

CREATE YOUTH-FRIENDLY SPACES

Authentic youth engagement requires a welcoming environment for youth to gather. There is a difference between a place and a space. Place provides a physical location; the space is created by those who interact in it. Youth should have an active and on-going role in creating a youth friendly space. Their input goes beyond the look and feel of the room, youth can help create space usage guidelines, safety protocols, etc.

PLACE

Keep in mind the following when selecting a place:

- Is the location easy for youth to find and get to?
- Do the hours of operation meet youth's needs and schedules?
- Is the building accessible for youth with disabilities and special needs?
- Is the physical space comfortable and appealing to youth?
- Will noise or use of the location disrupt others in close proximity?
- Is there a quiet area that youth can use to de-stress and practice self-care?
- Is there an opportunity for youth to make the place their own?

SPACE

A safer space goes beyond the physical place. It's about the behaviors and interactions that create an open and accepting environment, a space where everyone feels respected and valued. In a safer space, people can express themselves honestly and authentically, and they can contribute actively without fear of being judged because their social identities such as, religion, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. A safer space is not free from discomfort. To grow and learn, both youth and adults must confront issues that make them uncomfortable. A safer space allows participants to take risks, analyze their position and to work through conflict respectfully.

TIPS FOR CREATING SAFER SPACES

- **Youth identify core values.** Collaboratively identifying values will help adults understand what matters to young adults and how individuals in a group want to behave with each other.
- **Set group norms and expectations.** Group norms help ensure positive interactions between group members. These should be established by the youth and adults utilizing the space. For example, the Positive Space Network at the University of Victoria has a Safer Space policy that helps establish how individuals within a group interact with one another. These are some of their policies.
 - Respect your own physical, mental and emotional boundaries.
 - Stay attuned to your own needs and remember that you are welcome to take time away from the group should you feel that you need time alone, or away from the group.
 - If something doesn't feel right to you, please speak up. You may not be the only one who feels that way.
 - Be assertive if possible. If you have a concern with someone, be direct.
 - Respect others' physical, mental and emotional boundaries.
 - Don't assume the race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, gender, history with violence etc. of others. Instead, ask if someone is open to engaging in dialogue about identity. Don't take it personally if someone doesn't want to answer a question.

- Respect the confidentiality of others.
 - Assume positive intent.
 - We are all here to learn, and we all have something to offer.
 - Clarifying questions are encouraged.
 - Respect diverse opinions, beliefs, and points of view. Share ideas rather than judgments.
 - Everyone (including you) will make unintentional mistakes.
 - Be aware of the effects your behavior has on others and accept responsibility for it.
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- **Youth are involved in decorating the space**
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- **Space is available outside of Youth Leadership group meetings or events**, during normal organizational business hours where youth can drop in.
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- **Adopt a trauma-informed lens** where agencies and service providers work to preserve the physical, emotional and cultural safety in a space. Trauma-informed practitioners help educate the young person and their support networks about the impact of trauma on their well-being so they can better reflect on, understand and respond to the effects of trauma on their behaviors.
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- **Free from triggers.** Some environments such as physical space, noises, smells, and people can trigger emotions in youth who have been through a traumatic experience. Example: Youth space is in a basement with no windows. This could trigger a youth who was confined in a juvenile detention center.