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Practitioner Observational Tool (POT) Technical Guide

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The Practitioner Observational Tool Technical Guide

Introduction

The **Practitioner Observational Tool (POT)** asks practitioners (whether paid staff or volunteers) to rate young people's **socio-emotional skills** based on behaviour displayed within the environment of youth provision settings, as observed during several provision sessions. This is a good indicator of how young people are likely to 'perform' in settings where they are well supported. Practitioners should observe each young person for at least four provision hours before using the POT.

Young people's socio-emotional development in context

The Practitioner Observational Tool (POT) is based on the Framework of Outcomes for Young People 3.0,[1] which sets out how youth provision contributes to improvements in socio-emotional outcomes for young people. The Outcomes Framework 3.0 includes a theory of change that details how quality youth provision can lead to socio-emotional skill development for young people (see Figure 1, below). In summary:

- High-quality staff practices and content offered at the point of engagement are likely to lead to higher levels of youth engagement during each session or activity.
- Young people bring with them a set of experiences and beliefs about themselves and the world around them, shaped by the contexts in which they are living and learning. These 'pre-existing' (or 'baseline') socio-emotional skills affect how young people initially engage with youth provision.
- Over time and multiple interactions, the combination of high-quality staff practices and young people's engagement promotes the growth of socio-emotional skills.

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[1] https://www.ymcageorgewilliams.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/Framework%20SE%20Outcomes%203.0%20AUGFINAL1.pdf

- With sufficient participation in, and intensity of exposure to, high-quality settings, the effects of socio-emotional skill development will transfer to other settings.

- This includes the 'near transfer' of socio-emotional skills to family, school, and peers and the 'far transfer' of socio-emotional skills to subsequent life course events or experiences, such as early adulthood health, education, and employment. Young people continue to further apply and develop their socio-emotional skills in these settings.

- Improvement in socio-emotional skills is linked to longer-term impacts, including an improved ability to cope with the transition into adulthood and long-term improvements in mental and physical health, educational attainment, sustainable employment, finances, secure housing, positive relationships and personal safety.
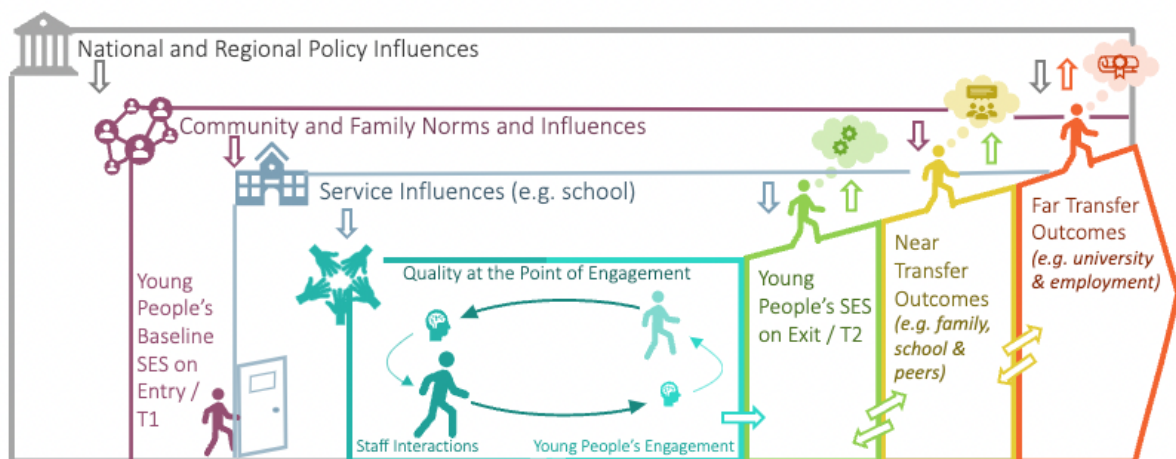

Figure 1: The Young People's Socio-emotional Skills in Context Model.

