be kept or taking on a “rescuer” role.
- Attempting to provide therapeutic support beyond one’s competence. Ignoring one’s own emotional responses or support needs — supervision, consultation and reflective practice and self-care are essential.

Practical example

A 20-year-old participant becomes easily frustrated and leaves group workshops abruptly. Instead of labelling this as “lack of motivation,” the youth worker recognises possible trauma triggers — loud noise, competition, or feelings of failure. The approach changes: sessions become shorter, structured, and include calm-down activities at the end. Over time, the participant begins to stay longer and engage more confidently.

A trauma-informed approach does not require youth workers to take on a therapeutic role. It requires them to respond to distress and disengagement with curiosity, respect, consistency, and awareness of professional boundaries. Such an approach can support participation, trust, and wellbeing.

. Many young people experience multiple, overlapping conditions, difficulties, identities, and support needs rather than a single clearly defined condition. Youth workers should

therefore avoid reducing a young person's experiences to one diagnosis or explanation and focus instead on the individual's expressed needs, strengths, circumstances, and preferred forms of support.

Co-occurring conditions and complex needs

1. Multiple co-occurring conditions

Often, a young people may experience more than one condition, difficulty or source of disadvantage. Psychological, behavioural, and physical conditions may co-exist. Youth workers should avoid assuming one diagnosis explains all presenting behaviours or difficulties. For example, anxiety might coexist with ADHD, trauma responses, or depression.

2. Diagnostic overshadowing

Professionals sometimes attribute mental health symptoms solely to a disability. For instance, a child with an intellectual disability may show signs of depression or PTSD, but these are overlooked because the behaviour is assumed to be part of their disability. Emotional and psychological needs should be considered in their own right rather than automatically attributed to the person's disability.

3. Substance use risks

Young people with disabilities may be excluded from substance use prevention programmes due to assumptions that they are "not at risk." Prevention, information and education programmes should be accessible to and inclusive of these young people, taking account of the barriers and risk factors they may be exposed.

4. Internalizing vs. externalizing symptoms

Mental health conditions can present differently between individuals and may be influenced by gender, culture, disability, communication style, social expectations and personal experience. Distress may be expressed through withdrawal, irritability, changes in behaviour, physical complaints or other verbal and non-verbal signs. Youth workers need to interpret behaviours within context, rather than automatically labelling them as conduct issues or attention-seeking.

5. Intersectional vulnerabilities

Young people whose identities or circumstances place them at the intersection of multiple forms marginalisation —such as LGBTQ+ young people, refugees, or people from ethnic minority groups — may experience layered barriers. These may include discrimination, systemic obstacles, and internalised stigma, which can exacerbate mental health and wellbeing. Cultural context is important: as young people may understand, communicate and express distress indifferent ways.

6. Behaviour as communication

Behaviour that is perceived as challenging may be related to unmet needs, distress, communication differences, or environmental barriers, rather than

deliberate misconduct. Possible contributing factors can include sensory sensitivities, environmental stressors, anxiety, or transitions. Understanding the root cause helps in creating appropriate interventions rather than punitive responses.

Practical strategies for uncertain situations facing hidden and unexplored conditions

Youth workers frequently encounter situations where a young person's behaviour, emotional reactions, or needs are unclear. The young person may not have a formal diagnosis, may be reluctant to talk about personal experiences, or may simply react differently from what the facilitator expects. These uncertain situations often arise when working with young people in a NEET situations or young people with hidden or less visible conditions.

The aim is not to diagnose, but to respond safely, empathetically, and professionally even when the cause of behaviour is unknown. A flexible, trauma-informed, and person-centred approach allows youth workers to act ethically and effectively without overstepping professional boundaries.

Key principles

When faced with uncertainty, youth workers should follow five guiding principles:

1. **Stay calm and observe** – Avoid reacting impulsively. Notice patterns: when and where the behaviour appears, what triggers it, and how it changes over time.
2. **Assume there is a reason behind every behaviour** – Even when it seems irrational or oppositional, behaviour communicates something: fear, confusion, stress, or need for control.
3. **Prioritise safety**– Ensure both physical and emotional safety for everyone present. De-escalate situations by lowering your voice, if it supports the situation slowing your speech, and maintaining non-threatening body language.
4. **Avoid making assumptions**– Don't label or guess ("maybe it's autism," "she's depressed"). Instead, describe observations neutrally and refer to professionals when needed.
5. **Reflect and consult**– Seek supervision or team reflection. Discuss challenging cases confidentially to gain perspective and share responsibility.

Grounding and emotional regulation techniques

When a young person becomes overwhelmed, help them ground themselves in the present moment:

- Suggest slow breathing ("inhale for 4, exhale for 6").

- Encourage physical grounding (“feel your feet on the floor,” “hold a small object”).
- Use sensory tools — stress balls, calming scents, quiet music, or gentle movement.

Clear and predictable communication

Provide short, specific instructions and avoid abstract language. For example, instead of saying “*Calm down*,” say “*Let’s take a short break; you can sit here quietly for two minutes*.” Predictability builds trust and reduces anxiety.

Establish safe spaces and routines

Designate calm zones in the centre or activity space where young people can withdraw temporarily without being punished. Maintain clear routines and visible schedules.

De-escalation in moments of crisis

If a young person becomes agitated or aggressive:

- Stay at an appropriate physical distance.
- Use a calm, neutral tone.
- Avoid confrontation or power struggles.
- Validate feelings without approving harmful actions (“I can see you’re upset — let’s find a safe way to handle this”). After the situation, follow up individually and, if necessary, document and report it.

Collaborative problem-solving

Involve young people in identifying what helps them feel safe and focused. Questions like “*What usually helps when this happens?*” or “*How can we make next time easier for you?*” encourage self-awareness and ownership.

Professional networking and referral

When a youth worker suspects deeper psychological or social issues, collaboration with psychologists, counsellors, or social services ensures adequate care. Early referral prevents escalation and builds a network of support.

What to avoid

- Overreacting emotionally or matching the young person’s intensity.
- Ignoring warning signs such as isolation, aggression, or withdrawal.
- Forcing immediate disclosure or explanation.

- Taking behaviour personally.
- Attempting to provide therapy without proper training.

Example from practice

During a creative workshop, a participant suddenly withdraws, avoids eye contact, and refuses to continue. The youth worker does not press for explanation but offers quiet space and water, saying, “You can take a few minutes — we’ll continue when you’re ready.” Later, the participant shares that loud noises reminded them of a past traumatic event. The facilitator then adjusts the environment in future sessions. A small act of calm respect prevented escalation and built trust.

When in doubt, choose **calm, safety, and empathy**. Youth workers do not need to have all the answers — they need to create a stable and respectful space where young people feel seen and supported. Flexibility, reflection, and teamwork are the strongest tools in uncertain situations.

6.3. Objectives and guidelines for working with young people with additional support needs

Within a Youth House, objectives related to social relationships, independence, life skills, employability, self-confidence, mental well-being, and self-awareness should be understood as interconnected aspects of holistic youth development. A Youth House is not merely a physical space, but a supportive environment that promotes belonging, participation, personal growth, and structured learning opportunities.

Supporting social relationships means creating opportunities for peer interaction, cooperation, teamwork, and shared responsibility. Through group activities, creative workshops, community projects, and informal social spaces, young people strengthen communication skills, trust, and conflict-resolution competences.

Independence develops through increasing participation in decision-making, planning activities, managing responsibilities, and taking ownership of projects. By providing guidance rather than control, youth workers support autonomy, problem-solving, and gradual transition toward adult self-management.

Life skills development includes practical everyday competencies such as communication, teamwork, organisation, digital literacy, emotional regulation, and conflict management. Workshops, mentoring, and experiential learning activities help young people practice these skills in safe and supportive settings.

Preparation for the labour market extends these competencies into professional contexts through career exploration, mentoring, volunteering, project-based learning, and introductory work experiences. Young people are encouraged to recognise their

strengths, explore career pathways, and build confidence regarding future employment.

Strengthening self-confidence and mental well-being requires a psychologically safe and supportive environment. Positive feedback, supportive relationships, creative activities, and achievable challenges can support young people in developing resilience, emotional regulation, and a stronger sense of self-worth.

Finally, developing self-awareness supports all other developmental goals. Through reflection, mentoring, and experiential learning, young people gain deeper understanding of their strengths, needs, values, and aspirations, supporting healthier decision-making and long-term personal development.

Key areas for different actors in the Youth house

The following key areas are drawn from our years of experience running youth houses. We aim to highlight the core objectives for all participants—young people, professionals, and organizations—so that the purpose and focus of each role are clear and actionable.

1. Key objectives for young people at the youth house: Competences and life integration

The core objective for young people with additional support needs is to support their transition from childhood to independent and productive adulthood. This involves fostering social inclusion, self-determination, practical skills, and mental well-being.

Social relationships and well-being: Developing peer networks and social competencies is central. Inclusive programs encourage friendship-building, mentorship opportunities, and participation in group activities, providing protective factors against social isolation and loneliness commonly experienced by disabled youth.

For young people with additional support needs, these interactions are often limited to their school environment, and once they finish school, they may lose regular contact with peers of the similar age. A youth house provides a valuable space where they can meet new people, form friendships, navigate conflicts, and experience first relationships, all of which are essential aspects of social and emotional development during this stage of life.

Self-determination and self-awareness: Youth should be supported to become primary agents in their own lives, developing self-awareness, self-advocacy, and emotional literacy. Programs incorporate activities that teach recognition of personal triggers, coping strategies, and confidence in expressing individual needs, promoting both mental health and empowerment.

Please note that for many young people, engaging in self-reflection can be very challenging due to their condition or simply because they have never been asked to do it before. Young people with autism, for example, often face difficulties with abstract thinking and reflecting on their own experiences. As a result, they need structured support to learn self-reflection from the very beginning, starting with concrete and guided activities before progressing to more abstract forms of introspection.

Life skills and labour market preparation: Practical skills are essential for independence. Guidelines emphasize training in areas such as financial literacy, daily living tasks, and technology use, alongside vocational activation. Programs focusing on those exemplify structured approaches to bridging education with employability, preparing young people to enter the labour market with confidence.

Youth with additional support needs often lack basic life skills, such as time management, shopping, handling paperwork, cooking, and personal organization. Without developing these foundational skills, sustainable employment becomes unrealistic. Therefore, structured programs that teach and reinforce these competencies are essential to prepare young people for independent living and meaningful participation in the workforce.

2. Key objectives for professionals: Empowerment and ethical practice

Professionals play an important role as allies and facilitators. The focus is not on providing therapy but on inclusive mentorship and growth-oriented engagement.

Create safe and inclusive spaces: Ensure that the youth house is physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe, where all young people feel welcome, respected, and free to express themselves.

Offer diverse opportunities for development: Provide a range of activities and programs that support social, emotional, and practical skill development, enabling youth to pursue personal goals and explore new interests.

Promote youth leadership and participation: Actively involve young people in decision-making and program design, offering leadership opportunities that foster self-confidence, responsibility, and a sense of ownership over their environment.

Promoting leadership can help young people build confidence and become more actively engaged in their communities. It is important that all youth have opportunities to take on leadership roles, while keeping in mind their individual support needs. Both over expectation and under expectation can be harmful. Youth workers need the skills and knowledge to identify challenges that are just beyond the youth's current competencies—so they can grow from the experience—without making tasks overwhelming. Young people should also be actively involved in co-creating these scenarios and opportunities, ensuring that leadership experiences are meaningful, empowering, and tailored to their needs.

Engage in self-reflection and address biases: Continuously reflect on personal attitudes, assumptions, and potential prejudices, and work to minimize their impact on interactions and decision-making with youth.

Even when we are committed to supporting young people with additional support needs, we may still experience hidden or overt resistance to certain behaviours. It can be challenging to remain fully present when a young person is experiencing distress, anger, frustration, or difficulties with personal hygiene. These reactions are natural and human. What is essential, however, is recognizing these feelings and managing them professionally, ensuring that our responses remain supportive, empathetic, and consistent with the youth worker's role.

Model positive behaviour and maintain boundaries: Serve as a consistent role model through professional conduct, ethical behaviour, and clear boundaries, balancing warmth and support with adult authority.

3. Key objectives for organisations: Safe and sustainable integration

Organisations must embed inclusion as a core component of their operations, rather than treating it as an optional or peripheral activity. Sustainable, accessible, and empowering frameworks ensure long-term impact, but this requires realistic planning and resource management.

Be realistic with resources: Take into account available physical spaces, human resources, knowledge, and funding. Avoid overcommitting to initiatives that are unrealistic or excessively demanding for the organisation. Ensuring both physical and psychological safety for young people and professionals should be a priority. Measures include anti-hate policies, comfort or sensory regulation spaces, and cognitively accessible communication tools like easy-to-understand communication guidelines.

Make gradual steps toward inclusion: Inclusion should be implemented incrementally, allowing for learning, adaptation, and long-term sustainability rather than attempting immediate full-scale integration. Make your plans and assessments with active participation of young people with disabilities as co-creators ("*Nothing about us without us*").

Assess needs within existing realities: Identify which aspects of accessibility needs can be addressed within the organisation's current capacity, and remain open to supporting additional needs as resources and capabilities grow.

Provide adequate support for youth workers: Ensure staff have access to supervision, appropriate resources, training, and professional development, so they can perform their roles effectively and sustainably.

Sustainability and Resource Management: Long-term viability requires dedicated accessibility/accommodation budgets to prevent support costs from undermining

program resources. Additionally, organizations should develop inter-agency networks linking youth services, healthcare, and social support to provide wraparound assistance, particularly during key transitional phases.

6.4 Professionals and skills

Teamwork, supervision, and interdisciplinary support in practice

The principles, professional roles, and possible partners involved in collaboration are introduced in Chapter 5.4. This section focuses on how internal teamwork, case reflection, external cooperation, professional consultation, local partnerships, and supervision can be organised in everyday youth work practice.

The young person as an active partner

Teamwork and case coordination should begin with the young person's own goals, preferences, strengths, experiences, and support needs. Professionals should not make plans around a young person without involving them in an accessible and meaningful way.

Before involving other professionals or institutions, the youth worker should discuss with the young person:

- what they would like to achieve;
- what support they believe would be helpful;
- which people or services they already know or trust;
- who they agree should be involved;
- what information may need to be shared;
- how they would like to participate in meetings and decisions;
- how and when the support plan will be reviewed.

The young person may participate directly in meetings, prepare their views in advance, use an accessible communication method, invite a trusted supporter, or choose another way to express their preferences. Their involvement should be adapted to their communication needs and comfort level.

Information shared during teamwork or case discussions must be relevant, necessary, and proportionate. Only the minimum information required for the specific professional purpose should be shared with authorised people. The young person should be informed about what will be shared, with whom, and why, unless doing so would create an immediate safeguarding risk.

The extended professional team in individual work

No youth worker can independently respond to every emotional, educational, social, health, accessibility-related, or practical difficulty. Effective support therefore depends on teamwork among professionals with different competences, experiences, and perspectives.

Different youth workers or mentors may also connect more successfully with different participants. Collective reflection can reveal strengths, barriers, risks, and possible solutions that one professional may not recognise alone.

Even when one youth worker coordinates the individual support process, the wider team may contribute through:

- structured case reflection;
- joint planning;
- consultation on difficult or unfamiliar situations;
- observations from different professional perspectives;
- review of accessibility and participation barriers;
- coordination of support and follow-up actions.

Team discussions should remain focused on the young person's agreed goals. They should not become informal discussions about the person or include private information that is irrelevant to the support process.

For each agreed action, the team should clarify:

- what the young person wants to achieve;
- what support or adjustment is needed;
- who is responsible for each action;
- what information is necessary;
- how the young person will be involved;
- when progress and decisions will be reviewed.

External collaborators as part of the support network

External professionals may work within the organisation or in schools, health and mental health services, social services, employment offices, community organisations, or other institutions.

Youth workers may help the young person to:

- identify relevant professionals and services;
- understand what each service can and cannot provide;
- establish initial contact;
- prepare for appointments or meetings;
- communicate their goals and support needs;
- understand information received from institutions;
- follow up agreed actions.

The youth worker should support the young person in navigating professional systems rather than take control of the process. Cooperation should strengthen autonomy and access to support, not create unnecessary dependence.

The foundations of collaboration may emerge when a young person first enters the programme. Some young people are referred by employment offices, schools, health institutions, social services, or other organisations. Others join through parents, relatives, friends, or their own initiative.

A referral source should not automatically determine future cooperation. Youth workers should explore:

- whether the young person is already connected to relevant services;
- how the young person experiences and views those services;
- whether continued cooperation is useful and safe;
- what new contacts may be needed;
- what role the young person wants each professional or institution to have.

Before cooperation begins, the young person, youth worker, and relevant partners should clarify:

- the purpose and scope of the cooperation;
- the roles and responsibilities of each person involved;
- how communication and referrals will be initiated and maintained;
- whether the cooperation will be occasional or ongoing;
- what information may be shared and with whom;
- how the young person will participate in decisions and follow-up?

All cooperation should follow the principle: “Nothing about the young person without the young person.”

Creating local networks and community partnerships

Youth organisations should actively map the services, institutions, organisations, and informal resources available in their local environment.

Practical steps include:

- researching the general environment and youth-related services available locally;
- identifying institutions and organisations that may support individual participants or contribute to activities;
- learning about each organisation's role, mandate, eligibility criteria, resources, limitations, and referral procedures;
- identifying accessible and reliable contact persons;
- understanding how young people experience and perceive the institution;
- agreeing on clear communication and referral routes;
- approaching people within organisations who can support outreach and cooperation;
- maintaining relationships through regular communication, joint activities, mutual assistance, and professional exchange;
- reviewing whether the cooperation produces meaningful benefits for young people.

Youth centres are not self-contained systems capable of resolving every participant's situation independently. With the young person's involvement and consent, cooperation with external institutions may be essential. Building trust and sustainable cooperation between organisations can take time and requires consistent relationship-building.

Relevant community partners may include:

- municipalities and local authorities;
- educational institutions;
- health, mental health, and social services;
- employment providers and local businesses;
- Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and self-advocacy groups;
- cultural institutions, libraries, and sports organisations;
- civil society organisations;
- local media;
- informal community groups and volunteers.

Community cooperation should not only connect young people to services. It should also create opportunities for them to participate, contribute, take visible roles, and experience belonging beyond the youth programme. Young people need to feel that they are part of something larger than the programme itself, while communities benefit from recognising young people as active contributors.

Mentoring and team meetings

Team meetings should have a clear purpose, structure, facilitator, time frame, and record of agreed actions. Without sufficient structure, meetings may drift into unfocused discussion or result in unclear responsibilities.

Questions for individual or programme-related reflection may include:

- What are the young person's own goals and priorities?
- What do they want to learn or change?
- What strengths and existing resources can be built upon?
- What barriers are affecting their participation?
- What support or adjustment is needed?
- How will the young person participate in the decisions?
- How will we support the learning process?
- How will progress be recognised?
- What should happen if the current approach is not working?
- How will achievements be acknowledged and built upon?
- Who is responsible for each next step?
- When will the plan be reviewed?

Only relevant information should be recorded. Records should clearly distinguish:

- the young person's own views;
- factual observations;
- professional assessments;
- agreed decisions;
- assigned responsibilities;
- follow-up actions.

Extended professional team meetings

Extended professional team meetings or pedagogical conferences may be organised periodically and may involve youth workers, mentors, programme leaders, relevant

external professionals, volunteers where appropriate, and the young person or a person chosen to support them.

Their purposes may include:

- reviewing progress towards the young person's goals;
- reviewing participants' situations and identifying necessary interventions;
- identifying barriers and necessary adjustments;
- coordinating professional support;
- planning programme and project activities;
- strengthening interdisciplinary coordination;
- reviewing risks and safeguarding responsibilities;
- sharing relevant observations and professional perspectives;
- agreeing on responsibilities and follow-up actions;
- evaluating whether the current support remains useful and proportionate.

Participation should be limited to people who have a clear role in the process. The young person should be informed about the purpose of the meeting, who will attend, what will be discussed, and how decisions may affect them.

Where appropriate, the young person should be invited to participate directly. Where direct attendance would not be suitable or desired, their views should be collected beforehand and clearly represented during the discussion.

Professional consultation, training, and accessibility reviews

Youth work teams may use different forms of specialist support, including:

- individual case consultation;
- consultation on communication, behaviour, learning, or emotional regulation;
- coaching on accessible and plain-language communication;
- guidance on Universal Design for Learning;
- training led by specialists or people with lived experience;
- joint review of activities and learning materials;
- physical accessibility audits;
- sensory and environmental accessibility reviews;
- communication and information accessibility reviews;
- digital accessibility reviews;
- consultation on assistive technologies or individual adjustments;
- review of safeguarding, crisis-response, or referral procedures.

A structured network or pool of trusted specialists can help organisations access targeted expertise when unfamiliar or complex support needs arise.

Consultation and training should not focus only on individual participants. They should also help the organisation identify and remove environmental, methodological, communication, and attitudinal barriers.

Supervision

Regular supervision provides a protected professional space in which youth workers and mentors can reflect on:

- professional dilemmas;
- emotionally demanding situations;
- boundaries and attachment dynamics;
- team relationships and conflicts;
- uncertainty and feelings of excessive responsibility;
- possible bias or unhelpful assumptions;
- safeguarding and ethical concerns;
- signs of stress, emotional overload, or burnout.

An external supervisor can provide an independent perspective and help the team recognise patterns that may be difficult to see from within everyday practice. Supervision can support the resolution of complex situations, reduce burnout risk, and strengthen reflective practice.

Supervision should be confidential, professionally facilitated, and clearly separated from staff performance management. Teams should work with supervisors they trust and with whom they can openly discuss uncertainty, mistakes, and emotionally difficult experiences.

Extended professional teams in project-based learning

External experts may also contribute to project-based learning. Mentors and participants should jointly identify:

- what the project aims to achieve;
- what participants want or need to learn;
- which tasks require additional knowledge or support;
- which external people or organisations could contribute;
- how participants will take part in making contact and organising the cooperation.

Youth workers can model initiative and confidence by supporting participants in reaching out to external collaborators, organisations, or public figures. They can help participants prepare invitations, questions, presentations, and professional communication.

For example, if participants decide to invite a well-known stand-up comedian to contribute to a project, the mentor may facilitate contact and help participants prepare questions, present themselves professionally, and reflect on the experience, regardless of whether the invitation is accepted.

External experts involved in projects may also contribute to evaluating participants' achievements and competences. With the young person's agreement, this feedback may support certificates, portfolios, recommendation or reference letters, and future education or employment pathways.

Examples from practice

Example A – Coordinated collaboration

A young person shows signs of suicidal ideation. The youth worker remains with the young person, provides immediate support within their professional role, follows the safeguarding procedure, contacts the safeguarding officer, and activates appropriate psychological or clinical support. The young person is informed and involved in the next steps as much as possible. The relevant professionals coordinate follow-up support over the following days.

Example B – Isolated decision-making

A youth worker tries to manage the situation alone because the young person has asked them not to tell anyone. The worker provides emotional support but does not consult the safeguarding lead or activate appropriate professional support. Important signs of risk are missed, the situation escalates, and both the young person and the youth worker are placed at greater risk.

Systemic and attitudinal issues related to professionalism

A recurring criticism in international and local analyses is that attitudes remain a major barrier to inclusion. Even where physical accessibility and financial resources are available, prejudices, fear and low expectations often prevent disabled youth from participating meaningfully. Another challenge is the prevalence of “apparent integration”, where integrated education exists only in form: young people with additional support needs are placed in mainstream settings without appropriate support, often harming their self-esteem and reinforcing exclusion.

Professionals also note that assistance systems frequently operate in parallel structures. Special education support may occur outside the mainstream programme, signalling that disabled youth do not belong and unintentionally contributing to segregation. Cooperation between mainstream and specialised professionals is often limited, and joint planning is rare.

Low participation of disabled youth in non-formal education reflects these systemic issues. Negative social attitudes, family overload, limited self-confidence among young people and the perception that only highly educated or highly independent participants can take part all contribute to exclusion. Many professionals also feel unprepared to work with disabled participants, which may lead to anxiety, avoidance or unintentional exclusion.

Inclusive youth work therefore relies on well-structured professional systems, including interdisciplinary teams, continuous training and ongoing self-assessment at both individual and organisational levels.

Addressing these barriers requires well-structured professional systems, continuous training, reflective supervision, and ongoing self-assessment at both individual and organisational levels. The principles of interdisciplinary collaboration are described in Chapter 5.4, while their practical implementation is presented earlier in this chapter under “Teamwork, supervision, and interdisciplinary support in practice.”

Youth workers' education and preparation

Well-prepared youth workers are essential for genuine inclusion. Their professional development should combine general youth-work and facilitation competences with practical knowledge of additional support needs, inclusive methodologies, and ethical practice.

Core competences

Importantly, professionals do not need rare or exceptional skills, but they must be open-minded, reflective awareness, able to identify strengths and be comfortable facilitating respectfully diverse groups. Respectful communication and the ability to create emotionally and physically safe environments remain fundamental.

Professionals do not need “extraordinary” skills, but rather **mindful and open-minded** ones.

Disability- and accessibility-related knowledge

Training should address disability awareness, accessibility, discrimination, systemic inequality, ableism, and the social and human rights-based understanding of disability. Youth workers also benefit from learning about intersectionality, including how

additional support needs may interact with gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, poverty, migration, and other life circumstances.

Practical knowledge is also essential. For example, with the increasing presence of neurodivergent participants, youth workers need practical skills that help them navigate communication differences, support those who struggle with figurative language and make effective use of visual tools such as schedules, symbols, and emotion cards. They should also be able to adapt activities and respond constructively to distress or behaviour that may communicate an unmet need.

However, expectations should remain appropriate for non-formal education—youth workers are not expected to become clinical specialists!

Fundamental professional attitudes and skills

Core professional attitudes include people-centeredness and respect for each person's dignity and individuality, replacing pity with respect. Continuous self-reflection is also required, as professionals must examine their own unconscious biases and recognise the presence of ableism — the privileging of non-disabled norms — in their work. Another key competence is responsiveness to multiple needs, defined as the ability to respond flexibly to unpredictable reactions and diverse individual needs within a group. Maintaining high expectations is equally important; professionals should communicate a “you can do it” attitude and avoid reinforcing learned helplessness.

Principle / Competence	Description	Concrete examples
People-centeredness	Focus on the individual and respect each participant's competences, preferences and support needs.	A youth worker has a small conversation with a young person in a wheelchair, similar to the chats they have with other participants, to get to know them as a person before beginning activities, ensuring they can participate fully rather than being limited by assumptions about their support needs.
Self-reflection and impartiality	Continuously examine personal biases and challenge ableism in one's own practice.	After noticing they unconsciously call on young people with disabilities more often, a facilitator adjusts their practice to ensure that young people without disabilities are equally included in discussions and decision-making.
Responsiveness to multiple needs	Ability to respond flexibly to multiple and sometimes unpredictable needs within a group.	During a group activity, a youth worker supports a neurodivergent participant who is overstimulated while also ensuring that other participants remain engaged, feel safe, and are not distracted or excluded by the situation.

Principle / Competence	Description	Concrete examples
Empowering approach	Maintain a “you can do it” attitude; avoid reinforcing learned helplessness.	Instead of taking over a task for a youth with cognitive difficulties, the worker provides guidance and encouragement, allowing them to complete it independently with appropriate support.

European model and its limitations

ETS competence models for trainers and youth workers¹

The ETS competence models provide broad and flexible frameworks for high-quality youth work and non-formal education across the European Union. Their purpose is to support professional development, training design, and reflective practice. However, because the models are intentionally general, they require adaptation to specific contexts and target groups.

A significant limitation of the frameworks is the absence of disability-specific competencies. Although the models emphasise diversity and responsiveness to learners’ needs, they provide little concrete guidance on accessibility, adapted methodologies, conditions for participation, assistive tools, sensory considerations, or safety planning for young people with additional support needs.

This gap is particularly important in the current European context, where approximately one in four adults in the EU lives with some form of disability. When disability is treated only as a general aspect of diversity, important inclusion and support needs can easily remain overlooked.

For this reason, the frameworks should be further adapted and contextualised for accessible and inclusive youth work. Embedding disability-specific considerations within existing competence models would strengthen their inclusive potential and better reflect the realities of contemporary youth work across Europe.

Relevant strengths of the ETS models

Some elements remain highly valid to youth with additional support needs:

- learner-centeredness and flexibility
- ability to identify and overcome barriers

¹ You may find the ETS models here: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/training-and-cooperation/trainercompetencedevelopment/trainercompetences/> and <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/training-and-cooperation/tc-rc-nanetworktcs/youthworkers-competence-model/>.

- support for inclusion and solidarity
- creating safe, supportive environments
- empathetic, relationship-based practice
- flexibility in selecting and adapting methods
- empowerment and participatory approaches.

Area	Concept	Description	Concrete example in youth work
Philosophical / Ethical Foundation	A human right-based approach informed by the social model of disability	Recognising that disability results from societal and environmental barriers, not individual deficits.	Rearranging a room to remove obstacles so a young person in a wheelchair can fully participate.
	Trauma-informed approach	Ensuring safety, reliability, and choice; being aware of past trauma and emotional triggers.	Explaining session rules, offering options to participate silently or verbally, and allowing breaks if needed.
Pedagogical / Learning design	Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	Designing activities accessible to all from the start, using multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression.	Providing instructions both visually and audibly, with tactile tools for participants with additional support needs.
	Individualised adaptations	Adjusting pace, materials, and expectations to fit individual needs.	Allowing extra time for writing tasks or offering verbal or visual alternatives for responses.
	Flexible facilitation	Willingness to adapt or change an activity in real time if it doesn't fit the group's support needs; embracing ambiguity.	During a game, the youth worker notices a participant struggling and modifies the rules on the spot to allow participation for everyone.
	Choice and self-determination	Allowing participants to make decisions about	Youth choose whether to lead, observe, or co-create an activity,

		how they engage and express themselves.	selecting the role that fits their comfort and ability.
	Co-creation with young people with additional support needs	Involving youth in planning and shaping activities to ensure meaningful participation.	Participants suggest activity for a music workshop to ensure everyone can play instruments or follow along.
Communication / Relations	Active listening (Coaching)	Focusing on understanding participants' motivations and feelings rather than giving advice.	Listening attentively to a frustrated participant, reflecting back their feelings, and validating their experience before suggesting solutions.
	Accessible communication	Using plain language, symbols, visuals, and structured instructions.	Providing pictograms and simplified written instructions alongside verbal guidance for activities.
	Peer support and cooperation	Encouraging participants to support and learn from each other collaboratively.	Pairing a neurodivergent young person with a peer buddy to assist in a collaborative robotics project.
Behaviour / Safety management	Behaviour management	Interpreting challenging behaviour as communication of an unmet need, not a disciplinary issue.	Redirecting a young person displaying disruptive behaviour to express frustration through drawing or verbal sharing instead of punishment.
	Sensory awareness	Adjusting the environment to reduce sensory overload and meet individual needs.	Providing a quiet corner with soft lighting and headphones for participants who need a sensory break.
Planning / Monitoring	Individual development plans (IDPs)	Documenting participants' goals, preferences, adaptations, and	Staff consult each participant's IDP to ensure instructions, environment, and

		support strategies for structured guidance.	support are tailored to their needs.
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These offer some foundation but require further disability-focused elements to ensure they are implemented in practice. Thus we suggest alterations bellow.

Specific considerations and procedures for adapting ETS models

A disability-inclusive competence model should be based on a clear philosophical framework and collaborative, horizontal attitudes. Key principles include:

- **The social model of disability:** Recognising that barriers come from the environment and societal attitudes, not the individual.
- **Human rights-based perspective: Promoting the rights, autonomy, participation and equal opportunities of persons with disabilities, while addressing systemic injustice.**
- **Attitude-based training:** Challenging ableism, prejudice, and micro aggressions.
- **Person-centred approach:** Acknowledging and responding to each individual's unique support needs.
- **Safe challenge:** Promoting growth and learning opportunities without compromising wellbeing.

Methodology and programme design for inclusive practice

Inclusive methodology ensures participation is built into the design from the outset, not added later. Beyond appropriate attitudes, professionals also require methodological and specialised knowledge to ensure accessibility and safety. Inclusive youth work requires that participation, accessibility, and safety are considered from the outset. Professionals need a solid understanding of the human right-based approach informed by the social model of disability, and trauma-informed principles to create environments where all young people can engage meaningfully. Programmes should be flexible and adaptable, allowing staff to respond to the diverse needs, preferences, and motivations of participants in real time. Ethical, people-centred attitudes, reflective practice, and collaboration with interdisciplinary teams underpin the practical competencies applied in activities. The following table illustrates how these principles connect to the methodology and how they translate into concrete actions for inclusive youth work with participants with additional support needs.

Reviewing the existing ETS competence model of youth workers

To the existing 9 competences, a 10th was added to extend the ETS framework specifically for disability-inclusive youth work. This new competence emphasises the accessibility of programmes, procedures, environments, and communication, ensuring that all aspects of youth work—from planning and facilitation to evaluation—are consciously designed to include young people with support needs. This extension explicitly addresses gaps in the original model, which assumes general diversity awareness but does not provide guidance on practical inclusion, safety, or anti-ableist practices.

It functions as a cross-cutting complement to the existing nine competences, integrating ethical, pedagogical, relational, and environmental considerations that are essential for meaningful participation of young people with additional support needs.

ETS Competence	Support needs considerations
1. Facilitating individual and group learning in an enriching environment	Adapt learning to support needs using Universal Design for Learning (UDL), provide multi-sensory access, recognise individual strengths, ensure emotional and psychological safety, offer predictability and clear structure, manage transitions, and create safe, supportive spaces that assume competence and respect person-first principles.
2. Designing programmes	Include accessibility and inclusion from the outset, plan flexible pacing and alternative formats, visual aids, sensory adjustments, co-create activities with young people with disabilities, perform needs assessments to tailor learning objectives, and apply ethical principles like “ <i>Nothing About Us Without Us</i> .”
3. Organising and managing resources	Ensure physical, digital, and sensory accessibility, provide assistive tools, allocate staff to support diverse needs, anticipate and mitigate risks, plan budget and time for adaptations, and maintain environments that reduce barriers to participation.
4. Collaborating successfully in teams	Work in interdisciplinary teams (youth workers, special educators, therapists, mentors with disabilities), coordinate roles to support individual needs, share knowledge about disabilities, consult specialists when needed, and engage families or support networks while respecting autonomy.
5. Communicating meaningfully with others	Use accessible communication methods (plain language, symbols, visual supports), practice active listening including non-verbal cues, consult participants on preferred terminology, demonstrate empathy and emotional intelligence, and foster trust in diverse groups.

ETS Competence	Support needs considerations
6. Displaying intercultural competence	Recognise disability as a dimension of diversity, challenge stereotypes and ableism, respect individual experiences and intersectionality (e.g., LGBTQ+ youth with disabilities), and foster inclusive group dynamics that promote equity.
7. Networking and advocating	Build partnerships with disability organisations, families, and support networks; advocate for accessible programmes, inclusive policies, and safe participation; raise awareness about barriers and rights of young people with disabilities.
8. Developing evaluative practices to assess and implement appropriate change	Include accessibility and inclusion criteria in evaluation, gather feedback from young people with disabilities, reflect on barriers, assess effectiveness of adaptations, apply reflective practice, and adjust programmes to improve participation and outcomes.
9. Being civically engaged	Support participation of young people with additional support needs in decision-making, promote empowerment and critical thinking, raise awareness of social and systemic barriers, enable youth-led initiatives, and encourage advocacy skills among participants.
10. Ensuring accessible and safe learning in international youth work	Plan for inclusive physical, digital, and sensory environments, manage emotional and psychological safety, apply de-escalation strategies when needed, integrate UDL principles across international contexts, embed safety and accessibility in all programme design, and maintain ethical, person-centred, anti-ableist approaches.

While the existing competence models offer a broad and flexible framework, they also have limitations. They emphasise diversity and responsiveness to learners' needs but contain few explicit references to disability-specific competencies such as accessibility planning, adapted methods or safety considerations. This gap is significant, in the European context approximately one in four adults lives with some form of disability. When disability is treated only as a general aspect of diversity, practical aspects such as accessible communication, assistive tools, sensory considerations or environmental adaptations may be overlooked. Integrating disability-specific perspectives into existing competence frameworks would therefore strengthen their inclusive potential without requiring youth workers to become clinical specialists.

Organisational responsibilities

Inclusive youth work requires organisational commitment, not only individual attitudes. Organisations must ensure interdisciplinary teamwork, accessible communication and recruitment practices, budget planning for accessibility measures, representation of

disabled professionals, and clear ethical guidelines supported by reflective supervision and ongoing professional training. Relevant training pathways may include inclusive methodologies, ethics education, competence frameworks such as the ETS model, and practical safety-planning tools.

