

# ***Practice Brief: A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector***

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Positive Mental Health

# ***Practice Brief: A Framework for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Youth Sector***

*Erasmus+ Project: Promoting positive mental health in the European Youth sector*

## ***Intellectual Output 1***

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# Introduction

As part of the European Youth Goals, young people have identified better mental health and wellbeing as one of their main concerns for young people today ([www.youthgoals.eu](http://www.youthgoals.eu)). The increasingly complex global, economic, socio-cultural and planetary climate presents significant challenges for young people, which are reflected in rising levels of mental health problems and youth suicide.<sup>1,2</sup> Positive mental health and wellbeing and the acquisition of important social and emotional life skills ensure that young people can handle these challenges effectively and flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The youth sector setting is an important one for promoting positive young people's mental health and social and emotional wellbeing by providing a supportive environment for building positive relationships with adults and peers and practicing social and emotional competencies. Although many innovative practices are currently applied in youth settings, there is a lack of a systematic approach for promoting young people's mental health and wellbeing in the European youth sector.

This practice brief provides an overview of a framework for promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in the European youth sector. A framework is a tool that helps to organise ideas to provide a foundation for thinking, communicating and acting.<sup>3</sup> The framework provides the background and theory for promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in the European youth sector. Based on a review of the literature, the framework outlines six domains of social and emotional skills that should be promoted in youth setting: *How I think*, *How I feel*, *How I relate*, *Values*, *Mindsets* and *Identity*. These competencies can be promoted in youth organisations through taught and caught practices. The framework also highlights the importance of engaging young people's intrinsic motivation to encourage social and emotional learning, and outlines the competencies required from youth workers in order to promote positive youth mental health.

The framework was developed as part of the Erasmus+ project *Promoting Positive Mental Health in the European Youth Sector*. The framework, along with consultations with youth workers and young people in Europe, inform the development of a manual and training for youth workers and guidelines for youth organisations in promoting positive youth mental health.







# Background and rationale

## What is positive mental health?

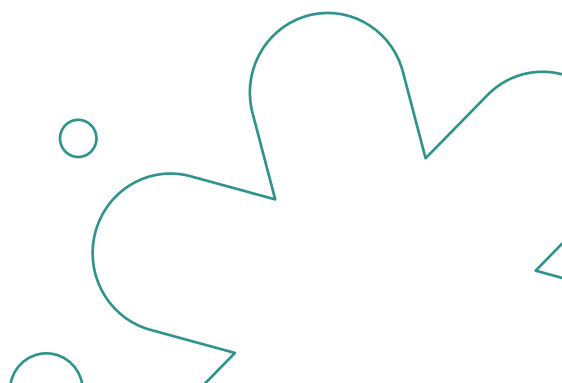
Positive mental health is a state of wellbeing in which the

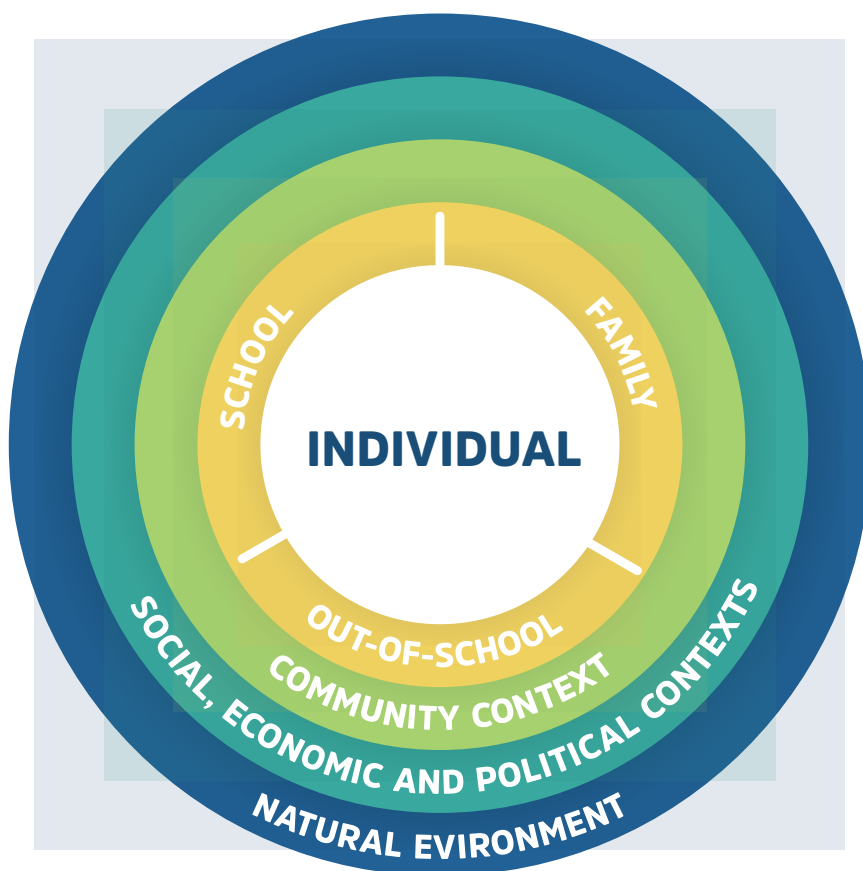
*“individual realises his or her own abilities, can manage the normal stresses of life, can work effectively, and is able to play a role in his or her community”.<sup>4</sup>*