About the POT

The Practitioner Observational Tool (POT) is an observational rating instrument used to assess *optimal* socio-emotional behavioural skills in six domains of socio-emotional functioning (Emotion Management, Empathy, Initiative, Problem Solving, Responsibility, and Teamwork). Optimal skills are the best someone can do while receiving high-quality support to enact these skills, for example, within the youth provision setting. The POT focuses on specific observable behaviour associated with the socio-emotional skill learning of young people from 10 to 18 years of age and can be used within the context of any type of provision. If your

primary goal is to assess socio-emotional skill growth, we generally recommend using observational measures like the POT because they focus on optimal behavioural skills, which we view as the most valid and sensitive (to change) information about socio-emotional skills (Smith & Peck, 2020). Higher scores indicate more socio-emotional skill in each domain.

The POT was developed from extensive practitioner input and research associated with the research programs of Larson et al. (e.g. Larson & Angus, 2011; Larson & Brown, 2007; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Larson et al., 2006; Pearce & Larson, 2010; Rusk, Larson, et al., 2013; Salusky, Larson, et al., 2014) and Smith et al. (2016). Psychometric details for a previous version of this kind of observational rating system for assessing young people's socio-emotional behavioural skills in the six socio-emotional domains used here, including reliability and validity information, are available from the Weikart Center (i.e. cypq.org; Peck, Smith, Hillaker, Macleod, Roy, Helegda, & Smith [2018]).

The measure

The POT includes 24 core items about the young person's socio-emotional skills and two background questions about the practitioner's (or 'rater's') experience with the young person. The response scale[2] for items 1-24 is:

1 = Never

2 = Rarely

3 = Occasionally

4 = Most of the time

5 = All of the time

The following two background questions, Items A and B, are useful for understanding important factors that may help you to interpret your findings.

A: How long have you known this young person?

Less than 1 month	1 to 6 months	7 to 12 months	Over 12 months

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[2] We are trialling the option to include a 'no opportunity to observe' option on the POT. This may be used where the circumstances in which young people are engaged means that it is not possible to observe that area of young people's behaviour because the opportunity did not arise for the young person to display it. The downloadable copy of the measure has been updated to support this trial.

B: About how many hours have you observed this young person in your provision?

Less than 4 hours	4 to 8 hours	9 to 13 hours	14 to 18 hours	More than 19 hours

C: About the young person

		Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
Emotion Management						
1	How often did the young person easily manage both positive and negative feelings (e.g. didn't lash out at others when feeling bad; didn't brag or gloat when feeling good)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
2	How often did the young person get easily frustrated (e.g. challenging tasks, minor setbacks, disagreements, or critical feedback cause more frustration than expected for a successful provision experience)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
3	How often did the young person respond constructively when frustrated by challenging tasks, minor setbacks, disagreements, or critical feedback (e.g. thought about it and tried again or sought help)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
4	How often did the young person disrupt or withdraw from participation (e.g. stopped paying attention; stopped participating in an activity)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
Empathy						
5	How often did the young person notice when someone was sad, upset, uncomfortable, or feeling rejected or bullied?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
6	How often did the young person respond without judgement to other people's opinions, feelings, or situation?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
7	How often did the young person appear to experience the same feelings as another person's feelings (e.g. not just understand, but feel what someone else was feeling, or empathise with others)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time

8	How often did the young person discuss or describe or act on social biases they noticed (e.g. adultism, sexism, ableism, classism, racism)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time

Initiative

9	How often did the young person take the initiative (e.g. volunteer for a challenging task; quick to raise hand in response to a question put to the group)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
10	How often were goals set that were ambitious?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
11	How often did the young person stay focused and on-task despite distractions?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
12	How often did the young person push through during a challenging task?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time

Problem solving

13	How often did the young person evaluate alternative plans for reaching a specific goal?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
14	How often did the young person create plans, with multiple steps, for reaching a specific goal?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
15	How often did the young person manage their time (e.g. by showing up on time, sticking to a plan, or moving on when a step may not have been completed perfectly but was good enough)?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
16	How often did the young person think about, and adjust to feedback about, things that happened in the past?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time

Responsibility

17	How often did the young person finish the task they started, with minimal supervision?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
18	How often did the young person do the things they said they were going to do?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
19	How often did the young person do the things an adult asked them to do?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
20	How often did the young person acknowledge a mistake and take action to address it?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time

