



Youth Affairs
Council Victoria



Code of Ethical Practice

for the Victorian Youth Sector



Acknowledgement of Country

YACVic respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands throughout Victoria and pays its respects to their Elders, children and young people of past, current and future generations. Our work takes place across Victoria. YACVic's head office is on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne). We also have offices on the lands of the Gunditjmara Nation in Warrnambool, and on the lands of the Wemba Wemba and Wadi Wadi Nations in Swan Hill. YACVic pays our respects to Elders past and present for their wisdom, strength, support and leadership. Bunjil's lore states that those who walk on this land must care for Country and the waterways as well as care for the children and young people.

We stand in solidarity to pay respect to the ongoing culture and continued history of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations. Sovereignty was never ceded. **This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.**

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About YACVic

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is Victoria's peak body and leading advocate for young people aged 12-25, and the youth sector that supports them. Our vision is that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and that they are active, visible and valued in their communities.

We promote youth participation and make policy recommendations on issues that affect young people's lives, build the capacity of the youth sector, nurture connections for collaboration and support, and identify and advance thinking on emerging issues for young people. We have a particular focus on young people who face marginalisation and disadvantage.

YACVic receives its core funding from the Victorian Government Office for Youth, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing who also funded the development of this revised edition.

This publication is available to download, along with accompanying documents and information, at yacvic.org.au/code and hard copies are available from:

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Introduction

What is a code of ethical practice?

Codes of ethical practice are developed by bodies of practitioners to provide an agreed foundation and set of values for professional practice. They provide a frame of reference from which to develop ethical and safe practice. Codes of ethical practice also guide expectations for best practice when working in the field.

Human rights underpin the *Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector*. The Code outlines a framework of principles

and practice responsibilities that guide the professional field of youth work in Victoria.

The Code aims to support the safety, wellbeing and rights of young people. It also promotes the credibility of the Victorian youth work sector in its ongoing professionalisation. The Code outlines clear standards, encourages accountability and supports the holistic wellbeing of young people and youth workers, making it a valuable framework for ethical practice.

What is youth work?

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition defines youth work as:

... a practice that places young people and their interests first. Youth work is a relational practice, where the youth worker operates alongside the young person in their context. Youth work is an empowering practice that advocates for and facilitates a young person's independence, participation in society, connectedness, and realisation of their rights.¹

State and territory youth affairs councils and peak bodies support this definition.

Youth work has origins in **non-formal and informal education and learning***, social justice, human rights and peer work. Youth work enables the empowerment of young people in a society where they have less agency than adults. Youth work is practised alongside young people, with goals set by young people themselves.

Youth work is not about 'treating' or 'curing' using clinical interventions. Youth workers are specialist workers trained in:

- the developmental needs of young people
- the human and political rights of young people
- core skills such as engagement and advocacy.

Youth work has a well-defined body of knowledge, with distinctive practice methodologies such as **social pedagogy**. These methodologies are internationally recognised, and tertiary-level qualifications are endorsed by the national professional association—Youth Workers Australia.²

*words and phrases that are in bold are defined at the end of the document

Why does youth work need a code?

A code of ethics is important for reflecting the unique and specialist nature of youth work. Youth work is the only profession that positions young people as the primary consideration of the worker. The Code ensures the best interests of young people

are at the centre of youth work practice. It does this by setting clear expectations that distinguish the role of youth workers from other professionals who interact with young people.

Who does the Code apply to?

The Code is voluntary but is widely endorsed by the sector and applies to all qualified youth workers. It is also relevant for others working with young people without a youth work qualification. Youth Affairs Council Victoria encourages all those who work with young people to adopt the Code as a reference point for ethical decision making.

The Code recognises that the legal status of children and young people changes at

different times in their lives and that laws apply differently according to their age. Youth workers should be aware of these laws. In Victoria the legal definition of a child is up to the age of 18 years. For the purposes of the Code, the term 'young people' refers to those aged between 12 and 25 years, in line with Victorian Government policy. Some organisations work with young people in a broader age bracket, and so the Code may still apply.

