Developed by:

The Change Collective,
Calgary, Alberta

Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports: A Practice Framework

Version 2.0
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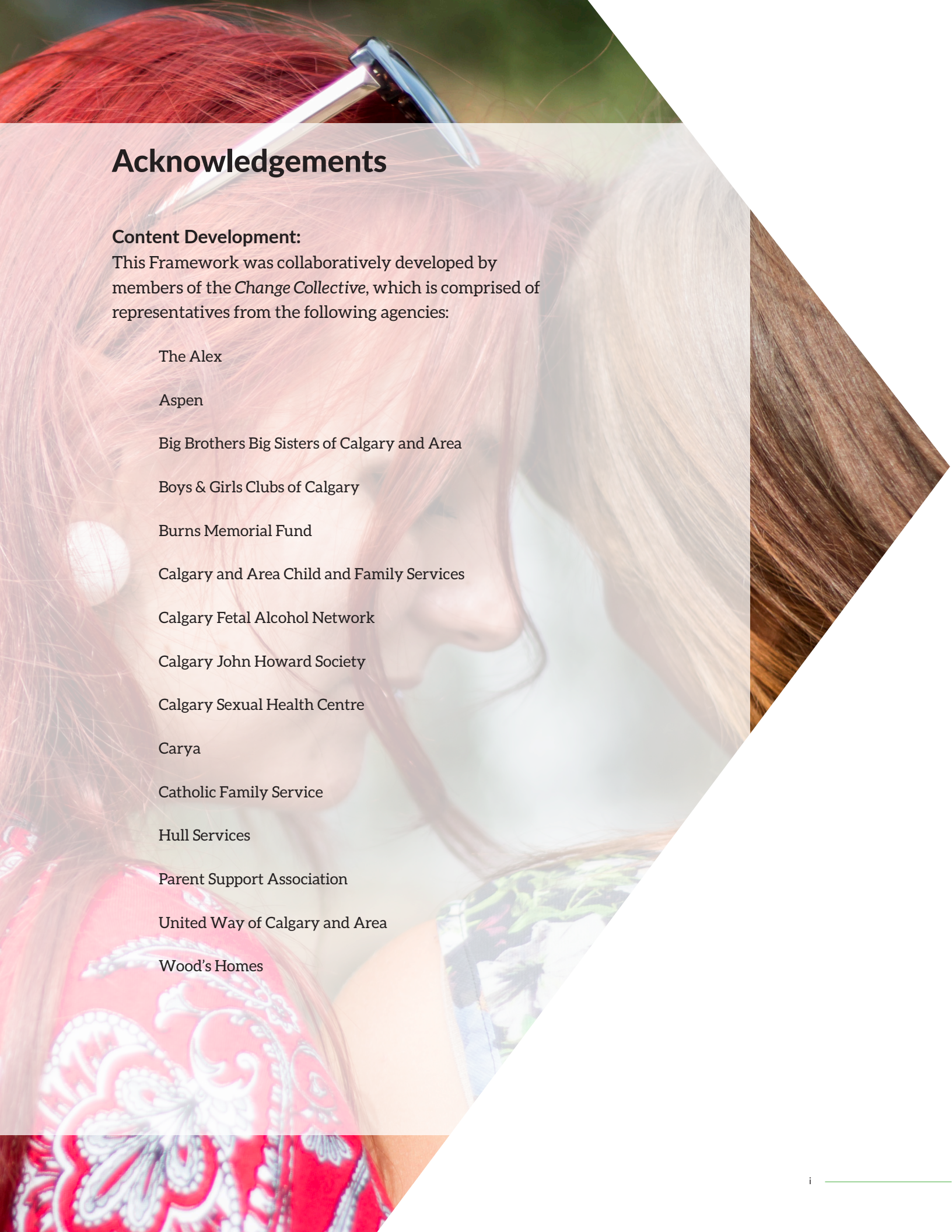

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The Alex

Aspen

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Calgary Fetal Alcohol Network

Calgary John Howard Society

Calgary Sexual Health Centre

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Preface to the 2018 Edition

Early in 2017, we released our first version of *Enhancing Natural Supports for Vulnerable Youth: A Practice Framework*. The response over the past year has been extraordinary. As of January 2018,

- Over 400 practitioners have been trained in the approach;
- Funders have begun to incorporate natural supports into their Requests for Proposals;
- Organizations have adapted their hiring, training and supervisory practices, and revised their strategic plans to align with the approach;
- Change Collective members have presented the approach at conferences throughout Alberta;
- Policy Fellows in Calgary have drawn on the Framework to develop a "Connections First" focus for their research;
- Groups from across Canada have expressed interest in the Framework.

Thank you to all of you who have embraced the Framework and offered your insights to guide the development of the 2018 Edition!

What's new in the 2018 Edition?

Based on insights and feedback from training sessions and Community of Practice meetings throughout 2017, the Framework was revised to include:

- Additional insights and practice examples
- A section entitled *Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports* (p. 63)
- An *Organizational Audit* (p. 61)
- A section entitled *Assessing Social Support Needs* (p. 61)

We hope that practitioners will continue to use the Natural Supports Framework to enhance their work and ensure that youth are supported by a robust network of friends, family and community.*

* Note: The framework was developed by and for youth practitioners, and we focus on youth throughout this document. However, a Natural Supports approach applies to people at all stages of life – so we encourage you to apply this framework to your work with families, younger children, seniors and other adults.

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PART ONE:
BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

1.0 Introduction

The importance of family, community, and peer relationships is obvious to most of us. We know we'd be lost without the support of people whose lives are intertwined with ours. As complicated as they sometimes are, these relationships have a huge impact on our sense of identity and belonging, and provide a rich array of resources and supports on which to draw.

While the idea of natural supports is intuitive, the practice is not: Research suggests that practitioners understand the importance of natural supports, but often struggle to effectively engage them. (This can be a problem even in programs that have an explicit focus on natural supports.*) So, while a growing body of research clearly demonstrates the linkages between positive natural supports and healthy youth development,[1] the practice of helping youth to identify, strengthen and extend their social networks lags far behind.

The Change Collective was initiated to address this gap and develop our collective capacity to enhance the natural support networks of vulnerable youth (particularly older youth who are transitioning to adulthood). Comprised of representatives from 13 youth- and family-serving agencies in Calgary, the Change Collective has been meeting regularly since 2015 to identify and test a set of principles and practices to guide this work. This framework is based on our ongoing inquiry and discussions. It also draws on the academic and practice literature in this field, as well as on the experiences of a group of five agencies that were involved in an earlier phase of this work.

While natural supports are as old as humans themselves, our understanding of how to nurture, repair and strengthen those supports is still in its infancy. This framework represents our best thinking to this point – but we acknowledge that we still have a lot to learn. It is our hope that this framework will help to guide our collective work as we continue to explore and test our capacity to enhance natural supports for vulnerable youth.

* For example, an evaluation of "systems of care" (SOC) networks in the US found that informal supports were rarely being engaged, despite the fact that the SOCs are based on a wraparound model which emphasizes the involvement of natural supports (Cook & Kilmer, 2010).

1.1 How to Use This Framework

A natural supports approach cannot be captured in a series of steps or procedures that will work in every situation. It's a context-sensitive approach that requires practitioners to adapt their methods to the strengths, needs and circumstances of each youth.[2] For this reason, you won't find step-by-step instructions in this framework. Instead, you'll find a set of higher level principles to guide practice.

Unlike procedures, principles require considerable reflection to apply in practice. To support this type of integration, we have structured this document as a workbook, with reflection questions and case studies to help you think about the implications of the framework for your practice. Please don't rush through the reflection exercises! The Change Collective found that we needed to do a lot individual and group reflection to be able to change our practice in meaningful ways.

In addition to working through the questions and case studies on your own, you might want to:

- Work through the materials with a group of colleagues.
- Arrange a Natural Supports Training for your staff.
- Use the principles to frame discussions at your team meetings, or integrate them into your supervision meetings.
- Find someone who can mentor and coach you in this approach, or find a practice partner so you can hold yourselves mutually accountable.

Finally, it is important to remember that a practice framework is only the first step in enhancing our capacity to work in this way. The literature suggests that, in addition to ongoing self-reflection, organizational and system-level support is critical to sustained practice change.[3] This means that the principles and practices outlined in this framework must be integrated into all aspects of our work – including hiring, training, supervision, evaluation, organizational policies and protocols, and funding practices.* While this kind of change management process takes time, we've already seen some promising developments in the short time that we've been working on this – so we know it's possible.† Guided by the principles outlined in this framework, we will continue to advocate for the kinds of organizational and systemic changes that are necessary to enable a natural supports approach. We hope you will join us.

* *The Enhancing Natural Supports Organizational Audit* (p. 61) was designed to support this process.

† For example: agencies that have been involved in this work since 2011 have: 1) Made changes to their supervision practices so that they include reflective practice and collective decision-making, 2) Changed job descriptions, interviewing protocols and training processes to create staff teams that are able to apply the principles, 3) Redesigned or developed new programs that integrated a natural supports approach, and 4) Developed outcomes related to natural supports.

2.0 What Are Natural Supports?

Natural supports are the relationships and personal associations that we develop in the course of daily living. They are 'natural' in the sense that they are informally and locally developed, and are based on reciprocity or give and take.[4] (In contrast, professional supports are formal or structured supports that explicitly involve the delivery of a service.*)

Natural supports "enhance the quality and security of life for people,"[5] and may include family, friends, romantic partners, neighbours, coaches, co-workers, team-mates, fellow students, and other relationships or associations that comprise our social network. These types of supports give us a sense of belonging, identity, security, and self-esteem. In addition to helping meet emotional needs, they can also help to meet physical and instrumental needs.

* Of course, professional supports can sometimes become natural supports: "Professionals and paraprofessionals who interact with the family primarily offer paid support; however, they can also be connected to family members through caring relationships that exceed the boundaries and expectations of their formal roles. When they act in this way, professionals and paraprofessionals too can become sources of natural support" (Bruns et al, 2004, pp. 6-7).

The term 'natural supports' was first introduced by Nisbet and Hagner in 1988 to indicate the importance of actively drawing on family and community relationships to help youth with developmental disabilities transition to adulthood. Since then, the strategy has been integrated into practice models designed to support a wide range of vulnerable youth, including: incarcerated youth,[6] homeless youth,[7] youth in care,[8] youth with mental health issues,[9] and youth with severe behavioural issues and emotional disturbances.[10]

The literature distinguishes between two kinds of natural supports: bridging and bonding relationships. Bonding supports are the strong ties we have with people who share a similar identity, history and/or background. These relationships pull on us in a very compelling way, and give us a sense of belonging and security. (This may help to explain why youth in care sometimes run away to be with their biological family or return to their family after aging out of the system.[11])

Bridging ties are weaker – but they're critical because they bring some diversity to our networks. Bridging ties such as mentors, teachers, and coaches help people connect to information and resources beyond what's available within their immediate group. For example, a coach who helps with the university application process might be an important bridging support, particularly if no one else in the youth's social network has ever attended post-secondary.

> *"Natural mentoring has emerged as a promising approach for youth in foster care and has been shown to promote positive outcomes. Because youth self-select supportive, caring adults from within their existing social networks, the enduring quality bond associated with an effective mentoring relationship may already be established. For youth in foster care, this pre-existing nonparental adult relationship may be particularly important, as the organically formed bond may be stronger and more likely to endure over time."*
>
> *(Thompson, Greenson & Brunsink, 2016)*

Sometimes these bridging supports are facilitated by professionals rather than developing naturally (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters might connect a young person with a volunteer mentor), but natural mentors can also play a bridging role. (See sidebar.)

Table 1: Bonding and Bridging Ties	
Bonding Ties	**Bridging Ties**
Nature: Homogenous	**Nature:** Heterogeneous
Function: Identity, belonging, security, social norms, attachment, stability, self-esteem	**Function:** New ideas or ways of doing things, access to information and resources beyond your immediate group
Examples: Parents, siblings, extended family, friends	**Examples:** Coaches, teachers, mentors*

*In real life, the division is messier, of course. A relationship with a caring coach might develop into a bonding tie for example.

3.0 Why Are Natural Supports Important?

Humans are social animals. We evolved to belong to a group: our early hunter-gatherer ancestors lived in a physically dangerous world, and group membership was an important survival strategy. In fact, being ostracized from the group usually meant certain death – which is why, all these years later, peer or family rejection continues to create so much psychological distress. We're hard-wired for group membership: Family, friends and community relationships are central to who we are as human beings, and fundamental to our emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Since these types of supports are a natural function of human activity, you may wonder why we need to develop a strategy around them. Unfortunately, for many vulnerable youth, these

support systems have been damaged or disrupted, creating a kind of 'psychological homelessness' that cannot be addressed through professional services alone.[12] A natural supports strategy is needed to help rebuild what might have been disrupted, and ensure a healthy balance between natural and professional supports.

