Family and Natural Supports

Operations Manual

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FAMILY and NATURAL SUPPORTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge the lasting impacts of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples across North America, and the intergenerational harm it continues to cause. We also recognize the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring effects on Black and racialized communities whose resilience and contributions remain vital to our collective healing and future.

This framework was developed within a Western context, yet many cultures have long embraced ways of living rooted in connection, interdependence, and natural supports. We commit to honouring and respecting Indigenous, Black, and diverse cultural communities by valuing their knowledge, traditions, and approaches to care as essential foundations for well-being and belonging. This work reflects a shift away from a colonial lens and toward community- and connection-based supports. While much learning and unlearning lies ahead, we remain committed to walking alongside Indigenous, Black, and racialized people, guided by their wisdom.

The Family and Natural Supports framework builds on the foundational work of Calgary's Change Collective, "Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance Their Natural Supports," which demonstrated that while professional supports are important, they are not sustainable without strong natural networks.

We extend gratitude to the programs and agencies that welcomed us into their spaces and to the youth and families who shared their experiences in coffee shops, focus groups, and phone calls. Their openness has helped us better understand their journeys and challenged us to do better. We shared with the youth and families that their voices, their words, would be used in this document to support service providers to deliver the best outcomes and meaningful services. You have been kind and patient leaders, and we thank you for all you have taught us. We are grateful for the individuals, teams, and agencies that, throughout this journey, became thinking partners and created space and trust to carry this work forward.

We also acknowledge the vision and leadership of Dr. Stephen Gaetz, whose work through the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness has helped shape Canada's national prevention agenda and deeply influenced the adoption of Family and Natural Supports work in Canada and beyond. His contributions continue to guide our collective efforts to ensure that every young person has the relationships and networks they need to thrive.

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Finally, we are grateful for the support of the Government of Canada, whose continued investment in demonstration projects, research, and community practice has allowed us to deepen this work and strengthen families across the country. These investments continue to help prevent youth homelessness and keep young people connected to the people who matter most.

Canada

FAMILY and NATURAL SUPPORTS

INTRODUCTION

This operations manual was developed in response to growing interest from the youth sector for a practical, evidence-informed guide to support the design and delivery of Family and Natural Supports (FNS) services. The expanding adoption of the FNS approach throughout Canada, the United States, and Europe has highlighted the need for a structured and actionable manual to support effective implementation.

Rooted in over seven years of research, demonstration projects, and on-the-ground experience, this manual outlines the core principles of the FNS model and provides step-by-step guidance for embedding it within organizational practice. Whether launching a new program, building prevention capacity, or strengthening existing supports, the FNS philosophy can be applied as a foundational approach to deepen connection, enhance outcomes, and foster long-term stability for young people. This manual offers practical strategies for program planning, implementation, and evaluation, with the goal of supporting a proven, prevention-based model that reduces youth homelessness by centring meaningful relationships.

> *"I feel like all of these services, the FNS and everything that was offered…really did help and prevent my son from being homeless, because he was walking a very, very thin line of actually having to go to [shelter] himself.*
>
> *So you guys really saved my son from being one of those people out there living in the tents right now. Because I don't know if he would have gone to the shelter and yeah, if he would have had to go to a men's shelter at being just sixteen, I can tell you as a community nurse, I've entered some of those places, and I don't think he would have been able to survive those places.*
>
> *So yeah, it really prevented my son from actually being homeless himself."*
>
> ***– Parent from an FNS program***

What Is the Family and Natural Supports Approach?

The FNS approach calls for a fundamental shift in how organizations value and prioritize lasting, supportive relationships in their work with youth.[1]

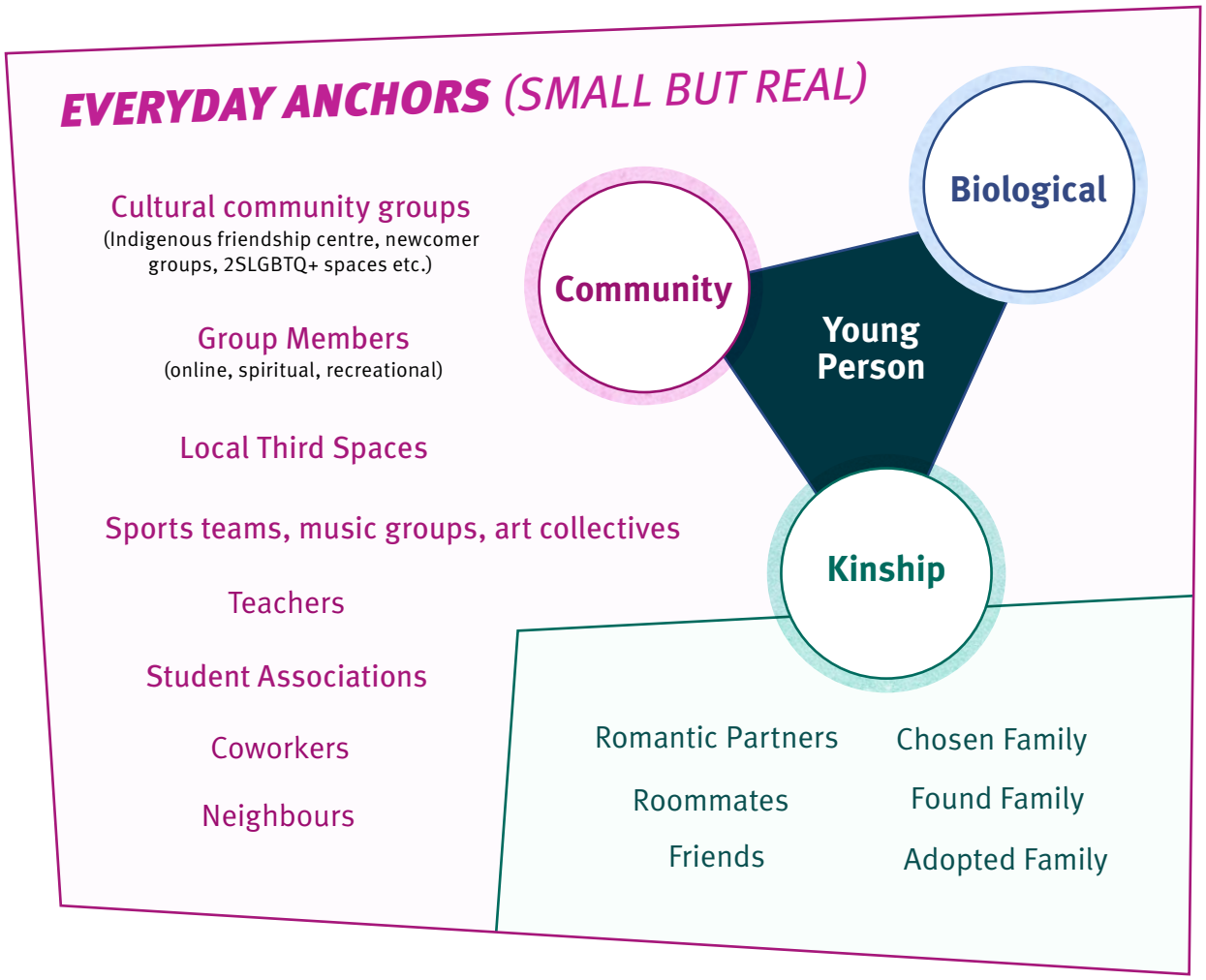
At its core, FNS is about identifying, strengthening, and activating relationships that can provide a stable foundation for young people. Strengthening a young person's network of support is one of the most effective strategies for preventing youth homelessness. While friends and peers play an important role in belonging, identity, and emotional connection, supportive adults are especially critical. Adults can offer consistency, guidance, advocacy, access to resources, and long-term commitment in ways that help young people navigate challenges, make informed decisions, and feel less alone. FNS helps young people build and sustain these adult connections so they have a stronger foundation of care, stability, and support around them. These enduring relationships create a safety net that lasts long after formal services have ended. While professional supports are important, they should serve as a bridge that reinforces and empowers the lifelong connections that ultimately foster long-term stability. Regardless of the housing option that a young person chooses or needs, FNS work consistently prioritizes opportunities to foster meaningful social connections. This includes supporting young people in repairing fractured relationships, forming new ones, and exploring what "community" means to them in their unique context.

