

Building Family Inclusive Youth Services



OVERVIEW

Foundry has been working with families and caregivers of youth and is continuing to learn about what it means to involve families in supportive and safe ways for young people.

In this brief, we look to available research and evidence, as well as the wisdom and experiences of youth, families and service providers, to explore where we would like to go as a network and as a province.

With increasing recognition that families have a positive impact on young people's well-being, **we believe a family inclusive approach is needed in integrated youth services (IYS) which:**

- Considers diverse definitions of “family”;
- Reframes “youth or families” as “youth as part of families”;
- Emphasizes relationship building with families and service providers; and
- Is embedded across practice, services and the organizational culture of IYS.

BACKGROUND

Family Involvement: Supporting Young People's Circle of Care

For many of us, our family is an important source of emotional support and feelings of belonging and safety. This can be especially true for young people as they manage the transition to adulthood, at times while coping with mental health or substance use (MHSU) challenges. There is strong evidence highlighting the value of positive relationships with family in supporting the well-being of young people.¹ Families can recognize early on when a young person is struggling² and many young people seek help at the encouragement of their families and friends.^{3,4} Families provide important contextual information for service providers, including how issues present differently in various situations^{5,6} as well as supporting a young person to navigate complex service systems and advocating on their behalf.³ At the same time, there are challenges that prevent the involvement of family and friends in the care and support of young people.

“It’s a support system for the youth, but I think integrating family more would be better for both the youth and the family.”

Youth

Families are diverse and dynamic — a young person's definition of, and relationship with, their family may vary greatly and change over time. At the individual level, some youth may not want their families or caregivers to know they are accessing services or may not want them aware or involved due to fears of stigma, shame, rejection or causing worry.⁷ This concern can be a significant driver for young people not accessing mental health services, as noted in the 2023 Adolescent Health Survey from the McCreary Centre Society.⁸ Both youth and family members may also have concerns about the young person's right to privacy, confidentiality and ability to make decisions about their own treatment. A young person's MHSU struggles can be difficult for family and impact other individuals (including siblings) and relationships in challenging ways. In many cases, family members also need support to help navigate the challenges they personally encounter while supporting a young person.

At the service level, clinicians and service providers may lack the practice or training to effectively include family members, leading to discomfort and potentially causing them to exclude family members. They may have had negative experiences in previous attempts at inclusion and may require additional



OUR DEFINITION OF FAMILY

At Foundry, family is defined uniquely by each young person and can include anyone supporting or advocating for their wellness. Family, whether by birth, choice or circumstance, holds a significant role in supporting a young person by fostering a sense of belonging and hope through their shared experience.

ABOUT US

Foundry is a provincial integrated youth services (IYS) network in British Columbia that offers a range of low-barrier and youth-friendly services for youth ages 12-24 in the areas of mental health, substance use support, peer support, physical and sexual health, and social services, including inclusive employment supports.

supports. And, importantly, at the system level, there has been limited development of tools to advance family involvement in care, as well as limited resources for programs, services and support for caregivers and families, especially for those of older youth.⁹

Whatever “family” means and looks like for a young person, we know that families can play an important role in the health and

well-being of youth as a natural support network that complements and extends beyond support from service providers. It is therefore important for young people to have a circle of care to support them when they are struggling, who can provide them with feelings of belonging and connectedness that are vital for their long-term wellness.

Family Inclusive Services at Foundry

Foundry is working to broaden our offerings of services for families of youth, recognizing the high volume of interest and need in many communities, as well as the valuable role of families in the lives of many young people. Indeed, current internal data^a (see Figure A) indicates that approximately 1 in 5 young people (ages 12–24) accessing services indicated that they learned about Foundry from a family member. For younger youth, this family referral was even more important — 39% of youth ages 12–14 and 28% of youth ages 15–17 heard about Foundry from a family member.

Family-based interventions offered at Foundry centres may include family peer support (FPS), family therapy, family education and workshops, drop-in caregiver support, family navigation, family mediation, family outreach, trauma resiliency training, cultural wellness services and more. In many instances, these services are offered in partnership and with the support and expertise of key community organizations, such as FamilySmart and Moms Stop the Harm.