> *"In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage – to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness."*
>
> *(Alex Haley)*

In addition to this, there are at least four reasons for implementing a natural supports approach with vulnerable youth:

1. Natural supports play a critical role in promoting youth resiliency, social integration, and positive development.
2. Professional supports, while important, aren't sustainable.
3. Extended periods of 'Social Quarantine' create emotional and developmental harm.
4. Loneliness is lethal.

Each of these is discussed briefly below.

3.1 Natural supports play a critical role in promoting youth resiliency, social integration, and positive development

Research clearly demonstrates that youth with strong community ties, family support, and positive role models are more likely to successfully navigate the transition from youth to adulthood than youth with limited or negative social connections.[13] Supportive family and social connections are associated with increased well-being, greater social emotional health,[14] lower levels of stress,[15] pro-social behaviors, and increased resilience.[16]

Limited positive connections with natural supports may be a key factor contributing to poorer outcomes for vulnerable youth.[17] By strengthening natural connections and supporting relational interdependence, practitioners can help youth to develop the types of social environments that support healthy development. Positive natural supports also have the potential to:

- Contribute to a youth's recovery and growth process;[18]
- Serve as "powerful motivators and models for positive change";[19]
- Help young people to reappraise and restructure how they think about themselves and others;[20]
- Reduce psychological distress;[21]
- Help vulnerable youth to successfully transition to adulthood.[22]

> *"Feeling connected to an adult has been found to have positive effects not only on general well-being and socio-emotional health, but also can buffer some of the negative outcomes this population is reported to face."*
>
> *(Samuels, 2008)*

3.2 Professional supports, while important, aren't sustainable

Professional supports are important – particularly in meeting vulnerable youths' needs for information/advice, skill building, technical support, and advocacy.[23] However, professional supports are not life-time supports: Programs end, professionals change jobs and youth age out of services. If the only supportive adults in a young person's life are professionals, they're likely to be at increased risk when they age out of programs and services (which means we've helped to make them even more vulnerable):

> "While the support and assistance of professionals (e.g., therapists, case managers, and social workers) are clearly needed, active engagement of natural supports, individuals, and groups who are part of families' ongoing social environments, is also critically important. When families rely exclusively on paid professionals, a significant gap in support can occur [after] professionals are no longer involved with the family. Furthermore, natural supports can often provide support that professionals cannot (e.g., tangible assistance, or the supportive confrontation that comes from long-standing association with and knowledge of the family), and that is sustainable after the professionals leave."[24]

Worker turnover can also have a devastating impact on youth when they do not have a broader range of supports on which to draw. This is particularly true for youth in care: research suggests that worker turnover can contribute to "the chronic experience of relational impermanence and ambiguous loss,"[25] and is associated with negative outcomes such as lack of stability and loss of trusting relationships for children and youth in care.[26]

"We measure success in numbers of people we see and how much we support them, when really we want the opposite. We want people to be resilient, independent and connected to people who love them – not to us."

- Youth-Serving Practitioner

An over-reliance on professional supports may also diminish a young person's capacity to develop the kind of reciprocity that is required for relationships with people who are not being compensated for their time. If young people do not have sufficient opportunities to practice the skills involved in 'real world' relationships, they may find it increasingly difficult to develop the social emotional competencies necessary to develop and maintain relationships with family, friends and community members.

While professional supports are needed, they must be provided in a way that does not diminish community capacity or displace other types of support. As John McKnight points out in *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits*, over the past century North America has experienced a monumental shift towards the professionalization of care, where functions that were once performed by community are now effectively 'outsourced.' An emphasis on natural supports helps to restore the balance between professional and non-professional supports.

3.3 Extended periods of 'Social Quarantine' create emotional and developmental harm

Kevin Campbell, creator of *Family Finding*, uses the term "social quarantine" to describe the process of removing children and youth from their families and communities when they have experienced abuse and/or neglect. He points out that while separation may be necessary in these types of situations, extended periods of social quarantine can result in harmful emotional and developmental outcomes.[27] He cautions us to remember that 'quarantine' is intended as a temporary measure. Natural supports are critical to healthy development, and we should be actively helping young people to restore existing family connections or build new ones.

Other authors have documented the impact of 'psychological homelessness'*and social network disruption[28] on children and youth, noting that repeated or extended disruption can result in:

- Psychological distress[29]
- Problem behaviors[30]
- Social adjustment challenges[31]
- Sparse social networks and fractured relationships[32]
- Lack of emotional support[33]
- Loneliness[34]
- Challenges related to identity formation[35]

> *"Without a determined commitment by agencies and communities to reorganize and reconsider practice traditions that isolate youth from relationships of affection, [...] children and youth in care will face impacts on their health and development that may contribute to a lifetime of challenges."*
>
> *(Campbell & Borgenson, 2014)*

While the research in this area is limited, one study suggests that the negative impacts associated with social network disruption can be reduced when young people are supported to rebuild strong networks among family, adult mentors, and peers.[36]

> *"No caseworker … wants youth and young adults to be discharged to the community without the support and affection of caring, safe adults. But in our current practice model this continues to be what happens for far too many youth and young adults."*
>
> *(Waiting Child Fund)*

3.4 Loneliness is lethal

A growing body of research suggests that loneliness is as big a risk factor for premature death as smoking or alcohol consumption.[37] Social isolation is also associated with several physical, cognitive, and psychological issues, including:

- Increased risk to cardiovascular health in young adulthood
- Reduced executive function, optimism and self-esteem
- Increased depression, anger, and anxiety[38]

This is consistent with findings from the longest longitudinal study of human development ever conducted – the *Harvard Study of Adult Development* which has lasted over 75 years. The study effectively shows that "loneliness is toxic": "People who are more isolated than they want to be from others find that they are less happy, their health declines earlier in midlife, their brain functioning declines sooner and they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely."[39] These findings convey the urgency of a natural supports approach. To be healthy and happy, young people need family and social connections.

Reflection Questions

If loneliness is detrimental to physical, psychological and mental health, it should be a consideration in safety planning. Are you safety planning for loneliness? If so, how? If not, how might you begin to do that?

*This term is used by Samuels to describe a chronic feeling of psychological displacement (i.e., feeling you don't belong, feeling you don't have a home) that some youth in care experience as a result of multiple placements and social network disruptions. In: Samuels, G. M. (2008). *A reason, a season, or a lifetime: Relational permanence among young adults with foster care backgrounds*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Available at: http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/415.pdf

4.0 What Does It Mean to Take a Natural Supports Approach?

One of the most challenging things about a natural supports approach is that most people think they're already doing it. That's not surprising. For one thing, the idea of natural supports is an old one – for millennia, humans have understood the importance of family, community and peer relationships. For another, the approach is strongly aligned with a number of other approaches. For example, while different, this approach certainly aligns with:

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the relationship between individuals' development and their social context.
- Positive Youth Development, which maintains that development is promoted through an "interplay between individual capacities and supportive relationships, settings and institutions."[40]
- Signs of Safety, a "strength-based and safety-focused approach to child protection work" that seeks to build partnerships with families suspected of child abuse.[41]
- High Fidelity Wrap Around, a process that includes natural supports in a team of people that is convened to help youth meet their goals.
- The Family Finding model, which offers "methods and strategies to locate and engage relatives of children currently living in out-of-home care" so that "every child may benefit from the lifelong connections that only a family provides."[42]

"The biggest change among our staff has been a recognition that the goal is not to become the youth's person but rather to offer temporary support while working to build the youth's skills so that they can build their own network of support – we are now focused on finding out who the youth's people are and what their people need. This is a significant shift in thinking about our role as professionals."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

A natural supports approach draws on many elements of these models and is compatible with all of them. However, a natural supports approach centres on creating a healthier balance between professional and natural supports, and focuses on the types of basic emotional needs that can only be met through family and community supports. This requires a significant philosophical shift, as the table below illustrates.

Table 2: What's Different About a Natural Supports Approach?

Status quo approach	Natural supports approach
Our first instinct is to meet every need with a professional support.	We actively seek out and draw on resources and assets within the youth's support network.
We attend to basic physical needs first (food, shelter, clothing), and consider relational/social emotional needs later.	We treat the need for connection with the same urgency as physical needs (and we DON'T assume that we can meet that need ourselves).
We protect youth by limiting their exposure to those who could hurt them.	We recognize the limits of our power, and know that youth will often maintain a connection with people that we do not consider positive or healthy. Instead of forbidding contact, we build youth capacity to set boundaries and keep themselves safe.
We focus solely on the youth – their needs, their perspective, their goals.	We work with youth in the context of their natural supports, seeking to strengthen the capacity of those within the network to support the needs and goals of the youth.

Sometimes it's difficult to understand the implications of this approach until you've worked through a few scenarios. We used case studies extensively to support the development of this framework, and found that they really helped to ground the approach in something 'real.' They also helped to surface some of the assumptions, values and practices that are implicit in much of our work, and how these might bump up against a natural supports approach. You'll find a series of case studies in the *Implementation* section of this framework (starting on p. 51). Feel free to jump ahead and look at them now if you feel it would be helpful to work through some practice examples.

Reflection Questions

- How is this approach aligned with your current practice?
- How is it different?
- What challenges might this type of approach present to your current practice?

4.1 Applying This Approach in a Variety of Contexts

The principles and practices that are outlined in this framework are easier to apply in contexts where practitioners work with individual youth over a significant period of time. Case management relationships, for example, provide opportunities for capacity building and network development – both of which require an ongoing investment of time and effort. There may be fewer opportunities to engage in this kind of work in drop-in or group settings, where youth come and go or don't get individualized attention. So what does a natural supports approach look like in those contexts? Here are some of the ways that this approach can be applied in a variety of settings:

- **Staff at shelters and drop-in programs can…**
  - Ask questions about family and supports.
  - Invite family and supports in to problem-solve.
  - Create space for youth to talk about their hopes and needs related to these relationships.
  - Make the space welcoming and inclusive of natural supports.

- **Staff delivering group or educational programs can…**
    - Create opportunities for youth to explore identity and belonging.
    - Ask questions or do activities that will get them thinking about their circles of support and how to strengthen them.
    - Integrate social emotional learning into the program.
    - Create opportunities to connect family and other natural supports to the program through targeted engagements or communications.
- **Mentoring program staff can…**
    - Encourage mentors to help youth bridge to existing natural supports.
    - Create effective transition supports so that mentoring relationships can evolve into long lasting relationships that endure beyond the length of the program.
- **Residential program staff can…**
    - Ask youth about natural supports, and create space for them to talk about what they want and need from these relationships.
    - Invite natural supports to be part of events with the youth.
- **Individual and family counsellors can…**
    - Provide opportunities for youth to explore identity and belonging, and build youth skills to connect to natural supports in positive and meaningful ways.
    - Help to strengthen, restore and maintain relationships with natural supports.

"We had to examine what this approach meant in the context of our organization, where we were only in contact with youth for a very short amount of time or in group education contexts where the program does not allow individual relationship building with youth. We've found a number of ways to build the approach into our work. For example, in one of our sexual health programs, we have created activities that help participants to explore identity, belonging and social supports. In our camp for sexual and gender diverse youth, we reach out to parents to connect them to resources, build community, develop their capacity to talk to their child and understand how to be supportive."

-Youth-Serving Practitionerr

5.0 What About Relationships That *Aren't* Supportive?

At this point, you may be thinking: Natural supports are great when they're healthy and positive – but some of the youth I work with come from families who struggle with addictions, violence, and mental health issues. It's not all sunshine and roses... Absolutely: Some of the people who comprise parts of a young person's social network might have a highly destructive impact. That's one of the things that makes this approach so challenging, and why we need to work collectively to understand how to move forward in ways that will help rather than create further harm. At the same time, we would encourage a more nuanced view of a young person's social network. For example, consider the following:

1. Research suggests that 90% of youth who have transitioned out of care are in touch with their biological families,[43] and up to half choose to live with them.[44] Even when they're fraught with conflict, those relationships obviously provide something terribly important – important enough to endure the negative aspects that might accompany them. Instead of dismissing these relationships, we need to figure out how to support them in ways that help youth to safely meet their needs.

