NATURAL SUPPORTS

A Practice Framework

Third Edition | 2025

Contributions

2017 – First Edition

2018 – Second Edition

2025 – Third Edition

Document History

Early in 2017, the first version of *Enhancing Natural Supports for Vulnerable Youth: A Practice Framework* was rolled out. In the first year:

- over 400 practitioners were trained in the approach
- funders began to incorporate natural supports into their Requests for Proposals
- organizations adapted their hiring, training, and supervisory practices and revised their strategic plans to align with the approach
- the approach was presented at conferences throughout Alberta
- Policy Fellows in Calgary drew on the Framework to develop a "Connections First" focus for their research
- groups from across Canada expressed interest in the Framework

In 2018, the Framework was revised to include:

- additional insights and practice examples
- a section titled *Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports*
- an *Organizational Audit*
- a section titled *Assessing Social Support Needs*

This 2025 revised Framework has been updated to reflect how the Natural Supports Approach applies to all people at all stages of life, extending far beyond working strictly with youth populations. The *Natural Supports Community of Practice* and *Natural Supports Leadership Table* have partnered to fund and make changes to the Framework, including:

- inclusive language
- expanded population and demographics
- updated design

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Tables and Figures

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

1.0 Introduction

This Framework has been developed as a response to levels of isolation and loneliness commonly experienced in modern Western society and the tendency to address this need with professional supports. We understand the importance of family, community, and peer relationships, but often struggle to help individuals identify, strengthen, and extend their social networks. However, strategies to engage and strengthen these supports can be an unfamiliar and challenging concept for some practitioners. The Change Collective was initiated to address this gap and develop capacity to enhance natural support networks. Initially, this work focused on vulnerable youth transitioning to adulthood. The Framework has evolved to encompass all individuals because of the importance of natural supports for everyone.

We acknowledge that the experience of social isolation and loss of community connection does not encompass the full breadth of the diverse cultures across the globe and that the loss of connection is a representation of our environments. We recognize the impact that Westernization has had on the rich and diverse practices of the Indigenous peoples of North America, as well as various cultural groups that are part of Canada's fabric. We seek to honour and respect the Indigenous peoples and the diverse cultural communities across our nation, recognizing their distinct worldviews, philosophies, and approaches to support, which are integral to their identity, healing, and well-being. We respect the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous communities and the importance of integrating culturally relevant and respectful approaches into human service practices.

This Framework represents a shift in understanding natural supports away from a Western perspective toward a more community and connection-oriented approach. While there is still a lot to learn and unlearn, we hope this Framework will help guide our collective work as we continue to explore and test our capacity to enhance natural supports for those we work with. We commit to continued work with the diverse cultures across the nation, to acknowledge and allow the oral approaches of Indigenous peoples of North America to inform this way of being.

1.1 How to Use This Framework

A Natural Supports Approach cannot be captured in steps or procedures that will work in every situation. It's a context-sensitive approach that requires practitioners to adapt their methods to each individual's strengths, needs, and circumstances. For this reason, you will not find step-by-step instructions in this Framework. Instead, you will find a set of higher-level principles to guide practice.

Unlike procedures, principles require considerable reflection to apply in practice. To support this type of integration, we have structured this document as a workbook with reflection questions and case studies to help you think about the Framework's implications for your practice. Individual and group reflection is critical to change practice in meaningful ways.

In addition to working through the questions and case studies on your own, consider:

- ► working through the materials with a group of colleagues
- ► attending a Natural Supports Training
- ► using the principles to frame discussions at team meetings or integrating them into supervision
- ► finding a mentor to coach you in this approach

Finally, it is important to remember that a practice framework is only part of enhancing our capacity to work in this way. Literature suggests that in addition to ongoing self-reflection, organizational and system-level support is critical to sustained practice change (Meyers et al., 2012). This means that the principles and practices outlined in this Framework must be integrated into all aspects of our work—including hiring, training, supervision, evaluation, organizational policies and protocols, and funding practices. An organizational audit was created to help this work. You can find more information about the audit in .

2.0 What Are Natural Supports?

The relationships and personal associations we develop throughout our daily lives are considered natural supports. They are *natural* in the sense that they are informally and locally developed and based on reciprocity or give and take (Allen, 2005; Leake & Black, 2005). In contrast, *professional* supports are formal or structured supports that explicitly involve the delivery of a service.

Natural supports "enhance the quality and security of life for people," (Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act, 2016) and may include family, friends, romantic partners, neighbours, coaches, co-workers, teammates, cultural communities, religious communities, and other relationships or associations that comprise our social network. These types of supports give us a sense of belonging, identity, security, and self-esteem. In addition to helping meet emotional needs, they can also help to meet physical and instrumental needs.

The term *natural supports* was introduced by Nisbet and Hagner (1988) to highlight the importance of actively drawing on family and community relationships to help youth with developmental disabilities transition to adulthood. The strategy was later integrated into practice models designed to support a wide range of vulnerable youth, including those who have been incarcerated (Hagner et al., 2008), struggled with homelessness (Davis, 2003) or reside in care (Clark et al., 1996), and those who experience mental health challenges (Alegria et al., 2010), severe behavioural issues, and emotional disturbances (Cook & Kilmer, 2010).

Since Nisbet and Hagner introduced the concept, there has been significant research and literature that expanded the idea, particularly in the fields of supportive workplaces, disability studies, inclusive education, community integration, aging in place, incarceration and post-incarceration supports, and mental health and social support networks.

➤ In the 1990s and early 2000s, researchers like Rogan and others investigated how natural supports improve job retention and social integration in the workplace for individuals with disabilities, emphasizing how co-workers, supervisors, and employers can support individuals with disabilities, reducing the need for formal job coaches.

➤ Natural supports have been studied as a way to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Peer supports, friendships, and school staff involvement have been key areas of focus in understanding how students with disabilities can be supported naturally within their school environments without needing excessive external interventions (Hunt & Carter 2010).

➤ Scholars like Amado (1993b) and Butterworth (2017) have studied how families, neighbours, and community members can help individuals with disabilities participate fully in community life, fostering relationships and reducing dependence on formal support services. The focus here has been on shifting from segregated models of care to inclusive, community-based support.