The strength of the FNS model lies in its flexibility, as it does not assume that returning home or living with family is not necessarily the right path for every young person. Instead, it focuses on ensuring that every young person has meaningful, reliable community and community connections that include people they can turn to in times of need. For some, returning home may not be safe or appropriate due to experiences of abuse, conflict, or other risks. That's why it's essential to approach the concept of "family" with care, recognizing that it holds different meanings and complexities for every individual.

1. FNS has been developed as a philosophy, intervention, and practice targeting youth vulnerable to homelessness. However, similar supports could be adapted to support adults in strengthening relationships with family and personal networks.

What are Family and Natural Supports?

The FNS model recognizes that meaningful, lasting connections can come from a wide range of people, not only biological family. As shown in the diagram below, these relationships may include chosen family, found family, adopted family, friends, coaches, neighbors, community group members, coworkers, and more. **Each of these roles can offer emotional support, practical help, and a sense of belonging in a young person's life.**

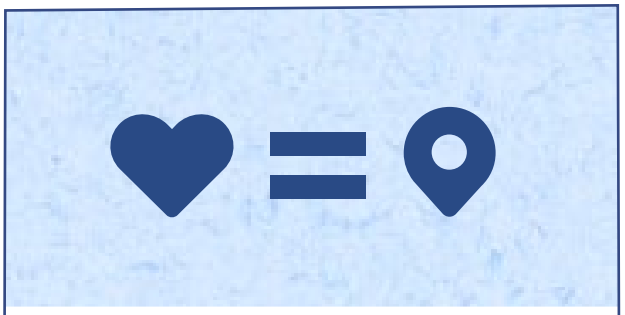


Program vs. Philosophy

FNS is more than a program model; it is the foundation for ensuring that young people have successful trajectories into adulthood with lasting social networks that will protect them. To truly shift trajectories, FNS must be embraced as an organizational philosophy, grounded in the understanding that connection to community, family, and natural supports is a fundamental human need. This approach ensures that relational support is not siloed but woven throughout systems of care.

FNS can function as a standalone program when implemented as a structured service delivery model within an organization. This would involve having dedicated staff and resources focused on helping young people build, strengthen, and sustain relationships with natural supports and chosen family. FNS workers often receive referrals from both within the organization and the broader community, helping ensure that relational support is accessible across programs and systems. FNS can also be used as a case management practice within another program or intervention, a good example being the central role it plays within the Housing First for Youth program model.

Whether the FNS approach is implemented as a dedicated program, an ongoing practice, or an organizational philosophy, the FNS model recognizes both the young person and their family as clients. While engagement typically begins with the young person, the family and natural supports are equally central to the work — not simply an extension of it.



RELATIONSHIPS ARE PREVENTION

Research consistently shows that young people with strong community ties and reliable support networks are more likely to thrive and avoid homelessness.

At its core, the FNS model is grounded in the understanding that stable, trusting relationships are vital to a young person's well-being and successful transition to adulthood.

However, it is important to recognize that youth and families are not always ready to reconnect or strengthen their relationships together right away. In some cases, the young person may not wish to engage, while their family members or key supports seek connection. This is perfectly okay, the process is not linear, nor is it expected to be. Each person moves at their own pace and in their own time. Effective FNS practice provides direct support to the young person while also offering parallel support to their family and natural supports, ensuring that the entire network is strengthened over time.

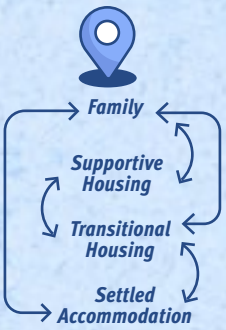
Relational Pathways to Housing Stability

Stable housing for youth needs to begin with relationships. Family, natural supports, and chosen family can provide the least intrusive and often most sustainable pathways to safety and belonging. Whenever possible, these relational options must be explored and strengthened before considering more formal models of care.

Housing Can Look Like...

Referal pathways & potential supports

- School
- Crisis/Shelter
- Couch Surfing
- Home/ Extended Family
- Drop-in/ Outreach Community



Family
Return home • Family • Natural supports • Chosen kin

Supportive Housing
24/7 Staff on site • Place-based • Long-term

Transitional Housing
Transitional housing • Host homes

Settled Accommodation
Living independently • Roommates • Private rental
Social housing

Young people can enter systems of support during times of instability and crisis, often through shelters, schools, drop-in centres, couch-surfing situations, or community programs. From these points of entry, youth may transition into a variety of housing arrangements, such as supportive housing, settled accommodation, family-based arrangements, or transitional housing. Each journey is unique, shaped by the youth's relationships, needs, and goals.

Because family conflict or breakdown is often at the root of homelessness, some youth may require temporary separation to ensure safety, reduce tensions, and create space for potential reconnection. It should be noted, however, that the more time that passes, the harder it becomes to bring people back together. Regardless of the path, the priority is to create youth-centred, flexible systems that emphasize relationships, safety, belonging, and long-term stability. The FNS approach plays a critical role in strengthening these connections and guiding transitions toward sustainable housing.

WORK IN ACTION!
A FAMILY AND NATURAL SUPPORTS CASE STUDY

PROFILE: JORDAN

Jordan was a 17-year-old who arrived alone at an emergency youth shelter seeking safety. For several weeks, he had been without a permanent home, relying on couch surfing, transit stations, and unsafe environments for shelter. Without intervention, Jordan was at high risk of chronic homelessness.

FAMILY CONTEXT

Jordan's mother passed away when he was 13, creating ongoing grief and emotional instability. Since her death, he had experienced persistent family conflict and inconsistent caregiving. His father lived in a Vancouver neighbourhood with high levels of substance use and street involvement, and contact between them was minimal. His maternal grandparents lived nearby but had been uninvolved due to unresolved family tensions. It was unclear what those tensions were or when they began.

OVERVIEW OF NEEDS AND STRENGTHS

Jordan faced significant risk factors: substance use (cannabis, alcohol, and recently meth), risk-taking behaviours, lack of independent living experience, disconnection from school, and social isolation.

At the same time, Jordan demonstrated resilience and an openness to support. He maintained personal care, engaged cautiously with shelter staff, and expressed hopes for safety, belonging, and independence. These strengths provided a foundation for staff to build trust and connect him to natural supports.

Applying the FNS Approach

Starting with Curiosity and Trust-Building

When applying the Family and Natural Supports (FNS) approach, the starting point is always curiosity. With Jordan, staff began by asking who he saw as important in his life and what he wanted to focus on first. He shared that he would like to reconnect with his grandparents but felt ashamed and fearful of rejection because of his substance use. He believed he would need to "get clean" before reaching out.

SURVIVING ON THE STREETS

Jordan was without stable housing for weeks, surviving through unsafe environments. He used meth as means of staying awake and safe while spending nights on the street. He felt completely alone.

The FNS worker gently offered another perspective, suggesting that his grandparents might be willing to walk alongside him as he was. Over the following weeks, the worker returned to the conversation, offering encouragement until Jordan felt ready to share the grandparents' contact information. When the worker reached out, the grandparents' response was mixed; his grandfather expressed anger over past thefts, while his grandmother voiced the deep worry and grief she has felt since Jordan's mother passed away. Sensing possibility, the worker invited them to meet and helped them understand the realities of shelter living and the risks Jordan faced. Multiple conversations were needed to unpack the grandfather's resistance, which stemmed from fear that Jordan would end up alone once they passed away. As the worker helped Jordan begin reconnecting with his grandparents, starting slowly with text messages and phone calls, he continued meeting him daily at the shelter, using those moments to build trust and provide steady support. At the same time, the worker stayed in touch with Jordan's grandparents, offering guidance and reassurance so they could feel part of his journey and understand how to support him.

Gradually, Jordan created a wellness plan that included a goal of stopping meth use while continuing to manage his cannabis and alcohol use. Jordan was also open to sharing this plan with his grandparents so they could see how to help him and have a clear way to walk alongside him. This strengthened a family connection that had been distant for years.

Even though school wasn't his immediate focus, the worker reached out—with Jordan's consent—to his former school to keep the door open. The principal, who had always cared about Jordan, arranged for staff to send him a card reminding him that he was welcome back anytime. This was a quiet but powerful message that he was not alone and had a place to return to.

