



# Bringing Youth to the Table

**A youth-created handbook for  
empowering marginalized voices**



# The Purpose of **This Handbook**

This handbook is a guide for proper practices around engaging marginalized youth, built on the perspectives of youth in Chilliwack, BC. The purpose is to offer advice to service providers looking to engage these youth, in hopes that by following these practices the powerful stories and thoughts of youth on the margins will be shared in a safe, informed environment.

## Who are we and why did we feel this was needed?

This effort has been spearheaded by Channeling Youth Voices (CYV) — a youth-led initiative that has been working since 2019 to empower the voices of youth in Chilliwack who have a disproportionate need for supports and services. The youth who lead CYV have struggled with a variety of barriers, including poverty, homelessness, substance use, death or loss of significant adult figures, and challenges with mental and/or physical health. Over the course of several research and engagement projects (see links to related work below), CYV has amassed a lot of experience conducting knowledge sharing events, wherein youth help plan and execute events to share their perspectives and findings with the broader community (typically service providers and/or decision-makers).

We are lucky to live in a time and place where this kind of lived experience is valued and being increasingly sought after. We have witnessed powerful transformative connections happen during these events. Youth have often felt incredibly empowered and seen, and attendees have often left inspired, moved, and ultimately changed or

renewed in the way they see or do their work. It is a special thing, to hear the stories and perspectives of youth who are brave enough to come forward and share. There is a rawness, vulnerability, and honesty that cannot be ignored.

However, sharing in this way demands a great deal of vulnerability from youth. It can involve reliving painful memories, or talking about challenges that are still ongoing or not fully processed. Sometimes youth find themselves in a place or in front of people who are/were involved in their journey (especially in a smaller community like Chilliwack). Sometimes the attendees of these events have no frame of reference and assume too much, or too little, of the youth present. These are just a few examples of factors that can, at best, create discomfort for youth, and, at worst, invalidate or retraumatize them.

We wanted to put together a handbook of youth-defined principles and practices that helps avoid these pitfalls and creates the circumstances for youth to share their experiences in a safe, empowered way.

## How did we go about this?

CYV received funding from the Chilliwack Social Research and Planning Council (CSRPC) and the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth (RCYBC) to create this handbook. Our first step was to have team discussions reflecting on our many presentations — the successes, the failures, and the factors that made youth feel either safe or unsafe in the process. Current CYV members also interviewed past CYV members. These collaborative reflections were gathered

and arranged thematically into a first draft. Team members then took this draft to other youth in the community with experience sharing their stories in public to gather their feedback. Some of these youth were contacted through personal relationships in the community, others through SD33, Cyrus Centre, Switchback, Traverse, or youth-led groups such as VYPER and Hummingbird Society. Thanks to input from all these youth, the draft has gone through many iterations already.

## What are our hopes for this?

We plan to continue vetting the document with youth, finalizing a 2025 draft for the community at the end of the year. One of our most promising recent partnerships is with the Foundry, which is slated to roll out in Chilliwack in the near future. Foundry representatives have expressed interest in this handbook as a guiding document for youth engagement. Our vision is that this document lives on as a reference that can be found on the

Foundry website and is updated by youth every year as part of an annual conversation on youth representation for those living at the margins, who have survived many challenges. We also hope these conversations yield an additional handbook that reflects the same principles but is worded and crafted for those youth as an audience (as opposed to service providers).

# Before the Event

So you want youth voices...?



---

## Think about **WHY** you want to involve youth

- **Don't tokenize.** If you're wanting their voice, be prepared to really hear it and make space for it.
- Think about **your goals** and the information you are hoping to gather.
- **Be transparent.** Explain to the youth **WHY** you want to involve them and be transparent in your motives, intentions and what you hope to achieve.
- Make sure there's **appropriate time for the youth** to share what you're asking of them. This can be adjusted by the number of youth speakers, the format of the delivery, or the type/number of questions being asked. If youth are being asked to be vulnerable it's very important for them not to feel cut off.
- Be prepared to **follow through.** When youth devote their time, energy and **HOPE** by being vulnerable and offering their perspectives, it is harmful and demoralizing for them to find out their feedback and suggestions were not honoured or incorporated in any way.
- Weigh the **pros and cons.** Is this event going to do the youth involved more harm or good?