➤ Person-centred planning approaches, which prioritize the individual's preferences, interests, and natural support systems, have become more integrated into care planning for vulnerable populations. This is seen in the work on "Circles of Support," where the focus is on building a strong network of natural supports around an individual (Amado, 1993a). Further studies have examined how Natural Supports help older adults remain in their homes and communities rather than moving to institutional care settings. Family members, neighbours, and community organizations are crucial in assisting with daily living activities, social interaction, and access to health services.

➤ For incarcerated individuals, natural supports are often provided by family members, friends, and community groups that assist with maintaining relationships during incarceration and help reintegrate individuals into society post-release. Research has shown that maintaining connections with family and friends while incarcerated can reduce recidivism and improve mental health outcomes. These natural supports provide emotional stability, encouragement, and a sense of belonging, helping inmates cope with the challenges of prison life (Cochran, 2012).

➤ Studies have highlighted how natural supports are crucial for reentry into society, assisting with finding housing and employment and rebuilding social networks. Family and community support networks play an essential role in helping formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrate into society and reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Berg & Huebner, 2010).

➤ Natural supports can aid individuals with mental health issues. Social support networks, including family, friends, and community groups, are viewed as important in mental health recovery, with natural supports helping to reduce social isolation and promote mental well-being (Carstensen, 2006).

The literature over the past few decades has built on Nisbet and Hagner's foundational work by showing that Natural Supports not only enhance inclusion but are also cost-effective and sustainable. The shift in focus from reliance on professional services to leveraging existing relationships has gained traction in various domains of human services and beyond.

2.1 Bonding and Bridging Supports

The literature in the previous section also distinguishes between two kinds of natural supports: bridging and bonding. Bonding supports are the strong ties we have with people who share a similar identity, history, or background. These ties pull us in a compelling way and give us a sense of belonging and security.

Bridging supports are weaker but critical because they bring diversity to our networks. Bridging ties—such as mentors, teachers, co-workers and coaches—help people connect to information, ideas, perspectives, and resources beyond what is available within their immediate group.

Sometimes, these bridging supports are facilitated by professionals rather than developed naturally. For example, Big Brothers Big Sisters might connect a young person with a volunteer mentor, but natural mentors can also play a bridging role. Additionally, some supports can cross between both bonding and bridging ties.

Table 1: Bonding and Bridging Ties

	Bonding Ties	Bridging Ties
Nature	Homogenous	Heterogeneous
Function	Identity, belonging, security, social norms, attachment, stability, self-esteem	New ideas or ways of doing things, access to information and resources beyond your immediate group
Examples	Caregivers, partners, siblings, extended family, friends, pets, connection to land, faith-based groups, cultural communities	Coaches, teachers, doctors, therapists, mentors, co-workers, faith-based groups, cultural communities

3.0 Why Are Natural Supports Important?

Human beings are social creatures: our strength comes from our ability to work and exist together. Throughout our existence, connection has provided safety and belonging, while disconnection has meant vulnerability, risk, and loneliness. This is why peer or family disconnection continues to create significant psychological distress. We are hard-wired for group membership: Family, friends, and community relationships are central to who we are and fundamental to our emotional and psychological well-being.

Since these supports are a natural function of human activity, you may wonder why we need to develop a strategy around them. Unfortunately, for many, these support systems have been damaged or disrupted, creating a kind of *psychological homelessness*, described as a chronic feeling of psychological displacement (i.e., feeling you don't belong, feeling you don't have a home) that professional services alone cannot address (Samuels, 2008). A natural supports strategy is needed to help rebuild what might have been disrupted and ensure a healthy balance between natural and professional supports.

In addition to this, there are at least four reasons for implementing a Natural Supports Approach:

- ➤ natural supports play a critical role in promoting resilience, social integration, and positive development

- ➤ professional supports, while important, are not sustainable

- ➤ extended periods of *social quarantine* create emotional and developmental harm

- ➤ loneliness is lethal

3.1 Natural Supports Play a Critical Role in Promoting Resilience, Social Integration, and Positive Development

Research demonstrates that those with strong community ties, family support, and positive role models are more likely to successfully navigate transitions throughout the lifespan than those with limited or negative social connections (Munson et al., 2015; Cook & Kilmer, 2010; Werner, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1989). Supportive family and other social connections are associated with increased well-being, greater social-emotional health, lower stress levels, pro-social behaviours, and increased resilience (Gholamian et al., 2023; Collins et al., 2010; Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Munson et al., 2015). Healthy relationships between children and a range of caregivers are important for building strong brains: having responsive caregivers builds a strong foundation for healthy development (Card, 2024; Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, n.d.).

Limited positive connections with Natural Supports may be a key factor contributing to poorer outcomes for those who are struggling (Munson et al., 2015; Osgood et al., 2010). By strengthening natural connections and supporting relational interdependence, practitioners can help people develop social environments that support healthy development. Positive Natural Supports also have the potential to:

- ► contribute to a person's recovery and growth process (Kurtz et al., 2000)
- ► serve as "powerful motivators and models for positive change" (Kurtz et al., 2000)
- ► help people reappraise and restructure how they think about themselves and others (Munson et al., 2015)
- ► reduce psychological distress (Perry, 2006)
- ► help people navigate major live events (Card, 2024)

3.2 Professional Supports, while Important, Are Not Sustainable

Professional supports are important, particularly in helping individuals during a specific challenge in their lives. However, professional supports are not life-long: programs end, professionals change jobs, and services have restrictions. If the only supports in a person's life are professionals, they are likely to be at increased risk when they leave programs and services, which means we've potentially made them more vulnerable (Cook & Kilmer, 2010).

Reliance on professional supports has an impact on people when they do not have a broader network on which to draw. This is particularly true for people residing in care settings. Research suggests that worker turnover can contribute to "the chronic experience of relational impermanence and ambiguous loss" (Samuels, 2008) and is associated with negative outcomes such as lack of stability and loss of trusting relationships for those in care (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010).

An over-reliance on professional supports may also diminish a person's capacity to develop the kind of reciprocity required for relationships with people who are not being compensated for their time. If people do not have sufficient opportunities to practice the skills involved in real-world relationships, they may find it increasingly difficult to develop the social-emotional competencies necessary to develop and maintain relationships with family, friends, and community members.

While professional supports are needed, they must be provided in a way that does not diminish community capacity or displace other types of support. As McKnight points out in *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits* (1995), over the past century, North America has experienced a monumental shift towards the professionalization of care, where functions that were once performed by the community are now effectively outsourced. An emphasis on natural supports helps to restore the balance between professional and non-professional supports.