Key areas:

- interdisciplinary teamwork and horizontal support systems
- meaningful representation of professionals with lived experience of additional support needs at different organisational levels
- accessibility and accommodation planning
- accessible communication and recruitment practices
- ethical guidelines, professional boundaries, and reflective supervision
- continuous self-assessment and organisational development

Organisations are also responsible for complying with relevant legal and professional standards. For example, the Slovenian PUM-O+ framework requires mentors to hold specialised qualifications or equivalent recognised competencies in order to ensure consistent and inclusive professional practice. These requirements help maintain supportive, relational, and ethically grounded youth work environments.

Ethics in non-formal youth work with young people with additional support needs

Inclusive youth work should be grounded in:

- dignity and respect
- autonomy and participation
- anti-ableist practice
- emotional and physical safety
- confidentiality and professional boundaries
- non-judgmental communication
- collaborative decision-making

For more detailed guidance, see Chapter 5.2, *Ethics in Practice*. Continuous self-screening and organisational self-assessment

Continuous self-screening and organisational self-assessment are essential for maintaining safety, inclusion, and disability awareness in youth work. Reflective practice helps professionals and organisations evaluate biases, preparedness, accessibility barriers, and organisational structures, ensuring that support remains responsive to the diverse needs of young people.

Disability-inclusive youth work also requires coordinated collaboration between different professionals, including educators, special educators, assistants, psychologists, and youth workers. Clear role distribution, interdisciplinary cooperation, and continuous professional development help create more consistent and supportive environments for young people with additional support needs

Overall, inclusive youth work depends on reflective attitudes, methodological competence, ethical awareness, organisational commitment, and ongoing evaluation. These elements together create conditions in which young people with additional support needs can participate safely, meaningfully, and with dignity.

Additional practical materials related to the topic are provided in the Annexes, such as a concise practical guide for youth workers and mentors, including practical tools and everyday support strategies.

6.5. Physical and technical conditions

Creating physical and technical conditions for an inclusive Youth House requires combining legal standards with principles of accessibility, universal design, and trauma-informed practice. Beyond basic compliance, youth spaces should aim to provide flexible, safe, and accessible environments that support meaningful participation for young people with additional support needs.

In practice, this includes barrier-free access, flexible room layouts, accessible restrooms, sensory-friendly spaces, visual supports, and communication tools adapted to different needs. Spaces should be easy to navigate, predictable, and adaptable for both group and individual activities. Quiet areas and low-stimulation zones are especially important for young people experiencing anxiety, sensory sensitivities, trauma-related difficulties, or emotional overload. Accessible communication may also include simplified instructions, pictograms, AAC tools, visual schedules, and other supportive communication methods.

Youth Houses should support a broad range of learning and participation opportunities through multipurpose rooms, digital technologies, creative workshops, outdoor spaces, and experiential learning activities. Creative materials, developmental games, movement-based activities, and digital tools can strengthen participation, emotional regulation, communication, cooperation, and practical skill development.

Physical space is not a neutral backdrop but an important part of the developmental process. Predictable, emotionally safe, and welcoming environments increase young people's willingness to participate, build relationships, express themselves, and take positive risks. Through everyday experiences within such spaces, young people

gradually develop confidence, autonomy, social skills, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Not all organisations can immediately achieve ideal accessibility conditions. However, reducing barriers and continuously improving participation conditions should remain a central principle of inclusive youth work. Even small environmental adaptations can significantly improve safety, inclusion, and engagement for young people with accessibility needs.

Area	Minimum standard	Practical example (Minimum)	Extended version
Physical environment – Entrance & circulation	Step-free access to main rooms; ramps for wheelchair users; wide pathways	A ramp allows wheelchair users to enter the main hall; pathways are clear of obstacles to reach activity rooms.	Step-free access to all rooms including balconies and basements; accident-proof ramps; automatic door openers; clear circulation markings
Physical environment – Wayfinding & signage	Basic signage with clear text; visible directional signs	Signs above doors show room names in large, readable font; arrows indicate direction to key areas.	Signs with pictograms and Easy-to-Read text; Braille numbers on doors; Braille map of building; consistent colour coding for zones
Physical environment – Interior accessibility	Door handles, light switches, and elevator buttons at reachable height; standard furniture	Elevator buttons reachable from wheelchair; tables allow a wheelchair to fit under them.	Adjustable door handles, light switches, and elevator buttons; height-adjustable furniture; free space for mobility devices; ergonomic arrangement for conference/dining areas

Physical environment – Sanitary facilities	Accessible toilets near main activity areas; grab bars	A toilet stall near the main hall has horizontal grab bars for support and basin at proper height to wash hands.	Automatic disinfectant devices; horizontal metal grab bars; height-adjustable toilet seats; sufficient turning space for wheelchairs
Sensory & emotional conditions – acoustics & lighting	Minimized background noise; standard lighting	Activity rooms away from loud machinery; lights positioned to avoid glare.	Induction loops and high-quality microphones in plenary/reception areas; adjustable lighting to reduce glare; accommodate hearing and visual sensitivities
Sensory & emotional conditions – Comfort corners / Quiet zones	Designated quiet area for self-regulation	A corner with a soft chair and low stimulation where youth can sit if overwhelmed.	Fully equipped "safer spaces" with sensory toolkits (fidget toys, weighted blankets, noise-cancelling headphones, bean bags, calming elements like lava lamps)
Sensory & emotional conditions – Predictability tools	Visual schedules or posted timelines	Wall poster showing the day's schedule with simple symbols.	Detailed visual schedules, timelines, and social stories displayed prominently for transitions and daily routines
Technical digital conditions – Adaptive computer rooms	Basic computer access; headphones available	One computer with headphones available for individual use.	Screen-reading software; Braille printers and keyboards; webcams for sign language; adjustable workstations

Technical digital conditions – Library of technologies	&	Limited assistive tools	A few switches or communication boards available to borrow during sessions.	Dedicated "library of technologies" for borrowing/testing tools: eye-tracking software, communicators (e.g., Go Talk), specialized mice, special joysticks
Technical digital conditions – Digital accessibility	&	Websites, registration forms, e-learning platforms meet basic accessibility	Forms online in simple text; readable on a standard screen reader.	Full WCAG 2.1 AA compliance; digital documents text-based for text-to-speech; visual communication, choice and break cards and emotional thermometers for non-verbal communication
Safety emergency protocols – Alarms	&	Standard fire alarms, doorbells	Audible alarms installed in all main activity areas.	Accessible alarms with vibrating and flashing devices for deaf or hard-of-hearing participants (e.g., pillow vibrators)
Safety emergency protocols – Hazard mitigation	&	Remove obvious tripping hazards	Cables taped down or removed; floors kept clear of clutter.	All electrical cables covered or routed away from paths; consistent floor markings for visual guidance; ensure wheelchair navigation
Safety emergency protocols – Emergency procedures	&	Basic evacuation plan	Evacuation map posted on walls; staff familiar with general procedure.	Risk assessments co-designed with young people with disabilities; evacuation protocols tailored to mobility and communication needs;

			staff trained in individualized support during emergencies
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This table provides a practical baseline that youth centres can aim to meet, while continuing to improve accessibility over time according to available resources and local regulations.

In this sense, the Youth House becomes a holistic developmental infrastructure: a place where spatial design, accessibility measures, technological tools, regulatory standards, and youth-work principles converge to enable young people to explore, learn, self-regulate, and grow while developing social relationships, life skills, self-awareness, confidence and readiness for labour market. These provide important foundations for successful adult life.

6.6 Methodology and programme structure

The methodology and programme structure for inclusive youth work are built on the social model of disability and a human rights-based approach that prioritises the support needs, strengths, and agency of every young person.

The Youth House methodology is grounded in non-formal learning, individualisation, and holistic development ensuring that activities enhance personal, social, digital, vocational, and life-management competences, while supporting autonomy, inclusion, and wellbeing. The environment is participant-centred, developmentally appropriate, and universally accessible, enabling meaningful learning for young people of with diverse support needs.

Diverse activity framework

Programmes combine competence-based, developmental, and recreational activities to support engagement, personal growth, and socialisation. For many young people, fun, peer connection, and informal interaction are just as important as formal learning, since communication, cooperation, emotional regulation, and frustration management are often developed most naturally through shared activities and everyday interactions.

Creative, recreational, and experiential activities—such as arts, crafts, theatre, movement, storytelling, or collaborative games—provide opportunities for self-expression, relationship-building, and identity development. Even informal moments, such as conversations, shared meals, or group games, can support learning and social participation when guided intentionally by youth workers.

Developmental and social-emotional learning also takes place through structured workshops focused on self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, communication, and problem-solving skills. Workshops may cover diverse themes, but should always include clear goals, structured facilitation, and accessibility adaptations that enable meaningful participation for young people with additional support needs.

Skills such as communication, digital literacy, organisation, money management, and teamwork often require more intentional guidance, structured practice, and supportive learning environments to support independent living and future employability.

2. Competence-based learning structure

As stated earlier, having planned, intentional activities with clear developmental direction is essential, even when they appear light, playful, or informal. Based on initial assessments and research, four main competence areas can be identified as the core focus of our work.

All activities are designed to develop one or more of these core competences, while naturally contributing to other areas when relevant. These four domains therefore provide the primary framework guiding programme design and facilitation.

Area	Competence	Challenges Faced	Development Directions
Personal and developmental competences	Self-regulation, communication, emotional literacy	Difficulty identifying and expressing emotions; impulsive reactions; communication barriers; low confidence	Activities that support emotional awareness (storytelling, creative expression); guided reflection; structured communication exercises; supportive

			feedback from mentors
	Executive functioning (planning, decision-making, problem-solving)	Difficulty organising tasks, managing time, or completing multi-step activities; need for external structure of guidance	Step-by-step task planning; project-based activities requiring decision-making; visual planning tools and routines; gradual increase of responsibility
	Independent living skills (daily routines, self-care, community mobility, financial basics)	Limited practical experience with everyday tasks; reliance on family or institutions; uncertainty in independent situations	Practical workshops (cooking, budgeting, travel planning); real-life simulations; supported practice in daily routines; guidance on personal responsibility
Social and community competences	Collaboration through group projects	Difficulty working in teams; misunderstandings in communication; social anxiety	Small-group projects with clearly defined roles; cooperative games; facilitated group reflection on teamwork

	Peer mentoring and cooperative problem-solving	Limited experience supporting peers; uncertainty in group decision-making	Peer mentoring structures; problem-solving tasks in pairs or small groups; encouraging mutual support
	Participation in community-based learning (local initiatives, volunteering)	Limited exposure to community environments; fear of unfamiliar situations	Guided participation in local initiatives; volunteering opportunities; preparation sessions and reflection after activities
Vocational and practical competences	Hands-on project tasks aligned with interests	Difficulty identifying interests or strengths; lack of experience applying skills	Interest-mapping activities; project work based on participants' preferences; practical learning through doing
	Work simulations, maker-style activities, digital creation	Limited workplace experience; difficulty understanding expectations and responsibilities	Simulated work environments; maker activities and digital projects; mentoring on work habits and task completion
	Development of soft skills relevant for supported employment	Challenges with punctuality, teamwork, communication with supervisors	Role-play of workplace situations; structured routines; feedback and reflection on behaviour and responsibilities

Recreational and wellbeing activities	Creative workshops (art, music, crafts)	Limited opportunities for self-expression; fear of failure in creative tasks	Guided creative workshops; process-focused facilitation; encouraging experimentation and expression
	Movement and sensory-friendly physical activities	Sensory sensitivities; low physical confidence or coordination	Adapted movement activities; sensory-friendly environments; gradual participation in physical exercises
	Leisure projects selected by participants (gaming clubs, gardening, outdoor trips)	Limited access to meaningful leisure activities; social isolation	Participant-led leisure projects; supported organisation of clubs and outings; encouragement of peer interaction and shared interests

All competences are integrated into project cycles where participants explore real-life challenges and produce concrete outputs (events, products, services, presentations).

3. Structure with self-directed learning

The programme structure should offer multiple levels of involvement to support both stability and autonomy. It is the job of the youth worker to balance it out. There are inevitable advantages of structure. A clear framework with established rules and youth worker guidance provides the safety net needed for example for risk-taking and boundary-pushing young person in a controlled environment. On the other hand, the advantages of self-direction, giving the participant meaningful choices (e.g., choosing roles like leader, participant, or observer) fosters self-determination and a sense of being the "primary causal agent" in their own lives.

Element of Self-Directed Learning	Actions by youth workers	Practical example
Choice and autonomy	Provide options between activities, roles, or projects; encourage participants to make decisions about their learning.	A participant chooses whether to contribute to a cooking workshop, a digital design project, or a gardening activity.
Goal ownership	Support youth in identifying personal goals and linking them to programme activities.	A young person interested in gaming sets a goal to learn basic digital design and creates graphics for a youth event poster.
Reflection and self-assessment	Encourage participants to reflect on their progress, feelings, and learning experiences.	Young people use simple reflection tools such as emoji cards, short audio recordings, or drawing to describe what they learned after an activity.
Role flexibility	Allow participants to choose different levels of engagement (leader, organiser, participant, observer).	During a group project, one youth coordinates tasks, another documents the process with photos, while another focuses on a practical task.
Exploration and experimentation	Provide safe opportunities to try new skills and interests without fear of failure.	A participant experiments with music production during a creative workshop even if they have never used such tools before.
Access to resources	Ensure materials, tools, and information are accessible so participants can explore topics independently.	Youth can borrow tablets, assistive technology, or creative tools to work on their own small topics.

		projects during open activity time.
Mentor support without over-control	Mentors guide, encourage, and ask reflective questions rather than directing every step.	Instead of giving instructions, a youth worker asks: “What do you think would be the first step to organise the event?”
Peer learning	Encourage participants to support each other and share knowledge or skills.	A participant who is confident with computers helps another young people create a digital presentation.
Safe structure for independence	Provide predictable routines while leaving space for participant-led decisions.	The day has a clear schedule, but youth can choose which group to join during the main activity block.

4. Individual learning plans (ILPs)

The ILP is the central tool for structuring personalised progression. A tailored approach ensures that the learning process responds to the specific developmental stage and interests of the participant.

It is important to emphasise that people with the same diagnosis or disability may have different support needs, personality, competences, and or learning styles. Young people with similar diagnoses, or disability or similar life experiences—such as depression, autism, or history of trauma —can differ greatly in their experiences, coping strategies, motivations, and ways of learning.

Professionals may sometimes make the mistake of grouping participants based on diagnosis, disabilities or experiences and applying the same approaches to everyone. However, this diagnosis-based generalisation is problematic and can lead to ineffective or even harmful practices. Each young person must be recognised and supported as an individual, with attention to their unique strengths, support needs, preferences, and progress pace.

Therefore, inclusive youth work requires continuous observation, dialogue, and adaptation, ensuring that methods, expectations, and support are tailored to the individual rather than assumed based on diagnostic categories.

Individual learning plans are drawn up by interdisciplinary teams involving the young people, parents, and specialists, and are revised regularly (e.g. every six months) to track progress. Individual transition plans are a specific version designed for critical transition points, such as moving from high school to adulthood or employment; these plans focus on professional orientation and independent living. Obviously these are in line with *"Nothing About Us Without Us,"* youth should be co-creators of their own learning objectives and programme rules.

Steps of individual learning plan:

Step	What it includes	Concrete practical examples
1. Initial assessment	✓ Mapping strengths, interests, learning styles, sensory needs, communication preferences ✓ Functional assessment (mobility, cognition, social interaction) ✓ Identification of barriers and required adaptations or assistive technologies	Youth worker has an introductory meeting and informal activities with the participant to understand interests (e.g., gaming, cooking, art). Observation during first group sessions to see how the young person communicates and interacts. Short questionnaire or visual preference cards to identify sensory sensitivities (noise, lights). Checking if the participant needs tools such as noise-cancelling headphones, pictograms, screen readers, or mobility support.

2. Goal setting	✓ Short-term and long-term goals formulated with the participant ✓ Competence-based objectives tied to activities ✓ Layered goals: developmental, educational, vocational, recreational, wellbeing	Young person and mentor agree on goals such as: speaking once during group discussion, managing a small budget during a cooking project, or presenting a project result. Long-term goal might include preparing for a supported internship or gaining confidence in public spaces. Goals are written in simple language and visually displayed for the participant.
3. Learning pathway design	✓ Selection of suitable projects and activities ✓ Identification of learning methods: visual, tactile, experiential, digital, peer-supported ✓ Defined support system (mentor, assistant, therapist if relevant)	Participant joins a gardening project because they prefer hands-on learning. Activities include visual step-by-step instructions and demonstration rather than long explanations. Peer mentor supports them during group tasks. If needed, therapist or special educator advises the youth worker on communication strategies.
4. Adaptations and supports	✓ Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles ✓ Task breakdown, flexible timing, alternative outputs, sensory accommodations ✓ Use of assistive communication, digital tools, structured routines	Instead of a written reflection, a participant records an audio message or draws their reflection. Tasks are divided into small steps with visual checklists. Breaks are allowed if sensory overload appears. Visual schedule is placed on the wall to structure the day. Tablets with speech-to-text or communication apps are available if needed.

5. Monitoring and evaluation	✓ Weekly mentor check-ins ✓ Self-reflection tools adapted for cognitive and communication needs ✓ Evidence of progress through portfolios, project artefacts, and competence rubrics ✓ Regular adjustments of the ILP	Short weekly conversation or visual “mood and progress” cards to discuss how the participant feels about activities. Photos of completed projects are collected in a portfolio. Mentor and youth review goals monthly and adjust them if the tasks are too easy, too difficult, or interests have changed.
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5. Personalisation and situational adaptation

A personalised methodology provides:

- High engagement and intrinsic motivation due to choice-based projects
- Skill development at each participant’s optimal pace, reducing frustration
- Stronger self-efficacy, as tasks are achievable yet challenging
- Improved inclusion, since adaptations enable active participation in group work
- Greater functional relevance, with real-life projects supporting independent living
- Holistic progress, integrating cognitive, emotional, social, and physical dimensions
- Measurable competence gains through structured assessment and ongoing mentoring.

Personalisation ensures that each young person experiences success, autonomy, and meaningful participation—key protective factors for long-term wellbeing and social integration.

The hallmark of a high-quality programme is its responsiveness to situational needs rather than strict adherence to a fixed curriculum. Professionals must be prepared to make last-minute individual adjustments—for example, providing extra time, offering sensory regulation tools, or using alternative communication formats—while maintaining the youth’s dignity and avoiding negative attention. This approach reflects reasonable accommodation, balancing support without overprotecting participants, reinforcing unhelpful habits, or relying on outdated or dysfunctional methods.

Flexibility in facilitation is essential. If an activity is not effective or participants’ energy and engagement levels are low, youth workers should have the authority to adapt or

change the agenda immediately to suit the group's needs. The priority is active participation, meaningful involvement, and developmental progress, rather than simply completing a predetermined curriculum. This requires aware, trained, and reflective professionals who can continuously assess and respond to the dynamic needs of each participant and the group as a whole.

6. Regularity and predictability

For many young people, particularly neurodivergent young people such as those with autism, predictability can be a core element of safety and comfort. Clear routines and consistent structures may help reduce anxiety, support self-regulation, and enable meaningful participation. Visual schedules and timetables may also be helpful. Displaying a clear sequence of activities can help young people to anticipate what comes next, providing orientation and reducing stress during transitions. If any changes occur, youth workers need to be prepared to hold the space and support participants' reactions. While maintaining the planned schedule may be helpful, occasional alterations can become learning opportunities when guided carefully. Regular check-ins, repeated exercises, and stable daily patterns create a sense of security and allow participants to take ownership of their engagement. Transition management is equally important. Tools such as "5-minute alerts," transition tunes, or visual countdowns can support young people in moving between activities, maintaining focus and minimizing disruption or distress.

Key elements of a predictable and supportive environment include:

- Consistent daily structure and predictable routines
- Flexible project blocks interwoven with recreational and wellbeing activities

This creates a balance between learning, rest, and social connection, mirroring the supportive ethos of an inclusive, need-responsive environment.

6.7. Recruitment and involvement

Recruitment and involvement of young people with disabilities, neurodivergent young people, young people with mental health needs, or other support needs should never be understood as a single intake moment. It is a continuous, relational, and adaptive process that begins long before formal enrolment and continues throughout participation. In inclusive youth work, the real task is not simply to "fill places" in a programme, but to create conditions in which young people can recognise that participation is meaningful for them, enter voluntarily, and remain involved in ways that strengthen autonomy, belonging, competence, and voice. This chapter presents recruitment and involvement as a structured yet flexible process, rooted in accessibility, trust, co-creation, and sustained support.

Recruitment as outreach, trust-building, and social-cultural animation

Young people with additional support needs are often not reached through standard youth work communication. Some remain socially isolated, discouraged by previous institutional experiences, excluded through inaccessible communication, or unaware that a programme is relevant to them. Recruitment therefore needs to be active, multi-channel, and relationship-based.

A strong recruitment strategy combines several pathways. Institutional referrals from schools, counsellors, social workers, health professionals, employment services, and community organisations can help identify young people who may benefit from inclusive youth programmes. At the same time, participation must remain voluntary, with referrals serving as invitations rather than obligations.

Families are also an important route into participation, particularly for young people with high support needs. Building trust with families helps address concerns related to safety, transport, stigma, or previous negative experiences while still respecting the young person's autonomy and choices.

Voluntary self-application should remain accessible and straightforward. Application procedures should use plain language, clear visual structure, and accessible formats so they do not unintentionally exclude young people with cognitive, sensory, communication, or digital-access barriers.

In inclusive youth work, recruitment is not simply a marketing activity but a process of outreach, dialogue, and trust-building. Many young people who have experienced exclusion or lost trust in institutions need supportive conversations and meaningful human connection before they feel ready to participate.

The first contact: from intake to meaningful onboarding

The first interactions after contact are often decisive. Whether the young person arrives through a referral, family encouragement, outreach activity, or self-application, the initial phase should communicate three core messages: you are welcome here, you are not reduced to your diagnosis, your disability or your experience and your participation will be shaped with you, not for you.

An initial interview or onboarding conversation is an important step. This conversation should be strengths-based and person-centred. Instead of focusing narrowly on deficits, diagnoses, or "problems to be managed," youth workers should assume competence and explore interests, aspirations, motivations, existing skills, fears, previous experiences, and practical barriers to participation. A young person should be seen first as a person with preferences, talents, and goals, not as a case. This is especially important for those who have repeatedly experienced being spoken about rather than spoken with.

The onboarding process should also clarify expectations in a transparent and accessible way. The young person needs understandable information about what the programme is, what participation involves, what support is available, what the basic rules are, and what remains voluntary. Clear explanation reduces anxiety, supports informed consent, and helps prevent later misunderstandings. For some participants, it may be useful to spread onboarding across several shorter meetings rather than one formal session.

A helpful next step is the co-creation of an individual development or involvement plan.²This can be called an IDP, personalised support plan, or another locally appropriate term, but its function is the same: to create a living roadmap that links the young person's goals with realistic forms of participation and support. Ideally, the plan is developed by an interdisciplinary circle that includes the young person and, where relevant and appropriate, family members, youth workers, educators, social workers, therapists, or other professionals. The plan may include personal, social, emotional, educational, creative, civic, or vocational goals. It should also identify barriers, support needs, and existing strengths.

At this stage, youth workers often act as resource brokers. The youth work setting cannot and should not do everything alone. Some young people will need additional services beyond the competence or mandate of the programme: mental health care, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, legal support, benefits advice, specialist education, housing assistance, or labour market support. Mapping these services early helps avoid unrealistic expectations and builds a more coherent support pathway. Good recruitment does not end with “yes, you can join”; it continues with “let's understand what you need to participate meaningfully.” The organisation should also realistically assess the level of support it can provide and identify when referrals to other professionals are necessary. It is equally important to openly acknowledge and communicate any areas that fall outside its scope, ensuring these limitations are clearly discussed and appropriately considered.

The lifecycle of involvement

Meaningful participation develops through a sequence of stages, but these stages are not rigid or strictly linear. Young people may move forward, pause, regress, or need to revisit earlier steps. The process is best understood as a cycle of introduction, assessment, planning, participation, monitoring, and redesign.

The introduction phase is about creating a safe first experience. For some young people, this means becoming familiar with the physical space, the staff, the group culture, and the routine before being expected to engage actively. Team-building exercises, positive check-ins, informal conversations, visual orientation tools, peer buddy systems, and small low-pressure activities can reduce anxiety and support

² (Colley, 2003)

rapport. The aim is not immediate performance but the gradual building of psychological and relational safety.

The next step is **individual needs assessment**. The question is not only “what diagnosis does the young person have?” but “what helps or hinders this young person’s participation in this environment?” This means looking at emotional wellbeing, communication preferences, sensory processing, physical accessibility, daily routines, social confidence, family context, transport issues, digital access, relevant trauma history and environmental barriers. A needs assessment is not a label; it is a practical tool for planning participation.

On the basis of this assessment, an involvement plan is co-created with the young person. The principle “*Nothing About Us Without Us*” must be operational here, not just cited. Young people should influence decisions about their goals, pace, preferred activities, support arrangements, and forms of expression. Ownership matters. A plan that is professionally perfect but disconnected from the young person’s own motivations is unlikely to work. During the individual needs assessment, youth workers apply elements of motivational interviewing and strengths-based conversation to explore the young person’s values, aspirations and fears.³ The involvement plan then translates this understanding into concrete forms of participation: which activities the young person will try, how often they will attend, and which supports will be in place.

Participation itself may begin with one-to-one support, especially if the young person has low confidence, communication barriers, strong anxiety, or limited prior experience in group settings. Individual mentoring can create a bridge into wider participation. Over time, however, inclusive youth work should foster group participation, because peer relationships, collective learning, friendship, mutual recognition, and social capital are among its greatest strengths. Group activities, creative workshops, collaborative projects, community-based learning, youth-led actions, and informal peer spaces all contribute to belonging and development. Additionally, individual work places a significant strain on organisational financial and human resources, while relying exclusively on one-to-one activities can also be counterproductive for the young person’s development.

Regular monitoring is essential if participation is to remain meaningful. Monitoring should not be reduced to administrative reporting. It should involve dialogue with the young person about what is working, what feels difficult, what has changed, and what support is needed next. Formal reviews every six months can be helpful, but informal feedback loops are equally important. Observation, self-reflection tools, easy-to-use questionnaires, mentoring notes, and periodic review of the individual plan can all contribute to a better understanding of progress.

³ (Miller & Rollnick, 2013)

Redesign is a normal and necessary part of the process. Young people's lives change, and a good involvement plan changes with them. Goals may evolve; barriers may increase or decrease; confidence may grow; crises may occur; educational or labour market opportunities may appear. Participation should therefore be responsive rather than fixed. Redesign can involve changing activity types, adjusting support intensity, revising goals, involving new partners, or preparing transitions into employment, education, volunteering, or community leadership.

Balancing structure and autonomy

One of the central professional tasks in recruitment and involvement is finding the right balance between structured and self-directed participation. Too much structure can become controlling and infantilising. Too little structure can create insecurity, confusion, or exclusion, especially for young people who rely on predictability.

Structured opportunities are often particularly important for younger participants, for those with intellectual disabilities, for many neurodivergent young people, and for anyone whose participation is supported by routine and clarity. Structured participation may include guided workshops, stable timetables, repeated rituals, clear transitions, visual schedules, explicit expectations, and adult facilitation that reduces ambiguity. These structures can create safety, reduce cognitive overload, and help participants build confidence.

At the same time, self-directed opportunities are equally important, especially for older youth and those ready for greater ownership. Youth-led projects, affinity groups, peer mentoring, open studio or workshop time, co-designed events, and roles as facilitators, trainers, or ambassadors all support autonomy and agency. Such opportunities allow young people to move from participation as attendance to participation as influence. This is a significant shift. It positions young people not merely as recipients of support, but as contributors, organisers, and emerging leaders.

Research on self-determination theory shows that when young people experience autonomy, competence and relatedness, their intrinsic motivation and engagement increase significantly⁴. A Youth House that combines both forms avoid the extremes of rigid programming on the one hand and chaotic "anything goes" on the other.

The key is not choosing one model over the other, but intentionally combining them. A well-designed programme offers enough scaffolding to make participation possible, while also leaving room for experimentation, authorship, and choice. This balance is especially important when working with young people who have repeatedly experienced either rigid control or chaotic neglect. The organisation's working style, routines, resources, and other structural factors all influence the types of activities that can be offered, as well as the balance between structured programmes and autonomy-

⁴ (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

based approaches. These approaches should therefore be balanced consciously and aligned with the organisation's actual capacities and funding conditions.

Working with diversity in support needs

Recruitment and involvement strategies must be sensitive to the fact that young people with additional support needs are not a uniform group. The supports that make participation possible for one young person may be irrelevant or inadequate for another.

Young people with physical disabilities may require barrier-free access, transport solutions, adapted equipment, flexible scheduling, personal assistance, or activity redesign that removes environmental obstacles. Young people with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties may need easy to understand language, visual supports, shorter instructions, repetition, and gradual orientation to routines. Neurodivergent young people may benefit from clear transitions, low-sensory spaces, explicit social expectations, and the possibility to step back without penalty. Young people with trauma histories, emotional distress, or mental health needs may require trust-building, predictable relationships, de-escalation competence from staff, and environments that avoid shame and unnecessary pressure.⁵

What matters professionally is not treating adaptation as an exception, but as a normal part of inclusive programme design. The aim is not to make everyone participate in the same way, but to make meaningful participation possible without stigma.

Managing challenging behaviours is an integral part of this work and must be approached from a developmental and relational perspective rather than a purely disciplinary one. Many young people in a NEET situation have experienced trauma, instability, discrimination or chronic stress; what appears as aggression, withdrawal or defiance is often a strategy for self-protection or a response to environments that have historically been unsafe for them⁶. Effective practice combines clear and fair boundaries with empathy, de-escalation skills and opportunities for repair. Youth workers need competencies in conflict resolution, trauma-informed practice within the boundaries of their role and emotional self-regulation. Reflective supervision and team-based reflection on challenging situations can help reduce the risk of burnout and support professionals in responding reflectively rather than reactively⁷.

Expanding the framework: areas that increasingly matter

The basic recruitment and involvement pathway can and should be expanded in response to emerging realities.

⁵ (Kapp, 2020; Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013)

⁶ (Herman et al., 2015)

⁷ (Banks, 2010)

One important area is digital inclusion. Youth work is no longer only face-to-face. Online synchronous activities, asynchronous forums, and blended models can widen participation for young people who face mobility barriers, fatigue, anxiety, stigma, or geographical isolation. However, disability, poverty, and limited digital literacy can create barriers to digital participation. Inclusive recruitment therefore increasingly includes digital access, accessible platforms, plain-language online communication, and support in using digital tools. Gamified and interactive formats may also support participation and emotional learning, when used carefully and accessibly.

A second important aspect of recruitment and involvement is the integration of creative and arts-based approaches as alternative entry points. Many young people express themselves more easily through image, movement, performance, making, or sensory exploration than through direct verbal communication. Therefore, creative forms of expression should be incorporated wherever possible in recruitment processes, initial interviews, and early participation in youth house activities. This may be particularly relevant for young people with speech difficulties or those who struggle to articulate their thoughts.

Offering theatre methods, improvisation, visual arts, music, tactile media, and craft-based activities can make programmes more engaging and attractive, helping to spark initial interest. Beyond this, these approaches can also serve as pathways into deeper participation, supporting self-regulation, advocacy, and identity development over time. They are especially valuable in situations where trust is low or where conventional, conversation-based approaches may create pressure or exclusion.

A third area is **economic security and social entrepreneurship**. For many young people with additional support needs, inclusion is incomplete if it stops at social participation and ignores financial independence. Youth work increasingly contributes to transitions towards vocational learning, supported employment, entrepreneurship, and hybrid work opportunities. Recruitment processes should therefore not only ask “what activities interest you?” but also “what future do you want, and what support do you need to move towards it?”

A fourth area is **rights, justice, and democratic participation**. Involvement is not only about joining activities; it is also about being recognised as a citizen with rights. Inclusive youth work should help young people understand their legal rights, report harmful practices, participate in decision-making, and contribute to policy discussions that affect their lives. Rights-based communication and accessible participation processes are part of this.

A fifth area is **participation during crises**. The Covid-19 pandemic made clear that young people’s right to be heard is often among the first things to disappear in emergencies. Inclusive youth work should therefore build crisis-proof participation models in advance: hybrid communication channels, trusted relationships, flexible

contact structures, and ways for young people to shape responses during disruption, disaster, or institutional closure.

A sixth area is the **whole-family and intergenerational perspective**. The participation of a young person with disabilities is often deeply connected to the wellbeing of family members and carers. Youth work cannot replace family support, but it should recognise this ecology. Trauma-informed family support, cooperation with carers, and, where appropriate, intergenerational activities can strengthen long-term inclusion and prevent unnecessary isolation or institutionalisation.

The youth workers' role

. Recruitment and involvement require well-developed professional competences from mentors and youth workers. They need to listen attentively, communicate clearly, recognise strengths, identify barriers, build trust across differences, coordinate with other professionals, and sustain young people's motivation over time. This work also demands emotional resilience and reflective capacity, as it often involves uncertainty, changing levels of engagement, and repeated setbacks.

It can place a significant emotional and psychological burden on professionals, particularly when working with young people who have experienced trauma, exclusion, or difficult life situations. Maintaining consistent engagement, patience, and a supportive attitude can be challenging, especially when participants appear disengaged, unresponsive, or difficult to connect with. For this reason, ongoing reflection, supervision, and peer support are essential to help professionals process these experiences and sustain a constructive, respectful approach in their work.

The youth worker and the mentor is not merely an organiser of activities. In this context, the mentor is also an animator, bridge-builder, advocate, translator between systems, and guardian of participation. They help the young person interpret possibilities, connect needs with supports, and remain engaged even when confidence is low or progress is uneven. Just as importantly, they help organisations remain open, accountable, and responsive.

Conclusion

The concept of social-cultural animation offers a unifying framework for understanding all these elements. As Šarlija (2014) summarises, social-cultural animation is not marketing in the commercial sense but a process of awakening, supporting and organising people so they can recognise their own needs, express their own interests and co-create environments that respond to them. In the context of a Youth House, this means that outreach, initial interviews, individual plans, group activities and partnerships with institutions are all part of a broader effort to “re-animate” young people's desire for learning, participation and social contribution. Animation does not end when a young person enrolls; it continues throughout their participation, especially for those who arrive with low motivation and little faith in themselves. Over time,

through repeated experiences of being heard, respected and supported, many young people begin to see the Youth House not simply as a service they attend, but as a community to which they belong and a platform from which they can shape their own futures.

Recruitment and involvement in inclusive youth work must be understood as a continuous cycle rather than a front-end administrative task. It begins with outreach, accessibility, and trust-building; develops through strengths-based onboarding, shared planning, and personalised support; deepens through individual and group participation; and remains effective only through monitoring, reflection, and redesign. The most successful approaches combine structure with autonomy, institutional cooperation with person-centred practice, and practical support with a clear commitment to rights, dignity, and agency.

Young people with additional support needs do not need to be “fitted” into youth work as it already exists. Youth work itself must be designed, questioned, and redesigned so that they can enter as full participants, shape their own pathways, and experience themselves not as passive recipients of services but as members of a community and authors of their own futures. This direction is fully consistent with the handbook’s practical and honest methodology, which treats inclusion not as an add-on, but as a core organisational responsibility and an ongoing professional task.

6.8. Creating and maintaining a welcoming and safe environment

A welcoming and safe environment is the foundation of **quality inclusive youth work**. Young people — especially those with disabilities, traumatic experiences, or in a NEET situation — need **stability, trust, and predictability** before they can engage, learn, or actively participate in community life. The following strategies, protocols, and practices for creating such an environment are synthesized from the practices, experiences of the partners.

Safety in youth work is not limited to physical protection; it includes **emotional, social, and psychological safety**— the feeling that one’s identity, needs, and experiences are respected. A safe environment fosters belonging, encourages self-expression, and allows mistakes to be seen as part of growth, not as failure.

Creating such an environment requires conscious design of space, clear communication, and consistent behaviour from youth workers. Every aspect — from room setup and tone of communication to group rules and daily routines — contributes to the young person’s sense of safety and inclusion.

Safety in youth work goes beyond physical protection. It includes:

- **Emotional safety** (feeling accepted and valued)
- **Social safety** (being included without fear of exclusion)
- **Psychological safety** (being able to express oneself without judgment)

A safe environment fosters **belonging, self-expression, and growth**, where mistakes are treated as part of learning rather than failure.

Creating such an environment is not accidental — it requires **intentional design**, clear communication, and consistent behaviour from youth workers. Every element — from room setup to communication style — contributes to how safe young people feel.

