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THE YOUTH PROTECTION ISSUE



Youth Mental Health: Responsibilities and Opportunities for Nonprofits

By Rachel Sams

This article contains information about how to identify and respond to signs of mental health issues and suicide risk in young people.

Have you ever looked into the eyes of a young person your nonprofit serves and seen that they were hurting?

What did you do? If it hasn't happened yet, what would you do?

Any nonprofit employee who works with youth will confront a tough question: is this young person's behavior a natural response to the developmental challenges

of growing up, or is it a sign that they are experiencing a mental health challenge?

Youth-serving nonprofits are more likely to face that question now than ever before. An increasing number of young people faced mental health issues even before the pandemic, studies show. The isolation of COVID took a toll on more young people's mental health. Many youth-serving nonprofits are restarting or rebuilding programs scaled back or shuttered during COVID. Those nonprofit

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providers might be the first to spot youth mental health issues that didn't get noticed at home or school as caregivers and educators faced their own challenges.

It's especially important now for youth-serving nonprofits to watch for and respond to signs that young people they serve experience mental health issues or thoughts of suicide. Youth-serving nonprofits face risks if they don't respond appropriately to warning signs that someone on their watch may harm themselves or others. Nonprofits that serve youth also have a powerful opportunity to help create community and individual supports that can assist young people in building positive mental wellness.

For all young people, adolescence brings heightened risk for mental health issues. As youth approach adolescence, they face huge developmental changes. They must navigate the changes in their bodies, forge their identity, and build a value system. And youth face challenges from peer pressure to substance misuse.

The risks to young people mounted in the 21st century, including new threats from cyberbullying, declining family and social support, and the pressures of social media, according to [a study by Holly R. Farley published in Nursing2022](#). All that took place even before the COVID pandemic, which early studies show took a toll on young people's mental health. U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory in December [calling for a swift and coordinated response](#) to the nation's youth mental health crisis.

Stressors on youth mounted during the pandemic. More than 140,000 American young people have experienced the death of a parent or grandparent caregiver due to COVID, according to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). And young people of color faced up to 4.5 times the risk of losing a

caregiver to COVID, compared to other children.

A [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) study found that parents' income insecurity and poor mental health during the pandemic may have hurt children's mental health and could be associated with a possible rise in child abuse. Families of color faced more economic setbacks during the pandemic: Hispanic women and immigrants faced the highest impact of job loss, the Pew Research Center found.

Reports of child abuse and related emergency room visits dropped during the pandemic, but experts note that cases may have gone unreported while schools and nonprofit programs were shut down or virtual. School personnel and others who work with youth play key roles in identifying and reporting child abuse.

Nonprofits that work with young people face a unique set of risks and responsibilities. As the mental health risks to young people have mounted, so have the risks youth-serving nonprofits must consider. If a young person harms themselves or others due to a mental health issue while under a nonprofit's supervision, the nonprofit could face legal and reputational risks.

Youth-serving nonprofits can't anticipate every issue that could arise for young people under their supervision. But they can and must develop and follow clear guidelines for how to recognize and respond to signs that young people they serve are in mental distress. This work is essential to youth-serving nonprofits' mission to provide support and understanding and make a difference in the lives of the young people they serve.

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“Nonprofits that serve youth have a powerful opportunity to help create community and individual supports that can assist young people in building positive mental health.”

How to identify mental health warning signs in youth

It can be especially difficult to know when younger children struggle with their mental health. But the [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#) says if these symptoms persist and interfere with a child’s daily activities, they should see a health professional:

- Frequent tantrums or intense irritability
- Frequent talk about fears or worries
- Regularly complains of stomachaches or headaches with no known medical cause
- Constantly moves around and seems unable to sit quietly (unless they’re watching videos or playing video games)
- Sleeps too much or too little, often has nightmares, or seems sleepy during the day
- Doesn’t show interest in playing with other children or has difficulty making friends

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“More than 140,000 American young people have experienced the death of a parent or grandparent caregiver due to COVID, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.”