3.3 Extended Periods of 'Social Quarantine' Create Emotional and Developmental Harm

Kevin Campbell, creator of *Family Finding*, uses the term "social quarantine" to describe the process of removing children and youth from their families and communities when they have experienced abuse or neglect. He points out that while separation may be necessary in these types of situations, extended periods of social quarantine can result in harmful emotional and developmental outcomes (Campbell, 2015). He cautions us to remember that quarantine is intended as a temporary measure. Natural supports are critical to healthy development, and we should be actively helping young people to restore existing family connections or build new ones.

Other authors have documented the impact of psychological homelessness and social network disruption on children and youth, noting that repeated or extended disruption can result in:

- ➤ psychological distress (Perry, 2006; Munson et al., 2015)
- ➤ problem behaviors (James et al., 2004)
- ➤ social adjustment challenges (Blakeslee, 2012)
- ➤ sparse social networks and fractured relationships (Perry, 2006; Samuels, 2008)
- ➤ lack of emotional support (Samuels, 2008)
- ➤ loneliness (Headley, 2005)
- ➤ challenges related to identity formation (Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994)

While the research in this area is limited, one study suggests that the negative impacts associated with social network disruption can be reduced when young people are supported to rebuild strong networks among family, adult mentors, and peers (Perry, 2006).

> **Reflection Questions**
>
> 1. What can be learned from the impact and implications of social quarantine experienced during the 2020 COVID pandemic?

3.4 Loneliness is Lethal

A growing body of research suggests that loneliness is as big a risk factor for premature death as smoking or alcohol consumption (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Work by Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) shows social isolation is also associated with several physical, cognitive, and psychological issues, including:

- ► increased risk to cardiovascular health
- ► reduced executive function, optimism, and self-esteem
- ► increased depression, anger, and anxiety

This is consistent with findings from the longest longitudinal study of human development ever conducted, the *Harvard Study of Adult Development*, which has lasted over 75 years. The study effectively shows loneliness is toxic: "People who are more isolated than they want to be from others find that they are less happy, their health declines earlier in midlife, their brain functioning declines sooner, and they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely" (Waldinger, 2015). These findings convey the urgency of a Natural Supports Approach. To be healthy and happy, people need family and social connections.

Reflection Questions

1. If loneliness is detrimental to physical, psychological, and mental health, it should be a consideration in safety planning. Are you safety planning for loneliness? If so, how? If not, how might you begin to do that?

4.0 What Does It Mean to Take a Natural Supports Approach?

A Natural Supports Approach means focusing on creating a healthier balance between professional and natural supports and maintaining awareness of the types of basic emotional needs that can only be met through family and community.

One of the most challenging things about encouraging the use of a Natural Supports Approach is that most people think they are already doing it. That's not surprising. For one thing, the idea of natural supports is old: humans have, for millennia, understood the importance of family, community, and peer relationships. For another, the approach is strongly aligned with several other approaches, for example:

> ► **Social Health**, as a key health dimension to both physical and mental well-being (Raufi et al., 2023).

> ► Bronfenbrenner's **Ecological Systems Theory**, which highlights the relationship between individuals' development and their social context.

> ► **Positive Youth Development**, which maintains that development is promoted through an "interplay between individual capacities and supportive relationships, settings, and institutions" (Walker & Gowen, 2011).

> ► **Signs of Safety**, a strength-based and safety-focused approach to child protection work that seeks to build partnerships with families suspected of child abuse (Signs of Safety, n.d.).

> ► The **Family Finding model**, which offers "methods and strategies to locate and engage relatives of children currently living in out-of-home care" so that "every child may benefit from the lifelong connections that only a family provides" (National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness, 2017).

> ► **Asset-Based Community Development**, which focuses on identifying and mobilizing existing community assets and resources to solve problems and promote development (Block, 2008).

> ► **Circle of Support**, which involves a small group of people forming around an individual (e.g., someone with a disability) to offer support and help achieve their goals (O'Brien & O'Brien, 2002).

"The biggest change among our staff has been a recognition that the goal is not to become the youth's person but rather to offer temporary support while working to build the youth's skills so that they can build their own network of support—we are now focused on finding out who the youth's people are and what their people need. This is a significant shift in thinking about our role as professionals."

-Youth-Serving Practitioner

Despite its alignment with many other approaches, *"Table 2: What is Different About a Natural Supports Approach?" on page 12* illustrates that moving to a Natural Supports Approach remains a significant philosophical shift.

Table 2: What is Different About a Natural Supports Approach?

Status quo approach	Natural supports approach
Our first instinct is to meet every need with professional support.	We actively seek out and draw on resources and assets within the individual's support network.
We attend to basic physical needs first (food, shelter, clothing) and consider relational/social-emotional needs later.	We treat the need for connection with the same urgency as physical needs (and we DO NOT assume that we can meet that need ourselves).
We protect people by limiting their exposure to those who could hurt them.	We recognize our limits and know that individuals will often maintain a connection with people that we do not consider positive or healthy. Instead of forbidding contact, we build their capacity to set boundaries and keep themselves safer.
We focus solely on the individual – their needs, perspective, and goals.	We work with individuals in the context of their natural supports, seeking to strengthen the capacity of those within the network to support the needs and goals of the people we work with.

Part of appreciating the implications of this approach is to work through scenarios. Case studies supported the development of this Framework and grounded the approach in something real. They also helped to surface the assumptions, values, and practices implicit in much of our work and how these might bump up against a Natural Supports Approach. You will find a series of case studies in .

> **Reflection Questions**
>
> 1. How is this approach aligned with your current practice?
> 2. How is it different?
> 3. What challenges might this type of approach present to your current practice?

4.1　Applying This Approach in a Variety of Contexts

The principles and practices outlined in this Framework are easier to apply in contexts where practitioners work with individuals over a significant period. Case management relationships, for example, provide opportunities for capacity building and network development, both of which require an ongoing investment of time and effort.