The Code is a living document

The Code is a living document developed with and for the Victorian youth sector. It is ongoing in the way it responds to the diverse and dynamic contexts and needs of youth workers and young people. The Code was first published in 2007 and was launched jointly by the Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Minister for Youth Affairs. The Office for Youth funded an update of the Code in 2023-24 to meet changing sector needs.

This updated version of the Code is informed by surveys and consultations run by Youth Affairs Council Victoria. It was guided by a steering committee of practitioners from a range of youth organisations, academia and young people themselves. The Code draws on the history and evolution of youth work in Victoria, codes from other Australian states and international codes.

Young people's human rights

The Code is underpinned by a commitment to the human rights of young people as expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Australia has ratified the CRC, which is particularly relevant to youth work. Its four core principles are:

- non-discrimination
- the best interests of the child
- the right to life, survival and development
- respect for the views of the child.

Article 3.1 of the CRC prescribes that:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.³

Other United Nations declarations relevant to the Code are the Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities also outlines human rights that all Victorians can expect to enjoy. This includes cultural rights and freedom of expression.⁴ These declarations and charters include several terms that protect young people from discrimination of any kind, irrespective of their race, colour, gender, gender identity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, class, property, disability, birth or other status.⁵

Youth workers should develop their understanding of these rights and actively promote them.

Youth workers support and uphold the rights of young people of all backgrounds, experiences and identities. This includes young people who experience marginalisation or who have multiple intersecting identities such as young people who:

- are First Nations
- are part of the LGBTIQA+ community
- Live with disabilities or are disabled (including mental-ill health, chronic health conditions, and neurodivergence)
- are young carers
- live in poverty or experience homelessness
- are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background
- are of refugee or migrant experience
- have experience of living in out-of-home care
- have had contact with the justice system or live with a parent/guardian/carer who has had contact with the justice system
- have lived or living experience of harmful alcohol or other drug use
- have experienced or been exposed to family, sexual or intimate partner and/or gender-based abuse, violence, or neglect.

Youth work principles

The Code's youth work principles describe what youth work aims to achieve. These principles reflect values that inform youth work and are underpinned by a commitment to the human rights of young people and relevant government legislation. The youth work principles are of equal value and are not placed in order of importance. In adopting the Code, youth workers will follow the youth work principles.

Empowerment

The Code acknowledges that young people under the age of 18 are **disenfranchised** and lack power because of their age. The Code advocates for and promotes the voices, experiences and agency of young people. It supports the pursuit of all young people in achieving their best interests and rights.

Participation

The Code promotes opportunities for young people to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them. This is consistent with the CRC's emphasis on children's right to express their views and have them considered.

Social justice

The Code highlights the role of youth workers as social justice educators and advocates. It prioritises young people's human rights, access to social and economic resources, equity, participation, diversity and justice.

Climate justice

The Code highlights the role of youth workers to support and encourage young people's engagement in climate mitigation and action and emphasises the importance of taking an **ecologically centred** approach to all work with young people. The Code promotes care for and connection with the environment (waterways, air, land and ecosystems) that youth workers and young people live and work on. It acknowledges the particular importance of this for First Nations young people.



Respect for human dignity and worth

The Code advocates respect for young people's dignity, worth and their right to make choices. This is in keeping with the CRC's principles of respecting children's views and best interests.

Respect for diversity

The Code acknowledges and respects the multiple, diverse and intersecting identities, cultures, abilities and backgrounds of young people. This mirrors the CRC's call for eliminating discrimination against children.

Connectedness to friends, family, community and culture

The Code highlights the importance of social and cultural connection for young people's sense of belonging, identity development, independence and wellbeing.

Positive health and wellbeing

The Code highlights the importance of supporting young people's resources to thrive through caring for their physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing. This aligns with the CRC's focus on children's overall wellbeing.