Reconnection and Ongoing Support

When Jordan and his grandparents finally agreed to meet in person for coffee, his grandmother embraced him warmly, while his grandfather remained cautious. The worker highlighted the strengths of both Jordan and his grandparents, affirming that despite conflict and loss, they remained a family. It was decided in this meeting that the goal was for Jordan to move in with his grandparents while rebuilding and strengthening their relationship, all with the continuous support of the FNS worker.

This reconnection was not the end of the story but the turning point, as the FNS worker continued facilitating conversations with Jordan's grandparents and encouraged exploration of other natural supports,

ALL YOUTH NEED STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEANINGFUL ADULTS

Youth who say they have "no one" are often the ones who most need FNS connection and support to build meaningful relationships with trusted adults and caregivers.

Staff do not need to know who those supports are at the outset. These connections can be discovered, rebuilt, or newly developed over time through intentional, relational work.

such as extended family, community members, and school connections. Jordan remained at the centre of every decision, and his grandparents offered valuable historical context, from family patterns of mental health and addiction to the grief Jordan had carried since his mother's death. These insights shaped a care plan that was both realistic and supportive.

Importantly, the FNS worker did not step back once Jordan moved in with his grandparents. Because trust had already been built, the same worker continued alongside Jordan and his family. In FNS, we think about support as being available for as long as it takes—not because support is meant to last forever, but because families should not be forced into artificial timelines. People do not want to be attached to programs and services indefinitely, so we should not be overly concerned with timelines. Instead, the focus should be on walking alongside families until support is no longer needed, and allowing that transition to happen naturally, with dignity and trust.

SUPPORT HAPPENS ON THEIR TIME, NOT OURS

FNS work doesn't follow a standard 9-to-5 schedule. Connection, crisis, and conversation often happen outside traditional office hours.

This role requires flexibility, mobility, and presence—it's not a desk job. Meeting youth and families where they're at means being available when needed, whether that's evenings, weekends, or in community spaces. FNS staff are not expected to work 24/7, but families should know how to reach on-call support, and there should be a wellness or debrief plan in place. Team case consultation and awareness of each other's caseloads are essential to ensure consistent, coordinated support for youth and families.

Key Takeaways

Jordan's story highlights that applying the Family and Natural Supports approach requires curiosity, patience, and persistence. Rebuilding relationships is rarely quick or straightforward, and progress often comes through many small steps over time. FNS workers must remain open to the young person's perspective, start with what matters most to them, and gently create opportunities for reconnection. Consistent presence, trust building, and harm reduction strategies provide a foundation for change, while parallel support for natural supports helps them process their own fears and challenges. Above all, the work demonstrates that relationships are preventive, and sustaining them requires both hope and steady investment. Jordan's experience demonstrates the effectiveness of the FNS approach in preventing youth homelessness. By reconnecting him with family and other natural supports, FNS workers helped Jordan stabilize and maintain housing, keeping him out of shelters and off the streets. Parallel support for his family strengthened his network and reduced the risk of future crises.

This approach shows that housing stability depends on trust, relationships, and ongoing engagement, not just a physical place to live. FNS also provides a cost-effective alternative to repeated emergency interventions, which shows that strategic investment in relationships can prevent homelessness, reduce the cost of crises over time, and keep youth safe and supported.

Foundational Practices for Access and Engagement

The first interactions a young person or family has with a program set the tone for everything that follows. In FNS work, building trust from the very beginning is essential.

As shown in **Jordan's case study**, taking time to sit with his grandparents in their home and listening to their struggles and the barriers they faced in reconnecting with him was critical in creating the trust needed for successful reconnection.

For that reason, referral pathways must be clear, accessible, and welcoming, and engagement must be rooted in curiosity, care, and relationship. Whether a youth finds their way to the program through a school, a shelter, or a caring adult, the process should feel open and affirming, not clinical or transactional. This section outlines strategies for making those first points of contact meaningful, from accessible referral tools to relational intake practices, so that youth and families feel seen, heard, and supported from the very beginning.

Referral Pathways and Access

Referrals to the program can come from a variety of sources. Many organizations receive self-referrals directly from young people, as well as referrals from their natural supports, family members, chosen family, or other caring individuals in their lives. Referrals may also be made by educators, counsellors, or other professionals in the community.

Accessibility and Timely Follow-up

Crisis doesn't always happen between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday to Friday. That's why it is crucial to ensure that families, caregivers, and young people can access information and submit referrals when they need to, whether late at night, on the weekend, or during a moment of urgency.

We recommend setting a clear time frame for responding to referrals so that individuals know when to expect a follow-up. For instance, stating that "someone from our team will reach out within 72 hours" can help to ease anxiety and reinforce trust in the process.

Creating a Welcoming Entry Point to FNS

One strategy that significantly increases referral uptake is creating a dedicated web page for your Family and Natural Supports program. This page should clearly explain what the program offers, how it supports young people and their natural supports, and what participants can expect as well as provide easy access to the referral package.

Your FNS program web page should include:

- A warm and welcoming description of the program
- An explanation of how it supports young people and their natural supports
- Expectations for what participation in the program will look like
- A downloadable form or online link to the referral package
- Plain, accessible language to describe the services and initial engagement process

Once a referral is received, it's important to connect with the referring individual right away to begin building rapport and gathering information. This could be a phone call or an informal meeting in the community such as meeting them for a coffee in their neighbourhood. These early conversations help uncover the dynamics of their situation and provide insight into what kind of support would be most helpful.

Determining Fit

This is where the real work begins. Through curiosity, active listening, and genuine dialogue, you can begin assessing whether your program is the appropriate fit for a young person or whether another service would better support their needs. It is the responsibility of your agency to maintain clear eligibility criteria for whom your FNS program is designed to support. For example, your program may exclusively support young people ages **12–24** who are **homeless or at risk of homelessness**, experiencing **family conflict**, or navigating other challenges and who do not have **ongoing child protection services involvement**.

As part of your referral conversation, it's helpful to explore a few key areas to determine whether the situation is within your program's scope or whether it requires more specialized or intensive support.

Consider questions such as:

- **Is this situation beyond our program's mandate or capacity?** For example, are the risks too high, or does the youth require a level of intervention that your team is not equipped to provide?
- **Is there an open child protection file or are other professional services involved that would be a duplication of resources?** If so, your role may shift to collaborating with those professionals or guiding the youth toward their existing support.
- **Are they working with a therapist, school counsellor, shelter worker, outreach team, or another case manager?**
- **Do they currently have case management elsewhere?** If the youth is already attached to another agency that provides case management or specialized intervention, it may be more appropriate to coordinate rather than duplicate services.

Exploring these questions helps ensure that each young person receives a level of support that truly meets their needs—whether that is through your FNS program or another, more suitable resource.

KEEP IN MIND: the referral form is just a tool; it's the starting point. True understanding comes through conversation and relationship building, which is why it's so important to prioritize connections with youth from the outset.

As a best practice, if your program isn't the right fit, aim to offer at least two alternative referrals that could offer support to the youth or their family. Doing so ensures that the young person and their support network walk away with a sense of hope, direction, and care.

Prioritizing Access to FNS Services

If your program has limited capacity to provide FNS services, prioritization becomes necessary. Regardless of the approach, it's important to communicate clearly and honestly with youth, families, and natural supports about what they can expect. This includes information about how support will be provided, estimated wait times, and whether any interim resources will be available. These details should be outlined in a caregiver and chosen family handbook to ensure transparency and manage expectations.

FNS programs typically assess individuals based on their level of need, risk, urgency, potential for positive impact, and the availability of resources. A key consideration is the young person's readiness to engage and the likelihood that reconnecting with their natural support network or strengthening their bonds will lead to meaningful benefits.

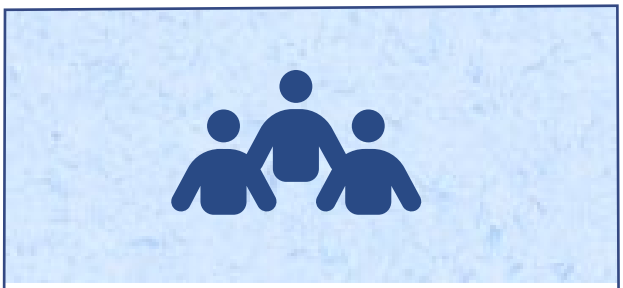
The Importance of a Caregiver and Natural Supports Handbook

Through conversations and research with dozens of families and chosen family members, we have learned that many are unsure about what an FNS program offers. When conflict or crisis happens, caregivers and natural supports may experience guilt, shame, or hesitation to seek support. By proactively offering information in a clear and compassionate way, we begin to break down these barriers and build trust early on. It is our responsibility to take the first step in engaging families and natural supports, rather than waiting for them to come to us.

