



Youth Leadership **InIt**iative Communication Guidelines

The Complexity of Navigating Professional and Personal Relationships and the Importance of Boundaries in Youth Development Work

I. INTRODUCTION

This document outlines expectations for InIt Program staff and volunteers regarding appropriate communications with youth delegates, including maintaining professional boundaries. Below the guidelines you will find the rationale for creating them, including an exploration of the multiple roles of youth workers and the importance of boundaries when involved in youth development work.

II. INIT PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES AND COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

It is expected that staff members' and volunteers' interactions with delegates are at all times appropriate and professional. The following guidelines were established to help InIt program staff and volunteers create healthy professional boundaries with InIt delegates both during and after Immersion Week. **As a condition of volunteering with InIt, volunteers must read, understand, and agree to abide by the following guidelines.**

➤ **Remember that InIt is for and about the delegates**

Immersion Week is an intense experience for adults, too, especially if it's their first time participating. Staff and volunteers can get wrapped up in their own journey of self-discovery and social consciousness. While it's natural to reflect and learn throughout the week, keep the focus on the youth. Throughout the week, you should listen WAY more than you talk. This holds for large group workshops, small discussion groups, and informal time during meals, free time, and in the dorms. Here are a few specific tips:

- During large group workshops, if you are not the facilitator, make sure all youth who want to speak have gotten the opportunity to do so before sharing your opinion or story.
- When facilitating your discussion group, let the youth respond to one another before stepping in.

➤ **Avoid one-on-one interactions behind closed doors**

If you are behind a closed door, be sure there is always more than one youth or more than one adult present at all times. If a delegate needs to speak to you in private, find a quiet indoor or outdoor place that is in close proximity to where other youth and/or adults are gathered. Alternatively, speak with the youth in an indoor room that has a glass door or wall.

➤ **Set limits on how much personal information you disclose**

Sharing personal information that is relevant to the issues and themes discussed during Immersion Week and at program days can help create an environment of trust, open communication, and “Real Talk.” Casual conversation about current events and common interests can help build rapport, too. However, sharing too much (even relevant) personal information and/or sharing non-relevant information that is too personal can blur the lines of professionalism. Here are a few tips:

- During Immersion Week, carefully consider during how many large group workshops you share your personal experiences and stories at length. Sharing once or twice is likely sufficient for building trust and modeling “Real Talk.”
- During more informal hang out times and even when you’re really tired, don’t forget that you’re still an adult in charge. It’s not appropriate to engage in gossip about other young people or talk badly about other InIt staff or volunteers.
- Talking about your relationship woes or other deeply personal problems might create a dynamic where the youth feel like they need to support you.
- Avoid sharing something personal for shock value or to try to relate to the youth in an inappropriate way (e.g. talking about how much you used to party in college). Find more meaningful ways to build rapport.

➤ **Communicate with intention**

Communicating with youth over text can result in youth viewing a volunteer less as a professional and more as a friend. Social media further blurs professional boundaries. Ed Finkel writes, “[T]he explosion of social media sites, led by Facebook... has added ease and casualness that’s stretched the definition of the word friend and has simplified sharing pictures, descriptions and accounts of people’s personal lives, which heretofore would have been much more cumbersome — and required much more intentional action.”

InIt staff and volunteers should prioritize in-person communication with delegates whenever possible. Email can also be an effective way of communicating with delegates, particularly to share resources and provide advice and support related to college admissions or professional networking. Below are some more specific guidelines for different methods of communicating with delegates:

- Think carefully before sharing your work or personal email address with delegates. Doing so should feel like making a contract with the youth that you will answer the emails you receive from them in a timely manner.
- Limit email correspondence to youth-initiated messages and to content related to topics discussed in InIt and educational and professional development.
- If you would rather not share your email address, you might explain that you are excited to connect with them in person during the program days or through the YW-administered InIt Program Facebook page.
- If you have a resource you’d like to share with the delegates, post it on the InIt Program Facebook page or email it to the Program Manager or Coordinator to disseminate via email.
- Do not share your personal cell phone number with delegates.

