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# SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

A proposed service delivery model



## OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NEED ENHANCED EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS

The term “soft skills” describes a range of skills related to emotional intelligence, interpersonal abilities, and personal traits or attributes favourably associated with employment success. Soft skills such as problem solving, collaboration, creativity, and adaptability are recognized by employers as critical for employment success and are among the top sought-after skills, yet are reported as often lacking in younger job candidates. Among Opportunity youth, there is emerging evidence that a lack of soft skills may be one of the key barriers limiting their employment success.

The value of soft skills is not promoted *in place* of technical or job-specific skills, but rather *in addition* to these, to enhance employment opportunities. Employment-specific interventions alone are unlikely to be sufficient for Opportunity youth and may need to be accompanied by support to access health resources, mental health supports, housing services, or other social services.

## WHO ARE “OPPORTUNITY YOUTH”?

Young people who are not enrolled in school or vocational training and not currently employed, and who are facing barriers to education and/or employment.

The term “Opportunity youth” is increasingly preferred to “NEET” (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) since it better represents the opportunities these youth may be actively seeking (i.e., volunteering, transitioning from school to work), and the opportunity for society to find ways to help them succeed.



## GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO WORKING WITH OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

### 01 Build relationships

- Strong and trusting relationships with youth
- Wide network and close working relationship with local employers

### 02 Address essential needs to support safety and stability

- Any required essential needs (i.e., housing, counselling) are assessed and addressed as much as possible in-house or through referral

### 03 Provide flexible, client-centred programming

- Skill development is non-linear
- Adaptations recognize and allow for diverse needs of each individual

### 04 Provide strength-based and capacity-building approach

- Skill assessment process identifies, builds on and enhances the knowledge, capabilities and skill sets of each individual

### 05 Celebrate all forms of success

- Wider and multiple definitions of success can afford youth an opportunity to celebrate milestones of all sizes

### 06 Leave the door open for continued support

- Follow-up program components can allow for continued support for youth and re-engagement with needed services

## HOW ORGANIZATIONS EMBED SOFT SKILLS TRAINING INTO THEIR PROGRAMMING

Organizations embedding soft skills training into their programming emphasized the importance of learning these skills in practical contexts and prioritizing applied learning with youth.

Skills training is an important part of positive youth development and can be a key connection to community supports. Dedicating program time to checking in on overall well-being and mental health can give youth a chance to seek help and resources that can have lasting benefits for their development and continued engagement in skills training.

Program flexibility and accessibility can be enhanced by providing options for in-person, online, or hybrid programs depending on individual circumstances, while also aligning with the growing demands of the 21st century workforce.

Informed by the latest evidence on the value of soft skills in the modern economy, including a focus group discussion with youth and interviews with service providers and agency staff, we developed an employment service delivery model for embedding soft skills development within employment and training programs working with Opportunity youth. The model (on the next page) provides recommendations to employment and training providers and other organizations working with youth for operationalizing soft skills training within their programming. It highlights strategies and activities that can be used throughout program delivery, from intake and assessment to program completion and follow-up.

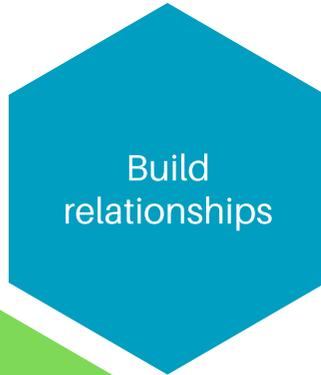
*“Feeling like they truly want to form a connection is so important. Honestly, I feel the most encouraged when working with someone who is patient with me and supports, understands my situation. Someone who says, ‘let me connect you with other resources, let me find out who can help you.’”*

– Youth focus group participant

# SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT WITH OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

*"I have what I need to move forward with programming"*

- Connect youth with supports to meet basic needs (e.g., housing, food, mental health)
- Ensure process is flexible, strength-based, and builds trust
- Assess for existing soft skills and build them into action plan



*"I feel safe to explore my skills"*

- Ensure programming is youth-centered and offered in safe learning environments
- Give youth opportunities to practice skills in many different contexts
- Model skills expected of youth



## Guiding Principles



- Mark and celebrate progress towards goals and milestones
- Provide opportunities for continued involvement as graduate or peer
- Keep an open door for ongoing supports and communication



- Maintain close relationships with both youth and employers
- Where possible, negotiate placements in workplaces where soft skills can be learned, applied, and refined
- Seek feedback from employers and offer ongoing supports



*"I feel confident and independent"*

*"I feel supported and motivated to work"*