Mental health is, therefore, more than the absence of mental ill-health. It relates to a person’s ability to enjoy life, have positive relationships, function effectively and cope with challenges. Positive mental health incorporates the concept of resilience, the ability to manage negative feelings and life events and to bounce back in the face of adversity.<sup>5,6</sup> Positive mental health is a value in its own right and contributes to an individual’s overall wellbeing and quality of life. Keyes<sup>7</sup> conceptualises positive mental health as flourishing and feeling good in a life that one functions well in.

## Determinants of mental health

Young people’s mental health is determined by multiple biological, psychological, social, cultural and environmental factors, which interact in complex ways (Figure 1). On an individual level, early childhood experiences, such as having a positive attachment<sup>8</sup> or experiencing trauma<sup>9</sup>, can have a long lasting effect on children’s development and wellbeing. Individual level protective factors, such as positive self-esteem and self efficacy, and the ability to manage thoughts and feelings, build healthy relationships and cope with stressful or adverse circumstances, can be developed in young people and will protect their mental health and wellbeing.





**Figure 1.** Determinants of mental health for young people  
(adapted from *Foundations for Young Adult Success* by Nagaoka et al., 2015,  
University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research)

Safe and supportive home, school and out-of-school environments that offer a sense of belonging and social support are all linked to improved mental health and wellbeing in young people. Although parents are probably the most important source of influence in children's and adolescents' lives, research has shown that having a positive relationship with even 'one good adult' can help young people develop resilience and overcome adversity.<sup>10,11</sup>

Finally, societal factors, such as poverty, social disadvantage, human rights abuses, violence and social exclusion have a negative and detrimental impact on the health and mental health of young people.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the effect of nature and climate change on mental health is increasingly being recognised.<sup>13</sup>



## *Youth organisations as a setting for mental health promotion*

Mental health promotion is concerned with building psychosocial strengths, competencies and resources in individuals and communities, and aims to impact on the determinants of mental health to increase positive mental health and reduce inequities.<sup>14</sup> Mental health is created in multiple settings in which people live, learn and play.<sup>15,16</sup> The youth setting provides a unique opportunity for promoting positive youth mental health, particularly for more disadvantaged young people, such as those who have dropped out of mainstream education prematurely and who may experience multiple vulnerabilities. Youth organisations can be seen as having a key role to play in facilitating the development of personal skills in young people, strengthening community networks and support, providing supportive and safe spaces for young people, advocating for youth friendly policy and improving access to mental health promotion and prevention strategies while collaborating with mental health services. Youth organisations play an important part in advocating for the value of youth work and young people in their wider local, regional, national and international contexts. Young people need to be seen as an asset rather than a problem to their families, the community and society as a whole.