A well-designed handbook serves as both a welcoming introduction and a practical guide. It sets the tone for respectful and inclusive partnership, reminding caregivers and natural supports that their involvement is valued and essential. While organizations can offer services and connect families to resources, it is the family and natural supports who understand the history, knowledge, and unique needs of the young person. Recognizing and affirming this expertise is key to building effective and lasting collaboration.

The caregiver handbook should include:

- **Clear Communication and Expectations:** A handbook helps caregivers understand what the program offers, including the types of supports, policies, and procedures. This transparency reduces confusion and misunderstanding while building trust. As the saying goes, "You don't know what you don't know."



INVOLVE FAMILY AND NATURAL SUPPORTS EARLY

Bringing family and natural supports into the process from the beginning, when appropriate, helps align everyone on the same page. It creates shared purpose, clarifies roles, and shows the young person that support will continue beyond professional involvement.

- **Stronger Collaboration:** When expectations are clearly communicated from the start, it sets the stage for a strong, cooperative relationship between staff and natural supports who can all work together for the youth's well-being.
- **Reduced Stress and Anxiety:** Caregivers often feel overwhelmed. A clear, accessible handbook can answer common questions and provide reassurance, which helps caregivers to feel safe, confident, and supported. Raising teenagers comes with unique challenges. Part of the FNS worker's role is to recognize those challenges and remind parents that they are doing their best. By offering guidance and encouragement, FNS workers help caregivers feel less alone and more capable in their parenting journey.

Core Program Services

At the heart of the FNS model is a commitment to walking alongside young people and their networks in ways that are relational, practical, and rooted in dignity. The core supports outlined in this section reflect the diverse and interconnected needs of youth and their families and natural supports. These services go beyond traditional case management to include emotional coaching, cultural connection, and tools that build long-term stability and resilience. Whether it's helping a young person navigate complex systems, equipping a caregiver with new communication strategies, or offering flexible funds to ease financial strain, each support is designed to strengthen relationships and promote lasting connection.

Services for Youth

Youth services provide a network of interconnected supports to help young people meet their unique goals and needs. These services create stability and belonging, allowing youth to focus on their personal development and long-term well-being.

Core Supports for Youth

- **Case Management:** Youth receive consistent guidance through case management, which helps coordinate services, monitor progress, and adapt plans as their needs and goals evolve. This approach ensures youth have a clear, consistent plan and access to the right mix of services at the right time. It also involves families and young people in the planning process, giving them defined roles and responsibilities. This collaborative approach ensures that everyone involved is on the same page and working toward shared goals.

- **Wraparound Support (not timelimited):** Youth receive assistance in meeting both immediate and ongoing needs, including food, safe housing, health care, and transportation. By ensuring these essential needs are met, wraparound support provides the stability necessary for focusing on education, employment, relationships, and healing. Wraparound support takes a holistic, person-centred approach. Instead of offering a single, isolated service (like housing or food), it involves a coordinated network of services tailored to the individual or family's unique needs.
- **Connection to Culture and Community:** Youth are encouraged to strengthen or explore connections to culture, identity, and chosen communities. this may involve taking them to reconnect with traditions, joining community events or finding safe spaces where they feel seen, valued, and supported.
- **Relationship Coaching:** Youth receive support in repairing or strengthening relationships with parents, caregivers, or trusted adults. This coaching acknowledges the pain of past conflict, trauma, or separation and focuses on rebuilding trust and communication in safe and supportive ways.
- **Social-Emotional Coaching:**[2] Youth are given opportunities to build social-emotional skills through guided conversations, reflective exercises, and role modelling. They learn to manage strong emotions, take accountability, communicate clearly, and set healthy boundaries. These skills create a foundation for healthier relationships and greater confidence.

Services for Family and Natural Supports

Services for family members and natural supports are designed to help them strengthen their capacity to support the young person in their life. These services recognize that caring for a youth, especially one who has experienced adversity, can be challenging, and they aim to walk alongside families while offering compassion and practical tools.

2. We want to acknowledge that we are using the word *coaching* instead of *mediation*, and we'd like to share why. The word *mediation* suggests two sides in conflict, which is not how we want to begin our work with families. Our goal is for natural supports and chosen family to see themselves as one unit, not divided. Families and staff also shared that *mediation* felt too clinical. Many youth and families said the language turned them off and made them hesitant to engage. When we listened with curiosity, we heard that this wording reminded them of other systems they had already experienced. We also learned that *mediation* gave the impression that someone was in the middle of the family. That's not the role we want to play. Instead of creating dependency on professionals, we aim to use a coaching approach—standing on the sidelines, supporting the family, and teaching skills they can continue to use long after we are gone.

Core Supports for Family Members and Natural Supports

- **Light Case Management:** Families receive support to navigate complex systems, coordinate services, and access timely information or referrals. This may include help with housing, transportation, financial assistance, or mental health resources. These supports strengthen the stability and well-being of everyone involved.
- **Coaching:** Caregivers are provided with tools to improve communication, set boundaries, understand adolescent development, and manage stress or conflict in the home. Coaching focuses on building practical skills that promote healthier interactions and stronger relationships.
- **Strengths-Based Reflection:** Families are encouraged to reflect on their own values, reactions, and strengths. This process builds empathy, consistency, and confidence, helping them respond to their young person with greater understanding and care.
- **Building Networks of Support:** Building Networks of Support: Families are supported in strengthening their own networks of connection, while also developing the social-emotional skills and communication tools needed to sustain those connections. This may include friends, relatives, other caregivers, cultural or spiritual resources, or peer support groups. When natural supports feel equipped with practical skills, connected to their communities, and valued as partners in the work, they are better able to show up for youth in ways that foster healing, trust, and belonging.

Barrier Removal Funds

Family conflict and breakdown that lead to youth homelessness are often deeply tied to financial instability. When families are under economic strain, the stress can impact caregivers' mental health, their ability to meet basic needs, and how they show up in relationships with their children. Many parents and natural supports feel stretched beyond their limits, and this pressure can erode trust, connection, and communication at home. Addressing financial hardship with compassion is therefore critical. Flexible barrier removal funds offer a tangible way to respond with dignity and care by supporting both young people and the adults in their lives who are doing their best to hold things together.

To be effective, barrier removal funds must be unrestricted, so they can be used creatively to address a wide range of challenges that limit access to essential resources, services, and opportunities for connection. Importantly, we recognize that our support is not permanent—youth and families will eventually continue on their paths without direct

intervention from us. An essential part of our work, therefore, is ensuring that families have the financial means and knowledge to sustain themselves once support services conclude.

This can include connecting families to existing resources that help meet basic needs, such as rental assistance programs, food supports, utility assistance, childcare subsidies, and health care coverage. We also support families in building financial skills, including budgeting, managing bills, and planning for emergencies. Beyond immediate needs, we help explore pathways to economic stability through employment, education, and training opportunities. By linking families to these resources and equipping them with practical skills, we aim to strengthen resilience and create a foundation for long-term stability, even after direct support ends.

Flexible barrier removal funds, combined with guidance and connections to sustainable financial resources, are therefore not only a lifeline in the moment—they are an investment in the ongoing well-being and independence of youth and families.

BARRIER REMOVAL FUNDS IN ACTION

Barrier removal funds are not about "extras." They are about removing immediate obstacles that stand in the way of connection and stability.

A small, flexible investment, such as bus fare to visit family, groceries for a shared meal, or a phone card to stay in touch, can make the difference between isolation and connection.

Key Functions of Barrier Removal Funds

- **Addressing Immediate Needs:** Youth and families often face urgent financial pressures that, if left unmet, create instability and crisis. Barrier removal funds can cover essentials such as food, transportation, housing costs, health care, technology, or school fees. By relieving these pressures, youth and caregivers can focus on stability, relationships, and long-term goals.
- **Strengthening Families and Natural Supports:** Families and natural supports experience their own challenges, from paying school fees and filling the car with gas to purchasing appropriate work equipment or simply putting food on the table. When the day-to-day needs and well-being of natural supports are met, it directly benefits the young person. For this reason, barrier removal funds should be available not only to youth but also to their families, chosen families, and natural supports.