- Avoid “friending” delegates on Facebook or otherwise engaging directly with youth on social media sites using your personal profile. See InIt’s Social Media Policy – adherence to which is a condition of volunteering with InIt – for more information.

➤ **Non-negotiable rules for adult-youth interactions.**

Just as we create “non-negotiables” for the delegates, there are non-negotiables for InIt program staff and volunteers regarding interaction with delegates. Not adhering to the following rules will result in YW Boston asking the person to no longer volunteer with InIt.

- Do not give money to youth
- Do not bring a young person to your house
- Do not lie to protect a young person
- Do not make suggestive comments to a young person
- Do not engage in sexual relations or flirty behavior with a young person

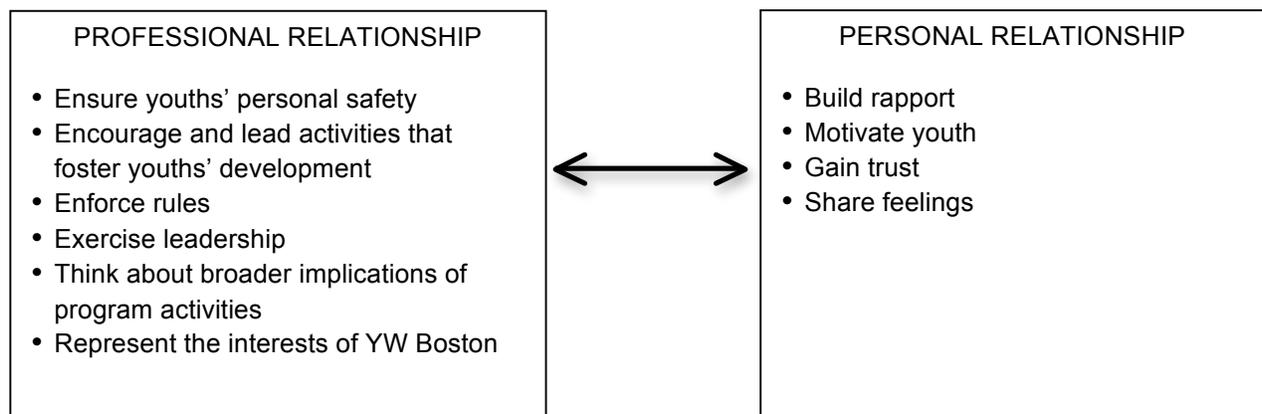
Note:

The InIt Program Manager, Program Coordinator, and Program Assistant have a different relationship with the delegates than InIt program volunteers or even other YW staff members. InIt staff are able to make themselves more available to the youth. In addition, they work with and see delegates on a very regular basis throughout the program year. While most of the boundaries and communications guidelines and all of the non-negotiable rules still stand, the InIt staff have more license regarding communicating with delegates over email and text. It is appropriate for InIt program staff to communicate with delegates over email or text to provide program information, schedule meetings, or check in as they see fit.

III. THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM LEADERS

Youth development programs provide unique opportunities for youth-adult engagement. Compared to workplaces, schools, and homes, youth programs often have less of a hierarchy and offer more room for negotiation of status among youth and adults. In addition, these contexts can serve as a transition to professional worlds and adult life. As a result, youth programs are sometimes referred to as “intermediate spaces” or “border zones” or described as serving a “bridging function” (Walker, 2011).

Working in this unique environment can be incredibly rewarding but is not without challenges, including the tension of relating to youth in both professional and personal ways. The diagram below summarizes some components of this duality. On one hand, youth workers have a responsibility to relate to youth within professional standards from a position of authority. On the other hand, youth workers are often effective in their jobs by relating to youth in more personal and informal ways.



To effectively relate to youth in both professional and personal ways, youth workers usually adopt different roles in order to respond to the needs of a given youth or the group in a particular instance. Kathrin C. Walker, PhD, is a research associate at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Through interviews with youth and youth workers she identified five types of roles frequently played by youth workers: friend, parent, mentor, teacher, and boss. Table 1 summarizes ways in which youth workers fulfill each of these roles and the ways in which they do not.