Safety

The Code prioritises the safety of young people, closely reflecting the CRC's emphasis on safeguarding children's rights and interests. The Code prioritises creating environments that are physically, psychologically and culturally safe. Cultural safety is particularly important for First Nations young people and for young people with specific religious and spiritual connections and beliefs. The Code directs youth workers to follow the Victorian Child Safe Standards and the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. Youth workers must also uphold mandatory reporting obligations.

Youth work practice responsibilities

The youth work practice responsibilities describe key elements of what youth workers do when guided by the youth work principles. The practice responsibilities are the essence of youth work practice and are equally important in value. Each practice responsibility includes a section of commentary to help in its understanding and application.

Young people as the primary consideration

The primary consideration of youth workers is the young people they work with. Youth workers still consider other people and stakeholders, but a youth worker's primary responsibility is to young people.

Commentary

Achieving positive outcomes for young people may involve working closely with a range of people such as family/guardians, teachers, workers from other services, and friends. The key concern of a youth worker is achieving positive outcomes for young people. Young people need to know there is at least one person they can rely on to uphold their best interests.

Recognition of First Nations young people

Youth workers recognise that they live and work on the lands of First Nations people. They are respectful of First Nations cultures, histories, and perspectives, and understand that connection to culture and land is a right for First Nations young people. This connection is important for self-esteem, identity and social and emotional wellbeing.⁶

Commentary

Youth workers recognise and value the histories, cultures, perspectives and strength of First Nations young people and actively promote **cultural safety**. Youth workers uphold the rights of First Nations young people and communities to self-determination and in accessing services provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other services. Youth workers support and guide access to cultural programs for First Nations young people and understand the importance of connection to family, community and Country.

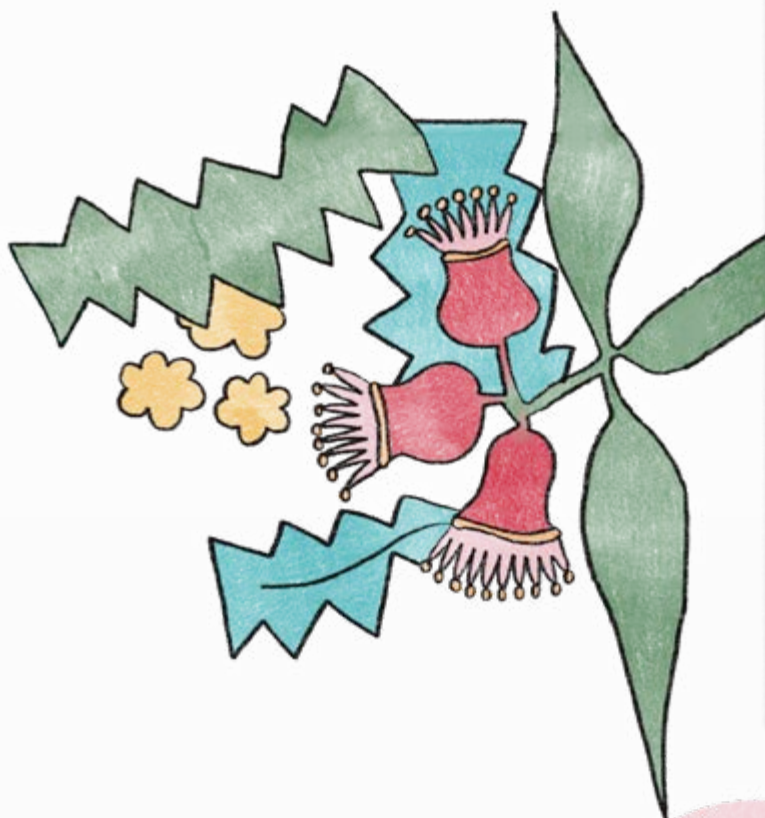


Duty of care

Youth workers act in the best interests of young people. They avoid exposing them to physical, psychological, emotional or cultural harm or injury and always uphold the principle of 'do no harm'. Youth workers assess risk and manage the safety of work and activities involving young people. They do this while being aware of the need to encourage young people to take part in activities that challenge them. Youth workers understand that risk comes in many forms, especially for young people who experience marginalisation and discrimination.⁸

Commentary

Youth workers have a responsibility to make sure activities, referrals and programs are safe for all young people and that no harm will result from their involvement. Risk assessment and management must be thorough. Equipment needs to be well maintained, and staff need to be properly trained. Youth workers exercise care when employing staff, whether paid or voluntary. They ensure the young people they work with are protected against abuse. This involves being careful about who they allow to interact with the young people they work with. It is a legal requirement in Victoria that all people working either voluntarily or in employment with young people first gain a **Working with Children Check**.