Importantly, the concept of a “**safer space**” acknowledges that absolute safety cannot be guaranteed. Instead, safety is a **collective, ongoing responsibility**, built through dialogue, reflection, and shared agreements.

Overview of the chapter

Element of safety	What it means	In practice	Activity example	If missing... (Impact)
Transparency & predictability	Clear structure reduces anxiety and builds trust	Visual schedules, clear explanations, consistent routines, transition warnings	Group agreement workshop; check-in/check-out	Anxiety, confusion, withdrawal
Accessibility	Everyone can access space, information, and participation	Step-free access, plain language, multiple formats, accessible digital tools	Accessibility check with participants	Exclusion, frustration, inequality
Sense of belonging	Feeling accepted, valued, and connected	Peer support, inclusive language, shared roles,	Strengths map; peer pairs	Isolation, low motivation

		visible diversity		
Stress regulation & rituals	Supporting emotional balance and self-regulation	Breathing exercises, routines, breaks, quiet space	4–7–8 breathing; energy check-ins	Overwhelm, escalation, disengagement
Empathy & respect	Understanding others' feelings and perspectives	Active listening, modelling empathy, reflection	Listening circle; "Maybe Game"	Conflict, misunderstanding
Different support needs	Adapting to diverse needs and strengths	Flexible participation, clear communication, UDL approach	Multi-format participation; buddy system	Exclusion, frustration
Managing behaviour	Behaviour as communication, not defiance	ABC method, de-escalation, offering choices	Scenario role-play	Escalation, unsafe environment

Additional practical materials related to the topic are provided in the Annexes.

6.8.1. Creating a safe space: transparency, predictability, and managing transitions

- **Transparency and trust:** Be open about the structure of activities, rules, and expectations. Explain what will happen, when, and why. Uncertainty increases

anxiety, especially for young people who have experienced instability or trauma. An informed approach requires being clear and open about the programme's structure, your position, and how things are done within the agency. Transparency and trustworthiness should also be core principles of all non-formal learning.

- **Predictability:** Keep routines consistent — start and end sessions at the same time, use familiar openings (check-in rounds) and closings (reflection moments). Predictability helps young people prepare mentally and emotionally. Young people, particularly neurodivergent young people, feel safer when they know what to expect. Organisations should post clear **visual schedules and timetables** in the programme area.
- **Managing transitions:** Sudden changes in activities, staff, or locations can be overwhelming. Prepare participants in advance, explain reasons for changes, and provide visual or verbal cues (“*In five minutes, we will move to another room*”). Using “**transition tunes**”(rhythmic songs or signals) may also help youth prepare for changes. These elements build trust and reduce fear of the unknown, which is essential for engagement and emotional regulation.

Practical tools for implementation

- Co-create a *Group Agreement* with participants at the beginning of each cycle (rules, confidentiality, respect, attendance).
- Begin and end sessions with a short *check-in/check-out* circle where participants can share how they feel.
- Keep the session structure predictable (agenda on the board, clear transitions between activities).
- Use visual support and easy-to-understand communication to ensure understanding.

Activity example – Group agreement workshop

- **Duration** 30–40 min
- **Materials:** flipchart, markers, sticky notes
- **Steps:**
 1. Ask: “*What helps you feel safe and respected in a group?*”
 2. Write down all responses.
 3. Discuss and agree on shared rules.
 4. Create a poster and display it in every meeting.

6.8.2. Accessibility: physical, informational, and digital

Accessibility ensures that all young people can fully participate, regardless of their support needs, background, or technical resources. Accessibility must be treated as a proactive mindset rather than an afterthought.

- **Physical accessibility:** Venues should offer step-free access, automatic door openers, and enough space between furniture for mobility devices to move freely. Spaces should be wheelchair-accessible, well-lit, and clearly marked. Include quiet areas for sensory regulation and avoid strong smells or flickering lights. It is critical to ensure that accessibility options do not compromise an individual's dignity (e.g., not requiring them to enter through a back service door)
- **Informational accessibility:** Use "Plain Language"—writing in concise, clear, and age-appropriate way. Offer information in multiple formats (written, visual, verbal). Translate key materials into languages used by participants. Use accessible formats (large print, easy-to-read text, audio). Information should be provided in alternative formats including **Braille, large print, audio**, and "Easy-to-Read" versions featuring pictograms.
- **Digital accessibility:** Online platforms and documents must be accessible to users of screen readers. This includes using high colour contrast, adding alt-text to images, and saving PDF documents as text-based files rather than images. Ensure that online content (forms, videos, platforms) follows accessibility standards — subtitles, readable fonts, alt text for images, and contrast settings for visually impaired users. Regularly check understanding and encourage feedback. Accessibility is not only about compliance; it's a statement that *everyone belongs here*.

6.8.3. Inclusive Strategies and Sense of Belonging

Belonging is a fundamental human need, and exclusion can lead to significant psychological pain and impaired self-regulation. Inclusion goes beyond physical presence — it is about feeling valued and connected.

Key strategies include:

- Encouraging collaboration instead of competition.
- Using group agreements that reflect respect, listening, and empathy.
- Rotating roles and responsibilities so every young person contributes in different ways.
- Celebrating cultural diversity through food, music, and storytelling.
- Creating opportunities for peer mentoring and mixed-ability cooperation.

Practical tools for implementation

Finding commonalities: Use team-building activities and icebreakers to highlight what youth have in common, which helps dismantle the "us and them" mindset.

Visual representation: Display imagery, posters, and rainbow flags that promote diversity to signal that the programme is for everyone.

Respectful terminology: Professionals should ask young people directly what pronouns and descriptors they prefer (e.g., person-first vs. identity-first language) and respect those choices.

Micro affirmations: Practice brief, everyday affirming strategies such as making eye contact, calling participants by their names, and giving praise for effort rather than just success. Respect individual rhythm; encourage self-expression and creativity.

A strong sense of belonging develops when young people see that their experiences and voices matter. This reduces loneliness, strengthens motivation, and builds resilience. Creating a sense of belonging increases motivation and engagement.

Activity examples:

- **My strengths map:** participants visually represent their personal strengths (drawing, collage, photos).
- **Peer support pairs:** participants support each other between sessions.
- **Shared rituals:** start each session with a short energizer, quote, or stretch.

6.8.4. Stress-relieving activities and rituals

Integrating wellness practices helps youth navigate a world that is often fast-moving and overwhelming. Stress management supports emotional regulation and mental well-being for both participants and facilitators. Youth workers can integrate simple rituals that help participants relax, transition between tasks, or release tension. Examples include:

Practical tools for implementation

Mindfulness: Simple activities like "**counting breaths**" or "**30-second stretches**" help reduce stress and increase attention and emotional control.

Rituals: Establish consistent **check-in and check-out rituals**, such as sharing one positive thing that happened since the last session or choosing a single word to represent the day's activities.

Comfort corners (Quiet zones): Designate a space equipped with a **sensory toolkit** (e.g., fidget toys, weighted blankets, noise-cancelling headphones) where youth can go to self-regulate when they feel overstimulated

Activity examples:

- Short breathing at the beginning and end of sessions (e.g., “4-7-8” technique). It is a simple method to help calm the body and mind. Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds. Hold the breath for 7 seconds. Exhale slowly through the mouth for 8 seconds. This pattern slows down the heart rate, reduces stress, and helps participants relax, focus, and regulate emotions.
- “Energy check-ins” using colours or emojis to express mood.
- Light stretching, play calming music during transitions, include 5-minute stretch breaks in long sessions or group games that reset energy levels.
- Quiet moments of reflection, journaling, or gratitude sharing. Rituals create rhythm, predictability, and emotional continuity— essential for groups with diverse needs.

6.8.5. Teaching and modelling empathy

Empathy involves treating others with thoughtfulness and care. Empathy cannot be taught through lectures alone— it is also modelled through behaviour. Youth workers demonstrate empathy by listening without judgment, acknowledging feelings, and responding calmly even in difficult situations. Encouraging peer empathy helps reduce bullying and conflict. Activities like role-play, perspective-taking exercises, or storytelling help young people understand emotions — both their own and others. Empathy creates the emotional glue of inclusive groups: when young people feel understood, they begin to understand others.

Empathy strengthens group cohesion and reduces stigma.

Practical tools for implementation

Active listening: Model empathy by paying close attention to body language, remaining silent while the youth speaks, and paraphrasing their statements without judgment to show understanding.

Perspective-taking: Engage youth in exercises like the “Maybe Game,” where they brainstorm possible reasons for another person’s behaviour to foster compassion.

Role modelling: Professionals serve as “credible messengers” by acting authentically and showing empathy for all learners, which youth then mirror.

Activity examples:

- One way to build empathy in a group is through an active listening circle. Participants sit together and one person shares a short personal experience, for example a moment when they felt misunderstood. Another participant then responds by paraphrasing what they heard, using phrases such as “It sounds like you felt...” The speaker can confirm or correct this. This exercise helps young people learn to listen without interrupting, pay attention to emotions, and respond without judgment. It also creates a sense of being heard and respected. Although changing perspective may be difficult for some participants, and the profile and composition of the group may influence how the activity works.
- Another useful activity is the “Maybe Game,” which supports perspective-taking. The facilitator presents a situation, such as a participant refusing to join an activity, and asks the group to suggest possible reasons. Each response must begin with “Maybe...”. As different ideas are shared, participants begin to understand that behaviour can have many underlying causes, such as anxiety, confusion, or tiredness. This reduces quick judgments and encourages more compassionate responses.
- Creating space to talk about mistakes is another important practice. The facilitator reinforces that mistakes are a normal part of learning and not something to be ashamed of. When appropriate, the facilitator can also acknowledge their own mistakes within professional boundaries, modelling openness, accountability, and learning through their own example. This helps reduce fear, builds confidence, and strengthens psychological safety within the group.
- Reflective discussions on inclusion and respect can also deepen understanding. This encourages young people to consider multiple perspectives and develop empathy in real-life contexts.

Situation example:

One participant, Marko, is trying to introduce himself to the group but forgets what he wanted to say and gets flustered.

Facilitator could say:

“Great job, Marko, thank you for giving it a try! This happens to everyone when we speak in front of others — it’s not easy. This is actually a great moment to see how we can handle it when our mind goes blank. Would anyone like to share what helps them in situations like this?”

Why this is effective:

- **Normalizes the mistake:** It shows that forgetting is normal and not something to be ashamed of.
- **Highlights learning:** It turns the moment into a shared learning opportunity about managing nervousness and communication under pressure.

6.8.6. Working with young people with additional support needs

Working with young people with diverse support needs, learning styles, neurodevelopmental profiles, and support needs requires flexibility, empathy, and a strengths-based approach. Young people with additional support needs are not a homogenous group — each person has unique strengths, challenges, preferences, and ways of participating.

The role of the youth worker is to create an environment in which every young person can participate meaningfully without pressure to engage in the same way or at the same pace as others.

a) Individualised approach and flexible participation

Youth workers should offer flexible ways of participating and adapt activities according to individual needs and preferences. Some young people may feel more comfortable participating verbally, while others may engage better through visual, creative, practical, or observational activities.

An inclusive approach recognises that participation can look different for different young people.

b) Strengths-based mindset

A strengths-based approach focuses on talents, interests, effort, and potential rather than deficits or limitations. Youth workers should acknowledge progress, persistence, creativity, cooperation, and small steps of development.

This is especially important for young people who have experienced repeated failure, exclusion, or low expectations in educational or social environments.

c) Avoiding assumptions about support needs

Labels such as “autistic,” “hyperactive,” or “disabled” should never define expectations about a young person’s support needs, behaviour, or potential. Youth workers should treat each young person as an individual, ask about preferences and support needs, and remain open to adapting activities and communication styles when needed.

Behaviour should not automatically be interpreted as resistance or lack of motivation without considering possible underlying needs, anxiety, sensory overload, confusion, or emotional distress.

d) Supportive communication

Clear, respectful, and accessible communication helps reduce stress and increases participation. Youth workers should use simple and concrete instructions, combine verbal explanations with visual support when helpful, allow processing time, and regularly check understanding without pressure or judgment.

Supportive communication can be particularly important for young people with neurodevelopmental differences, specific learning difficulties, anxiety, or communication barriers.

e) Peer support and collaborative learning

Peer support strengthens belonging, confidence, and social connection. Small group activities, pair work, mixed-ability collaboration, and buddy systems can help create more supportive and less intimidating environments for participation.

Young people often learn effectively from one another, especially in environments where cooperation is valued more than competition.

Case example: mutual peer support in practice

A youth centre introduced a voluntary peer-support arrangement between a young person with a visual impairment and a neurodivergent young person experiencing social anxiety. Although they encountered different barriers, their shared experiences helped them build trust. The young person with a visual impairment supported their peer in social situations, while the neurodivergent young person provided support with navigation and travel. Both contributed and received support, engagement increased, and staff observed more proactive and inclusive attitudes within the group.

This example shows that peer support should be mutual, voluntary, and based on the young people's strengths, preferences, and consent rather than on fixed helper and recipient roles.

f) Adapting activities and expectations

Inclusive youth work recognises that different young people require different levels of structure, pacing, sensory input, and support. Youth workers may therefore need to adapt activities by simplifying tasks, allowing breaks, offering quiet spaces, reducing sensory overload, or providing additional structure and guidance when necessary.

The goal is not perfection or uniform performance, but meaningful participation, safety, engagement, and personal development for all young people.

6.8.7. Managing challenging behaviours

Challenging behaviour should be viewed as a form of communication rather than a personal affront.

Practical tools

When it occurs:

- Stay calm and neutral; avoid confrontation in front of the group; avoid taking reactions personally.
- Address behaviour, not personality (*"I notice you seem upset – would you like a short break?"*).
- Identify possible triggers (fatigue, sensory overload, and misunderstanding).
- Offer choice and agency.
- Use de-escalation techniques — lower voice, give space, offer choices.
- Set clear boundaries: explain what behaviour is acceptable and why.
- After the incident, debrief privately and focus on learning, not punishment. If behaviours are recurrent or escalate, consult with a psychologist or social worker for additional guidance. Consistent empathy and boundaries help young people feel both cared for and safe.

Safety and inclusion are not single actions but continuous practices. By creating transparent, predictable, and accessible environments, youth workers send a powerful message: *you are welcome here, just as you are*. When young people feel safe, they can take risks, learn, and grow.

Activity examples

The ABC analysis protocol: To understand behaviour patterns, staff should identify the Antecedent (what set it off), the Behaviour (what occurred), and the Consequence (what happened immediately after).

The "Bringing youth back" de-escalation protocol follows five steps:

1. Notice the distress signs before behaviour escalates.
2. Calm yourself (model calm behaviour).
3. Calm the youth (invite them to take a deep breath).
4. Connect on a personal level (talk about their special interests).
5. Encourage them to re-engage with the group.

Teachable moments: Use incidents of "put-downs" or ableist language as teachable moments to educate the entire group about the impact of such behaviour.

Example from practice

During an art workshop, a participant becomes upset when asked to share their drawing. Instead of insisting, the youth worker calmly explains that sharing is optional and suggests a short break. Later, the participant voluntarily shows the drawing and explains that being "put on the spot" felt overwhelming. A simple act of respect transformed resistance into trust and engagement.

Additional practical materials related to the topic are provided in the Annexes.

7. PROGRAMME PLANNING AND OPERATION

This chapter focuses on how to plan and operate programmes for young people with disabilities within a human rights-based, inclusive framework. It highlights how youth work can move beyond fixed service models by creating flexible, co-designed programmes that remove barriers and strengthen young people's agency. The emphasis is on practical ways to ensure meaningful participation and equal access through adaptive, responsive programme structures.

Context-informed and needs based programme planning

Planning begins with a grounded understanding of the local context and the lived realities of participants. Programme development begins with a thorough analysis of the local context. Understanding the specific profile of young people in a NEET situation educational gaps, barriers to labour market integration, mental health challenges, housing instability, migration status, disability or neurodivergence is essential for constructing a programme that is purposefully tailored rather than generic. The situations of young people with disabilities are shaped by intersecting factors such as socio-economic background, education, mental health, family context, or migration experience. Effective programme design responds to this complexity by combining structured planning with flexibility. The process follows a cyclical logic: identifying needs, co-designing activities, implementing them, reflecting on outcomes, and using these insights to continuously refine the programme. This cyclical approach allows youth work to remain responsive rather than static.

From comfort to learning

Meaningful development requires moving beyond what is familiar, but in the case of young people with additional support needs this process must be understood and facilitated with particular care. The comfort zone – learning zone – panic zone model remains a useful framework, yet the boundaries between these zones are often positioned differently compared to non-disabled peers. Some young people with disabilities may have grown up in environments characterised by overprotection,

lowered expectations, or limited opportunities for independent decision-making. As a result, their comfort zone may be relatively narrow, while even small steps towards autonomy—such as making a choice, initiating interaction, or taking responsibility for a simple task—can already represent entry into the learning zone.

Youth work must therefore intentionally create opportunities for the gradual, supported expansion of autonomy and ownership. This includes recognising that “risk” is not only about physical or social challenges, but also about everyday acts of independence: expressing preferences, managing time, navigating unfamiliar spaces, or handling minor failures. For some young people, the learning zone may begin with practising self-advocacy or making low-stakes decisions, rather than engaging in more visibly demanding activities.

Practitioners must remain aware that repeated experiences of failure, stigma, or exclusion may have reduced a young person’s confidence in their own capacities. This can lead to avoidance, heightened anxiety, or reliance on adults to take control. In such cases, pushing too quickly—even with good intentions—can easily shift the young person into the panic zone. Here, stress is not productive but paralysing, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and dependency.

The role of the youth worker is to create a structured yet flexible “safer space” where experimentation is possible without fear of judgement or failure. This involves breaking down challenges into manageable steps, offering choices rather than directives, and explicitly valuing effort over outcome. Support should be present but not intrusive: the aim is not to remove difficulty, but to scaffold it in a way that enables the young person to experience competence and progress. Gradually, responsibility can be shifted from the adult to the young person, reinforcing a sense of agency.

Importantly, this process also requires challenging internalised expectations. Young people who are accustomed to being “taken care of” may initially resist or feel uncomfortable with increased responsibility. Similarly, professionals must critically reflect on their own tendencies towards overprotection, ensuring that safeguarding does not become a barrier to development. Encouraging a “can-do” attitude in this context means recognising potential while respecting individual pacing.

In practice, supporting movement into the learning zone for young people with additional support needs is less about pushing limits in a traditional sense and more about redefining what growth looks like. It is a process of enabling participation, strengthening self-determination, and building the confidence to engage with the world more independently—step by step, within a framework of safety, respect, and high but realistic expectations.

Self-determination

A defining feature of the Youth House is its commitment to participatory co-creation. Young people are active partners who shape the programme’s content, rhythm and

culture. For example, project-based learning forms are great for this purpose and can become the structural backbone: participants select real challenges from their environment, develop concrete project ideas and collaboratively execute them. These projects range from creative productions and community interventions to skill-based micro-initiatives. Through them, young people build competences in communication, teamwork, planning, social responsibility and problem-solving—competences that are central to both personal development and labour market engagement. Each project is also linked to individual learning objectives, ensuring that every participant can see their own contribution and progress.

Participation and ownership are essential parts of this process. Their involvement can gradually extend to decision-making and taking responsibility within the programme. Co-creation strengthens motivation, self-confidence, and the feeling that their ideas, choices, and contributions genuinely matter.

Transitional moments

Particular attention must be paid to transitional moments within the programme. Changes between activities, environments, or social contexts can be disproportionately stressful for young people with cognitive, sensory, or emotional regulation differences. Managing these transitions effectively—through advance warnings, consistent signals, and allowing sufficient time for processing—reduces anxiety and supports continuity of engagement. These seemingly small adjustments often have a significant impact on accessibility.

Final transition planning begins at entry and intensifies in the final phase of participation, ensuring that each young person has a clear pathway towards education, work or further support. Even after exit, light-touch follow-up and alumni engagement help maintain continuity, confirming that the Youth House remains a stable, trustworthy point of reference in the young person's life.

Referrals and cooperation with other service providers

Programme operation should include clear and accessible referral pathways to relevant education, health, mental health, social, employment, and community services. Youth workers should help young people understand available options, establish contact where needed, and participate actively in decisions about referrals and cooperation.

Roles, communication routes, consent, information-sharing limits, responsibilities, and follow-up steps should be agreed clearly. Only relevant, necessary, and proportionate information should be shared. Detailed principles and practical guidance on interdisciplinary cooperation are provided in Chapters 5.4 and 6.4.

Regulations and ethical frameworks

This work must be grounded in clear regulatory and ethical frameworks. Compliance with equality legislation and anti-discrimination principles is a minimum requirement, but inclusive practice goes further by actively challenging ableism and exclusionary norms. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, informed consent, and safeguarding are central to building trust. Young people need to understand not only that their information is respected, but also the limits of confidentiality in situations involving risk of harm. Transparent communication of these boundaries strengthens both safety and accountability.

A continuous development plan

Inclusive youth work requires continuous reflection, evaluation, and adaptation. Programmes should regularly review what supports participation, engagement, learning, and well-being, while also identifying barriers or areas requiring adjustment.

Evaluation should combine feedback from young people, observations from youth workers, and reflection within the wider team. The goal is not only to measure outcomes, but also to understand experiences, improve practice, and strengthen inclusion over time.

A learning-oriented organisational culture encourages flexibility, openness to feedback, interdisciplinary cooperation, and willingness to adapt programmes according to the changing needs of young people and the local community.

Organisational self-reflection

At the same time, organisations must engage in ongoing self-reflection. Inclusion is not a fixed achievement but a continuous process of identifying and addressing gaps. This involves examining physical accessibility, communication practices, staff competences, and the extent to which the organisation reflects the diversity of the community it serves. Honest self-assessment can reveal barriers that are otherwise invisible, creating opportunities for improvement and innovation.

Dealing with uncertainty and unfamiliar situations

Finally, working with young people with disabilities may involve uncertainty. Even the most carefully planned activities may not unfold as expected and unfamiliar situations are part of everyday practice. Youth workers must therefore develop the confidence and competence to adapt in real time, to improvise when necessary, and to reflect critically on their own assumptions and reactions. This includes recognising moments of personal discomfort and questioning whether they stem from bias or from legitimate professional concerns. The ability to remain flexible while maintaining a clear ethical and professional grounding is a key competence in inclusive youth work.

When these elements are integrated, programme planning and operation become a dynamic process of co-creation, reflection, and adaptation. In settings such as a Youth House, this is reflected in participatory structures where young people actively shape activities, engage in project-based learning, and connect their individual goals with collective experiences. A stable yet flexible framework supports both routine and responsiveness, while continuous evaluation ensures that the programme evolves in line with participants' needs.

In this way, the Youth House more than a service or a series of activities: it provides an environment in which young people can develop skills, build relationships, and move towards greater autonomy and social inclusion.

7.1. Two main areas of development: Social and emotional development

This chapter explores how youth programmes can intentionally support emotional well-being, resilience, and social integration among young people with additional support needs including young people with disabilities through understanding their emotional and mental needs, setting realistic developmental goals, and applying practical strategies that strengthen both individual and interpersonal competences.

Social and emotional learning is not an optional addition to youth work, but part of its core infrastructure. Through these processes, young people build healthy identities, learn to manage emotions, develop empathy, form relationships, and make responsible decisions. The World Health Organization highlights adolescence as a key developmental period for strengthening coping skills, emotional regulation, interpersonal competences, and problem-solving competences that support long-term mental well-being. For this reason, youth programmes that aim to promote participation, learning, employability, or empowerment cannot treat emotional and social development as secondary.

This has direct practical implications for inclusive youth work. WHO's *Helping Adolescents Thrive* guidance recommends universally available psychosocial support for all adolescents, alongside more targeted support for young people already experiencing emotional difficulties. In practice, this means that all young people should encounter emotionally safe, relational, and supportive environments, while some may additionally require individualized support, adaptations, or referral pathways.

Social and emotional development are deeply interconnected. Emotional stability supports participation in social life, while positive social experiences strengthen emotional well-being. For many young people with additional support needs, these developmental processes have been disrupted by exclusion, instability, trauma, stigma, or lack of supportive environments. Youth work must therefore go beyond

employability or skills training alone and intentionally foster emotional literacy, self-regulation, empathy, resilience, and the ability to build and maintain relationships.

This process is gradual and requires consistency, patience, flexibility, and professional reflection. However, it is precisely this foundation that enables young people with accessibility needs to participate more fully in education, employment, relationships, and community life.

Emotional and mental needs of young people

Many young people in this target group experience heightened emotional challenges, including anxiety, frustration, fear of failure, and loneliness. These experiences are often intensified by social isolation, stigma, or previous negative encounters with education or support systems. For those affected by trauma, neurodiversity, or specific learning difficulties, emotional responses may be unpredictable or difficult to manage.

Their key needs include:

- **feeling safe and accepted**, regardless of behaviour or background;
- **being heard and taken seriously** by adults;
- **having supportive relationships** that model empathy and respect;
- **opportunities to succeed** and experience self-efficacy;
- **clear boundaries** that provide stability and predictability;
- **access to relaxation and stress-regulation tools.**

When these emotional and relational needs are met, young people are more likely to develop confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging. When they are neglected, disengagement, conflict, rebellion or internalised feelings of inadequacy often emerge.

Realistic expectations and goals

Setting appropriate expectations is one of the most challenging aspects of working with young people with additional support needs. Youth workers must balance encouraging development with respecting individual capacities and circumstances. Unrealistic expectations — such as rapid behavioural change or continuous high performance — may undermine motivation and reinforce negative self-perceptions.

A professional approach therefore requires a strengths-based perspective that recognises existing talents, interests, effort, and potential. Youth workers should:

- focus on small and measurable progress rather than perfection,
- recognise that setbacks are a normal part of growth,
- encourage self-reflection and supportive feedback,

- and adapt goals regularly according to the young person's motivation, capacity, and emotional state.

Progress in emotional and social development is rarely linear. Small achievements — such as expressing emotions more clearly, remaining engaged for longer periods, or successfully resolving a minor conflict — can represent important indicators of growth.

An equally important aspect of realistic goal-setting is meaningful involvement of young people in the process. This helps strengthen self-determination, confidence, and their sense of agency in everyday life.

Specific strategies for social and emotional development

1. Creating conditions for social development

Social development does not occur automatically within a group, but requires intentional support and inclusive programme design. Youth programmes should create environments that encourage interaction, and belonging through predictable structures, collaborative activities, and emotionally safe spaces. Within such environments, social connectedness and emotional development reinforce one another.

2. Developing emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence includes recognising emotions, regulating emotional responses, empathising with others, and communicating feelings in constructive ways. In youth work, these skills support participation, cooperation, and conflict resolution.

Youth workers can support the development of emotional intelligence through:

- reflection exercises,
- emotion cards or visual emotion tools,
- discussions about emotions in everyday situations,
- and modelling calm, respectful responses to stress or conflict.

Many young people express emotions through behaviour rather than words. Expanding emotional vocabulary and encouraging reflection gradually supports emotional awareness and healthier communication.

Additional practical materials related to the topic are provided in the Annexes.

3. Supporting self-regulation

Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage emotions, impulses, and stress. For many young people with additional support needs, these skills are still developing and often require external support and structured environments.

Youth workers can support regulation through:

- grounding and breathing techniques,
- breaks and quiet spaces,
- predictable routines,
- reflection after emotionally intense situations,
- and positive reinforcement of emotional-control efforts.

Co-regulation is particularly important, as calm and supportive adults help young people gradually strengthen their own emotional-regulation capacities.

Additional practical materials related to the topic, such as self-regulation tools, are provided in the Annexes.

4. Conflict management

Conflict is a natural part of group work and social interaction. Rather than avoiding conflict, youth work should use it as an opportunity for learning, communication, and relationship-building.

Helpful approaches include:

- using respectful and non-accusatory communication,
- active listening,
- mediation and collaborative problem-solving,
- and restorative approaches focused on repairing relationships rather than punishment.

Youth workers should also recognise that conflicts may be connected to unmet needs, sensory overload, communication difficulties, or previous experiences of exclusion.

Additional practical materials related to the topic, such as practical conflict-management activities are provided in the Annexes.

5. Stress management and relaxation

Stress directly affects emotional stability, concentration, and participation. For young people with additional support needs, unmanaged stress can quickly lead to withdrawal, conflict, or emotional dysregulation.

Programmes can support stress management through:

- breathing and mindfulness exercises,
- movement and physical activities,
- creative expression,
- humour and play,
- and supportive routines that encourage balance and recovery.

Young people regulate stress differently, so programmes should offer flexible options rather than one fixed approach.

Additional practical materials related to the topic, practical stress-management tools are provided in the Annexes.

Example from practice

During a vocational skills workshop, several participants become frustrated and start arguing after a group task fails. Instead of imposing discipline, the youth worker pauses the activity, acknowledges emotions (“We’re all stressed; that’s okay”), and guides the group through a breathing exercise. Then, together they reflect on what caused the tension and agree on clearer roles. The conflict becomes a learning opportunity in emotional regulation and cooperation.

7.2 Typical situations and challenges

Working with young people with additional support needs involves navigating a wide range of recurring situations that are often emotionally charged, relationally complex, and not easily resolved through standard approaches. These situations are not exceptions but an inherent part of inclusive youth work. Understanding their underlying dynamics is essential for responding in ways that are professionally grounded, emotionally safe, and supportive of young people’s development.

Youth workers frequently encounter recurring behavioural patterns and group dynamics when working with young people with additional support needs.

These situations should not simply be interpreted as “bad behaviour,” but as relational, developmental, or emotional responses emerging within group settings. Recognising these patterns allows youth workers to respond calmly, maintain boundaries, and create safe and supportive environments.

Below, the most common challenges are presented together with practical guidance for responding to them. The chapter begins with group dynamics, as most youth work

takes place in group settings, and then moves to recurring themes and situations frequently arising in everyday practice.

Group dynamics

Every youth group develops its own emotional climate, patterns of interaction, and unspoken rules. These group dynamics strongly influence participation, behaviour, safety, conflict, and belonging. Understanding group processes is particularly important when working with young people in a NEET situation, trauma-affected young people, or neurodivergent participants, who may react sensitively to changes in atmosphere.

Group dynamics are not random; they often follow recognisable patterns. A group may move through phases of excitement, resistance, testing, connection, conflict, jealousy, withdrawal, or cohesion. Individual behaviour is shaped not only by personality but also by the emotional and social energy of the group itself.

Key phenomena youth workers often observe

1. The dominant voice

One or two participants shape the group mood or direction. If they are anxious, the group becomes tense; if they are enthusiastic, the energy rises. Youth workers must balance influence to ensure everyone is heard.

2. Social contagion

Emotions spread quickly - laughter, stress, frustration, excitement. For trauma-affected youth, another person's emotional outburst can act as a trigger, leading to a chain reaction.

3. Group resistance

Sometimes the whole group becomes uncooperative, disengaged or avoids tasks. This usually reflects a fear of failure, unclear instructions, or tension within the group, not laziness.

4. Role formation

Youth often fall into roles (the leader, the clown, the quiet one, the helper, the outsider). These roles can become rigid unless youth workers intentionally disrupt them.

5. Splitting

The group views staff as "good" or "bad" depending on who set a boundary or denied a request. This phenomenon is very common in groups with trauma histories.

6. Emotional mirroring

Young people mirror the emotional state of the adult present. If the youth worker is calm, the group calms; if the youth worker becomes tense, the group escalates.

Understanding these patterns helps youth workers interpret behaviour not as “problems,” but as natural relational responses within the group system.

I. “Favourites” and attachment dynamics

In youth work, it is common for certain young people to develop strong emotional attachment to one particular youth worker. This usually reflects developmental needs, emotional vulnerability, trauma histories, or unmet relational needs rather than inappropriate behaviour from staff.

Young people who have experienced instability, neglect, inconsistent caregiving, or social isolation may attach strongly to adults who feel predictable, calm, and emotionally safe. The youth worker may become a “secure base” within an otherwise unstable environment.

At the same time, these attachments can create practical and ethical challenges:

- other participants may feel excluded or jealous,
- the young person may expect special treatment,
- emotional dependency may develop,
- boundaries may become blurred or tested
- the group dynamic may shift around this relationship

Understanding the dynamics behind “favourites” helps youth workers respond with empathy rather than guilt or frustration.

Typical signs

Some behaviour that indicate a “*favourite*” dynamic include:

- Arriving early or staying late just to talk to that worker
- Positioning themselves physically close during every activity
- Refusing to participate unless that worker is present
- Expecting emotional exclusivity (“You’re the only one who understands me”)
- Jealousy, becoming upset, withdrawn, or angry when the youth worker focuses on someone else
- Testing boundaries (“Can you take me home?”, “Can I message you privately?”)

These behaviours are not manipulative — they are attachment strategies.

Area	Practical steps for youth workers
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Enlarging the circle of support	Gradually introduce additional trusted adults instead of withdrawing abruptly.
Consistency without exclusivity	Maintain warmth while ensuring equal attention to all participants.
Team-based support	Reinforce that support comes from the whole team, not one individual.
Emotional regulation	Provide predictable routines, grounding strategies, and emotional check-ins.
Clear boundaries	Set calm, consistent, and predictable limits around time, communication, and availability.
Group integration	Use group activities and rotating partnerships to reduce one-to-one dependency.
Team reflection	Discuss these dynamics through supervision and team consultation.

Practice example case:

Samira, 17, recently placed in foster care, forms a strong attachment to one youth worker. She waits outside the centre before opening hours, wants to sit next to that worker in every session, becomes angry when attention is given to others, and asks to follow the worker on social media.

Professional response:

1. Validating Samira's feelings: *"It makes sense that you feel close to people who make you feel safe."*
2. Maintaining gentle but clear boundaries: *"We don't connect with young people on social media, but we can talk here anytime during sessions."*
3. Introducing additional trusted adults: *"Ana and I will work as a team to support you."*
4. Encouraging peer connections through structured activities:
 - Pair Samira with calm supportive peers
 - Involve her in small-group tasks
5. Validate without feeding dependency: *"I'm here for you. And I want you to feel safe with the whole team."*

6. Track progress: Over weeks, encourage her to talk to at least one other trusted adult.

II. Outcasts and exclusion dynamics

In most youth groups, some participants quietly remain on the margins. These young people are often not openly rejected, but they lack meaningful peer connection and may gradually withdraw from participation.

Silence or isolation should not automatically be interpreted as disinterest. It may reflect:

Why young people become “outcasts”

Several underlying factors can lead a young person to withdraw or be excluded from group interactions:

- **Social anxiety or fear of rejection**– speaking up feels risky, so silence feels safer.
- **Neurodivergence** – difficulties with social timing, sensory overload, or reading cues can create distance.
- **Trauma histories**– hypervigilance or self-protection can appear as detachment.
- **Previous bullying**– past experiences can create strong avoidance of groups.
- **Cultural or language barriers**– migrant youth may struggle to integrate into established peer structures.
- **Low self-esteem or insecurity**– the young person assumes others won’t be interested in them.
- **Rigid group dynamics**– some groups develop “inner circles,” leaving others on the edge.

These young people rarely “choose” isolation freely; withdrawal is often a coping or self-protective strategy.

Typical signs

- sitting alone, avoiding eye contact
- rarely speaking without being asked
- being left out during group work
- participation dropping over time

- unintentional dismissal by peers
- looking anxious, frozen or unsure where to stand/sit
- quietly “giving up” during activities

These signs are subtle — which makes them easy to miss, but important to address.

Step	Practical strategy
Notice invisible exclusion	Observe who consistently remains silent or isolated.
Build gentle connections	Begin with low-pressure interaction and small responsibilities.
Pair intentionally	Match participants with supportive or at least neutral peers.
Use structured interaction	Clear roles and turn-taking reduce social uncertainty.
Highlight strengths	Positive visibility increases confidence and belonging.
Address subtle exclusion	Calmly interrupt dismissive or excluding behaviour early.
Support confidence privately	Offer one-to-one guidance without creating pressure.

Short practice example

Pali, 21, sits alone every session. Peers rarely choose him. He begins skipping sessions.

A youth worker gently starts weekly 1:1 check-in, pairs him strategically with a kind peer, highlights his strengths in group tasks, and uses structured group activities that reduce pressure. Within several weeks, Pali becomes more comfortable, contributes more often, and forms his first friendship in the group.

III. Attention-seeking and dependency dynamics

Some young people demand constant attention from youth workers in order to feel emotionally safe, valued, or regulated. This may appear through interruptions, emotional escalation, clinginess, monopolising conversations, or distress when attention shifts elsewhere.

These behaviours are commonly linked to:

- anxiety,
- unstable attachment experiences,
- trauma,
- insecurity,
- emotional neglect,
- or difficulties coping with group environments.

The challenge for youth workers is to remain empathic while maintaining fairness and healthy boundaries within the group.