- Struggles academically or experienced a recent decline in grades
- Repeats actions or checks things many times out of fear that something bad may happen

NIMH says older children may benefit from having a health professional evaluate their mental health if they:

- Lose interest in things they used to enjoy
- Have low energy
- Sleep too much or too little, or seem sleepy throughout the day
- Increasingly spend time alone and avoid social activities with friends or family
- Diet or exercise excessively, or fear gaining weight
- Engage in self-harm behaviors (like cutting or burning their skin)
- Misuse substances (like smoking or using alcohol or drugs)
- Engage in risky or destructive behavior alone or with friends
- Have periods of highly elevated energy and activity, and require much less sleep than usual
- Say they think someone is trying to control their mind or that they hear things other people can't hear
- Have thoughts of suicide

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Identifying and responding to suicidal ideation

Suicide is the leading cause of death among school-age young people, according to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). But as NASP points out, suicide is preventable. Staff at youth-serving nonprofits might be the first to notice a child is struggling. When they do, they must alert caregivers right away.

Factors that increase a child's risk of having suicidal thoughts include mental health issues and substance misuse; family stress or dysfunction; environmental risks, including firearms in the home; and crises like the death of a loved one, physical or sexual abuse, or family violence.

Young people who have suicidal thoughts probably won't seek help directly, NASP says, but caring adults or peers can

spot warning signs and take immediate action to keep the child safe. Those signs include:

- Changes in behavior, appearance, thoughts, or feelings
- Preoccupation with death
- Making arrangements like funeral planning, writing a will, or giving away beloved possessions
- Threats of suicide, either direct ("I'm going to kill myself") or indirect ("I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up.")
- Suicide notes or plans, including online postings
- Previous suicidal behavior

If a child under a youth-serving nonprofit's supervision shows signs that they might be considering suicide, staffers should remain calm and ask the child directly if they are thinking of suicide, NASP says. Show that you're concerned

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for the child’s well-being and don’t make accusations. Listen. Let them know they can get help for what they are going through and they don’t have to feel this way forever. Supervise the young person at all times and ensure they aren’t alone. Remove any possible means for self-harm. Never agree to keep a child’s suicidal thoughts a secret. Inform the child’s caregivers right away. Call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) and get immediate help from mental health or medical professionals or take the child to an emergency room.

How to address mental health risks of working with youth

Make a plan. Don’t wait for a crisis to create a framework for how your nonprofit will respond when a youth in your care shows signs of mental distress.

Involve youth, their families, and the community in your plan. Ask the young people you serve and their parents and caregivers for input on how your nonprofit should screen for and respond to mental health issues. This process could start with a prompt as simple as: “If you or your friend was depressed or thinking of hurting themselves, what would you want us to do or not do?” Make sure parents and caregivers know how to connect with staff at your organization, and how to support your mental health screening program if they have the time and interest. Offer training and educational materials on youth mental health to parents and caregivers. Make the interaction you seek serve the schedules of parents and caregivers, and make it culturally sensitive to all. Ensure youth and families have access to multicultural and multilingual staff and training materials.

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Meet young people where they are. Build a foundation in non-emergent situations where youth are encouraged to speak openly about difficult topics in their lives, and are not judged when they do so. Engage in informal conversations to help staff understand young people's circumstances and mental state. In *Nursing2022*, [Holly Farley](#) recommends asking open-ended questions that show interest and build rapport, like, "What do you enjoy doing outside of school?" or, "Tell me about your friends." Listen and give the young person plenty of time to answer. Let them know it's okay to struggle and that you're proud of them for trying their best in hard circumstances.

Understand reporting and privacy requirements. Know who has legal authority for the children in

your nonprofit's care. If a young person threatens harm to themselves or others, you'll typically need to obtain informed consent from their legal guardian to share information about that threat with others, according to [Allied World](#). And know your state's regulations and case law – in some cases, a duty to warn of violent threats may supersede privacy rights under state law.

Build a strong community to support youth at every stage of their journey

Working with youth brings unique joys and challenges. Bearing witness to the pressures young people face can feel overwhelming. Nonprofit staff should engage in open conversation with each other about this to normalize the struggles and create approaches and boundaries that [decrease the risk of organizational trauma](#).