- **Enabling Flexible and Compassionate Responses:** Every youth and family has unique needs, and barrier removal funds are most powerful when used flexibly. These funds might be used to cover travel costs so a young person can connect with relatives they thought they'd never see again or to provide a small gesture of care, like a SkipTheDishes gift card for a caregiver having a tough week that quietly says, "You are seen, and you matter."
- **Fostering Everyday Moments of Connection:** Relationships are strengthened in everyday moments of care, fun, and recognition. Young people tell us time and again that what matters most are the experiences that bring them closer to the people they love, whether that means attending a recreational activity or arts event with someone important to them or simply spending quality time together. These experiences foster attachment, joy, and belonging. While many programs give gifts directly to youth, greater impact is achieved when families supported and empowered to give those gifts themselves or when youth are supported to give back to the people who matter most.

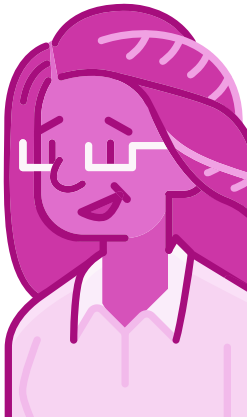
When used in these ways, barrier removal funds are more than financial tools; they become a powerful means to nurture and invest in relationships that prevent youth homelessness and sustain well-being.

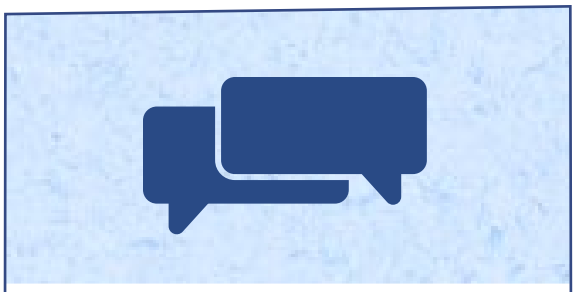
Cultural Supports

In FNS work, culture is a foundation for belonging, resilience, and stability. When young people are supported to stay rooted in their cultural traditions, practices, and communities, they are more likely to experience the sense of identity and connection that makes housing stability possible. A safe place to live is important, but lasting stability comes when youth also feel that they belong somewhere and are connected to people who value and understand them.

Culture can look different for each young person. For some, it may mean family traditions, language, food or spiritual practices. For others, it may be expressed through chosen family, peer groups, or community connections. We cannot assume a shared definition, so curiosity and openness are essential.

> *"One year in our FNS program, we celebrated the holidays in four different ways. A Ukrainian youth shared their traditions through food and decorations, another invited us to celebrate Chinese New Year, we enjoyed a Western-style Christmas with Santa and stockings, and we learned about Hanukkah together. These experiences opened my eyes to how often in my previous work I had simply put up Christmas trees without considering the diverse cultures and families youth come from. It was one of the best Christmases I've ever had, because I learned so much about what mattered most to each young person."*
>
> ***– FNS Program Staff***





LANGUAGE MATTERS

Based on feedback from youth and staff, we've shifted our language to better reflect the values of dignity, trust and collaboration:

1) "Engagement" replaces "intake" to move away from clinical, institutional language and toward a more relational, youth-centred approach.

2) "Wellness" replaces "safety" to honour young people's autonomy and avoid implying they lack the ability to care for themselves.*

* We've begun using the term "*wellness*" in place of "*safety*" when discussing safety plans. The goal is to broaden the conversation to include overall well-being, not to minimize or avoid direct discussions about safety.

Talking openly about safety remains essential, and we encourage people to address it directly whenever needed. These changes recognize that language shapes experience and that our words should reflect respect, partnership, and shared understanding.

Cultural support helps youth sustain and celebrate their identity while also offering opportunities for exploration when traditions feel distant or unfamiliar. Support may include access to language, opportunities to practise rituals, guidance from Elders or spiritual leaders, and education about heritage and values. It may also involve access to traditional foods, clothing, or sacred spaces, along with the freedom to practise cultural, religious, or spiritual beliefs.

By including cultural supports in FNS work, we can strengthen the natural networks of care that surround young people. These connections foster belonging, reinforce identity, and help youth feel less alone, which are all key ingredients for both immediate safety and long-term housing stability.

Case Management and Service Planning

Case management in the FNS model is more than coordinating services; it is about building trust, honouring youth voices, and supporting meaningful progress over time.

This section outlines the processes that guide everyday practice in FNS work. From the moment a young person enters the program, every interaction is an opportunity to reinforce connection and self-agency. Shifting from traditional approaches toward more relational, strengths-based planning helps ensure that youth feel respected and supported as they define their own goals and pathways forward. Whether through intentional language, collaborative goal setting, or thoughtful transition planning, case management in FNS puts young people and their natural supports at the centre every step of the way.

Case Management

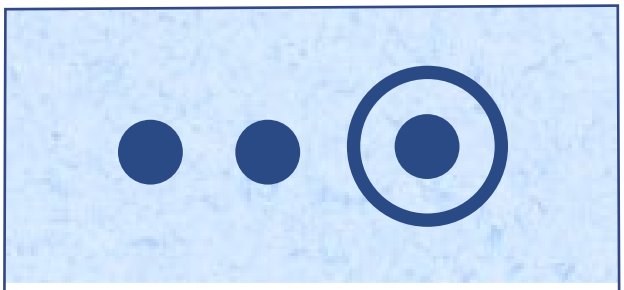
Case management is a well-established approach for supporting youth with complex needs or those experiencing crisis. It is a coordinated approach to providing services and support, and its goal is to ensure that a person receives the right services at the right time, in an organized and efficient way. In the context of FNS, case management plays a vital role in helping young people navigate services, build stability, and stay connected to meaningful relationships.

Effective case management depends on tools that foster connection, encourage planning, and support follow-through. In response to feedback from young people, we have made intentional shifts in language to better reflect FNS values. What was once called the Intake Package is now the Engagement Package, and the Safety Plan is now referred to as a Wellness Plan. Youth shared that the word "safety" can feel like a loaded term, sometimes implying they are not capable of caring for or protecting themselves. They reminded us that safety looks different for everyone. The term "wellness" offers a more holistic and strengths-based frame that affirms their self-knowledge and emphasizes collaboration, dignity, and shared understanding in planning.

Caseload Management

In the original FNS model, a caseload of 20–25 was recommended. However, after seven years of implementation, research and learning from staff, youth and families, it is clear that this number is too high. A smaller caseload, ideally 8 to 10 youth per worker, is far more effective for delivering meaningful, relationship-based support. **Remember that each youth participating in FNS will have meaningful adults (family members, natural supports) who will be engaged in the work as well and who will also need support.**

Working with young people and their natural support networks is complex and time intensive. Smaller caseloads allow staff to move beyond crisis response and referrals, creating the space needed to build trust, understand each family's unique context, and support long-term goals.



WHY 8–10 MATTERS

FNS works best when each worker supports 8–10 youth at a time. Smaller caseloads give staff the time to build trust, work with families, and focus on long-term stability rather than just crisis response.

Setting case management ratios at 8 to 10 clients per FNS worker is grounded in several important considerations:

- **Youth acuity:** Young people with higher levels of acuity require more intensive, time-consuming support. This reduces the number of clients an FNS worker can serve effectively.
- **Family complexity and size:** Families experiencing multiple challenges—such as mental health concerns, substance use, housing instability, or caregiving for several children—often require more frequent and comprehensive support. It's also important to consider the number of people in a youth's circle, as the size and complexity of these networks can impact how much s pace and time are needed for effective intervention.
- **Early engagement:** New families often need more time for initial assessment, engagement, and service planning.
- **During transition:** Stable families who are preparing to transition out of intensive support may require less frequent contact, which allows for slightly larger caseloads.

Balancing these factors helps ensure that each FNS worker can offer high-quality, individualized support while maintaining a manageable workload.

To ensure FNS programs deliver lasting outcomes, communities and funders must commit to staffing models that reflect the true scope of this work. Sustained impact requires more than good intentions; it requires the capacity to show up, consistently and meaningfully, for both youth and the people who support them.

Smaller caseloads allow staff to engage more intentionally with the broader circle of people surrounding a young person, including parents, caregivers, chosen family, and other key natural supports. When these relationships are actively supported and nurtured, they create a stronger foundation for meaningful change. In our research, young people have consistently shared that the work of repairing and rebuilding relationships cannot rest solely on their shoulders. Healing and connection are most successful when these efforts are shared by the people in their lives. This holistic approach strengthens the entire support system, leading to more sustainable and lasting outcomes for both youth and their natural supports.