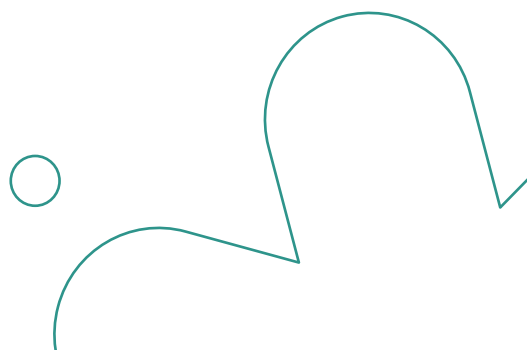


# ***Promoting young people's mental health through social and emotional learning***

In promoting young people's mental health, the development of social and emotional competencies, such as enhancing positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, enhancing the management of feelings, thoughts and behaviours, building positive social relationships and fostering the ability to learn and acquire education is of particular importance.<sup>17,18</sup> Social and emotional learning aims to facilitate social and emotional development in young people thereby supporting young people in realising their potential, enhancing mental health and wellbeing, maximising their participation in education, training and employment, and reducing health and social inequities.<sup>19</sup> Focusing on psychosocial strengths and protective factors rather than behavioural problems and risk factors for mental health is also likely to be more acceptable to young people<sup>20</sup>, and may relieve some of the stigma related to mental health problems.