There may be fewer opportunities to engage in this kind of work in drop-in or group settings, where individuals come and go or don't get individualized attention. So, what does a Natural Supports Approach look like in those contexts? Here are some of the ways that this approach can be applied in a variety of settings:

- ► **Staff at shelters and drop-in programs can**
  - · ask questions about family and supports
  - · invite family and supports to problem-solve
  - · create space for individuals to talk about their hopes and needs related to these relationships
  - · make the space welcoming and inclusive of natural support

- ► **Staff delivering group or educational programs can**
  - · create opportunities for participants to explore identity and belonging
  - · ask questions or do activities that will get people thinking about their circles of support and how to strengthen them
  - · integrate social-emotional learning into the program
  - · create opportunities to connect family and other natural supports to the program through targeted engagements or communications

- ► **Mentoring program staff can**
  - · encourage mentors to help bridge existing natural supports
  - · create effective transition supports so that mentoring relationships can evolve into long-lasting relationships that endure beyond the length of the program

- ► **Residential program staff can**
  - · ask about natural supports and create space to talk about wants and needs from these relationships
  - · invite natural supports to be part of events

- ► **Individual and family counsellors can**
  - · provide opportunities for people to explore identity and belonging and build skills to connect to natural supports in positive and meaningful ways
  - · help to strengthen, restore and maintain relationships with natural supports

5.0 What About Relationships That *Are Not* Supportive?

Natural supports are great when they are healthy and positive, but some of the people we work with come from families and community networks that struggle with dysfunction, stress, lack of knowledge, addictions, violence, and mental health issues. Even with these risks, natural supports can still offer several key advantages.

- ➤ Family and friends, despite their flaws, provide emotional bonds that formal services often cannot replicate.
  - · Natural supports promote social integration and reduce isolation, offering companionship and a sense of connectedness to one's community. These emotional ties can be crucial for well-being, especially during a crisis or transition.
  - · Natural supports' tailored, personalized care and advice are based on familiarity with the person's unique needs and circumstances, which can sometimes be more meaningful and flexible than professional supports.

- ➤ Natural supports can be more consistent and enduring.
  - · Formal supports may be time-limited or transactional. Even if natural supports are not always effective, they can provide long-term emotional and relational connections that foster a sense of belonging and stability.
  - · Formal services can also be costly. Natural supports can be more sustainable over time. For example, in caregiving situations, family members often provide unpaid assistance, reducing the need for formal care.

- ➤ Natural supports can help individuals navigate formal systems more effectively, such as assisting with accessing healthcare, employment, or legal services. Even when imperfect, they serve as critical intermediaries connecting individuals to formal assistance.

Using a Natural Supports Approach can be challenging, and we need to work collectively to understand how to move forward in ways that will help rather than create further harm. At the same time, we would encourage a more nuanced view of a person's social network. Consider the following:

- ► Research suggests that 90% of youth who have transitioned out of care are in touch with their biological families (Samuels, 2008), and up to half choose to live with them (Collins et al., 2010). Even when they are fraught with conflict, those relationships provide something critically important—important enough to endure the negative aspects that might accompany them. Instead of dismissing these relationships, we need to figure out how to support them to help youth safely meet their needs.

- ► When we see the family or social network as the problem, we're far less likely to include them as part of the solution. However, research suggests that family and friends play a critical role, either supporting or undermining young people's progress towards their goals. "If family or significant others are brought on board," they are less likely to "undermine the effort [and] more likely to give the young person permission or encouragement..." (Crane & Kaighin, 2011).

- ► Research suggests that even when social supports are inconsistent or strained, the presence of any social ties, whether strong or weak, can buffer against stress and improve outcomes. For example, Thoits (2011) argues that social support, even when it creates stress, still generally contributes to mental health by offering some level of social interaction and connectedness.

- ► Caregiver relationships, particularly those involving family, are often ambivalent. Caregivers can experience positive and negative feelings toward the person they support. Despite the emotional complexity, caregiving remains a critical form of natural support that significantly affects the well-being of the individual receiving care (Gilligan, Suitor, & Pillemer, 2013).

- ► The dual role of social networks, which can help and hinder individuals, is well-documented in the literature. A study by Finch and Vega (2003) explores how family support among Latino communities is a source of resilience and stress. Despite this complexity, these natural supports remain critical to the social fabric of individuals' lives.

PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

6.0 Overview of the Framework

The Natural Support Framework is comprised of one goal, three foundational constructs, five principles, and a continuum of opportunities. (See *"Figure 1: Natural Supports Framework Overview" on page 18*).

➤ **Goal**
- Individuals are able to rely on and contribute to a life-long network of supportive family, community, and peer relationships.

➤ **Foundational Constructs**
- *Identity and Belonging*
- *Trauma-Informed Practice*
- *Reflective Practice*

➤ **Guiding Principles**
- *Connection First* – We treat connection to natural supports with the same urgency as food, shelter and clothing.
- *Seek Out & Scooch Over* – We actively seek out natural supports and create space for them to contribute.
- *Doing With, Not For* – We respect the autonomy of individuals and their natural supports.
- *Social-emotional Learning* – We support individuals to build and maintain meaningful relationships.
- *A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships* – We cultivate a more realistic approach to risk management and safety.

➤ **Continuum of Needs & Opportunities**
- *Engaging* – Help individuals cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports.
- *Finding* – Work with individuals to identify potential supports.
- *Strengthening* – Help individuals to strengthen relationships with natural supports.
- *Restoring* – Support healing and restoration.
- *Maintaining* – Help individuals maintain connections.
- *Transitioning* – Help individuals transition to other relationships.

Figure 1: Natural Supports Framework Overview

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- *Connection First –* We treat connection to natural supports with the same urgency as food, shelter and clothing.
- *Seek Out & Scooch Over –* We actively seek out natural supports and create space for them to contribute.
- *Doing With, Not For –* We respect the autonomy of individuals and their natural supports.
- *Social-Emotional Learning –* We support individuals to build and maintain meaningful relationships.
- *A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships –* We cultivate a more realistic approach to risk management and safety.

CONTINUUM OF NEEDS & OPPORTUNITIES

- *Engaging –* Help individuals cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports.
- *Finding –* Work with individuals to identify potential supports.
- *Strengthening –* Help individuals to strengthen relationships with natural supports.
- *Restoring –* Support healing and restoration.
- *Maintaining –* Help individuals maintain connections.
- *Transitioning –* Help individuals transition to other relationships.

FOUNDATIONAL CONSTRUCTS

- *Identity and Belonging*
- *Trauma-Informed Practice*
- *Reflective Practice*

GOAL

Individuals are able to rely on and contribute to a life-long network of supportive family, community, and peer relationships.

7.0 The Goal of This Approach

The goal of this work is for *individuals to be able to rely on and contribute to a life-long network of supportive family, community, and peer relationships*.

A few phrases within that goal merit focused attention to ensure clarity.