2. When we see the family as the problem, we're far less likely to include them as part of the solution. But research suggests that family and friends play a "critical role" in supporting or undermining young people's progress towards their goals. "If family or significant others are brought on board," they are less likely to "undermine the effort [and] more likely to give the young person permission or encouragement…."[45]

> *"Mom might always smoke pot and have bad boyfriends, but that is where the youth runs when she is in crisis. We need to help prepare kids for how to manage these relationships rather than trying to keep them away from these relationships. They are family and we aren't, and we shouldn't try to change that. We spend a lot of time fighting that but we aren't going to change it."*
>
> *- Youth-Serving Practitioner*

3. Extended families are comprised of an average 100 to 300 members,* and "adult functioning in this group is as highly variable as it is in the family you are a part of" – meaning that every family is a mix of positive and negative influences, and all extended families have members who struggle and others who "are safe and able to help."[46] If you haven't encountered any positive influences in a young person's extended family, you may not have looked far enough.†

During a 2015 Family Finding training for Alberta practitioners, Kevin Campbell told a number of stories that challenged practitioner assumptions about kids who have "no one" and families who are incapable of providing support. One story focused on an 18 year old girl who had been taken into care a decade earlier and was about to age out of the system in a few weeks. Her mother struggled with addictions, mental illness and chronic homelessness and was not able to provide the support she would need to manage the transition. With no other non-professional supports in her life, the girl was likely to end up in a shelter. In a last-ditch effort to avoid this, her caseworker asked Campbell to track down a family member who might be willing to provide shelter. Within two hours, Campbell had identified 220 adult relatives. One of these, the mother's sister (a full sibling), was a US Senator, "a sitting member of one of the most powerful and exclusive clubs on the planet." The Senator had no idea that her niece had spent the last 10 years in the custody of the state and was now on the verge of homelessness. She was naturally very angry that she had not been contacted a decade earlier. The story reminds us that the assumptions we make can limit the possibilities for positive connections.

(You'll find Kevin Campbell's webinar and other resources in *Online Tools and Resources* on p. 73.)

*This estimate is for extended families in the US, but presumably Canada's figures would be similar.

† We acknowledge that some workers are not in a position to be able to seek out natural supports (especially those who are working with youth more episodically and/or in group settings) – but we can all take time to check our assumptions about the families of vulnerable youth, and begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities that exist in every young person's life. And even if we aren't able to actively seek out natural supports, we can create space for youth to talk about natural supports that are important to them and to explore ways in which they might re-build these relationships.

PART TWO: PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

6.0 Overview of the Framework

The Natural Support framework is comprised of one goal, three foundational constructs, five principles, and a continuum of opportunities. (See Figure 1, below).

1. **Goal**

Youth are able to rely on, and contribute to, a life-long network of supportive family, community and peer relationships.

2. **Foundational Constructs**

    - Identity and Belonging
    - Trauma-Informed Practice
    - Reflective Practice

3. **Principles**

    - **Connection First** – We treat connection to natural supports with the same urgency as food, shelter and clothing
    - **Seek Out & Scooch Over** – We actively seek out natural supports and create space for them to contribute
    - **Doing With, Not For** – We respect the autonomy of young people and their natural supports
    - **Social emotional Learning** – We support youth to build and maintain meaningful relationships
    - **A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships** – We cultivate a more realistic approach to risk-management and safety

4. **Continuum of Needs & Opportunities**

    - **Engaging** – Help youth to cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports
    - **Finding** – Work with the youth to identify potential supports
    - **Strengthening** – Help youth to strengthen relationships with natural supports
    - **Restoring** – Support healing and restoration
    - **Maintaining** – Help youth maintain connections
    - **Transitioning** – Help youth transition to other relationships

Figure 1: Natural Supports Framework Overview

Natural Supports Practice Framework

Guiding Principles

1. **Connection First:** We treat connection to natural supports with the same urgency as food, shelter and clothing
2. **Seek Out & Scooch Over:** We actively seek out natural supports and create space for them to contribute
3. **Doing With, Not For:** We respect the autonomy of young people and their natural supports
4. **Social Emotional Learning:** We support youth to build and maintain meaningful relationships
5. **Harm Reduction:** We cultivate a more realistic approach to risk-management and safety

Needs & Opportunities

- **Engaging:** Help youth to cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports
- **Finding:** Work with the youth to identify potential supports
- **Strengthening:** Help youth to strengthen relationships with natural supports
- **Restoring:** Support healing and restoration
- **Maintaining:** Help youth maintain connections
- **Transitioning:** Help youth transition to other relationships

Foundations

- **Identity & Belonging**
- **Trauma-Informed Practice**
- **Reflective Practice**

Goal

Youth are able to rely on, and contribute to, a life-long network of supportive family, community and peer relationships.

7.0 Goal of This Approach

The goal of this work is that *Youth are able to rely on, and contribute to, a life-long network of supportive family, community and peer relationships.* This goal challenges assumptions that many of us have about vulnerable youth and their social networks – assumptions such as "this kid has no one except me" or "everyone in her social sphere is toxic." We believe that all youth can and should have access to a network comprised of supportive family, community and peer relationships. The process of helping youth to build and sustain this type of network is certainly challenging, but it's crucial to their long-term development and well-being.

There are a few things to unpack with this goal. The first is the phrase "rely on." Individuals will vary in their ability to provide support – so no one individual can be relied upon in all circumstances. That's why a network is so important: redundancy is a key feature of large, diverse networks – when one person drops the ball, someone else can pick it up. We can't focus on connecting youth to one significant adult; we have to help them build a network.

Another key phrase in this goal is "contribute to." This approach is based on the type of reciprocity that is the foundation of all social relationships. Dependency does not help to cultivate self-esteem or self-efficacy. Youth need and want mutuality in their relationships – particularly as they transition to adulthood.[47]

The final term that warrants some attention is "life-long." This phrase is not intended to imply that all relationships will last forever. Rather, it signals the importance of relationships that are developed within natural settings and circumstances, rather than the types of term-certain relationships that are developed through service provision.

Reflection Questions

- How does this goal align with your values and beliefs?
- In what ways might it conflict with some of your assumptions about clients and/or their natural supports?

8.0 Foundational Constructs

A natural supports approach draws on many of the foundational constructs associated with social work generally and youth work specifically (e.g., social justice, cultural competency, respect for the inherent dignity of individuals, strength-based focus, etc.). In addition to these important constructs, a natural supports approach is built on three key foundational elements:

- Identity and belonging
- Trauma-informed practice
- Reflective practice

Each of these is briefly described below.

8.1 Identity and Belonging

We're unlikely to fully appreciate the importance of a natural supports approach unless we have some sense of the centrality of identity and belonging to youth development. Identity formation* is one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence,[48] and natural supports are integral to this process. Peers offer "models, diversity, and opportunity for exploration of beliefs and values," whereas family provides the basis for the foundational values and beliefs that are developed early in life. [49] Even if youth ultimately reject these aspects of their identity, these values and beliefs comprise a starting point for self-exploration and loom large in their efforts to understand who they are. This may be one of the reasons that families comprise such a strong psychological presence even when they are physically absent from a youth's life.

> *"Establishing a strong sense of identity provides individuals with a sense of continuity and sameness, and plays favourably into psychosocial functioning. However, identity confusion is associated with a disorganized or haphazard sense of self. Identity-confused individuals seem to be out of touch with their inner needs and lack the energy to invest in identity-related exploration and to commit to life-defining choices."*
>
> *(Luyckx et al., 2013)*

* Identity formation involves a complex process of "exploring and committing to a set of personally meaningful values, beliefs, and future aspirations" (Dumas, 2011, p. 917).

Like identity, belonging is one of our strongest motivations as humans,[50] and it impacts our wellbeing in a number of ways. A sense of belonging to groups and networks is associated with greater:

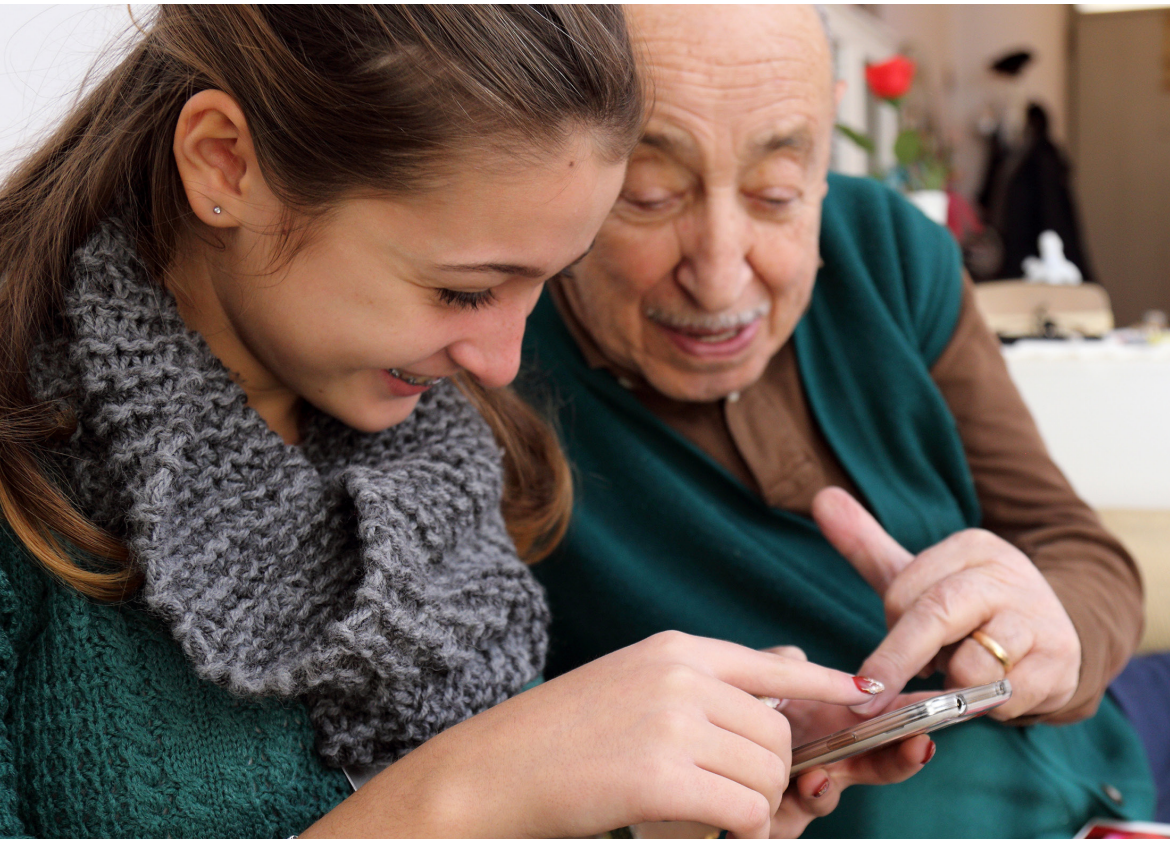
- Life satisfaction
- Cognitive and academic performance
- Self-esteem
- Self-efficacy
- Ease of transition from adolescence to adulthood
- Ability to cope
- Physical health[51]

In contrast, those who lack a sense of belonging are at greater risk for psychological distress, mental illness, poor physical health, and suicide.[52] "Knowing that one belongs and is loved in a stable and supportive relational network [is] fundamental to the human experience"[53] – but many vulnerable youth have experienced conflict, trauma and separation from the families and communities that might give them a sense of belonging. Youth who have been taken into care can especially struggle to build a sense of belonging. "Experiencing the multiple moves typical of children who remain in care can challenge young people in building personal and familial attachments and a sense of belonging. As foster children grow up and move into adulthood, there may be few adults who possess intimate knowledge of them, or who can respond to their individual needs for social support in ways that reflect a depth of personal connection over long periods of time."[54]

Identity and belonging must be understood within the context of the systems of power that shape them. The term 'intersectionality' was developed to indicate that social identities are multiple and overlapping, and must be understood in the context of related systems of discrimination and oppression. The term also reminds us that an individual's component identities contribute to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The youth we work with embody many identities, experiences, values and beliefs – and these overlap and intersect in ways that uniquely shape their experiences and relationships. As practitioners, we need to be aware of intersecting identities and the systems of power that influence identity and belonging. We also need to reflect on our own power and privilege so that we are able to check our assumptions and model anti-oppressive values in our work.

When identity and belonging needs are not adequately addressed, young people can be vulnerable to predatory individuals or groups (e.g., gangs) that perform the functions associated with identity and belonging.[55] Supporting positive development in these areas is therefore central to a natural supports approach.

(For further information on identity and belonging, please refer to the list of *Online Tools and Resources* on p. 73).