Privacy and confidentiality*

Youth workers respect young people's right to privacy and confidentiality. This means youth workers avoid any unnecessary invasions of privacy when collecting information about a young person and that confidentiality is protected. Youth workers have a clear understanding of privacy and confidentiality requirements. They ensure this is communicated clearly so young people can make informed decisions when sharing information. Youth workers help young people consider the current and potential future implications of giving consent. They ensure young people fully understand their rights on giving and withdrawing consent. This includes publishing young people's images online. Refer to the eSafety Commissioner website for more information.

There are limits, including legal obligations, to maintaining confidentiality. This means young people must be informed from the outset about privacy and confidentiality limitations and what may be done with information they provide. It is best practice to get a young person's informed consent before collecting personal or health information or sharing it with others.



Youth workers are encouraged to go beyond simply considering their legal obligations in protecting privacy and confidentiality. They should consider the full extent of the privacy implications of activities or actions that a young person may engage in.

Commentary

There are legal obligations that may affect the way information is collected, kept and shared. Examples are the obligations outlined in the **Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014** and the **Health Records Act 2001**. These Acts regulate the way government-funded services can collect, use, keep and secure personal and health information. Youth workers must also follow the **Victorian Child Safe Standards** and the **National Principles for Child Safe Organisations**. They must uphold **mandatory reporting obligations**.

* This information is not legal advice. There may be relevant legal obligations that are not discussed here. Seek clarification through employers if unsure about privacy and confidentiality obligations, or refer to the **Office for the Victorian Information Commissioners website** for information on the Information Privacy Act 2000. For information on the Health Records Act 2001 refer to the **Office of the Health Complaints Commissioner website**.

Boundaries

The youth work relationship is strictly professional. Professional boundaries protect both the young person and the worker. Youth workers maintain the integrity of these limits at all times.

It is important that youth workers develop trusting, healthy relationships with the young people they work with. This involves recognising the power imbalance built into the professional relationship. Youth workers often become a significant adult in young people's lives. They must acknowledge that the relationship between themselves and young people is a professional relationship and work within professional boundaries.

Commentary

In Australia there are specific legal restrictions relating to adult sexual conduct with young people that youth workers must fully understand. Refer to the **Reportable Conduct Scheme** for more information. Relationships in which professional boundaries are not respected may become exploitative and result in harmful and lifelong effects for young people. Youth workers respect these professional boundaries with young people in work and broader public settings including online.

Transparency, honesty & integrity

The professional relationship between youth workers and young people is open and truthful, enabling young people to access information and resources to make informed decisions in their lives. Youth workers and youth agencies do not advance themselves or other stakeholders at the expense of young people. They follow the principles and practice responsibilities of youth work, and they do not bring it into disrepute.

Commentary

Youth workers build a trusting relationship with young people. They are mindful of misleading young people in what they can and can't deliver. This means youth workers are clear about the scope of what they can offer from the outset. Youth workers are transparent about confidentiality, disclosure, safety, who the worker works for and what the agency is funded or contracted to provide. Youth workers also have a role in explaining to young people the nature of other stakeholders' relationships to them and the expectations this may place on them. Best possible practice of youth work means youth workers are aware of their role and the professional boundaries, principles and responsibilities required of them and other stakeholders. They value and respect different approaches taken by other professions.