# Planning the event



Involve youth in the planning process as much as possible! And inform them of any changes in advance as soon as possible. Involving the youth in the planning process not only helps them to feel more comfortable, it also helps better inform the hosts about youth expectations. Also, youth often have the most creative ideas and outside-the-box solutions.



## Inviting Youth

### Best to invite two or more youth

- Spreads the responsibility around
- Makes it easier for youth to leave if they need to
- Creates less pressure in front of an audience

### Try not to cherry-pick

If you're thinking of choosing a couple of youth because their experiences are relevant to your service, choosing them because they are "well spoken" or have more positive experiences than most goes against the point. Pick a diverse range of people, not just the youth who you think will make your services look better.

# Consult with youth

## Transportation

If transportation cannot be provided/supported, meeting/event location must be easily accessible to team members or a hybrid option made available.

- Bare minimum accommodation of a two-way transit ticket (there and back)
- If another youth is able to drive and transport others, provide a gas card to support them in this

## Food

Food can be a very important factor and make it possible or more probable for youth to attend. This is also fun to plan. What are their suggestions, not just for themselves but for others?

## Breaks

Plan for breaks if the event is over an hour. Youth may become overwhelmed. Make it clear that they can leave at any time.

## Substance use

Be clear about what can take place. If you truly want to involve hard-to-reach youth, be open to understanding what it takes to include them. This may mean planning for or allowing some measure of substance use (vaping, smoking, etc). Attendees should also be informed about what is allowed, so as to respect everyone's needs.

## Topic

Everyone should know what the event is about.

- Who is it for? Is it just for hearing youth voice? Or is it more lateral discussion between youth and service providers?
- Again: be clear with intentions and motives. Talk about what you hope to achieve by involving youth. Be clear on what subjects you would like to explore so they can prepare in advance.
- Boundaries. Make sure the youth know what they're going to be (or might be) asked. Ask the youth ahead of time what they do NOT want to talk about. Their boundaries should be respected.

## Accessibility

Ask the youth ahead of time for any extra support needed at the event (mobility, hearing, translation/literacy needs, etc)

## Compensation

Compensation shows that you value a consultant or speaker's input. Youth with lived experience are experts of their own experience. If you were to consult a financial planner, for example, you would compensate them as such.

- Consult youth about what kind of compensation they would appreciate (e.g. cash, gift card)
- For youth who are working-age, there may be job opportunity cost for sharing their time, so minimum wage or higher is important
- Younger youth still need a thank-you (e.g. small gift card)

# Safety at the event

1

## Environment

Think about the environment of the event venue

- Tell youth the location ahead of time and ask if they will have any issues with it. For example, some church locations or school locations might be difficult for some youth to re-enter.
- It's best to address possibilities for past institutional trauma directly. Inform the youth if there have been efforts to shift the space (for example, safe spaces that have been created).

2

## Space

Nominate a safe place with the youth to decompress/escape while at the event. It could be in the building or outside the building.

3

## Safe Adult

Nominate a safe adult who is there as a go-to for the youth

- This is a person they can go to if they're having an issue or have any questions, or even just be a safe place to make eye-contact in the audience.
- Consider that it would be good to have more than one person for this role because it's not a one-size-fits-all... someone who is safe for one youth might not be for another
- This could even be someone who is not related to the event; someone they bring

4

## Guests

Allow youth to see the confirmed guest list prior to the event

- This is very important. When entering a space with service providers, there is a high likelihood youth will see adults they have interacted with at some point through school or in their journeys through the system. Giving them the guest list ahead of time creates an opportunity for youth to avoid potentially harmful interactions, prepare emotionally, or strategize (with you) for how to mitigate those interactions.

5

## Coordinator / Facilitator

Consider that it might make youth comfortable to meet the event coordinator and/or facilitator before-hand. Make time for that based on what the youth want.

