

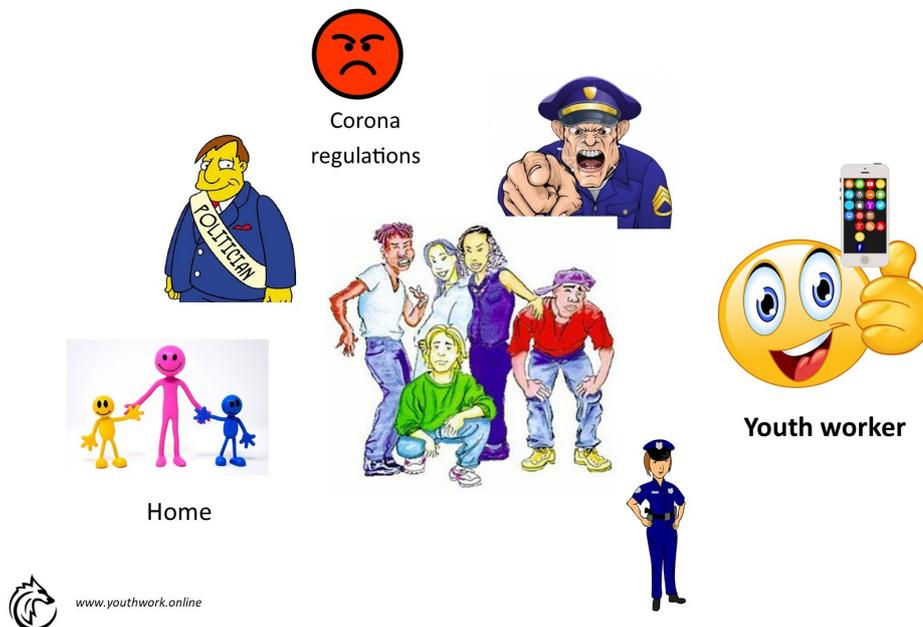


# Youth work and improving the social environment

## Preface

If one thing has become clear after the start of the Corona crisis, it is that youth work is able to adapt the range of activities to the strongly changed circumstances and knows how to develop alternative, often online, methods of working in a very creative way to help and support young people.

During Zoom sessions with youth workers in the Netherlands and in an app group on the topic, many beautiful examples came up. At the same time, many youth workers are again experiencing a lot of pressure on them. In the current situation, when “people” are concerned about the behaviour of young people, a great appeal is made to youth work. And, as from many comments during the Zoom sessions and in the app-group shows, it is expected that professional practice will mainly consist of supervising and enforcing on the street. Especially in situations in which large groups of young people meet outside, more than usual, this issue arises, and youth workers wonder: how can we prevent this?



## Where are we coming from?

*The pedagogical mission of youth work:*

Youth Spot, the youth work section of the University of Applied Science of Amsterdam, conducted a study, entitled: Education in the neighbourhood, an extensive literature study on pedagogical mission of youth work. Highly recommended reading, it offers you a lot of substantive arguments to facilitate a conversation with clients and partners. From this literature study the following quote:

*“Youth work has a pedagogical task in contact with young people.*

*Target group of the youth work are young people aged 10-23 (Metz 2011). Characteristic of the stage of life of youth is that young people are in transition from child to adulthood. Youth work focuses on guiding young people in growing up in society (Metz 2011; 2016). Everything youth work delivers contributes to the youthfulness and maturity of young people.”*

Young people grow up in interaction with their social environment and youth work therefore focuses on both elements. Youth workers naturally focus strongly on the young person(s) during their work; this can also mean that they overlook the possibilities the social environment of young people has to offer. In this article I focus on this particular part of youth work.

As a youth worker you not only focus on the young person, but you also try to involve the social and physical environment of young people in working on what is so beautifully called: a positive pedagogical climate. A climate in which young people feel at home, feel valued and heard, and where they are given the necessary space to learn to discover their own role in society. An environment that is also aware of the special position in which young people find themselves, with regard to the psychological development phase as well as in terms of cognitive and emotional ability depending on, for example, the development phase of the brain. And we do not even mention hormones.

Youth work is by far the professional group most capable of protecting the social environment of young people: youth workers are “present” in the world of young people and therefore possess real insight into, and contact with, that social environment; the youth worker is a neighbourhood educator in the third education domain and makes the connections with the other two domains (family and school) which increases their perspective of the social environment. In that social environment, the youth worker is development-oriented (of the young person) in contrast to other professionals who are goal-oriented or problem-oriented (such as youth care, education, police).

Another important aspect concerns the importance of social connection. Ever since the 1960s, when criminologist Hirshi presented his social control theory, scientific research and publications prove how important it is, that young people feel connected to their neighborhood and social environment.