"Rely On"

Individuals will vary in their ability to provide support, so no one individual can be relied upon in all circumstances. That is why a network is so important: redundancy is a key feature of large, diverse networks—when one person drops the ball, someone else can pick it up. We cannot focus on connecting the people we work with to one person; we must help them build a network.

"Contribute To"

This approach is based on the type of reciprocity that is the foundation of all social relationships. Dependency does not help to cultivate self-esteem or self-efficacy. People need and want mutuality in their relationships (Munson et al., 2015).

"Life Long"

This phrase is not intended to imply that all relationships will last forever. Instead, it signals the importance of relationships developed within natural settings and circumstances rather than the types of term-certain relationships developed through service provision.

The goal challenges assumptions many of us have about vulnerable people and their social networks, such as "this person has no one except me" or "everyone in her social sphere is toxic." We believe that all people can and should have access to a network comprised of supportive family, community and peer relationships. The process of helping individuals build and sustain this type of network is undoubtedly challenging, but it is crucial to their long-term development and well-being.

Reflection Questions

1. How does this goal align with your values and beliefs?
2. In what ways might it conflict with some of your assumptions about clients or their natural supports?

8.0 Foundational Constructs

A Natural Supports Approach draws on many of the foundational constructs associated with social work and other human service fields (e.g., social justice, cultural awareness, humility, capacity building, respect for the inherent dignity of individuals, strength-based focus, etc.). In addition to these important constructs, a Natural Supports Approach is built on three key foundational elements:

- ► Identity and belonging
- ► Trauma-informed practice
- ► Reflective practice

Each of these is briefly described below.

8.1 Identity and Belonging

We're unlikely to fully appreciate the importance of a Natural Supports Approach unless we have some sense of the centrality of identity and belonging to the person's development. Identity formation involves a complex process of "exploring and committing to a set of personally meaningful values, beliefs, and future aspirations" (Dumas et al., 2012) and is one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence (Luyckx et al., 2013; Para, 2008). Natural supports are integral to this process.

Peers offer "models, diversity, and opportunity for exploration of beliefs and values," whereas family provides the basis for the foundational values and beliefs developed early in life (Para, 2008). Even if youth ultimately reject these aspects of their identity, these values and beliefs comprise a starting point for self-exploration and loom large in their efforts to understand who they are. This may be one of the reasons that families comprise such a strong psychological presence even when they are physically absent from a youth's life.

Like identity, belonging impacts our well-being in several ways. O'Brien and Bowles (2013) gathered a significant volume of research highlighting how belonging is one of our strongest motivations as humans and how a sense of belonging to groups and networks is associated with greater:

- ► life satisfaction
- ► cognitive and academic performance
- ► self-esteem
- ► self-efficacy
- ► ease of transition across various life stages
- ► ability to cope
- ► physical health

In contrast, those who lack a sense of belonging are at greater risk for psychological distress, mental illness, poor physical health, and suicide (O'Brien & Bowles, 2013). "Knowing that one belongs and is loved in a stable and supportive relational network [is] fundamental to the human experience" (Samuels, 2008), but many people, beginning in childhood and youth, have experienced conflict, trauma, and separation from their families and communities. This often continues into adult relationships. For example, youth who have been taken into care can especially struggle to have personal connections. "Experiencing the multiple moves typical of children who remain in care can challenge young people in building personal and familial attachments and a sense of belonging."

Identity and belonging must be understood within the context of the systems of power that shape them. The term 'intersectionality' indicates that social identities are multiple and overlapping and must be understood in the context of related systems of discrimination and oppression. The term also reminds us that an individual's component identities contribute to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The people we work with embody many identities, experiences, values, and beliefs—and these overlap and intersect in ways that uniquely shape their experiences and relationships. As practitioners, we need to be aware of intersecting identities and the systems of power that influence identity and belonging. We also need to reflect on our own power and privilege so we can check our assumptions and model anti-oppressive values in our work.

When identity and belonging needs are not adequately addressed, we experience more vulnerabilities (Van Ngo et al., 2015). Supporting identity and belonging development is critical to a Natural Supports Approach.

For further information on identity and belonging, please visit the Connections First website: *www.connectionsfirst.ca*.

8.2 Trauma-Informed Practice

Many of the individuals we work with have experienced considerable trauma in their lifetimes. While trauma-informed practice is critical, it is a particularly important component of a Natural Supports Approach. This approach is relational in nature, and we know that trauma can have a significant impact on relational capacity.

Increasingly, organizations are understanding how to create physical and social environments that are trauma sensitive. Guarino et al. (2009) described key principles associated with a trauma-informed approach, including:

- ► establishing a safe physical and emotional environment
- ► ensuring cultural competence
- ► supporting client control, choice and autonomy
- ► sharing power and governance
- ► integrating care
- ► believing that recovery is possible

Another important principle that has direct implications for a Natural Supports Approach is that healing happens within the context of relationships: "Safe, authentic, and positive relationships can be corrective and restorative to survivors of trauma" (Guarino et al., 2009). This very hopeful statement provides further evidence for the importance of a Natural Supports Approach.

For resources related to trauma-informed practice, please visit the Connections First website: *www.connectionsfirst.ca*.

8.3 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is the process of critically analyzing everyday practice in ways that help you to surface unhelpful values or assumptions, process thoughts and emotions, identify barriers and enablers, and ultimately improve practice. Johns (as quoted in Maclean, 2011), suggests reflective practice is a window through which practitioners can "view and focus self within the context of [their] own lived experience in ways that enable [them] to confront, understand, and work towards resolving the contradiction within [their] practice between what is desirable and actual practice."

Reflective practice is critical to a Natural Supports Approach for at least four reasons:

1. A Natural Supports Approach is highly individualized and context specific. To be effective, practitioners need to be able to inquire, learn, adapt, and use their imaginations.

2. A Natural Supports Approach often involves *working in the grey*—i.e., in areas that are not well-developed or professionally recognized yet; therefore, practitioners need to be able to think things through for themselves and test their own understanding.

3. Our assumptions (e.g., assumptions about families) and our sense of identity (e.g., the need to be a 'rescuer') can present barriers to a Natural Supports Approach; it is therefore critical to be able to reflect on our habits of thinking and caring and reconstruct them as required.

4. To support the identity and belonging needs of the people we work with, we need to understand our own social location*, and this requires honest reflection to ensure that we are identifying blind spots related to our own power and privilege.