Social and ecological context

Youth workers understand the importance and value of adopting an ecological lens when working with young people. They recognise the disproportionate impacts of climate change on young people, and advocate for protecting and preserving the environment and its ecosystems and inhabitants. Youth workers cultivate connection and reciprocal care towards the waterways, air and land in which they live and work. They support young people's leadership in climate change mitigation and encourage engagement in climate action.⁹

Youth workers recognise how social and structural forces affect young people. This means the practice of youth work responds to young people's experiences and needs. It also challenges barriers that restrict the life opportunities of young people. This includes acknowledging the impacts of trauma and using trauma-informed approaches in practice.¹⁰

The role of a youth worker is not limited to bringing about change within the individual young person. It also extends to the social context in which the young person lives. Youth workers recognise and address the marginalisation and discrimination that specific groups of young people face. They understand how intersecting identities and experiences can intensify exclusion. Youth workers recognise that racism and cultural abuse is a factor in the lives of some young people, particularly First Nations young people. They therefore aim to promote an environment that values cultures, histories, practices, and perspectives. Youth workers also recognise various forms of discrimination such as the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ young people, disabled young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, and young people living in poverty.



Commentary

Youth workers are agents of change in a variety of contexts, both with individual young people and in wider society. As youth workers, it is important to consider a young person in their social context rather than in isolation. Young people are shaped and influenced by the contexts in which they live, including in online spaces. They are part of their communities and broader social contexts, and this is acknowledged in youth workers' approach to working with

them. Youth workers involve and support young people in climate justice initiatives and decision-making processes at all levels. This includes providing young people with accurate information, supporting their involvement and response to climate-related disasters and facilitating opportunities to contribute ideas and actions to adapt, mitigate and respond to the drivers and impacts of climate change.

Anti-oppressive practice, non-discrimination, equity and self-awareness

Youth workers ensure equality of opportunity is promoted and understand how oppression operates in the lives of young people. They enable and encourage young people to respect and celebrate their own and others' cultural backgrounds, identities and choices.¹¹

The practice of youth workers is non-discriminatory. It works to overcome inequities caused by unequal access to economic, social and cultural resources; it promotes just and fair behaviour.¹² Youth workers engage in peer-based reflective practice to challenge and expand their knowledge and to develop self-awareness of unconscious bias and power dynamics.¹³ Reflexive and reflective practice allows youth workers to work more effectively with young people to challenge and oppose racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, intersexism and all other forms of discrimination and oppression.

Youth workers actively advocate against and try to change unjust policies and practices for all young people. They understand that to work with First Nations young people with equity, their practice must be culturally safe. Youth workers educate themselves about the power imbalance between the dominant culture and First Nations young people.

Commentary

Youth workers work to counter the economic and political marginalisation of young people and help them find and use their individual and collective voices. Under **human rights** and **equal opportunity legislation**, all young people have the right to be treated in a fair way that promotes equity and equality. This applies regardless of race, gender, gender identity, religion, disability, environment, association, background or sexual identity. Equal opportunity legislation also stipulates that workers have a positive duty to prevent discrimination.

Young people have the right to be responded to based on their need, regardless of a youth worker's personal beliefs or the beliefs of the organisation a youth worker is working for. If a youth worker cannot detach their personal beliefs from the situation, they must ensure the young person is referred to a worker or other organisation that can support their needs in a non-discriminatory and sensitive way.

Cooperation and collaboration

Youth workers cooperate and collaborate with others, including families, guardians, and carers, to secure the best possible outcomes for young people. This is done with the consent of the young person. Youth workers look for opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and professionals from other agencies and sectors; they mobilise young people and others to work together on issues of common concern. Youth workers are particularly conscious of the need to work with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to support positive outcomes with First Nations young people.

Commentary

Ethical youth work practice involves a commitment to cooperative partnerships with relevant service providers and across sectors to collectively achieve positive outcomes for young people. Inter-agency and cross-sector collaborative approaches allow a young person more choice in support networks and access to a range of information, skills and resources to meet all their needs. Collaboration between workers is an essential part of ethical practice because it aims to ensure the best possible outcomes for young people.