Misha de Winter (Dutch professor Pedagogy) wrote about this as chairman of the Council of Social Development (RMO) in October 2005 in his advisory report “Aansprekend opvoeden” (Appealing education) referring to social connection: *“This term ('connectedness' in English) has emerged in recent international research literature, is emerging as a crucial socio-pedagogical factor that drives development opportunities, appears to be a major driver of the sinfulness behaviour and well-being of young people. People need it to be needed in a community, and they need it to be sustainable bear responsibility for others. American research shows that juveniles feel that they are valued in their primary environments, especially at home and school and make a difference ('to make a difference') are significantly less likely to develop psychological problems flowers, crime, early school leaving, addiction, et cetera. “*



From the aforementioned Youth Spot literature study:

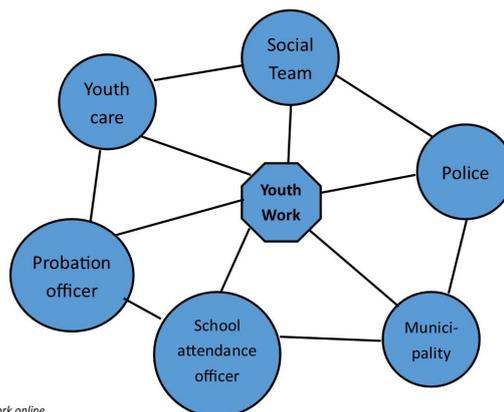
A positive pedagogical climate ensures that young people feel comfortable and safe in the youth work, dare and ability to develop and contacts with others young people. The creation of a safe and stimulating environment is a precondition for achieve the goals of youth work. The active reation of an appropriate pedagogic climate promotes the acceptance of young people. Ac-knowledgment, appreciation and respect for young people as they are and who they are, im-portant features of a positive pedagogue are climate (Jongepier et al., 2010; Milburn, Forsyth, Stephen & Woodhouse, 2000). On the other hand it strengthens social perception. Experienced through a positive pedagogical climate young people that they are competent enough to par-ticipate in various activities and grow (in) direct their self-esteem in dealing with other peers (Checkoway, 2011)

### How?

Youth work cannot do it on its one. Shaping the social environment can only be effective if that happens in collaboration with other partners and individuals. So *networking*.

Many youth workers already participate in formal networks, focusing on, for example, a group ap-proach, personal approach etc. I call these networks institutional networks because protocols, working methods and objectives of the organizations involved are usually leading. Just think, for example, of re-ported and registration procedures, waiting lists, etc. In addition, these networks are often problem-oriented. You can see an example of such a network in the image below.

## Formal network



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But as a youth worker you are pre-eminently able to create networks from two other angles, honouring and using it for shaping that social environment, namely from the young person perspective and from the environment perspective. Informal but very important and effective networks.

In considering matters from the young person's perspective, I use parts from different methodologies, insights from recent research and publications (among those mentioned in this article). Combined with my practical experience this had led this social environment approach.

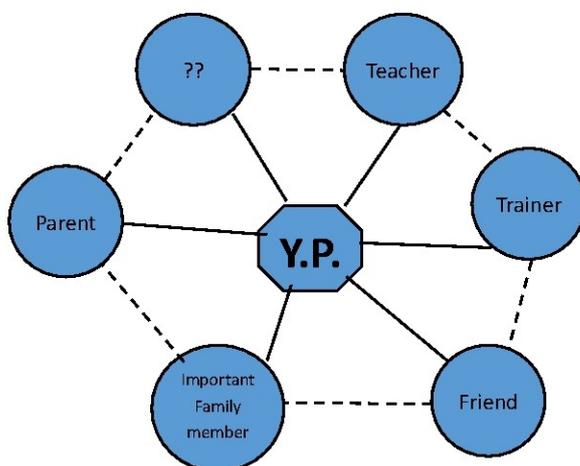
Which people are important to the young person and have a positive influence? In other words: who are the Very Important Persons. In order to get a picture of these VIPs it is necessary that you have an overview on the different whereabouts and locations where a young person abides. So you shouldn't just limit yourself to known sites, such as the hangout or the youth club, but also find out on which other places the youngster is literally "to be found".

The point is to actively deploy these VIPs to support young people, within the possibilities they offer of course. This commitment of VIPs has added value for the youth worker. In this way the pedagogical climate is designed by several people, in which the same principles are applied with regard to education and support. But you can also use the deployment to strengthen support in a specific area. Think, for example, of the young person who performs poorly at school due to insufficient cognitive abilities and therefore developed a negative self-image; this will prompt him to show "deviant" behaviour, and because of that behaviour the response of the teachers is also negative (action-reaction), etc. The same young person can be a member of a football club where he shows very different behaviour: he can play football well, appears to be a good leader, supports his teammates and is appointed captain by the trainer. The outcome is a positive self-image, pride, self-esteem, etc. By bringing teacher and trainer together in this case, and thus school and club, and showing the teacher other conduct you create more opportunities for a positive support for the young person at school as well.