For more information on reflective practice and supervision, please visit the Connections First website: *www.connectionsfirst.ca*.

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*   Social Location can be defined as the "groups people belong to because of their place or position in history and society. All people have a social location that is defined by their gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Each group membership confers a certain set of social roles and rules, power, and privilege (or lack of), which heavily influence our identity and how we see the world."
Source: https://web.archive.org/web/20230329102740/http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/courses/csafety/mod2/glossary.htm

9.0 Principles

The following five principles are key to a Natural Supports Approach:

- ► Connection First
- ► Seek Out & Scooch Over
- ► Doing With, Not For
- ► Social Emotional Learning
- ► A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships

Learning to apply these principles in our everyday practice will enable us to more effectively support those we work with in identifying, strengthening, and maintaining a network of caring relationships and social support.

9.1 Connection First

Recognizing the fundamental significance of family, peer, and community relationships is foundational to this approach (Winland et al., 2011). Identity, belonging, affection, and connection are basic human needs, and natural supports are critical to emotional and psychological well-being (Para, 2008). Often we prioritize physical or instrumental needs and only think about meeting these important emotional needs once "stability" has been achieved. However, research suggests that people want to connect to their natural supports even when they are in crisis or before basic needs have been met (Winland, 2013).

PRINCIPLE: CONNECTION FIRST

What it means: We treat connection to Natural Supports with the same urgency as food, shelter and clothing.

What it looks like in practice:

➤   A sense of belonging is a basic human need—connection with natural supports is given the same priority as shelter and other basic needs. This means that the process of supporting 'real world' (rather than professional) connections starts right away. We do not wait for "stability" to start identifying and strengthening relationships within an individual's network.

➤   This does not mean that we are tasked with solving a client's social needs upon intake. It just means that we begin exploring those needs (just as we would with other basic needs) so that we can figure out what is required and what role we will play in supporting to meet those needs.

➤   We are careful to explore current social and emotional connections in ways that are not triggering. For this reason, we might not use a formal assessment tool (e.g., genogram, DSM, ASQ, etc.) until we have explored the topic of natural supports more informally with the client. Think about asking questions like:
   · "Who are the important people in your life?"
   · "Who do you call when you have had a bad day?"
   · "Who is the person you can call for help in the middle of the night?"

➤ Identifying natural supports is only the first step. We then need to:
  1. explore the nature and strength of these ties

  2. identify what relationships may need to be strengthened or restored

  3. identify ways that we can support this process (See *"10.0 Continuum of Needs & Opportunities" on page 35* and *"14.2 Assessing Social Support Needs" on page 54*.)

➤ A healthy sense of identity and belonging is critical for lifespan development, so we make these explicit goals of our work, actively seeking to strengthen both.

➤ A single connection to a positive natural support is a great starting point, but it cannot end there. We create space in our work to help identify and strengthen multiple relationships so that they develop a lifetime network of support.

Reflection Questions

1. What are your priorities when you first meet with a client?
2. What types of questions do you ask?
3. What types of referrals do you typically make?
4. How could you include a greater focus on Natural Supports?

9.2 Seek Out & Scooch Over

While most of us understand the importance of natural supports, our practices can sometimes isolate people from relationships of affection or support (Campbell, 2014) and create an overreliance on professional supports. Professionals have an important role to play in the lives of vulnerable individuals. Still, we are limited in what we can do for them. Those we work with require reciprocal, real-world relationships that will outlast professional services and supports (Cook & Kilmer, 2010; Dryfoos, 1990; Kurtz et al., 2000; Werner, 1990).

Researchers have noted that 'professional arrogance' can be a barrier to involving Natural Supports (Cook & Kilmer, 2010). Professional arrogance is defined as the belief that your "discipline, profession, or organization has a better grasp of what is needed and how to address families' issues" than others do (Cook & Kilmer, 2010). Another barrier is the belief that families are generally the problem—and therefore never part of the solution (Para, 2008). To effectively implement a Natural Supports Approach, practitioners may need to reframe how they think about families.

A Word of Caution: We need to be careful about potentially overwhelming natural supports or approaching them in a purely utilitarian way as a vehicle to help lighten our case management or program delivery load—so this principle requires some discernment. This is discussed further in *"14.3 Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports" on page 56*.

PRINCIPLE: SEEK OUT & SCOOCH OVER

What it means: We actively seek out Natural Supports and create space for them to contribute.

What it looks like in practice:

➤ Rather than always looking for a professional service or support to address a particular need, we actively look for ways for natural supports to fill that role. (e.g., Before we call a shelter, we brainstorm with individuals to see if someone within their network might be able to help.)

➤ We acknowledge that we have something important to contribute as professionals but are not 'the expert.' Families are complex systems and our limited exposure to that system gives us only a small part of the story. By relinquishing the expert role, we leave room for families and other natural supports to bring their ideas forward.

➤ We view family and other natural supports as a potential asset rather than 'the problem,' and take an appreciative approach that positions the individual and their families as operating in stressful circumstances rather than being dysfunctional (Crane, 2009). We then seek to contextualize the challenges that families face by identifying the individual, institutional, and structural barriers that need to be addressed in order to support the person better (Crane, 2009).

- ► We use various tools* to actively seek out those people in an individual's life who can offer affection, belonging, and support. We are persistent in this endeavour, which means that we do not stop until we have found multiple connections. We create an open invitation for natural supports to contribute to the individual's well-being in any way they can, recognizing that there is a spectrum of engagement versus a single way to contribute. (This is explored further in *"14.3 Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports" on page 56*.)

- ► We do what we can to make it easy for families and other natural supports to engage. This might mean meeting with them outside of normal work hours and in varied settings (coffee shops, homes, libraries, etc.).

- ► We recognize that relationships come and go. Therefore, one natural support is not the answer. We cast the net wide. (Practice experience suggests the need to identify a large number of potential supports to work toward a handful of meaningful relationships). The process of 'seeking out' social connections works best when it is owned by the client (with lots of support from the practitioner). We consider ways of building our clients' capacities to reach out to natural supports when it makes sense. (See *"9.3 Doing With, Not For" on page 29*.)

