



**Youth  
Thrive**  
An initiative  
of CSSP

MAY 2021

# CROSSWALK: YOUTH THRIVE & HEALING CENTERED ENGAGEMENT



*Center for the  
Study of  
Social Policy*  
Ideas into Action

## About Youth Thrive

Youth Thrive believes that all young people should be valued, loved, and supported to reach their goals. To achieve this, Youth Thrive works with youth-serving systems and partners to change policies, programs, and practices so that they build on what we know about adolescent development, value young people’s perspectives, and give youth opportunities to succeed. Youth Thrive is both a research-informed framework on youth well-being and an action-oriented Initiative, based on the framework, that is designed to better support healthy development and promote well-being for youth with partners across the country. To learn more, please visit us at: [CSSP.org/our-work/project/Youth-Thrive/](https://CSSP.org/our-work/project/Youth-Thrive/).

## About CSSP

CSSP is a national, non-profit policy organization that connects community action, public system reform, and policy change. We work to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. To do this, we translate ideas into action, promote public policies grounded in equity, support strong and inclusive communities, and advocate with and for all children and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

## Acknowledgements

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This resource draws upon and applies Dr. Shawn Ginwright's concept of healing centered engagement to youth serving systems. Dr. Ginwright first coined the term "healing centered engagement" in 2018 in his article "[The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement](#)," published in Medium. Visit [Flourish Agenda](#) to learn more about Dr. Ginwright and healing centered engagement.

Similar to the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors, Dr. Ginwright's work on healing centered engagement has broad applicability and is attuned to supporting the holistic needs of young people. This resource is for those who work with and support young people and are interested in exploring how to apply healing centered engagement and build the Protective and Promotive Factors with young people to help them heal and thrive.



Youth Thrive believes that all young people should be valued, loved, and supported to reach their goals. To achieve this, Youth Thrive works with youth-serving systems and its partners to change policies, programs, and practices so that they build on what we know about adolescent development, value young people's perspectives, and give youth opportunities to succeed. Youth Thrive is both a research-informed framework on youth well-being and an action-oriented Initiative, based on the framework, that is designed to better support healthy development and promote well-being for youth. The framework identifies five Protective and Promotive Factors—Youth Resilience, Social Connections, Knowledge of Adolescent Development, Concrete Support in Times of Need, and Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence—that mitigate risk and promote thriving (see page 5 to learn more or [visit us online](#)).

In exploring interventions that are supportive of building the Protective and Promotive Factors, healing centered engagement was identified as a holistic approach that aligns with and operationalizes the tenets of Youth Thrive.

## What is Healing Centered Engagement?\*

Trauma can be experienced at any age. It can be caused by single, life threatening events or long-term harms experienced as a result of abuse and neglect, racism, discrimination, and cultural bias. Further, trauma can manifest interpersonally, generationally, systemically, and/or historically in communities.

Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) is a holistic approach to trauma that involves “culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing.”<sup>1</sup> HCE expands upon trauma-informed care through its strength based, collective view of healing that does not limit trauma to the experience of an individual and “offers [a] more holistic approach to fostering well-being.”<sup>2</sup>

HCE brings together collective healing practices found throughout history and across the globe, including healing circles rooted in indigenous culture and drumming circles found in some African cultures. HCE is described as “akin to the South African term ‘Ubuntu’ meaning that humanness is found through our interdependence, collective engagement and service to others.”<sup>3</sup> HCE moves away from deficit-based mental health models that characterize many therapeutic interventions. In doing so, adults working with young people shift from asking young people “what happened to you” to “what’s right with you” and views young people as “agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events.”<sup>4</sup>

### KEY DEFINITIONS






- **Trauma:** Results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being.
- **Complex Trauma:** Exposure to multiple traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on immediate and long-term development.
- **Historical Trauma:** Collective trauma that is inflicted on a group of people based on their identity or affiliation related to ethnicity, religious background, and nationality. These experiences can be damaging on a physical and/or emotional level for the community, and the trauma can then be transmitted epigenetically to future generations.
- **Toxic Stress:** Biological and emotional responses that result from strong, frequent, prolonged adversity (e.g., child abuse and neglect, family violence).
- **Chronic Environmental Stressors:** A constant background level of threat based on the environmental physical and social structure (e.g., racism, economic inequity).