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Teamwork						
21	How often did the young person help or cooperate with others?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
22	How often did the young person encourage others to do their part?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
23	How often did the young person seek help from others when stuck?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time
24	How often did the young person keep track of their own and others' group progress?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Most of the time	All of the time

How and when to use

The POT should be used by practitioners to assess young people's optimal socio-emotional skills. It can be used after at least two weeks (or four hours) of provision time, from when young people first entered provision, in order to assess their *baseline* socio-emotional skills. Baseline socio-emotional skill information can be used to plan provision (e.g. to tailor provision to the needs of the young people who are attending) and better familiarise you with the young people attending provision. If the aim is to assess 'pre-test' skill information for the purposes of assessing change with a post-test, it is best to collect POT information as early as possible (i.e. near the four hours of provision mark) because later assessments may not accurately reflect young people's 'pre-test' skills (i.e. they are likely already growing their skills during the first few weeks of provision).

The POT can be used at both baseline and follow-up, shortly after or near the end of provision, in order to assess socio-emotional skill growth. Although POT scores tend to be especially sensitive to socio-emotional skill growth, particularly where building socio-emotional skills is the primary focus of provision, we generally recommend waiting at least two months to conduct follow-up POT ratings if your primary aim is to assess socio-emotional skill growth within the context of typical forms of provision (e.g. open access, social action, youth voice). Information about socio-emotional skill growth can be used to understand both young people's development and the relation of this development to other aspects of provision (e.g. the impact of instructional quality on socio-emotional skill growth).

Please keep in mind that the POT does *not* provide a *clinical* assessment of young people. The POT is intended only for lower-stakes planning, improvement, and

programme evaluation purposes (e.g. where low scores signal areas of focus and support for young people but not failure, sanctions, or other disciplinary action for the young person or the practitioner).

We recommend using the POT with young people who are six years of age and older. The POT should take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete, and can be used with young people in any kind of provision.

Choosing between POT-Full and POT-Accessible

There are two versions of the POT: the 'full' version of the POT uses 24 items focused on the six socio-emotional skill domains, whereas the shorter, 'accessible' version of the POT uses nine items focused on the schemas and awareness that underly the six socio-emotional skill domains. These two versions of the POT are not directly comparable in the sense that the full version produces six domain scores (i.e. Emotion Management, Empathy, Initiative, Problem Solving, Responsibility, and Teamwork) and the accessible version produces three scale scores (i.e. Broaden and Build Schemas, Narrow and Constrain Schemas, and Awareness). This means, for example, that if you used the full version at baseline and the accessible version at follow up, you would not be able to assess socio-emotional skill growth at the domain or scale levels. On the other hand, they are partially comparable in the sense that the full and accessible total scores will identify the same children or young people as having stronger or weaker socio-emotional skills in general. This means, for example, that if you used the full version at baseline and the accessible version at follow up, you could assess *general* socio-emotional skill growth by comparing baseline total scores derived from the full version with follow up total scores derived from the accessible version.

Organisations might choose to use the full version of the POT because they feel that working with the content named in the six socio-emotional skill domains more closely reflects the way they describe their work to young people, funders, or other stakeholders. Alternatively, organisations might choose to use the accessible version of the POT because they want to obtain more specific information about the socio-emotional skills that underly the skills named by the six domains.

As described in 'Outcomes Framework 3.0', the 'objects' named in the POT items for each domain are not as distinct as the domain names might imply. This means, for example, that teamwork skills (e.g. cooperating with others) include things like emotion management, empathy, initiative, and problem-solving skills. In contrast, the 'objects' named in the POT-Accessible items refer to the specific, distinct skills (e.g. 'broaden and build schemas') that affect performance in each of the socio-emotional skill domains named in the full POT. For example, children and young

people with well-developed broaden and build schemas are more likely than others to successfully manage their emotions, empathise with their peers, and show initiative during activities. This means, for example, that trying to influence teamwork behaviour by focusing on teamwork behaviour may be less effective than trying to influence teamwork behaviour by focusing on the mental skills that influence that behaviour. Further, because schemas are a more specific intervention target than the relatively general concepts of emotion management, initiative, and problem solving, using the POT-Accessible can help practitioners focus on, measure, and track the growth progress of the specific skills likely to influence a wide range of more general skills. In short, using the POT-Accessible can help practitioners more clearly target the specific skills necessary for children and young people to excel in both the six skill domains and life in general (e.g. school, home, work).

