

Letter 3: YRT1_Y8.F.17

To Whom it may concern,

Supporting children and youth mental health is crucial for academic, social and emotional well-being. Mental health professionals, educators and police officers should be aware of two main notions about working with youth and supporting their mental health and well-being.

Due to a large age and power difference, youth often feel disconnected from the adult community. This is largely due to an inability to connect as the struggles of youth are constantly unacknowledged, invalidated and overlooked. The perpetuated culture that 'children have it easy,' or 'your teen years are the best of your life,' is what fosters this disconnect. Teenagers are too often seen as immature, or incompetent based on appearance, race, and sex. When working with and supporting youth, it is important to unlearn such a mindset. Youth should be treated as equal; their opinions, feelings and ideas should be genuinely valued. Every child deserves to feel heard and valued, such an effort from mental health professionals, educators and police officers, would make a lasting impact on that youths' trajectory and well-being. When in conversation, it is important to actively listen and direct conversation to every individual in the group. This gives opportunity for youth that are shier to share their vibrant ideas. Active listening and communication strategies such as open body language, nodding, guiding questions and summary statements are all methods to make an individual feel listened to. Acknowledging accomplishments and encouraging growth through paying attention to the youth's strength and seeing potential in their future can also make lasting differences on their mental health.

In order to support youths' mental health and well-being, mental health education needs to be provided to youth and parents, professionals, educators and police officers. Due to youth's feelings being unacknowledged and a lack of positive role models, many adolescents do not know how to handle emotions. Through elementary and middle school, mental health needs to be discussed. Youth need to be taught: what is emotion, how to identify and understand emotion, how to self-regulate and how to communicate their emotions in a healthy way. Learning coping strategies and communication strategies at a younger age can help the general youth population support their well-being. Furthermore, there needs to be a large focus on how to build and maintain healthy relationships and how to identify toxicity. Relationships are a large part of many youths' lives and contribute to their mental health as it majorly affects self-esteem, which is already a sensitive part of youthhood. Additionally, adults working with youth should be role models and mentors. Referring to Banduras behavioural learning theory, I do agree that behaviors are often learned from the environment. Many youth may not have positive role models or trusted adults to confide in. Therefore, adults working with youth need to model good emotional regulation and openness so youth can learn young how to handle their emotions and talk about them by learning through observation.

Schools and organizations often try to support youths' mental health but fail to do so due to the use of toxic positivity. Toxic positivity is extremely prevalent in today's culture and contributes to the invalidation of youth's feelings. Toxic positivity is dismissing negative emotions and responding to distress with false reassurances rather than empathy. It's a belief that promotes having a positive mindset regardless of the situation at hand. Using phrases such as 'look on the bright side' or 'everything happens for a reason' or 'just stay positive' or 'at least...' are often coming from a place of promoting a positive mindset over acknowledging uncomfortable feelings. I understand that these statements are most likely well-intentioned. However, life is sometimes challenging and there is nothing more a youth might need than someone to provide them with a safe space for express their feelings. Toxic positivity leads to youth questioning 'why' they are feeling something and analyzing if it is valid to feel this way. Additionally, it leads to feeling shameful when faced with negative feelings, because toxic positivity perpetuates that being sad about a situation is a choice that the person is making. They should be 'staying positive,' instead. This is another way youth feelings are invalidated. On a one-on-one basis and an organizational level, individuals and schools need to *not* stray away for talking about hard topics. For example, mental health awareness campaigns should not be based on the 'just be happy' mentality, it should be more about how to deal with difficult life circumstances and foster a healthy mind after such events. It should encourage vulnerability. It should explain how to confide in others, and how to respond when someone else confides in you. Most individuals face life events such as a loss of a family member, heartbreak, friend conflicts, yet how to deal with such circumstances are never discussed.

In conclusion, working with children and youth and supporting their mental health well-being is something that should be reimagined by professionals. Moving forward, I hope mental health professionals, educators, police officers bridge the disconnect between adults and youth through reframing their mindset and validating youths' emotions. Additionally, I hope to see mental health education implemented in our school curriculum, adults demonstrating positive behaviours and the concept of toxic positivity irradiated from our system.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I appreciate the opportunity to share my messages to mental health professionals.

Sincerely, [name]