Service Planning and Goal Setting

Goal setting is a central element of the FNS model. It involves empowering young people to reflect on their strengths and challenges and to use that insight to shape their future. A key role of the FNS worker is to create space for youth to explore their dreams and aspirations, develop a sense of identity, and build a vision for what's next. This may involve regular conversations that help youth learn from their experiences. For example, youth

might examine how communication challenges impact relationships and explore more effective ways to express themselves. While often difficult, these moments can be powerful opportunities for growth in resilience, self-awareness, and personal responsibility.

Goal setting brings structure, direction, and motivation to a young person's journey of self-discovery. It fosters accountability, supports autonomy, and helps youth recognize their progress, even the small, easily overlooked steps. Most importantly, goals must be youth-led. The role of the FNS worker is to guide and support, not to direct or decide. There may be times when a youth's goals, or the path they choose, don't align with our own views. But growth often comes through exploration, missteps and trying things out. Our job is not to impose our beliefs, but to create space for youth to learn, adapt and build confidence in making their own choices.

Involving trusted individuals such as family members, natural supports or chosen family in the goal-setting process can make it even more impactful. These supports can offer encouragement, practical assistance, and emotional support as the young person works toward their goals. Their involvement reinforces motivation, builds accountability, and fosters a shared sense of investment in the youth's success. During times of uncertainty, these trusted connections can also provide stability and remind the young person of their worth and potential, especially when their self-belief wavers.

Because goal setting can be unfamiliar and emotionally challenging for some youth, it should be introduced thoughtfully and gradually. Building a trusting relationship is essential to support this process effectively. As the relationship grows, youth will feel safer opening up about what matters to them and what direction they want to take in life.

Collaborative Case Consulting

Case consulting is a vital practice in FNS work, because the complexity of youth and family needs can feel heavy and sometimes overwhelming. By creating space to seek guidance from colleagues, supervisors, or specialists, staff ensure that decisions are not made in isolation but are grounded in collective wisdom. This collaborative process

> *"The biggest part of my job is sitting on the phone with staff and being a thinking partner. It can be scary for staff to make decisions in isolation, so having someone available to reflect with is crucial."*
>
> ***– Heidi Walter, FNS Training with A Way Home Canada***

strengthens ethical and effective decision-making, helps clarify complex situations, and ultimately improves outcomes for the young people and families we serve.

Consultations may take place in one-on-one conversations, team discussions, or staff meetings, but their purpose remains the same: to keep practice thoughtful, informed, and centred on the individual. When professionals share responsibility for decisions, the stress and pressure are no longer carried alone, and the quality of care is enhanced.

Best practice involves dedicating structured time each month to consult on every young person on a staff member's caseload. This intentional approach ensures that needs are reviewed consistently, reflective practice is encouraged, and emerging concerns are identified early. By adjusting strategies through ongoing dialogue, teams can provide more responsive, coordinated, and effective support. In this way, case consulting not only creates a supportive environment for the staff but also strengthens the care and stability offered to youth and families.

Transition Planning and Discharge

When it is time, a transition plan allows youth and their natural supports to be actively engaged in the discharge process. It gives them a voice in setting goals and ensures they are both accountable and recognized for their contributions. The plan also includes clear milestones to help track progress and celebrate achievements along the way. Additionally, transition plans help to reduce risk by reinforcing natural supports and helping youth retain and apply the skills they have learned and practised. It prepares them to navigate challenges and respond effectively when situations arise.

Discharge should be considered when:

- **Goals Have Been Met**
  - The youth and their identified people have successfully completed their goals.
  - They are demonstrating significant progress and stability.
- **Increased Autonomy Is Evident**
  - The youth is managing independently and has had significant opportunities to practise.
  - They are using their natural support networks to navigate challenges.
  - They are taking initiative and making informed decisions.
- **The Youth Requests to End Services**
  - If the youth is capable of making an informed decision, their choice should be respected. However, if they are not of age or lack the cognitive ability to make this decision, it is important to engage their key supports. We do not

take the choice away from the young person, and we listen to their voice, but this does not mean the process should be rushed. A request to end services does not mean it needs to happen immediately. Allowing space for the youth to process their decision and create a supportive, thoughtful transition plan with appropriate follow-up is best practice.

- **Persistent Disengagement**
  - The youth has consistently missed appointments and refuses to participate, despite persistent efforts by the staff team to re-engage over several months. There has been absolutely no contact or indication of interest from the youth, despite repeated attempts made through various methods.
- **A More Appropriate Service Is Available**
  - The youth is transitioning to a more appropriate level of care, such as being referred to a specialist or a community-based program better suited to their needs.

Collaborative Practice Foundations

In professional or organizational settings, collaborative practice foundations are the structures and processes that allow staff to learn from one another, reflect on their work, and support each other. Some of these foundations are reflective practice, communities of practice, staff meetings, and case consultations. They allow teams to share knowledge, seek guidance, and engage as thinking partners. These foundations foster professional growth, enhance teamwork, and promote better outcomes through collective learning and shared problem-solving.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice (RP) is an intentional process of pausing to look back on your professional experiences in order to learn, grow, and strengthen your practice. It goes beyond simply thinking about what happened. It requires analyzing your experiences with honesty, vulnerability, and curiosity.

Why Reflective Practice Matters

In FNS work, relationships are the foundation. Staff are constantly navigating complex situations with young people, families, and natural supports. RP creates a structured and safe space to step back from the busyness of the work, examine what has gone well, and acknowledge moments that did not align with our best intentions. Safety in this context is not assumed; it is defined collectively by the group or team, recognizing

that safety can mean something different to each person.

RP is not about judgment or blame. It is about learning how to show up differently next time, building self-awareness, and modelling the same openness we ask of youth and families. When practised consistently, RP strengthens staff resilience, deepens relational skills, and improves outcomes for young people.

Reflective Practice: What It Is (and Isn't)

Reflective Practice is:

- A regular, non-negotiable time set aside only for reflection
- A confidential space where vulnerability is honoured
- A process of individual sharing, supported by respectful listening from others
- A way of recognizing personal learning and growth over time

Reflective Practice is not:

- A supervision session, although it can inform supervision if significant harm or policy violations are disclosed
- A staff meeting, case conference, or informal check-in
- A place for problem-solving, giving advice, or critiquing others' practice

How Reflective Practice Works

Reflective practice is most effective when it is intentional, structured, and protected from the competing demands of daily work. It is not something that can be done informally or "whenever there is time."

To create the safety and consistency needed for staff to be open and vulnerable, RP must follow clear guidelines that shape the rhythm, tone, and environment of each session. The following components outline how to structure RP so that it becomes a meaningful and reliable part of team culture.

1. **Consistency is key.** RP should happen on a regular schedule, such as monthly, and should never be cancelled or pushed aside. Choose a time that minimizes conflict with other responsibilities so there is no temptation to reschedule.

2. **Group size matters.** Keep teams small, ideally no more than five or six staff, so that everyone has space to share.

3. **Structure and roles.** Supervisors or facilitators always go first, setting the tone of honesty and vulnerability. They should not use RP to discuss other staff or raise unrelated issues going on amongst the team.

4. **Sharing.** Each participant takes a turn reflecting on a recent moment in their practice. This may involve acknowledging a challenge, a misstep, or a learning moment. Everyone participates.

5. **Listening.** The group responds only with gratitude and acknowledgement, such as, "Thank you for sharing that so we can all learn from you." This is not the time for advice, strategies, or problem-solving.

6. **Environment.** Create terms of engagement that reinforce safety and equality. No cell phones are allowed. Participants should sit in a circle. If notes are taken, it must be clear that they are for shared learning and not to track mistakes. The goal is to shed ego and create a space of honesty.

7. **Confidentiality.** What is shared in RP stays in RP. If a serious harm or major policy violation is disclosed, the issue may need to move into supervision. Otherwise, RP remains a protected space for growth.

Creating the Right Conditions

For reflective practice to succeed, it must be facilitated by supervisors or leaders who bring strong emotional intelligence, humility, and people skills. They must be willing to model transparency and vulnerability, setting the tone for the group. If your organization is new to RP, do not attempt to implement it without guidance. Seek coaching or mentoring from someone experienced in this process. Reading about RP on its own is not enough to grasp the nuances that ensure safety, depth, and meaningful impact on staff practice.