Helpful responses - Something that you can say

- *“I’m here for you, but I also need to support everyone in the group.”*
- *“I can see you need connection right now. I’ll speak with you after this activity.”*
- *“Your feelings matter, and I’ll check in with you — let’s agree on a moment that works for both of us.”*
- *“It seems like it’s hard for you when I’m not right next to you. How can we make this feel easier?”*
- *“You’re important, and you’re not being forgotten. I just need to balance my attention.”*

These responses validate emotional needs without reinforcing exclusivity or dependency.

Important considerations for youth workers:

Area	Description
Attachment history	Young people with inconsistent or insecure care experiences may interpret neutral situations (e.g. a worker turning attention elsewhere) as rejection, leading to increased need for reassurance.
Anxiety	High levels of anxiety can make even short separations feel unsafe. The young person may seek constant proximity to maintain a sense of security.
Group fairness	When one young person dominates staff attention, others may feel overlooked or treated unfairly, which can create tension and imbalance within the group.

Professional boundaries	Over-involvement by youth workers can unintentionally reinforce dependency and may lead to professional risks such as burnout or role confusion.
Triggers	Situations such as transitions, changes in routine, or peer conflict often intensify attention-seeking behaviour and should be anticipated as high-risk moments.

IV. Challenging behaviour and emotional regulation

Some young people behave in ways adults perceive as disruptive, provocative, loud, impulsive, or emotionally overwhelming. Such behaviours are rarely intentional attempts to “misbehave.” More often, they may reflect, trauma responses, anxiety, boredom, sensory overload, emotional dysregulation, difficulties communicating needs or other unmet needs, including those associated with neurodivergence.

Behaviour often becomes communication.

Examples may include:

- repeated interruptions,
- sarcasm,
- loudness or hyperactivity,
- refusal to follow instructions,
- attention-seeking behaviour,
- excessive complaining,
- or constant boundary-testing.

These behaviours can disrupt the group, overwhelm professionals, and trigger conflict if not addressed calmly and consistently.

Youth worker response – practical strategies

Strategy	Practical application
Stay calm and model regulation	A youth worker’s emotional state influences the entire group. Responding with a calm tone, slower pace, and steady body language reduces escalation and creates a sense of safety. A

	regulated adult can co-regulate a young person more effectively than a reactive or strict response.
Provide structure and predictability	Disruptive behaviour often emerges in unclear or overstimulating situations. Using simple instructions, consistent routines, visual schedules, and clear time frames helps young people understand expectations. Predictability reduces anxiety and prevents chaos.
Redirect gently rather than confront	Instead of confrontation (e.g. “Stop it!”), use neutral redirection such as <i>“Let’s focus here for a moment”</i> or <i>“Try sitting next to me for this part.”</i> Short, simple cues are more effective than lengthy explanations and help shift behaviour without triggering defensiveness.
Identify and respond to underlying needs	Behaviour often signals unmet needs such as boredom, overwhelm, or the need for movement. Offering quick alternatives—a short break, a movement task, a new role, or a grounding exercise—can resolve the situation more effectively than correction alone.
Offer limited choices	Providing limited choices (e.g. <i>“Now or in five minutes?”</i> , <i>“Here or at that table?”</i>) reduces power struggles and restores a sense of control. This approach is particularly effective for young people with ADHD or those sensitive to authority.
Maintain boundaries with respect	Clear, consistent boundaries (e.g. <i>“We take turns speaking”</i> , <i>“I need you to stay in this area”</i>) create safety without shame. Boundaries should be firm but supportive, helping the young person feel contained rather than rejected.
Follow up privately	A brief, calm one-to-one conversation after the session allows reflection on what was difficult and what could help next time. This strengthens trust, reduces shame, and supports the development of self-regulation skills.

V. Formation of subgroups and cliques

Subgroups naturally form in every youth group. Young people gravitate towards peers who feel familiar, safe, or similar to them in personality, interests, culture, or communication style. While some subgrouping is harmless, tightly closed cliques can

become problematic when they begin to exclude others, dominate group dynamics, or create “us versus them” attitudes.

In practice, cliques show through inside jokes, exclusive seating patterns, whispering, and reluctance to work with others, or visible discomfort when mixing with different peers. Vulnerable youth — quieter, neurodivergent, or socially anxious individuals — are often the ones left out.

Why this becomes problematic

Closed cliques limit social learning, reduce group cohesion, and can lead to exclusion or bullying. They may also silence some voices while elevating others, making the group environment unequal or unsafe.

Youth worker response – practical strategies

Strategy	Practical application
Encourage mixing through structure	Young people rarely leave cliques on their own. Using structured methods such as rotating pairs, mixed small groups, and task-based collaboration helps naturally diversify interactions without direct confrontation.
Create shared goals that require cooperation	Group tasks, challenges, and projects shift focus from “my group” to “our group.” When success depends on cooperation, subgroup boundaries weaken and collective identity strengthens.
Model inclusive communication	Youth workers set the tone by greeting everyone, involving quieter participants, and distributing attention evenly. Young people tend to mirror inclusive behaviour when it is consistently demonstrated.
Address subtle exclusion calmly and early	Behaviours such as whispering, closed body language, or refusal to engage should be addressed early and calmly. For example: <i>“Let’s make sure everyone is part of this activity.”</i> This redirects the situation without shaming individuals.
Strengthen overall group identity	Activities that build a shared sense of belonging—such as co-created group agreements, rituals, team challenges, or joint projects—help reduce the influence of cliques and promote inclusion at group level.

Build bridges between cliques	Intentionally pairing members from different subgroups for short, positive tasks creates opportunities for new connections and reduces tension between cliques.
Support isolated individuals	When cliques dominate, some participants may be excluded. Youth workers should identify these individuals and create safe entry points into group activities, often by pairing them with supportive peers.
Reinforce norms of respect and inclusion	Regularly emphasising values such as openness, respect, and curiosity helps shape group culture. Statements like “ <i>Everyone here belongs</i> ” reinforce inclusive norms and reduce exclusivity.

Practice example

A group of four confident boys consistently sits together, refusing to join mixed teams. The youth worker introduces a weekly rotating-team system where everyone collaborates with different peers. Over time, the group becomes more integrated, and quieter members feel more included.

RECURRING THEMES AND ISSUES

I. Bullying

Bullying and exclusion require clear and immediate responses. In inclusive groups, differences in ability, communication, or behaviour may increase vulnerability to power imbalances. Harmful dynamics often begin with subtle remarks, jokes, exclusion, or disrespectful behaviour that can gradually become normalised if left unaddressed.

Bullying refers to repeated behaviour that harms, humiliates, intimidates, or isolates another young person. It may be verbal, physical, relational, emotional, or digital. In youth work settings, bullying often appears through exclusion, repeated teasing, whispering, ignoring, spreading rumours, or “jokes” directed at one participant.

These behaviours can significantly affect emotional safety, participation, confidence, and group cohesion, particularly for young people who already experience social exclusion, trauma, neurodivergence, or low self-esteem.

Bullying often reflects insecurity, peer pressure, unresolved emotional difficulties, learned behaviour, or attempts to gain control or social status within the group.

Youth workers should treat early signs of bullying as important intervention points by:

- clearly naming inappropriate behaviour,

- reinforcing group expectations around dignity and respect,
- supporting the targeted young person,
- and addressing group dynamics before harmful patterns become established.

Even low-level bullying can have significant emotional and developmental consequences if it is ignored or minimised.

Youth worker response – practical strategies

Strategy	Practical application
Respond early, consistently, and calmly	Bullying escalates when ignored or minimised. Youth workers should intervene at the earliest signs—even subtle ones—using a calm and steady tone. This signals that disrespectful behaviour is not acceptable and that all participants are protected.
Reinforce clear norms of respect and safety	Clearly stated expectations such as “ <i>We speak respectfully here</i> ” or “ <i>Everyone belongs in this group</i> ” should be repeated regularly and consistently modelled by staff.
Address behaviour privately, not publicly	Public confrontation can lead to shame or defensiveness. Instead, speak with the young person privately to explore triggers, reflect on impact, and support accountability without relying on punishment.
Support the harmed young person with empathy and safety planning	Acknowledge their experience (e.g. “ <i>It makes sense you felt upset</i> ”), assess their sense of safety, and explore what support they need. Avoid minimising the situation; instead, reinforce that speaking up was the right decision.
Involve the group in building a culture of inclusion	Use group agreements, empathy-building exercises, and cooperative activities to create a shared responsibility for inclusion, making bullying socially unacceptable within the group.
Monitor peer dynamics closely	Pay attention to early warning signs such as power imbalances, subtle exclusion, or shifting roles within the group. Continuous observation allows for early intervention before patterns become entrenched.

Use teamwork and supervision when needed	Discuss complex or repeated bullying situations with colleagues or a supervisor to understand the group dynamics, avoid isolated decision-making, and agree on a coordinated response.
Apply safeguarding procedures when necessary	In cases of escalation—such as threats, violence, discrimination, or serious emotional harm—follow established safeguarding protocols. This may include involving parents, psychologists, social services, or designated safeguarding staff.

II. Love and sexuality

Topics such as love and sexuality require particular attention. Young people with additional support needs are frequently either overprotected or overlooked in this area. Ignoring these aspects of their lives can lead to misinformation, vulnerability, or frustration. A professional approach recognises sexuality as a natural part of development while ensuring that discussions are handled respectfully, inclusively, and with appropriate boundaries. Supporting LGBTQ+ young people within young people with additional support needs requires particular care, especially regarding confidentiality and identity affirmation.

Romantic feelings, attraction, and curiosity about sexuality are natural parts of adolescent development. In youth work settings, these dynamics can appear in subtle or intense ways: infatuation between young people, jealousy, emotional turbulence, or more sensitively, romantic or sexualised feelings also directed towards staff members.

Youth workers need to approach this topic with maturity, neutrality, and strong ethical awareness. Their responsibility is not to moralise, but to maintain safety, dignity, and clear boundaries for all young people while protecting themselves and their professional integrity.

How to talk about love and sexuality in youth groups

Discussions should be:

- normalised but not pushed (“It’s normal to like someone at your age, but we also respect each other and keep the group safe.”)
- age-appropriate
- inclusive of different identities (gender, orientation, expression)
- non-judgmental

- focused on emotional safety, respect, consent and boundaries
- never personal (no disclosure of staff's love life, relationships, preferences)

Topics that can be discussed appropriately:

- what healthy vs. unhealthy relationships look like
- consent and respecting others' boundaries
- coping with jealousy or rejection
- how relationships affect group belonging
- privacy and emotional safety
- digital safety (e.g. sexting, online pressure)

Youth workers *should not*:

- discuss their own romantic/sexual experiences
- make jokes about young people's crushes
- matchmake or comment "Who likes who"
- encourage disclosure of private details in the group

The goal is to keep conversations **educational, safe and emotionally grounded**.

Romantic feelings directed towards staff

This is one of the most predictable and emotionally sensitive situations in youth work.

Such feelings usually reflect:

- developmental exploration,
- unmet emotional needs,
- attachment dynamics,
- admiration,
- or confusion between safety and romantic feelings.

The key task is to respond ethically, calmly, and without shaming the young person.

Youth worker response – practical strategies

Strategy	Practical application
Stay calm and neutral	Avoid reacting with shock, embarrassment, or humour. A calm and steady response protects the young person from shame and keeps the situation safe.
Validate the feeling without encouraging it	Acknowledge emotions while maintaining boundaries. For example: <i>"It's completely normal to have strong feelings for people who support you. But my role here is to help you as a youth worker, not as a romantic partner."</i>
Reinforce professional boundaries clearly	Communicate boundaries in a direct and respectful way: <i>"I care about you as someone I support, not in a romantic way. It's important we keep our relationship safe and professional."</i> Boundaries should be clear and not apologetic.
Do not personalise the situation	Understand that this is linked to the young person's developmental stage and emotional needs, not to the individual qualities of the youth worker.
Redirect towards appropriate connections	Encourage peer relationships, friendships, hobbies, and healthy coping strategies to support emotional needs in appropriate ways.
Inform your supervisor (always)	Even if the situation seems minor, informing a supervisor ensures transparency and protects the young person, the youth worker, and the organisation. Documentation should remain factual and neutral.
Avoid reinforcing the attachment	Do not create situations that strengthen emotional dependency. This includes avoiding one-to-one meetings outside structured settings, private messaging, special treatment, sharing personal information, or crossing physical and emotional boundaries.
Maintain respectful and consistent interaction	Continue treating the young person with respect. Avoid distancing, punishment, or withdrawal, as this may increase feelings of rejection or shame.

What youth workers should avoid

- Never laugh, make jokes or minimise the emotions

- Never say “*I like you too but I can’t*”
- Never blame the young person
- Never share personal or emotional details
- Never discuss it with other young people
- Never ignore the situation or hope it disappears
- Never engage in behaviour that could be interpreted as flirting

Practice example

A 18-year-old girl begins complimenting a youth worker excessively, seeking his attention, volunteering only for activities he supervises, and once tells him privately: “I think I like you.”

The youth worker responds calmly: “Thank you for trusting me with your feelings. It’s normal to have strong emotions at your age, especially towards people who make you feel safe. My role is to support you professionally, not to be in a romantic relationship. I’m here for you, but in that role only.”

He informs his supervisor the same day, continues treating her with respect, avoids exclusive interactions, and ensures another staff member is present during future conversations. Within weeks, the intensity decreases and the girl becomes more engaged with peers.

Young people explore identity, intimacy and affection through relationships around them. Youth workers must provide **safety, clarity and boundaries**, not participation in that exploration. They must understand that attraction from a young person is normal, predictable, and manageable, not the worker’s fault and must be handled professionally, ethically and transparently. The goal is always the same. Protect the young person, protect the group, protect the worker, and protect the integrity of the organisation.

III. Hygiene problems

Seemingly practical issues, such as hygiene problems, often carry deeper meaning. Neglect of personal care may indicate emotional distress, mental health difficulties, or a lack of learned routines. Addressing these situations requires sensitivity. Direct confrontation or shaming can damage trust, while avoidance can reinforce the problem. A balanced approach—combining respect, clarity, and practical support—is needed.

Hygiene issues are often emotionally sensitive and can quickly lead to shame, isolation or peer rejection. Poor hygiene should not automatically be interpreted as a sign of disrespect — it may reflect deeper challenges such as depression, trauma, poverty, unstable housing, neurodiversity (e.g., sensory aversions), or a lack of support at

home. For many young people, especially those from complex or disadvantaged backgrounds, maintaining hygiene can feel overwhelming or even impossible.

Young people who struggle with hygiene may avoid close interactions, sit apart from peers, or withdraw from physical activities. Meanwhile, other group members may react with discomfort, avoidance, or teasing, which can amplify the young person's shame. Because of the emotional vulnerability attached to this issue, youth workers must approach it with exceptional sensitivity, privacy, and respect.

How to address hygiene issues with young people

The conversation should always take place privately, with warmth and compassion. The goal is not to point out a problem, but to understand the situation and offer support without shaming.

Example phrases a youth worker can use

- *"I wanted to check in with you privately. How are things going for you these days?"*
- *"Sometimes keeping up with daily routines can be difficult, especially when a lot is going on. How are you managing?"*
- *"Is showering or washing clothes challenging at the moment? If so, we can look at ways to support you."*
- *"You deserve to feel comfortable here. If you need anything — supplies, space, or someone to talk to — I'm here."*

These phrases invite dialogue rather than defensiveness.

How to support the young person

After opening the conversation:

- Listen without interrupting.
- Ask simple questions to understand whether the issue is emotional, practical, or related to living conditions.
- Offer small, concrete support options (hygiene products, a place to wash, learning routines, or help contacting social services).
- Avoid lecturing or giving long explanations.
- End with encouragement and reassurance.

A supportive closing line: *"Thank you for being open with me. Let's check in again soon — you're not alone in this."*

IV. Lack of self-control

Group environments can also amplify risk. Emotional escalation, imitation of risky behaviour, or collective disengagement can develop rapidly, particularly in unstructured moments or transitions. What starts as minor disruption can evolve into self-endangering behaviour if not addressed early. This highlights the importance of continuous observation and proactive facilitation, rather than reactive intervention.

Lack of self-control in young people often appears as impulsivity, sudden emotional outbursts, restlessness, or difficulties managing frustration. While these behaviours can be challenging for adults, they are rarely intentional. Instead, they typically reflect developmental immaturity, trauma responses, neurodiversity (especially ADHD or autism), sensory overload, or difficulties with emotional regulation. For those with additional support needs, the ability to regulate emotions or impulses may have been affected by unstable environments, lack of supportive adults, or chronic stress. Therefore, self-control problems should be understood as a **signal of unmet needs**, not wilful disobedience.

Young people with low self-control may interrupt frequently, react intensely to small frustrations, move restlessly, quit tasks easily, or lash out verbally when overwhelmed. These behaviours can disrupt the group, but they are often the young person's attempt to manage internal tension they cannot yet express in words.

How to talk to young people about self-control challenges

Conversations should be calm, steady, and free of judgment. The goal is to help the young person understand what happened and what might help them next time, not to scold or shame them.

Example supportive phrases

- *"It seems like that moment was really overwhelming for you. What did it feel like inside?"*
- *"I noticed you reacted quickly — would you like to take a moment to breathe together?"*
- *"When you get frustrated, what usually helps you calm down?"*
- *"You're not in trouble. I just want to understand what was difficult for you."*
- *"Let's think together about what you might try next time this feeling comes up."*

These sentences validate the young person's experience and guide them towards learning regulation skills.

What youth workers should pay attention to

- The young person may not recognise their emotions until after they escalate.
- Impulsivity can be linked to fatigue, hunger, sensory overload, or anxiety.
- Young people who have experienced trauma- may react strongly to perceived criticism or loss of control.
- Neurodivergent young people may need movement, structure, or sensory tools to function well.
- Group climate affects self-control: chaotic environments make behaviour worse.

Youth workers should respond with calmness, predictability, and grounding presence.

V. Rule-breaking in the grey zone

Not all rule-breaking is explicit. Much of it happens in the “grey zone,” where behaviour challenges expectations without clearly violating rules. This includes passive resistance, sarcasm, or testing boundaries in indirect ways. This may involve arriving slightly late, stretching instructions, pushing limits quietly, or doing tasks halfway. These small acts often create uncertainty for youth workers, who may feel unsure whether to intervene or let it pass.

These behaviours are often linked to a need for control or uncertainty about expectations. Reacting emotionally or taking such behaviour personally can escalate tension. Instead, a reflective approach—making expectations visible, acknowledging the situation, and responding consistently—helps maintain stability.

For many young people, especially those who have experienced trauma, unstable caregiving, or inconsistent rules at home, limit-testing is a way to explore safety:

- *“Are the adults here consistent?”*
- *“Are the rules real?”*
- *“What happens if I push a little?”*

Others engage in grey-zone rule-breaking because they want autonomy, dislike strict control, or are trying to establish a sense of independence. Neurodivergent young people may break rules unintentionally because instructions felt unclear, overwhelming, or not logical to them. Grey-zone behaviour is not about disrespect; it is a developmental process mixed with emotional needs.

How to talk to young people about grey-zone behaviour

The key is to stay calm, address the behaviour early, and explain expectations without shaming. Youth workers should frame limit-testing as something normal, but not something that supports group safety.

Example supportive phrases

- *“It looks like you’re testing the boundary a bit. Let’s be clear about what we expect here.”*
- *“I can see you want more freedom in this activity, let’s find a way that works for you and still keeps the group safe.”*
- *“When the rules are bent, it becomes confusing for everyone. Let’s try sticking to the agreement.”*
- *“What made it difficult to follow the instruction? Let’s figure this out together.”*
- *“I’m not upset; I just want to help you understand the limit.”*

These phrases set boundaries without escalating tension.

VI. Self-endangerment in groups

Self-endangerment refers to any behaviour in which a young person puts their own safety at risk during group activities. This can include running away impulsively, climbing unsafe structures, hitting themselves, threatening self-harm, refusing to follow essential safety instructions, or becoming emotionally overwhelmed to the point of losing awareness of danger. While these behaviours may appear dramatic or manipulative, they are usually rooted in emotional distress, trauma, impulsivity, or difficulty regulating intense internal states.

Self-endangerment is especially common among young people with trauma histories, neurodivergent conditions, anxiety disorders, or those experiencing overwhelming stress in daily life. In group settings, the presence of peers can intensify these reactions, either as a call for help, an escape strategy, or a response to sensory or emotional overload. For youth workers, these situations are stressful because they require immediate action, emotional regulation, and careful attention to group safety.

How to talk to young people after a self-endangering incident

The conversation must happen once the young person is fully calm and regulated. The goal is not to punish them, but to understand what triggered the behaviour and to develop a plan to keep them safe.

Example supportive phrases

Some young people may find it difficult to identify or explain what they felt or needed. When the youth worker knows the young person well, they can offer a small number of possible options without making assumptions or speaking for them.

- *“You may not know yet what would help. Would a break, a quieter space, fewer people, or support from someone you trust make it easier?”*
- *“That moment looked really overwhelming for you. What was happening inside?”*
- *“I’m glad you’re safe now. Let’s talk about what made it hard for you.”*
- *“When you feel that level of stress again, what could help you before it gets too big?”*
- *“You’re not in trouble; I want us to understand what you need so this feels safer next time.”*
- *“What can we do together to help you feel more in control?”*

These statements communicate care, reduce shame, and reinforce collaboration.

VII. Rescuer roles

In some youth groups, one young person consistently tries to “save” or protect others, stepping into conflicts, offering emotional support far beyond their capacity, or taking responsibility for peers’ wellbeing. Although this may look mature or caring, it often reflects deeper emotional patterns rooted in their personal history or sense of identity.

Young people take on the rescuer role for different reasons: they may have grown up caring for siblings or parents; they may fear conflict and try to keep everyone calm; they may feel valuable only when they are helpful; or they may struggle with their own emotions and focus on others to avoid dealing with them. Rescuer behaviour can include mediating arguments, comforting others without being asked, giving inappropriate advice, feeling guilty when peers struggle, or becoming distressed if they cannot help.

While well-intentioned, rescuers often carry emotional burdens that exceed their developmental capacity. This can lead to exhaustion, anxiety, blurred peer roles, and unsafe situations where a young person feels responsible for another’s mental health or behaviour.

Supporting young people who take on rescuer roles

When addressing this dynamic, youth workers must validate the young person’s empathy while gently guiding them towards healthier boundaries. The goal is never to discourage caring behaviour, but to ensure that support responsibilities remain with adults — not placed on a young person’s shoulders.

Helpful responses

Conversations should be warm, respectful and reassuring:

- *“I see how much you care about others — that’s a real strength.”*
- *“But it’s not your responsibility to fix their problems. That’s what I’m here for.”*
- *“You also deserve space to relax and focus on yourself.”*
- *“What happens inside you when someone else is upset?”*
- *“Let me take over here so you don’t feel overwhelmed.”*

These messages acknowledge their good intentions while addressing the emotional cost of the role.

Boundaries, safeguarding, and reflective practice

Personal boundaries remain an ongoing challenge in youth work because relationships are often informal, emotionally close, and trust-based. Clear boundaries regarding communication, availability, emotional roles, and professional responsibilities are essential for maintaining safety and preventing dependency.

Youth workers are mentors and facilitators, not therapists or substitute family members.

To navigate complex situations, professionals rely on:

- structured reflection,
- team consultation,
- supervision,
- safeguarding procedures,
- cooperation with specialised services.

Warning signs such as sudden withdrawal, hopelessness, behavioural escalation, or self-endangerment should never be minimised. In such situations, the role of the youth worker is to ensure immediate safety, remain calm and present, and involve appropriate support systems.

Ultimately, the challenges described in this chapter are not problems to be eliminated but realities that require awareness, competence, consistency, and reflective practice. Professional youth work involves recognising patterns early, maintaining stability under pressure, and turning difficult moments into opportunities for learning, growth, and connection.

7.3. Youth participation and empowerment

Supporting the participation and empowerment of young people with additional support needs requires youth workers to create environments where every young person is seen, heard, and valued. Participation is not simply about inviting young people to activities—it is about ensuring that they can influence decisions, feel safe to speak up, and develop the confidence and skills needed for meaningful engagement. The following principles and practices offer a practical framework for inclusive youth work, especially in settings that involve young people with diverse support needs.

How young people can report inappropriate practices

Quality youth work is grounded in safety, dignity, and accountability. Young people—especially those with disabilities—must have access to transparent, accessible, and trusted mechanisms for reporting inappropriate practices such as bullying, harassment, discrimination, or ableism.

Clear procedures are essential. This system should include a way to log incidents, record staff responses, and a plan for addressing the problem.

Youth programmes should define and communicate rules that prohibit discriminatory or harmful behaviour, using simple and accessible language. Reporting systems should be easy to use, confidential, and supportive, allowing young people to log incidents and understand how the organisation will respond. Many young people, particularly those who rely on alternative communication, need multiple channels for reporting: an online form, a box and form for reports, or a trusted adult they can turn to. Equally important is ensuring that the dignity and safety of the young person making a report is fully protected. Youth workers must respond consistently and intentionally, demonstrating that concerns are taken seriously, and that the young person's voice truly matters.

Organisations should ensure that young people can provide feedback in accessible ways on how to improve services. Feedback and accountability mechanisms should be established that are accessible and useful to youth with disabilities and their families.

Youth leadership training and mentoring

Empowerment becomes real when young people feel capable, confident, and supported. Leadership training and mentoring play a significant role in this process, offering opportunities to build life skills, strengthen self-determination, and foster positive identity development. Mentoring has a particularly strong impact on young people with additional support needs.

Mentoring can take both simple and more structured forms. What matters is that it grows gradually and naturally. Often the most effective starting point is simply encouraging young people to support each other with small tasks, building trust and confidence before moving into more formal mentoring roles. It does not need to be a large or overwhelming commitment; rather, it can begin as a mutual “I need help – you need help – let’s support each other” approach. For peer mentoring pairs, it is especially valuable to look at their complementary strengths, interests, and support needs, ensuring that both young people can benefit and contribute in ways that feel meaningful and balanced.

Skilled mentors—especially those who share similar lived experiences—can support young people in developing independence, communication skills, and confidence in navigating challenges related to disability. Leadership training should therefore be available, accessible and inclusive, enabling young people to take on roles that reflect their strengths and ambitions.

Mentoring programmes can help young people reflect on their experiences, strengthen their self-understanding and confidence, navigate barriers and prejudice, and draw on their lived experience to contribute to their community. Supporting self-determination is a key part of mentoring. According to Self-Determination Theory⁸, individuals thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. For young people with disabilities, mentoring can help them develop these capacities by encouraging them to act, make decisions, and take ownership of their choices as primary agents in their own lives.

Self-determination for youth with disabilities⁹ involves providing opportunities to set personal goals, make meaningful decisions about participation and learning, and develop skills at their own pace. Mentors can guide them in problem-solving, advocating for themselves, and building confidence in their competences, while ensuring they feel connected and supported. .

Such programmes not only help individuals grow, but they also strengthen the wider youth community. When young people recognise how their identities and experiences can contribute to collective goals, they become active agents of change.

Reaching out to passive and non-participating young people

Young people with additional support needs often hesitate to join youth programmes due to low self-confidence, past negative experiences, or the assumption that such activities are “not for them.” Reaching these young people requires proactive and sustained outreach efforts.

⁸ <https://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/>

⁹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740924005164>

Youth organisations should make the first move by directly inviting young people with disabilities and providing accessible information through email, social media, and community networks.

It is important to reach out to families and guardians to build trust and inform them about the benefits of non-formal education activities. Parents can often be overly protective, which can hinder young people's participation. So building trust through direct communication, open days, or family meetings can help break down barriers.

Outreach youth work and community-based presence remain effective tools for reaching young people who do not engage with institutional settings. The goal is not only to inform them about opportunities, but to show them that these opportunities genuinely welcome and include them.

Involving young people in decision-making

Involving young people in the planning and management of programmes is a fundamental requirement, in line with the human rights-based approach. Participation is most meaningful when young people have real influence over programmes that concern them. The principle *“Nothing about us without us”* applies strongly to youth work involving young people with disabilities. It can only be ensured through their direct involvement and consultation.

Young people should be engaged in programme planning, evaluation, and in shaping everyday rules and routines. This involvement can take many forms: focus groups, youth advisory boards, collaborative planning sessions, or creative participation methods such as ranking exercises, photo elicitation, or storytelling. These alternative approaches ensure that young people with various communication styles can express themselves comfortably.

Empowering young people through meaningful choice is a key aspect of fostering ownership. When they see that their decisions have an impact, they engage more actively and confidently. Encouraging self-determination by offering options, choices and involving youth in decision-making strengthens their sense of autonomy and ownership of the programme.

Youth participation can be understood as a continuum. Hart's Ladder of Participation¹⁰ is one influential framework for illustrating different levels of involvement, but it is not the only or definitive model. Youth workers may also explore other participation frameworks and select approaches that best fit the young people and setting.

In youth work with young people with additional support needs, this model is particularly useful because it helps youth workers understand that meaningful

¹⁰ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/citizenship-and-participation#Hart's%20ladder>

engagement is not a single step but a gradual process. Some young people may initially participate at lower levels due to communication barriers, limited confidence, or lack of prior opportunities. Others may be ready to take on leadership or co-decision roles from the start.

The goal is not to push every young person to the top immediately, but to support them in moving upward at their own pace—towards genuine partnership, shared decision-making, and youth-led initiatives. Importantly, the ladder helps highlight what should be avoided: tokenism and “decoration,” where young people are present but have no real influence. These practices can be especially harmful for disabled youth, who have historically experienced exclusion and whose contributions are often underestimated.

By using Hart’s ladder as a guiding framework, youth workers can design opportunities that are accessible, gradual, and responsive to individual needs. This may include alternative communication methods, accessible formats, additional time for decision-making, or one-to-one support. Ultimately, participation must remain a matter of choice: young people should always be able to decide whether they want to engage more deeply or prefer a different level of involvement. The aim is to empower them—not to pressure them—so that meaningful participation becomes both possible and desirable.

Person, not diagnosis approach

Inclusive youth work places the individual at the centre, not their diagnosis. Youth workers should consciously “see the person first,” focusing on strengths, interests, and aspirations rather than limitations. It is important to remember that youth workers are generally not special education teachers, psychologists, or disability specialists. Their expertise lies in working with young people through non-formal education to support development, social skills, and personal growth. For adolescents and young adults, this includes key areas such as identity formation, developing autonomy, navigating friendships and romantic relationships, and preparing for adulthood. By focusing on these universal developmental goals, youth workers can remain within their professional field while still providing meaningful, person-centred support to young people with disabilities.

Programmes should build on the talents, competences, and unique perspectives that each young person brings, encouraging self-determination and choice. It also aligns with the idea that support should be defined by the young person themselves: they decide what they need, when they need it, and how they prefer to receive it. Support should be identified with the individual and not defined for the individual, meaning that the young person has the right to decide when and how they want support.

No preconceptions: every contribution is valuable

Youth workers must approach young people with additional support needs without stereotypes, low expectations, or assumptions about what they can or cannot do. Every contribution—whether it is a gesture, a short comment, a picture, or a long conversation—has value.

In many cases, simply showing up is already a significant achievement, particularly for young people with disabilities who may face anxiety, difficulties with travel, or past negative experiences that make participation challenging. Youth workers need to understand their participants and recognise that engagement can take many forms. Gradual participation is valid: a young person might sit silently throughout an activity yet be learning and processing a great deal, or they might appear disengaged or tired, but this does not reflect a lack of value or potential contribution. What is visible on the surface often does not capture the full story.

Learning and engagement can take many forms. Some youth may participate quietly, observe, or take time to build confidence; others may appear disengaged but are still processing and learning. Youth workers should recognise these subtle forms of participation and respect each individual's pace.

At the same time, young people with disabilities are not fundamentally different from their peers. Professionals should avoid having preconceptions or low expectations of young people with disabilities. They can be challenging, assertive, or even difficult, just like any other youth of their age. Preconceptions—whether assuming incompetence or idealizing them—are unhelpful in either direction. Every young person has strengths and challenges, and it is the role of youth workers to recognise both, set clear boundaries where needed, and create an environment where each participant can contribute in their own way. They are neither “hopeless” nor “angels,” but individuals whose presence and participation are meaningful in many ways. One of the most important aspects of quality work is overcoming attitudinal barriers and continuously examining the biases and assumptions of professionals.

Recognising small steps is essential for building confidence. Inclusive practice means appreciating diverse forms of participation and avoiding rigid standards for what “active engagement” looks like. By continually reflecting on their own biases, youth workers can dismantle attitudinal barriers that often exclude young people more than the disability itself.

Creating safe spaces

Safe spaces are a fundamental requirement of inclusive youth work and include both physical and psychological safety. Safety should be supported through clear group agreements, consistent routines, respectful communication, and opportunities for young people to express emotions in constructive ways.

A trauma-informed approach can help create more supportive and predictable environments for all participants. Predictable routines, clear communication, structured activities, and consistent responses reduce anxiety and help young people feel more secure and included.

Practical guidelines

This is not about specialised therapeutic intervention, but about applying awareness, empathy, flexibility, and structure in ways that support safe and meaningful participation.

1. Prioritise safety and predictability

- Create structured routines and clear expectations for activities.
- Use visual schedules or written reminders when helpful.
- Establish and consistently apply group agreements or codes of conduct.

2. Build trust through relationships

- Be consistent, patient, and respectful in interactions.
- Take time to get to know each young person individually.
- Respect preferences, boundaries, and communication styles.

3. Focus on gradual participation

- Recognise that participation may look different for different young people.
- Allow youth to participate at their own pace.
- Acknowledge small steps of engagement and progress.

4. Support emotional regulation and coping

- Integrate simple relaxation, grounding, or mindfulness activities when appropriate.
- Provide access to quiet or sensory-friendly spaces.
- Encourage supportive peer relationships and buddy systems.

5. Respect individuality: person, not diagnosis

- Focus on strengths, interests, and developmental potential.
- Avoid assumptions based on diagnoses or labels.
- Adapt support strategies to the individual young person.

6. Recognise emotional distress and overwhelm

- Understand that withdrawal, frustration, anxiety, or emotional reactions may reflect stress or previous negative experiences.
- Respond with patience, structure, and supportive communication rather than punishment.

7. Support autonomy and self-determination

- Offer choices and encourage decision-making within safe boundaries.
- Support participation without pressure or forced disclosure.

8. Maintain professional boundaries

- Set clear expectations and consistent boundaries.
- Balance flexibility with safety, structure, and accountability.

9. Encourage collaboration and peer support

- Use peer mentoring, pair work, or buddy systems when appropriate.
- Promote mutual respect, cooperation, and supportive group dynamics.

Physical accessibility and sensory comfort are also important components of safe spaces. You may find more detailed guidance in the accessibility section.

Mentors who are role models with disabilities

Representation truly matters. Young people are more likely to trust, connect with, and feel inspired by mentors who share similar experiences. The presence of adults with disabilities in leadership, facilitation, or mentoring roles challenges stereotypes and demonstrates what is possible. The role model effect is powerful: seeing someone with shared experiences succeed can encourage young people to take steps they might otherwise hesitate to try or did not realize were possible.

The concept of “credible messengers” reinforces this idea: guidance and advice are more meaningful when delivered by someone who has lived through similar challenges. For this reason, programmes benefit from intentionally recruiting mentors and staff with disabilities, ensuring that lived experience is not only represented but valued as a form of expertise.

Additionally, peer mentors—youth participating in the same activity—can support each other. They not only receive support but also give it, which is highly beneficial. Beyond avoiding learned helplessness or similar issues, peer mentoring allows young people

to experience their own strengths, build confidence, and support one another in meaningful ways.

8. EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

Evaluation in inclusive youth work operates on multiple, interconnected levels: the individual, the professional, and the organisation. This chapter explores each of these dimensions, while also highlighting the specific features that distinguish evaluation in this context from more general youth work practices. Particular attention is given to accessibility, participation, and the need to capture qualitative progress and barrier removal.

Evaluation and feedback in inclusive youth work go beyond measuring participation or attendance. The focus is on understanding the qualitative “distance travelled” by each young person, including personal development, increased autonomy, and the gradual removal of barriers. In this approach, evaluation is not a separate or final step, but a continuous, cyclical process embedded in everyday practice. It supports learning, strengthens motivation, and ensures that insights gained directly inform future activities and professional decisions.

Rather than being perceived as judgement or control, evaluation becomes a shared, developmental dialogue between young people and professionals. This aligns with participatory and empowerment-based approaches, where feedback is inclusive, accessible, and responsive to individual needs.

What makes evaluation in inclusive youth work different?

“Before I came to the youth house, no one asked me what I think...”

Evaluation in youth work with young people with additional support needs differs fundamentally from general youth work evaluation. Rather than focusing primarily on participation, satisfaction, or programme outputs, it centres on the removal of barriers, the realisation of rights, and the individual “distance travelled” by young people navigating structural inequalities.