## Why is Healing Centered Engagement Important for Youth-Serving Systems?

Many youth-focused systems—such as child welfare, education, and juvenile justice—are deficit oriented and rooted in risk reduction approaches to working with young people. These approaches too often perpetuate racist and oppressive beliefs, policies, and practices that harm young people and families. In recent years, guided by trauma-informed practices and services, there have been efforts to re-center these systems around young people’s strengths. Although this is an essential first step in responding to young people’s needs, further work is needed to focus on healing and how young people can be supported to use their history to reflect on and transform their own lives and reconnect with their communities.

## How Do Healing Centered Engagement and the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors Align?

At its core, healing centered engagement strives to promote youth well-being and help young people to thrive. The table below illustrates how HCE aligns with the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors:

| Youth Thrive Protective & Promotive Factors  | Youth Thrive Definition   | Alignment Between the Protective & Promotive Factors and Healing Centered Engagement   |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Youth Resilience</p>                            | <p>Managing stress and functioning well when faced with stress, challenges, or adversity.</p>   | <p>HCE is a strengths-based approach to helping young people heal from trauma, that includes young people strengthening their self-efficacy and internalizing the belief that whatever their trauma, it does not define who they are.</p>    |
| <p>Social Connections</p>                         | <p>Having healthy, sustained relationships with people, places, communities, and a force greater than oneself that promote a sense of trust, belonging, and that one matters.</p>   | <p>One of HCE’s core concepts is that trauma and healing are collective experiences. HCE emphasizes the importance of building strong social and community connections in the healing process.</p>   |
| <p>Concrete Supports in Times of Need</p>         | <p>Making sure young people receive quality, equitable, respectful, and culturally supportive services that meet their basic needs. Teaching young people to self-advocate and take the lead in identifying, seeking out and obtaining the help they need in their community and through social and cultural connections.</p> | <p>A fundamental tenet of HCE is that young people are essential and powerful agents in creating and leading their own well-being, this includes self-advocacy and reconnecting with their culture for support in their healing journey.</p> |
| <p>Knowledge of Adolescent Development</p>        | <p>Understanding the unique changes and assets of adolescence and implementing policies and practices that reflect a deep understanding of development.</p>   | <p>HCE recognizes young people’s individual experiences, knowledge, skills, and curiosity as positive traits to be enhanced, and promotes approaches to healing that build upon a young person’s life journey</p>                            |
| <p>Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence</p>  | <p>Acquiring skills and attitudes that are essential for forming an independent, positive identity and having a productive and satisfying adulthood.</p>  | <p>HCE’s emphasis on identity restoration in the healing process includes building a healthy identity that is grounded in a “sense of meaning, self-perception, and purpose.”<sup>5</sup></p>  |



## What are the Key Elements of Healing Centered Engagement?<sup>7</sup>

Healing Centered Engagement is guided by a set of key elements that drive its practice. Each one of them must be considered when applying HCE to youth-centered practice within youth-serving systems, such as child welfare and juvenile justice. At its core, healing centered engagement:

- **Urges young people who experience trauma to be agents in restoring their own well-being.** Young people and their families need to understand the systems that impact their lives—the relevant laws, policies, practices, and history—in order to best advocate for themselves. In the foster care or juvenile justice systems, this means that young people must have a seat at the table to be part of decision making and, with support from their family, caring adults, youth workers, and other system professionals, young people must be given the space to learn and lead.
- **Considers healing as the restoration of identity.** “Healing is experienced collectively, and is shaped by shared identity such as race, gender, or sexual orientation.”<sup>6</sup> Young people in foster care or involved with juvenile justice must be supported to restore their full identity and establish a shared identity. These systems, more often than not, remove young people from their social connections—family, community, and natural networks—and the opportunities young people need to explore and develop all aspects of their identity. HCE recognizes this reality and names restoration of identity as a key component of healing.
- **Focuses on the well-being young people want, rather than behaviors or “acting out” that adults want young people to suppress.** HCE uses an asset-driven strategy that “acknowledges that young people are much more than the worst thing that happened to them, and builds upon their experiences, knowledge, skills, and curiosity as positive traits to be enhanced.”<sup>7</sup> Youth-serving systems, such as child welfare and juvenile justice, tend to focus on reducing risk factors and promoting well-being outcomes for young people, such as high school graduation rates and access to health care. And while these are important indicators for how young people are faring, they may not fully address how young people define their well-being. Young people must be asked what they consider important to their well-being and healing and helped to identify and build upon their strengths and interests.
- **Supports youth workers<sup>8</sup> in their own healing.** The well-being of the adults who work with young people is critical to supporting young people’s identity and health. Healing is an ongoing process that benefits all. Youth workers and other system professionals who work directly with young people must be aware of what they bring to their relationship with young people—previous experiences, personal trauma, and biases can all inform how these adults work with young people. Youth workers must be aware of this and actively ensure their own healing and well-being are in order so that they can support their young clients in their healing journey.