8.2 Trauma-Informed Practice

Many of the youth we work with have experienced considerable trauma in their short lifetimes. While trauma-informed practice is critical to youth work generally, it is a particularly important component of a natural supports approach. This approach is relational in nature – and we know that trauma can have a significant impact on relational capacity:

> "The importance of a child's close relationship with a caregiver cannot be overestimated. Through relationships with important attachment figures, children learn to trust others, regulate their emotions, and interact with the world; they develop a sense of the world as safe or unsafe, and come to understand their own value as individuals. When those relationships are unstable or unpredictable, children learn that they cannot rely on others to help them. When primary caregivers exploit and abuse a child, the child learns that he or she is bad and the world is a terrible place.
>
> "The majority of abused or neglected children have difficulty developing a strong healthy attachment to a caregiver. Children who do not have healthy attachments have been shown to be more vulnerable to stress. They have trouble controlling and expressing emotions, and may react violently or inappropriately to situations. Our ability to develop healthy, supportive relationships with friends and significant others depends on our having first developed those kinds of relationships in our families. A child with a complex trauma history may have problems in romantic relationships, in friendships, and with authority figures, such as teachers or police officers."[56]

Increasingly, youth- and family-serving organizations are understanding more about how to create physical and social environments that are trauma-sensitive. Some of the key principles associated with a trauma-informed approach include:

- Establishing a safe physical and emotional environment
- Ensuring cultural competence
- Supporting client control, choice and autonomy
- Sharing power and governance
- Integrating care
- Believing that recovery is possible[57]

Another important principle – one that has direct implications for a natural supports approach – is that healing happens within the context of relationships: "safe, authentic and positive relationships can be corrective and restorative to survivors of trauma."[58] This very hopeful statement provides further evidence for the importance of a natural supports approach.

(For resources related to trauma-informed practice, please refer to the list of *Online Tools and Resources* on p. 73).

8.3 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is the process of critically analyzing everyday practice in ways that help you to surface unhelpful values or assumptions, process thoughts and emotions, identify barriers and enablers, and ultimately improve practice. In essence, it is a "window" through which practitioners can "view and focus self within the context of [their] own lived experience in ways that enable [them] to confront, understand and work towards resolving the contradiction within [their] practice between what is desirable and actual practice."[59]

> *"Adopting reflective practice into our monthly staff meetings has been hugely impactful in implementing the natural support approach. It is so ingrained in us as social workers that we need to have a plan, manage crisis, problem solve, and know what to do, that we become focused on the doing and not on the bigger picture of the consequences of what we do. Reflecting as a team helps us to question what we are doing and why, and to think about what it means over the longer term. Without reflective practice the natural supports principles would just be principles and we would not be changing the way we work."*
>
> *- Youth-Serving Practitioner*

Reflective practice is critical to a natural supports approach for at least four reasons:

1. A natural supports approach is highly individualized and context-specific, and there are no step-by-step instructions for this kind of work. To be effective, practitioners need to be able to inquire, learn, adapt and use their imaginations.

2. A natural supports approach often involves 'working in the grey' – i.e., in areas that are not well-developed or professionally recognized yet; therefore, practitioners need to be able to think things through for themselves and test their own understanding.

3. Our assumptions (e.g., assumptions about families) and our sense of identity (e.g., the need to be a 'rescuer') can present barriers to a natural supports approach; it is therefore critical to be able to reflect on our habits of thinking and caring, and reconstruct them as required.

4. In order to support the identity and belonging needs of youth, we need to understand our own social location,* and this requires honest reflection to ensure that we are identifying blind spots related to our own power and privilege.

(For more information on reflective practice and supervision, please refer to the list of resources on p. 73).

9.0 Principles

The following five principles are key to a natural supports approach:

1. Connection First
2. Seek Out & Scooch Over
3. Doing With, Not For
4. Social Emotional Learning
5. A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships

Learning to apply these principles in our everyday practice will enable us to more effectively support youth to identify, strengthen and maintain a network of caring relationships and social support.

* Social Location can be defined as the "groups people belong to because of their place or position in history and society. All people have a social location that is defined by their gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Each group membership confers a certain set of social roles and rules, power, and privilege (or lack of), which heavily influence our identity and how we see the world." Source: http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/courses/csafety/mod2/glossary.htm

9.1 Connection First

Recognizing the fundamental significance of family, peer and community relationships is foundational to this approach.[60] Identity, belonging, affection and connection are basic human needs, and natural supports are critical to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of youth.[61] Often we prioritize physical or instrumental needs, and only think about meeting these important emotional needs once the youth is stabilized. However, research suggests that youth want to connect to their natural supports even when they are in crisis and/or before basic needs have been met.[62]

Principle: Connection First

What it means: We treat connection to natural supports with the same urgency as food, shelter and clothing.

What it looks like in practice:

- A sense of belonging is a basic human need – so connection with natural supports is given the same priority as shelter and other basic needs. This means that the process of supporting 'real world' (rather than professional) connections starts right away. We don't wait until the youth has been stabilized to start identifying and strengthening relationships within a youth's network.

- This doesn't mean that we're tasked with solving a client's social needs upon intake – it just means that we begin exploring those needs (just as we would with other basic needs) so that we can figure out what's required and what role we will play in supporting youth to meet those needs.

- We are careful to explore youth's current social and emotional connections in ways that aren't triggering. For this reason, we might not use a formal assessment tool (e.g., genogram) until we've explored the topic of natural supports more informally with the client. Questions like "Who are the important people in your life?" or "Who do you call when you've had a bad day?" or "Who is the person you can call for help in the middle of the night?" can be helpful ways of beginning a conversation around natural supports.

- Identifying natural supports is only the first step. We then need to 1) explore the nature and strength of these ties, 2) identify what relationships may need to be strengthened or restored, and 3) identify ways that we can support this process. (Note: See *Continuum of Needs and Opportunities* on p. 45 and *Assessing Social Needs* on p. 61.)

- A healthy sense of identity and belonging is critical to youth development, so we make these explicit goals of our work, actively seeking to strengthen both.
- A single connection to a positive natural support is a great starting point, but it can't end there. We create space in our work to help youth identify and strengthen multiple relationships – so that they develop a life-time network of support.

'Connection First' in Practice

"I do the crisis work, but even as I am doing it the questions I ask are so different. Instead of 'Which shelter would you like to go to? Who are the professionals I need to connect you to? What resources do you need?' I ask 'Who in your family can help you? Who do you wish would support you now? Who would you like to invite to come along? How would that be different than getting support from a professional?' I do the work and connect them to the resources they need but at the same time I orient the youth back to their natural supports."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

'Connection First' in Practice

"One of the simple things I've done to implement the 'Connection First' principle is to ask my clients if they would like to bring a friend or family member to intake."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

Reflection Questions

- Think about a time in your life when you were in crisis or needed some help. Who did you draw on for support? How many of those people were professionals? What would it have felt like if you were only helped by professionals?

- What are your priorities when you first meet with a client? What types of questions do you ask? What types of referrals do you typically make? How could you include a greater focus on natural supports?

9.2 Seek Out & Scooch Over

While most of us understand the importance of natural supports, our practices can sometimes serve to isolate young people from relationships of affection or support[63] and create an overreliance on professional supports. Professionals have an important role to play in the lives of vulnerable youth, but we are limited in what we can do for them. To successfully transition into adulthood, youth require reciprocal, 'real world' relationships – ones that will outlast professional services and supports.[64]

Researchers have noted that 'professional arrogance' can be a barrier to involving natural supports.[65] (Professional arrogance is defined as the belief that your "discipline, profession, or organization has a better grasp of what is needed and how to address families' issues" than others do.[66]) Another barrier is the belief that families are generally the problem – and therefore never part of the solution.[67] To be effective in implementing a natural supports approach, youth practitioners may need to reframe how they are thinking about families.

A Word of Caution: We need to be careful about potentially overwhelming natural supports and/or approaching them in a purely utilitarian way as a vehicle to help lighten our case management and/or program delivery load – so this principle requires some discernment. This is discussed further in *Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports* on p. 63.

Principle: Seek Out & Scooch Over

What it means: We actively seek out natural supports and create space for them to contribute.

What it looks like in practice:

- Rather than always looking for a professional service or support to address a particular need, we actively look for ways for natural supports to fill that role. (e.g., Before we call a shelter, we brainstorm with youth to see if someone within their network might be able to help.)

- We acknowledge that we have something important to contribute as professionals, but we are not 'the expert.' Families are complex systems and our limited exposure to that system gives us only a small part of the story. By relinquishing the expert role, we leave room for families and other natural supports to bring their ideas forward.

- We view family and other natural supports as a potential asset rather than 'the problem,' and take an appreciative approach that positions young people and their families as operating in stressful circumstances rather than being 'dysfunctional'.[68] We then seek to contextualize the challenges that families face by identifying the individual, institutional and structural barriers that need to be addressed in order to better support the young person.[69]

- We use various tools* to actively seek out those people in a young person's life who can offer affection, belonging and support. We are persistent in this endeavor – which means that we don't stop until we have found multiple connections. We create an open invitation for natural supports to contribute to a youth's well-being in any way they can, recognizing that there is a spectrum of engagement versus a single way to contribute. (This is explored further in *Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports* on p. 63.)

- We do what we can to make it easy for families and other natural supports to engage. This might mean meeting with them outside of normal work hours and in varied settings (coffee shops, homes, libraries, etc.).

- We recognize that relationships come and go. Therefore, one natural support is not the answer. We cast the net wide. (Practice experience suggests identifying 40 potential supports to be able to work towards six to eight meaningful relationships.)

- The process of 'seeking out' social connections works best when it is owned by the client (with lots of support from the practitioner). We consider ways of building our clients' capacity to reach out to natural supports when it makes sense to do so. (See *Doing With, Not For* on p. 35).

* Please see "Tools for Identifying Natural Supports" in *Online Tools and Resources* on p. 73.

‘Seek Out & Scooch Over’ In Practice

“We were all scrambling around trying to figure out how we were going to get this kid to the intake for his residential treatment program at 7:00 in the morning. I was trying to get another staff person to come and look after my daughter so that I could leave at 6 am to go get the boy and drive him to the treatment center. Then someone said ‘What about his mom? Maybe his mom could take him?’ We’d never considered it. We talked about the pros and cons and couldn’t find any cons. So I called his mom and asked her. She started to cry. She said she had been waiting for this day for six years. She had hoped so much he would go to treatment. She was so happy to be the one who could take him. It was amazing to us how we never even thought of her as a resource and how happy she was to have the chance to be part of this with him. We were going to put our own families out because we were trying to do everything for this boy. We forgot that there are others who want to help him too. This experience really changed things for the team. It changed the way we problem solve. Whenever we can now, we try to ask families or friends to help. We invite them to things and encourage youth to invite them.”

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

‘Seek Out & Scooch Over’ In Practice

“At our group home, we used to spend program dollars taking our youth out to lunch on their birthdays. Then we decided to ask them to invite a friend or family member – but no one came. (Who wants to have lunch with their friend’s social worker!) Then we decided to just give our youth a gift certificate to treat a friend to lunch and celebrate their birthday in whatever way they want. It’s about creating space for relationships to flourish. Those are the relationships that will really matter in the long run – not their relationship with us.”

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

‘Seek Out & Scooch Over’ In Practice

“Years ago, I worked with a mom with severe mental health issues who was struggling to maintain housing. I was her case manager, and I helped her move, get to appointments, build furniture. When I look back at it now, I remember her talking about having a brother with a truck who was a carpenter. She also mentioned friends from university who she never saw any more. In retrospect, why didn’t I get her to contact her brother to help her move and build furniture? And why didn’t I help her to reconnect with those old friends? Later I changed jobs and the funding shifted, and she was cut off from our services. She immediately entered into homelessness again. I feel like I did her a disservice. If I had connected her to natural supports instead of professional supports, maybe she would have been able to maintain her housing."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

Reflection Questions

- In one of his webinars, Kevin Campbell offers a beautiful visual demonstration of the family finding process that he developed: he represents each youth in one of his Family Finding studies as a branch. At first, there are only a couple of leaves on most of the branches (and some have none). These represent family that the youth knows about and can identify. After a family finding process (which takes an average of 48 minutes per youth), the branches are full of leaves – except for two. He explains that those two branches represent caseworkers who didn't bother looking for family, because they already knew what they'd find based on the youth's file. He goes on to explain that the biggest hurdle is not finding family members who would like to contribute. The biggest barrier is caseworkers who won't try. Sometimes organizational barriers limit our capacity to seek out natural supports – but often, it's our own attitudes and assumptions that get in the way. What assumptions do you have about vulnerable youth and their families? How might these assumptions affect your ability to 'seek out and scooch over'?

- "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few." (Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*). How does being the expert shut down inquiry? How might you cultivate a beginner's mind?