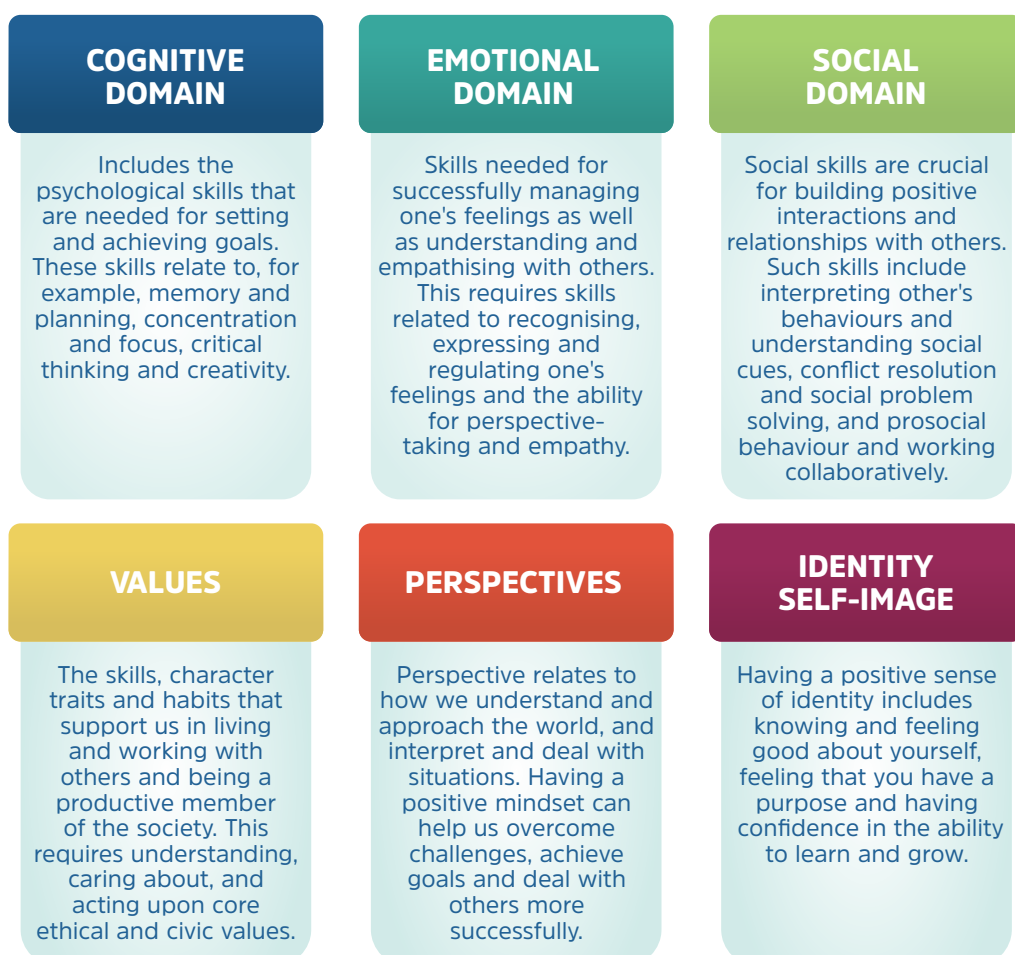
## ***What does the evidence say?***

A number studies and meta-analyses have demonstrated the positive effects of social and emotional learning interventions on young peoples' social and emotional skills, positive behaviours, mental wellbeing and academic outcomes.<sup>21-24</sup> A review of social and emotional learning programmes delivered in youth settings in the UK found support for the implementation of youth programmes applying a range of approaches, including creative arts, sports, outdoor and adventure activities, mentoring, and engagement in community and social action projects.<sup>24,25</sup> These interventions were shown to lead to promising positive outcomes for young people, including improved self-esteem, social skills, reduced behaviour problems and greater engagement in school and society.



## Defining social and emotional skills

Social and emotional competencies include the skills, knowledge, attitudes that individuals require in order to thrive and navigate through one's life.<sup>26</sup> Multiple frameworks exist that identify a range of social and emotional competencies that are important for young people's development.<sup>27</sup> Based on these frameworks, social and emotional skills can be divided into six overarching domains (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Six domains of social and emotional skills  
(adapted from <http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu>)





# ***Theoretical framework for promoting positive youth mental health***

This framework outlines the competencies that should be promoted in young people in order to support their positive mental health. The framework was developed based on a review of the literature on social and emotional learning frameworks and best practice guidelines in promoting positive mental health in youth settings. It emphasises that young people's social and emotional development is supported within the wider social, political and cultural context in which young people live their lives.

The framework positions that in order for young people to flourish and enjoy life, they need to have a set of cognitive (**How I think**), emotional (**How I feel**) and social skills (**How I relate to others**), as well as a positive outlook on life (**Mindsets**), healthy sense of **identity** and strong **values** and character (Figure 3). These domains are centred on the core concept of the observing self (**I am**), an awareness of oneself, one's thoughts and feelings.<sup>28,29</sup> The observing self does not change, but simply experiences, without judgement, what is happening within and around oneself. This awareness is crucial for taking a step back, and not identifying with unhelpful emotions or thoughts regarding private events<sup>30</sup> and for promoting contact with the present moment. Becoming aware of the observing self is the core focus of mindfulness-based strategies.<sup>31</sup>

The cognitive, emotional and social domains are presented at the core of the framework, as the development of these domains starts in childhood and early adolescence and forms the basis for the positive development of values, identity and mindsets. However, all of these domains are interlinked, where for example, valuing diversity affects how we relate to others, and on the other hand, developing social awareness can facilitate the development of more prosocial values.





**Figure 3.** Framework for promoting positive mental health among young people  
(authors' compilation)

## *Social and emotional competencies*

Examples of competencies under each of the six domains are presented in Table 1 below. This list is not exhaustive, and the relevance of specific competencies is dependent on the wider social and cultural context and the developmental stage of the young people. Young people and youth workers should identify themselves, which competencies are relevant to them. Example strategies of promoting specific social and emotional skills in youth organisations can be found in Appendix 1.

| Domain                  | Competencies   |
|-------------------------|--|
| How I think?            | Critical Thinking<br>Goal setting<br>Decision making skills<br>Creativity<br>Making your own decisions<br>Awareness of personal achievements |
| How I feel?             | Recognising and labelling emotions<br>Expressing and managing feelings<br>Empathy  |
| How I relate to others? | Relationship skills<br>Communication skills<br>Conflict resolution and problem solving<br>Team working                                       |
| Values                  | Valuing diversity and human rights<br>Respecting rule of law<br>Desire to perform to one's highest potential                                 |
| Mindsets                | Optimism<br>Openness<br>Gratitude  |
| Identity                | Self-knowledge<br>Self-esteem<br>Self-efficacy<br>Sense of purpose<br>Being aware of and valuing other identities                            |

**Table 1.** Examples of competencies under the six domains

## *How are these competencies promoted in youth organisations?*

There is a close link between the life skills facilitated in youth settings and the skills taught through social and emotional learning practices. Four common principles have been found to underpin both high-quality youth setting practices and social and emotional learning practices.<sup>32</sup> These common principles demonstrate the potential for strong links between social and emotional learning and youth setting practices.