## How is Healing Centered Engagement Different from Trauma Informed Care?

HCE acknowledges the strengths of trauma informed care while also intentionally reframing trauma in order to uplift approaches to healing that do not fit within the trauma informed care model:<sup>9</sup>

- **HCE treats trauma as a collective experience, not an individual one.** This approach differs from trauma informed care's presumption that trauma is an individual experience. Research shows that trauma is a shared experience. For example, "children in high violence neighborhoods all display behavioral and psychological signs of trauma" and communities disproportionately impacted by natural disasters share a common experience.<sup>10</sup>
- **HCE considers how to "address the root causes of trauma in neighborhoods, families, and schools."**<sup>11</sup>Trauma informed care relies on a medical model and focuses on how to best treat individual trauma. HCE recognizes that when a youth's trauma is collectively experienced, youth workers must "consider the environmental context that caused the harm in the first place."<sup>12</sup>
- **HCE emphasizes the possibility of well-being.** Trauma informed approaches can over-rely on medical models of care that focus on treating symptoms of trauma, rather than strengthening well-being. HCE acknowledges the strengths of trauma informed care, but asks and focuses on "what's right with you?" instead of asking "what happened to you."

## How to Build the Protective and Promotive Factors When Using Healing Centered Engagement with Young People?

Youth-serving agencies and those who work directly with young people play important roles in helping young people address, cope with, and overcome past traumas. Below are suggestions for individuals and organizations committed to partnering with young people to achieve healthy development and well-being.

### **How individuals can build their HCE capacity:**

- **Start by building empathy with young people.** Fostering empathy strengthens emotional literacy and helps young people to open up about and process their feelings. This process requires building trust with young people, takes time and space, and will fluctuate—feeling as though two steps are taken forward then three steps back. To better understand the young person's experiences, focus on building **Social Connections** with them:
  - Youth workers can "share their story first, and take an emotional risk by being more vulnerable, honest, and open to young people."<sup>13</sup> Sharing first creates an opportunity for youth workers and their clients to find similar or shared experiences, which in turn builds empathy.
  - Practice listening without judgment. Show young people that they can be themselves around a trusting and caring adult.
  - Cultivate connections with young people. This means getting to know young people for who they are. Ask them about their favorite tv shows, what they like to do on weekends, what makes them laugh. Youth workers can also try to find other points of connection, such as shared allegiance to a sports team or a favorite musician.
- **"Encourage young people to dream and imagine!"<sup>14</sup>** Build young people's **Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence** and strengthen future goal orientation by encouraging young people to envision what they want to become and who they want to be.

- Create activities for young people to “play, reimagine, design, and envision their lives.”<sup>15</sup>
- Regularly engage young people in positive discussions about their future.
- Build opportunities for goal setting. Planning for the future can be intimidating at times; help young people to practice setting big and little goals, for the near and distant future. As young people begin to act on and achieve these goals, they build pride, self-worth, and confidence in their own agency.
- Create opportunities for young people to identify their own assets. Explicitly call attention to and draw on their assets during individual and group interactions.
- **Act with love and caring.** The word “love” rarely shows up in policy, legal statutes, or practice manuals. However, acting with love and caring is a crucial aspect of youth workers’ ability to support young people in their healing and development. Youth workers can still maintain important boundaries with young people while creating a relationship that includes love and strengthens *Youth Resilience*.
  - Practice patience with young people.
  - Help young people see that they matter.
  - Show up for young people in times of crisis. Showing young people that they can rely on youth workers especially in times of crisis builds trust and care. This means showing up when not expected, standing by young people when they are in trouble, and helping young people distinguish moments of failure from being a failure.
  - Challenge and push young people in ways that encourages them to reflect and grow. Doing so can show young people that youth workers really care and want what is best for them. These conversations work best when the young person and worker have established a relationship with each other—this helps the young person to recognize that the youth worker cares about them and is acting out of love, not judgment.
- **Build critical reflection that draws upon the collective, moral, and emotional aspects of healing.** This includes helping young people to increase their *Knowledge of Adolescent Development* and to understand how their experience with youth-serving systems may influence and impact their developmental journey.
  - Support young people in reflecting upon and learning from their personal adolescent journey, this includes learning about the adolescent brain, the impact of racism, trauma, toxic stress, and being excluded due to a disability on their well-being, and how connections to family, caring adults, friends, and the community can have a role in their healing.