Community of Practice

A community of practice is a group of individuals who share a common interest or professional focus and come together regularly to learn, share knowledge, and solve problems. These communities foster continuous learning, collaboration, resource-sharing and remind staff they are not alone in their work. They also create space to build and strengthen a network of tools, strategies, and organizational contacts that can be drawn on when supporting youth and their families.

This kind of shared learning environment is especially valuable when implementing a new program or philosophy, like Family and Natural Supports. It helps teams navigate uncertainty, build confidence, and grow together through shared experiences and peer learning.

Ultimately, a community of practice can evolve into a powerful support, not only for professional development and practice alignment, but for strengthening outcomes for the young people and the families that we support.

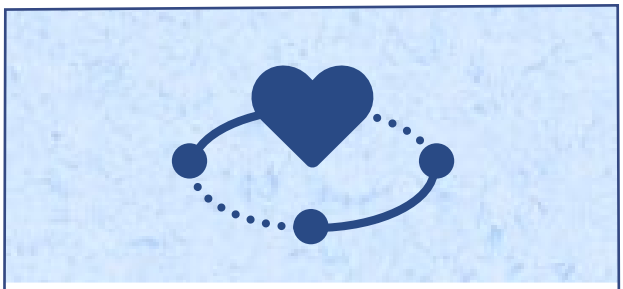
Staffing Model

Strong staffing is the foundation of any effective FNS program. A well-structured team ensures that young people and their support networks receive consistent, relational, and responsive care. This section outlines the essential roles, skills, and supports needed to implement an FNS program successfully. From frontline workers to supervisors and organizational leads, each position contributes to building trust, promoting connection, and sustaining long-term impact. Managing caseloads thoughtfully, providing reflective supervision, and fostering collaboration and ongoing learning are all essential for helping staff perform their duties with empathy.

The Role of the FNS Worker

The Family and Natural Supports worker plays a critical role in supporting youth who are experiencing housing instability and disconnection from their families or natural support systems. This position focusses on helping young people identify, build, and activate meaningful relationships that can support their transition to adulthood and long-term stability. A key component of success for this role is hiring, where possible, someone who reflects the diversity of the clientele you are serving.

Through individualized coaching, assessment, and advocacy, the FNS worker engages with youth, families, natural supports, and chosen family members to expand social capital and foster long-term stability for everyone.



SUPPORTING YOUTH MEANS SUPPORTING THEIR CIRCLE

When you work from an FNS approach, you're not just supporting one young person. You're investing in the web of relationships that surrounds them. Every conversation with a caregiver, sibling, or chosen family member is part of the work.

Services are delivered in community settings or within the home, based on the youth's preferences, comfort, service plan, and personal goals as well as those of their family and natural supports.

Key responsibilities of the FNS worker include:

- Identifying individual and family strengths and needs, including each person's goals
- Providing role modelling and guidance
- Teaching communication and problem-solving skills
- Supporting crisis management and conflict resolution
- Educating on family systems and adolescent development, including realistic expectations
- Strengthening relationships
- Making referrals to relevant community resources and services
- Promoting engagement in wraparound supports
- Providing coaching to support connection and collaboration with other professionals

The FNS worker also collaborates with community partners to ensure that youth and their support network are connected to the right resources. By strengthening the relationship with natural supports, the FNS worker enhances the youth's well-being, resilience, and long-term housing stability.

Staff should be knowledgeable in strengths-based practice, positive youth development, and family systems theory. Training should also include harm reduction, trauma-informed practice, social and emotional learning, and a relational approach, with an emphasis on cultural humility and anti-oppressive practices. Additionally, staff should have experience working with vulnerable youth and families and understand their unique needs and challenges.

Who Can Be an FNS Worker?

Not everyone is suited to be a Family and Natural Supports worker, and that is okay. Families have told us they feel more comfortable engaging with someone who demonstrates maturity, life experience, and a strong background in the field.

For this reason, the role is not typically suited to someone brand new to their career or fresh out of school.

FNS work requires a unique skill set. Workers must be able to navigate the "grey areas," hold space for difficult or awkward conversations, and coach through conflict in ways that help all parties feel respected and supported.

An effective FNS worker is comfortable working independently and entering family homes and community spaces and is equipped with strong social-emotional skills and emotional intelligence. Above all, they understand the importance of family and believe every young person and adult deserves a sense of belonging and identity. The right person can remain calm in moments of tension, de-escalate conflict, and model healthy communication that builds trust and connection.

The FNS Change-Maker

To fully embed FNS as a core philosophy within an organization, one effective approach is to designate one or more dedicated individuals to lead the change management process. This FNS change-maker role can help ensure fidelity to the model by acting as a thinking partner to staff, providing on-the-floor coaching, and guiding reflective practice.

Unlike program-specific roles, the change maker works across teams and services, showing up flexibly wherever support is needed. This responsibility is difficult to add onto another position, as leading transformational change requires full attention, intentionality, and dedicated capacity. The change maker's role is to lead, model, and champion FNS practice across the organization, helping it become a sustained and integrated philosophy rather than a standalone program. While this approach has proven effective in many organizations, it is one of several ways to support the adoption and integration of FNS principles.

YOU DON'T NEED TO BE A CLINICIAN

You don't need to be a clinician or therapist to do this work. In the Making the Shift demonstration projects, families and youth said they valued connecting with staff who could walk alongside them, without the pressure of a clinical appointment.

Many shared that systems like child services and justice often require clinician involvement, which can feel forced.

Having supportive staff outside of a clinical role makes the experience more genuine and collaborative.

Supervisory Role and Support

Supervision in an FNS program goes beyond task management. It is about guiding staff through the relational, emotional, and often complex realities of family work. Strong supervisors lead with curiosity, empathy, and thoughtful questioning. They model a mindset that challenges assumptions, emphasizing that families are not broken or bad. While professionals bring valuable skills, the true experts are the youth and the people in their lives.

Supervisors play a vital role in helping staff stay grounded in the core principles of FNS. They provide a safe space for reflection, encourage emotional intelligence, and support staff in navigating difficult situations with compassion. Through reflective supervision, they help team members make sense of complexity by offering their perspective and reminding them to step back from the details to stay focussed on the bigger picture.

SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A Way Home Canada can support your agency with the change management process and the implementation of an FNS program and philosophy across all services. Their expertise helps organizations build capacity, stay true to the model, and embed FNS as a guiding approach throughout the entire system of care.

A critical function of supervision is helping staff know when to step in, when to step back, and when to walk alongside. Supervisors help teams discern whether to "do with," "do for," or "do nothing," always centring the readiness and voice of the youth and family. This includes recognizing when a young person and their supports are ready to transition out of services and helping staff navigate that shift with confidence and care.

Effective FNS supervision must be rooted in a deep understanding of the model. Staff cannot be fully supported by someone who does not grasp its principles, goals, and nuances. Supervisors bring not only technical knowledge but also a relational presence. They hold space for staff to process, learn, and grow while staying aligned with the values that make FNS so impactful.

IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS FACTORS

Implementing the FNS model requires more than adopting new tools or adjusting workflows. Success depends on how we approach relationships, respond to challenges, and support the people doing the work.

This section highlights several key factors that contribute to lasting implementation, including applying harm reduction principles to relationships, navigating situations where staff and youth do not connect, and managing change within teams and organizations. These practices reflect the heart of FNS. They focus on meeting people where they are, staying grounded in respect and reflection, and building trust over time. When these approaches are embedded throughout the organization, FNS becomes more than a program; it becomes a way of working, leading, and showing up for youth and their communities.

Applying Harm Reduction Principles to Building Safe, Healthy Relationships

Many of us understand harm reduction in the context of substance use — needle exchange programs, overdose prevention efforts, and health education. These strategies aim to reduce risk without requiring abstinence, and they are grounded in the idea of meeting people where they are. In FNS work, we can draw on these same learnings and apply them to how we support young people in their relationships, without conflating the two.

Young people sometimes remain in relationships that adults or professionals may see as unhealthy or unsafe. The typical response is to encourage them to leave or cut those ties. But when we take a harm reduction approach, the response shifts.

Rather than insisting on complete disconnection, we focus on staying close. We continue to offer support, help youth reflect on their choices, and encourage them to make safer decisions. We provide guidance and tools while respecting their right to make their own decisions.