9.3 Doing With, Not For

When we do things for youth, we limit the opportunity for them to learn how to do them for themselves. This can create problems when they age out of our services. If we want young people to be able to set goals, problem-solve, maintain healthy boundaries, and keep themselves safe, we need to give them opportunities to practice these skills with coaching and support. By respecting youths' autonomy, practitioners enable them to build skills in a safe environment and provide space for natural supports to assist them.

Principle: Doing With, Not For

What it means: We respect the autonomy of young people and their natural supports.

What it looks like in practice:

- We work in partnership with youth in a non-directive way, ensuring that the perspectives and priorities of the young person drive the work. This means that we don't set client goals ourselves; goals arise organically over time through effective questioning, coaching and discussion.

- We resist the urge to problem solve or fix things for youth, knowing that this can interfere with their learning process.* Instead, we work through problems with them, supporting them to learn how to problem-solve for themselves. We create opportunities for youth to fail safely and to learn from their mistakes.

- Natural supports are selected on the basis of youth choice, not worker choice. We explore what family means for a young person, and revisit the conversation periodically understanding that the meaning can shift over time.[70] Deciding which natural supports should become involved, when, and in what capacity, is always done with the direction and consent of the young person,† recognizing that this may also change over time.[71]

- In cases where youth-identified supports present a potential risk, we don't forbid contact knowing this is unlikely to be effective anyway. Instead, we work with the youth to identify/understand the risk(s) and develop strategies to help them navigate those relationships. (See *Harm Reduction*, below).

* Consider the 'Snowplow Parent' – so called because they clear the way of any challenges their child might face. How are those children likely to develop? Similarly, 'Snowplow Practitioners' rob youth of the opportunity to build their own capacities. Some challenges are overwhelming, and we may need to take a 'do for' approach in those circumstances, but we should always be mindful of working towards 'doing with.'

† While supporting autonomy is important for youth of all ages, the process of consent is a little more complicated for younger adolescents. For these youth, practitioners will need to work with the guardian and follow consent protocols.

- We begin where youth and natural supports are at emotionally and developmentally. To do this, we need to be able to assess the levels of knowledge, skill or awareness the young person/natural support currently has so that we can figure out how we can tailor our support to their particular context.

- We might need to take a phased approach to 'doing with'. For example, the practitioner might make the first phone call for an appointment, with the youth watching how to do it. The youth could then make the next call with the practitioner in the room ready to jump in as needed. A phased approach will be based on our assessment of the client. (Keep in mind, though, that we often underestimate our clients' capacities.)

- We work on *their* timeline, not ours, understanding that the process is likely to be longer or more disjointed than we would hope. We anticipate that young people may go through a process of "trial and error," trying something short-term and then changing their minds.[72] During this time, we need to resist the urge to jump in and fix things.

'Doing With, Not For' In Practice

"I used to feel guilty if I wasn't doing enough. Now I feel guilty if I do too much. There has been a big shift for me. Instead of reminding myself that I have a long list of things that I need to do for this kid, I now have to remind myself to back off to give them a chance to do it themselves."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

'Doing With, Not For' In Practice

"It's easy to fall into the trap of doing everything for youth. We drive them to their appointments, we fill out their referrals, we take care of everything. If we really want to build capacity, we should help them figure out how to apply for the cheap bus pass and take the bus with them so they can learn the route. Or sit with them while they fill out the referral and show them how to send it in."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

‘Doing With, Not For’ In Practice

“Often when we’re doing safety plans with youth, we essentially create the plan ourselves rather than working with them to find strategies that they could try. We might have some ideas we can share, but if we are on auto-pilot because we make safety plans all the time – if we aren’t really doing it with them – it isn’t likely to be as effective and it doesn’t allow them to really start to learn to plan for their safety without us.”

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

Reflection Questions

- Most people become youth workers because they want to help. What are you learning about what it takes to be helpful? How can ‘doing for’ ultimately be unhelpful?
- Reflect on the nature of your interactions with youth. Where do you see examples of ‘doing with’? Where do you see examples of ‘doing for’? How could you improve in this area?

9.4 Social Emotional Learning

A natural supports approach is dependent on young people being able to develop and maintain reciprocal, supportive relationships with the people in their lives. Social emotional skills that support healthy, long-term relationships include:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Responsible decision-making
- Relationship skills (including communication, cooperation, conflict negotiation, seeking/offering help, and navigating peer pressure)

Many of the youth we work with have encountered adverse childhood experiences (ACES), which can disrupt healthy brain development, and create challenges in creating and maintaining healthy attachments/relationships. However, the impact of ACES can be mitigated through the development of resilience and social emotional skills.

Principle: Social Emotional Learning

What it means: We support youth to build and maintain meaningful relationships.

What it looks like in practice:

- Many vulnerable youth may be starting with a belief that they do not deserve or are not able to have healthy relationships. They may be dealing with trauma and/or grief that takes time to process. As practitioners, we need to know how to support healing and recovery and help youth repair fractured relationships.
- Some youth may have never had healthy relationships modeled for them or may have challenges maintaining relationships because of the trauma they've experienced. We need to be able to model and support skill-building related to self-awareness, managing strong emotions, reciprocity, communication, cooperation, conflict negotiation, boundary setting, identifying risks, and keeping themselves safe. Similarly, natural supports may also struggle with social emotional skills and may need help navigating their relationships with the young people in their lives.

- Youth who have experienced traumatic or unpredictable relationships often develop protective mechanisms (e.g., suspicion, distrust) that can serve as a barrier to forming and maintaining close personal relationships.[73] We need to support youth to develop relational discernment and help them make meaning of relationships they have lost. (This is discussed further in *Helping Youth Understand Relational Instability* on p. 48.)

- Skills development can be supported through a supportive relationship, experiential learning and modelling, as well as through standalone curricula or programs designed to cultivate social emotional learning. The approach that we take depends on the youth we are working with and what would best resonate with them.

'Social Emotional Learning' In Practice

"When a young person hurts my feelings or makes me angry, I try to respond as a real human being versus just putting on my professional hat and trying to brush it off. I let them know that they hurt me or whatever, and then we work it through. Then later, when they're hurt or pissed off with someone, we can talk about how I handled it when they pissed me off – and get them thinking about what they can draw on from that example."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

'Social Emotional Learning' In Practice

"We currently have a young person who has FASD. She's highly sensitive to picking up attitudes in the room because it's a learned survival behavior. So we tried tapping into that skill in a way that will help her to cultivate empathy. Now we start every one of her meetings by asking her to guess what kind of day everyone at the meeting has had. This gives her practice reading facial expressions and the people on her team feel understood and validated by her. It's really helpful to build on skills that already exist."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

‘Social Emotional Learning’ In Practice

“What I’ve noticed is as young people come out of systems of care expecting that their support systems will magically know what to do and treating them as if they’re trained professionals. And the natural supports go ‘They treat me like crap and expect me to show up the next day!’ But they do that because that’s what professionals have always done. So it’s an unlearning piece, retraining them for natural relations. One of the big reasons that natural supports get turned off is they don’t feel valued, they don’t experience any gratitude. So we’ve focused on small ways that we can help them learn how to express gratitude and kindness.”

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

Reflection Questions

- Review the list of social emotional skills that are listed in this section (p. 38). How would you assess your own relationship skills? Are there any skills you would like to work on?
- How could you model skills and support their development in the youth you work with?
- To what extent are relationship skills part of your current work with youth and natural supports? Are there resources and/or expertise in your organization that you could draw on to help you further integrate social emotional learning into your work with youth?

9.5 A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships

A natural supports approach respects youth autonomy, and lets them take the lead in identifying their support network. However, some of the supports they choose may be risky (e.g., When a youth who has recently achieved sobriety wants to connect with her alcoholic aunt). Our instinct in those circumstances is to create boundaries to mitigate the risk. However, experience suggests that while this can make us feel better about the situation, it doesn't always achieve the results we want. Forbidding a relationship that a youth identifies as meaningful or important often has the effect of driving it underground (i.e., the youth continues to see the person but just doesn't let us know about it). When that happens, we have even less control because, once the relationship goes underground, we can't play a role in coaching the young person through the situation or help them to develop the skills to keep themselves safe.

A harm reduction approach[74] to relationships offers a more realistic assessment of risk and provides greater opportunities to build youths' capacity to keep themselves safe. While typically used in the context of addictions, the underlying principle of harm reduction is a focus on keeping people safe in the context of high risk situations.

Principle: Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships

What it means: We cultivate a more realistic approach to risk-management and safety.

What it looks like in practice:

- This type of approach requires the capacity to work with youth to assess risk and develop safety plans. When youth are supported to identify the risks themselves (rather than being told what the risks are), they are more likely to take them seriously.
- We resist the urge to forbid contact.* Instead, we work with youth to help them identify potential risks and figure out how to safely navigate those relationships.
- We position ourselves as coaches, asking the young person to draw on us for support as they're navigating risky relationships.

*Note: This doesn't mean that we need to pretend to be enthusiastic about the situation or can't express concerns – but we need to do it in a way that is not judgemental and conveys that we are open to possibilities. It's sometimes helpful to think back to when you were a teenager. If your mom forbade you to see someone, what would your response have been? Tap into your inner teenager when you're thinking about how to convey your concerns.

- We use questions and non-judgemental language to help the youth think through the risks – e.g., "What risks might be involved in seeing this person? Here are some of the concerns I have – do you think they're legitimate? What ideas do you have for keeping yourself safe in that relationship?"

- A harm reduction approach is likely less risky than the status quo approach because relationships don't go underground. However, the approach can *feel* riskier to many practitioners. For this reason, it's helpful to draw on a collaborative decision-making model so that the burden is shared by a broader team and supported by supervisors/managers who 'have your back.' Collaboration also gives us the opportunity to draw on the distributed intelligence of others, so that we can more effectively develop the level of insight and foresight required for this very challenging work. This might take on several forms, including interdisciplinary teams, peer review, case conferencing, and the development of an organizational culture where learning and questioning are valued.

‘Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships’ In Practice

“One of our youth has an EPO [Emergency Protection Order] with mom. He can’t be in contact with her, but we’ve agreed to let them connect by Facebook. He gets the emotional support and connection he needs and she gets the connection she needs without putting her at risk of his behaviours. A year ago, I would have said no way to that. The EPO says no contact so no contact. Now I think about it differently. I think about what is safe contact. They need each other. They don’t need to live with each other or even see each other, but they need contact with each other. But this is making some of my colleagues really uncomfortable and if the [Probation Office] finds out, it is likely the youth would be considered to be breaking the order. We need to get Justice involved. We need to re-think how we protect mom. We need to rethink what no contact means.”

- Youth-Serving Practitioner

‘Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships’ In Practice

“We have this young woman turning 18, serious addiction issues. She identified her drug dealer as a natural support in her safety planning to ensure she doesn’t OD – total harm reduction approach – he knows her and knows what drugs she can use together. Wow, that feels really scary and risky but we have shifted our whole thinking about safety and risk and judging natural supports – our whole decision making process. We can’t manufacture a natural support for her and we can’t tell her who her natural supports can and can’t be. We have to deal with the reality of the situation. Four years ago we would have said really clearly no – he is a drug dealer, he is not safe, no. And yet the young person is very clear that she cannot stop using right now and so we needed to develop a plan with her where she could be supported and in ways she thought she could be successful, and in this case success was avoiding overdose and staying alive.”

- Youth-Serving Practitioner

Reflection Questions

- What fears or concerns do you have about a harm reduction approach to relationships? What types of things could happen? Could those things happen even if you forbid contact? Why/why not?
- What kinds of organizational supports would you need to be able to take this kind of approach? How can you work with your team and supervisor to put these supports in place?

10.0 Continuum of Needs & Opportunities

The continuum listed below was developed to sensitize practitioners to the various relational needs and opportunities that exist when we are working with vulnerable youth and their natural supports. **This continuum is not linear: young people can move back and forth between various points, and may want or need several types of supports at once.** Distinguishing between the various types of needs and opportunities that exist can help us to focus our efforts and be thoughtful about our objectives.

As with other aspects of this approach, how you engage with youth at each of these points depends on a range of contextual factors, and cannot be captured in a procedural way. However, in the *Online Tools and Resources section* (p. 73), we've listed a number of resources that are helpful in supporting practitioners to work with youth and natural supports at various points along this continuum.