- Actively engage with young people in ongoing civic education. This includes helping young people better understand child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and other public policies and laws that may impact their current and future experiences. Young people should be given opportunities to join youth councils and to explore community advocacy opportunities.
- Help young people uncover historical, racist and structural impediments that impede them from thriving.
- Help young people analyze the practices and policies that contributed to their trauma in the first place. “Without an analysis of these issues, young people often internalize and blame themselves for lack of confidence.”<sup>16</sup>
- **Use culturally grounded practices.** Focusing on the Protective and Promotive Factors and HCE “goes beyond viewing healing only from the lens of mental health, and incorporates culturally grounded rituals and activities to restore well-being.”<sup>17</sup> This includes making sure young people receive quality, equitable, and culturally supportive services that meet their basic needs; as well as, connecting young people to their communities and culture to build relationships with adults and peers who can help them restore their identity and access **Concrete Support in Times of Need**.
  - Help young people identify and connect with mentors, peers, caregivers, family members, community elders and historians, community programs, and social action groups that share key identities with young people, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE), and religious or spiritual beliefs.
  - Actively engage with young people on their terms in conversations about identity. This includes creating safe spaces for young people to explore and talk about SOGIE, race, ethnicity, spirituality, etc.
  - Share with young people worker’s own experiences of harm and healing related to aspects of their own identity.
  - Encourage young people to explore different healing activities, including healing circles or drumming circles.
- **Take collective action in communities where young people live.**<sup>18</sup> “Collectively responding to political decisions and practices that can exacerbate trauma”<sup>19</sup> builds a sense of power and control for young people over their lives. Building this sense of power in young people is a significant feature in building and strengthening all of the Protective and Promotive Factors and restoring young people’s holistic well-being.<sup>20</sup>
  - Help young people identify opportunities for civic engagement that interest them (e.g., school walkouts, joining a youth council, organizing a peace march, calling or writing to their government representatives, or promoting access to healthy foods).
  - Engage young people in community problem solving and support them to be representatives of their community. This could include engaging in organizing and activism groups and encouraging them to attend public hearings and town halls. Encourage young people to speak at city council or school board meetings to discuss challenges and opportunities in their community that they are passionate about.
  - For young people age 18 and older, help them register to vote, learn about candidates, volunteer for campaigns, and develop a voting plan that includes where, how, and when they will vote (e.g., transportation, ballot by mail, required ID).
  - Work with young people with disabilities to advocate for local and state legislation that improves access to educational and career opportunities and changes to physical structures (such as building sidewalk and entrance ramps and installing automatic doors to enter buildings) to make them more accessible.

**How to build HCE capacity and a focus on building the Protective and Promotive Factors within organizations:**

- **Create a space that builds empathy.** Youth workers can practice empathy with coworkers by reflecting on their adolescent experiences, their personal journey to form identity, or other situations and stressors that young people may face. Recognize the value of inclusivity and belonging and foster a culture of connectedness.
- **Incorporate practices that reinforce young people "mattering."** Create opportunities to involve young people in reviewing organizational policies. Establish a youth advisory board to better engage young people and receive their feedback. Provide sufficient time for youth workers to build and maintain relationships with young people, and sufficiently flexible policies that encourage relationship building and promote the Protective and Promotive Factors.
- **Heal the healers.** Adulthood is not a final, trauma-free destination. Supervisors should consider how to support youth worker's well-being, such as establishing retreats, sabbaticals, and incentives for continuing educational opportunities that deepen their learning about well-being and healing. This includes supporting staff in caring for themselves and dealing with the stress inherent in working with young people who have experienced significant adversity.
- **Train staff in HCE and the Protective and Promotive Factors.** With resources and trainings on healing centered engagement and Youth Thrive, and support to incorporate these into practice, staff at all levels of an organization can create an organizational culture that promotes healing and thriving.

Youth Thrive and Healing Centered Engagement encourage individuals, organizations, and systems to change the narrative about young people and to rethink how they provide support. Both approaches center young people's resiliency, aspirations, and agency; value connections with family, peers and community; promote understanding of how positive and negative experiences impact young people's development and future; and underscore the need for young people to have cultural and political connections—all to help move beyond trauma to healing and achieving health and positive well-being.



