



# #YOUTHWORKWORKS

today and  
tomorrow

} About youth  
work's mission,  
DNA and challenges



Bazart Kortrijk • © Brecht Vermeesch

There are these moments you'll never forget.

The smells, feelings and faces are carved in your memory. Youth work makes a difference in the young people's lives.

And it has an impact on their future lives. That's what we see and hear on a daily basis. 'De Ambrassade' went to every nook and cranny of youth work to ask the question: why does youth work actually work? We see and say that youth work is important ... but do we really know why #YouthWorkWorks? Why it functions, has impact, is worth its while?



**D**ifficult. Because ask 100 youth workers and young people what youth work means to them and you get 100 different answers, 100 different ways to describe it, 100 different stories. Half of all children and young people in Flanders and Brussels come into contact with youth work or take an active role in one of the 6000+ different youth work initiatives.

We were looking for common elements in youth work practices: what connects us? We were not looking for a strict definition of youth work, because definitions delineate and exclude initiatives that are just that tiny bit different or more experimental. And that is one of the powers of youth work: starting from the base and giving space to young people.

Ok, but what is youth work then? Youth work is a place where children and young people can be young, where they experience the positive power of a group, where they can grow at their own rhythm, where they can make friends and learn by experience.

Youth work is an attitude that resolutely puts children and young people at the centre. Youth work is playful, crazy, creative, diverse ...

Youth work has always been in motion. And the last few years, it is increasingly active at the crossroads with education, culture, sports and wellbeing. Youth work takes diverse shapes and works with diverse target groups. Youth work is experimental and it gives children and young people a voice. Youth work offers powerful experiences for and by children and young people. These experiences are very unique, yet very universal, thanks to the power of the group, thanks to a first taste of truly taking up responsibility and commitment.

Youth work doesn't exist for itself, it exists to empower children and young people. The challenges for children, young people and their organisations are growing.

To ensure that youth work keeps its power in the future, that it continues to develop and that it addresses these challenges, it is important that:

-  every youth worker can tell the powerful story about what makes youth work so strong,
-  policy makers invest A LOT more in children, young people and their organisations,
-  there can be more youth work.

Therefore, De Ambrassade – together with many youth workers - developed a language to express the value of youth work. Get to know the mission of youth work, the DNA of the youth worker and 5 challenges for the future that we want to address. Together with you! 





# Mission statement

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**W** here do children and young people truly get space in our society? When are they allowed to fail? Does their voice really matter? Or do they simply have to wait until they have grown up? Do they get the space to develop their own leisure-time projects as they desire? Still far too little.

→

Jeugdienst Don Bosco

In youth work, we do create that space. We build spaces with children and young people and promote the right to experimenting, to participation, to development and to leisure time adapted to each young person. Even the Convention on the Rights of the Child says: 'Every child is entitled to grow and develop' (→ article 6), 'Every child is entitled to an own opinion, and people should take it into account' (→ article 12 and 13) and 'Every child is entitled to free time, to play and to participate in cultural and artistic activities' (→ article 31).

That's why we say that **youth work is a right for ALL children and young people**. Because everybody is entitled to feel young and to get as much space as possible to do so. That's why we need more youth work and why our society needs to choose to invest more in children, young people and youth work.

## Mission

Youth work's mission is to actively create space for four specific rights of children and young people. That's how every child and young person will get more space to be young.

## #YOUTHWORKWORKS

BECAUSE YOUTH WORK ACTIVELY  
CREATES SPACE FOR ...

-  **the right to experiment, and to learn by experience:** youth work is a 'safe haven' where children and young people can learn from their experiences. In youth work, they get the space to try out things and fail forward.
-  **the right to participate fully in society:** children and young people are fully-fledged citizens in society. Youth work associations help making that possible. Through information, co-creation and co-decision.
-  **the right to free time, leisure, cultural and artistic activities:** youth work is the place where children and young people can take part in numerous types of leisure-time activities. In which they can experience and create culture.
-  **the right to develop and to grow up together:** youth work is part of the integral development of children and young people, as an educational environment. Also in youth work, they can grow together. 



FOS open Scouting • © Thomas De Wulf

# DNA



YOUTH WORK AS A WAY OF LIVING, THINKING, LOOKING ...



Whether they are paid staff or volunteers, all youth workers are equipped with a specific DNA that you can only experience or learn in youth work. Indeed, youth work is playful, creative, dirty, rebellious, alive and kicking, passionate, wacko ... But **youth work is above all an attitude**: the way you live and look at society. Not because you have to, but because you want to. If everybody in contact with children and young people lets their inner youth worker out, we will be moving towards a society that empowers children and young people. Not top-down, but rather bottom-up. Not starting from unequal power positions, but from active ownership and critical citizenship.



## #YOUTHWORKWORKS

### BECAUSE YOUTH WORKERS ...

 **consistently put children and young people at the centre:** youth workers always start from the realities of children and young people. Youth workers offer children and young people their own space in society, based on their capacities and desires, geared towards their own interests.

 **give children and young people ownership:** children and young people can take care of activities, group dynamics, organisation, processes and experiments by themselves. They are equal to their youth leaders, coordinators and professional youth workers.

 **pay attention to both process and product:** together with children and young people, youth workers work towards a product. But the road to get to that result is just as valuable. Cycles of reflection and action alternate. People learn and progress through dialogue, experience and group processes.

 **use the power of group dynamics:** youth work connects children and young people by cooperating, through shared interests, by meeting, by building networks and communities. Youth work creates the feeling that you belong and stimulates openness for other opinions and habits.