## Materials to Have Ready



- Tissues
- Name tags with pronouns
- Water
- Refreshments (drinks, snacks, food)
- Pens & paper
- Colouring books & colouring pencils, fidget items (nothing that clicks too loud)
- Ice-breaker or preliminary questions (talk with youth about what this should look like. Sometimes it's not a good idea to have joke-y ice-breakers; make it optional)
- Programs for the youth
- Printed table rules or event rules [See Appendix A]
- Printed guidelines for the facilitators [See Appendix B]

## Other considerations

- Consult with youth and Elders about ways to incorporate Indigenous frameworks that are relevant to the land you're on, and/or the group you're working with
  - ▶ Land acknowledgement
  - ▶ Access to medicines (e.g. smudging)
  - ▶ Elders to open the event or be around
- Consult with youth about LGBTQIA+ inclusive practices that would make them feel safe
  - ▶ Example: providing pins with pronouns
  - ▶ Example: introductions that include pronouns
- Have a list of resources visible (possibly for takeaway) that apply to those present, e.g. number for the Office of the Representative for Children & Youth, addiction, housing, human trafficking, young parenting, menstrual products, harm reduction (e.g. naloxone kits), training opportunities
- Young parents
  - ▶ Childcare
  - ▶ If children are at event
    - ◆ Caregivers
    - ◆ Child-safe snacks, place for breastfeeding
    - ◆ Play area, toys
- Language/literacy needs
  - ▶ Make sure everything has been explained verbally and give space for confirming that the youth understand and can ask questions
  - ▶ Newcomer youth (perhaps English is not their first language)

## Set expectations for the attendees especially if they will be interacting directly with youth

It is important to set the stage for attendees. Make it clear whether they are expected to just listen, or if it is a dialogue activity, or if they need to have questions ready. This can be done in a pre-event email, as part of the information about the event, and/or it can be part of the opening. Some other important principles to communicate:

### **DO NOT ARGUE WITH THE YOUTH!!!!!!**

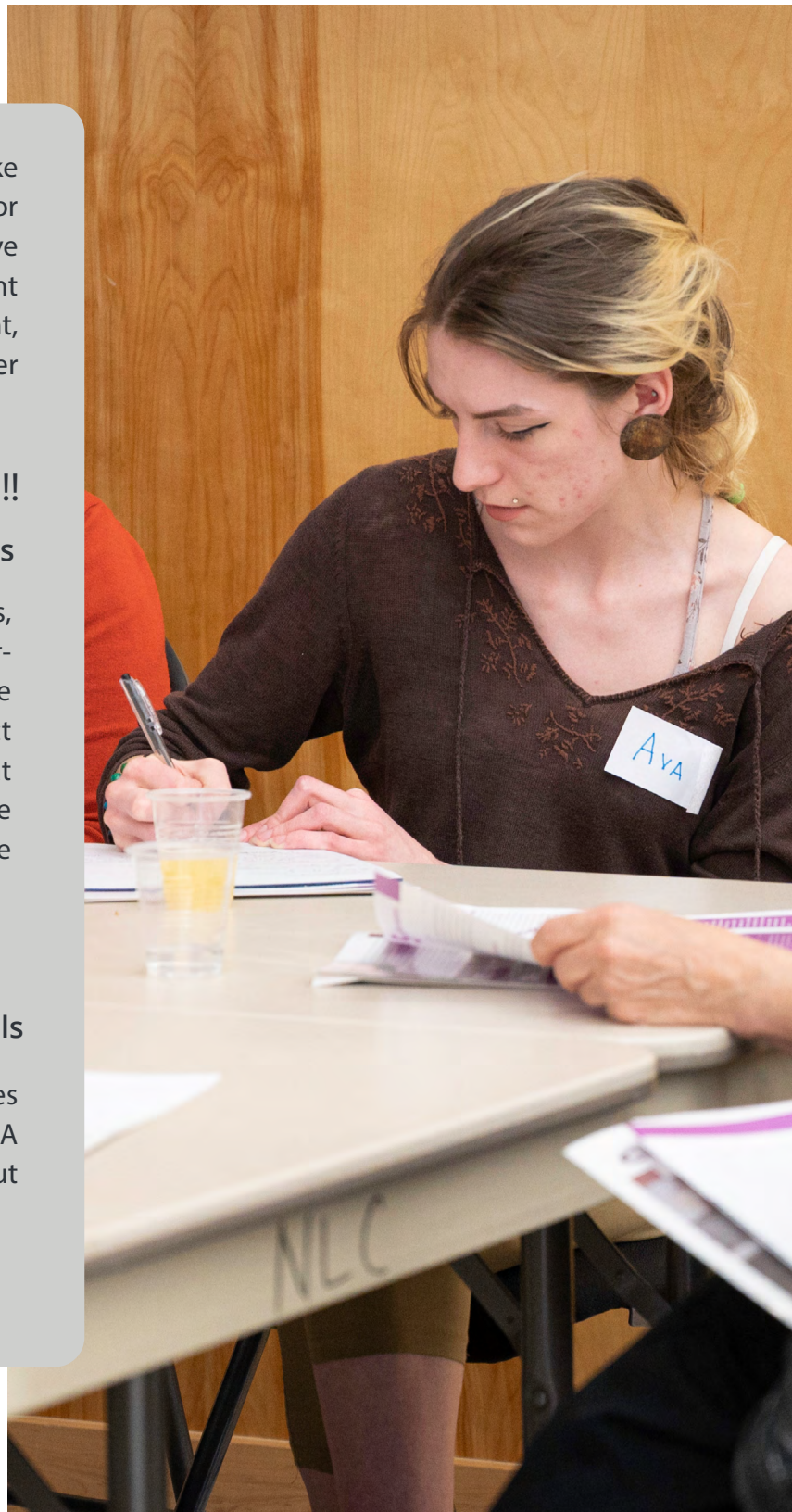
#### **Youth are experts about their experiences**