Reflection Questions

In one of his webinars, Kevin Campbell offers a beautiful visual demonstration of the family-finding process that he developed: he represents each youth in one of his Family Finding studies as a branch. At first, there are only a couple of leaves on most of the branches (and some have none). These represent family that the youth knows about and can identify. After a family finding process (which takes an average of 48 minutes per youth), the branches are full of leaves except for two. He explains that those two branches represent caseworkers who did not bother looking for family because they already knew what they would find based on the youth's file. He goes on to explain that the biggest hurdle is not finding family members who would like to contribute. The biggest barrier is caseworkers who will not try. Sometimes, organizational barriers limit our capacity to seek out natural supports, but often, it is our own attitudes and assumptions that get in the way.

1. What assumptions do you have about vulnerable youth and their families?
2. How might these assumptions affect your ability to seek out and scooch over?

"In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." (Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*).

3. How does being the expert shut down inquiry? How might you cultivate a beginner's mind?

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* For more information about tools for identifying natural supports, please explore *"14.0 Tools and Resources" on page 53*, and the Connections First website: *www.connectionsfirst.ca*.

9.3 Doing With, Not For

When we do things for participants, we limit the opportunity for them to learn how to do them for themselves. This can create problems when they transition out of our services. If we want people to be able to set goals, problem-solve, maintain healthy boundaries, and keep themselves safe, we need to give them opportunities to practice these skills with coaching and support. By respecting the individual's autonomy, practitioners enable them to build skills in a safe environment and provide space for natural supports to assist them.

PRINCIPLE: DOING WITH, NOT FOR

What it means: We respect the autonomy of people and their natural supports.

What it looks like in practice:

➤ We work in partnership with people in a non-directive way, ensuring that their perspectives and priorities drive the work. This means that we do not set client goals ourselves; goals arise organically over time through effective questioning, coaching, and discussion.

➤ We resist the urge to problem-solve or fix things, knowing that this can interfere with their learning process.* Instead, we work through problems with them, supporting them in learning how to problem-solve for themselves. We create opportunities for youth to fail safely and to learn from their mistakes.

➤ Natural supports are selected on the basis of the individual's choice, not the worker's choice. We explore what family means for those we work with and revisit the conversation periodically, understanding that the meaning can shift over time (Crane & Kaighin, 2011; Winland, 2013). Deciding which natural supports should become involved, when, and in what capacity is always done with the direction and consent of the individual,** recognizing that this may also change over time (Crane & Kaighin, 2011).

➤ In cases where identified supports present a potential risk, we do not forbid contact, knowing this is unlikely to be effective anyway. Instead, we work with the individual to identify and understand the risk(s) and develop strategies to help them navigate those relationships. (See *"9.5 A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships" on page 33*.)

➤ We begin where the participant and their natural supports are at emotionally and developmentally. To do this, we need to be able to assess the levels of knowledge, skill, or awareness the person/natural support currently has so that we can figure out how we can tailor our support to their particular context.

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*   Consider the 'Snowplow Parent'—so-called because they clear the way of any challenges their child might face. How are those children likely to develop? Similarly, 'Snowplow Practitioners' rob youth of the opportunity to build their own capacities. Some challenges are overwhelming, and we may need to take a 'do for' approach in those circumstances, but we should always be mindful of working towards 'doing with.'
** While supporting autonomy is important for all ages, the process of consent is a little more complicated for younger adolescents. For these youth, practitioners will need to work with the guardian and follow consent protocols.

➤ We might need to take a phased approach to 'doing with.' For example, the practitioner might make the first phone call for an appointment, with the individual watching how to do it. The individual could then make the next call with the practitioner in the room, ready to jump in as needed. A phased approach will be based on our assessment of the client. (Keep in mind, though, that we often underestimate our clients' capacities.)

➤ We work on *their* timeline, not ours, understanding that the process will likely be longer or more disjointed than we hope. We anticipate that they may go through a process of 'trial and error,' trying something short-term and then changing their minds (Crane & Kaighin, 2011). During this time, we need to resist the urge to jump in and fix things.

Reflection Questions

1. Most people become social service workers because they want to help. Think about what being "helpful" means. How can 'doing for' ultimately be unhelpful?

2. Reflect on the nature of your interactions with those you work with. Where do you see examples of 'doing with'? Where do you see examples of 'doing for'? How could you improve in this area?

9.4 Social-Emotional Learning

A Natural Supports Approach is dependent on people being able to develop and maintain reciprocal, supportive relationships with the people in their lives. Social-emotional skills that support healthy, long-term relationships include:

- ► self-awareness
- ► self-management
- ► social awareness
- ► responsible decision-making
- ► relationship skills (including communication, cooperation, conflict negotiation, seeking/offering help, and navigating peer pressure)

Many of the people we work with have encountered adverse childhood experiences (ACES), which can disrupt healthy brain development, creating challenges in forming and maintaining healthy attachments/relationships. However, the impact of ACES can be mitigated through the development of resilience and social-emotional skills.

PRINCIPLE: SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

What it means: We support people in building and maintaining meaningful relationships.

What it looks like in practice:

- ► Many vulnerable people may be starting with a belief that they do not deserve or are not able to have healthy relationships. They may be dealing with trauma or grief that takes time to process. As practitioners, we need to know how to support healing and recovery and help people repair fractured relationships.

- ► Some people may have never had healthy relationships modelled for them or may have challenges maintaining relationships because of the trauma they have experienced. We need to be able to model and support skill-building related to self-awareness, managing strong emotions, reciprocity, communication, cooperation, conflict negotiation, boundary setting, identifying risks, and keeping themselves safe. Similarly, natural supports may also struggle with social-emotional skills and may need help navigating their relationships with the people in their lives.

➤   People who have experienced traumatic or unpredictable relationships
    often develop protective mechanisms (e.g., suspicion, distrust)
    that can serve as a barrier to forming and maintaining close
    personal relationships (Samuels, 2008). We need to support
    people to develop relational discernment and help them
    make meaning of relationships they have lost. (An
    example of this is discussed further in *"10.1 Helping
    Understand Relational Instability" on page 39*.)

➤   Skills development can be supported through
    a supportive relationship, experiential learning
    and modelling, as well as through standalone
    curricula or programs designed to cultivate
    social-emotional learning. The approach
    that we take depends on the person we are
    working with and what would best resonate
    with them.

Reflection Questions

1. Review the list of social-emotional skills that are listed in this section (*page 31*). How would you assess your own relationship skills? Are there any skills you would like to work on?

2. How could you model skills and support their development in those you work with?

3. To what extent are relationship skills part of your current work? Are there resources or expertise in your organization that you could draw on to help you further integrate social-emotional learning into your work?