And that local resident who is an avid athlete may also really enjoy spending time with young people to kick a ball and teach them some techniques or give running training. Or consider the technical local resident who may want to participate in a project to repair scooters.

An example of such a network is shown in the following image:

## Network Young Person's VIP's



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### *From point of view of the district / neighbourhood*

Connecting with your neighbourhood, feeling that you belong, that you matter, feeling safe and familiar are important elements for growing up positively, as we concluded before.

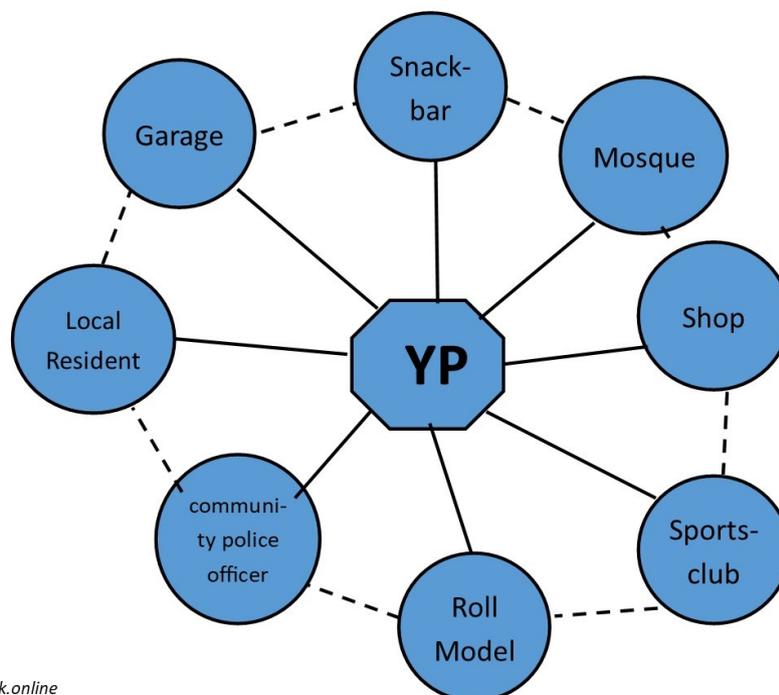
As a youth worker it is therefore important that you utilize the possibilities offered by the physical environment and actively deploys as part of creating a pedagogical climate.

In addition to your formal networks and your networks of VIPs, an active informal neighbourhood network is an important mean to involve young people in their neighbourhood, giving them the feeling that they are of significance and give a positive boost to the image of young people.

Look for so-called key figures from the neighbourhood: people who are also known to young people or who want to get involved with the young people in the vicinity. That could be a father who used to be a "bastard" himself but now wants to work for a nice neighbourhood in which his children can grow up safely. But also the shopkeepers of the shopping centre who want to participate in an activity by, for example, making prizes available.

Do you not have a suitable space for cooking lessons; then why not ask for in the kitchen of the retirement home and then share the meals with the residents? Or if you have no place where young people can tinker, consult with the garage nearby. And also for gaining work experience or for internships you may be able to appeal to the social involvement from local businesses.

## Informeel wijknetwerk



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Continuously working on connection and working together on a positive pedagogical climate gives you as a youth worker even more tools to support your young people in their process towards adulthood and a participating member of society, after all our mission as youth workers. The extensive network you build up also provides a lot of new information and knowledge, including how you can interpret the environment of young people and their position in their social environment. You look at that environment not only from the position of young people and through the lenses of the youth worker but you get more insight into other actors in that social environment.

And keep in mind that your presence is relative, only a few hours a week. Even without your presence, it is important that the social environment of the young person is actually “young people friendly”.

Working according to this approach means that you build up stable networks of people who are also involved in the pedagogic support of young people. There will be a more clear distinction in the role the different actors have in the education of young people. An additional benefit is that also in times of trouble it will be clear that a youth worker is not a co-enforcer but a professional who can influence people from a pedagogical point of view and thus contributes, together with others, to the realization of a social environment where young people feel they are an appreciated part of.



Would you like more information about a tailor-made training “Neighbourhood oriented working” or other forms of professional support, please contact me at [dicksmit@youthwork.online](mailto:dicksmit@youthwork.online) or go to my website [www.youthwork.online](http://www.youthwork.online).