Protocol

Please read and carefully follow these criteria for observational ratings using the POT:

1. Identify the adult/practitioner who will conduct the ratings of young people's behaviour. This is the 'rater'.

   - The rater should be a person who regularly leads the session in which the young person participates and has had the opportunity to observe the young person for approximately four hours of session time over a period at least two weeks before completing the POT.

   - Although there is no training requirement, the rater should, ideally, be among the best trained in the areas of youth development, social-emotional skills, and adult practices that promote positive youth development and socio-emotional skill growth.

2. Observe young people during provision sessions for at least two weeks or for *at least* four provision hours.

3. The ratings should be based on direct observations of the young person, considering only behaviour the rater has actually seen. Behaviours that were reported to have occurred in other settings, or were not observed by the

rater, should not be scored.

4. With reference to the guidance below, complete ratings for young people using the paper form of the tool or directly in the portal.

- Rate only those young people who have been identified.
- Double-check that you correctly entered the young person's Unique ID Number.
- Allow 10 to 15 minutes to complete the ratings for each young person.
- The ratings should be completed during a quiet time where there are no distractions.

5. For most or all of the rating items, we could have added the phrase "when appropriate" because we want to know how often the behaviour is observed in situations where the behaviour is considered appropriate for that situation.

- For example, for the question, "How often did the young person help or cooperate with others?" using the response scale option "2" (i.e. rarely) does not mean they are working alone most of the time so have few opportunities to help or cooperate but rather that, of the opportunities you observe, they rarely help or cooperate.

6. There are no right or wrong answers. Please do not skip any items.

Prompt

The purpose of this survey is to understand the young person's socio-emotional behaviour from what you have observed of them. You will complete a survey for each young person, according to the schedule set out by the study team (or your own measurement plan).

Set Up

You may want to explain to the young people that practitioners are generally rating their skills at the same time as the young people complete their surveys. This would be useful if you want to compare scores. Do not let them know how and when this is taking place though as it will affect their behaviour. You may instead decide not to let them know they are being observed and that you will keep this information confidential. Regardless, the intention is *never* to 'catch the young people out' or survey them for reasons of compliance or sanction.

Instructions

Please read each question and think about how it applies to the behaviour of the young person you have observed in the past two weeks (or for at least four hours of provision).

Mark the box that best describes how often you saw that behaviour from that young person.

If you want to change any of your ratings, please mark an "X" through the old response and fill in the new one.

We are trialling the option to include a 'no opportunity to observe' option on the POT. This may be used where the circumstances in which young people are engaged means that it is not possible to observe that area of young people's behaviour because the opportunity did not arise for the young person to display it.

Please note that higher scores are not better or worse – all people will have a mix of high and low scores, and we want to know your view of this young person's unique behaviour.

When you are not sure, just pick the response option that is closest to what you have observed the young person doing and keep moving.

Thank you!

Input choices

There are three ways you can collect and input data with each of the measures. These are:

1. Download the PDF form from the SES Measurement Hub in size 12 font, print and use as a paper copy. If you choose this approach you will need to manually transfer the data into either our data portal, or into your own system or spreadsheet.

2. Complete the information on a webform within the data portal. This means your data is automatically entered into the portal. This is a good option for the measures the practitioners complete (the demographic form, Practitioner Observation Tool and the Quality Practice Tool) but would not be appropriate for young people. This is also where data collected in a paper format is entered into the data portal.

3. Enter the data using our mobile friendly survey software. This is suitable for young people and practitioners and again means that data is entered

straight into the data portal.

Which type of data entry works best for you will depend on the preferences of the young people you support and the practitioners and volunteers who work with you.

Scoring

If you want to calculate a young person's Emotion Management domain score by hand, rater responses to items 2 and 4 should be reverse scored, such that: 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, and 5 = 1.