This approach expands evaluation into a three-fold process, assessing:

- the inclusivity of the organisation,
- the development and experience of the young person,
- and the self-awareness and practice of the professional.

At the same time, it introduces several unique elements that distinguish it from more traditional evaluation frameworks.

1. From participation to meaningful change

In inclusive youth work, evaluation shifts from measuring *what happened* to understanding *what changed*.

Success is not defined by attendance or activity completion, but by whether young people:

- feel safe, respected, and included,
- receive necessary adaptations without delay or stigma,
- develop confidence, autonomy, and self-expression.

Particular attention is given to outcomes such as:

- self-determination and agency,
- disability identity and self-acceptance,
- the ability to self-advocate in formal and informal contexts.

Importantly, evaluation must consider different starting points. The concept of “distance travelled” recognises that progress is relative and shaped by systemic barriers, not just individual effort.

2. Accessibility as a core evaluation principle

Evaluation methods themselves must be inclusive. Traditional tools alone are insufficient and may unintentionally exclude participants.

Inclusive evaluation therefore relies on:

- **accessible formats**, such as Easy- to-Read materials, visual scales, symbols, or audio-based tools,
- **multiple communication channels**, including verbal, non-verbal, and digital feedback,
- **flexibility in participation**, allowing extra time or alternative ways to respond.

Creative approaches—such as visual documentation, video reflections, or symbolic tools—can make evaluation more engaging and meaningful. The goal is not standardisation, but ensuring that every young person can express their experience in a way that works for them.

3. Participation as co-creation

A defining principle of inclusive evaluation is “*Nothing about us without us.*” Young people are not passive subjects of evaluation, but active contributors.

This can include:

- involving young people in designing feedback tools,
- jointly defining what success looks like,
- reflecting together on programme changes.

Approaches such as user journey mapping help capture how young people experience services from their own perspective, identifying barriers that may not be visible to professionals.

This participatory approach strengthens ownership, relevance, and trust.

4. Multi-perspective understanding

In some cases, young people may find it difficult to articulate their development or the impact of a programme. For this reason, evaluation benefits from a multi-perspective approach.

This may include input from:

- parents or caregivers,
- teachers or support staff,
- mentors and youth workers,
- external professionals or evaluators.

Such “wraparound” perspectives provide a more complete picture of progress and help identify changes that might otherwise go unnoticed. External reviews or accessibility audits can further support objectivity and quality assurance.

5. Reflection and accountability in practice

Inclusive evaluation places strong emphasis on professional reflection and organisational accountability.

Youth workers are expected to reflect on:

- their own assumptions and biases,
- how their behaviour may include or exclude,

- how they respond to feedback in practice.

At the organisational level, evaluation must lead to visible change. Closing the feedback loop is essential: young people need to see that their input has an impact.

Simple practices such as communicating changes (“We heard you—this is what we are doing differently”) strengthen trust and reinforce participation. Without this, evaluation risks becoming symbolic rather than meaningful.

Why this matters

What makes evaluation in inclusive youth work distinct is not only the tools used, but the shift in mindset:

- from control → to learning
- from measurement → to development
- from standardisation → to accessibility
- from observation → to participation

When done well, evaluation becomes more than a reporting requirement. It becomes a relational and empowering process that supports young people’s growth, strengthens professional practice, and continuously improves the quality and inclusiveness of the programme.

Organisational self-assessment and professional feedback

At the organisational level, regular self-assessment ensures that programmes remain aligned with inclusive values and responsive to changing needs. Structured tools—such as inclusion self-assessment frameworks—can support reflection on accessibility, communication practices, and service quality.

For professionals, reflective practice is essential. Youth workers should regularly review their own actions, assumptions, and emotional responses, ideally within supervision or team discussions. Reflecting not only on *what worked*, but also on *why it worked*, helps build a culture of learning and shared responsibility.

Collaboration with psychologists, social workers, educators, or other professionals provides additional insight and helps prevent organisational blind spots. Using simple logic models to define goals—such as increased confidence, social skills, or agency—can further support tracking meaningful outcomes over time.

Level Component	Description and practical application
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Three-fold monitoring approach	Monitoring is a three-fold process that evaluates organisational practice, the youth experience, and the professional's own self-awareness. This ensures a comprehensive understanding of both impact and process.
Benchmarking tools	Organisations should use formal assessment tools, such as the <i>PYD Organizational Inclusion Self-Assessment</i> , to evaluate performance in areas like physical accessibility, communication, and human resources. These tools provide structured insight into strengths and gaps.
Staff reflection	Practitioners should engage in regular, supervised reflection to identify unconscious biases and knowledge gaps. Staff meetings should include discussion of what worked well—and why—to build a culture of shared learning and continuous improvement.
Logic models	Developing a logic model helps define clear inclusion goals and measurable indicators (e.g. confidence, agency, social skills). This supports tracking meaningful progress over time rather than focusing only on outputs.

Adaptation: flexible responses to individual needs

A defining feature of high-quality inclusive youth work is its capacity to adapt. Since each young person brings unique experiences, needs, and competences, evaluation must remain flexible and supportive rather than rigid or standardised.

Effective programmes establish iterative feedback loops: feedback is gathered, discussed within the team, and translated into concrete adjustments. Importantly, these changes should be communicated back to young people (e.g. *“We heard you, and this is what we are changing”*), reinforcing their sense of agency and trust.

Flexibility also requires professionals to be willing to adjust plans in real time. If an activity is not working—because it is too complex, not engaging, or causing stress—youth workers should feel confident to modify or replace it without hesitation.

Providing individualised participation options is another key element. Young people may choose different roles (e.g. active participation or observation), formats (individual or group work), or even modes of engagement (in-person or online), depending on their needs and comfort level. This ensures that evaluation supports inclusion rather than reinforcing barriers.

Making evaluation more effective and useful

To strengthen practice, evaluation processes should go beyond data collection and actively support learning and improvement. Key elements include:

- **Closing the feedback loop:** Always show young people how their feedback leads to real changes. This increases trust and motivation.
- **Keeping it simple and regular:** Short, frequent feedback moments are more effective than complex, occasional evaluations.
- **Combining methods:** Use a mix of verbal, visual, and observational tools to capture a fuller picture of progress.
- **Focusing on development, not performance:** Highlight growth, effort, and small steps forward rather than comparing outcomes.
- **Supporting staff capacity:** Provide time and space for reflection, supervision, and shared learning within teams.
- **Embedding evaluation into daily practice:** Feedback should not feel like an extra task but a natural part of interaction and programme flow.

Measuring progress of youth: diverse and accessible methods

Progress should be captured in ways that allow young people to express themselves authentically, taking into account different communication styles, support needs, and levels of confidence.

Verbal feedback plays a central role. Short one-to-one conversations or group reflection moments create space for young people to share experiences at their own pace. These exchanges help normalise reflection and support the development of self-awareness.

To complement this, youth workers can use easy-to-complete questionnaires designed in accessible formats. Visual tools such as emoji scales, pictorial choices, or simple rating systems allow participation regardless of literacy level or cognitive differences. These tools reduce pressure and make evaluation more inclusive.

Observation is equally important, as many young people express progress through behaviour rather than words. Changes in engagement, cooperation, emotional regulation, or independence provide valuable insight into development. This process should remain empathy-led and non-intrusive, focusing on understanding rather than judging.

Video testimonials can further enrich evaluation by allowing young people to reflect on their experiences in their own voice. When made accessible (e.g. with subtitles or sign

interpretation), these recordings not only document progress but also support identity-building and self-confidence by making development visible over time.

Additional practical materials related to the topic are provided in the Annexes. Such as Practical examples of accessible feedback tools and programme adaptation based on participant feedback.

Common mistakes in inclusive evaluation (and how to avoid them)

These are not minor errors—if repeated, they systematically exclude the very young people inclusive youth work aims to support.

Common mistake	Why it is a problem in inclusive youth work	Better approach
Focusing only on attendance or outputs	Ignores real change and fails to capture the <i>distance travelled</i> , especially for young people facing systemic barriers	Measure qualitative progress: confidence, autonomy, participation, and barrier removal
Using standard, inaccessible tools	Excludes young people with different communication needs and reinforces inequality	Use accessible, flexible methods (Easy- to -Read, visuals, audio, multiple formats)
Not closing the feedback loop	Undermines trust—young people feel unheard or tokenised	Clearly communicate changes based on feedback (“ <i>We heard you...</i> ”) and show impact
Treating evaluation as control or judgement	Creates anxiety, reduces honesty, and discourages participation	Frame evaluation as learning, reflection, and shared development
Excluding youth from the evaluation process	Reinforces power imbalance and contradicts inclusive principles	Involve young people as co-creators in defining success and shaping tools
Treating all young people the same	Overlooks different starting points and individual needs	Adapt evaluation methods and expectations individually
Ignoring the removal of barriers	Focuses only on individual performance instead of systemic obstacles	Evaluate how environments and structures are becoming more inclusive
Over-reliance on verbal feedback	Excludes non-verbal or less confident participants	Combine verbal, visual, behavioural, and creative methods
Ignoring non-verbal progress	Misses key indicators like engagement or emotional regulation	Use structured observation as a core method
Not including multiple perspectives	Provides a limited or biased understanding of progress	Include input from caregivers, professionals, and external observers

Lack of professional self-reflection	Allows unconscious bias to shape evaluation outcomes	Build supervision, reflection, and team learning into practice
Rigid evaluation processes	Limits responsiveness to real needs	Use flexible, iterative feedback loops and adapt continuously

Conclusion

In inclusive youth work, evaluation is not merely a tool for accountability—it is a **core developmental practice**. By valuing young people’s voices, recognising progress in multiple forms, and maintaining a flexible, reflective approach, evaluation becomes a driver of both personal growth and professional quality. It strengthens self-awareness, builds confidence and agency among young people, and supports continuous improvement within organisations.

Continuous monitoring of acceptance and inclusion

Monitoring of inclusion

Monitoring provides data for improvement, not judgment.

The provision of quality youth work and the operation of inclusive youth centres (or any inclusive programme) for young people with additional support needs is based on continuous monitoring and evaluation, which is a critical element of the long-term sustainability and development of programmes.

A particular focus on support needs, accessibility, attitudes, professional and ethical guidelines, and the sharing of international experiences (good and bad practices) should be present.

What does monitoring mean in a Youth House context? Monitoring is a continuous, structured process used to ensure that youth work is safe, effective, and inclusive. It involves regularly checking:

- Are young people safe and supported?
- Are activities engaging and meeting their intended goals?
- Are staff delivering high-quality, inclusive youth work?
- Are young people achieving developmental outcomes (e.g., social skills, independence, well-being, employability)?
- Are barriers to accessibility and participation identified and removed?
- Is every young person included and able to participate fully?

Since monitoring plays a role in every phase, none should be skipped. The following provides one possible scenario, but keep in mind that local realities and specific objectives may require adjustments.

PHASE 1 — Planning & baseline: Before activities start

Key tasks:

- Define goals (e.g., social inclusion, independent living skills, employment readiness).
- Define indicators of success.
- Assess each young person's baseline in areas such as:
 - Social skills
 - Independence level
 - Communication
 - Interests
 - Support needs
 - Safety concerns
- Identify support needs (physical, cognitive, sensory, communication).

Tools:

- Intake form (survey, interview, focus group, video interview, drawing—adapted to the support needs and preferences of the target group)
- Risk assessment
- Accessibility checklist
- Baseline self-assessment (adapted to cognitive level)
- Parent/caregiver input, if needed

Example: In the Salva Vita Youth House, each young person has at least one entry interview. They can apply online and complete a questionnaire, either by writing freely or selecting from given options. This is followed by an in-person interview, which focuses among others on practical information such as:

- Medication needs
- Ability to travel independently
- Living conditions

We also observe performance aspects, for example:

- Punctuality

- How they adapt to a new environment

Most importantly, the interview is a dialogue. We assess whether the young person's expectations align with what we can offer and determine how we can best support them. In some cases, certain needs—such as untreated psychiatric issues—may require postponing participation until appropriate support or treatment is in place.

PHASE 2 — Ongoing activity monitoring: During weekly programmes and daily work.

Key task to monitor:

1. Attendance & engagement
2. Participation quality (Are they active? Passive? Avoidant?)
3. Well-being & behaviour changes
4. Skill development in the activity
5. Accessibility barriers (noise, sensory triggers, communication difficulties)
6. Staff performance & use of inclusive methods
7. Team reflections

Tools:

- Attendance sheets
- Weekly observation notes
- “Traffic light” engagement scores (Green = engaged, Yellow = fluctuating, Red = struggling)
- Support need logs
- Staff (professionals working with youth in groups/individually) reflection diaries
- Sensory and environmental monitoring
- Quick youth feedback cards (smiley faces, icons)

Example: Some habits or behaviours can negatively affect young people's development and their chances of getting a job. For instance, failing to keep agreements or having a severely disrupted sleep schedule can be problematic.

At the Youth House, activities are scheduled during the day, starting at 10 a.m., to allow everyone to arrive on time. However, some young people stay up late playing games and are too tired to attend morning activities.

To encourage responsibility and participation, we use a “learning fee” system:

- If a youth does not attend an activity they signed up for, they must pay a small fee.
- They cannot join the next activity until the fee is resolved.
- Families and caregivers are informed that the youth themselves should handle the payment.
- If the youth cannot pay, they can fulfil the requirement through housework or tasks assigned by their caregivers.
- Exceptions are made if a young person is ill or there is a family emergency, provided they notify us in advance.

This system helps young people develop accountability while remaining supportive and flexible.

PHASE 3 — Periodic reflection & adjustment (Monthly/Quarterly): You stop and analyse **what happened.**

Key reflection questions:

- What worked well?
- What didn't?
- Which young people need more support?
- Any crisis, conflict, or safety issues?
- Are we meeting accessibility requirements?
- Are families reporting improvement at home?
- Are youth reporting progress?
- Do we need to change schedules, spaces, staff, tools, or communication?

Tools:

- Monthly staff meeting
- Case discussions
- Youth focus group (with easy-to-read questions)
- Short parent/caregiver interviews
- Reviewing data (attendance, incidents, achievements)
- Check your Competence Wheel scores (if applicable)

Example: At the Salva Vita Youth House, we hold monthly reflection meetings with all staff. During these meetings, we review attendance sheets, engagement scores, and incident logs to see what is working and what isn't.

We also conduct case discussions for individual young people who may need extra support. For instance, if a young person consistently arrives late or struggles to participate, the team considers adjustments—like providing additional support, or modify spaces, introduce new tools or communication methods to better suit their needs.

PHASE 4 — Outcome measurement: Every 6–12 months or at programme cycles.

Key areas like:

1. Social skills
2. Independence
3. Mental well-being
4. Self-expression & communication
5. Confidence & self-esteem
6. Employment readiness
7. Community participation

Tools:

- Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) adapted for disabilities
- Before–after self-assessment
- Family reflection forms
- Youth worker assessment rubric
- Observation checklists (e.g., Can identify needs, can work in a group, etc.)
- Skills passports
- Youthpass (adapted)
- Employment outcomes (for NEET programmes)

Example: At the Youth House, we run an intensive employment preparation programme for young people who are ready to take steps towards work. The programme includes both group and individual sessions, as well as job placement activities, and lasts approximately six months.

Throughout the programme, we monitor progress using almost all the tools described in the previous phases—attendance sheets, engagement scores, observation notes, support logs, and youth feedback cards.

At the end of the programme, each young person either:

- Secures employment, or
- Works with staff to identify which skills or areas need further development before they are ready to move on.

This phase emphasises individualized planning, continuous monitoring, and adjustment to ensure each youth achieves meaningful outcomes.

PHASE 5 — Reporting & learning: Turning monitoring data into knowledge

Note: This phase focuses on organizational learning, not just data collection.

Key areas:

- Analysing all collected monitoring data (attendance, engagement, feedback, incidents, skill development)
- Identifying trends, successes, and areas for improvement
- Sharing learning within the team and across the organisation
- Using insights to inform programme adjustments and future planning

Tools:

- Data dashboards or spreadsheets
- Staff reflection summaries
- Young people and family feedback compilations
- Case study documentation

Outputs:

- Short internal monthly reports
- Quarterly quality reports
- Annual impact assessments
- Case stories highlighting individual journeys and outcomes
- Summaries of accessibility issues and solutions
- Recommendations for programme improvement

Example: At the beginning, all young people complete an entry questionnaire about their goals and how they would like to use the opportunities at the Youth House. Parents or caregivers also provide input.

After a year, or when a young person gains employment or leaves the Youth House, they complete a follow-up questionnaire about their experiences. By comparing responses with the initial questionnaire, we can draw conclusions—not only on an individual level but also more broadly to improve and adapt our programmes.

Case stories are also documented—for example, a youth who progressed from group activities to a successful employment placement—illustrating the impact of our programmes. These insights are then used to improve future activities, train staff, and inform strategic planning.

What should you monitor? (Indicators tailored for young people with additional support needs)

A. Participation indicators

- attendance consistency
- punctuality
- initiative-taking
- willingness to join tasks
- cooperation with peers
- ability to follow structure

B. Well-being & safety Indicators

- mood changes
- sensory overload triggers
- anxiety levels
- communication of needs
- behaviour incidents
- support needed to remain safe

C. Skill development indicators

- independent task completion
- social communication
- problem-solving
- mobility skills (if relevant)
- digital skills
- daily living skills
- career awareness

D. Youth worker & programme quality indicators

- use of inclusive communication
- adaptation of tasks
- proactive support
- safeguarding practice
- engagement methods
- consistency and rapport building
- crisis response quality

E. Accessibility indicators

- physical access
- sensory environment
- communication accessibility
- cognitive accessibility
- psychological, mental settings
- availability of assistive tools
- staff sensitivity and knowledge

4. Reflection points (What & when to ask)

Daily / after each session

- Who participated well today and why?
- Who withdrew or struggled and why?
- Were there accessibility issues?
- Did anyone experience stress, sensory overload, or conflict?
- Did we adapt properly?

Weekly

- Are we seeing progress or patterns?
- Are support plans still effective?
- Any emerging risks?

Monthly

- Is the environment still safe and inclusive?
- Are goals being met?

- Any specific staff training needs (e.g., autism-informed practice, ADHD-informed support, behaviour support)?

Quarterly

- Are outcomes improving?
- Are resources enough?
- Are participation barriers changing?
- Are we reaching young people in a NEET situation who rarely leave home?

Additional practical materials related to the topic are provided in the Annexes, such as Practical examples of accessible measurement, observation, and feedback tools.

Evaluation and monitoring processes must themselves remain accessible and flexible, ensuring that young people can participate in ways that match their communication styles, competences, and support needs.

Ensuring accessibility

Evaluation and monitoring processes must themselves remain accessible and flexible, ensuring that young people can participate in ways that match their communication styles, competences, and support needs. Feedback and evaluation methods should therefore use accessible language, flexible formats, and multiple participation options whenever possible. Accessibility in evaluation is not an additional feature but an essential component of inclusive practice.

Additional practical guidance related to accessibility procedures and tools can be found in the relevant accessibility chapters and appendices.

9. NETWORKING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Effective youth work cannot exist in isolation. Supporting young people with additional support needs requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach. Networking and sustainability are therefore not additional elements, but structural pillars that ensure inclusive youth work moves beyond isolated projects and becomes a reliable system of support.

When organisations build strong partnerships and long-term strategies, young people receive more consistent, accessible, and comprehensive support. Without this, fragmented services increase the risk that young people “fall through the gaps.” Sustainability, in this sense, is not only about funding, but about creating resilient systems that continue to function despite change—in staff, projects, or external conditions.

Why networking is critical in inclusive youth work

Networking in youth work with young people with additional support needs differs significantly from general youth work or standard civic collaboration.

Young people with disabilities, mental health challenges, or complex social situations frequently depend on multiple systems at once—education, healthcare, social services, and community support.

Inclusive youth work therefore requires a higher level of responsibility and precision in networking. It is not enough to “know about” other organisations—youth workers must actively collaborate, refer, follow up, and advocate. In many cases, the youth worker becomes the bridge between fragmented systems, ensuring that support is continuous and accessible.

For some young people, this network is not just supportive—it is life-stabilising or even life-saving, particularly in situations involving mental health risk, family instability, or social isolation. This makes networking a core safeguarding function, not an optional organisational activity.

9.1 Referral systems for unmet needs

Youth centres cannot and should not attempt to meet all needs internally. Some young people require additional professional support such as mental health care, disability support services, social services, legal advice, or crisis intervention. A well-functioning referral system is therefore a core responsibility.

An effective referral system is not passive, but actively managed. It includes:

- clear criteria for when referral is necessary,
- established relationships with relevant services (e.g. psychologists, social workers, employment agencies, disability services),
- up-to-date knowledge of available support options,
- transparent communication with young people and, where appropriate, caregivers,
- follow-up to ensure that the young person successfully accesses the referred service.

Importantly, referrals should be guided by an equity-based approach. Youth workers may need to support young people through the process, especially when navigating systems that can be complex, inaccessible, or potentially discriminatory. In this role, professionals act as resource brokers, helping young people connect with appropriate and safe support.

9.2 Building cross-sector relationships

Inclusive youth work becomes significantly more effective when it is embedded in a network of complementary services. These partnerships create a “wraparound” support system that addresses multiple dimensions of a young person’s life.

Key partnerships include:

- Schools and education providers: enabling early identification of needs, aligning Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with non-formal learning, and supporting transitions between education levels.
- Employers and the private sector: facilitating realistic pathways to employment through inclusive recruitment practices, workplace sensitisation, and mentorship opportunities.
- Civil society organisations and identity-based groups: including disability organisations, minority-led associations, and LGBTQ+ groups, which provide specialised support and strengthen inclusion.
- Local authorities and public services: ensuring access to social welfare, health services, and youth support systems.

These relationships require time and consistency. Trust—especially with marginalised communities—is built gradually through reliable, long-term engagement, not one-off collaboration.

9.3 Knowledge sharing and professional development

Sustainable youth work depends on the continuous development of professional knowledge and organisational capacity. In a rapidly changing social context, youth workers must be able to adapt to new challenges, approaches, and needs.

This includes:

- ongoing training in areas such as trauma-informed practice, mental health, disability inclusion, and safeguarding,
- use and development of practical manuals, guidelines, and methodological tools,
- regular team reflection, peer learning, and supervision,
- participation in international exchanges and networks (e.g. Erasmus+, Council of Europe initiatives).

Cross-sector learning is particularly valuable. Joint training with professionals from education, health, and social sectors helps create a shared language and understanding, improving collaboration and service coordination.

9.4 Long-term strategy and continuous development

Sustainability requires a shift from a project-based mindset to a long-term organisational commitment. This means embedding reflection, adaptation, and development into the structure of the organisation itself.

Key elements include:

- developing a continuous improvement plan linked to organisational goals and quality standards,
- integrating feedback loops, where input from young people, staff, and partners leads to concrete programme adjustments,
- conducting periodic self-assessments or inclusion audits to identify gaps and emerging needs,
- maintaining consistent ethical and safeguarding standards,
- diversifying funding sources to reduce dependence on short-term grants,
- responding flexibly to changing community needs.

Crucially, feedback must lead to visible change. Communicating these changes back to young people strengthens trust and reinforces their role in shaping the programme.

Sustainability also depends on structural stability. Inclusive youth work should be supported by long-term funding frameworks and institutional recognition, ensuring continuity of support throughout a young person's development, rather than only within limited project cycles.

When networking fails: a practice scenario

A young person attending a youth centre begins showing signs of emotional distress and withdrawal. Although the youth worker recognises the need for specialised support, the organisation lacks clear referral pathways and established cooperation with external services. Due to limited guidance and fragmented systems, the young person disengages from the programme without accessing adequate support.

Key learning: Weak or informal networking systems increase the risk that young people with complex needs fall through gaps in support.

Conclusion

Networking and sustainability transform youth work from isolated interventions into a connected support ecosystem. Through strong partnerships, clear referral pathways,

continuous learning, and long-term strategic thinking, organisations can ensure that young people receive consistent, inclusive, and meaningful support.

In this way, youth work becomes not only a programme, but a reliable part of the broader social safety net, capable of supporting young people across different life stages and changing circumstances. By embedding reflection and adaptation in its structure, the youth centre becomes a stable, reliable support system for young people, not just during one project, but over many years.

10. RESOURCES, EVALUATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of inclusive youth work requires more than stable funding or well-designed programmes. It depends on a coherent system in which financial planning, human resources, professional practice, and evaluation are closely interconnected. Only when these elements function together can an organisation maintain quality, accessibility, and meaningful impact over time.

In organisations working with young people with additional support needs, sustainability takes on a distinct meaning. In many general youth work settings, organisational sustainability mainly ensures that activities and services can continue, while individual young people may participate for shorter periods and move between different opportunities. For young people with additional support needs, continuity often has greater personal significance. They may have fewer accessible alternatives, limited social support, and need more time to build trust, develop skills, and make progress. Stable relationships, predictable environments, and continuous support are therefore essential not only for the organisation, but also for the young person's participation, development, and long-term well-being.

As a result, sustainability is not only organisational, but also **relational and systemic**. It involves maintaining stable support networks, adapting to changing individual needs, and ensuring that young people do not lose access to support when projects end or circumstances change. For many young people, youth work programmes become one of the few stable and supportive environments available over longer periods of time.

Financial and material resources

Accessibility should be understood as a core design principle integrated into programme planning and budgeting from the outset. This means that budgets need to include not only operational expenses and staff salaries, but also the full range of accessibility measures, such as assistive technologies, adapted communication, transport support, or interpretation services.

A common risk in many organisations is treating inclusion as something that can be “added later” if needed. In practice, this leads to exclusion or compromised quality.

Sustainable programmes therefore plan accessibility **from the outset**, ensuring that resources are available when needed.

Budgeting should cover:

- regular operational expenses (rent, accessible utilities, equipment, materials),
- staff costs (youth workers, psychologists, social workers, mentors, peer-support workers),
- accessibility measures (physical adaptations, assistive technology, interpreters, simplified communication, digital accessibility, transport support),
- evaluation, supervision and staff development.

At the same time, organisations must navigate structural challenges such as short-term funding cycles and project-based financing. To reduce vulnerability, it is important to combine different funding sources and maintain a realistic balance between ambition and capacity. Overextension—taking on more than the organisation can sustainably support—is one of the most frequent hidden risks in inclusive youth work.

Human resources, burnout and ethical practice

The effectiveness of inclusive youth work depends heavily on the quality and stability of its team. Working with young people with complex needs requires an **interdisciplinary approach**, bringing together different professional perspectives. Youth workers, psychologists, social workers, and mentors each contribute to a more holistic understanding of the young person's situation.

Equally important is representation. Involving professionals and mentors with lived experience, including people with disabilities, strengthens trust and provides young people with credible and relatable role models.

However, this work is emotionally demanding. Professionals are often exposed to crisis situations, trauma narratives, and systemic limitations that cannot be resolved quickly. Without adequate support, this leads to burnout, which directly affects the quality and continuity of the programme.

Sustainability therefore depends on intentional **burnout prevention**, such as:

- realistic caseloads and clear role definitions,
- regular supervision (individual and group),
- peer support and structured team reflection,

- boundaries around availability and emotional labour,
- normalising help-seeking and vulnerability within the team.

Preventing burnout is therefore not an individual responsibility, but an organisational one. It requires clear role definitions, realistic workloads, regular supervision, and a culture where reflection and vulnerability are accepted. Boundaries around availability and emotional involvement are not signs of distance, but essential conditions for sustainable engagement.

Professional practice must be guided by clear ethical frameworks. Confidentiality, safeguarding, informed consent, and respect for autonomy are not abstract principles, but daily operational realities that require consistent attention and shared understanding within the team.

Professional reflection and learning

In inclusive youth work, professional competence is not defined only by technical skills, but also by the ability to reflect, adapt, and respond thoughtfully to complex situations. Youth workers often make decisions in emotionally demanding and unpredictable contexts shaped by their own beliefs, values, experiences, and assumptions. Without reflection, these may unintentionally reinforce exclusion or ineffective practices.

Structured self-reflection helps professionals:

- recognise and examine their own beliefs, expectations, and automatic reactions,
- consider how these influence relationships and decision-making,
- identify more supportive and constructive responses,
- and better understand how personal values and experiences shape professional practice.

Models such as reflective identity models can help professionals examine deeper layers of their practice, including beliefs, values, identity, and decision-making processes.

Practical tools for reflection and self-assessment may include:

- self-assessment questionnaires,
- reflective journals or developmental portfolios,
- value clarification exercises,
- structured reflection prompts,
- peer reflection and supervision,

- and critical incident discussions within teams.

Over time, reflective practice contributes to the development of a learning culture in which professional growth, adaptation, and continuous improvement become integrated into everyday work rather than limited to formal training settings.

Monitoring, evaluation and feedback

Sustainability also depends on the organisation's ability to understand and demonstrate its impact. In inclusive youth work, evaluation goes beyond measuring participation or outputs. It focuses on qualitative change, such as increased confidence, improved social connections, or greater independence.

Because young people with additional support needs often start from different positions, evaluation must take into account the concept of "distance travelled". Progress is not measured against a fixed standard, but in relation to individual starting points and the barriers that have been overcome.

A balanced evaluation system combines quantitative indicators—such as participation rates or transitions to education and employment—with qualitative insights gathered through conversations, observation, and creative forms of feedback. These processes should be accessible, low-threshold, and meaningful for young people.

Continuous development and long-term impact

A sustainable organisation functions as a learning organisation. It does not simply repeat activities, but continuously adapts based on experience, feedback, and changing needs. This requires regular reflection at team level, as well as the ability to translate insights into concrete adjustments in practice.

This involves:

- regular team reflection and evaluation meetings (not only on "what we did", but on "how we think and decide"),
- integrating findings from self-reflection, supervision and evaluation into concrete adaptations of the programme,
- systematic professional development planning for staff (shared learning goals, training plans, peer learning),
- maintaining documentation (portfolios, case collections, manuals) that preserves institutional knowledge despite staff turnover.

Long-term impact is closely linked to the transition into adulthood. For many young with additional support needs, this transition is more complex and less linear than for their

peers. It often involves navigating fragmented systems, gaps in services, and limited opportunities in the labour market.

Youth work therefore plays a critical role in building bridges—to education, employment, and community participation. This includes developing life skills, supporting career orientation, and helping young people understand and navigate institutional systems.

Sustainability, in this sense, is not only about maintaining services, but about ensuring that young people are supported beyond the programme itself, with lasting effects on their independence and participation in society.

Sustainability checklist for organisations

To support practical application, the following checklist summarises key elements of sustainable inclusive youth work:

Strategic and financial

- Accessibility is included in all budgets from the start
- Funding sources are diversified (core + project + partnerships)
- Programme scope matches available resources

Human resources and well-being

- Interdisciplinary team is in place
- Staff diversity reflects the community
- Regular supervision and peer support are ensured
- Burnout prevention measures are actively implemented

Professional practice

- Ethical protocols are clear, shared, and applied
- Continuous training is embedded in organisational practice
- Reflection is part of everyday work, not an exception

Evaluation and learning

- Both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods are used
- Feedback from young people is regularly collected
- Evaluation results lead to visible changes

- “Distance travelled” is recognised as a key indicator

Long-term impact

- Clear pathways to education, employment, and community participation exist
- Partnerships support transition beyond the programme
- Follow-up or alumni connections are maintained

Closing note

Sustainability in inclusive youth work depends on the alignment of resources, professional practice, organisational learning, and long-term commitment. When these elements function together, youth work can provide stable, adaptive, and meaningful support for young people over time.

To support implementation and professional development, a detailed adapted competence framework based on the ETS Competence Model — expanded to address disability inclusion, accessibility, safeguarding, co-creation, and human rights-based youth work — is provided in the Annex.

The framework uses the F–I–A–E model to describe four progressive levels of competence development:

F–I–A–E refers to four levels of competence development:

F – Foundation= awareness

This is the starting level. The person has basic awareness and understanding of the concept. They can recognise it in simple situations but may not yet apply it consistently in practice.

I – Intermediate= applied understanding

At this level, the person can apply the competence in familiar or supported situations. They understand how it works and can use it with some structure or guidance.

A – Advanced= confident, adaptive practice

Here the person applies the competence independently and consistently. They can adapt it to different contexts, respond flexibly to challenges, and integrate it into their regular practice.

E – Expert= leadership and system influence

This is the highest level. The person not only applies the competence but also shapes how others use it. They influence systems, train others, develop methods, and contribute to organisational or policy-level change.

Competence	Competence description	Learning outcomes (F–I–A–E)	Indicators (F–I–A–E)	Assessment tools	Missing from ETS models
Human-rights-based practice & ethical positioning	Applies a rights-based approach grounded in UNCRPD, ensuring dignity, equality, non-discrimination, and recognising young people as rights-holders rather than passive recipients.	F: Recognises basic rights and fairness principles. I: Explains UNCRPD and applies it in practice. A: Integrates rights into programme design and challenges violations. E: Advocates and shapes organisational/system-level rights-based practice.	F: Uses respectful language. I: References rights in activities. A: Challenges exclusionary practices. E: Influences policies and standards.	Reflective journals; case studies; ethical discussions; Youthpass.	No explicit UNCRPD/legal grounding or accountability.
Critical understanding of disability models	Demonstrates deep understanding of social, and human rights-based models and applies them critically to	F: Recognises disability as diversity. I: Explains different disability models. A: Applies social and the	F: Avoids deficit language. I: Identifies barriers. A: Redesigns environments.	Concept maps; essays; scenario analysis; peer feedback.	Lacks disability model literacy

	analyse and transform youth work practice.	human-rights-based models in programme design. E: Critically analyses systems and trains others.	E: Leads conceptual discussions.		
Accessibility design & implementation	Designs and implements accessible programmes across physical, sensory, cognitive, and communication dimensions using universal design and UDL, complemented by accommodations.	F: Identifies accessibility barriers. I: Applies basic adaptations. A: Designs fully accessible programmes. E: Develops accessibility systems and standards.	F: Notices barriers. I: Makes adjustments. A: Accessibility embedded in design. E: Organisation-wide accessibility culture.	Accessibility audits; observation; participant feedback; material portfolios.	No operationalisation of accessibility (UDL, AAC, Easy-to-Read).
Adaptive facilitation & Individual support	Adapts facilitation methods, communication styles, and environments to meet individual needs while maintaining	F: Recognises different needs. I: Uses varied facilitation methods. A: Applies trauma-informed and	F: Adjusts when needed. I: Uses multiple methods. A: High engagement across	Observation; video reflection; peer review; facilitator logs.	No concrete inclusive facilitation methods (sensory, trauma-informed).

	inclusive group dynamics and integrating trauma-informed approaches	sensory-aware approaches. E: Coaches others and leads inclusive facilitation practice.	participants E: Models practice for others.		
Participation & co-creation	Facilitates meaningful participation through shared decision-making, co-creation, and redistribution of power.	F: Encourages participation. I: Uses participatory methods. A: Shares decision-making power. E: Establishes co-governance structures.	F: Participation visible. I: Youth consulted. A: Youth influence outcomes. E: Youth co-lead programmes.	Participation mapping; group reflection; youth feedback; observation.	No explicit power-sharing or co-decision focus.
Empowerment & Self-determination	Supports autonomy, competence, and decision-making aligned with self-determination theory, strengthening young people's agency.	F: Encourages choice. I: Supports goal-setting. A: Builds autonomy and confidence. E: Designs empowerment systems.	F: Youth express preferences. I: Youth set goals. A: Youth act independently.	Goal-setting tools; reflection diaries; Youthpass; peer feedback.	No integration of self-determination theory.

			E: Youth lead initiatives.		
Communication for inclusion	Uses accessible, inclusive, and adaptive communication including plain language, Easy-to-Read, AAC, and multiple formats.	F: Uses clear language. I: Adapts communication. A: Designs accessible materials. E: Develops inclusive communication systems.	F: Basic understanding. I: Reduced confusion. A: High comprehension. E: Inclusive communication culture.	Material review; comprehension checks; observation; feedback tools.	No accessible communication standards.
Safeguarding & trauma-informed practice	Ensures physical and psychological safety by applying safeguarding procedures and trauma-informed principles.	F: Recognises importance of safety. I: Applies safeguarding basics. A: Integrates trauma-informed practice. E: Develops safeguarding systems.	F: Safe behaviour. I: Procedures followed. A: Participants feel safe. E: System-level safety culture.	Scenario exercises; simulations; observation; reflection logs.	No explicit trauma-informed framework.