Walker states:

[Youth workers'] role as a friend allowed them to build trust and sustain personal relationships with the youth. In a parent role, they cultivated an emotional closeness that afforded them ability to set limits and exert authority when needed. As respected adults in the role of mentor, they influenced youth by offering wise judgment and emotional support. As teacher and boss, they possess authoritative knowledge and expertise, and they offered instrumental support to enhance both learning and performance. **These program leaders embodied elements of archetypal reciprocal roles, yet the role relationships they cultivated with the youth appeared to be more nuanced.**

Indeed, an important distinction from friendships among peers is that there is not a mutual reciprocity in the "friendship" between a youth worker and a youth; rather, the relationship is primarily focused on the lives and concerns of the youth. Likewise, a parent-type relationship provides for a combination of emotional closeness and the ability to provide structure and discipline that is effective in youth work. Yet both the intimacy and authority are not as strong as what youth experience with parents.

Through her interviews, Walker identified several techniques employed by youth workers to navigate complicated relationships with youth, including building trust, being responsive to youth and context, and being clear and consistent. These techniques allowed the youth workers the latitude to switch roles as needed without causing the youth to feel undermined.

Table 1.

	How youth workers fulfill this role	How youth workers do NOT fulfill this role
FRIEND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enjoy mutual regard ○ Want to spend time together ○ Have fun ○ Act as source of social support ○ Offer place to explore new identities ○ Provide means for facilitating autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have a more nuanced relationship, reflecting the adult's obligation to maintain a professional stance ○ Have asymmetrical relationships (no mutual reciprocity as with peer friendships) ○ Engage in relationships that are primarily for and about the youth's lives and concerns
PARENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintain emotional bonds ○ Exercise benevolent authority ○ Engage in disciplinary action ○ Serve as social and emotional resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintain emotional bonds that are not as strong as what youth experience with parents ○ Exercise authority that is not as influential as what youth experience with parents
MENTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Are older, more experienced ○ Provide guidance, instruction, and encouragement ○ Influence youth through wisdom and experience ○ Provide emotional support ○ Advocate on behalf of youth ○ Seen as a valued additional resource ○ Have asymmetrical relationship with youth (no equal reciprocity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Might engage in the relationship for a more discrete period of time

TEACHER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide instructional support to enhance learning ○ Share knowledge and expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have a less formal and hierarchical relationship with youth ○ Provide more emotional support ○ Have more opportunities to engage in informal conversations and enjoyable activities
BOSS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide direction ○ Supervise work ○ Hold youth accountable to expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have less power ○ Manage programs in which youth are often not paid to participate

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT WORK

As stated above, youth workers are often effective in their jobs by relating to youth in more personal and informal ways (Walker and Larson, 2006). At the same time, youth workers have myriad other responsibilities, such as ensuring youths’ safety, meeting program goals, and exerting authority as needed. Setting clear boundaries helps youth workers build relationships with youth while also meeting their other professional obligations. Below are examples of how boundaries can play an important role in meeting other InIt program and youth development goals.

Create a supportive environment

The InIt program prioritizes creating an environment in which youth feel supported by their peers and adults to engage in “Real Talk”; share their feelings, thoughts, and stories; and ask questions that help them gain a better understanding of other people’s identities and experiences. Adult staff and volunteers create such an environment, in part, by sharing their own personal experiences. Doing so helps build rapport and trust with the youth and also provides opportunities to teach concepts and model behaviors. At the same time, youth workers have a professional obligation to set appropriate boundaries regarding what they share. InIt staff and volunteers should be careful not to take up too much space because ultimately the program is for and about the youth. A delegate shouldn’t feel a need or obligation to provide support to a staff member or volunteer because the adult disclosed too much personal information (Walker and Larson, 2006; Ali-Coleman, 2008).