## Four common principles of social and emotional learning practices

1. Programmes provide a safe and positive environment for young people and adults.
2. Programmes support the development of high quality relationships between young people and adults.
3. Programmes are developmentally appropriate, relevant and engaging for young people.
4. Programmes provide opportunities for direct skill building.

**Table 2.** Principles of social and emotional learning practices (Jones et al., 2017)

Furthermore, social and emotional learning practices are most effective when they use a systematic and explicit approach to teaching social and emotional skills.<sup>21</sup> This approach is summed up by four practices, described by the acronym S.A.F.E., as follows:

- S** *Sequenced activities to develop social and emotional competencies in a step-by-step fashion.*
- A** *Active forms of learning.*
- F** *Focused attention on social and emotional competencies development.*
- E** *Explicit about which social and emotional competencies targeted.*

It is important that all four elements of effective practices work in combination with each other rather than as independent factors.

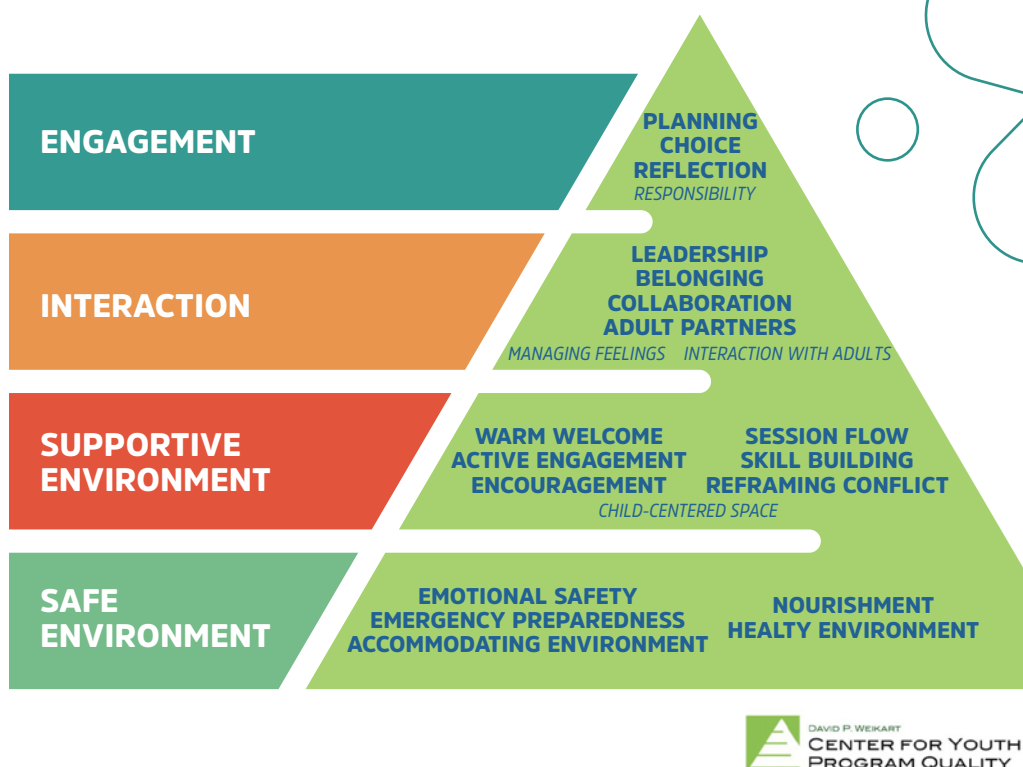
## *Developing social and emotional competencies: taught or caught?*

Youth workers play an important role in the social and emotional development of young people, however, the learning of these skills does not happen by accident. In youth settings, it is important that opportunities are provided for social and emotional competences to be both taught and caught.<sup>33</sup> Designed learning experiences, which teach young people about specific social and emotional skills, are considered taught practices. This can be done either through comprehensive programmes that teach social and emotional skills through structured lesson blocks, (e.g. the MindOut social and emotional learning pro-



gramme) or by integrating the teaching of social and emotional skills into the daily practices of the youth setting.