Knowledge, skill and self-care

Youth workers keep up to date with changes to law and the information, knowledge and practices needed to meet their obligations to young people.¹⁶ They commit to ongoing learning and undertake regular training such as cultural safety training to ensure the best possible outcomes for First Nations young people. They engage in anti-racism, disability inclusion and LGBTIQ+ training, and all other training that supports young people facing marginalisation.

Ethical youth work practice is consistent with protecting the health of youth workers. Youth workers prioritise self-care to promote career longevity and continuing high-quality services to young people. Youth workers acknowledge that wellbeing and care should be expanded beyond the responsibility of individual workers. This means advocating for care from their employers and encouraging an open and supportive work environment.¹⁷

Commentary

It is essential to maintain a level of competence through an ongoing commitment to being informed and skilled in best practice youth work. This includes youth workers recognising when new skills and knowledge are needed and seeking relevant education and training. This includes getting feedback from service users and colleagues on the quality of their work. Youth workers create an environment where young people feel comfortable sharing feedback on the professional relationship. This involves encouraging open discussion and adequately responding to feedback. Engaging in regular, peer-based, reflective practice is a helpful tool that supports ethical practice and professional development.¹⁸ Youth workers only undertake work or take on responsibilities for which they have the necessary skills, knowledge, training or support.

A strengths-based approach

Youth workers take a strengths-based approach that values young people's knowledge and life experiences. Youth workers:

- focus on young people's existing strengths
- highlight strengths that young people may not yet be aware of
- support opportunities to develop and build on these strengths to reinforce self-efficacy and agency and to support wellbeing.

Youth workers work collaboratively with young people, acknowledging young people have expert knowledge of their own lived and living experience and context.



Commentary

Working from a strengths-based perspective encourages youth workers to understand that young people's lived and living experiences inform how they have navigated the world. This means youth workers will not pass judgement, label or approach young people from a deficit perspective. They will instead enable young people to build on their strengths. Youth workers value and support young people who choose to share their lived and living experiences in peer work roles. They offer opportunities for young people to share their lived and living experiences to inform youth programs, services and policymaking.

Relevant legislation

The following legislation informs the Code and ethical youth work practice. Youth workers should stay updated about changing or new legislation when working with young people. To access up-to-date legal information, refer to [Victoria Legal Aid's website](#).

Victorian

- [Children Youth and Families Act 2005](#)
- [Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005](#)
- [Child Employment Act 2003](#)
- [Worker Screening Act 2020](#)
- [The 11 Child Safe Standards](#)
- [Mandatory reporting obligations](#)
- [Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006](#)
- [Equal Opportunity Act 2010](#)
- [Crimes Act 1958, ss 327 and 328](#)—for more information, refer to the Department of Justice and Community Safety's website: [Failure to protect](#) and [Failure to disclose](#)
- [Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014](#)
- [Health Records Act 2001](#)

National

- [Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031](#)
- [National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#)
- [Commonwealth Child Safe Framework](#)
- [Privacy Act 1988](#)

Definitions

Non-formal and informal education and learning refers to organised educational activities outside of formal education, such as youth leadership programs. It also includes lifelong learning that can happen in any setting including formal environments. It can be conversational or intentionally supported by a youth worker.

Social pedagogy is a core part of youth work practice that supports young people to examine and reflect on their various contexts and experiences from both structural and individual perspectives, to develop their understanding and awareness of themselves and the world. This is a social justice approach informed by the work of Paulo Freire.

Disenfranchisement is when a group is deprived of the rights and privileges that other citizens hold—in particular the right to vote.

Ecologically centred perspectives recognise and value the intrinsic worth of all lifeforms and non-living systems on Earth. An eco-centered perspective does not center humans as the dominant species and instead considers humans as a part of a larger interrelated system.

Cultural safety is described by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care as a safe, nurturing and positive environment where First Nations young people are comfortable being themselves and in expressing their cultural, spiritual and belief systems. They are supported by a carer who respects their Aboriginality and encourages their sense of self and identity.²⁰ Cultural safety is more than the absence of racism and is beyond 'cultural awareness or sensitivity'. It instead builds environments and relationships where First Nations young people feel empowered and safe to be themselves.²¹



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