

Success In School For Children and Youth In Care

Engaging Positively With Young People In Care

Engaging positively with children and youth in care is essential for the Success in School for Children and Youth in Care Initiative – Provincial Protocol Framework. The values, outcomes and achievements of the initiative are supported by a core team. The core team highlights the young person's importance, and the belief in his or her future success in school and in life.

Core team members include caseworkers, caregivers, a school point person, the classroom teacher, the young person and any other guardian of the young person. Together, the members of the core team help promote success in school by reinforcing the importance of an education, positive peer groups, and connection to supportive adults in the lives of young people in care. Building relationships and increasing communication between members are key components of the core team. Collectively, the team can draw out the voice of the young person during team meetings, and individually, members can engage the young person to develop personal, positive and supportive relationships.

Relationship building with adults is crucial because these are the types of relationships that have been called into question in the first place. Trust needs to be re-established. This will only occur over time, through repeated positive relationships with trustworthy adults in the lives of young people in care.

“Youth at school who feel good, perceive meaningful attachment to adults, and possess a sense of belonging are also more likely to feel engaged, to work harder, and to be involved in activities in and outside of school time.” – Janis Whitlock. 2003. “Fostering School Connectedness” in ACT for Youth Upstate Centre of Excellence Research Facts and Findings.

“Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible - the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family.” – Virginia Satir, U.S. family therapist and author.



Youth in Care Say...

■ *“Make us feel important and take an interest in our lives.”*

■ *“You need to be ‘real’ in order for us to want to talk to you.”*

■ *“Without making it too obvious, pull me aside at some point and talk to me. Ask me what I need, rather than trying to guess.”*

■ *“There are a lot of adults in my life that I’m ‘supposed’ to talk to and trust. But that’s not the same as trusting someone ... just because of who they are.”*

■ *“Even though I want to blend in, I want to stand out ... not for being in foster care, but for being special, funny and interesting.”*



How Can I Support Educational Success for Young People in Care?

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING:

■ Use humour.

Kind-spirited humour goes a long way with young people. It shows that you can relax and enjoy life and relationships. Find things to laugh about together. Some young people like telling jokes, and pre-teens and teenagers enjoy learning how to use humour appropriately in social situations. Laughing at yourself and your own mistakes shows humility and makes you seem real and more approachable.

■ Make appropriate, professional self-disclosures.

Personal disclosures such as stories about your pet, favourite sports team or personal passions create opportunities to talk in general and can help identify common interests.

■ Invest time and attention in the young person when no crisis is happening.

Then, if a crisis arises, your assistance will be welcomed.

■ Talk about all areas of the young person’s life such as friends, school, interests, activities and culture.

The young person has much more going on in their life than being a child or youth in care.

■ **Help young people in care develop healthy boundaries about how much personal information they share with others.**

Although abuse or neglect is often implied if in care, be wary of asking for personal information about the past that is not necessary to developing a meaningful relationship.

■ **Engage the young people in discussions about how to achieve their goals.**

Young people often have semi-developed goals for their future. Even if you believe their dream is far-fetched (e.g., playing in the NHL, becoming a singer or movie-star), help break down their goals into smaller, more manageable tasks that get them involved at school or in the community. (e.g., joining a hockey team, arranging voice lessons, taking a role in a school play).

■ **Help the young person make connections between current schoolwork and their hopes and dreams.**

■ **Avoid making assumptions.**

Making assumptions about how the young person feels or what she wants will disrupt your relationship.

■ **Talk with the young person in terms of future success**

Use clear language to communicate your expectation that he will graduate from high school and pursue post-secondary education or work training.

■ **Avoid lecturing.**

Respectfully point out how her choices or actions may get in the way of goals she has set for herself.

■ **Be honest and upfront. Keep your promises.**

There is a lot of unavoidable bureaucracy that young people in care have to deal with, so keep it simple and do what you say you will.

■ **Find ways to offer support without making the young person stand out.**

Young people in care want to blend in and be treated like everyone else.

TEAM MEETINGS :

■ **Prior to the first team meeting, explain the purpose of the meeting and who will be there.**

Focus on the positive intent of the meeting.

■ **Ask the young person if there is anyone they want to invite to the team meeting as personal support.**

Think outside the box in terms of who may have a strong connection with the young person, such as a former teacher or coach. Acknowledge possible feelings of powerlessness on the part of the young person about the people who will attend the team meeting. Understand that there may be relationships with some of the adults in their lives that impact their sense of trust in this process.

■ **Look for opportunities to build on their strengths.**

Keep the Success in School Plan focused on positives. If the young person is excelling in a subject area, find out if she would be willing to assist a peer or younger students in that subject.

■ **Use challenges as a learning opportunity.**

Talk about personal motivation, changing interests, and where to get assistance in achieving goals.

■ **As a team, remember to stay on task**

Ask, “How can we more fully support this child?” and “What are we doing that is going to make a difference?”

■ **Don't give up.**

Many youth in care express appreciation later on in life for adults that ‘hung in with them’ during difficult times in their lives.

■ **Work together to identify who can provide additional support.**

This is particularly important if a young person is struggling in a subject area.

■ **Develop a plan with the young person about managing stressful situations.**

The plan should include identifying warning signs and early intervention strategies.

■ **Arrange a meeting between a young person and the appropriate cultural liaison for the school, when appropriate.**

A cultural liaison person can help to support the young person in connecting to their heritage or may be aware of other supports available.

■ **Talk with the young person about his experience of safety at school and in the community.**

Help him to find ways of dealing with issues related to bullying, racism or negative peer pressure.

■ **Identify who in the school will go out of their way to check in with the young person on a regular basis. This person should look for opportunities to make the young person feel special and unique.**

This includes greeting her in the hall, making suggestions about ways to get involved in school activities, or asking for her help with school tasks. Consider the potential of the full school team, including teachers, teaching assistants, principals, coaches, office assistants, counselors, and school volunteers.

■ **Invite the young person to participate in school activities or events.**

Don't assume that the young person knows about the opportunities to get involved. The young person in care may lack the self-esteem to take the initiative to try out or join.

■ **Be innovative in developing opportunities for participation.**

You might find a new group, club or sports team at the school that appeal to the young person (for instance, a book club reading the latest teenage book series). What are the untapped possibilities for this young person at this school?

■ **Ensure the young person has various outlets for expression.**

Some examples are counseling, art supplies, access to music or musical instruments, sports, and notebooks or a journal.