Ensure youths’ safety

Related to creating a supportive environment is ensuring that all youth feel safe. Fostering an environment in which youth feel free to speak their mind does not mean that adults don’t have a responsibility to set parameters for discussion. Just as we set ground rules to be respectful and use “I” statements, we can set ground rules around the use of graphic language. InIt staff and volunteers should explain and model that stories can be really powerful even if we leave out violent details. We are not doing this to censor or sanitize but rather to provide a safe environment for people who have experienced trauma and for whom graphic and violent language can be triggering.

Meet youth where they are developmentally

The InIt program demonstrates that young people are ready to tackle emotionally heavy issues and engage in intellectually stimulating conversation. Regarding the general developmental characteristics of youth ages 15-18, the Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota explains that teenagers are mastering abstract thinking. Instead of taking what they’re told at face value, they interpret how things are based on what they see, feel, and experience. Socially, they want to be treated with respect and feel more like adults. Emotionally, they are gaining confidence and autonomy. While it’s a period of growth and maturity for most adolescents, “the pathways that will help them do things like make positive choices, have healthy relationships, regulate their emotions and reactions, and plan ahead are actually in the process of being hardwired.” As a result, adults have an important role to play to “help them establish healthy, appropriate

behavior, boundaries, and expectations.” As noted by psychologist David Walsh, author of *Why Do they Act that Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*:

Adolescent brains get the gas before the brakes. Puberty gives adolescents a body that looks like an adult’s and a brain that is prone to wild fluctuations and powerful surges. The brain’s gas pedal is ready for a NASCAR-paced adulthood. But...the brain’s got the brakes of a Model T... Impulsiveness and risk taking come with the adolescent territory. So [supportive adults] have to function as the brakes—in part by setting and enforcing reasonable boundaries—until the teen brain installs its own set.

Exercise leadership

Sharing common interests, talking, joking around, and playing games are great ways to build rapport with youth. However, spending too much time in this role or not maintaining a degree of professional distance in friendships with youth makes it difficult to act with authority when needed. InIt staff and volunteers have the important responsibilities of setting limits, enforcing rules, and ensuring that youth are learning and developing skills. If clear boundaries aren’t maintained, a youth worker’s ability to switch to the role of an adult in charge can be undermined.

Develop sustained, positive youth- adult relationships

While developing a strong personal bond with a youth may seem like the highest priority during a difficult situation, having clear boundaries help youth workers think bigger picture about the long-term wellbeing of the youth with whom they work. We encourage InIt volunteers to extend their participation with the program beyond Immersion Week. Participating in the program days allows volunteers to demonstrate a more sustained commitment to the delegates and continue to develop a meaningful relationship by working together toward common goals. And for those volunteers who are unable to continue participation throughout the program year, establishing boundaries is important so that youth do not think of them as a long-term support they can rely on. Additionally, not maintaining boundaries makes it more difficult for those who are continuing with the program to fulfill their professional obligations. According to Khadijah Ali-Coleman of So Our Youth Aspire:

When we blur those boundaries and give youth the false idea that we are their friend and on equal stance when it comes to confiding and sharing, then we are doing a disservice to that young person. If we are more than an unbiased youth worker and now their friend who they can chat with and who, in turn, chats and shares with them, then that young person must now reciprocate with being someone who provides an ear to listen to for you. We no longer are able to provide services, supports and opportunities to young people once we have diluted our role as a youth worker. We also make it harder for our colleagues who understand and implement professional boundaries yet must make amends for [others’] unprofessionalism.

Align InIt with youth development best practices

InIt strives to apply youth development best practices in all stages of program development and implementation. The Association of Child and Youth Care Practice has established competencies for Professional Child & Youth Work Practitioners, several of which relate to professional boundaries:

- Recognize and assess own needs and feelings and keep them in perspective when professionally engaged
- Develop relationships with children, youth and families that are caring, purposeful, goal-directed and rehabilitative in nature; limiting these relationships to the delivery of specific services
- Set, maintain, and communicate appropriate personal and professional boundaries

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