On the other hand, the learning environment of the youth setting can provide opportunities for social and emotional competencies to be caught. The practices that staff can carry out in order to promote a positive learning environment for young people can be categorised into four levels (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Four levels of staff practices that promote a positive learning environment  
(adopted from Smith, et al. (2012). *Continuous quality improvement in afterschool settings: impact findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention study*. The Forum for Youth Investment, Washington, DC.)



## Engaging young people in social and emotional learning

In order to achieve meaningful participation and the transfer of skills to real life settings, it is important to ensure that young people consider the skills taught to be relevant to their goals and values, thus increasing their motivation to learn these skills.<sup>34</sup> Young people are more likely to engage in social and emotional learning if they are intrinsically motivated, i.e. engaging in an activity because they want to, rather than because it is required of them.<sup>35</sup> This can be done by demonstrating how the skills taught can be used to contribute to wider social issues relevant to young people and providing young people with opportunities to practice skills in hands-on projects that improve their communities.<sup>36</sup>

*“The program didn’t imply that “you need skills because there is something wrong with you.” Instead, it began with the assumption that young people want to matter—they want to do something of consequence for the world around them, and they want to have a coherent life story.”<sup>34</sup>*

## Youth worker competencies

Youth workers need a set of competencies to effectively promote the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Awareness of these competencies can assist in identifying areas of development for staff and assessing the quality of social and emotional learning practices.<sup>37</sup> Competencies required to promote positive mental health and wellbeing among young people have been identified by the Council of Europe and Orygen in Australia<sup>38,39</sup> and these are shown in Table 3.



### Youth worker competencies for youth mental health

- Knowledge of positive mental health and its determinants for young people
- Confidence and skills in engaging young people in talking about their mental health
- Building relationships with young people based on confidentiality, respect and trust
- Addressing stigma
- Valuing diversity and cultural differences in understanding and addressing mental health and wellbeing
- Collaborating with families and other services to support young people's mental health needs
- Dealing with challenging situations
- Implementing and evaluating evidence-based strategies to promote young people's mental health and wellbeing
- Self-management strategies

**Table 3.** Youth worker competencies for youth mental health



# Conclusions

This report introduced a theoretical framework for promoting positive youth mental health in the European youth sector. This framework is used as a basis for developing a practical manual for youth workers and youth organisations for promoting positive youth mental health. Consultations with youth workers and young people also guide the development of these resources.

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## **Appendix 1. Example strategies for promoting social and emotional skills**

### **Domain: How I think Skill: Goal setting**

The MindOut Social and Emotional Learning Programme for youth settings (Dowling et al., 2019) is based on the CASEL Framework for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2003). Effective goal setting is promoted in the MindOut programme by using the SMART Model for goal setting (Doran, 1981). Young people are asked to identify a personal goal that they would want to achieve, and then reflect on whether the goal is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic, Time-framed), and discuss achieving this goal with other young people.

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### **Domain: Mindsets Skill: Gratitude**

The Character Lab have created a social and emotional skills framework that provides guidance on how to promote the development of a range of character strengths by Modeling, Celebrating and Enabling. For example, gratitude, the appreciation of what you have been given and the desire to reciprocate, can be encouraged in others by highlighting positive aspects of difficult situations (Model it), acknowledging when someone demonstrates gratitude (Celebrate it), and by establishing practices such as sharing one good thing that happened that day at meal time (Enable it). Specific activities for improving gratitude include writing a gratitude journal, noticing three good things that happen every day and writing a gratitude letter to someone you are thankful for. For further information, please see [www.characterlab.org](http://www.characterlab.org)

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### **Domain: How I relate to others Skill: Team work**

Teamwork, the ability to coordinate actions and collaborate with others, is identified as one of six domains of social and emotional competencies in the Preparing Youth to Thrive social and emotional learning guide (Smith et al., 2016). The guide identifies Key Youth Experiences and Staff Practices to promote this competency. The related youth experiences include providing opportunities to participate in teams that work towards a shared goal and practicing effective communication skills (e.g. taking turns, active listening, respectful disagreement). Staff practices that promote team working include providing norms and structure for effective group work, modelling teamwork skills and intervening when needed to foster successful collaboration. For more information, please see: [www.selpractices.org](http://www.selpractices.org)

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