Currently, all centres have at least one family inclusive service available, with the most accessed family inclusive services being FPS, counselling and family education and workshops (see Figure B). FPS is a core service offered across Foundry centres, where family members with lived experience of supporting a young person provide practical, emotional and social support for other families whose young people may be going through similar difficulties. As a valued service at Foundry, FPS offers families a feeling of connection and hope through shared experiences. Foundry is also working to develop its family-based cultural services offerings, including Elder supports and through programs such as Gathering our Medicine (see page 4 for more information.)

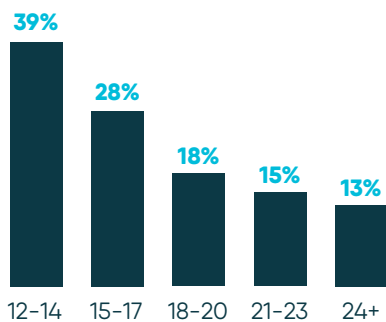
FIGURE A: PROPORTION OF YOUTH WHO HEARD ABOUT FOUNDRY FROM A FAMILY MEMBER

1 in 5

youth ages 12-24 heard about Foundry from a family member



Younger youth are more likely to hear about Foundry from a family member



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^a This policy brief utilizes internal administrative data collected from youth and family members who accessed Foundry services between April 2018 and December 2023. Information is provided by youth and family members on a voluntary basis.

FIGURE B: FAMILY INCLUSIVE SERVICES AT FOUNDRY



The most commonly accessed family services at Foundry are:

“Giving people the skills to support you in your life so you’re not always going to service providers.”

Youth

“The parent is trying to support the young person through all of those ups and downs. So knowing that a parent or caregiver can come and get that peer support is so crucial.”

Family/Caregiver

Other family-based interventions, including Emotion-Focused Family Therapy, are offered by trained counsellors, often jointly with Family Peer Supporters. Many centres offer family education groups or workshops which provide guidance on topics such as communication skills, self-care and condition-specific information. Such training can assist families and caregivers to help youth facing MHSU challenges manage their substance use or reduce symptoms such as depression or anxiety.^{10,11}

Family-based interventions have also been shown to benefit youth with eating disorders compared to individual therapy alone¹² and help improve symptoms for youth at high risk of psychosis.¹³ However, we should note that research around family inclusive services and interventions is still limited and primarily qualitative, and studies and programs vary widely in design, making it difficult to draw broader comparisons.^{14,15} Regardless, we know that many families seek support, information and skill-building so that they can help a young person who may be struggling.

We also know that some families who face additional barriers due to poverty, food or housing insecurity, and other challenges that stem from systemic inequities may need support to be involved, and some caregivers may have their own personal struggles. Our hope is to build on existing knowledge and gain new learnings so that we may offer a consistent array of accessible family inclusive services and supports, ranging from family inclusion in care planning to family-specific therapies (i.e., young person and family member), as well as caregiver-specific services.

Our Learning and Perspectives

A Broader Definition of “Family” and “Care”

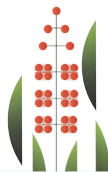
Existing care and service systems are not explicitly or consistently designed for family involvement, partly because the dominant Western colonial approach to care, especially the medical model, tends to focus on the individual in isolation. Current systems may also make assumptions about what constitutes “family”—that the nuclear family and biological kinship ties are the only relationships that constitute legitimate family. However, this assumption can undermine what family means to a young person. Youth may find greater support and safety in relationships with extended family members, Elders, partners or other caring adults who become their “chosen family” and offer them a sense of belonging and safety. In still other

instances, young people may also be a parent or caregiver themselves to a family member and may benefit from caregiver support.

