



Guidance for Youth Workers

# Facilitating and Engaging Young People



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## 1 Introduction

Working with young people is a dynamic and rewarding process, especially when supporting those who may face challenges in expressing themselves, navigating social environments, or managing emotions. Youth workers play a vital role in creating safe, inclusive, and empowering spaces where young people feel heard, valued, and supported. This guidance document is intended to help facilitators, trainers, and youth workers develop practical strategies, refine their approaches, and strengthen their capacity to engage meaningfully with young people.

The principles outlined here are grounded in evidence-based practice, including trauma-informed care, strengths-based approaches, and youth-centered facilitation. By integrating these principles, youth workers can foster trust, encourage self-expression, and promote positive development while maintaining a professional, ethical, and empathetic framework.

## 2 Listening and Speaking with Young People

Active listening is the cornerstone of effective youth engagement. Youth workers must focus not only on the words spoken by young people but also on non-verbal communication such as body language, gestures, and pauses. These signals often provide critical insights into a young person's feelings, thoughts, and needs.

Treating young people with respect involves approaching them as partners in the learning and facilitation process. This means sitting alongside them during activities, asking open-ended questions, and taking the time to understand their perspectives, roles in families or communities, and personal experiences. Facilitators should also reflect on their own attitudes and biases, recognizing how personal experiences and cultural frameworks influence their interpretation of young people's behaviour.

Monitoring body language and emotional cues is crucial. Signs of discomfort, disengagement, or distress may indicate a need for additional support or adaptation of the activity. Pausing to check in individually or in small groups ensures that participants feel safe and supported throughout the session.

## 3 Emphasizing Self-Expression

Creating opportunities for authentic self-expression is fundamental to youth development. A positive, energetic, and empathetic approach encourages young people to engage fully in activities and share their experiences without fear of judgment.

Youth workers serve as role models by demonstrating respectful behaviour, healthy communication, and integrity. The focus is on guiding rather than directing participants, helping them explore ideas while fostering

autonomy and critical thinking. Building trusting relationships is central to this process; fun and engaging energizers, open dialogue, and consistent encouragement help establish a welcoming environment.

Patience and flexibility are essential qualities, as activities may not always unfold as planned. Facilitators should allow for organic discussion, creativity, and spontaneity, ensuring that young people feel ownership of the process. Encouraging self-reflection promotes personal growth, emotional literacy, and self-esteem, reinforcing the understanding that there is no single truth but multiple perspectives to be acknowledged.

## 4 Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Inclusivity is a core principle in youth engagement. Facilitators must ensure that all participants feel welcome, regardless of background, culture, gender, ability, or life experience. Awareness of power dynamics is critical, as age, social position, or professional authority can affect participation and responses.

It is important to clearly communicate the non-judgmental nature of the space and establish ground rules that protect participants' dignity and emotional safety. Attention to accessibility—both physical and emotional—is essential, ensuring that young people with disabilities, mental health challenges, or other needs can participate fully.

Caution should be exercised when discussing sensitive topics such as mental health, trauma, relationships, or challenging behaviours. Facilitators must set boundaries, prepare participants for potentially emotional discussions, and provide access to support if needed. Being attentive to non-verbal cues allows youth workers to intervene appropriately and prevent escalation.

## 5 Monitoring Progress and Providing Support

Effective facilitation requires ongoing monitoring of participant engagement and well-being. Regular check-ins, informal conversations, and observation allow youth workers to gauge comfort levels and address emerging concerns promptly.

Open communication channels reinforce a supportive environment. Participants should feel confident that facilitators are available to listen, provide guidance, and help navigate challenges. Feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes, brief reflection sessions, or group discussions, create opportunities for continuous improvement of activities and ensure that young people's voices shape the facilitation process.

Celebrating achievements, both small and significant, reinforces motivation and fosters a sense of accomplishment. Acknowledging courage, creativity, and active participation demonstrates respect for young people's contributions and highlights the potential for positive growth and change.

## 6 Working with Sensitive Subjects

When exploring sensitive topics, youth workers must adopt a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approach. Recognizing that young people may have experienced adversity, loss, or marginalization is key to fostering trust and emotional safety.

Facilitators should create spaces where participants feel comfortable expressing emotions without fear of judgment. Techniques include one-on-one support, small group discussions, grounding exercises, and clear communication of available mental health or counselling resources. Responding with empathy, validation, and patience ensures that difficult conversations lead to understanding, healing, and constructive problem-solving rather than distress or withdrawal.