Table 3: Continuum of Needs & Opportunities

Need/ Opportunity	Appropriate When…	Practitioners can…
Engaging: Help youth to cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports	Youth presents as uninterested in cultivating natural supports	• Seek to understand the youth's fears and concerns around relationships, as well as their needs and desires • Explore the idea that while relationships are risky, so is loneliness and isolation • Draw on some of the engagement tools listed in the *Resources* section below to cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports
Finding: Work with the youth to identify potential supports	Youth is unable to name at least one person who they can rely on for support and/ or would like some help identifying further supports	• Draw on some of the identification tools listed in the *Resources* section (e.g., mobility mapping, genogram, family finding) to identify potential supports in a youth's life • Help to track down phone numbers and addresses, as needed • Support youth in their efforts to connect with the people they've identified (e.g., coach them on what to say in a phone call; help them draft a letter; accompany them to their first meeting) • Help to prepare youth for a range of responses • Work to develop safety plans, as needed
Strengthening: Help youth to strengthen relationships with natural supports	Youth needs assistance developing a stronger relationship with some of the natural supports they've identified	• Work with the youth and (where appropriate) natural support(s) to identify strengths and challenges, and develop goals for the relationship • Use problem-solving tools and processes to identify ways to build on strengths and address challenges in the relationship • Help them to cultivate empathy for one another and to develop realistic expectations (e.g., someone can care about you deeply, but not be able to support you in the way that you would like) • Draw on the *Attachment and Social Emotional Learning tools* listed in the *Resources* section to build youth's capacity to effectively engage in meaningful, reciprocal relationships

Table 3: Continuum of Needs & Opportunities

Need/ Opportunity	Appropriate When…	Practitioners can…
Restoring: Support healing and restoration	Youth and natural support(s) need help repairing the relationship and finding safe and effective ways of moving forward	• Draw on the Grief and Loss tools listed in the *Resources* section to help youth integrate their trauma and loss experiences in ways that are healing. (The exercises in Darla Henry's *3-5-7 Model Workbook* can be particularly helpful.) Tools to support identity and belonging might also be helpful here (see *Resources*) • Make referrals as needed. This includes referrals for family members and other natural supports who may also need to embark on their own healing journey in order to be able to support the young person more effectively • Develop safety plans as needed, and support youth and natural supports to establish healthy boundaries
Maintaining: Help youth maintain connections	The relationship is stable but still somewhat vulnerable, and youth/ natural support(s) need help understanding how to maintain it	• Work with youth and natural supports to identify areas of vulnerability and why they exist. Problem solve together to identify ways to enhance the resiliency of the relationship and reduce the risk of breakdown • Ongoing capacity building around social emotional learning and relationship skills will be helpful here (See *Resources* below)
Transitioning: Help youth transition to other relationships	Youth has experienced the end of a relationship, and/ or would like to extricate themselves from some of their current relationships and transition to other friendship groups or supports	• Help the youth to make meaning of the loss. (Discussed in the next section: *Helping Youth to Understand Relational Instability*.) Note: This type of support should be offered regardless of whether the youth initiated the transition • Help the youth to develop goals and strategies to support the transition • Draw on the Grief and Loss tools in *Resources* as needed

10.1 Helping Youth Understand Relational Instability

The continuum of needs and opportunities highlights the various stages of relationships, and speaks to the need to help prepare youth to make meaning of the range of relational experiences that they have and will continue to encounter – including relationships that disappoint, hurt or end. "There may be a tendency to over-focus on the benefits of having natural supports," writes one Change Collective member, "but in moving towards change it's important to acknowledge that it's risky to let people in and work through those feelings of 'What if they leave or disappoint me again?'" We noted that it is important to help to normalize relational instability (i.e., the fact that people will always come and go from our lives), and help young people to develop effective ways of understanding and integrating these losses. Without this, it could be difficult to inspire any interest in cultivating new connections or risking the kind of vulnerability that often exists in mutually close relationships.[75]

In her study of relational permanence among youth with foster care backgrounds, Gina Samuels found that many youth drew on a poem entitled "A Reason, a Season or a Lifetime" to help them make sense of the relational instability they had experienced in their lifetime. The poem (reprinted in the text box on page 50) suggests that there is value in different types of relationships – regardless of how long they last. The poem offers "an alternative interpretation of relational loss" by separating "the value of a relationship from its duration in our lives…." Samuels suggests that this helps to cultivate "an alternative coping skill by anticipating change and reframing loss in terms of what is gained…. It is also helpful for underscoring the fact that experiencing an intimate connection to someone does not ensure a relationship's permanence, nor does the end of a close relationship erase the impact or value it had in one's life. As such, it is a complement to coping with one's experience of an ambiguous loss."[76]

While natural supports are critical to human development, they can also be a source of enormous pain and disappointment. This approach must therefore include efforts to help young people make meaning of relational pain and loss in ways that maintain their capacity to allow people into their lives. We also need to help youth contextualize the various sources and types of risk so that they can keep themselves safe in a range of situations. And through it all, we need to remind them why this matters: After all, relationships may be risky, but loneliness is lethal.

Reflection Questions

- Read the poem below, thinking about key relationships (past and present) in your own life. How can you use the poem to make meaning of those relationships? How might you use this poem with youth?
- Think about a youth you work with who has developed coping mechanisms that might isolate them from other people. They are probably very aware of the risks involved in close relationships. How can you help them to think about the risks of NOT having close relationships?

A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime

People come into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. When you figure out which one it is, you will know what to do.

When someone is in your life for a REASON, it is usually to meet a need you have expressed. They have come to assist you through a difficulty, to provide you with guidance and support, to aid you physically, emotionally, or spiritually. They may seem like a godsend, and they are! They are there for the reason you need them to be.

Then, without any wrong doing on your part, or at an inconvenient time, this person will say or do something to bring the relationship to an end. Sometimes they die. Sometimes they walk away. Sometimes they act up and force you to take a stand.

What we must realize is that our need has been met, our desire fulfilled, their work is done. The prayer you sent up has been answered. And now it is time to move on.

When people come into your life for a SEASON, it is because your turn has come to share, grow, or learn. They bring you an experience of peace, or make you laugh. They may teach you something you have never done. They usually give you an unbelievable amount of joy. Believe it! It is real! But, only for a season.

LIFETIME relationships teach you lifetime lessons; things you must build upon in order to have a solid emotional foundation. Your job is to accept the lesson, love the person, and put what you have learned to use in all other relationships and areas of your life. It is said that love is blind, but friendship is clairvoyant.

- Author unknown

PART THREE: IMPLEMENTATION

11.0 Practice Examples

We used case studies extensively in the development of this framework. We found that working with real-life examples brought the principles to life in ways that helped us to understand how this approach differs from the status quo. The process also helped to surface conflicting values and assumptions. The examples below are based on actual cases. We suggest that you work through them on your own and with your team, taking time to reflect on the questions that follow.

11.1 Jenna

Jenna is 18. She has a long Child Welfare history and was identified as a PSECA* kid when she was 12. She is currently attending a mental health day program. Jenna's case manager is working to identify and cultivate her natural supports – which isn't easy because most of the supports in her life have been professionals (case workers, therapists, shelter workers, etc.). She has a few friends, but none she can really rely on. A few weeks ago, Jenna met a guy named Brett at her day program, and they have become quite close. She now identifies him as her primary support – the kind of person that she could call at 3:00 in the morning if she were in trouble. When Jenna's case manager learns more about Brett, she grows increasingly concerned. There are a lot of red flags: First, Brett is 10 years older than Jenna. Given Jenna's history of sexual exploitation, this is a bit of a concern. Second, he did time a few years ago for possession of child pornography. The case manager knows that this is a dangerous situation.

Reflection Questions

- What's your first instinct as a professional? Why?
- What is Jenna likely to do if her case manager tells her she can't see Brett? What risks does this present?
- What would a status quo approach to this situation look like? (Be honest).
- What would a natural supports approach look like? (You might want to revisit the Principles before answering this question.)
- What risks are associated with each approach? Is one approach any riskier than the other? Why/why not?

*Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act (PSECA) is legislation that "clarifies that children and youth involved in sexual exploitation are victims of sexual abuse and have the right to safety and protection. This legislation incorporates specific penalties for individuals who solicit or encourage children to be involved in prostitution. PSECA also provides community programming for children and youth who voluntarily choose to end their involvement in prostitution and confined treatment for youth who refuse to end their involvement and continue to be at risk of harm through involvement in sexual exploitation." (Retrieved from: http://www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/P30P3.pdf)

11.2 Dustin

Dustin is 21 years old. He started drinking heavily at an early age and has been in and out of treatment for his addiction. The youth worker advises Dustin to avoid anyone with active addictions so that he can maintain his new-found sobriety, but most of the people who comprise his natural support system struggle with addictions – mom, uncles and aunts, grandparents, cousins, and most of his friends. Dustin points out that if he is going to have family in his life, then there's no way to avoid alcoholics. "Besides," he tells his youth worker, "these are my people. I don't even 'get' people who don't drink – they're useless to me because I can't relate. I need to be with people who understand me."

Reflection Questions

- What's your first instinct as a professional? Why?
- What does this case tell us about the role that natural supports play in identity and belonging?
- How could you honour Dustin's identity and belonging needs while 1) helping him to manage the risk, and 2) supporting ongoing exploration of who he is?
- What would a status quo approach to this situation look like?
- What would a natural supports approach look like?
- What risks are associated with each approach? Is one approach any riskier than the other? Why/why not?

11.3 Aisha

Aisha was taken into care when she was 8. Her mother was an alcoholic with mental health issues who would often leave her alone or take her to places where she wasn't safe. Because of the neglect she had experienced, she was made a permanent ward of the state (PGO). Aisha grew up moving through different foster care placements, and never stopped wishing she could be with her mom. When Aisha became a teenager she began to drink and use drugs, and was eventually placed in a group home at 15. The workers there tried to help Aisha with her substance abuse and support her to stay in school. Aisha wanted to succeed and be healthy, but she would regularly AWOL from the group home and go and stay with her mom.

When that happened, the workers would either have to go and get her from mom's or close her bed at the group home and wait for things to fall apart again. Aisha felt caught between places: She wanted to be settled and go to school, but she really wanted to be with her mom as well. Her workers wanted to help her but were frustrated with her behaviour.

Reflection Questions

- What's your first instinct as a professional? Why?
- Why do you think kids sometimes run away to be with their parents even when those relationships are abusive?
- What would a status quo approach to this situation look like?
- What would a natural supports approach look like?
- What risks are associated with each approach? Is one approach any riskier than the other? Why/why not?

12.0 Implications for Practitioners

Based on our experience, the biggest implications of this approach for practitioners is that it requires careful examination of our own values and assumptions. Below is a list of some of the common values and assumptions that can create barriers to a natural supports approach. As you read them, think about whether you've had similar thoughts.

- Professionals can meet the emotional and psychological needs of youth.
- Our role is to rescue youth and/or fix things for them.
- We have a duty to protect youth, and that means limiting their exposure to those who could hurt them.
- All vulnerable youth come from messed up families.
- Youth who have been neglected or abused by family or friends have no interest in connecting with those natural supports.
- Family is the problem, so they can't be part of the solution.
- We don't have the capacity to address family issues, so we should avoid discussing family with vulnerable youth.
- Natural supports are dangerous and unreliable, whereas professionals are dependable and will always be there for a youth.
- The youth is the victim, and their perspective is all that matters.
- Natural supports are a 'nice to have'; you have to attend to basic needs like food and shelter first.
- Relationships are not a valuable outcome.
- Relationships are not measurable, so this work is not valued by funders.
- We, the professionals, know best; we define what success looks like for youth and families.

> *"I have to get over not being the center of the kid's life. I need to learn not to be the rescuer. This isn't about me. That's really hard sometimes. I want to be needed. Youth workers who will do anything are glorified. So I always have to be sure that what I am doing to help [...] strengthens the youth instead of rescues them. My job is to help them to learn to help themselves and to rely on other people – their people."*
>
> *-Youth-Serving Practitioner*

Reflection Questions

- Which of these values do you identify with?
- How do they show up in your work?
- What would it take to reconstruct those values and assumptions?

13.0 Implications for Organizations and Systems

While many in our sector understand the value of a natural supports approach, organizational and systemic barriers can sometimes inhibit implementation. The Change Collective is committed to working with systems and organizations to try to address any barriers that might impede our ability to fully implement this approach.

Some of the issues that we initially identified turned out to be less significant than we thought. For example, many of us were concerned about the potential for increased risk and liability with this type of approach. As a Collective, we engaged a lawyer and workshopped some case studies with our organizational leaders to identify potential areas of increased exposure. However, when we dug into the issue deeply, we found that a natural supports approach didn't really introduce additional risk.* In fact, this approach is more likely to reduce risk because it acknowledges the limits of our control, and focuses on building the capacity of youth to keep themselves safe in a variety of situations. It also reduces risks that we rarely consider – that is, risks associated with social quarantine, psychological homelessness and social network disruption.