A one-size-fits-all approach to interventions is unlikely to meet the needs of all youth and their families.¹⁶ Working with Indigenous youth and their families means honouring how youth are living within intergenerational systems and relations, so that supporting a young Indigenous person means also supporting the whole family. For newcomer youth, immigration, acculturation and language barriers can affect family dynamics, and these struggles are often inseparable from their MHSU concerns.¹⁷ For many 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, friends and significant partners can be their primary source of support and feeling

“I don’t define family as just being biological... your biological family can also be your chosen family, but not always.”

Youth



PROMISING PRACTICE: GATHERING OUR MEDICINE

Gathering Our Medicine is a cross-cultural framework intended to facilitate the restoration of care and attachment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people to their family and kinship circle. The program was developed to meet the unique needs of youth impacted by colonization and intergenerational trauma.¹⁶ Foundry has begun offering this program to service providers and staff.

Gathering Our Medicine is informed by Indigenous wisdom, developmental psychology, affective neuroscience and attachment theory. It is designed to restore the kinship circle and dignity to the role of caring.

“I personally think that having family supports at Foundry is super important because if a youth is going through something it’s not only them all the time, but the family is also involved and supporting.”

Youth

of belonging if family support is lacking.¹⁸ For families facing structural inequities, such as poverty and racism, the daily challenges and stress resulting from these inequities may create barriers for accessing services.¹⁷ These examples show that it is important to honour each type of family, familial relationship, family context and circle of care.

There are also assumptions in colonial systems about what constitutes “care” in the family context. Research shows that child protection authorities, clinicians and schools tend to over-report Indigenous and racialized families for neglect or abuse, often due to assumptions about risk and misinterpretation of cultural practices, using tools and frameworks that are grounded in classist and white-centric notions of acceptable child rearing.¹⁹ Social norms

Being Youth-Centred and Honouring Family: Addressing Tensions Around Family Inclusion

There are ongoing conversations in youth-serving organizations about whether and how to support and include the family, as this can feel at odds with maintaining a focus on youth. Recognizing that youth live within a broader circle of care, our hope is to address this concern by reframing family inclusion to centre youth. Honouring the family, as defined by youth and in all its diverse configurations, helps support the feeling of belonging that young people need to thrive throughout their life course.²⁰

A key area where family inclusion can raise concerns is around youth autonomy and confidentiality. Indeed, there tends to be confusion and misunderstanding when it comes to legal elements around confidentiality and decision making for care planning and treatment. In British Columbia (BC), “mature minors” can access health care services and consent to treatment independently of their parents.^b In many instances, this can be crucial to removing

around gender also affect understandings and realities of caregiving. For example, 4 out of 5 family members accessing Foundry family inclusive services identify as women, which reflects caregiving norms and highlights an opportunity to engage more fathers or male family members at Foundry.

Intentional outreach is important to support a wider range of families who may be unfamiliar with or fear accessing care, particularly mental health care. This includes learning from and working with Indigenous youth and families to decolonize the concept of family and integrating concepts around community-oriented care, including kinship circles. It is also important to engage in cross-sector conversations about the different definitions of family and care and how that impacts the well-being of youth.

access barriers. Working with youth and families to ensure that the choices, autonomy, confidentiality and safety of youth are honoured is essential while also supporting families and caregivers. At Foundry, this can look like taking time to explain the “why” behind confidentiality to caregivers to help ensure greater transparency without compromising youth autonomy. It also means ensuring that youth have the power to determine the involvement of their families and caregivers — when, how and to what extent — and documenting these decisions so that all service providers and staff are aware.²¹ Youth may be more interested in family involvement over time knowing their concerns, whether around confidentiality, their own or their family’s well-being or otherwise, have been addressed. The involvement of families and caregivers needs to be an ongoing process of respectful exploration, as things may change over time for a young person and their relationship with their family.

^b According to BC’s *Infants Act*, a child under age 19 may legally consent to a medical treatment, without consent from a parent/guardian, if a health care provider assessment shows they have the understanding to give consent and that the treatment is in the child’s interest. There is no set age for when a child can give consent. For more, see [HealthLink BC \(2022\)](#).