Body language, tone of voice, and environmental cues must be carefully managed. Facilitators should pause activities if participants display distress and provide immediate, supportive engagement. Non-verbal support, such as sitting alongside or using calming strategies, reinforces safety and trust.

## 7 Conclusion and Professional Practice

Youth work is fundamentally relational. The effectiveness of facilitators depends on the quality of relationships built with young people. By listening actively, fostering self-expression, ensuring inclusivity, and maintaining emotional safety, youth workers empower participants to grow, explore, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Facilitators must combine empathy with professionalism, balancing support with appropriate boundaries. Continuous reflection, training, and peer supervision are essential to prevent burnout and sustain ethical, effective practice. By integrating trauma-informed care, strengths-based perspectives, and youth-centered approaches, facilitators can respond to challenging behaviours constructively, helping young people develop resilience, self-confidence, and social competence.

## 8 Connecting Guidance to Curriculum Sessions

This guidance directly informs the curriculum's practical sessions, offering facilitators concrete principles and strategies for working with youth exhibiting challenging behaviours. For example, in modules on conflict resolution, inclusive participation, or emotional regulation, facilitators will apply these approaches to manage group dynamics and support individual growth.

The guidance ensures that each session is anchored in empathy, safety, and empowerment. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt techniques such as reflection exercises, role-playing, storytelling, and body-mind integra-

tion to the specific needs of participants. This alignment between knowledge and practice fosters professional growth and contributes to more resilient, inclusive youth work environments across North Macedonia, the EU, and beyond.

## 9 Quick Reference Guide: Facilitating Youth with Challenging Behaviours

### 1. Core Principles

- Active Listening: Pay attention to words, tone, and body language.
- Respect & Empathy: Treat young people as partners in the learning process.
- Inclusivity: Ensure all youth feel welcome regardless of background, ability, or experience.
- Safety & Boundaries: Establish a safe, predictable, and respectful environment.
- Strengths-Based Approach: Focus on abilities, passions, and resilience rather than deficits.
- Trauma-Informed Care: Recognize that behaviour often reflects past trauma or unmet needs.

### 2. Tips for Engaging Young People

Area	Do's	Don'ts
Listening	Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues; validate feelings	Interrupt, dismiss, or judge stories
Communication	Use open-ended questions; encourage self-expression	Give directives; impose your opinions
Relationships	Build trust; be consistent and reliable	Be inconsistent, reactive, or judgmental
Activities	Be flexible; use energizers and interactive methods	Force participation; rigidly follow the plan
Inclusivity	Ensure participation for all; adapt for disabilities	Ignore power dynamics or marginalization
Sensitive Topics	Prepare participants; provide support	Minimize trauma or avoid emotional safety concerns

### 3. Strategies for Managing Challenging Behaviour

1. Observe & Assess: Identify triggers, escalation signs, and coping mechanisms.
2. Stay Calm: Use a composed tone; avoid reactive responses.

3. Positive Reinforcement: Reward desired behaviours; model respect and patience.
4. Alternative Expression: Encourage journaling, art, music, or movement.
5. Conflict Mediation: Facilitate restorative conversations instead of punitive measures.
6. Debrief & Reflect: Encourage youth to reflect on behaviour and its impact.

#### 4. Creating Safe Spaces

- Establish ground rules collaboratively with participants.
- Ensure emotional safety: check-in frequently, offer support when needed.
- Manage physical space: calm, organized, predictable, and accessible.
- Be aware of power dynamics: consider age, position, culture, and ability.

#### 5. Working with Sensitive Topics

- Provide content warnings before discussions.
- Check for non-verbal cues indicating distress.
- Offer immediate support: sit with upset participants, listen compassionately.
- Make referrals to professional help when necessary.

#### 6. Monitoring & Feedback

- Use short reflection exercises, check-ins, and informal conversations.
- Encourage youth to provide feedback on activities and facilitation.
- Track progress and engagement, adjusting methods when necessary.
- Celebrate achievements: acknowledge courage, participation, and growth.

#### 7. Facilitator Self-Care

- Practice reflective supervision and peer learning.
- Recognize signs of emotional fatigue; schedule regular breaks.
- Maintain cultural humility and awareness of personal biases.
- Continue professional development on trauma-informed and strengths-based practices.

## 8. Quick Checklist for Each Session

- Prepare safe, inclusive environment
- Review participant needs & potential triggers
- Plan interactive, flexible activities
- Establish ground rules & confidentiality
- Monitor engagement and emotional responses
- Celebrate participation and provide feedback
- Reflect on session and make adjustments

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