“Build a foundation in non-emergent situations where youth are encouraged to speak openly about difficult topics in their lives, and are not judged when they do so.”

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But just as nonprofit staff have a front-row seat to the difficulties young people face, they have a powerful opportunity to help build a more supportive world for youth. Many “protective factors” can support young people’s mental health. Youth-serving nonprofits can provide or strengthen protective factors across multiple dimensions of a young person’s life.

For individual young people, positive physical development, academic or intellectual development, high self-esteem, the ability to regulate emotions, good coping and problem-solving skills, and multiple connections with school, peers, athletics, employment, religion, and culture can benefit mental health, [according to youth.gov](https://www.youth.gov).

Families can help youth by providing supportive relationships, clear expectations for behavior and values, and structure, limits, rules, and predictability. Nonprofits can provide help to families as they work to create these supports for youth.

And schools, neighborhoods, and the community can foster youth mental wellness through mentorship and support to develop skills and interests; opportunities for school and community engagement; positive norms; clear

expectations for behavior; and physical and psychological safety. Psychological safety means an environment in which a child feels they won’t be humiliated or punished for speaking up about something.

Youth-serving nonprofits constitute one piece of a child’s complex world. Within that space, you have the possibility for great influence.

I’m so proud of you for telling me you’re going through a hard time.

You don’t have to feel this way forever.

People care about you and want to help.

Your nonprofit’s words and actions matter. Build the foundation now to navigate challenging situations when they arise.

If you or someone you know is suicidal, get help immediately via 911, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK or the Crisis Text Line (text “HOME” to 741741).

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer with the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Reach out to her with questions or feedback on this article at 703-777-3504 or rachel@nonprofitrisk.org.

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The Nonprofit Risk Management Center (NRMCM) produces the Risk Summit—the only conference for nonprofit risk management leaders and corporate supporters of risk management in the nonprofit sector. NRMCM is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a mission to inspire effective risk management practices and Risk Champions.



What Youth-Serving Nonprofits Need To Know About Youth-On-Youth Abuse

By Rachel Sams and Melanie Lockwood Herman

Youth-serving nonprofits invest a great deal of time and effort addressing the risk that an adult associated with their programs could harm children.

Many youth-serving nonprofits may not have gone to the same lengths to address the risk that youth participants in their programs could harm other young participants. Those risks are real and must be addressed. This article explores research about youth-on-youth abuse and presents practical strategies to help nonprofits craft a prevention approach.

Children possess innocence and playfulness, but they can absorb other stimuli from the world around them, too, including violence and aggression. Youth-on-youth abuse can occur anywhere children are gathered, including institutional settings or nonprofit-sponsored programs.

The range of inappropriate or abusive behaviors by young participants can include many actions, such as bullying, hazing, physical contact, sexual talk, initiations, games, exposure to inappropriate materials, and sexual contact and assault. A child might demonstrate this behavior once, or it could evolve over several escalating incidents.

Nonprofits that work with youth must thoughtfully design and execute programs to serve them, supervised by trained adults. Awareness and understanding of how children can abuse other children will help a nonprofit staff or volunteer team prevent cases of youth-on-youth abuse and misconduct and quickly detect and address any that do happen.

If one young person abuses another while under a nonprofit's supervision, the nonprofit could face legal and reputational

risks. Youth-serving nonprofits can't anticipate every behavioral issue that might arise among young people they supervise. But they can and must develop and follow clear guidelines for how to recognize and respond to signs of youth-on-youth abuse. Done well, this work not only will help maintain a baseline of safety at youth-serving nonprofits, it will clearly demonstrate to participants what behaviors are and aren't acceptable and show young people appropriate boundaries and the consequences for violating them.

The Facts About Youth-On-Youth Abuse

Research suggests nearly a third of those who sexually abuse children may be juveniles themselves, according to [Judith Becker](#), professor emeritus of the University of Arizona College of Science.

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“Awareness and understanding of how children can abuse other children will help a nonprofit staff or volunteer team prevent cases of youth-on-youth abuse and misconduct and quickly detect and address any that do happen.”