They are being asked to share their perspectives, not argue about policy, etc. For example, if during a youth's story they stated that a resource didn't exist when they needed it (when in fact it did exist), the point of learning should be that this agency could be doing more to promote their services. The point should not be to argue with the youth on this matter.

#### **Leave your hat at the door**

#### **Everyone who enters is respected as equals**

It can also be very helpful to print out principles and have them in relevant places. See Appendix A for **CYV's Guidelines of Engagement** print-out that we put at our dialogue tables.



# Discussion Facilitators

If you are going to have an event where youth interact with the service providers, it is important to have prepared facilitators. This could be someone who is moderating a Q&A with a youth panel, or people you place at table discussions. Facilitators serve as a buffer between the youth and the event attendees. This is crucial because there is a power differential between youth and adult service providers, and this is even more extreme in the case of marginalized youth who have often experienced mistreatment from adults. By agreeing to share their perspectives and heart, they have engaged in an act of hope; hope that their words might change something for the better; and hope that the system can be better. This hope is sacred, easily broken, and should be fiercely protected.

## Principles and practices to guide facilitators:

### 1 Be on the youth's side

We have witnessed bullying from some attendees. This can happen in a variety of ways, including an attendee talking over a youth or lecturing (e.g. "but we DO offer that service, so you should have made the call earlier"), or ridiculing a similar circumstance. Facilitators need to be ready to call out that behaviour and stop it in its tracks.

### 2

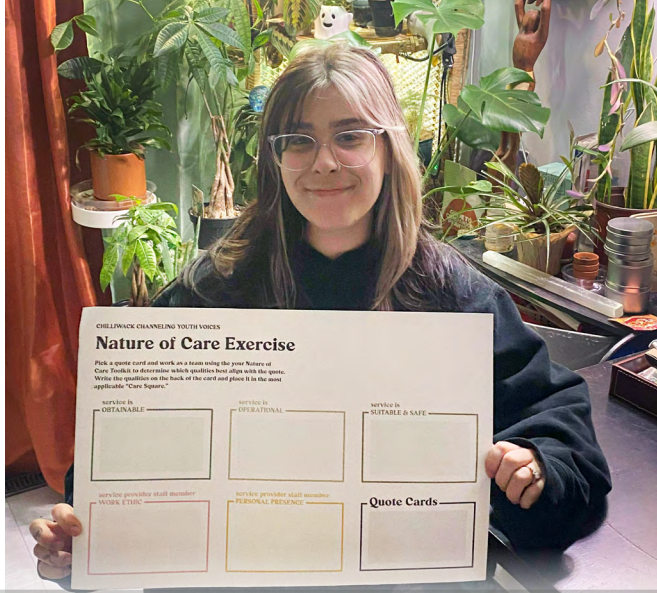
### Manage the audience

If there is a large audience with a youth panel and a Q&A session, consider using an interactive engagement tool like Mentimeter rather than simply handing the mic to audience members. This way you can manage which questions come to the panelists. Sometimes questions can be inappropriate, difficult, or sensitive and can trigger or fluster the youth.