## Tools and Resources for Practicing, Implementing, and Training Staff on Healing Centered Engagement

To learn more about HCE and gain more tools for practicing HCE, [visit the Flourish Agenda's website for workshops, certification opportunities, coaching services, and additional tools](#). In addition to Flourish Agenda's website, please consider the following resources (note, some of these resources require financial investment):

- [Youth Thrive Alive! Forum: The Struggle is Real—Finding Healing During Difficult Times](#): in this webinar, young people and Dr. Shawn Ginwright explore healing and what individuals and systems can do to support young people in their healing journey.
- [Using the Protective and Promotive Factors to Support Youth Well-Being: An Interactive Guide](#): provides those working with young people—agency workers, judges, lawyers, CASA workers—questions that stimulate and enrich conversations about the presence of the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors in a young person's life. This resource also includes sections for youth and their parents.
- [Transformational Relationships for Youth Success](#): explores the transformational relationship between youth and workers, in settings ranging from large human services agencies working with youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems to small efforts helping youth to address homelessness and substance abuse problems. The findings include worker behaviors and organizational supports that helped to build relationships and support transformational youth work practices.
- [Transforming Our Systems to Meet Students Where They Are](#): showcases how the Savannah Chatham County Public School System went about implementing HCE and includes a list of reflection questions to consider.
- [Seneca Family of Agencies](#): an innovative leader in the provision of unconditional care through a comprehensive continuum of school, community-based and family-focused treatment services for children and families experiencing high levels of trauma who are at risk for family disruption or institutional care for the children. Seneca Family of Agencies offers resources and trainings, including the Seneca Institute for Advanced Practice and the National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness.
  - **Unconditional Care: Relationship-Based, Behavioral Intervention with Vulnerable Children and Families**: presents the Seneca treatment model for working with clients with intensive needs. Central to the model are the following three “streams” of assessment and intervention: relational, behavioral, and ecological.
- **Healing Guidebook: Practical Tips and Tools for Working with Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Trauma (and for the Adults Who Love Them, Too)**: created by [Anu Family Services](#), this resource includes tools that can and have been used and adapted to help young people and others heal from relational trauma.



# CITATIONS

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<sup>1</sup> Ginwright, S. (2018). “The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement.” Medium.com. <https://ginwright.medium.com/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ginwright, S. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ginwright (2018)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Youth Worker is defined as those who work directly with young people, such as case workers, social workers, probation officers, and youth counselors.

<sup>9</sup> Ginwright (2018)

<sup>10</sup> Ginwright, S. (2018) citing Sinha & Rosenberg 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Ginwright (2018)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ginwright, S. 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Ginwright, S. (2018) citing Martinez 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Ginwright, S. 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Shawn Ginwright describes this step as “taking loving action.” For the purpose of this brief, the concept has been renamed to avoid confusion with another suggested step, “act with love and caring.”

<sup>19</sup> Ginwright (2018)

<sup>20</sup> Ginwright, S. (2018) citing Morsillo & Prilleltensky 2007; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2006.






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# How Do Healing Centered Engagement and the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors Align?

## PRINTABLE ONE PAGE HANDOUT

At its core, healing centered engagement strives to promote youth well-being and help young people to thrive. The table below illustrates how HCE aligns with the Youth Thrive™ Protective and Promotive Factors.

| Youth Thrive Protective & Promotive Factors  | Youth Thrive Definition   | Alignment Between the Protective & Promotive Factors and Healing Centered Engagement   |
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| <p>Social Connections</p>                          | <p>Having healthy, sustained relationships with people, places, communities, and a force greater than oneself that promote a sense of trust, belonging, and that one matters.</p>   | <p>One of HCE's core concepts is that trauma and healing are collective experiences. HCE emphasizes the importance of building strong social and community connections in the healing process.</p>   |
| <p>Concrete Supports in Times of Need</p>         | <p>Making sure young people receive quality, equitable, respectful, and culturally supportive services that meet their basic needs. Teaching young people to self-advocate and take the lead in identifying, seeking out and obtaining the help they need in their community and through social and cultural connections.</p> | <p>A fundamental tenet of HCE is that young people are essential and powerful agents in creating and leading their own well-being, this includes self-advocacy and reconnecting with their culture for support in their healing journey.</p> |
| <p>Knowledge of Adolescent Development</p>        | <p>Understanding the unique changes and assets of adolescence and implementing policies and practices that reflect a deep understanding of development.</p>   | <p>HCE recognizes young people's individual experiences, knowledge, skills, and curiosity as positive traits to be enhanced, and promotes approaches to healing that build upon a young person's life journey</p>                            |
| <p>Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence</p>  | <p>Acquiring skills and attitudes that are essential for forming an independent, positive identity and having a productive and satisfying adulthood.</p>  | <p>HCE's emphasis on identity restoration in the healing process includes building a healthy identity that is grounded in a "sense of meaning, self-perception, and purpose."</p>  |