Similar to substance use, harm reduction in relationships is about reducing risk where possible, staying connected without judgment, and creating space for growth, safety, and autonomy. It is not about forcing a decision before the young person is ready. It is about walking alongside them, even when the path is complicated.

When Connection Is Challenging

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, a connection between an FNS worker and a young person just doesn't form. This can feel discouraging, especially in relational work like FNS, where trust is at the centre. But even without a strong bond, staff still have an important role to play.

It's essential to remain grounded in professionalism, respect, and consistency. Youth benefit from adults who set clear boundaries, treat them fairly, and show up reliably, whether or not the relationship feels close or easy.

These situations also offer an opportunity to model something important: In life and in work, we will encounter people we don't always get along with, but respect and kindness still matter. That lesson can be just as valuable as a strong personal connection.

At the same time, staff should take time to reflect on their own responses. Ask yourself:

- Are any of my biases, assumptions, or personal triggers affecting this dynamic?
- Am I holding expectations that may not be realistic or helpful?

Using a trauma-informed lens can help staff understand that resistance, avoidance, or even hostility from a young person may be rooted in past hurt or a need for self-protection. It is not always about defiance. Stay curious, not judgmental. Offer choices when possible and give the young person a sense of control.

If another staff member connects more naturally with the youth, it is okay to let them take the lead. Sometimes a different personality makes all the difference. And when things feel stuck, involving a supervisor can bring fresh insight, new strategies, and needed support.

Change Management and Staff Resistance

Implementing an FNS approach often requires a deep shift in culture and practice. For many staff, especially those who have worked primarily as advocates for youth, it can feel like a major change in identity and purpose. Moving from "protecting youth from others" to "partnering with families and networks" challenges long-held beliefs about professional roles, power, and trust. Recognizing this emotional and professional shift is essential to managing change well.

Resistance is a natural part of any change process. It often stems from uncertainty, discomfort, or fear of losing effectiveness, autonomy, or alignment with personal values. Some staff may worry that working more collaboratively with families could compromise their advocacy for youth or blur boundaries. Others may be unsure how to engage families safely when relationships are complex or strained.

Clear, consistent communication helps ease this transition. Staff need to understand not only what is changing, but why change is happening, how it will benefit youth, families, and natural supports, and what it means for their own roles. When staff see that this change is about improving connection and long-term well-being, not diminishing their expertise, they are more likely to engage with it.

Involving staff early in the planning and implementation process helps build a sense of ownership and trust. Creating space for dialogue, questions, and feedback helps staff feel seen and valued, not just managed.

Ongoing support is essential. This includes regular check-ins, training opportunities, reflective practice, and participation in team meetings. These strategies help keep the lines of communication open and provide staff with the information and reassurance they need to adapt with confidence.

Leadership has a critical role to play. Staff are more likely to embrace change when they see leaders modelling the same expectations by attending trainings, engaging in implementation, and being open to feedback themselves. Change is more sustainable when it is lived and practised at all levels of the organization.

When staff feel supported and involved in the change process, they are better positioned to deliver consistent, high-quality, and person-centred services. Over time, this strengthens relationships, enhances collaboration, and leads to better outcomes for youth and the people who support them.

DATA COLLECTION & PROGRAM EVALUATION

Effective data collection and evaluation are essential to understanding how an FNS program is functioning and evolving. Data not only supports program monitoring and continuous improvement but also plays a critical role in sustaining funding and demonstrating impact to partners and stakeholders.

Evaluation is a key part of ensuring program fidelity and understanding the impact of FNS. It plays an important role in both program development and continuous improvement. Through evaluation, you can monitor how the program is functioning at different stages of its growth. It identifies whether the program's activities are being delivered as intended, what is working well, areas for improvement, and overall effectiveness.

Several types of evaluation can support FNS implementation, including developmental, implementation, and outcomes evaluation. A developmental evaluation is especially helpful during the early stages, when the program is still evolving. As the program becomes more established, implementation evaluations help determine whether the model is being delivered with consistency and fidelity. This often includes fidelity assessments and ongoing feedback loops.

Evaluation is most useful once the FNS program has stabilized, a clear theory of change is in place, and the model is being applied consistently with its core principles. At that point, evaluation becomes a powerful tool for reflection, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Outcomes Measurement

Outcomes measurement tools are used to assess both the primary and secondary impacts of a program. **Primary outcomes** include enhanced family functioning and increased housing stability, while **secondary outcomes** focus on broader areas, such as health and well-being, social inclusion, and engagement in education or employment. Tracking these outcomes helps programs understand their effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate the value of FNS in supporting youth through critical transitions.

Below are examples of the types of data your program should collect. Best practice recommends collecting feedback every **30–60 days** to monitor progress and make timely adjustments.

FNS Outcomes Measurement

1

PRIMARY OUTCOMES

- **Enhancing family and natural support functioning:** improvements in communication, relationships, or support within the family
- **Promoting housing stabilization**
- **Increased housing stability:** securing stable housing or avoiding homelessness

2

SECONDARY OUTCOMES

- **Fostering health and well-being:** improvements in physical or mental health
- **Enhancing social inclusion:** feeling connected to community, reducing isolation
- **Engagement in education or employment:** participation in school, training, or work opportunities

Program Fidelity

Program fidelity is not merely a tool to check boxes—it is a comprehensive, expert-led process designed to ensure that programs are implemented as intended. Fidelity assessments are conducted by experienced professionals who deeply understand not only the practices but also the underlying principles that guide the model. To maintain objectivity and provide a fresh perspective, fidelity reviews should always be led by external experts, bringing an unbiased lens to your program's design and implementation.

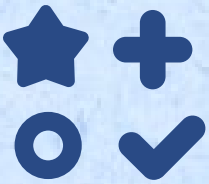
The fidelity process goes beyond evaluating whether a program is functioning as designed. It includes thoughtful recommendations and a clear action plan to enhance fidelity, ensuring that core components, foundational principles, and service delivery methods are consistently implemented over time. High program fidelity ensures staff adhere to the model's structure and guidelines with minimal deviation, which is critical for achieving intended outcomes and program effectiveness.

Conducting a fidelity review within the first six to twelve months of implementation allows for early observation and timely course corrections before practices become entrenched. As part of ongoing quality improvement, annual fidelity reviews are recommended to sustain alignment with the model, foster accountability, and support shared ownership of results. Maintaining strong program fidelity ensures young people are supported in an evidence-based way and ultimately strengthens outcomes.

Program fidelity refers to how closely a program or intervention's delivery follows its original design. It ensures that the core components, such as foundational principles and service delivery methods, are implemented consistently and as intended over time. High program fidelity means that staff are following the model's structure, practices, and guidelines with minimal deviation. This is critical, as straying from the intended design can reduce the program's effectiveness and make outcomes harder to achieve.

A fidelity review is recommended within the first six to twelve months of implementation. This window provides enough time to observe early results while still allowing for meaningful course corrections before practices become entrenched. As part of ongoing quality improvement, consider conducting an annual fidelity review to assess how closely the program is being implemented in alignment with its intended design. This supports consistent delivery, accountability and shared ownership of results.

Maintaining strong program fidelity supports better outcomes and ensures that evaluations accurately reflect the impact of the model and not the influence of unplanned adaptations.



SUPPORTING EVALUATION AND FIDELITY

A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness can support your agency with fidelity reviews and program evaluation. Their expertise helps achieve higher fidelity to the model and provides data that can be used to sustain long-term funding.

CONCLUSION

The Family and Natural Supports (FNS) model is rooted in the belief that youth thrive when they are connected to caring relationships, meaningful culture, and stable housing.

This manual has outlined the core philosophies, practices, and tools that guide FNS work, from case management and service planning to cultural supports and system navigation. Together, these components ensure that practice remains relational, strengths-based, and youth-centred.

Ultimately, the goal of FNS is not only to prevent homelessness but to help young people build lives with safety, belonging, and purpose. By walking alongside youth, strengthening natural supports, and fostering connections to community and culture, we create pathways to long-term stability. This is not easy work, but it is transformative work. It is work that changes trajectories, disrupts cycles of disconnection, and affirms every young person's right to a hopeful future.

To learn more about Family and Natural Supports (FNS) visit the Homeless Hub: homelesshub.ca/collection/programs-that-work/family-and-natural-supports