However, please note: Only the original 'raw' scores should be recorded on the rating forms and/or entered into the data portal.

The mean (average) of the response values across all items within a domain should be calculated to produce a single domain-specific scale score for each young person. For example, to produce a score for the domain of Emotion Management, you should calculate the mean score of items 1-4. If some item responses are missing, scale scores can be calculated as long as there are responses to at least 3 of the 4 items in each domain (but remember to calculate the mean score based only on the number of questions for which you have actually provided a rating for the young person). Each of the six domain-specific scale scores should range from 1 to 5. Maximum total score is 120 (5 x 24 items).

Interpretation

It is useful to meet with your staff team to review the data and to work out what it means for their practice. Seeing that the data supports practice developmental is key to practitioners wanting to use the measures over time.

Data collected with the POT can be entered into the data portal hosted by the Centre for Youth Impact at YMCA George Williams College. This will enable you to view average socio-emotional skill total and domain scores for the young people participating in a given programme/project hosted by your organisation, obtain initial estimates of changes in young people's socio-emotional skills across the provision period (e.g. where the POT is used at baseline and follow up), and see young people's average levels of total and domain-specific socio-emotional skill (and skill growth) across your programme offerings where POT results are aggregated to the site or organisation level.

After calculating the POT domain scores, this information can be used to inform decisions about future training decisions or provision planning. For example, organisations serving high percentages of young people who score very low in the problem-solving domain may decide to focus training and provision more closely on opportunities to promote young people's reflective thinking skills. Similarly, organisations in which young people tend to score very low on the POT total score may decide to offer professional development training to practitioners focused more generally on the importance of developing a holistic skill set that places equal value on providing young people opportunities for warm supportive relationships, well-scaffolded instruction, collaboration in small groups, and practice using focused awareness to improve reflective thinking (about goals, plans, problem-solving, feelings etc), emotion regulation (e.g. empathy, impulse control) and mindfulness (non-judgemental awareness of present-moment thoughts and feelings).

Finally, if the POT is used as both a baseline and follow-up measure, changes in POT total and domain scores can be used to estimate improvements in socio-emotional skills (e.g. by comparing baseline domain scores to follow-up domain scores). Finding evidence of improved POT scores, particularly for young people who were exposed to high-quality versus lower-quality staff practices, can support conclusions like (a) our professional development activities appear to have been a good use of our time and, potentially, (b) the reason young people evidenced such substantial socio-emotional skill growth is because our practitioners took advantage of the training opportunities we provided and then translated that training into higher-quality practices at the point of engagement.

Validity

Detailed psychometric information about the construct validity (e.g. the ability to distinguish among the scales), criterion validity (e.g. the ability to predict young people's 'performance'), and reliability of the current version of the POT is limited. However, based on the data we have analysed to date, the POT can be viewed as a reliable and valid measure of young people's socio-emotional skills in six domains (i.e. Emotion Management, Empathy, Problem Solving, Initiative, Teamwork, and Responsibility) and overall (using the POT total score).

Reliability has been assessed only in terms of the *internal consistency* among the items, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient (e.g. we have not conducted test-retest reliability analyses of POT scores). Across two samples of POT data (with n's averaging 81 young people, about 78% of whom were aged 10-14),

alpha reliability estimates for the POT total score ranged from .92 to .94 and averaged .93, and alpha reliability estimates for the six socio-emotional skill domain scale scores ranged from .76 to .92 and averaged .84. Specifically, they were .79 and .78 for Emotion Management, .76 and .79 for Empathy, .91 and .79 for Initiative, .90 and .92 for Problem Solving, .88 and .80 for Responsibility, and .91 and .85 for Teamwork.

