



Everyday Actions:

Youth Workers Helping Young People to Thrive

October 2021

What are *Everyday Actions: Youth Workers Helping Young People to Thrive*?

- It is a tool for youth workers that brings into practice the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors and a focus on thriving.
- It is built upon the Youth Thrive Guiding Premises, which are the foundational tenets of a positive and nurturing relationship between an adult and a young person.
- Organized by the five Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors, each section is focused on developing and enhancing in young people the associated Protective and Promotive Factor.
- The tool recognizes the interconnectedness of the Protective and Promotive Factors. Some of the Everyday Actions are specific to one Protective and Promotive Factor, while others focus on more than one.
- It is not a checklist or to-do list. This resource brings together concrete approaches of practice principles, ideas, and opportunities for youth workers to create a relationship with young people that promotes authentic youth engagement, collaboration, youth agency, and success.

When and how to use *Everyday Actions*?

- Youth workers apply the Everyday Actions during all interactions with young people.

Why Are Youth Workers Important?

- They are the core people between the agency/ organization and young person.
- They serve as models for other caring relationships.
- They serve as formal and informal mentors, coaches, and educators.
- They help young people identify and achieve their goals.
- They listen and respond to young people's needs.
- They can be the connection to services and resources.
- They help young people navigate youth-serving systems, such as foster care, juvenile justice, and education.

- Some Everyday Actions may be better suited when a youth worker is beginning to build a relationship with a young person, while other Actions may be used throughout the relationship.
- Youth workers reflect on how often these Everyday Actions—frequently, sometimes, or never—are applied with young people. Additionally, youth workers may want to directly ask young people how well the youth worker is applying these Everyday Actions.
- The tool provides a table at the end of each section with example activities a youth worker can complete with young people to build their Protective and Promotive Factors. Youth workers are encouraged to use these examples as starting points and to grow this list with their own activities to strengthen the Protective and Promotive Factors in young people.
- For more information, visit: [Using the Protective and Promotive Factors to Support Youth Well-Being: An Interactive Guide](#).

While these Everyday Actions are for youth workers, whenever possible and with permission from the young person, parents/important adults in the young person’s life should also be invited to participate in activities that build young people’s Protective and Promotive Factors.

What are the *Everyday Actions* youth workers can do to support young people to thrive?

Youth Resilience

- **Recognize that young people are strong:** Acknowledge and reinforce a young person’s accomplishments, both big and small. Young people exhibit strengths and resilience every day—highlight and build upon them (e.g., “Do you see how you made it to school on time all last week? This is terrific. What do you need to keep it up?” “You interviewed for a job and didn’t get it, but it’s great that you tried. Let’s debrief the interview together and practice for your next interview.”).
- **Be comfortable with the uncomfortable:** How youth workers respond to young people matters. Young people often try new things, test boundaries, and may say or do things that make youth workers uncomfortable. They may not agree with recommendations youth workers offer. Youth workers should discuss strategies with their supervisors and colleagues to help them become comfortable with having difficult conversations and working with young people to problem solve, to explore options, and to help them decide what is the best course of action (refer to *Be Their Pre-Frontal Cortex* below). For example, a youth worker should ask clarifying questions to better understand a young person’s motivation or the results of their actions (e.g., Did you achieve the outcome you expected? How did the action make you feel? Is that how you wanted to feel? If you could participate in another activity to safely achieve the same result, what would it be?).
- **Get to “yes”:** Refrain from automatically saying “no” when young people have ideas or requests. Instead, explore whether there are learning opportunities, and take the time to find a balance between what the young person would like with what is realistic. For example, if a young person would like a pet, help the young person think through the responsibilities of caring for a pet—ask questions, such as “how often will you need to walk the pet, how will you pay for the pet’s veterinary visits, and who will care for the pet when you are at school or work?” If having a pet is not an option (e.g., a youth is in congregate care), think about alternative options. For example, explore if the young person can volunteer at a pet shelter or find a job at a pet store. Getting to “yes” is an opportunity to foster the relationship with a young person, expand their thinking, strengthen their problem-solving skills, and have them determine what is possible.

- **Make time for healing:** Young people need time and space to explore what healing means to them, how they can achieve it, and when they are ready for it. A focus on healing allows young people to consider how their experiences have impacted them, to identify supports and resources they need in their journey toward healing, and to realize that their past experiences do not define them or their future. Young people should be encouraged to go on this journey of self-exploration. This journey is not an overnight process and is not one size fits all. Young people should be given different options to consider for their healing journey, such as talk therapy, animal-assisted therapy, art therapy, meditation, and physical activities, like sports or running. Additionally, it should be communicated to young people that the journey is not linear, that setbacks will occur and are part of the healing process, and to not be discouraged when these setbacks happen.

Protective & Promotive Factor	Examples of Everyday Activities to do with Young People to Build their Protective and Promotive Factors
Youth Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in a mirror activity. Each week, ask the young person to identify and reflect on 1-2 strengths that they have. This activity will help to positively boost a young person’s sense of self. • Identify SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Specific) goals. Track and highlight when they reach each step in their progress toward achieving a goal. • Point out when a young person persists in working toward something or maintains composure in various settings. • Highlight when a young person uses strengths and skills well and talk about how they can do so again in the future. • Ask if they feel affirmed in their racial, ethnic, and gender identities, and if not, what you can do to support them.

Social Connections

- **Be a judgment free zone:** Hold space with young people, listen to them without judging, and be present in the conversation. It may be necessary to move away from the computer, turn off your phone, ask questions, and be an active listener instead of trying to “fix stuff.” Listening more means that youth workers talk less. This is especially important for starting and building a relationship with a young person. For more information on transformational relationships, please visit: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Transformational-Relationships-for-Youth-Success-Report.pdf>.
- **Just be you:** Young people yearn for connections with those who are genuine, honest, respectful, and willing to share. Sharing goes both ways. When working with young people, identify appropriate information to share so that they have an opportunity to get to know you and explore mutual interests (e.g., your favorite music, sports, and books; your hobbies; or best junk TV shows you like to watch). Boundaries can be permeable. While it is important to set boundaries, it is equally important to be open to sharing some information about yourself as a means of developing rapport with a young person. Youth workers should talk with their supervisor and colleagues about the benefits of sharing personal information and how to model establishing healthy relationships through clearly communicated and honest boundary setting.
- **Mean what you say:** Young people look to adults’ actions to determine if the adult is credible and consistent. If you share with a young person that you are going to do something, make sure to do it. If there is a consequence in response to a young person’s negative action or behavior, follow up on it. Additionally, do not overpromise—always be honest about any limitations that may make taking action

difficult. These actions help young people to learn about what to expect from the relationship. They also teach that actions have both positive and negative consequences.

- **Have unconventional moments:** Opportunities to explore young people’s interests and to get to know them do not only need to happen in the office, foster/resource parent or kin caregiver’s home, or congregate care setting. Experiential opportunities—such as going on a hike or walk together, baking or cooking together, and going out for a coffee together—allow for a youth worker and a young person to establish a connection, strengthen their bond, build trust, and enhance communication. These moments also help to build young people’s resilience by doing activities that test their strength and knowledge, and provide a space for young people to overcome fear or go beyond where they thought they could.
- **It’s okay to show love:** Part of building a relationship with young people is showing them that they are loved. This means that youth workers show they are committed to and care for the young person. This is especially applicable when young people test the relationship and do things that may push a youth worker away. For young people, understanding that a worker cares deeply about them may lead to them caring more about themselves, increasing self-agency, and setting and working towards difficult goals. Simultaneously, when showing love, there is also the opportunity to model love. This is necessary as young people develop and learn to navigate their own relationships beyond the youth worker and outside of programs or systems.
- **Ask for a ‘high five’:** Young people need relationships beyond the youth worker, program, and system. While youth workers should model how to build and sustain healthy relationships, young people need to be encouraged to practice their own relationship building skills. Youth workers should consider asking young people to identify at least five people who they would like to either develop a relationship with or reconnect with—this includes exploring with the young person different types of relationships and why they are important. For example, who are 1-2 family members the young person may want to connect with who could help them to learn about their family history? Who are 1-2 caring adults (e.g., a favorite teacher or coach) who could help the young person to explore career paths and opportunities? Who are 1-2 community members who could help the young person to understand local politics and/or become involved in the community? Young people may already have these relationships, but do not want to share them with the youth worker (e.g., the young person may not want the persons they have a relationship with to know they are in foster care; the young person does not want the person to be burdened by the system’s rules and regulations). The youth worker should acknowledge this, respect the young person’s decision, help the young person to strengthen these relationships, and continue to build trust with the young person so that they see the youth worker as a caring and loving adult who is committed to seeing them succeed.
- **Have fun and be safe:** Keep in mind safety precautions to protect young people and themselves from any health concerns. This includes educating young people about any pandemic or health-related risks and exploring how it could potentially impact their health and the health of anyone they live with, practicing social distancing, wearing a mask, connecting virtually/remotely instead of in-person if needed, supporting young people to have conversations about their own comfort levels with in-person meetings/gatherings, and accessing accurate information about any vaccines and/or medications.

Protective & Promotive Factor	Examples of Everyday Activities to do with Young People to Build their Protective and Promotive Factors
Social Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about their areas of interests and explore school or community groups focused on those activities—such as joining a church youth group, volunteering at a community center, or joining or starting a poetry or spoken word group. Encourage and help them to connect with groups that share their passion(s). Do not limit the young person based on what is currently available; if the activity or opportunity is not currently offered, how can it be started? Are there other young people who are interested in the area? Can they be brought together? Is transportation available for them to meet with an existing group in another town. • Connect young people with peer leaders and mentors. • Learn about the young person’s friends and facilitate opportunities for them to meet together. • Talk about their family members, brainstorm how to build and maintain connections with them, and create an action plan (e.g., attending a cousin’s birthday party, inviting a parent to an event at school, going with a sibling to grab a bite to eat). These connections should not be limited to special events, consider the day-to-day interactions that a young person can have with family members (e.g., dinner at an aunt’s house, shopping with a cousin). • Go with young people to access services and introduce them to the people you have relationships with (e.g., ride the bus with the young person to the Medicaid office and introduce them to your “go-to” people). • Do an ecomap or connectedness map with young people to identify family members, friends, and caring adults that young people have a relationship with. • Explore young people’s ideas on spirituality and religion and pursue opportunities for young people to be connected to a place of worship or other venue for exploring faith, religiosity, and feeling or sense of something beyond oneself, if interested. • Help connect with community activists, elders, historians, and others within their community or affiliations who can provide historical, community, and culturally specific information about the young person’s community, race, cultural traditions, and heritage. • Join advocacy and social action groups, local political or community boards, and voter registration and mobilization groups.

Knowledge of Adolescent Development

- **You're not a mind reader, just know the adolescent brain:** Adolescence is a period of tremendous brain development and growth. Two key components of the brain develop during this time period: 1) the limbic system—developed in early adolescence—controls emotions, pleasure-seeking, and processing social information; and 2) the prefrontal cortex—not fully developed until adulthood—controls priority setting and planning, impulse controls, decision-making, and self-regulation. Toxic stress and traumatic experiences, such as witnessing domestic violence and being placed in foster care, can negatively impact brain development and potentially lead to challenges in regulating emotions and actions, developing healthy relationships, making decisions, and future thinking. Understanding the structures of the adolescent brain, the impact of toxic stress and trauma on the developing brain, and the relationship between the developing brain and young people's behaviors and reactions helps youth workers to better respond to, coach, and support young people as they explore new opportunities, test boundaries, and practice independence.
- **Be their surrogate pre-frontal cortex:** Young people are still developing their prefrontal cortex (see above) and need help to understand and develop it. Understanding this, young people's planning and execution of an agreed upon plan will not be perfect every time—their current thinking may not transfer to the next action or activity. Young people test boundaries and take chances. How can they be helped to try and test in a healthy way? In conversation, help young people to think through actions, reactions, and consequences. Ask questions such as “If you do this, what are your thoughts on what will happen? Is this the only option?” Have a conversation about their plans and help them to build and strengthen their thinking process.

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Knowledge of Adolescent Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share with young people “fun facts” about the adolescent brain. • Start a “did you know” email series about the adolescent brain and development. If back in the office, post a fact per week about the adolescent brain in common areas, conference rooms, classrooms, your office, and/or reception area. Use these to prompt conversations with young people and co-workers. • Point out in the moment when you see young people frustrated or struggling with typical developmental experiences, such as emotional reactivity, forgetfulness, and interest in peers over responsibilities. Help normalize how they are feeling and what they are doing. • Remind young people that this is a normal phase of development, it has an endpoint, and they will not feel this way forever. • Find opportunities for young people to take “healthy” risks, such as trying out for a play or applying for a job. • Host a trivia activity with young people about their changing bodies. Include an anonymous question box for those who may not feel comfortable asking their questions in public. Explore different personal hygiene needs, such as deodorant and menstruation products, and where to purchase different items to meet the needs of their changing bodies.