In their report “Juveniles Who Commit Sex Offenses Against Minors,” researchers David Finkelhor, Richard Ormrod, and Mark Chaffin share some sobering statistics:

- Juveniles who commit sex offenses against other children are more likely than adult sex offenders to offend in groups and at schools.
- Teenagers who commit sex offenses are predominately male (more than 90 percent).
- Most offenses involve teenagers acting alone with young children as victims, according to research.

- Offenses cover a wide range, from a single event or a few isolated events to a large number of events with multiple victims.

Many young people who commit sex offenses have been sexually abused themselves. Between 40 percent and 80 percent of youth who commit sex offenses have experienced sexual abuse as children, and 25 percent to 50 percent have experienced physical abuse, according to the National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth (NCSBY). Like young people who commit other types of offenses, youth who sexually offend may have experienced child mistreatment, family instability, mental illness, inadequate social skills, learning disabilities, and substance use, NCSBY says.

Adverse childhood experiences, known as ACES, can impact the likelihood that a young person will experience or perpetrate future abuses, and can affect their health and opportunities for their whole lives. But it is possible to mitigate many effects of adverse childhood experiences.

Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Chaffin found that sexual crime recidivism among youth is relatively rare. The vast majority of juveniles who commit sex offenses have no arrests or reports for future sex crimes. Brain science researchers have found that the rational part of a person’s brain isn’t fully developed until around age 25. Advances in brain science have begun to change how judges sentence young people for crimes.

“Even though the primary sources for much of juvenile sexual offending are immaturity, lack of understanding around sexual consent and other social deficits, current responses are often punitive in nature and fail to address the educational and therapeutic needs of these youth,” write Kristan N. Russell, Ph.D., of the Texas Juvenile Crime Prevention Center, and Shawn C. Marsh, director of judicial studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. “This disconnect arises in part

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“Many incidents of youth-on-youth abuse go unreported by survivors and bystanders. Young people may fear adults won’t believe them, or they may blame themselves for what they experienced or saw.”

from misperceptions of their openness to treatment and likelihood of recidivism, which can lead to harsher sentencing and discriminatory treatment ... Ultimately, we propose better long-term outcomes can be achieved if we focus on rehabilitative approaches (e.g., therapy, social skills training) and prevention efforts (e.g., comprehensive sex education, early identification) to address sexual offenses in youth in lieu of current retributive practices (e.g., detention, registration).”

Youth-on-Youth Abuse Prevention and Detection

Many incidents of youth-on-youth abuse go unreported by survivors and bystanders. Young people may fear adults won’t believe them, or they may blame themselves for what they experienced or saw. They might have been intimidated into participating or

staying silent and not realized until later that what happened was wrong.

Youth-serving nonprofits can use multiple strategies to lessen the risk of youth-on-youth abuse at their organizations and respond immediately and appropriately if it happens.

Program Design

Youth-serving programs should be designed to maximize young people’s enjoyment and learning without compromising safety. Ensure that activities are suitable for the participants, that age groupings/ranges are appropriate for each program, and adequate adult supervision is available for all programs.

Policies

Organizations that serve preteen or teenage participants sometimes adopt a Participant

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“Including youth and staff in a single code of conduct sends a powerful message that rules are part of life for both kids and adults.”

Code of Conduct that governs acceptable behavior in the program. NRM’s [e-book “The Season of Hope”](#) offers a template. You may find that youth have more “buy-in” to the code of conduct if they participate in its formation. If you use a code of conduct, you must be willing to enforce it if someone breaks the code. Including youth *and* staff in a single code of conduct sends a powerful message that rules are part of life for both kids and adults.

Accountability and Discipline

Disruptive behavior by young participants should not be allowed to interfere with other children’s ability to benefit from your programs and services. Such behavior could put the safety of children and the organization at risk. Discipline of participants should be age-appropriate and related to the behavior you are trying to change.

Create A Culture That Won’t Tolerate Abuse

Make it a practice to inform parents about children’s behavior, whether positive, negative, or something that seems out of character. Document unusual behaviors among youth, especially sexualized

behaviors, along with the response by staff. Programs that allow misbehavior face an increased potential for abuse. Establish expectations for behavior and consequences for misconduct. Stick to the behavior plans you have created for participants. Find ways to recognize young people who speak up when something seems wrong, while protecting the confidentiality and privacy for participants.