Reflective practice & bias awareness	Engages in continuous critical reflection on personal biases, including ableism and intersectionality, and adapts practice accordingly.	F: Demonstrates basic awareness. I: Identifies personal biases. A: Changes practice based on reflection. E: Facilitates reflective processes for others.	F: Basic reflection. I: Recognises bias. A: Behaviour changes. E: Leads critical reflection.	Reflective journals; supervision; peer feedback; guided reflection.	No explicit focus on ableism and intersectionality.
Systems thinking & advocacy	Identifies systemic barriers and engages in advocacy to influence institutions, policies, and structural conditions.	F: Recognises structural barriers. I: Engages stakeholders. A: Leads advocacy actions. E: Influences policy and systemic change.	F: Identifies issues. I: Builds partnership. A: Advocacy actions visible. E: Structural impact achieved.	Project reports; stakeholder feedback; advocacy plans; case studies.	No structured advocacy competence.
Learning design & impact orientation	Designs programmes using theory of change, inclusive methodologies, and	F: Understands basic planning. I: Links activities to outcomes.	F: Basic planning evident. I: Clear objectives. A: Measurable	Programme plans; evaluation reports; Youthpass; reflection sessions.	No theory of change or impact measurement system.

	outcome-based evaluation to ensure measurable impact.	A: Applies evaluation methods. E: Designs impact frameworks.	e outcomes. E: Impact systems in place.		
Co-production with lived experience	Engages people with lived experience as equal partners in design, delivery, and evaluation, recognising their expertise and redistributing power.	F: Recognises value of lived experience. I: Includes participation. A: Shares decision-making. E: Builds co-production systems.	F: Inclusion visible. I: Active involvement. A: Shared power. E: Co-led structures.	Partnership feedback; co-evaluation; observation; reflection reports.	No prioritisation of lived experience as expertise.

Inclusive youth work is not defined by perfect systems or universal solutions, but by the ongoing commitment to accessibility, reflection, participation, and meaningful human relationships. The concepts, tools, and frameworks presented in this publication are intended to support professionals and organisations in building more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable youth work practices.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Young people with additional support needs remain underrepresented in many programmes and frequently encounter structural, social, and accessibility-related barriers that limit meaningful participation and long-term inclusion. This final section translates the principles and practical guidance presented throughout the methodology into recommendations for action. It addresses both decision-makers who shape the policies, funding, structures and systems that make accessible youth work possible and sustainable, and youth workers and other professionals responsible for everyday inclusive practice.

11.1. Recommendations for decision-makers on inclusive youth work

Young people with additional support needs are a highly heterogeneous group. They may experience disability, neurodivergence, mental health difficulties, trauma, chronic illness, learning-related barriers, sensory or physical access barriers, or combinations of these. Their needs, strengths, identities and developmental pathways differ, and some support needs may be non-visible or may change over time.

These recommendations are intended for European, national, regional and local decision-makers, public authorities, funders, programme designers and institutions that shape youth policies and services. Their responsibility is to create the legal, financial and organisational conditions in which meaningful participation is possible. Formal eligibility or the possibility to apply is not enough: programmes must be accessible in practice and provide the resources, support and flexibility required for participation.

Decision-makers in the field of youth work must address the needs of young people with additional support needs, including young people with disabilities with the same urgency and attention as other groups. Given the significant number of young people in this category, programmes and policies must be adapted at every level to remove barriers and ensure real opportunities. It is not enough that young person can “apply” to programmes—accessible resources, barrier-free platforms, and supportive structures must exist to make participation meaningful.

Background and key barriers

Young people with additional support needs are more likely than their peers without such needs to be outside employment, education or training, although the size of this gap varies by age, year, country and level of support needs. Data should therefore be presented with the population, indicator and time period clearly defined [1]. Across youth work and related systems, recurring barriers include:

- Fragmented support systems and weak coordination between youth work, education, vocational training, employment services, health care and social services.

- Physical, sensory, digital, communication and information barriers, including inaccessible recruitment and application procedures.
- Low expectations, stigma, ableism and institutional bias that restrict opportunities, career guidance and exposure to professional pathways.
- Late or insufficient transition planning and abrupt loss of support at age thresholds or when projects end.
- Short-term funding, inadequate staffing and failure to budget for accessibility, personal support, supervision and specialist consultation.
- Limited participation of young people with additional support needs in decisions that affect their lives, programmes and communities.

Timely, individualised and coordinated support can reduce these barriers and strengthen participation in youth work, education, training, employment and community life. The following recommendations call for a human rights-based approach informed by the social model of disability, sustainable financial commitment and the meaningful participation of young people at every stage of policy and programme development.

1. Strengthen rights-based policy and legal frameworks

- Fully implement, monitor and enforce the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), including within youth policy, public funding and service delivery [2].
- Mainstream accessibility and the needs of young people with additional support needs across all youth policies. Do not treat inclusion only as a separate category for 'young people with fewer opportunities' or as a specialist issue.
- Adopt a human rights-based approach informed by the social model of disability. Recognise that environmental, organisational and attitudinal barriers are major causes of exclusion and place responsibility for removing them on systems and institutions.
- Establish proactive equality, non-discrimination and accessibility duties in public funding, procurement and service standards, in accordance with the relevant European, national and local legal frameworks.
- Prevent gaps created by rigid age thresholds. Ensure continuity during the transition to adulthood and between youth work, education, training, employment and adult services, based on the young person's situation rather than an arbitrary cut-off.
- Adopt a whole-of-system approach that connects youth, education, social inclusion, health, independent living and labour-market policies while respecting the distinct role of youth work.

2. Provide sustainable, flexible funding and accessible procurement

- Provide stable, multiannual and core funding alongside project funding through European, national, regional and local instruments, including ESF+ and Erasmus+ where relevant. Continuity is especially important for young people who have limited alternative opportunities and may need more time to build trust, learn and develop.
- Treat accessibility as a core programme cost rather than an optional add-on. Inclusion-proof budgets and funding decisions from the beginning.
- Allow flexible budgets that can respond to individual access needs as they arise. Establish central or programme-level accessibility and reasonable accommodation funds so local managers do not have to divert activity budgets.
- Make eligible costs explicit, for example including personal assistance, sign-language interpretation, augmentative and alternative communication, accessible information, transport, accommodation, activity adaptations, assistive technology, additional preparation time, specialist consultation and additional staff capacity.
- Support shared resources such as community technology libraries, pools of accessible equipment and specialist support that smaller organisations can access.
- Require accessibility in publicly funded procurement, venues, digital tools, communication services and commissioned programmes.
- Ensure that funding levels reflect realistic staffing ratios, supervision, staff cover, training and recovery time. Burnout prevention and professional sustainability are core responsibilities, not matters of individual resilience alone.

3. Resource meaningful participation and empowerment

- Apply the principle 'Nothing about us without us' by involving young people with additional support needs in policy and programme design, implementation, governance, monitoring and evaluation.
- Make participation accessible and properly resourced. Provide information in advance, offer different ways to contribute, cover access-related costs and compensate young people and representative organisations for their expertise where appropriate.
- Use supported decision-making and accessible communication so that young people can understand options, express preferences and influence decisions without others automatically deciding on their behalf.
- Support networks of young leaders and professionals with lived experience who can challenge social norms, act as role models and influence policy. Recognise and strengthen initiatives that already exist.

- Recruit staff and volunteers with additional support needs or accessibility requirements at all levels, including leadership, and remove barriers within recruitment, employment and volunteering.
- Publish how young people's contributions affected decisions. Participation should produce a visible feedback loop rather than consultation without influence.

4. Require accessibility and universal design from the outset

- Apply Universal Design (UD) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) across programme design, learning methods, events, venues, materials, recruitment and digital tools, while retaining the possibility of individual reasonable adaptations.
- Conduct regular access audits covering physical, sensory, social, informational, communication and digital environments. Audits should involve accessibility professionals and young people with lived experience.
- Apply the European Accessibility Act within its scope and enforce other relevant accessibility and equality requirements for youth services, buildings, information and digital environments [3].
- Require digital content and services to meet the applicable European accessibility framework, including EN 301 549 where relevant. Use WCAG 2.2 as current technical guidance and best practice where appropriate [4][5].
- Provide core information and recruitment materials in clear, accessible and easy-to-understand formats by default. Offer alternative formats such as Easy Read, large print, Braille, audio, captioned or sign-language content according to the audience and identified needs.
- Ensure that application and first-contact procedures do not require unnecessary diagnostic disclosure. Ask what support or access arrangements are needed and explain how personal information will be used.

5. Build workforce competence and organisational capacity

- Require funded programmes to establish clear professional standards, a code of ethics, safeguarding procedures, role descriptions and referral pathways for youth workers and other staff.
- Use the European Training Strategy competence model for youth workers as a reference framework, adapted to context and complemented by explicit competence in disability inclusion, accessibility, safeguarding, supported decision-making and assistive communication [6].
- Provide regular training for staff and relevant decision-makers on accessibility, unconscious bias, ableism, microaggressions, intersectionality, trauma-informed

practice, inclusive communication and the recognition of non-visible support needs.

- Make reflective practice, mentoring and professional supervision standard operational requirements and provide dedicated funding and working time for them.
- Support peer learning and exchange between mainstream youth organisations, organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), Centres for Independent Living (CILs), youth-led organisations and services supporting neurodivergent young people and young people experiencing mental health difficulties, trauma, chronic illness or learning-related barriers.
- Build organisational capacity so responsibility for complex situations does not rest on one committed worker. Provide realistic caseloads, adequate staffing, management support and clear escalation procedures.

6. Create coordinated pathways through education, youth work and employment

- Establish joint protocols between youth work, education, vocational training, employment services, social services, health services and independent-living support, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- Offer a named transition coordinator when cross-sector coordination is needed. The young person should be involved in choosing the arrangement, understand the coordinator's role and consent to information-sharing within the applicable legal framework.
- Provide tailored vocational counselling, job coaching, mentoring and transition support through professionals trained in inclusion and accessibility.
- Expand access to reskilling, micro-credentials, dual learning and work-based learning, with adaptations based on individual goals and access needs.
- Ensure access to practical life-skills opportunities when these correspond to the young person's own goals. Do not impose one standard pathway or assume that every participant needs the same training.
- Develop employer networks for inclusive recruitment, workplace adaptation and disability awareness. Use measures such as wage subsidies and workplace-accommodation funds where evidence and local policy support them.
- Plan continuity beyond individual projects and prevent abrupt endings. Support planned transitions, handovers and follow-up while preserving the young person's autonomy and privacy.

7. Establish safeguarding, accountability and accessible complaints systems

- Require youth programmes to have accessible safeguarding, consent, confidentiality, incident-reporting, risk-assessment, crisis-response and referral procedures.
- Ensure that the limits of confidentiality and any legal or organisational duty to report are explained in accessible language before information is shared.
- Provide confidential, accessible and, where appropriate, independent channels through which young people and families can report discrimination, exclusion, abuse or unsafe practice and suggest improvements.
- Offer more than one reporting method, protect complainants from retaliation, communicate expected response times and document how concerns are followed up.
- Monitor whether policies work in practice, including whether incidents are recorded factually, escalated appropriately, reviewed and used for organisational learning.

8. Improve ethical data, research, monitoring and evaluation

- Strengthen data on participation, accessibility, education and employment outcomes while clearly defining age groups, indicators and disability or support-need categories.
- Collect only data that are necessary for a stated purpose. Make disclosure voluntary where possible, use accessible consent processes, protect privacy and process disability- and health-related data lawfully and securely.
- Where data are disaggregated by gender, region, disability or support need, use categories that are meaningful, proportionate and co-designed with affected young people. Avoid small-group reporting that could identify individuals.
- Evaluate more than attendance. Monitor accessibility, quality of engagement, sense of belonging, autonomy, personal 'distance travelled', barrier removal, continuity and longer-term outcomes.
- Commission targeted research to identify gaps and systemic shortcomings. Involve young people with additional support needs and professionals working with them in defining research questions, interpreting findings and developing responses.
- Publish findings in accessible formats and show how monitoring, complaints and youth feedback lead to concrete policy and programme improvements.

11.2. Recommendations for youth workers and professionals

These recommendations clarify what youth workers, mentors and other professionals should consider when working with young people with additional support needs. They translate the methodology's principles into concrete responsibilities and everyday practices for creating accessible learning environments and meaningful opportunities to participate, develop and contribute.

Inclusive practice requires preparation, accessible first contact, professional competence, safe relationships, continuous reflection and cooperation with relevant people and services. Youth workers have an important role, but they should not be expected to replace therapists, medical professionals, social workers or other specialists. Quality support depends on clear roles, supervision and shared organisational responsibility.

1. Establish a human rights-based, person-centred approach

- Recognise young people with additional support needs as rights-holders and active members of the community, not as passive recipients of charity or special assistance.
- Treat accessibility, safety and meaningful participation as core programme standards rather than optional adaptations.
- Assume competence, recognise strengths and goals, and focus on removing environmental, social, organisational and attitudinal barriers rather than trying to 'fix' the young person.
- Involve young people in decisions about activities, support, youth spaces and evaluation. Offer opportunities to contribute as participants, peer educators, facilitators, advocates or leaders without assuming that everyone wants the same role.
- Reflect critically on personal and organisational assumptions. Examine how stigma, stereotypes, low expectations, ableism and unconscious bias may influence communication, risk decisions and opportunities offered to young people.
- Recognise intersectionality: disability or additional support needs interact with gender, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, sexuality, migration experience and other aspects of identity.

2. Make outreach and first contact accessible

- Use clear, accessible invitations and registration procedures. Provide practical information about the activity, timing, location, transport, accessibility, available support, contact person and what participants can expect.

- Offer more than one way to ask questions or register, such as email, telephone, messaging, an online form or support through a trusted person.
- Discuss access requirements before participation where possible, but do not demand a diagnosis when information about practical support needs is sufficient.
- Explain how personal information will be used, who will have access to it and what confidentiality can and cannot cover.
- Remember that participation in youth work is voluntary. Young people should be able to choose how they participate, observe first, request a break, refuse an activity, select an accessible alternative or withdraw consent without punishment or shame.
- Use outreach to reach young people who do not already use youth services, including those in segregated settings, rural areas or situations of social isolation.

3. Develop specialised competence for inclusive youth work

Quality youth work with young people with additional support needs requires competence beyond general facilitation skills. Youth workers should receive regular training, mentoring, peer-learning opportunities and professional supervision. Relevant competences include:

- Inclusive facilitation and adaptive pedagogy, enabling activities to be modified without lowering meaningful learning or participation goals.
- Intersectional competence and disability-inclusion competence, recognising additional support needs as part of human diversity.
- Clear and accessible communication, including plain language, easy-to-understand information, visual support, augmentative and alternative communication, and appropriate assistive technology.
- Emotional intelligence and trauma-informed practice, supporting calm responses to anxiety, frustration, distress, sensory overload or withdrawal.
- Conflict mediation, prevention of exclusion and inclusive group management.
- Safeguarding, basic risk recognition, crisis-response procedures, factual documentation and appropriate referral.
- Reflective practice and the ability to recognise the limits of one's role, knowledge and competence.

4. Design programmes that enable participation from the start

- Apply Universal Design for Learning by offering multiple ways to engage, understand information, participate and express learning.

- Set meaningful goals while allowing flexible routes towards them. Adapt format, pace, group size, communication, materials, sensory load, time, roles and methods when needed.
- Provide clear instructions, visual aids, step-by-step guidance and opportunities to check understanding without public testing or shame.
- Use predictable routines and transparent schedules while retaining enough flexibility to respond to changing needs, fatigue, distress or sensory overload.
- Offer different participation roles based on strengths and preferences, including organising, documenting, presenting, creating, observing or supporting peers.
- Use project-based, experiential and non-formal learning approaches that emphasise cooperation rather than unnecessary competition.
- Include accessibility and safeguarding in programme planning, staffing, venue selection, transport, communication, emergency arrangements and evaluation from the outset.

5. Create accessible physical, sensory, informational, digital and social environments

- Check physical access to entrances, activity rooms, toilets, routes, transport and emergency procedures, including whether assistance is available when required.
- Provide accessible information and communication through easy-to-understand materials, visual supports, captions, sign-language interpretation, AAC support and digital tools compatible with screen readers where relevant.
- Offer sensory-friendly options such as quiet areas, reduced-noise arrangements, flexible seating and lighting, predictable breaks, fidget tools, ear defenders or noise-reducing headphones, and calming spaces.
- Create clear community agreements that reject discrimination, ableism, bullying, shaming and exclusionary behaviour. Explain how the group will respond when harm occurs.
- Do not wait until a participant discloses a condition before considering accessibility. Build accessible options into the ordinary environment and add individual adaptations where needed.
- Review accessibility with young people themselves. A technically accessible space may still feel confusing, unsafe or socially excluding.

6. Build supportive relationships and respond constructively to behaviour

- Build trust through consistency, reliability, respect, clear communication and emotional safety.

- Practise active listening and attentive observation so that early signs of discomfort, anxiety, withdrawal, conflict or overload can be noticed.
- Understand that behaviour may communicate unmet needs, distress, fear, difficulty understanding expectations or sensory overload. This perspective supports understanding but does not mean ignoring harm or unsafe behaviour.
- Use structured observation tools such as the Antecedent-Behaviour-Consequence framework where appropriate to identify environmental patterns and possible adjustments. Use observations ethically and avoid turning them into labels about the young person.
- Respond to challenging situations with calm guidance, de-escalation and relational support rather than punishment, public criticism, sarcasm, humiliation or automatic exclusion.
- Prioritise immediate safety while preserving dignity and connection, then support repair, reflection and reintegration into the group where appropriate.
- Do not assume that everyone with the same diagnosis or condition will respond in the same way. Ask, observe and adapt to the individual.

7. Maintain safety, ethics and professional boundaries

- Follow the principle of 'do no harm' and prioritise the young person's physical and emotional safety over activity completion or attendance targets.
- Explain roles, boundaries, support options and the limits of confidentiality in clear and accessible language.
- Seek informed consent and use supported decision-making. Check consent again when circumstances change and respect refusal wherever there is no immediate legal or safeguarding obligation to act.
- Know and follow organisational safeguarding, risk-assessment, incident-reporting, emergency and crisis-response procedures, as well as applicable legal duties.
- Document serious concerns and incidents factually, recording what was observed, said and done without unsupported diagnosis or interpretation.
- Escalate and refer when a situation exceeds the youth worker's role or competence. Do not manage high-risk or clinical situations alone, and do not present youth work as therapy or medical care.
- Maintain sustainable boundaries around availability, communication outside working hours, physical contact, gifts, dual relationships and personal self-disclosure.
- Use supervision and team consultation to review ethical dilemmas, emotional impact, risk and role boundaries.

8. Monitor quality, reflection and youth feedback

- Monitor more than attendance. Consider meaningful engagement, sense of belonging, autonomy, confidence, relationships, personal development and the young person's 'distance travelled' from their own starting point.
- Review which barriers appeared, which adaptations were used and whether they improved participation without creating new barriers.
- Collect feedback through accessible options such as easy-to-understand text, visual or pictorial tools, short interviews, private conversations, creative reflection or group activities.
- Provide safe ways to report discrimination, exclusion or unsafe practice. Explain confidentiality, protection and follow-up arrangements.
- Involve young people in peer evaluation and co-research where they choose to participate, and protect privacy when collecting or sharing information.
- Close the feedback loop by explaining what will change, what cannot change and why. Use findings to revise activities, environments and organisational practice.
- Use individual and team reflection, mentoring and supervision as part of continuous professional development.

9. Support empowerment, leadership and long-term pathways

- Support young people to define their own goals and recognise progress towards autonomy, participation and independence.
- Create accessible opportunities for leadership within programmes and for participation in youth councils, advocacy groups and community initiatives.
- Provide mentorship and skills development in facilitation, project management, public speaking, advocacy and peer support for those who want these roles.
- Support interested young people to become youth workers, trainers, volunteers, mentors or peer educators.
- Recognise that leadership is not the only meaningful outcome. Offer pathways connected to education, employment, volunteering, independent living, relationships, wellbeing and community participation, based on individual goals.
- Plan endings and transitions in advance. Where continued support is needed, agree referrals or handovers with the young person and avoid abrupt withdrawal of trusted support.

10. Strengthen collaboration, referral and shared responsibility

- Build working relationships with organisations of persons with disabilities, Centres for Independent Living, schools, social services, health and mental-health

services, employment services, therapists, community organisations and other inclusive youth organisations.

- Invite accessibility professionals and people with lived experience to contribute as trainers, mentors, consultants or guest facilitators, and recognise their expertise appropriately.
- Consult families, caregivers or trusted supporters only when appropriate and in line with the young person's wishes, rights, consent, privacy and safeguarding requirements.
- Agree who is responsible for what, what information may be shared, and how urgent concerns will be escalated. Share only information that is necessary and lawful to share.
- Develop local networks through which organisations can exchange accessible resources, practices, training and participation opportunities.
- Do not allow coordinated support to become control over the young person. Keep the young person informed and involved, and protect their autonomy.
- Recognise that inclusion cannot depend on one highly committed worker. Organisations must provide policies, staffing, supervision, training, accessibility resources, realistic role limits, budgets, monitoring and leadership commitment.

Closing message

Inclusive youth work becomes sustainable when responsibility is shared, planned and supported. Youth workers create accessible and trusting everyday practice; organisations provide professional structures and continuity; and decision-makers ensure that rights, funding, standards and systems make inclusion possible. The objective is not simply to admit young people to existing programmes, but to remove barriers so they can participate meaningfully, make choices, develop relationships, learn and influence the communities to which they belong.

Sources used to verify the recommendations

[\[1\] Eurostat, Young persons neither in employment nor in education and training by level of disability \(dataset edat_lfse_39\)](#)

[\[2\] United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

[\[3\] European Commission, European Accessibility Act](#)

[\[4\] European Commission, Web accessibility policy and European standards](#)

[\[5\] World Wide Web Consortium, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.2](#)

[\[6\] SALTO-YOUTH, ETS Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally \(2023\)](#)

ANNEXES AND SUPPORTING RESOURCES

Table of Content

Practical examples of professional boundaries in youth work (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETICS AND SAFEGUARDING)	2
Suicide risk: practical guidance and response tools (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETICS AND SAFEGUARDING)	7
Safeguarding & Protection Protocol (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETICS AND SAFEGUARDING)	9
Organisational self-assessment tool (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETICS AND SAFEGUARDING)	14
Self-assessment questionnaire for youth workers (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETICS AND SAFEGUARDING)	23
Practical quick guide for youth workers and mentors (from 6. BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE YOUTH WORK)	30
Practical feedback tools and adaptation examples (from 8. EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK)	33
Practical measurement and monitoring tools (from 8. EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK)	35
Ethical guidelines and reflective tools for inclusive youth work (from 6. BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE YOUTH WORK)	37
Positioning of the adapted ETS competence framework (from 10. RESOURCES, EVALUATION AND SUSTAINABILITY)	41
GLOSSARY	42
References	56

Practical examples of professional boundaries in youth work (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING)

The following examples illustrate common boundary-related situations in youth work practice. They are intended to support reflection, ethical decision-making, safeguarding awareness, and consistent professional practice.

When boundaries were NOT set

A youth worker accepted a participant on Instagram. The young person began messaging late at night about emotional problems. The worker felt pressured to answer because the messages felt urgent. Over time, the young person expected immediate replies and became upset when ignored. Other participants found out and felt hurt that they did not have “special access” to the youth worker. This created jealousy, conflict in the group, and emotional exhaustion for the worker.

When boundaries WERE set

A young person sent a friend request to a youth worker. The worker answered kindly:

“Thank you for reaching out. I can’t connect on personal accounts, but I’m here for you during the centre hours.”

The young person understood the rule, and the worker stayed protected from emotional overload and unequal relationships.

Tip: If relevant to the young person’s communication profile — for example in cases of selective mutism, social anxiety, speech impairments, or when a youth clearly expresses a preference for written or asynchronous communication — it can be appropriate to establish dedicated professional social media accounts (e.g. Messenger, WhatsApp) specifically for youth work purposes.

However, this must be framed within strict ethical and professional parameters.

First, the account should be clearly separated from the youth worker’s private digital presence. It must be a professional profile created exclusively for work-related communication. Its purpose, scope, and limitations should be explicitly communicated in advance, ideally in written form, to the young person and, where relevant, to caregivers.

Second, boundaries must mirror those applied in in-person work. This includes: – clearly defined working hours; – no expectation of responses outside those hours; – no informal or purely personal exchanges; – communication limited to programme-

related matters, support coordination, or agreed check-ins; – no use of disappearing messages or informal platforms that undermine transparency.

Third, protocols must address safeguarding and data protection. Conversations should be documented when necessary, supervisors should be informed that this channel is in use, and organisational policies must permit such communication. Where a young person subject to guardianship is concerned, guardian consent may be required, depending on national legislation and organisational rules.

Fourth, digital communication should remain a facilitative tool, not a replacement for relational work. It can lower entry barriers for young people who struggle with verbal expression or initial face-to-face disclosure, but it should gradually support confidence-building in broader communication contexts where possible.

In this sense, digital channels can function as a reasonable accommodation, provided that the principles of “do no harm,” confidentiality, professional boundaries, and transparency are maintained. The same ethical standards that govern physical youth work spaces must apply equally in digital environments.

2. No physical contact beyond safe supportive gestures - Practical examples

When boundaries were NOT set

A youth worker gave long hugs to one participant who seemed sad. Other young people felt uncomfortable and perceived it as “favouritism”.

One participant told peers: “You get attention only if you cry.”

This changed the emotional climate and triggered competition for emotional closeness with adults.

When boundaries WERE set

A participant became upset and started crying. The youth worker said softly: “I’m here with you. Would you like to sit next to me or have space?”

The young person chose to sit near the worker — safe but not intimate. Other participants saw the adult as supportive **and predictable**, rather than selectively affectionate.

Tip: Physical contact is a particularly sensitive dimension when working with young people with additional support needs. Preferences and tolerances vary significantly. Some young people may experience anxiety or distress even in response to socially routine gestures such as a handshake. Others may actively seek physical reassurance, including hugs or close proximity. There is no uniform standard; this must be assessed individually.

It is advisable to clarify boundaries and comfort levels during the initial meetings. This can be done in a calm, explicit manner by asking about preferred forms of greeting, personal space, and what feels supportive or uncomfortable. These preferences should not be treated as fixed. Over time, comfort levels may change as trust develops or as the young person gains confidence. Continuous observation and periodic check-ins are therefore necessary.

Physical contact should always be intentional, consent-based, and developmentally appropriate. Consent must be active and ongoing, not assumed from previous interactions. The principle is not to avoid all touch categorically, but to ensure that any physical interaction serves a clear supportive function for the young person's learning, regulation, or sense of safety.

At the same time, transparency is essential in group settings. If a young person has specific sensory sensitivities or needs regarding touch and physical distance, this should be communicated to the wider group in an appropriate and respectful way, with the young person's agreement. Establishing shared group norms around personal space, consent, and physical interaction reduces misunderstandings and protects everyone involved.

One boundary must remain absolute: no hidden or secret physical contact under any circumstances. All physical interaction must be visible, professionally justified, and in line with safeguarding policies. This protects the young person, the practitioner, and the integrity of the working environment.

3. No dual relationships (friendship, romantic, financial) - Practical examples

When boundaries were NOT set

A youth worker started meeting a participant privately outside the programme "as friends." Soon the young person began expecting favours, free food, rides, and constant emotional availability. Group members noticed and said:

"They're friends. That's why she gets special treatment." Trust in the centre decreased, and leadership had to intervene.

When boundaries WERE set

A participant invited a youth worker to a birthday party. The worker replied warmly and professionally: "I care about you and I'm grateful for the invitation. But outside of the youth centre, I cannot attend personal events. I'd love to celebrate with you when we meet at the centre this week."

The young person felt valued while the boundary stayed intact.

Tip: There are situations in youth work that can place a practitioner in a “grey zone,” particularly when working with young people with additional support needs. For example, providing a ride home because a participant falls ill during a programme may seem like a simple act of care, but it can be perceived differently by the youth or by peers. Some may interpret it as a privilege or special treatment, potentially triggering feelings of jealousy, exclusion, or heightened expectations.

To manage these situations safely and ethically, transparency is essential. The youth worker should clearly communicate the circumstances both to the individual involved and, where appropriate, to the group. It should be emphasised that this is an exceptional measure, not a regular benefit or entitlement. Framing it as a one-off response to an unusual situation helps prevent misunderstandings and maintains fairness within the group dynamic.

Additionally, it is important for the practitioner to remain aware of professional boundaries and safeguarding protocols. Any transport, or support must be clearly justified, documented if needed, and communicated in advance whenever possible. Reflecting on potential group perceptions and planning communication in advance reduces ambiguity and supports a safe, consistent, and inclusive environment.

4. Avoiding personal disclosure - Practical examples

When boundaries were NOT set

A worker overshared about their own difficult childhood to “connect” with a participant. The young person later used the story during conflict:

“You can’t tell me what to do — you did the same when you were my age!” The professional lost authority and safety, and the dynamic became blurred.

When boundaries WERE set

A youth worker shared only a minimal supportive statement: “I don’t know exactly how you feel, but I have also experienced difficult times. What helped me was talking to someone. Let’s see how I can support you now.”

The focus stayed on the young person, not on the worker’s past.

Tip: Many helping professionals, including youth workers, enter their field because of personal experiences, challenges, or formative difficulties in their own youth. This can create a natural impulse to share “me too” stories as a way to connect or normalize experiences. However, in working with young people—especially those with additional support needs—over-identifying or centering the conversation on the professional’s own experiences can unintentionally shift attention away from the youth, reduce their agency, or blur professional boundaries.

To hold back personal disclosures and instead focus on the young person, professionals can follow these steps:

1. **Pause and self-check**– Before responding, take a moment to notice the urge to share a personal story. Ask yourself: Is this about me, or is it about the youth? Will sharing this help them, or satisfy my own need to connect?
2. **Reflect on the purpose**– Consider whether the anecdote genuinely supports the youth's learning, coping, or decision-making. If it doesn't, refrain from sharing.
3. **Redirect with curiosity**– Shift the conversation towards the youth's perspective by asking open-ended questions: "How did that feel for you?" or "What do you think would help in this situation?"
4. **Use empathic acknowledgment instead of personal disclosure**– Statements like "I can see that was really difficult for you" or "It makes sense that you felt frustrated" validate the youth's experience without inserting the professional's own story.
5. **Offer general insights, not personal history**– When guidance or advice is necessary, frame it in terms of general strategies or observations: "Many young people find it helpful to..." rather than "When I was in your situation, I..."
6. **Reflect and process afterward**– If the urge to share persists, use supervision or peer reflection to process your own experiences outside the session. This preserves your wellbeing while keeping the youth-centred focus in practice.
7. **Model reflective listening**– Show that attention, curiosity, and validation are directed towards the youth. This reinforces their autonomy and the sense that their experience is the priority.

By consciously redirecting attention from "me" to "you," professionals maintain ethical boundaries, strengthen the young person's voice, and ensure that the support provided is truly responsive to their individual needs and context. Over time, this approach also helps build trust and empowerment, showing the youth that their story and agency are what matter most in the interaction.

Warning: there are two fields which are highly affected if boundaries are not set and met.

1. Crisis
2. Burn-out

1. Communication during crisis - Practical examples

When boundaries were NOT set

A participant had a panic attack and a youth worker promised: "I won't tell anyone, I swear." Later, when they had to report it for safety, the participant felt betrayed and stopped trusting the centre.

When boundaries WERE set

The youth worker said: "I will keep things private unless your safety is at risk. If I ever need to tell someone to keep you safe, I will tell you first."

The young person felt informed, respected and protected.

2. Lack of boundary → burnout - Practical examples

When boundaries were NOT set

A youth worker constantly helped one participant outside working hours, answered messages late at night, and felt solely responsible for their wellbeing. This led to emotional exhaustion, resentment, and eventually burnout.

When boundaries WERE set

The worker used a clear frame: "I'm available here at the centre. Outside of that time, you can use this helpline or grounding techniques we learned."

The participant learned healthy independence; the worker stayed stable and able to support the whole group.

Suicide risk: practical guidance and response tools (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING)

Common myths and facts about suicide

Common myths create fear and hesitation when youth workers respond to suicide risk. Understanding these misconceptions improves confidence and safety.

Myth 1: People who talk about suicide won't do it.
Fact: Most people who die by suicide told someone beforehand.
Myth 2: Suicide in youth is impulsive.
Fact: Most have been thinking about it for a long time.
Myth 3: Talking about suicide puts the idea into their head.
Fact: Open conversation reduces risk.
Myth 4: People who express suicidal thoughts want to die.
Fact: They want the <i>pain</i> to stop, not life.
Myth 5: All suicides can be prevented.
Fact: Most can, but not all — this reduces guilt and burnout.
Myth 6: Suicide happens with no warning.
Fact: Most people show signs beforehand.
Myth 7: Only mentally ill people are suicidal.
Fact: Suicidal thoughts come from severe distress, not necessarily illness.
Myth 8: A failed attempt is not serious.
Fact: Previous attempts greatly increase risk.
Myth 9: When they feel better, risk is gone.
Fact: Risk can increase when energy returns.
Myth 10: Suicide is more common in certain groups.
Fact: Affects all socioeconomic levels.

Myth 11: Suicidal thoughts are lifelong.

Fact: They are usually temporary.

Warning Signs

- taking unusual or extreme risks
- increased alcohol or drug use
- withdrawal, isolation
- statements about death or disappearing
- giving away belongings
- sudden calm after distress
- self-harm behaviours

Risk Factors

- substance misuse
- depression or mental illness
- previous attempt
- trauma, loss, separation
- isolation
- family conflict
- socioeconomic stressors
- cultural pressures

Safeguarding & Protection Protocol

(from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING)

Purpose: Safeguarding ensures that all young people are protected from harm, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and unsafe environments. This protocol provides clear steps for youth workers to follow whenever there is concern about a young person's physical, emotional, or psychological safety.

Youth workers are mandatory reporters of risk, not investigators. Their role is to:

- recognise signs of abuse or harm
- respond calmly and ethically
- record accurately
- refer to designated safeguarding authorities

Step 1: Recognise signs of harm or abuse

Youth workers must be trained to notice **physical, behavioural and verbal indicators**.

Potential signs include:

a) Physical signs:

- unexplained bruises, burns or injuries
- repeated physical marks
- signs of neglect (poor hygiene, extreme tiredness, untreated medical issues)

b) Emotional signs:

- sudden withdrawal or fearfulness
- extreme compliance or “frozen” behaviour
- low self-esteem
- expressions of shame or guilt
- strong reactions to certain adults or environments

c) Behavioural signs:

- aggression, running away, destructive behaviour
- difficulty trusting adults
- inappropriate sexualised behaviour
- self-harm or suicidal ideation
- substance misuse
- excessive risk-taking

d) Environmental signs:

- young person avoids going home
- reports of violence, conflict or instability at home
- parental/caregiver behaviour that raises concern

Important: One sign alone does not confirm abuse — but **multiple signs over time MUST be treated seriously.**

Step 2: Respond calmly and offer containment

If a young person discloses harm:

Do:

- stay calm
- listen without interrupting
- thank them for telling you
- use non-judgmental language
- validate their experience

Do NOT:

- Express shock (“*What?! That’s terrible!*”)
- Blame the young person
- Ask leading questions
- Investigate details
- Confront the alleged perpetrator.

Example: *“Thank you for telling me. I’m really glad you trusted me. You deserve to be safe, and I will help make sure you get the right support.”*

Step 3: Do NOT promise confidentiality

Young people must understand that safety overrides privacy.

Example: *“I cannot keep this a secret because your safety is very important. But I will stay with you and support you through the whole process.”*

This maintains trust and transparency.

Step 4: Gather minimal necessary information

Youth workers **do not investigate**. Ask only **open, neutral, non-leading** questions such as:

- *“Can you tell me what happened?”*
- *“When did this happen?”*
- *“How are you feeling now?”*

Avoid questions like:

- *“Did he hit you with his hand or a belt?”*
- *“Are you sure you’re telling the truth?”*
- *“Why didn’t you tell anyone earlier?”*

Your role is **clarification**, not interrogation.

Step 5: Ensure immediate safety

Depending on the situation:

- separate the young person from the source of harm
- keep them supervised
- provide emotional regulation
- activate crisis protocol if needed
- ensure medical support if injured

If the young person is in **immediate danger**→ call emergency services.

Step 6: Report concerns to the safeguarding lead

Every organisation must have a Designated Safeguarding Officer (DSO). Youth workers must:

- report as soon as possible (within the same day)
- share only factual, necessary information
- follow the organisation's reporting pathway
- escalate serious cases to statutory services

If the DSO is unavailable → escalate to the next responsible authority.

Step 7: Refer to external authorities (when required)

Depending on national law and organisational policy, referrals may go to:

- social welfare services / child protection
- police (in criminal cases)
- emergency mental health teams
- medical professionals
- family services

Youth workers NEVER decide whether abuse “is real” — they **report concerns**, and authorities investigate.