“Our case manager always stressed confidentiality to me and to my daughter, but it showed my daughter that I cared. That I wanted to be involved, but not that our/her case manager was going to share stuff with me that she [my daughter] didn’t want me to know. So that was a really fine line my daughter’s case manager navigated with extreme skill.”

Family/Caregiver

“I think we should re-establish the value of family and the value of community. And I think government and bodies of power and Foundry and other non-profits can do a lot to make that happen. To make people believe in families again and in the real power of love and supportiveness.”

Youth

Changes in young people’s relationship with their families and caregivers can also raise practical questions around family inclusion. For young people, the importance and role of their families change as they move from childhood and early adolescence to late adolescence and begin individuation as part of their development into adulthood.² While services for families tend to emphasize the developmental childhood and adolescence stages, more and more young adults

(over age 18) are living with their parents/ caregivers for longer²² and many continue to desire family support as they develop their independence into adulthood²³ There is some evidence that the family management approach during late adolescence may result in less MHSU challenges during adulthood.²⁴ In general, research on young adults is lacking²⁵ and more knowledge is needed to understand how best to support them in the context of their families.

Guiding Family Involvement at Organizational and System Levels

Stronger resourcing, supports and clear frameworks are needed at multiple levels — organizationally and provincially, and across sectors — to include family in a youth-directed way and help facilitate the adoption of this lens. Policies and procedures that help support family work are key to embedding family inclusion into broader health and social services more explicitly and to creating a culture of family inclusion where supportive families and caregivers feel welcome. Without a culture of family inclusion at all levels, there tends to be a lack of funded positions for family support or, where they are available, providers of family inclusive services can feel isolated and unsupported.

Building on foundational work done around children with disabilities to advocate for the involvement of families,²⁶ there has been a growing recognition of the importance of the family in some provincial and national policy. In BC, there has been an emphasis on a family-centred approach in some public sector areas²⁷ including by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development in its Child and Youth Mental Health Service Framework produced in 2019.²⁸ The youth homelessness sector has also been reframing services to include family and natural supports, recognizing that caregivers often play a key role in preventing homelessness.²⁹ There are similar movements taking place in child protection services and family justice and mediation to encourage family inclusion,^{30,31} as well as recognition of the inherent rights of Indigenous communities and groups to govern and administer their own child and family services.³² However,

there remains more work and support needed to operationalize these frameworks at the service delivery and practice level, as well as cross-sector conversations about how different definitions of “family” and “care” impact the well-being of young people.

At the organizational level, training and supervision are needed for clinicians and service providers to take a family inclusive approach within a youth context. Family inclusion is often a new area of competency for service providers, and they may feel hesitant to include caregivers in their practice, especially as some youth may have had strong negative experiences in their family environment that may make family inclusion inappropriate. This can lead to the exclusion or even blaming of all caregivers when they can be an important source of support for a young person. Training for clinicians and service providers can include role-play and communication scripts to help navigate areas such as confidentiality and decision making with youth and their caregivers.

Recommendations

Family inclusion within an IYS context needs to be considered across the developmental continuum, beyond childhood and adolescence, and over multiple legal and policy areas, with an emphasis on relationship building with youth, their families (as defined by the young person) and service providers. We present the following recommendations for governments, policymakers and IYS and youth-serving organizations to offer guidance and direction toward greater family inclusion in youth services.

1. Provincial guidance and resourcing to better operationalize family inclusive practice across sectors.

Further work is needed to support family inclusive practice in youth and young adult services in health and wellness and across related social sectors. This includes:

- Policy and/or service and practice standards, training supports for service providers and funding to support the operationalization of this approach.
- Guidance for family inclusion spanning across young people's development, from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood.
- Integration of Indigenous perspectives on family and kinship within the guidance and training.