 **co-create society:** youth workers help children and young people grow up as active, committed citizens in society. They reflect with children and young people about the neighbourhood or (local) policy, they take initiatives that bring people closer together ...

**So, dear youth worker, it isn't all that difficult to explain what makes youth work so special. Be proud of your DNA and use it on a daily basis. ➔**



Kazou • © Sien Verstraeten

# Challenges

**MORE PRESSURE MEANS  
MORE POWER**  
Challenges set our agenda

**T**he society in which #YouthWorkWorks is changing and poses new challenges.

No month passes without new figures about children and young people in difficult situations: 1 out of 10 has fewer opportunities, 1 out of 5 is unemployed, 1 out of 10 young people drops out of school, ever more young people survive thanks to the help of social welfare services.

Youth work cannot solve these issues on its own, but it can contribute and cooperate to increase the opportunities for children and young people. So what youth work is and how youth work works, changes along with the bigger complex challenges.





### VOLUNTEERS

#### PRESSURE ON CONSCIOUS COMMITMENT

We owe the rich variety of youth work in Flanders and Brussels to hundreds of thousands of volunteers throughout history. Without them, it isn't possible. Young people commit time next to their studies and work, and they are interested to care for others. Because they find it important. But that commitment has changed a lot over the last decades: less time with the same organisation, fewer strings attached, more dependent on their personal interests.



Youth worker, focus on the ownership of volunteers and offer them the right support.

Policy maker, create more social recognition of volunteering and reduce the regulatory pressures on volunteers.



### EXPERIMENTING

#### PRESSURE ON LEISURE TIME AND SOCIAL SPACE

Young people feel a lot of pressure on their free time. They constantly need to make the 'correct' and the most 'useful' choices. This causes leisure-time stress. There is very little time for real 'down time'. What's more, there is also literally little space for them. Places where they can truly play are disappearing. And fewer things are 'allowed'. Grown-ups see more risks, want to protect, make more rules and control more.



Youth worker, create free laboratory space for and by children and young people. Dare to fail

forward.  
Policy maker, trust the quality of youth work.



### DIVERSITY

#### PRESSURE ON OLD MODELS IN A SUPER-DIVERSE SOCIETY

Diversity is reality. Young people grow up in a super-diverse society: so many backgrounds, opinions and individual needs. We painstakingly search for a way to handle this diversity, especially in the cities. Old models and organisational formats don't always work to get through to all groups. If youth work is to offer opportunities for ALL children and young people, there should be more youth work. More different types of youth work, more support for these formats and a smooth cooperation between them.



Youth worker, go for interaction and links with new types of youth work.

Create equal opportunities and more social integration through youth work.

Policy maker, invest more in all types of youth work.



**PRESSURE ON THE SOCIETY  
IN WHICH CHILDREN AND  
YOUNG PEOPLE GROW UP**

The pressure on children and young people and the complexity of our society has increased dramatically over the last years. That's why it is ever more important for different policy domains to work together to strengthen the position of children and young people. The target group should be put first, not the structures. Youth work starts from children and young people and follows them in all spheres of life: leisure time, school, finding a job, resilience in difficult situations.

At the crossroads of these spheres of life, youth work can break down walls

and cooperate with other sectors. Youth work reduces the complexity for children and young people by building bridges with other sectors. Youth work teaches the other sectors to see things from children's and young people's perspective.

Strong youth policy starts from the reality of children and young people, and not from sectors and structures.



Youth worker, start cooperating with social welfare, education, employers, police, sports & culture ... and spread your youth work DNA to other sectors. Policy maker, get on with an integrated youth policy and children's rights policy, introduce the perspective of children and young people in other policy domains and combine this with a solid youth work policy at the crossroads of different life spheres of children and young people.



**CHILDREN'S  
AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S VOICE**

**PRESSURE ON THE  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
AUTHORITIES, MARKET  
AND CITIZENS**

The relationship with public authorities, the market, citizens and their associations has changed considerably over the last years. Crisis periods have given us a government that cuts back budgets and restructures. We are influenced by market approaches that put hard figures and efficiency first. And citizens are looking for new ways to make their voice heard.



Youth worker, dare to take up an explicit politicizing role in society again, create space for different opinions and put things in motion. Your aim is not to save your own organisation, but to empower children and young people. Policy maker, talk with children and young people, not only about them. ▶

**HASHTAG #YOUTHWORKWORKS**

Are you ready to carry out the mission of youth work? Do you feel the youth-worker DNA running through your veins? Help us to address the challenges of the future.

Communicate and amplify our message by tagging your activities with the hashtag #YouthWorkWorks.

Find more information about this #YouthWorkWorks story (in Dutch) at [ww.jeugdwerkwerkt.be](http://ww.jeugdwerkwerkt.be).



## AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

#YouthWorkWorks  
because youth work  
actively creates space  
for the RIGHT



to experiment, and to learn  
by experience



to participate fully in society



to free time, playing,  
leisure and cultural and  
artistic activities



to develop and  
grow up together

YOUTH WORK  
MISSION

#YouthWorkWorks  
because youth workers ...



put children and  
young people at the centre



give children and young  
people ownership



pay attention to both  
product and process



use the power of  
group dynamics



co-create society

YOUTH WORKER  
DNA

YOUTH WORK is a RIGHT  
for ALL children and  
young people

The power of



**VOLUNTEERS**



**EXPERIMENTING**



**DIVERSITY**



**CROSSROADS**



**CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S VOICE**