### 3

### Make space for mistakes

Create an environment of patience. Make it comfortable for youth to make mistakes (if they don't know a word, stutter, say the wrong thing/fact, etc). Give time, don't rush. Also, if too much silence seems to be making youth uncomfortable, it can be good to lighten the mood or fill the quiet with your own reflections.



4

Bring it back to the big picture. What are we learning?

**Facilitating the attendees:** Keep the focus on thinking critically about services and what can be learned about the issues at hand and possible ways to improve, rather than just making it about one individual youth. It's important for attendees and youth to connect and express care on a genuine one-to-one basis if that happens, but a facilitator's job is to bring the focus back to the ultimate take-aways.

**Facilitating the youth:** Be ready to prompt or steer them gently back to the purpose of sharing. Sometimes a question will cause them to swim through an ocean of harmful memories and experiences and they need a reminder for why the question was asked.

5

Bring it back to the youth speaking

Sometimes empathy or excitement can block youth. You are there to make sure the youth are heard and ensure that the event attendees respect the opportunity to listen to them. Sometimes attendees or even facilitators themselves get excited and take over the discussion with their own experiences as a service provider or their memories as a disenfranchised youth, or how their services could address what is being discussed. But the precious opportunity is to listen to the youth. Facilitators need to be able to interrupt when this is happening and guard that space.

6

Be ready to reframe

Sometimes questions need to be packaged differently. Youth should not be expected to provide solutions for complex systemic issues on the spot. Asking a question like, "So what do you think is the #1 most important thing we can do to keep kids from doing drugs," can make a panelist feel stupid when they can't answer (even though most people couldn't). Rephrase these big questions into something they can answer about themselves: "Can you think of anything that might have kept you from using substances in a harmful way?"

# After the Event



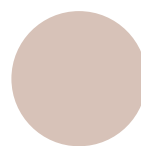
## Using youth information

- Photos, quotes, recordings – youth need to see them and consent before they are shared (see above in consent process ahead of event)
- When sharing info, default to de-identifying and give the youth the choice to be intentionally named
- Quote youth exactly, as possible
  - ▶ This keeps from misrepresentation and can be a powerful way of honouring youth perspective



## Following through

- Create the opportunity for youth to **debrief** with each other and trusted adults. Debriefing after the event provides a chance to reflect and process about the experience. This can be essential for celebrating victories, finding meaning, or identifying and working through any discomfort and receiving validation and support. It also provides crucial learning for both the youth and non-youth adults involved.
- It cannot be overstated how meaningful it is for the youth to hear **feedback** from the service providers about how the event went, and how their contributions were used. This is especially important if youth are being asked to give specific feedback or opinions for a new program, policy or issue. Being able to see some evidence of how their thoughts were captured, processed, and/or implemented is invaluable.



# Appendix A

## Guidelines Of Engagement

*We're grateful for everyone present, from the youth with lived experiences to those looking to learn more. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind. Please feel free to add more!*

**One Diva, One Mic:** Only one person should be speaking at a time.

**Be Curious:** Respect and listen to each other's ideas. Ask questions and strive to understand before criticizing.

**Move Up, Move Over:** If you find yourself speaking a lot, take some time to listen and leave space for others. If you find yourself withholding your thoughts, speak up and share your wisdom with us.

**Service Provider Check:** While listening to youth, it might be tempting to intervene with advice or to correct them about some aspect of service provision. Please put away your "work hat" and remember that you have this precious opportunity to hear about someone's truth.

**We Can't Be Articulate All the Time:** Sometimes we don't have the words to express our thoughts, and that's okay. Be patient if someone needs time, and feel free to "pass" or ask for the conversation to come back to you.

**Take Care of Yourself & Others:** If you need to remove yourself, please do so at any time. If you notice someone seems uncomfortable or emotional, reach out to them and see if they need support, or company in taking a break.