2. Intentional outreach and community partnerships to support youth and families from diverse communities.

Supporting family involvement for young people from diverse communities, such as Indigenous youth, newcomer youth and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, requires collaboration between youth, families, service providers and community partners. This work should include:

- Cross-sectoral partnerships, such as with immigrant services, schools, Indigenous communities and organizations, and other community services to help engage families who are not aware of IYS or who face barriers accessing services for themselves and for the young people in their lives.
- A focus on prevention by engaging families early (before a young person is struggling), to leverage the important role that families play in connecting youth to services, and exploring multiple points of engagement, including with groups who are under-represented among family members seeking Foundry services.
- Additional considerations that increase access and awareness, such as training around unconscious bias, language interpretation and translation, and ensuring family inclusive services staff reflect the diverse communities of youth and families being supported.

3. Providing training and support for service providers to build a stronger culture of family inclusive services in youth-serving health and wellness organizations.

A culture of family inclusive services starts with creating a sense of team and community around working with families among staff and service providers at IYS and similar youth-serving organizations. Supporting this goal requires:

- The development of infrastructure, training materials and content around family inclusive services at the provincial level and within organizations to support service provider training and upskilling.
- Developing pathways and protocols for communicating with families and youth around family inclusion, with a focus on relationship building between families and service providers and a shared understanding that supporting families also means supporting youth.
- Information gathering, such as data collection and needs assessments, to understand the barriers and enablers of family inclusion at the service provider level and to discover gaps in knowledge and training.

APPENDIX

Practical Considerations for IYS Organizations and Service Providers

Below is a distillation of best and wise practices that emerged during our conversations with youth, families and service providers that offer practical considerations for meaningful and respectful inclusion of families in IYS.

A. Proactive and Diverse Engagement

- Engaging and supporting the family before a young person needs support or if a young person is not ready to access services. Engaging families early can prepare them with knowledge and skills to support the young people in their lives (prevention) and connect them to services and community support for if/when they and a young person need them. This also means not requiring that services for families are tied to the services accessed by a young person.
- Learning from and working with Indigenous youth and families to decolonize the concept of family in a way that aligns with and draws on existing Indigenous wellness frameworks which include the kinship circle. This may include, for example, representing Elder programs more strongly as part of family inclusive services.
- Engaging in intentional outreach to support families from diverse communities, such as Indigenous families, immigrant/refugee families and families of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, as well as fathers/male caregivers (and other family members identifying as men). This includes incorporating their perspectives into service planning, engagement and knowledge gathering and using language interpretation services to help make services more accessible.

B. Youth-Centred and Family Inclusive Services

- Ensuring that youth have the power to determine the involvement of their families and caregivers — when, how and to what extent. The involvement of family and caregivers needs to be an ongoing process of respectful exploration, as things may change over time for a young person and their relationship with their family.
- Developing guidance for service providers that helps support youth choices, autonomy and confidentiality, as well as ensuring that the safety of youth is honoured while also supporting families/caregivers. For example, explaining to families/caregivers why confidentiality is important can help ensure greater transparency while supporting youth autonomy.
- Bringing together youth and families through informal social gatherings and more formal supportive or learning opportunities (such as family counselling and workshops for families about mental health and building skills to support young people). This can also create opportunities to include younger siblings or other youth in the family who may benefit.

C. Family Inclusive Culture

- Creating a sense of team and community around working with families among staff and service providers at Foundry centres, from leadership to services and programs. This involves emphasizing relationship building with families and service providers and aiming for a shared view that supporting families also means supporting youth.
- Providing training for providers in the family inclusive approach and upskilling clinicians, as well as offering supervision in this area. A needs assessment and information gathering to understand the barriers and enablers at the service provider level may be beneficial. Developing pathways and protocols for communicating with families, caregivers and youth around family inclusion can be supportive.
- Supporting a wide range of services and ways for families to be involved. This can include supports and services, such as family counselling, family peer support, family support and education groups, and formal and informal engagement. This also includes elements such as extended hours of operation for family inclusive services to accommodate youth and family members with daytime working hours, as well as having consulting rooms that are large enough to include family members and space for peer support conversations near the reception area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge, with much gratitude, that our work takes place on land steeped in rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples today. We recognize that Foundry centres are situated on the traditional and ancestral territories of many First Nations communities, and we are humbled and thankful to be able to carry our work forward with Indigenous Peoples who have been stewards of this land since time immemorial.

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