Another issue that was identified early on related to accreditation and professional ethics.† However, meetings with representatives from various professional and accreditation bodies suggest that the principles set out in this framework are generally aligned with the high level guidelines provided by our professional bodies to support case by case decision-making. Effective supervision, client-driven case conferencing and good professional judgement are central to ethical practice, and each plays an important role in protecting professionals from disciplinary action. The Natural Supports Framework encourages these practices, and therefore does not seem to be in conflict with the standards that have been developed by professional bodies. That said, one area that will need careful consideration as we move forward involves implementing this approach with younger clients. Issues of consent (e.g., in cases where the guardian does not approve of the supports identified by a young person) and safety (e.g., ethical considerations in taking a harm reduction approach with underage youth) will need to be explored, and organizations may need to develop specific guidelines for enhancing natural supports for underage youth.

* The exception to this was reputational risk. We agreed that our professional and organizational reputations could be at risk if the public or others in our sector do not understand the rationale for this approach. To this extent, the approach may require communications support more than legal support.

† Please see Appendix A: Notes on Accreditation and Ethics for a description of four key areas to pay attention to when implementing a natural supports approach.

As with professional standards, accreditation standards are intended to guide the safe and ethical delivery of specific programs. Agencies are expected to provide a rationale for how their program policies and procedures abide by these standards. To this point, programs applying the natural supports principles have been able to work with accrediting bodies to explain the approach and have experienced no issues with receiving accreditation. Agencies will need to continue to dialogue with accrediting bodies as they develop policies and protocols to support their staff to work with this framework.

While some of the implications of this approach are not as challenging as we initially thought, there are still a number of ways in which this approach requires change at the organizational and system levels. The types of changes that are needed include the following:

- Caseloads will need to be decreased to accommodate this work because capacity building and relational development take time. (This has implications for funders' expectations as well.)
- New reporting systems will need to be developed (including new outcome measures and indicators) to capture the complexity and dimensionality of this work.
- Organizations will need to review their policies, practices and protocols carefully to identify and change those that:
    - Limit/undermine youth autonomy
    - Isolate youth from their natural supports
    - Incentivize connections to professional supports (e.g., outcome measures based on the number of professional referrals)
    - Restrict the ability of professionals to meet youth and families in their communities
    - Undermine collective decision-making and case-conferencing in teams
    - Exclude natural supports and/or youth from case conferencing and problem solving
    - Create case management and/or service plans that are not aligned with the capabilities and life circumstances of youth and families.

- Organizations will need to create time, processes and structures to support reflective practice and supervision. Leaders will also need to consider how to further foster organizational cultures in which questioning and learning are valued.

- Organizations will need to re-examine perspectives and policies related to risk and safety. They may need to develop protocols that enable collective and case-by-case decision-making, and create opportunities to support youth and natural supports to build their capacity to assess and manage their own risks.

- Youth workers and family workers often exist in separate professional streams. Organizations will need to develop ways to support increased integration, and help youth workers to more effectively work with family-oriented professionals and services.

- Funders will need to support professional development in this area, and organizations will need to work with their staff to build their collective capacity for this approach.

14.0 Tools and Resources

14.1 Organizational Audit

The *Enhancing Natural Supports Audit* is meant to be used internally by organizations to examine their values, policies, practices and procedures. Copies of the Audit can be downloaded at: http://www.burnsfund.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Enhancing-Natural-Supports-Organizational-Audit.pdf

The Audit is intended to generate dialogue about the implications of this approach, and help organizations to:

- Identify ways in which they are currently facilitating and/or impeding this approach.
- Identify priorities.
- Develop ways to increase organizational capacity to implement a Natural Supports approach.

The Audit is designed to be used by Leadership Teams; however, we recommend finding ways to include frontline staff, supervisors and managers in the discussions – particularly those who have participated in Natural Supports training. We also recommend revisiting the Audit on an annual basis to track progress and develop new priorities/ideas for ways to further align organizations with a Natural Supports approach.

14.2 Assessing Social Support Needs

In order to enhance natural supports for youth, we need to understand something about their social needs. This kind of assessment can happen informally through questions about existing supports. For example:

- Who are the most important people in your life? Why?
- Who do you call when you've had a bad day?
- Who do you call when you've had a good day?
- Who shares your past with you or knows your life story?
- Who do you have fun hanging out with?
- Who can give you good advice or help with problems?
- Who can you share your feelings with?
- Who could you could call in the middle of the night if you had an emergency?

A more formal assessment can also be conducted. The one below, which is excerpted from *Skills for Psychological Recovery: Field Operation Guide*[77], is helpful because it looks at needs as well as the youth's capacity to extend support to others.

Table 4: Types of Social Support Worksheet

Name	Description	How You Get It & Give It	Need?	Can give?
Emotional Comfort	Feeling 'heard,' understood, accepted, and loved or cared for	Listening (without giving advice or judgment), giving a hug or a 'shoulder to cry on'	☐	☐
Social Belonging	Feeling as if you fit in, belong, and have things in common with other people	Spending time with friends and family members, participating in enjoyable or recreational activities with others	☐	☐
Feeling Needed	Feeling that you are important and valued by others	Words of appreciation or gratitude, showing someone you enjoy his/her company	☐	☐
Self-Worth	Feeling that you are a valuable and appreciated member of a family, group, or organization and that your contributions make a difference	Words or acts of appreciation for your skills, knowledge, talents and contributions; being asked to help or participate; feedback that you've faced and handled challenges well	☐	☐
Reliable Support	Feeling that you have people you can depend on to help you if you need it	Being available to help someone when they need or ask for help	☐	☐
Advice, Information & Problem-Solving	Having someone who can offer good advice, show you how to do something, give you information, or mentor you	Giving information on how to obtain the service or items that [you or someone else] needs; helping you think of options you have or ways to fix a problem	☐	☐
Physical Assistance	Having people who help you to carry out physical tasks or run errands	Helping someone do something you need, such as home or car repair, paperwork	☐	☐
Material Assistance	Having people give you tangible assistance	Giving items such as food, clothing, medicine, building materials or a loan	☐	☐

Source: Berkowitz, S. Bryant, R. Brymer, M., et al. (2010). Skills for Psychological Recovery: Field Operations Guide. National Center for PTSD and National Child Traumatic Stress Network, p. 161.

14.3 Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports

The degree to which we are able to work with natural supports will vary depending on our role, program and agency – but even taking small steps to engage family, friends and community can make a significant difference in the lives of our clients.

In many ways, the approach that is needed to work with natural supports parallels the approach needed to work with vulnerable youth:

- The work is context-sensitive, so it requires high levels of professional judgment.
- The five principles outlined in the framework apply to both.
- A trauma-informed approach is critical, as is the cultivation of empathy.
- The *Continuum of Needs and Opportunities* can be used to identify entry points for working with natural supports as well as youth.
- The work involves ongoing coaching and capacity building.

In addition to the higher level principles already outlined in the Framework, the suggestions offered in the tables below might be helpful, particularly if you are working directly with youth and the natural supports in their lives. Table 5 outlines strategies that Change Collective members use to initiate and sustain engagement with natural supports, and Table 6 outlines suggestions for addressing many of the challenges that arise in this work.

Table 5: Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports

Need/Opportunity	Suggestions
Initiating engagement with a natural support	• Work with the youth to develop a strategy for approaching the natural support they've identified. Should the youth initiate the call or should you? What are the potential risks and benefits of both approaches? What needs to happen before the call is made (e.g., What possibilities will you need to prepare the youth for)? Even if the youth is not in a position to initiate engagement, they can still be involved in the process. • Keep in mind that the goal of first contact with an identified support is to lay the foundation for a relationship, not to meet an instrumental need or get something from them. When we're overly focused on what a support can do for our clients, we risk alienating them or scaring them off. Furthermore, a 'What can you do for me?' approach does not reflect the principles of healthy relationships. Remember that the relationship is the goal. Begin the process by asking questions and developing rapport. • Be curious about the type of relationship the natural support would like to have with the youth or how they'd like to engage. For example, you might say: "This youth has identified you as an important person in their life. If you were to be part of their life, what could your role be? What could that look like?" • Take an appreciative, strength-based approach: "What is good about this relationship? What would you like to grow in the relationship?" • Figure out what is in it for *them*. Work with youth to make a compelling case for the natural support's involvement. • Draw out and validate their stories, hopes and needs, just as you would with a client. • Seek to understand their fears and potential points of resistance. Some natural supports will have had past experiences with social systems that left them feeling disempowered, judged and/or under-appreciated. Some might be worried about letting the young person down, while others might hesitate because of past experiences with the youth. Validate their concerns and help to address them where you can. • Be aware that you may be one of many professionals who have contacted them about the youth.

Nurturing and sustaining the relationship	• Help the youth and natural support to manage their expectations. Encourage them to start small and slowly build from there. Help both to understand that relationship-building takes time. Play the role of 'point person' (as needed) while the relationship is being established. • Be careful not to overwhelm the natural support (discussed further in *Challenges* below). Let them decide on the terms of engagement, and make sure they're not the only support in the young person's life. • Consider explicitly mapping out expectations and commitments. For example, you could: □ Work with the natural support to develop an understanding of what they can offer and when. □ Work with the youth to develop an understanding of what they can offer and when. □ Capture both sets of expectations and commitments in writing to prevent misunderstandings. □ Revisit and revise the document from time to time as expectations and commitments might change. • If the relationship is a relatively new one, spend time doing 'getting to know you' activities. If it's more established, identify fun activities that can help to strengthen the bond. • Understand that most system-involved youth have learned to work with professional supports, not natural supports. Help them to develop the skills required for reciprocal relationships. Use role play to practice their skills and anticipate various scenarios, and help them to think of concrete ways to nurture the relationship. (For example, one practitioner encouraged her youth to schedule their natural supports' birthdays into their phone so that they could reach out to them on that day with a card or a telephone call.) • Some natural supports need as much coaching as young people do – including coaching around healthy relationships, reciprocity, boundary setting, conflict resolution, managing reactions and problem solving. They may also need to be supported to understand adolescent development, trauma, grief and loss, and/or relevant disabilities (e.g., FASD, Autism, etc.). You may need to draw on other professionals to help to provide these supports. Don't feel like you have to do all of this on your own.

Table 6: Addressing Challenges Associated with Engaging Natural Supports

Challenges	Suggestions
The natural support feels overwhelmed and starts to pull away	*Natural supports sometimes feel like they're the only ones supporting the youth and the pressure of that can be overwhelming. Some of the ways to prevent this situation include the following:* • Ensure they're not the only support! It is critical to build redundancy into the youth's support system so that the load is shared. Kevin Campbell recommends identifying 40 potential supports to find 6-8 people who can play an active role in the young person's life. • Remind them that they can play whatever role they like – even if it's something really small like calling the youth once a month to check in and see how they're doing. Use your interview skills to understand what role might work for them. • Ask them about their fears and concerns. Work with them to try to problem-solve around those. • Help to manage expectations on both sides. Have open and ongoing conversations about roles and expectations. • Manage your own expectations: Try to be realistic about what the natural support can and can't do – and understand that situations will change. • Ensure that the natural supports have natural supports. Often they are just as isolated as the youth and are not getting the kind of support that would help them to be a positive influence in the young person's life. • Celebrate the work in an ongoing way. We tend to be really problem-focused in our work. Talk about the good things that have happened. Help the young person understand how to express gratitude in consistent ways. • Let them know that they are not alone in this – that there is a team to support them as they try to support the youth. • Don't push. Engaging natural supports is like a dance where you need to be responsive to the other person's lead. Slow down and consider the bigger picture.

The relationship is conflictual and is at risk of 'blowing up'	*What do you do when there's conflict between the youth and natural support? How do you work to ensure that the conflict doesn't lead to irreparable damage? Here are some ideas for taking a preventative approach to conflict:* • Help the natural support and youth to set limits and establish healthy boundaries. Ask them how you can support them in maintaining those boundaries. • Work with them to develop conflict resolution, problem solving and other social emotional skills. Use role play to help the youth/natural support anticipate encounters with one another. • Identify common ground and shared values. • Coach them around taking responsibility for what happened and asking for forgiveness. This skill does not come naturally to everyone and needs to be learned. • Support problem-solving by: □ Working with both to identify the primary need (i.e., what is needed to ensure this relationship can go forward). If there are several needs or the needs are complex, break them down into manageable chunks and prioritize. □ Brainstorming ways to meet that need. You can encourage creativity here by offering suggestions that are fun or impractical. This modeling helps them to understand that you're not evaluating solutions at this point and that they are free to offer ideas that are 'out of the box'. □ Helping them to assess all the potential strategies and identify ones that they want to try. □ Developing an action plan. (This includes thinking about the potential challenges involved in implementing the plan and how they could address them.) • Help them to develop realistic expectations of one another. In some cases, unrealistic expectations are related to a lack of knowledge/understanding around trauma, adolescent development, or disabilities like FASD. Coaching and education is critical in these circumstances.