Given the close alignment between the socio-emotional skill domain definitions (see the Outcomes Framework 3.0) and the POT item content, along with the assumption that provision settings are characterised by relatively high-quality practices (e.g. young people are well-supported), the POT total and domain scores can be viewed as highly face-valid indicators of young people's optimal socio-emotional skills. In addition, given that the correlations among the domain scores ranged from .36 to .81 and averaged .59 in one sample, and ranged from .11 to .79 and averaged .61 in another sample, the POT domain scores show good discriminant validity (i.e. each domain score reflects a different underlying construct). These discriminant validity results reflect an improvement over similar tools (e.g. the original Staff Rating of Youth Behaviour, where correlations among scales ranged from .47 to .84 and averaged .65 across 12 samples of young people; Peck et al. [2018]) and support the conclusion that the differentiation among POT scales is sufficient to produce both meaningful profiles of young people's socio-emotional skills and actionable performance feedback for continuous improvement processes (e.g. planning with data). For example, pattern-centred analysis of the six POT domain scores (for the sample of 96 young people) revealed six different socio-emotional skill profiles, with 11% of young people evidencing very strong socio-emotional skill profiles and 8% of young people evidencing very weak socio-emotional skill profiles. In addition, examining the relations between socio-emotional skill profiles constructed from both the POT and young people's self-reports of these same skills (i.e. the Young People's Survey [YPS]) provided evidence of convergent validity, that is, the two different measures reveal similar estimates of young people's socio-emotional skill sets). For example, young people with the highest-skill POT profiles were also more likely than expected by chance to have the highest-skill YPS profiles, and young people with the lowest-skill POT profiles were also more likely than expected by chance to have the lowest-skill YPS profiles (in two samples). Criterion validity data (e.g. predicting school performance from POT scores) are pending.

FAQs

1. Can the POT be delivered digitally? *Yes, we have a version of the survey available online which can be sent to young people's email addresses or completed on an ipad or laptop in your setting.*

2. Can the POT be adapted to align with our specific activities? *The POT was designed to be applicable to all settings in which adults and young people interact. We generally recommend that the POT be used "as is" (i.e., with no amendments to, or exclusions of, any items). However, there is always potential to modify any instrument in relation to local needs, in which case you should consult with a professional evaluator.*

3. What if I have some young people in the session who are under the age of 10? *Observations are valid for young people of all ages, however we have another measure, the POT-accessible, which is to be used if a young person has completed the YPS-A.*

4. Do we have to collect POT data at the specified time points with the same cohort of young people? *The POT should be used near the start of the time the young people have with you and again in no less then two months and up to a year to show the changes in their outcomes.*

5. Is there a recommended time period for a young person to be on the programme before staff fill out the POT? *Yes, you should have spent around four hours observing the young person before completing the observational survey.*

6. Do we have to collect POT data at the specified time points with the same cohort of young people? *In general, yes. However, the POT can be used with different groups of young people, at different time points, for a variety of purposes. We recommend consulting with a professional evaluator to ensure that the results generated from using the POT are aligned with your goals.*

7. Is there a recommended time period for a young person to be in the programme before a youth practitioner fills out the POT? *If by "programme" you mean a series of sessions that occur over a period of days, weeks, or months, then: No (as long as the rater observes the young person for at least four hours of provision time before they fill out the POT for that young person).*

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Miscellaneous. (a) The parties to this agreement are independent contractors and nothing in this agreement should be construed to create relations of partnership or joint venture or any other entanglement. You will not make any representations to any third party that you have authority to act in the name of YMCA George Williams College or to obligate YMCA George Williams College in any way. (b) If we have a dispute, it will be settled in UK courts of law. (c) You agree that the licensor has made no representation or warranty concerning your success and that the licensor disclaims any warranty or representation as to the success of the YMCA George Williams College IP under this agreement.

About us

At YMCA George Williams College, our vision is for a just and equitable society that invests in support for all young people to learn, grow, and explore their relationships with the world around them. Established in 1970, the College works to provide transformational support to practitioners, funders, and policy makers across the sector, to improve the quality and impact of provision and outcomes for children and young people across the UK. This support is characterised by safe spaces, high quality socio-emotional skill development opportunities, and relationships with trusted adults.

As part of its work, the College now hosts three Centres of Expertise. The Centre for Youth Impact at YMCA George Williams College supports organisations to generate and act on evidence of the impact of their provision. Using a robust evidence base, The Centre for Youth Impact designs, tests, and champions shared approaches to quality and impact that facilitate collective insight and learning, consolidating and sharing open access resources, research, and training for all those working in informal and non-formal youth provision.