**Las Vegas Rule:** Respect confidentiality, what is said in the group stays in the group.



# Appendix B

## Facilitator Guide

At the tables, there will be:

- Nature of Care toolkit (framework + worksheet + quotes)
- Community Conversations, to aid discussion and also for participants to take home

Things to keep in mind:

- While lively dialogue is great, the most important thing is to make sure that youth are given the space to express themselves as experts on the topics (if they want to) and that SPs get the chance to hear them.
- Please keep an eye on the youth leads and make sure everyone feels welcome to go take a breather whenever they need.
- Designate a service provider (not a youth) to take notes, so we can learn from the discussion sessions, and also to be able to share some reflections at the end.

Introductions

- Give us your name (and your role)
  - ▶ **SP:** Why you were interested in this event?
  - ▶ **Youth:** Why did you join CYV?

(Optional icebreaker questions)

- What music do you like to blast when you're alone?
- What is a habit you have, that your closest friends know about you (and maybe tease you about)?
- If you got sponsored to just do whatever you wanted for a whole year, how would you spend that time



## Dialogue Part 1 – What does “good care” look like? Getting familiar with toolkit

- Look through the framework – “Are there any themes that stick out to you in particular?”
- Start the exercise (using quote cards and framework)
  - ▶ Ask someone to read a quote
  - ▶ Talk about the quote – what can you learn from it? Are there things in the framework that help describe what’s happening in this quote?
- Prompt Qs:
  - ▶ Does this quote resonate for anyone? (prioritizing youth response)
    - ◆ What does it make you think/feel?
    - ◆ Is it surprising? Not surprising?
  - ▶ Is there a main category and subtheme into which it fits?
  - ▶ When this principle of care is not performed (or performed well), what are the possible repercussions? (How does this impact youth)
  - ▶ Is there anything you think could be added to help describe the principle?

## Dialogue Part 2 – Reflecting on the delivery of “good” care

- Look at quotes again and use the prompt questions (and your own) to think about the following question:

What helps SPs or hinders them from providing the kind of care illustrated in the framework?

- Prompt Qs for SPs:
  - ▶ What could be going on in this quote, from the SP perspective?
  - ▶ Have you ever experienced a “win” when it comes to the kind of scenario portrayed in this quote?
  - ▶ What were some things that helped (or tend to help)?
  - ▶ Have you ever felt like you wanted to do more to help a youth in the scenario described, but you couldn’t? What was in your way? (Was it in your control? Was it out of your control?)

(Additional questions if you have time)

- Was there anything in the documentary that stuck out for you or struck a chord today?
- When you look at the topics in the Community Conversations folder, which ones do you think impact youth the most? Which of these are most lacking supports?
- Service providers, is there something you would like to learn more about, from the perspective of youth?

# Acknowledgements

This handbook was made possible by the accumulated dedication and passion of several youth in Chilliwack who have led Channeling Youth Voices through the years, including Ava Savage, Brooke Meadows, Jaden Leblanc, Kelli Ovington, Kristy Cooper, Mikasa Drysdale, Nic Lakey, Oliver Peters, Summer Byrne, Synammin Byrne and Tatjana Raphael, with coordination help from Marinel Kniseley. Their tireless efforts have been responsible for great leaps forward in youth representation “from the margins,” in Chilliwack and beyond. We thank them and all the youth who have participated in this project for their stories, their bravery and their hope.

Knowledge goes nowhere without ready ears to listen, so we would also like to thank the Chilliwack Child and Youth Committee, MCFD, SD33, Xyolhemeylh, RCYBC, and the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARCBC) for being such excellent partners and knowledge users. Several community champions provided foundational and ongoing support for CYV throughout the years, including (but not limited to) Greg Laychak, Trevor Wiens, Michelle Mosey, Jennifer Hawkins, Larissa Kowalski, Camilla Coates, Sal Sharpe and Cristal Biela.

Finally, we would like to thank the Chilliwack Cyrus Centre for their ongoing sponsorship and support, as well as the Chilliwack Social Research and Planning Council, and the BC Office of the Representative for Children and Youth (RCYBC), who provided the funding for this handbook.



[linktr.ee/cyvchilliwack](https://linktr.ee/cyvchilliwack)



REPRESENTATIVE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH