

Best Practices to Support Youth Living With and Affected by HIV

This factsheet is from YouthREX's Research to Practice Report *Supporting Youth Living With and Affected by HIV in Ontario*

Programs can adopt a range of evidence-informed practices to support young people living with and affected by HIV.

Although each of the eight recommendations is critical in and of themselves, the inclusion of multiple recommendations will strengthen programs and services, and holistic approaches to supporting young people LWAH.

01. Understand youth's lived experiences

- **Ensure staff listen** and understand each young person's lived experience and the services they may need.
- **Understand youth** in terms of their strengths, assets, and excellence.
- **Recognize the different barriers** facing youth in accessing support services, and how these barriers are linked to the social determinants of health.
- **Acknowledge the role** that health literacy plays in accessing services. Health literacy refers to a young person's capacity to understand and obtain basic health information, and is dependent on social conditions. Ensure that toolkits and other resources for youth LWAH are accessible and youth-friendly; for example, present information in different languages and use visual aids.

02. Create leadership roles and opportunities

- **Train youth LWAH** to lead workshops or to serve as one-to-one peer mentors for other youth LWAH, on topics like mental health, disclosure, navigating support services, stigma, etc.
- **Integrate peer leadership** and mentorship opportunities for youth with lived experience.
- **Be flexible and adaptable** to ensure that youth leaders are able to direct conversations and programming.

03. Prioritize youth voice

- **Engage youth** in all aspects of programming, including program design, development, and evaluation.
- **Position youth** at the forefront of addressing their barriers to frame attainable and acceptable program and support service objectives. This process can be implemented in multiple aspects of programming (for example, from grant writing to the facilitation of workshops).

04. Implement group programming

- **Implement strength-based** support groups that are focused on the lived experiences of youth LWAH.
- **Ensure group programs** are age-specific and based on disclosure status to foster inclusion and trust between staff and peers, and to create a safe environment to learn about support services and to host conversations about living with HIV.

05. Remove barriers to services and programming

- **Reduce and eliminate** barriers experienced by youth LWAH; consider the hours of programming, location of services, transportation options and costs, and the availability of peer leaders, mentors, and frontline service providers who understand living with HIV from a critical and anti-oppressive lens.
- **Ensure an intersectional approach** is used when planning programs and support services by being mindful of the various social determinants of health.

06. Provide a safe and supportive environment

- **Promote mutual and supportive** relationships – within the physical space, among staff, and across the culture of the organization.
- **During group programming**, ensure the presence of peers, family, friends, and other members of young people's networks to demonstrate and encourage support (when appropriate).

07. Provide holistic support

- **Integrate other support services** (for example, mental health services) into HIV care and support programs, and facilitate a seamless transition and referral process.
- **Ensure that programming** is provided on an individual level, and support youth in navigating health and social systems to build rapport and trust.
- **Strengthen relationships** with other service providers to improve the referral process for medical and social services, in addition to other organizations that support parents, youth, and families LWAH.

08. Provide anti-oppressive practice training for frontline staff

- **Develop training opportunities** for youth workers in anti-oppressive practice and address the social determinants of health when providing support or care to youth LWAH.
- **Use appropriate terms** and be mindful of language (i.e. living with HIV rather than HIV-infected, experiencing substance use rather than drug user).
- **Ensure that the staff** of your organization are representative of the populations you serve and work alongside; young people may feel more connected or able to build rapport more easily with professionals and peers who have similar lived experiences.

HIV Disclosure: Respecting Confidentiality

Practitioners who work alongside youth LWAH must respect each young person's needs and wants regarding privacy and confidentiality about their HIV status and personal health information.

- Never disclose a person's status unless you have their express permission for each circumstance.
- Even when someone discloses in a small, closed group of peers, do not assume that they are comfortable with disclosure in other settings.
- Never identify a program or group publicly as being for youth LWAH.
- Understand your legal and ethical responsibilities, including the standards of practice for your profession and the policies of your organization.

To learn more about HIV disclosure, revisit the [Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network's privacy and disclosure guide for youth](#).