Step 8: Document everything accurately and objectively

Documentation must include:

- date, time, setting
- exact words spoken by the young person (quote when possible)
- observable behaviour
- any injuries seen (location, size, appearance)
- actions taken
- who was informed
- referral pathways activated
- risk level

- follow-up plan

Avoid opinions, assumptions or interpretations.

Step 9: Follow up with the young person

After reporting:

- reassure them that they did the right thing
- offer grounding and emotional support
- explain what will happen next (in simple language)
- maintain normal routine to reduce anxiety
- ensure ongoing monitoring

Example: *“I’m still here for you. You’re not alone in this.”*

Step 10: Team review and reflection

After the situation:

- inform relevant staff
- update the risk management plan
- offer supervision or debriefing to the youth worker involved
- identify gaps in procedure
- strengthen preventive measures

Safeguarding affects the whole team — not just the staff member handling the disclosure.

Organisational self-assessment tool (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING)

Instructions

For each statement, assess your organisation's current level of readiness using the following scale:

1 – Not in place – Limited / emerging practice – Partially in place – Mostly in place – Fully in place and consistently practiced

This tool can be completed individually by staff members or collectively by a team to compare perspectives and identify priorities for improvement.

At each domain you find examples for supporting your assessment.

Scale:

- **Level 1 – Initial / Beginner:** Minimal awareness, ad hoc inclusion, limited accessibility.
- **Level 2 – Developing:** Basic awareness, some policies and adaptations, but inconsistent practice.
- **Level 3 – Inclusive:** Policies, practices, and staff competencies largely in place; youth participation is supported.
- **Level 4 – Advanced / Leading:** Full inclusion embedded in culture, programmes, and partnerships; continuous improvement and innovation.

A. Organisational vision, leadership, and commitment

This section assesses whether inclusion of young people with additional support needs is embedded in the organisation's mission, leadership priorities, and long-term planning.

1. Our organisation has a clear commitment to inclusion of young people with additional support needs in its mission, vision, or strategic documents.
2. Leadership actively promotes inclusion as a core organisational value rather than an optional activity.
3. The organisation regularly reviews whether its programmes are accessible and inclusive for diverse young people.
4. Leadership allocates resources (time, budget, staff capacity) specifically for inclusive youth work.
5. The organisation collects or reviews data about the diversity of young people in the local community to understand who may be underrepresented.
6. The organisation has conducted or plans to conduct an accessibility or inclusion audit.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	Inclusion of youth with disabilities is rarely considered; leadership does not prioritise it.
2 – Developing	Leadership is aware of inclusion needs; some initiatives exist but are inconsistent.
3 – Inclusive	Inclusion is embedded in strategic plans and reflected in resource allocation; leadership promotes inclusive values.
4 – Advanced	Inclusion is a core organisational value; leadership actively champions innovation, monitors progress, and shares good practices externally.

B. Policies, procedures, and safeguarding.

This section evaluates whether the organisation's formal policies and procedures actively support the inclusion of young people with additional support needs, and ensure that all participants can access programmes fully.

1. The organisation has a written inclusion or equal opportunity policy that explicitly addresses disability, support needs, and accessibility.
2. Policies and procedures promote meaningful participation for all young people, regardless of ability, in all programmes and activities.
3. Staff and volunteers are familiar with the organisation's inclusion and accessibility policies and know how to implement them in practice.
4. There are clear procedures for reporting situations where activities, spaces, or resources were not accessible or prevented participation for any young person.
5. There are clear procedures for reporting discrimination, bullying, or exclusion.
6. The organisation ensures confidentiality and respectful handling of personal information.
7. Policies and procedures are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect inclusive values, best practices, and lessons learned from past experiences.
8. The organisation actively monitors compliance with accessibility procedures and follows up to address barriers or gaps in participation.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	No written policies for inclusion; reporting and safeguarding mechanisms are limited.
2 – Developing	Some inclusion or equal opportunity policies exist, but staff awareness is inconsistent.
3 – Inclusive	Policies fully cover accessibility, non-discrimination, participation, and safeguarding; staff are trained and procedures implemented.
4 – Advanced	Policies are regularly reviewed and updated; youth and families participate in shaping procedures.

C. Physical, sensory, and digital accessibility

This section assesses whether the organisation's spaces and communication channels are accessible.

1. Our youth spaces are physically accessible for participants with physical disabilities (e.g., ramps, elevators, accessible toilets, wide doorways).
2. There is sufficient space in activity areas for wheelchair users and participants with mobility aids.
3. Environmental factors such as lighting, noise levels, and crowding are considered when planning activities.
4. The organisation provides sensory-friendly areas or quiet spaces where young people can self-regulate if needed.
5. Signs, visual materials, and environmental cues support orientation and accessibility.
6. Information about activities is available in accessible formats (plain language, Easy-to-Read materials, visual supports, or digital formats).
7. Online communication channels and websites follow accessibility standards as much as possible.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	Physical and digital spaces are largely inaccessible; minimal adaptations.
2 – Developing	Some accessibility measures exist (ramps, basic visual aids); digital access limited.
3 – Inclusive	Physical, sensory, and digital accessibility is standard; quiet zones and sensory tools are available; multiple communication formats provided.
4 – Advanced	Accessibility is proactively embedded in planning; regular audits and youth feedback inform improvements; digital tools fully accessible.

D. Staff competences and organisational learning

Inclusive youth work requires trained and reflective professionals.

- Staff and volunteers receive training on disability inclusion and inclusive youth work practices.
- New staff or volunteers receive orientation on inclusion and accessibility when they join the organisation.
- Staff feel confident adapting activities for participants with different abilities.
- The organisation encourages staff to reflect on personal biases or assumptions related to disability.
- Staff understand the difference between the medical model and social model and the human rights-based model of disability.
- The organisation supports professional development related to inclusive education, communication methods, or assistive technologies.
- Staff feel comfortable asking participants directly about their support needs and preferred ways of participation.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	Staff have little or no training on inclusion or disability; rely on ad hoc knowledge.
2 – Developing	Some staff receive training; confidence and skills vary.
3 – Inclusive	Staff are trained in inclusive youth work, communication, and adaptation strategies; reflective practice is encouraged.
4 – Advanced	All staff are highly competent; mentorship, peer learning, and ongoing professional development are integrated; staff with disabilities are part of the team.

E. Inclusive programme design and implementation

This section examines whether youth activities are designed with inclusion in mind.

1. Activities are designed using inclusive principles such as Universal Design for Learning or similar approaches.
2. Programmes provide multiple ways for young people to participate (e.g., discussion, creative expression, movement, digital tools).
3. Activity instructions are provided in different formats (visual, verbal, written).
4. Programmes allow flexibility so that youth can participate according to their abilities and interests.
5. Staff anticipate potential barriers to participation and plan adaptations in advance.
6. The organisation ensures that venues, materials, and tools used in activities are accessible.
7. Youth workers remain flexible and adapt activities when unexpected needs arise.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	Activities rarely consider inclusion; youth participation is passive or optional.
2 – Developing	Some adaptations made; participation opportunities limited; youth feedback partially considered.
3 – Inclusive	Programmes are designed with inclusion in mind (UDL principles); youth with disabilities co-design activities; participation roles are meaningful.
4 – Advanced	Youth actively lead initiatives; evaluation and programme improvement are informed by youth input; multiple participation pathways exist.

F. Youth participation and empowerment

Inclusive youth work means ensuring young people influence the decisions that affect them.

1. Young people with disabilities are actively involved in the planning and design of activities.
2. Youth are offered meaningful choices regarding how they participate in programmes.
3. Participants are encouraged to take leadership roles where appropriate.
4. Youth feedback is actively collected using accessible methods (e.g., visual tools, simple surveys, group discussions).
5. Young people are informed about how their feedback influenced decisions or programme changes.
6. The organisation values the lived experiences of young people with disabilities as expertise.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	Youth with disabilities have little influence over activities; decisions are made mainly by adults.
2 – Developing	Some opportunities exist for youth input, but participation is limited or informal.
3 – Inclusive	Youth are actively involved in co-designing programmes and can choose meaningful participation roles; feedback is collected and used to improve activities.
4 – Advanced	Youth lead initiatives and decision-making where possible; participation is embedded across all programmes; feedback loops are systematic and transparent.

G. Partnerships and community collaboration

Strong partnerships help organisations provide holistic support for young people with additional support needs. The organisation collaborates with local organisations working in disability support or inclusive education.

1. Partnerships exist with schools, social services, or specialised professionals who can provide advice or support when needed.
2. The organisation maintains contact with organisations of persons with disabilities.
3. Families or caregivers have opportunities to provide feedback or share relevant information when appropriate.
4. The organisation can identify at least three community partners who could provide support related to accessibility or inclusion.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	Limited or no engagement with external partners; support for youth is mainly internal.
2 – Developing	Some collaborations with local services or schools exist, but coordination is inconsistent.
3 – Inclusive	Strong partnerships with schools, OPDs, social services, and families; external expertise integrated into programmes.
4 – Advanced	Systematic, multi-stakeholder collaboration; partnerships are strategic and include youth and family input; co-created initiatives are regular practice.

H. Organisational culture and inclusion climate

This section explores whether the organisational culture genuinely supports inclusion.

1. Staff treat young people with disabilities as capable individuals with strengths and potential.
2. The organisation promotes respectful language and attitudes towards disability.

3. Inclusive values are visible in the organisation's environment (e.g., posters, communication materials, public messaging).
4. Staff and volunteers address discriminatory behaviour or ableist comments when they occur.
5. The organisation promotes a culture where differences are respected and diversity is valued.
6. Young people with disabilities feel welcomed and respected in the organisation's programmes.

Level	Characteristics
1 – Initial	Inclusion is not part of organisational culture; issues addressed reactively.
2 – Developing	Staff and leadership recognise inclusion as important; improvement efforts ad hoc.
3 – Inclusive	Inclusion is embedded in culture; staff actively address discrimination; feedback loops and evaluations inform ongoing improvement.
4 – Advanced	Organisation demonstrates leadership in inclusive youth work; culture encourages innovation, continuous learning, and sharing good practice externally.

I. Evaluation and continuous improvement

Inclusive organisations continuously evaluate and improve their practice.

1. The organisation regularly evaluates its programmes from an inclusion perspective.
2. Feedback from youth with disabilities is actively considered in programme improvements.
3. Staff reflect on lessons learned from inclusive activities and share good practices internally.
4. The organisation identifies areas for improvement and develops action plans for inclusion.
5. Inclusion and accessibility are considered in future strategic planning and budgeting.

Level	Characteristics
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1 – Initial	Limited evaluation; inclusion not systematically reviewed.
2 – Developing	Evaluation occurs sporadically; some staff consider youth input.
3 – Inclusive	Programmes are regularly evaluated with youth participation; results inform improvements.
4 – Advanced	Inclusion and accessibility inform strategic planning; systematic evaluation and innovation ensure continuous organisational learning.

Scoring reflection

- Which areas received the highest scores?
- Which areas require the most development?
- Which domains with the largest gaps between current and desired levels.
- What practical steps could improve inclusion in the next 6–12 months?
- Which partnerships or resources could support this development?

Organisational action planning

1. What are the organisation's strongest areas regarding inclusive youth work?
2. Which areas require the most improvement?
3. What three concrete actions could the organisation take in the next year to strengthen inclusion of young people with disabilities?
4. Create a **strategic action plan**: set short-term goals (Level 2→3) and long-term goals (Level 3→4).
5. Repeat assessments periodically (e.g., annually) to track progress

Self-assessment questionnaire for youth workers (from 5. PRINCIPLES, ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING)

The following self-assessment questionnaire is synthesized from multiple sources focused on inclusive youth work and our experiences. It is designed to help youth workers and trainers reflect on their attitudes, language, programme structure, and relationship-building skills when working with young people with disabilities and support needs

Target group: Youth workers engaged in activities with young people with additional support needs.

Purpose: To assess personal competence and identify areas for professional development.

Rate your current level of competence for each statement on a scale from 1 to 5:

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neutral

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

A. Personal values, biases, and awareness

Ethical inclusive practice begins with understanding one's own “internal barometer”—the beliefs, assumptions, and feelings that influence professional behaviour when working with young people with disabilities.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I regularly reflect on what specifically about certain individuals or disabilities might make me feel uncomfortable and try to understand why. (Internal observation)					
I avoid assuming what a young person can or cannot do and instead assume competence and ask them directly about their abilities and needs. (Challenging assumptions)					
I have taken, or am willing to take, a formal assessment such as the Disability Implicit Association Test (IAT) or the PYD individual self-assessment to uncover hidden prejudices or knowledge gaps. (Identifying bias)					

I am aware of the power and privilege I hold as an adult or professional and reflect on how I might unconsciously use domination techniques in interactions with young people. (Power dynamics)					
I am willing to ask myself difficult questions about how freedom, participation, and access are distributed in my community. (Self-reflection)					

B. Language, communication, and inclusive interaction

Language serves as a foundational component for creating an environment where youth feel welcome, respected, and safe.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I ask young people directly what descriptors or terminology they prefer (for example person-first or identity-first language). (Preferred terminology)					
My print and digital materials follow accessibility guidelines, such as large print, plain language, or Easy-to-Read versions with pictograms. (Inclusive content)					
I provide instructions in multiple formats (written, visual, and verbal) to support young people who process information differently. (Multi-modality)					
I use active listening techniques, such as paraphrasing statements back to youth and maintaining an open and approachable posture. (Tone and body language)					
I feel confident and consistent in addressing put-downs, hate speech, or ableist comments immediately when they occur. (Handling slurs)					

C. Programme design and environment

Inclusive programmes are intentionally designed to accommodate diverse needs from the beginning rather than being retrofitted later.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I clearly define the aims and expected outcomes of activities for participants.					
I ensure that the programme schedule is transparent, clearly communicated, posted, and reviewed so participants know what to expect and when. (Transparency and routines)					
When planning activities, I ask myself who might be excluded and proactively provide multiple ways for young people to engage (for example drawing, speaking, moving, or writing). (Universal Design for Learning – UDL)					
I select appropriate non-formal learning methods suitable for participants with different abilities.					
I create a realistic and inclusive schedule adapted to different needs.					
I provide transition cues such as “5-minute alerts” or other signals to help youth prepare for ending one activity and moving to another. (Managing transitions)					
I identify and manage necessary resources effectively for accessibility including human, material, and financial resources.					
I apply innovative and sustainable approaches in activity planning.					
I assess the physical environment for potential stressors such as harsh fluorescent lights, loud sudden noises, or crowded spaces. (Sensory awareness)					
I ensure that the activity space includes a designated quiet zone or comfort corner with sensory tools such as fidget toys or headphones so youth can self-regulate if overwhelmed.					

D. Implementation of activities for young people with disabilities

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I cooperate effectively with all relevant stakeholders, including participants, colleagues, institutions, and community partners.					

I moderate activities in a way that ensures equal participation for all participants.					
I prepare venues and materials that are accessible and adapted to different types of abilities.					
I recognise and respond to the support needs of participants.					
I remain flexible and manage unforeseen situations constructively.					

E. Relationship dynamics and youth engagement

Strong and trusting relationships between youth workers and young people are a key factor in supporting the development and well-being of young people with disabilities.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I establish and maintain cooperative and confidential relationships with youth.					
I intentionally try to find common interests with young people (such as sports, music, or hobbies) to build stronger relationships. (Connecting on interests)					
I ensure that my support is based on respect for the young person's autonomy rather than pity or a "saviour" mindset. (Empathy vs. pity)					
I intentionally invite young people who appear to be on the fringes of activities to participate at a level that feels comfortable for them. (Active inclusion)					
I respect the confidentiality of a young person's disability status while also clearly explaining the limits of confidentiality (for example in situations involving harm to self or others). (Trust and confidentiality)					
I recognise and support the internal motivation of young people.					
I provide constructive feedback and encouragement to participants.					
I model respectful and positive interactions with people of all abilities so that other youth in the group can learn from these examples. (Role modelling)					
I recognise and build upon the competences and potentials of young people.					
I understand key developmental theories related to young people's needs.					

F. Methods of work – Group facilitation and teamwork

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I use creative and innovative approaches in group facilitation.					
I identify and address the needs and interests of the group.					
I ensure a positive, supportive, and motivating group atmosphere.					
I encourage group members' creativity and participation.					
I effectively manage and resolve conflicts within a group.					
I am familiar with a variety of group work methods and facilitation techniques.					

G. Supporting youth in acquiring competences

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I guide young people through personal development and reflection processes.					
I mentor young people effectively in non-formal learning settings.					
I use experiential learning methods effectively.					
I understand and promote the connections between formal, non-formal, and informal learning.					

H. Participation and empowerment

True inclusion ensures that young people have meaningful influence over the decisions that affect their lives.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Young people with disabilities are actively involved in the co-design and planning of programmes rather than only being consulted afterwards. (<i>Nothing about us without us</i>)					
I provide real choices and different participation roles (such as leadership roles, participant roles, or observer roles) so youth can practice self-determination. (Meaningful choice)					
I use youth-friendly evaluation methods such as Easy-Read forms, pictorial surveys, or video reflections to gather feedback from all participants. (Feedback loops)					
I inform young people how their feedback has influenced decisions and what changes were made as a result. (Accountability)					

I. Evaluation and learning from practice

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I evaluate activities critically and objectively.					
I am familiar with various evaluation tools and methods. I use evaluation results to improve and upgrade future activities.					
I actively involve young people in the evaluation process and take their feedback seriously.					
I provide different opportunities and methods for them to share their input.					

Checklist for continuous improvement

Please indicate whether the following statements are true for your current practice.

Statement	True
I have completed a personal bias self-assessment within the last 12 months.	
I have reviewed the programme rules together with youth to ensure they include protections for diverse identities.	
I have identified at least three community partners or specialists whom I can contact for advice on support needs.	
I regularly use teachable moments to address systemic injustice or ableism within my youth group.	

Reflection and development plan

1. Which competences do you feel strongest in?

2. Which competences would you like to develop further?

3. What specific steps or learning opportunities could help you improve?

Practical quick guide for youth workers and mentors (from 6. BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE YOUTH WORK)

1. Keep Support Personal and Meaningful

Every young person is different. Take time to understand how they learn, communicate, and move through the world. Shape your support around their strengths and challenges, and think long-term: where do they want to go, and how can we walk with them step by step?

1.2 Help Them Take the Lead

Young people should be in the driver's seat as much as possible. Encourage them to make choices, express preferences, and reflect on what works for them. Even small decisions build confidence and independence.

1.3 Make Transitions Less Stressful

From school to training, from training to work — transitions can be overwhelming. Clear communication, steady routines, and good coordination with other professionals help young people feel supported and safe during these changes.

2. How We Work (Methodological Support)

2.1 Use What We Know Works

Start with simple assessments to understand support needs and strengths across different areas — learning, communication, social skills, behaviour, and career interests. Turn those insights into clear goals you can work on together. Check progress regularly and adjust plans when needed.

2.2 Don't Work Alone

Collaboration makes life easier for both you and the young person. Reach out to teachers, therapists, families, employers — whoever is part of their world. A shared plan and consistent messages give them stability and clarity.

3. Ethical and Professional Foundations

3.1 Stay Respectful, Fair and Strength-Focused

Every interaction should reflect dignity and respect. Focus on what young people can do, not what they can't. Adapt your communication so they feel understood and included.

3.2 Be Clear and Honest

Explain what you're doing and why — in ways they can follow. Respect privacy, protect personal information, and guard their safety. Your clarity builds trust.

3.3 Keep Yourself Grounded

Document your work, reflect on it, and ask for supervision when you need it. Good practice grows from self-awareness and ongoing learning.

4. Boundaries That Protect Everyone

4.1 Know Where Your Role Begins and Ends

Youth workers often care deeply, but remember: you're a supporter, not a friend, parent, or rescuer. Clear boundaries protect both you and the young person.

4.2 Be Mindful of Emotions

The work can be emotionally heavy. Notice when you're becoming overwhelmed or over-attached. Use team support, supervision, and healthy detachment to stay balanced and effective.

5. Skills to Keep Developing

5.1 Communicate in Ways That Work for Them

Use visuals, simple language, AAC tools, or step-by-step explanations. Check understanding gently and often. Communication should feel safe and doable for them.

5.2 Strengthen Daily Living and Career Skills

Support them in building functional skills, managing tasks, working with others, and exploring real-life situations — school, training, volunteering, work trials.

5.3 Stay Connected With the Wider System

Learn how to coordinate with schools, psychologists, employers, social services. Good teamwork ensures young people don't get lost in the system.

6. Tools That Make Your Work Easier

6.1 For Understanding and Planning

- Simple functional assessments
- Strength-based profiles
- Visual goal-setting tools
- Communication checklists

6.2 For Everyday Support

- Visual schedules and task cards
- Social stories
- Sensory and emotional-regulation tools
- Accessible digital platforms

6.3 For Preparing for Work

- Job-task breakdowns
- Accommodation checklists
- Workplace observation forms
- Templates for talking with employers

Practical feedback tools and adaptation examples (from 8. EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK)

Practical example: simple feedback tool (visual)

One effective way to collect regular feedback is through low-threshold visual tools that are easy to understand and quick to use.

Example: Emoji-based feedback scale

At the end of a session, young people are invited to respond to a simple question such as: *“How did you feel during today’s activity?”*

They can choose from visual options:

- **I liked it / I felt good**
- **It was okay**
- **I didn’t like it / I felt uncomfortable**

This can be done:

- verbally
- by pointing
- by placing a sticker or card
- digitally (tablet or phone)

Why it works:

- removes pressure to explain verbally
- supports neurodiverse communication styles
- provides immediate, usable feedback for the youth worker
- allows patterns to be tracked over time

This simple tool can be expanded with follow-up prompts such as: *“What made it good/useful?”* or *“What would you change?”*

Practice example: adapting based on feedback (mini case)

During a weekly group session, several young people consistently selected the neutral or negative emoji on the feedback scale. Observation also showed increased restlessness and disengagement during longer instructions.

Instead of continuing with the planned structure, the youth workers reflected on the feedback and identified that the activities were too cognitively demanding and not interactive enough.

Adjustment made:

- instructions were shortened and broken into smaller steps
- more movement-based and hands-on activities were introduced
- visual supports were added
- group work replaced long individual tasks

In the following sessions, feedback shifted noticeably towards positive responses, and participation increased. Young people also began contributing more actively during reflection moments.

Key learning: Small adaptations, based on real feedback, can significantly improve engagement and inclusion. What matters is not the tool itself, but how consistently feedback is used to guide change.

Practical measurement and monitoring tools (from 8. EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK)

Measurement tools (Practical & disability-friendly)

1. Observation sheets

Purpose: Track youth engagement, communication, independence, behaviour, and mood during activities.

Design: Short, easy-to-use forms for youth workers possibly digital format to have access to it for professionals later on.

Usage: Filled out during or immediately after sessions to record observations and note patterns over time.

2. Easy-to-use youth feedback

Purpose: Capture youth perspectives in a way that is accessible and engaging.

Design: Use icons, emojis, visual scales, or sentence starters adapted to cognitive and communication abilities.

Usage: Can be completed quickly during or after activities to provide immediate insight into youth experiences and feelings.

3. Safety assessment Tools

Purpose: Monitor physical, mental, and emotional safety, as well as the inclusiveness of activities.

Design: Simple checklists or reflection prompts for staff.

Usage: Regularly check for safety risks, identify barriers to inclusion, and review crisis management procedures.

4. Skills passport or Portfolio

Purpose: Document and track skill development over time.

Content: Social skills, practical skills, employment-related skills, and other developmental milestones.

Usage: Updated regularly with examples from activities, reflections, or youth achievements; shared with youth to visualize progress.

5. Case notes and incident reports

Purpose: Record individual situations, significant events, or challenges.

Design: Structured templates to ensure clarity and consistency.

Usage: Used for follow-up planning, support adjustments, or reporting to relevant staff.

6. Parent/caregiver feedback

Purpose: Capture insights on youth progress outside the Youth House.

Design: Short interviews, surveys, or informal conversations.

Usage: Used to understand home experiences, validate observations, and inform planning.

7. Youth worker reflection log

Purpose: Support staff learning and programme improvement.

Structure: Simple prompts:

- What happened?
- What does it mean?
- What will I change?

Usage: Completed after sessions or activities to reflect on effectiveness, challenges, and adaptations needed.

How to implement monitoring step-by-step?

Step 1: Create monitoring templates

Any format is good (xls, online survey etc.)

Step 2: Train staff on:

- observation
- non-judgmental recording
- inclusive communication
- safeguarding
- support needs

Step 3: Collect data weekly

Short, consistent, lightweight.

Step 4: Hold structured reflection meetings
Use the same guiding questions every time.

Step 5: Create a learning loop
New data → reflection → program change → monitor again.

Ethical guidelines and reflective tools for inclusive youth work (from 6. BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE YOUTH WORK)

Horizontal ethical guidelines

Ethical guidelines for working with young people with disabilities are based on humanitarian and human rights principles, professional integrity, continuous self-reflection, and respect for the autonomy of young people.

The most important ethical guidelines and expectations are listed below:

I. Philosophical and human rights foundations

1. Human rights-based approach: The issue of disability must be approached from a human rights perspective. Ensuring inclusion is also important from an ethical and human rights perspective.
2. Application of the social model: Professionals are encouraged to apply the social model of disability. This model suggests that disability is caused by the environment (e.g., a non-accessible youth centre or programme) and not by an internal deficiency of the person. This framework is empowering because it places the responsibility on the programme (staff and mentors) to be proactively inclusive.
3. Ethical commitment: Mentoring providers have an ethical obligation to meet the support needs of young people with disabilities and ensure that the mentoring experience is equitable and of high quality.
4. Moving away from stigmatization: Programmes must embrace the principle that they should proactively combat discrimination, exclusion, and structural inequalities.
5. Addressing ableism: Programmes should be mindful of the negative effects and implicit biases caused by ableism (the privileging of able-bodied and neurotypical individuals), which may stem from the unconscious beliefs of service providers.

II. Behaviour and language

1. Person-centred approach and dignity: The most important ethical guideline is: "See the person first, not the disability." Show respect, not pity. The focus should be on the individual's abilities, strengths, talents, and interests.
2. "*Nothing about us without us*" principle: Young people with disabilities must be directly involved and consulted in the planning and implementation of programmes and policies.

3. Self-determination and autonomy: Young people's self-determination and independence must be supported. Support should be provided to the individual, not for the individual.
4. Language use:
 - It is important for professionals to consult with young people about which terms they feel most comfortable with.
 - Terminology that reinforces segregation, stigma, or deficit-based perspectives should be avoided. Whenever possible, professionals should use respectful, person-centred, and accessibility-oriented language while also respecting individual preferences.
 - Hate speech and degrading terms such as racist, homophobic, sexist, or disability-related slurs (ableism) are prohibited.

III. Professional responsibility and preparedness

1. Professional development and addressing bias: Trainers and staff should continuously develop constructive attitudes towards working with diverse groups. Self-assessment should be incorporated to help identify personal biases, prejudices, and knowledge gaps.
2. Prohibition of low expectations: Professionals have an ethical obligation to avoid expressing prejudices or low expectations regarding the abilities of young people with disabilities. Instead, young people should be encouraged to ask the question: "Is it really impossible, or just difficult?"
3. Respect for ethical boundaries: Trainers and youth workers need to know what is ethical and what is not. Ethical principles, as outlined in materials on professional standards and ethical considerations, must be observed, particularly in therapeutic practices.
4. Conflict Management: Authoritarian approaches should be avoided. When a young person exhibits difficult behaviour, it should be interpreted as communication of their needs, not as bad or wrong behaviour.
5. Credible role models: Programmes should strive to feature professionals and mentors with disabilities as credible messengers, as this helps young people develop self-confidence and identity.

IV. Safety and accountability

1. Principles of a safe space: Physical and psychological safety must be ensured. It is advisable to follow the principles of the trauma-informed approach: Safety, Trustworthiness & Transparency, Choice & Empowerment, and Collaboration.
2. Confidentiality: Professionals must be aware of the limits of confidentiality, especially in cases of self-harm or threats to others, as this information is not protected and must be reported. It is important that staff do not discuss the support needs and difficulties of young people with others.

3. Feedback mechanisms: It is an ethical requirement to provide young people with a safe and accessible way to report inappropriate behaviour, harassment, discrimination, or inappropriate practices, which guarantees dignity and safety during the reporting process.
4. "Do no harm" principle: Particular care must be taken in the design of digital or therapeutic tools to ensure strict ethical oversight and clinical accountability so that solutions do not distort or oversimplify problems and cause harm.

Ethical chart for youth workers

1. Respect and dignity

- Treat all young people with respect, regardless of disability, background, or abilities.
- Use person-first language (e.g., “young person with autism” rather than “autistic youth”) unless the individual prefers otherwise.
- Honour individual choices, preferences, and autonomy.

2. Inclusion and accessibility

- Ensure all activities are inclusive, accessible, and adapted to different physical, cognitive, sensory, and communication needs.
- Remove barriers to participation wherever possible.
- Avoid assumptions about capabilities; ask and observe instead.

3. Confidentiality and privacy

- Protect personal information about youth, families, and colleagues.
- Share information only when necessary for safety, support, or legal reasons.
- Explain confidentiality boundaries clearly to youth and caregivers.

4. Safety and well-being

- Prioritise physical and emotional safety at all times.
- Follow risk assessment and crisis management procedures.
- Respond to signs of distress, abuse, or neglect promptly and appropriately.

5. Informed participation

- Explain activities, expectations, and potential risks in a way youth can understand.
- Obtain informed consent for participation, photos, recordings, or evaluations.
- Allow youth to withdraw or adapt participation without penalty.

6. Empowerment and development

- Support skill development, independence, and social inclusion.
- Encourage youth to express opinions, make decisions, and take appropriate responsibility.
- Avoid overprotection; balance support with opportunities for autonomy.

7. Fairness and non-discrimination

- Treat all youth equitably, avoiding favouritism or bias.
- Recognise and challenge personal prejudices and stereotypes.
- Ensure policies and practices are culturally sensitive and inclusive.

8. Professional boundaries

- Maintain clear boundaries with youth to foster trust and safety.
- Avoid dual relationships that could create conflicts of interest or exploitation.
- Model professional behaviour and integrity.

9. Collaboration and communication

- Work with families, caregivers, and relevant professionals to support the youth.
- Maintain open, respectful, and honest communication.
- Share insights and observations that may improve support, while respecting confidentiality.

10. Reflection and accountability

- Regularly reflect on personal practice, biases, and the impact of actions.
- Seek supervision, training, and peer support when needed.

- Be accountable for decisions and willing to adjust practices for the best interests of youth.

Positioning of the adapted ETS competence framework

(from 10. RESOURCES, EVALUATION AND SUSTAINABILITY)

This competence framework builds on the SALTO Training & Cooperation Resource Centre's ETS Competence Model for Youth Workers and Trainers, but significantly extends it to address the **specific demands of inclusive, rights-based youth work with young people with additional support needs**.

While the ETS model provides a strong general foundation for youth work practice—focusing on values, participation, learning, and facilitation—it remains **intentionally broad and non-prescriptive**. As a result, it does not sufficiently operationalise key areas required for high-quality inclusive practice in contemporary European youth work.

This framework responds to those gaps by:

- **Embedding a human rights-based approach grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD)**, moving beyond general value statements towards legal and ethical accountability.
- **Introducing conceptual clarity on disability**, including explicit use of the medical, social, and bio-psycho-social models, enabling practitioners to critically analyse and transform their practice.
- **Operationalising accessibility**, translating inclusion from a principle into concrete design competences (e.g. Universal Design, UDL, AAC, Easy Read).
- **Addressing power and participation more explicitly**, moving from participation as involvement towards **co-creation and shared decision-making**.
- **Integrating trauma-informed and safeguarding approaches**, which are not explicitly developed in the ETS model.
- **Recognising lived experience as expertise**, shifting from consultation towards co-production and shared authority.
- **Providing measurable learning outcomes, indicators, and assessment tools**, aligned with Youthpass, which are not systematically included in the ETS model.

In this sense, the framework does not replace the ETS model but **deepens, specifies, and operationalises it**, making it directly applicable for:

- training design

- programme implementation
- evaluation and impact measurement
- funding and policy alignment

GLOSSARY

This glossary presents selected key terms used throughout the methodology.

The competence links use the exact names of the nine competence areas in the 2023 *ETS Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally*:

https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4385/ETS_Competence_Model_Youth_Workers_final_2023.pdf

A

Ableism: Discrimination, prejudice, and systemic exclusion based on the belief that non-disabled ways of being, communicating, learning, or functioning are normal, more valuable, or superior. Ableism can operate at individual, institutional, and cultural levels. It may appear through low expectations, paternalism, inaccessible systems, segregation, or the assumption that people with disabilities need to be "fixed" rather than barriers needing to be removed.

<https://www.accessliving.org/newsroom/blog/ableism-101/>

Example: A youth worker assumes that a non-speaking participant cannot lead an activity and excludes them from leadership opportunities.

Practice: Question assumptions, presume competence, remove barriers, and ensure that responsibility, visibility, and leadership opportunities are genuinely accessible.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Being civically engaged.

Accessibility: The proactive and systematic design and adaptation of physical environments, sensory conditions, communication, information, digital platforms, methods, activities, services, and organisational practices so that all young people can access, understand, use, and participate in them on an equal basis. Accessibility is not an individual favour but a human right and a professional responsibility under the UN CRPD, particularly Article 9. It includes physical, sensory, communication, informational, digital, methodological, programmatic, and attitudinal accessibility. Accessibility anticipates diversity through universal design while also providing reasonable accommodation when individual requirements remain.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

Example: A youth centre provides step-free access, accessible toilets, a quiet space, visual schedules, Easy Read information, captioned videos, AAC options, screen-reader-compatible registration forms, and different ways to participate.

Practice: Integrate accessibility from the beginning, review potential barriers with young people, ask about individual access and communication preferences, provide reasonable accommodation without requiring unnecessary diagnostic disclosure, and regularly evaluate whether participation is genuinely accessible.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Managing resources; Communicating meaningfully.

Advocacy: Actions and processes that support people or groups to understand, claim, and exercise their rights and to influence decisions, institutions, and systems.

In youth work, advocacy includes supporting young people to speak and act for themselves through self-advocacy, while also challenging policies and practices that create barriers.

Example: A youth worker helps a young person understand how to request reasonable accommodation from an education or training provider.

Practice: Strengthen young people's knowledge, confidence, and opportunities to represent themselves, while addressing systemic barriers with relevant institutions when needed.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Networking and advocating; Being civically engaged.

Agency: The capacity and opportunity to make meaningful choices, influence decisions, and act in ways that shape one's own life. Agency depends not only on personal confidence or skills but also on environments that provide real choices, accessible information, appropriate support, and genuine influence.

Example: Young people choose the priorities and formats of a project rather than only selecting from decisions already made by adults.

Practice: Create real decision points, provide accessible options, respect refusal, and show how young people's choices influence outcomes.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Being civically engaged.

Assistive technology: Products, equipment, software, or systems that maintain or improve a person's functioning, independence, communication, learning, or participation. Assistive technology may be low-tech or high-tech and includes mobility aids, hearing technologies, screen readers, alternative keyboards, communication devices, and cognitive or organisational supports. Its usefulness depends on individual preference, appropriate assessment, access, training, and ongoing support.

<https://www.unicef.org/media/120836/file/%20Global%20Report%20on%20Assistive%20Technology.pdf>

Example: A participant uses text-to-speech software and an alternative keyboard to complete a digital storytelling activity.

Practice: Ask what technology the person already uses, ensure compatibility with programme systems, allow time for set-up and practice, and do not assume that one tool suits everyone with a similar condition.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Managing resources; Communicating meaningfully.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC): A range of communication methods that supplement or provide alternatives to speech. AAC may be unaided, such as gestures, facial expressions, or signing, or aided, such as objects, picture boards, alphabet boards, communication books, tablets, or speech-generating

devices. AAC can be used temporarily or permanently and may complement a person's existing speech.

<https://www.asha.org/NJC/AAC/>

Example: A participant uses a communication board alongside gestures and speech to contribute to a group discussion.

Practice: Follow the person's preferred communication methods, make their AAC available at all times, allow sufficient response time, and ensure that communication partners know how to use the system respectfully.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Facilitating learning.

B

Barrier: An attitudinal, environmental, communication, digital, institutional, financial, or procedural obstacle that restricts access, participation, choice, or inclusion. Within the social model of disability, exclusion arises when individual characteristics or support needs interact with barriers in society and the environment.

Example: A youth programme is officially open to everyone, but an inaccessible venue, complex registration form, and inflexible timetable prevent some young people from participating.

Practice: Identify barriers before, during, and after activities, involve young people in accessibility reviews, and record what was changed and what still requires action.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Assessing and evaluating.