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- **Ask young people what they want:** Young people should be supported in establishing and driving their own goals. Have conversations with young people about what their goals. For example, if a young person wants a car, help them to explore and map out what needs to be done for this to happen (e.g., study for a permit, practice driving, save money, pay for insurance, and car purchase considerations, such as the car’s safety rating and buying vs. leasing). Help young people to set high expectations—encourage dreaming big—and to push through negative messaging they may have received. Help them to realize they have the power and ability to influence their own future. This is also an opportunity to reflect on whether the goals they are working on are truly their own or goals that have been identified by and are being advanced by others. If a young person is not working on the goal, time should be taken to reflect on whose goal it is.
- **Do WITH young people, not FOR young people:** In a judgment free space, work with young people to brainstorm solutions (this includes youth workers being open to and moving ahead with solutions proposed by young people). Help young people to reconnect with the community to engage with others as they work toward their goals—this includes helping them to ask for, research, and obtain needed applications and resources they may need. Encourage them to ask questions. Do not bring the resources to young people; instead, teach, model, and support young people to self-advocate, search for and access resources.
- **Be responsive:** Take timely action regarding what young people say they need. Young people use many outlets to express their needs, including youth leaders speaking on behalf of young people, in case planning, and in town halls. Respond to young people’s needs, let them know you are taking action, and follow-up with young people during and after the action is completed.

Protective & Promotive Factor	Examples of Everyday Activities to do with Young People to Build their Protective and Promotive Factors
Concrete Support in Times of Need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help with completing a college application, housing application, job application, etc. • Identify and discuss banking and go with them to open a checking or savings account. • Work with young people to identify, access, and keep safe any personal documents, such as identification card, social security card, health insurance, school records, immunizations, and other important medical records. • Teach how to schedule medical and dental appointments. • Role play with young people about asking for help, advocating for themselves, and getting what they need. • Help young people to get support for the things they say they need, not just what adults think they need, or just what is readily available. • Regularly maintain an updated list of resources in the community for food, health care, and housing that youth can access.

Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence

- **If it's important to them, it's important to you:** Talk with young people, actively listen, and respond to them about their interests and activities they enjoy. Ask questions with a genuine desire to know and understand, such as “What do you like to do? What do you want to learn to do? What do you do with your friends?” From these questions begin to identify opportunities and help young people to connect to experiences that align with their interests (e.g., encourage and help them to join youth advocacy organizations or sports clubs and access internships that align with their career goals and aspirations).
- **Understand what you bring to the table:** Youth workers should explore and reflect on how their own experiences, culture, beliefs, and identities appear in their work with young people. Consider:
 - In your daily interactions with young people, how does your race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, class, immigration status, age, faith, level of education, and/or different abilities show up?
 - Are you able to identify strengths in a young person regardless of their identity, past experiences, or current behaviors?
 - What are your own past traumas and occurrences that may be triggered when working with a young person?
 - How does the privilege of being an adult or youth worker, and its inherent power, influence how you work with young people, including how young people’s voices, choices, and leadership are either supported or eliminated?
 - What are your strengths and challenges to an authentic partnership with young people?
 - Do you understand the various forms of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.), their intersections, histories, and influence and impact on your work with young people?
 - Are you able to identify which are your most proficient competencies, and which are ones that you are less comfortable with in your own life?

After self-reflecting on these questions and considerations, youth workers are encouraged to discuss these with young people to seek out their thoughts and opinions.

Protective & Promotive Factor	Examples of Everyday Activities to do with Young People to Build their Protective and Promotive Factors
Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send a message or meme via text or email at least once per week to encourage them, to check-in, and to connect. • Identify and support activities to alleviate stress (e.g., meditation, journaling, bike riding, listening to music, walking, or cooking.) • Involve them in activities that they are passionate about and support them through the highs and lows of engaging in their passions. Praise young people when they have handled things well and empathize when they have struggled with their emotions. • Support them to advocate for an issue they feel strongly about. Help them craft their story, prepare for their emotions, and get specific about the change they would like to see from their advocacy. • Normalize frustration in day-to-day experiences and show support in the good and hard times. • Help them deepen their cultural knowledge by obtaining information from reputable articles and books from the library, researching and connecting with cultural institutions, participating in culturally relevant webinars and other web-based enrichment activities, and connecting with community elders or historians. • Provide a paper-based or electronic planner and teach them how to use it to organize and keep track of appointments and activities. • Connect them to mentoring and tutoring help to address skills that need improving. • Connect them to healing-centered activities, such as meditation and mindfulness exercises, strength-based and holistic activities (e.g., participating in culturally grounded rituals, drumming circles and talking/healing circles), other therapeutic activities (e.g., working with animals, creative arts, and movement-focused therapies), and trauma-informed treatment.

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