The relationship is conflictual and is at risk of 'blowing up'	• Help them to be forward thinking rather than constantly rehashing what happened. One way of approaching this is to get them to think about who they are today and who they want to be going forward. • Draw on some resources in *Online Tools and Resources* (p. 73) to help the youth/natural support to engage in reconciliation and process grief, loss, trauma, and conflict. Help them to develop realistic expectations about how long it takes and how difficult (but rewarding) it is. • Be a buffer and help to champion the hard work of reconciliation. • Note: The best way to manage conflict is to prevent it in the first place. Help both natural supports and youth to anticipate potential sources of tension and build a strategy for dealing with them throughout the relationship. Check in often to make sure that they are communicating effectively and managing tensions as best they can.
The natural support does not seem to be a safe or positive influence	*The people that youth identify as important often have their own struggles, triggers and/or history of trauma, and this can make it difficult for them to be a positive influence in a young person's life. Here are some suggestions for working with natural supports that we may have concerns about.* • Draw on the same principles and practices you'd use for working with youth who are struggling with trauma or overwhelming life circumstances: □ Shift from "What's wrong with you?" to "What's happened to you?" □ Try to remain curious, empathetic and non-judgmental. □ Draw on your coaching and motivational interviewing skills. • Be sure to engage the natural support in safety planning, rather than solely planning with the youth. Work with them to identify potential concerns and ways of creating safety. Explore the 'what-ifs' and support them to create their own plan for keeping the youth safe so that they feel empowered. (*Signs of Safety* is a helpful approach here.) • Help them to develop their own system of support. Many are just as isolated as youth and need help connecting to a broader range of natural supports. • Know your limits and develop the confidence to say "I'm not a clinician" when the situation is beyond your capacity to manage. Stop and make a new plan.

Other professionals prohibit the involvement of the natural support	*In some cases, the fears and concerns of other professionals may impede your ability to engage natural supports. For example, a case worker might forbid all forms of contact with a particular individual. Some ideas for dealing with this challenge include the following:* • Help the professional to understand the dangers of loneliness and psychological homelessness. (Draw on the information in *Why Are Natural Supports Important*, p. 6) • Work through potential scenarios. What is likely to happen if we forbid contact? Will the relationship go underground? If so, what risks are associated with that? • Draw on the same skills you use with youth. □ Be empathetic. □ Genuinely try to understand their fears so that you can figure out how to address them. □ Validate them; ensure that they feel heard. □ Avoid appearing judgemental.
Parents question your competency because you're not a parent yourself	*A number of Change Collective members said that they didn't feel comfortable working with families because they themselves were not parents and were worried about the pushback they'd get when they offered advice.* • One of the most effective ways to meet this challenge is to be humble and relinquish the role of the expert. Genuinely position yourself as a learner. • Affirm that they are the expert when it comes to their own lives. Rather than offering advice, ask questions, help them tell their story and feel heard. Draw on all of your Active Listening skills.

The youth identifies a natural support who refuses to engage	*This may be the most difficult challenges. Here are some suggestions for how to manage it.* • Try to discern the reason for not engaging. In some cases, it will have more to do with you, the practitioner, than the youth. Some natural supports have had bad experiences with professionals. In some cases, there may be cultural issues involved (e.g., a male practitioner engaging a female support is not acceptable in some cultures). If you think the issue might be either of the reasons listed above, □ Identify someone else to engage the natural support (e.g., another natural support or the youth) □ Try to engage the natural support's partner (if they have one) • In some cases, natural supports will refuse to engage because they have been hurt by the youth in some way. If this is the reason for not engaging, try the following: □ Offer mediation between the youth and the natural support □ Help the youth to make amends □ Help the natural support to set boundaries with the youth (this may include safety planning with the natural support) □ Use letters and photos as an engagement tool □ Continue to include the natural support in email communications about the youth's progress • If the natural support continues to refuse engagement, □ Work with the youth to explore their grief and loss around this relationship. (See *Helping Youth Understand Relational Instability*, p. 48). Remember we can't always fix things, and loss is a normal part of life. □ Help the youth to figure out what they need to feel like they have some closure (e.g., write a letter, create a video, let a balloon go, etc.) □ Work with the youth to understand the need(s) that the non-engaging natural support met. Explore other supports who might potentially meet that need.

Working with natural supports feels overwhelming or out of scope	*This approach adds scope and complexity to the work of professionals, and it can feel as if you're taking on a whole new set of clients. This can be really challenging, especially when the current systems and structures have not yet changed to accommodate this approach (e.g., lower caseloads).* • Remember that you don't have to do all of this on your own. Draw on support from your teams and other professionals within and beyond your own agency to help with this work.

14.4 Online Tools and Resources

Below is a list of online tools and resources to support implementation of the Framework. Be sure to also check out the list of articles and books that follows, as there are a number of helpful resources listed there as well.

Tools & Resources to Support the Natural Supports Framework		
Category	**Tool/Resource**	**Source(s)**
Engagement Tools	Motivational Interviewing	http://www.homelesshub.ca/solutions/supports/motivational-interviewing ; http://motivationalinterviewing.org/
	Transtheoretical Model of Change	https://www.prochange.com/transtheoretical-model-of-behavior-change
	Engaging Natural and Community Supports	http://www.wicollaborative.org/uploads/2/1/4/8/21489738/engaging_natural_and_community_supports.pdf
Attachment	ARC model (Attachment, Regulation and Competency model)	http://hhyp.org/downloads/HHYP_ARC_Framework.pdf
	Working with vulnerable youth: Attachment, trauma and risk (IVY Workshop 2015)	http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Attachment-Trauma-Risk-Glasgow-2015-handouts.pdf

Tools & Resources to Support the Natural Supports Framework

Category	Tool/Resource	Source(s)
Tools for Identifying Natural Supports	Family Finding (Kevin Campbell)	http://familyfinding.org/ Also, check out videos of the *2015 Lighting The Fire of Urgency: Introduction to Family Finding and Importance of Family Connectedness*. These four videos feature Kevin Campbell, and help to train practitioners in his family finding method: Part #1 - https://vimeo.com/145126482 Part #2 - https://vimeo.com/145124467 Part #3 - https://vimeo.com/145121028 Part #4 - https://vimeo.com/145120154
	Tips and Techniques for Effective Discovery in Family Finding	https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Child_Trends-2011_12_01_RB_FamilyFindingTips.pdf
	Ecomaps/ Genograms	http://www.strongbonds.jss.org.au/workers/cultures/ecomaps.html
	Mobility Mapping	http://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/Curriculum/1300_FmlyFndngTOL/TrnrRsrcs/TR04_MbltyMppng_FlwDgrms.pdf
	Connectedness Mapping	http://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/Curriculum/207IntrdctnToFGDMPrts1_2/Part2/Hndts/HO08_TlsForDscvrngCnnctns.pdf
Grief and Loss Tools	3-5-7 Model	http://darlahenry.org/
	Grief Counseling Resource Guide	https://www.omh.ny.gov/omhweb/grief/
Identity and Belonging Tools	ACT for Youth: Centre of Excellence	http://www.actforyouth.net/adolescence/identity/
	Identity Toolkit	http://www.actforyouth.net/adolescence/toolkit/identity.cfm
	Aboriginal children : the healing power of cultural identity	https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/childhood-adolescence/programs-initiatives/aboriginal-head-start-urban-northern-communities-ahsunc/aboriginal-children-healing-power-cultural-identity.html

Tools & Resources to Support the Natural Supports Framework

Category	Tool/Resource	Source(s)
Socio-Emotional Learning	CASEL	http://www.casel.org/
	Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning	https://www.selpractices.org/about
Risk & Safety	Signs of Safety	http://www.signsofsafety.net/
	A Teen's Guide to Safety Planning	http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Teen-Safety-Plan.pdf
Trauma-Informed Practice	Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit	https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Trauma-Informed_Organizational_Toolkit_0.pdf
	The Trauma Toolkit	https://trauma-informed.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Trauma-informed_Toolkit.pdf
	SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach	http://traumainformedcareproject.org/resources/SAMHSA%20TIC.pdf
Reflective Practice	Reflective Practice	http://www.participatorymethods.org/method/reflective-practice
	Reflective Practice Meets Youth Work Supervision	http://www.youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/herman_reflective_practice_meets_youth_work_supervision.pdf
	The Social Work Pocket Guide to Reflective Practice	http://www.desitterpublications.com/reflectivepractice_toc.html
Assessment and Evaluation Tools	Youth Connections Scale	http://cascw.umn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/YCSImplementation.pdf

15.0 Conclusion

While the importance of natural supports is largely recognized among youth-serving practitioners and organizations, many of the organizational and system-level structures that influence our work are not yet aligned with this approach (e.g., policies, procedures, caseloads, funding and reporting mechanisms, etc.). For this reason, we need to continue to collectively advocate for this approach and support one another in implementation.

Being at the front end of practice can be challenging, but it's worth the effort: psychological homelessness has significant negative consequences for physical, emotional and psychological health, and strengthening the support networks of vulnerable youth is critical to positive youth development. Change Collective members will continue to promote and integrate the framework within our spheres of influence – we hope you will join us.

16.0 Articles & Books

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Appendix A: Notes on Accreditation and Ethics

Our meetings with representatives from the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) and two accreditation bodies (CAC and CARF) suggest that practitioners and agencies may need to pay special attention to the following four areas when applying the framework to their work:

1.0 Protecting Privacy and Consent

- Ensuring that the professional has permission to contact the natural support(s)
- Ensuring that the professional has consent to share information provided by the youth with the natural supports
- Ensuring that information shared by the natural support is protected and confidential and not shared with the youth without the consent of the natural support

2.0 Professional Relationships (Section 7 of the ACSW Standards of Practice)

- When working with youth and their natural supports it may be challenging sometimes to determine who is the primary client and how to best service the needs of multiple people. The ACSW representative we spoke with recommended using professional judgement and support from supervisors to decide if the social worker can provide quality support and services to both parties. Social workers should seek additional supports when they feel they are beyond their scope of practice.
- Special care should be taken in cases where a professional relationship has ended and both parties would like to stay in touch as friends. The standards of practice prohibit *sexual and/or financial relationships* with a client for *24 months* after the professional relationship has ended. Other types of relationships (mentoring, natural support) are not prohibited, *but* these relationships must be in the best interest of the client (i.e., the young person), rather than serving the needs of the professional. Again, reflective practice and discussion with peers and/or supervisors will enable social workers to make good decisions about forging natural relationships with clients once the professional relationship has been terminated.

3.0 Maintaining the Reputation of the Profession

- Some Change Collective members expressed concerns about reputational risk when using a harm reduction approach to relationships as part of the natural supports approach. There is nothing specific in the Code of Ethics or Standards of Practice in regards to this, other than case by case decision-making with supervisors and peers, referring to the standards for guidance. (In the work that we did around risk, it became evident that, in many cases, a harm reduction approach is likely to keep youth safer in the long run.)

- Practitioners should use the risk mitigation strategies outlined in the framework (e.g., collaborative decision-making and case conferencing.)

4.0 Working with Minors

- The issues set out above are especially important to pay attention to when working with minors.

- When working with a young person under 18, we need parent/guardian consent to contact and/or share information with natural supports. In cases where the parent/guardian does not approve of the natural support, the issue of consent will be complicated.

- Harm reduction could cause the parents/guardians to question the appropriateness of the contact being made. If this is made public or handled by the media in an insensitive way, this could create some reputational risk for the agency or practitioner.

Ultimately regular supervision, case conferencing and good professional judgment are central to protecting professionals and organizations from any kind of disciplinary action by the ACSW or the accrediting bodies .

Notes

[1] See for example: Cook, JR. Kilmer, RP. (2010). "The Importance of Context in Fostering Responsive Community Systems: Supports for Families in Systems of Care." American Journal of Orthopsychiatry; Vol. 80, No. 1, 115–123; Kurtz, DP., Lindsey, EW., Jarvis, S., & Nackerud, L. (2000). "How Runaway and Homeless Youth Navigate Troubled Waters: The Role of Formal and Informal Helpers." Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal; 17(5): 381-402; Dryfoos, J. (1991). Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention. Oxford University Press, USA; Samuels, G. M. (2008). A reason, a season, or a lifetime: Relational permanence among young adults with foster care backgrounds. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Available at: https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-reason-a-season-or-a-lifetime/

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