Belonging: The sustained experience of being accepted, respected, valued, connected, and able to contribute within a group or community. Belonging goes beyond attendance or physical presence: it includes relationships, recognition, influence, and the feeling that one's participation matters.

Example: A young person is regularly invited to contribute ideas, takes on meaningful roles, and is recognised as a valued group member rather than as a guest who is merely included.

Practice: Build reliable relationships, respond to exclusion early, recognise different forms of contribution, and create shared group experiences in which everyone has a meaningful role.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Displaying intercultural sensitivity.

Bio-psycho-social model of disability and functioning: A framework that understands functioning and disability through the interaction of biological or health-related factors, psychological factors, activities, participation, personal circumstances, and the social and physical environment. It can help professionals consider the whole situation rather than relying only on diagnosis. In this methodology, it complements rather than replaces the human rights and social

models, which remain essential for understanding rights, power, discrimination, and the responsibility to remove barriers.

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/classification/icf/icfbeginnersguide.pdf>

Example: Instead of explaining a young person's withdrawal only through anxiety, a team also considers sensory overload, previous experiences, group relationships, communication barriers, and the accessibility of the activity.

Practice: Explore interacting personal and environmental factors without turning youth work into diagnosis or treatment, and keep the young person's own perspective central.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Collaborating in teams.

C

Co-creation and co-production: Participatory approaches in which young people and people with lived experience share influence and responsibility in designing, implementing, reviewing, or governing programmes. Both go beyond consultation. Co-production usually implies a more sustained redistribution of power and equal partnership across the full process, while co-creation may also refer to jointly developing a particular activity, resource, or solution.

Example: Young people help define programme priorities, select methods, deliver activities, interpret feedback, and decide what should change.

Practice: Agree roles and decision-making power transparently, provide accessible participation options, compensate expertise where appropriate, and report how contributions influenced the result.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Assessing and evaluating; Being civically engaged.

Comfort corner or quiet zone: A designated, accessible, low-stimulation space where participants can take a break, regulate sensory or emotional overload, or recover without punishment or stigma. It should be available by choice and should not be used to isolate or remove someone for the convenience of the group.

Example: A youth centre provides a quiet area with adjustable lighting, comfortable seating, visual information, water, and optional sensory tools.

Practice: Explain and normalise the space for everyone, keep access voluntary, check individual sensory preferences, and ensure that using it does not exclude the young person from rejoining the activity.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Managing resources; Designing programmes.

Comfort zone - learning zone - panic zone: A model describing different levels of safety and challenge. The comfort zone is familiar and manageable; the learning or stretch zone involves achievable challenge and development; the panic zone

involves stress or overload that prevents meaningful learning. The boundaries between these zones differ between people and may change across situations.

Example: A young person who finds public speaking overwhelming first shares an idea with one partner, later in a small group, and only then decides whether to speak to the whole group.

Practice: Offer gradual and supported challenge, observe signs of overload, allow refusal and breaks, and agree the pace with the young person rather than pushing them towards a standard outcome.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes.

Communication, choice, and break cards: Visual or written tools that allow a person to communicate a need, preference, emotion, decision, or request without relying only on speech. They may include cards for "yes", "no", "I need help", "I need a break", emotional states, or activity choices. They are different from the specific Power Card strategy used in some autism interventions.

Example: During a busy group activity, a participant shows an "I need a quiet break" card instead of having to explain their need verbally.

Practice: Develop the cards with the people who may use them, teach the group what they mean, make them easy to reach, and treat the communication as valid and actionable.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Managing resources.

Confidentiality and its limits: The ethical and professional responsibility to protect personal information and not share it without a clear and legitimate reason. Confidentiality is essential for trust but is not absolute. Information may need to be shared when required by law, safeguarding duties, or an immediate and serious risk of harm. Any sharing should be necessary, proportionate, limited to relevant information, and explained to the young person wherever possible.

Example: A youth worker explains at the beginning of a conversation that information will remain private unless there is a serious safety concern that requires help from others.

Practice: Explain confidentiality and its limits in accessible language, obtain consent when possible, consult organisational procedures, share only the minimum necessary information, and document the reason and follow-up factually.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Collaborating in teams; Facilitating learning.

Credible messenger: A mentor, facilitator, peer, or role model whose relevant lived experience or trusted relationship can strengthen credibility, identification, and engagement. Shared experience does not automatically make someone suitable for

the role; appropriate preparation, boundaries, support, and fair recognition are also required.

Example: A young adult with a disability co-facilitates a session about navigating education or employment systems and shares practical experience without being expected to represent everyone.

Practice: Involve people with lived experience as equal and appropriately supported contributors, clarify their role, and avoid tokenism or unpaid emotional labour.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Collaborating in teams; Networking and advocating.

D

De-escalation: A set of calm, respectful, and proportionate communication and environmental strategies used to reduce rising distress, conflict, agitation, or risk. De-escalation prioritises safety, dignity, reduced stimulation, clear choices, and time. It does not mean winning an argument, forcing compliance, or providing clinical treatment beyond the youth worker's competence.

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng10/chapter/1-Recommendations>

Example: When a participant becomes overwhelmed, the youth worker lowers their voice, reduces the audience and sensory load, offers two clear options, and gives the person time to respond.

Practice: Recognise early signs, regulate your own response, use literal and non-shaming language, maintain physical safety, follow agreed protocols, and seek specialist or emergency support when the situation exceeds your role.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Communicating meaningfully.

Diagnostic overshadowing: A bias in which distress, pain, behavioural change, or another difficulty is attributed automatically to a known disability or diagnosis, while other possible causes are overlooked. This can delay appropriate support and reinforce inaccurate assumptions.

Example: A young person's withdrawal and loss of interest are dismissed as "part of autism" without considering depression, bullying, pain, exhaustion, or environmental stress.

Practice: Notice changes from the person's usual presentation, consider multiple explanations, listen to the young person, document observations rather than diagnoses, and refer appropriately when specialist assessment is needed.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Assessing and evaluating.

Disability: A form of human diversity shaped by the interaction between a person's physical, sensory, intellectual, cognitive, psychosocial, or other characteristics and attitudinal, environmental, communication, institutional, or other barriers. Disability is

not simply a diagnosis or an individual deficit. Its meaning may also be influenced by legal definitions, culture, identity, and self-identification.

<https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

Example: A wheelchair user is prevented from joining an activity held upstairs without a lift; the disabling factor is the inaccessible environment, not the wheelchair.

Practice: Ask what enables participation, remove barriers, avoid unnecessary diagnostic disclosure, and respect how each person describes their disability or condition.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Designing programmes; Being civically engaged.

Disability pride: A positive disability identity and rights-based perspective that affirms disability as part of human diversity and rejects shame, pity, and the assumption that a disabled life is necessarily inferior. Disability pride does not deny pain, impairment, discrimination, or support needs; it challenges ableism and recognises disabled people's culture, contribution, agency, and leadership.

Example: Disabled young people lead an event that celebrates disability culture, shares lived experience, and campaigns for access without presenting participants as objects of inspiration or charity.

Practice: Include positive and diverse disability representation, support disability-led initiatives, challenge pity-based or heroic stereotypes, and make space for young people to express identity in their own way.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Networking and advocating; Being civically engaged.

Distance travelled: An evaluation concept that recognises progress in relation to a young person's own starting point, goals, circumstances, and barriers. It values meaningful incremental change in areas such as confidence, autonomy, relationships, communication, participation, or skills rather than relying only on standardised outcomes.

Example: A young person who initially stayed outside group activities begins attending regularly, expressing preferences, and initiating contact with peers.

Practice: Agree individual goals, use accessible and varied evidence, review progress with the young person, and avoid comparing participants against a single standard pathway.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Assessing and evaluating; Facilitating learning.

E

Easy-to-read information (Easy Read): An accessible information format designed particularly for people with intellectual disabilities and others who may experience difficulties understanding written information. Easy Read follows specific standards for language, content, structure, typography, layout, and visual support. It uses familiar words, short sentences, one main idea at a time, clear headings, an uncluttered layout, and relevant images or symbols. People with intellectual disabilities should be involved in developing and checking the information. Easy

Read is more structured than plain language, and the two terms should not be used interchangeably.

<https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/>

Example: A programme invitation places each main idea on a separate line, explains difficult words, uses a clear and sufficiently large font, and includes relevant images explaining the time, place, activities, and available support.

Practice: Follow recognised Easy Read standards, involve people from the intended audience in preparing and checking the material, and ensure that images clarify meaning rather than merely decorating the page.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Designing programmes.

Emotional intelligence: The capacity to recognise, understand, manage, and respond constructively to one's own emotions and the emotions of others. In youth work, it includes self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, relational sensitivity, and the ability to communicate in ways that support trust and psychological safety.

<https://www.apa.org/topics/emotion/emotional-intelligence>

Example: A youth worker notices rising tension, recognises their own frustration, responds calmly, validates the feelings involved, and adapts the activity before the situation escalates.

Practice: Reflect on your emotional state, use active listening and validation, recognise early signs of distress, and adjust tone, pace, method, or group structure when needed.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Facilitating learning; Collaborating in teams.

Empowerment: A process through which young people strengthen their knowledge, skills, confidence, resources, relationships, and opportunities to influence decisions and exercise greater control over their lives. Empowerment is not something professionals give to young people; it requires reducing barriers, sharing power, and supporting agency and self-determination.

Example: Young people receive accessible information and support to chair a meeting, set priorities, and represent their own views to decision-makers.

Practice: Move from "doing for" to enabling and supporting, provide meaningful choices and achievable responsibility, and avoid replacing the young person's decisions with professional preferences.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Being civically engaged.

Equity and equality: Equality means providing the same rights, opportunities, or resources to everyone. Equity recognises that people face different barriers and may require different resources, adjustments, or levels of support to participate fairly.

Equity does not mean lowering expectations; it means creating conditions in which meaningful opportunity is genuinely available.

Example: Everyone is invited to the same workshop, but one participant receives Easy Read materials, another uses sign-language interpretation, and another is given additional processing time.

Practice: Ask not only whether the same opportunity is offered, but whether each person can access, use, and benefit from it in practice.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Being civically engaged; Designing programmes.

H

Human rights model of disability: An approach that understands people with disabilities as rights-holders rather than objects of charity, care, or protection. It connects disability to dignity, autonomy, equality, participation, and accountability. It recognises impairment as part of human diversity and requires states, institutions, and service providers to remove barriers, prevent discrimination, provide support, and ensure that people can exercise their rights in practice.

<https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

Example: A youth organisation treats accessible participation as an enforceable responsibility and includes young people with disabilities in decisions about its programmes and policies.

Practice: Frame inclusion as a matter of rights and institutional responsibility, involve young people in decisions, and ensure that support strengthens rather than restricts autonomy.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Being civically engaged.

I

Impairment: A difference, loss, or limitation in a person's physical, sensory, intellectual, cognitive, or psychosocial functioning. In the social model of disability, impairment and disability are not synonyms: disability arises when barriers restrict the participation of a person with an impairment. Some people prefer terms such as condition, difference, or disability, so terminology should follow the person's preference and the relevant context.

Example: A person may have a hearing impairment, while exclusion occurs when a meeting provides no captions, interpreter, visual information, or suitable listening conditions.

Practice: Do not infer abilities or support needs from an impairment label. Ask about access requirements, focus on removing barriers, and respect preferred language.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Communicating meaningfully; Designing programmes.

Inclusion: An ongoing and intentional process of changing environments, relationships, methods, systems, and power structures so that all young people are

welcomed, respected, supported, and able to participate meaningfully. Inclusion is more than physical presence or placement in a mainstream setting; it requires belonging, access, choice, influence, and appropriate support.

Example: A participant attends the same programme as their peers, can understand the information, choose how to contribute, access required support, build relationships, and influence activities.

Practice: Examine who can enter, participate, belong, influence, and benefit; remove barriers and adapt the programme rather than expecting the young person to fit an unchanged system.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Being civically engaged.

Informed consent: An ongoing process through which a person receives relevant information in an accessible form, has an opportunity to ask questions and consider options, and voluntarily agrees to an activity, decision, or use of information. Consent must be specific, understandable, and free from pressure. It can be reviewed or withdrawn. Supported decision-making and accessible communication may be required. Legal or safeguarding limits must be explained clearly.

Example: Before recording a video, the youth worker explains where it will appear, who may see it, how long it will be used, and that refusing will not affect participation in other activities.

Practice: Check understanding rather than relying on a signature, revisit consent when circumstances change, respect refusal, record consent appropriately, and follow legal and safeguarding duties when consent cannot determine the response.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Facilitating learning.

Internalised ableism: The process through which a person with a disability or additional support need absorbs negative social beliefs about disability and applies them to themselves. This may appear as shame, self-doubt, reduced expectations, reluctance to request support, or the belief that participation must be earned by appearing independent or "less disabled".

Example: A young person refuses an accessible participation option because they believe that needing support means they are incapable or a burden to others.

Practice: Challenge deficit-based messages, recognise strengths and effort, provide positive representation, normalise support, and create opportunities for successful participation and leadership.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Displaying intercultural sensitivity.

Intersectionality: A framework for understanding how aspects of identity and social position - such as disability, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, migration status, age, and socio-economic situation - interact to shape distinctive experiences of

privilege, discrimination, and exclusion. The effects are not simply added together; they can create specific barriers that a single-category approach misses.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>

Example: A young migrant woman with a disability may encounter barriers connected to accessibility, gender, language, legal status, and cultural expectations at the same time.

Practice: Avoid one-size-fits-all assumptions, ask about the whole context of participation, and examine how programme rules may affect people differently.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Designing programmes; Being civically engaged.

L

Lived experience: Knowledge and expertise developed through direct personal experience of disability, neurodivergence, mental health difficulties, trauma, chronic illness, exclusion, or other relevant life circumstances. Lived experience is a valid form of expertise, but no individual should be expected to represent every person with a similar identity or experience.

Example: Young people with additional support needs contribute to staff training by analysing programme barriers and proposing accessible solutions based on their own experiences.

Practice: Involve people with lived experience as equal partners, respect the limits of what they wish to share, provide access support, and recognise or compensate their contribution appropriately.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Collaborating in teams; Designing programmes; Assessing and evaluating.

M

Medical model of disability: A model that locates disability primarily within the individual's impairment, condition, or diagnosis and focuses on treatment, rehabilitation, or correction. Medical knowledge and healthcare may be important, but relying on this model alone can obscure environmental barriers, rights, strengths, and the person's own goals. Youth workers should not use diagnosis as the sole explanation for participation difficulties.

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/classification/icf/icfbeginnersguide.pdf>

Example: A programme concludes that a young person cannot participate because of their diagnosis without first considering whether communication, timing, sensory conditions, or activity design could be changed.

Practice: Recognise when clinical expertise is relevant, but keep youth work focused on participation, relationships, strengths, rights, and the removal of barriers.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Designing programmes.

Microaffirmations: Small, everyday actions that communicate recognition, respect, inclusion, and confidence in another person's contribution. Their cumulative effect can strengthen belonging and psychological safety, particularly for people who regularly experience exclusion or low expectations.

Example: A youth worker gives a participant enough time to answer, acknowledges their idea, uses their preferred communication method, and later shows how the idea influenced the activity.

Practice: Notice and validate different forms of contribution, use respectful language, recognise effort without patronising praise, and ensure that attention is distributed fairly.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Displaying intercultural sensitivity.

Microaggressions: Subtle, everyday comments, behaviours, or environmental messages that communicate stereotypes, disrespect, or exclusion towards a marginalised person or group. They may be unintentional, but their cumulative impact can undermine safety, confidence, belonging, and participation.

Example: A young person with a disability is repeatedly praised as "inspiring" for completing ordinary tasks, while their actual ideas and skills are ignored.

Practice: Reflect on impact rather than intention, respond when harmful language occurs, apologise and repair when necessary, and challenge patterns that reinforce stereotypes or unequal power.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Communicating meaningfully.

Multiplier: A participant who shares, applies, or develops learning from a programme within their peer group, organisation, or community. Multiplication extends impact beyond the original activity, but it should be based on the participant's interests, capacity, and voluntary choice rather than treated as an automatic obligation.

Example: After an inclusive youth exchange, a participant adapts an accessibility activity and facilitates it in their local youth group.

Practice: Help interested participants plan realistic follow-up, provide accessible materials and mentoring, and recognise different forms of contribution beyond public speaking or formal training.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Networking and advocating.

N

NEET: An abbreviation for young people who are not in employment, education, or training. NEET is a statistical and policy category, not a description of a person's identity, motivation, or potential. The group is highly diverse, and young people may enter or leave this situation for many reasons, including inaccessible systems,

disability, caring responsibilities, discrimination, health difficulties, or limited local opportunities.

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/21271.pdf>

Example: Two young people classified as NEET may need very different support: one may be seeking accessible employment, while another may be recovering from illness or navigating an interrupted education pathway.

Practice: Avoid deficit assumptions, explore individual goals and barriers, use outreach and trust-building, and connect young people with accessible education, employment, and community opportunities.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Networking and advocating; Being civically engaged.

Neurodiversity and neurodivergent: Neurodiversity refers to the natural diversity of human minds and neurological functioning within a population. It includes both neurotypical and neurodivergent people and therefore describes a group rather than an individual. Neurodivergent describes a person whose cognitive, sensory, communication, attention, or learning profile differs from dominant societal expectations. It may include autistic people and people with ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome, and other neurological differences. Neurodivergent is not a diagnosis and should not be used to assume abilities or support needs.

<https://neurodiversitysymposium.wordpress.com/what-is-neurodiversity/>

Example: A youth group may be described as neurodiverse because it includes people with different neurological profiles. An individual may describe themselves as neurodivergent, but not as "having neurodiversity".

Practice: Respect self-identification and preferred terminology, avoid assumptions based on labels, and ask directly about communication, sensory, learning, and participation preferences.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Communicating meaningfully.

Non-formal and informal learning: Non-formal learning is intentional, voluntary, and organised outside formal education, usually with learning aims, facilitation, and reflection but without necessarily leading to a formal qualification. Informal learning occurs through everyday experiences, relationships, participation, and activities and may be unplanned or not immediately recognised as learning. Youth work commonly combines both.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/recommendation-on-youth-work>

Example: A planned teamwork activity supports non-formal learning, while an unplanned conversation during a shared meal may lead to informal learning about communication or relationships.

Practice: Create accessible conditions for both planned and spontaneous learning, make learning visible through reflection, and avoid turning voluntary youth work into formal schooling.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes.

Nothing about us without us: A principle of the disability rights movement stating that people with disabilities must participate meaningfully in decisions, policies, programmes, and research that affect them. It requires more than consultation: people need accessible information, appropriate support, real influence, and feedback about how their contributions were used.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/>

Example: Young people with additional support needs participate in selecting programme priorities, testing materials, evaluating activities, and deciding what changes should be made.

Practice: Involve young people from the beginning, remove participation barriers, share decision-making power, compensate expertise where appropriate, and avoid tokenistic representation.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Being civically engaged; Designing programmes; Assessing and evaluating.

P

Participation (meaningful): The active and genuine involvement of young people in matters that affect them, with accessible opportunities to express views, make choices, share responsibility, and influence outcomes. Meaningful participation goes beyond attendance, information-giving, or consultation without impact. Participation can take different forms and does not require everyone to speak, lead, or contribute in the same way.

<https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6>

Example: Young people choose programme priorities, contribute through speech, writing, images, AAC, or supported discussion, and receive feedback showing how their contributions changed the programme.

Practice: Offer multiple ways and levels of involvement, provide information and support in advance, respect refusal, and ensure that participation produces visible influence rather than symbolic presence.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Being civically engaged; Facilitating learning; Designing programmes.

Person-centred approach: A way of working that sees the whole young person rather than reducing them to a diagnosis, impairment, behaviour, or support need. It respects dignity, preferences, strengths, relationships, identity, goals, and lived experience; presumes competence; and develops support with the person. This

professional approach is different from the grammatical choice between person-first and identity-first language.

Example: Instead of deciding what an autistic participant can manage based on a label, the youth worker asks about their interests, preferred communication, sensory needs, goals, and previous experiences.

Practice: Ask before assuming, focus on strengths and goals, involve the young person in decisions, adapt support without taking control, and review arrangements as circumstances change.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Communicating meaningfully; Displaying intercultural sensitivity.

Person-first and identity-first language: Person-first language places the person before a disability or condition, for example "a person with a disability". Identity-first language names disability or neurotype as part of identity, for example "disabled person" or "autistic person". Preferences differ between individuals, communities, languages, and contexts; neither form should be imposed universally.

Example: A participant says they prefer "autistic person", while another prefers "person with autism". The youth worker respects each preference.

Practice: Ask and follow individual preferences, use the terminology chosen by relevant communities when discussing groups, avoid outdated or degrading terms, and do not correct self-identification.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Displaying intercultural sensitivity.

Plain language: A communication approach that helps the intended audience find, understand, and use information as easily as possible. Plain language uses familiar words, concise and logically organised content, clear headings, short direct sentences, active language, and explanations of unavoidable technical terms. Unlike Easy Read, it does not necessarily follow specific rules for font, layout, images, or involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in producing and checking the material.

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

Example: Instead of writing "Participants are requested to indicate their preferred mode of participation prior to commencement", an invitation says, "Tell us how you would like to participate before the activity starts."

Practice: Identify the audience, put important information first, avoid unnecessary jargon, use direct sentences, and test whether readers can find, understand, and use the information. Use Easy Read when its more specific standards are required.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Designing programmes.

Professional boundaries: Clear and consistent limits that define a youth worker's role, responsibilities, availability, communication, physical contact, self-disclosure, confidentiality, and relationships with participants. Boundaries protect both young people and workers, support fairness and predictability, reduce dependency and

favouritism, and help professionals remain within their competence. Boundaries are not a lack of care; they make support safer and more sustainable.

Example: A youth worker explains their working hours and communication channels, does not provide therapy, and follows the agreed referral process when a young person requires specialist mental health support.

Practice: Explain roles and limits accessibly, use professional communication channels, apply rules consistently, seek supervision, document serious concerns, and refer or escalate when needs exceed your responsibility or competence.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Communicating meaningfully; Collaborating in teams.

Professional sustainability: The conditions that allow youth workers and organisations to provide safe, ethical, and consistent support over time without relying on overwork, blurred roles, or individual sacrifice. It includes realistic workloads, adequate staffing, supervision, training, role clarity, recovery time, organisational procedures, and sufficient financial and material resources. Preventing burnout is an organisational responsibility as well as an individual practice.

<https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon>

Example: An organisation schedules regular supervision, provides cover for absences, limits out-of-hours communication, and ensures that complex cases are shared by a team rather than held by one worker.

Practice: Monitor workload and emotional demands, use supervision and peer support, maintain role limits, raise capacity concerns early, and build staff support and accessibility costs into organisational planning and budgets.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Managing resources; Collaborating in teams; Assessing and evaluating.

R

Reasonable accommodation: Necessary and appropriate modifications or adjustments provided in a particular situation so that a person with a disability can exercise rights and participate on an equal basis with others, without imposing a disproportionate or undue burden. Reasonable accommodation is individualised and responds to identified requirements. It complements but does not replace general accessibility and universal design.

<https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

Example: A participant receives additional processing time, a quiet working space, adapted materials, or sign-language interpretation according to their requirements.

Practice: Discuss requirements with the person, respond promptly and respectfully, protect private information, avoid demanding unnecessary diagnostic evidence, and document organisational decisions when an adjustment cannot be provided as requested.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Managing resources; Communicating meaningfully.

Referral and escalation pathway: An agreed process for connecting a young person with support, expertise, or authority beyond the youth worker's role. Referral usually links the person to an appropriate service or professional; escalation raises a concern to a designated person or higher level of responsibility when risk, urgency, or complexity requires it. Both require clear roles, consent where possible, proportionate information-sharing, and follow-up.

Example: With the young person's involvement, a youth worker helps them contact an accessible employment service, while an immediate safeguarding concern is escalated to the organisation's designated safeguarding lead.

Practice: Maintain an up-to-date network and written procedures, explain available options, clarify confidentiality limits, use warm referrals where appropriate, share only necessary information, and check whether the person could access the support.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Networking and advocating; Collaborating in teams; Managing resources.

Reflective supervision: A structured, confidential professional process in which youth workers examine their practice, emotional responses, ethical dilemmas, boundaries, risks, and learning with a suitably prepared supervisor. Its purpose is professional reflection, support, accountability, and development; it should not function only as performance monitoring.

Example: A youth worker uses supervision to explore why a participant's repeated crises create a sense of personal responsibility and to agree safer boundaries and a team-based response.

Practice: Provide supervision regularly, separate it clearly from disciplinary procedures, protect confidentiality within defined limits, and use learning from supervision to strengthen both individual practice and organisational systems.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Collaborating in teams; Assessing and evaluating.

S

Safeguarding: The organisational and professional measures used to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation, violence, unsafe practice, and other harm. Some young people with additional support needs face increased risk because of dependency, communication barriers, isolation, discrimination, previous trauma, or inaccessible reporting systems; the risk is not an inherent characteristic of the person. Safeguarding requires prevention, accessible reporting, proportionate action, clear responsibilities, and accountability.

Example: An organisation has a named safeguarding lead, accessible complaint routes, clear reporting and crisis procedures, trained staff, and a process for documenting and reviewing concerns.

Practice: Know and follow applicable law and organisational procedures, explain reporting duties and confidentiality limits, respond to disclosures calmly, record facts, share information only as necessary, and never investigate beyond your role.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Managing resources; Collaborating in teams; Facilitating learning.

Safer space: An environment intentionally developed to reduce the risk of physical, emotional, interpersonal, and identity-based harm and to support dignity, respect, predictability, choice, and participation. The term "safer" recognises that complete safety cannot be guaranteed and that conditions must be actively maintained, reviewed, and improved.

Example: Participants co-create group agreements, know how to report concerns, can take a break without punishment, and receive clear information about what will happen during the activity.

Practice: Combine accessible environments, transparent expectations, anti-bullying action, confidentiality boundaries, safeguarding procedures, predictable structure, and regular feedback from participants.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes; Managing resources.

Self-determination: The right and ability to make choices, set goals, express preferences, take appropriate risks, and direct one's own life without undue external control. Self-determination does not mean being left without support; it may require accessible information, supported decision-making, opportunities to practise choice, and environments that respect autonomy.

Example: A young person chooses which activities to join, identifies a personal learning goal, and decides what support would help them work towards it.

Practice: Offer meaningful choices, respect refusal, support manageable responsibility, recognise individual pace, and avoid overprotection or automatically transferring decisions to family members or professionals.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Being civically engaged.

Self-determination theory: A psychological theory of motivation that identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs. In youth work, it can inform environments in which young people experience meaningful choice, feel capable of making progress, and develop supportive connections with others.

<https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>

Example: A participant chooses between several meaningful roles, receives an achievable challenge with useful feedback, and completes it as part of a supportive group.

Practice: Design activities that strengthen choice, achievable competence, and connection without using pressure, excessive control, or rewards that undermine intrinsic motivation.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes.

Self-directed learning: A process in which a learner takes an active role in identifying learning needs, setting goals, choosing methods or resources, and

reflecting on progress. Self-direction exists on a continuum and does not mean learning without structure or support.

Example: A participant chooses a project goal and preferred way of demonstrating learning, while the youth worker helps break the process into manageable steps.

Practice: Provide accessible choices, scaffolding, feedback, and reflection; gradually adjust support as confidence and competence develop.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning.

Self-regulation: The ability to notice and manage attention, emotions, behaviour, energy, and responses to stress in ways that fit the situation and the person's goals. Self-regulation is influenced by development, disability, neurodivergence, trauma, health, relationships, and the environment. It should not be confused with silent compliance or suppression of legitimate needs.

Example: A participant recognises sensory overload, uses a break card, moves to a quiet space, and returns when ready.

Practice: Support awareness of individual signals and strategies, reduce avoidable environmental stress, offer co-regulation and choice, and avoid shaming people for visible signs of distress.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Communicating meaningfully.

Social model of disability: A model that distinguishes impairment from disability and locates disability in the interaction between people and social, environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers. It shifts attention from "fixing" the individual towards removing barriers and changing systems. The model is essential for inclusion but should be used alongside a human rights approach and attention to the person's individual experience and support requirements.

<https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability/>

Example: A wheelchair user is excluded not by the wheelchair itself but by stairs, inaccessible transport, and programme planning that assumes everyone can use the same route.

Practice: Identify and remove barriers, challenge ableism, build accessibility into planning, and avoid locating every participation problem within the young person.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Designing programmes; Being civically engaged.

Social stories: Short, structured, individualised narratives that describe a situation, relevant social information, possible perspectives, and helpful responses in a clear and respectful way. They may use text and images and can support understanding of

unfamiliar activities, expectations, or transitions. They should explain rather than control behaviour and must be appropriate to the person's age and preferences.

<https://www.autism.org.uk/learn/what-we-do/training/social-stories>

Example: Before a residential programme, a young person receives a visual story showing the journey, venue, sleeping arrangements, daily schedule, people involved, and ways to ask for a break.

Practice: Develop the story with the young person where possible, use accurate and reassuring information, avoid childish materials for adults, and update it when plans change.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Facilitating learning.

Social-emotional learning (SEL): The process of developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to understanding and managing emotions, building relationships, showing empathy, making responsible decisions, and working towards goals. In inclusive youth work, SEL should be adapted to different communication, sensory, cognitive, and cultural experiences and should not impose one "correct" way of expressing emotion.

<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>

Example: A group uses visual emotion tools, role play, discussion, and individual reflection to explore conflict and different ways of asking for support.

Practice: Use accessible and varied methods, connect learning to real situations, respect different forms of emotional expression, and avoid turning youth work into therapy.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes; Communicating meaningfully.

Strengths-based approach: An approach that begins with a person's abilities, interests, relationships, resources, aspirations, and potential rather than defining them through deficits or problems. It does not ignore barriers, risk, or support needs; it addresses them while building on what already works and what matters to the young person.

<https://www.scie.org.uk/strengths-based-approaches/guidance/>

Example: A young person who finds group discussion difficult contributes through strong visual-design skills and gradually takes on a role creating accessible group materials.

Practice: Ask about interests and previous successes, recognise effort and small steps, set realistic but ambitious goals, and avoid praise that is patronising or disconnected from genuine achievement.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Communicating meaningfully.

Support needs: The adjustments, resources, assistance, or conditions a person may require to access, participate in, and benefit from education, employment, youth work, or community life. Support needs may be practical, social, emotional, communication-related, sensory, cognitive, physical, environmental, temporary, long-

term, or fluctuating. They arise through the interaction between the person, the activity, and the environment and cannot be inferred reliably from diagnosis alone.

Example: A participant may need clear advance information, additional processing time, a quieter environment, support with travel, or an alternative way to contribute.

Practice: Ask about requirements and preferences directly, focus on participation rather than diagnosis, agree support with the person, protect confidentiality, and review arrangements when the activity or circumstances change.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Communicating meaningfully; Assessing and evaluating.

Supported decision-making: A process that enables a person to make and communicate their own decisions with support when needed, rather than having another person decide for them. Support may include accessible information, additional time, trusted supporters, interpretation, AAC, help comparing options, or assistance communicating a decision. The person's will and preferences remain central.

<https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=OD3o%2BgOdAKWeDYmIhDj41RWC7o7rLAf%2BHNUqFD5jy4TnNCzzKoEyz%2BUfYG8mKCHLoXpv3o0bt4ArfbbK8tgVVRQ%3D%3D>

Example: A young person compares two programme options using pictures, visits both locations with a trusted supporter, asks questions, and communicates their own choice.

Practice: Identify what support would make the decision accessible, avoid steering the person towards the professional's preferred option, check understanding, and document the person's decision rather than the supporter's opinion.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Communicating meaningfully; Being civically engaged.

T

Theory of change: A structured explanation of how and why planned activities are expected to lead to particular outputs, outcomes, and longer-term impact. It makes assumptions and links between resources, actions, short-term change, and intended impact visible so they can be tested and revised.

<https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/>

Example: A programme explains how accessible outreach and individual support are expected to increase participation, which may strengthen confidence, relationships, skills, and later community or employment outcomes.

Practice: Develop the theory with participants and stakeholders, identify assumptions and barriers, select meaningful indicators, and revise the pathway when monitoring shows that change is occurring differently than expected.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Assessing and evaluating.

Transition planning and continuity of support: A person-centred process for preparing changes between activities, services, life stages, education, employment, independent living, or the end of a programme. It aims to prevent abrupt loss of

trusted support and to create clear, accessible pathways based on the young person's goals, consent, and changing requirements.

Example: Before a participant leaves a youth programme, they identify future goals, visit possible services, meet a new contact person, agree what information may be shared, and plan follow-up.

Practice: Begin planning early, involve the young person throughout, coordinate roles across sectors, provide accessible information, use warm handovers, protect privacy, and check what happened after referral or exit.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Networking and advocating; Collaborating in teams; Designing programmes.

Trauma-informed approach: An approach that recognises the possible and widespread effects of trauma and seeks to avoid re-traumatisation. It prioritises physical and emotional safety, trustworthiness, transparency, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural awareness. Youth workers do not need to know a person's trauma history or provide trauma treatment in order to use trauma-informed principles.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-approaches-programs>

Example: A participant may observe before joining, decline an activity without being shamed, receive advance information about changes, and choose how to contribute.

Practice: Build predictable relationships and routines, explain what will happen, avoid coercion and public confrontation, offer meaningful choice, notice signs of distress, and refer when specialist support is needed.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes; Communicating meaningfully.

U

Universal design (UD): The design of products, environments, programmes, and services so that they can be used by as many people as possible, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for later adaptation or specialised design. Universal design anticipates human diversity but does not remove the duty to provide reasonable accommodation for individual requirements that remain.

<https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design>

Example: A programme uses step-free venues, clear signage, flexible seating, accessible digital materials, predictable schedules, and several participation formats as standard features.

Practice: Apply universal design from the first planning stage, involve diverse users in testing, and combine general accessibility with individual accommodation where needed.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Designing programmes; Managing resources.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): A framework for designing learning that offers multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. UDL reduces avoidable barriers by providing different ways to access information,

become involved, practise skills, and demonstrate learning while keeping learning goals clear.

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

Example: Participants can explore information through text, audio, images, demonstration, or discussion and can show learning through speaking, writing, drawing, performance, or video.

Practice: Define the essential learning goal, provide meaningful options rather than separate lower-status tasks, maintain clarity and structure, and still provide individual accommodation when required.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes.

V

Voluntary participation: A defining principle of youth work according to which young people choose whether and how to participate without coercion, punishment, manipulation, or loss of unrelated support. Voluntariness includes the possibility of declining an activity, choosing an alternative, taking a break, changing one's mind, or withdrawing consent, subject only to clearly explained legal or immediate safety responsibilities.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/recommendation-on-youth-work>

Example: A young person decides not to take part in a role play and chooses to observe and provide feedback instead, without being criticised or excluded from the rest of the programme.

Practice: Explain options and consequences clearly, avoid pressure disguised as encouragement, provide meaningful alternatives, and regularly check whether participation remains voluntary.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Being civically engaged.

Y

Young people with additional support needs: Young people who may require additional, adapted, or more intensive support to access, participate in, and benefit from youth work on an equal basis with others. These needs may relate to disability, neurodivergence, mental health difficulties, trauma, chronic illness, learning-related needs, communication, sensory or physical access requirements, or social and environmental barriers. Support needs may be visible or non-visible, temporary, long-term, or fluctuating and should be identified with the young person rather than

assumed from a diagnosis. The term is an inclusive working concept, not a diagnosis or a single legal category.

Example: A young person participates fully when information is provided in Easy Read, additional processing time is allowed, travel support is arranged, and a quiet space is available.

Practice: Ask about preferred ways of participating, agree support with the young person, avoid unnecessary diagnostic disclosure, protect confidentiality, and review arrangements when needs or circumstances change.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Displaying intercultural sensitivity; Designing programmes; Communicating meaningfully.

Youth work: A wide variety of social, cultural, educational, environmental, and political activities carried out by, with, and for young people, individually or in groups. Youth work is delivered by paid or volunteer youth workers and is based on voluntary participation and non-formal and informal learning. It supports personal and social development, active participation, inclusion, community involvement, and young people's influence over decisions affecting their lives. Youth work is not a substitute for therapy, healthcare, or specialist intervention.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/recommendation-on-youth-work>

Example: Young people voluntarily take part in a community project, choose its priorities, work together, develop skills and relationships, and reflect on their learning with a youth worker.

Practice: Build trusting professional relationships, use participatory and non-formal learning methods, share decision-making power, maintain ethical boundaries, and adapt activities so that all young people can participate meaningfully.

Relevant ETS competence areas: Facilitating learning; Designing programmes; Being civically engaged.

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ISBN 978-963-87614-8-4



Co-funded by
the European Union

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edukaciju i istraživanje

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