Involve Parents as Partners

Parents play a vital role in protecting children from abuse and identifying abuse when it happens. Share culturally and linguistically appropriate materials with parents on how to help their children understand unacceptable behavior and report it. Communicate clearly how parents can raise questions and concerns. Add information about youth-on-youth abuse to parental education programs. Encourage parents to drop in for unannounced visits. One study found that childcare centers that used this strategy reported much lower rates of abuse in programs.

What Youth-Serving Nonprofits Need To Know About Youth-On-Youth Abuse

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Respond In The Moment

If abuse happens at your nonprofit's program, immediate steps to take include:

- Stop the abuse.
- Protect the person(s) being harmed.
- Separate the alleged victim(s) and the alleged perpetrator(s).
- Get any necessary outside help (such as calling 911).
- Notify parents or guardians.
- Notify appropriate officials at your organization.

Comply With Mandatory Reporting Laws

Youth-serving programs must have clear guidelines that comply with relevant mandatory reporting laws. Most U.S. states and many territories specify which professionals must report child maltreatment. The professionals most commonly mandated to report include social workers; teachers and other school personnel; physicians, nurses, and other health care workers; counselors and other mental health professionals; childcare

providers; medical examiners or coroners; and law enforcement officers. In almost 20 states and territories, any person who suspects child abuse or neglect is required to report. Typically, a report must be made when the person, in their official capacity, has reason to suspect a child has been abused or neglected. Another frequently used standard requires a report in situations where the reporter knows of conditions that would reasonably result in harm to the child.

How your organization approaches youth-on-youth abuse prevention and handles any incidents will impact the lives of all the young people involved. Creating a plan for how you will handle any issues around youth-on-youth abuse and a culture of prevention will strengthen all aspects of your nonprofit's child protection efforts.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. They welcome your thoughts on this article at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org, melanie@nonprofitrisk.org, or 703.777.3504.



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Session 3: October 25, 2022

3. The final session will guide you in adopting a sustainable cadence for risk management activities at your nonprofit, creating simple but powerful Risk Action Plans, and techniques for forming and supporting a high-performing Risk Committee. At the end, you'll present an overview of your risk project to the cohort.

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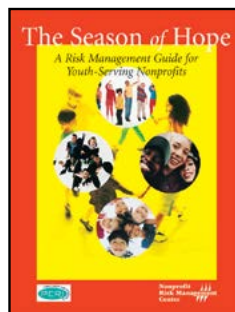
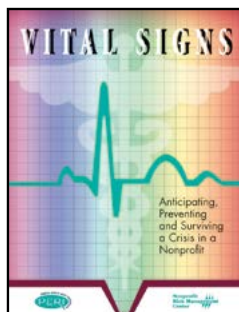
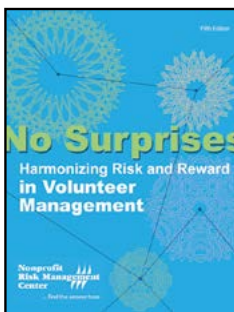
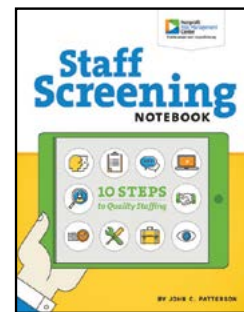
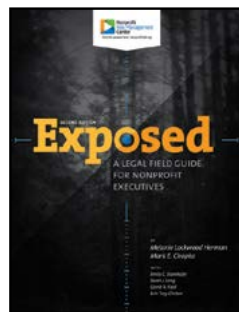
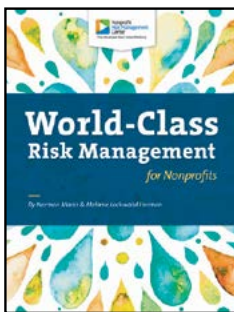
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Tips, Knowledge and Tools for Nonprofit Organizations

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