9.5 A Harm Reduction Approach to Relationships

A Natural Supports Approach respects personal autonomy and lets the individual take the lead in identifying their support network. However, some of the supports they choose may be risky. Our instinct in those circumstances is to create boundaries to mitigate and sometimes eliminate the risk. However, experience suggests that while this can make us as service providers feel better about the situation, it does not always achieve the results we want.

Forbidding a relationship that someone identifies as meaningful or important often has the effect of driving it underground (i.e., they continue to see the person but just do not let us know about it). When that happens, and the relationship goes underground, we cannot play a role in coaching the person through the situation or helping them to develop the skills to keep themselves safe.

A harm reduction approach (International Harm Reduction Association, 2010) to relationships offers a more realistic assessment of risk and provides greater opportunities to build capacity to keep themselves safe. The principle of harm reduction focuses on keeping people safe in the context of high-risk situations.

PRINCIPLE: HARM REDUCTION APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIPS

What it means: We cultivate a more realistic approach to risk management and safety.

What it looks like in practice:

- ► This type of approach requires the capacity to work with someone to assess risk and develop safety plans. When people are supported to identify the risks themselves (rather than being told what the risks are), they are more likely to take them seriously.

- ► We resist the urge to judge 'risky' supports.* Instead, we work with the person to help them identify potential risks and determine how to navigate those relationships safely.

- ► We position ourselves as coaches, asking the person to draw on us for support as they are navigating risky relationships.

- ► A harm reduction approach is likely less risky than the status quo approach because relationships are less likely to go underground. However, the approach can *feel* riskier to many practitioners. For this reason, it is helpful to draw on a collaborative decision-making model so that the burden is shared by a broader team and supported by supervisors/ managers who have your back. Collaboration also gives us the opportunity to draw on the distributed intelligence of others so that we can more effectively develop the level of insight and foresight required for this very challenging work. This might take on several forms, including interdisciplinary teams, peer review, case conferencing, and the development of an organizational culture where learning and questioning are valued.

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*   Note: This does not mean that we need to pretend to be enthusiastic about the situation or cannot express concerns, but we need to do it in a way that is not judgemental and conveys that we are open to possibilities.

Reflection Questions

1. What fears or concerns do you have about a harm reduction approach to relationships? What types of things could happen? Could those things happen even if you limited contact? Why/why not?

2. What kinds of organizational supports would you need to be able to take this kind of approach? How can you work with your team and supervisor to put these supports in place?

3. When helping an individual think through the risks of certain relationships, we use non-judgemental language and questions like, "What risks might be involved in seeing this person? Here are some of the concerns I have—do you think they are legitimate? What ideas do you have for keeping yourself safe in that relationship?"

10.0 Continuum of Needs & Opportunities

The continuum listed below was developed to sensitize practitioners to the various relational needs and opportunities that exist when working with vulnerable people and their natural supports. **This continuum is not linear: individuals can move back and forth between various points. They may want or need several types of supports at once**. Distinguishing between the various types of needs and opportunities can help us focus our efforts and be thoughtful about our objectives.

As with other aspects of this approach, how you engage with individuals at each of these points depends on a range of contextual factors and cannot be captured in a procedural way. However, in *"14.0 Tools and Resources" on page 53*, we have listed a number of resources that are helpful in supporting practitioners to work with the people they serve and their natural supports at various points along this continuum.

Table 3: Continuum of Needs & Opportunities

Need & Opportunity	Appropriate When...	Practitioners Can...
Engaging: Help individuals to cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports.	The individual presents as uninterested in cultivating natural supports.	➤ Seek to understand the individual's fears and concerns around relationships, as well as their needs and desires. ➤ Explore the idea that while relationships are risky, so are loneliness and isolation. ➤ Draw on some of the engagement tools listed in *"14.0 Tools and Resources" on page 53* to cultivate an interest in connecting with natural supports. ➤ Building strengths. Look back to times when the person had positive relationships or experiences and identify what they already "do" well so you can build on that. ➤ Explore times they were there for others and how that was for them. Explore the benefits of these experiences.

Need & Opportunity	Appropriate When...	Practitioners Can...
Finding: Work with the individuals to identify potential supports.	The individual is unable to name at least one person they can rely on for support or would like some help identifying further supports.	► Draw on identification tools to identify potential supports in an individual's life. More information about tools like mobility mapping, genogram, and family finding, is available at *www.connectionsfirst.ca*. ► Help to track down phone numbers and addresses, as needed. ► Support the individual in their efforts to connect with the people they have identified (e.g., coach them on what to say in a phone call, help them draft a letter, or accompany them to their first meeting). ► Help to prepare the individual for a range of responses. ► Work to develop safety plans as needed.
Strengthening: Help the individual to strengthen relationships with natural supports.	The individual needs assistance developing a stronger relationship with some of the natural supports they have identified.	► Work with the individual and (where appropriate) natural support(s) to identify strengths and challenges and develop goals for the relationship. ► Use problem-solving tools and processes to identify ways to build on strengths and address challenges in the relationship. ► Help them cultivate empathy for one another and develop realistic expectations (e.g., someone can care about you deeply but not be able to support you in the way you would like). ► Draw on the *attachment and social emotional learning tools* found in *"14.0 Tools and Resources" on page 53*, or online at *www.connectionsfirst.ca*, to build their capacity to effectively engage in meaningful, reciprocal relationships. ► Provide opportunities for individuals to connect with others who have the same challenges, such as groups or peer programs.

Need & Opportunity	Appropriate When...	Practitioners Can...
Restoring: Support healing and restoration.	The individual and natural support(s) need help repairing the relationship and finding safe and effective ways of moving forward.	➤ Draw on the *grief and loss tools* found in the resources section of *www.connectionsfirst.ca* to help individuals integrate their trauma and loss experiences in ways that are healing. (The exercises in Darla Henry's *3-5-7 Model Workbook* can be particularly helpful.) Grief and loss might be especially relevant to explore with older populations. ➤ Tools to support *identity and belonging* might also be helpful here. Explore them at *www.connectionsfirst.ca*. ➤ Make referrals to other professionals as needed. This includes referrals for family members and other natural supports who may also need to embark on their own healing journey in order to be able to support the individual more effectively. Referrals can be made to support individuals facing domestic abuse, senior abuse, are new to the country, or are looking for resources because of a disability. ➤ Develop safety plans as needed and support individuals and natural supports to establish healthy boundaries.

Need & Opportunity	Appropriate When...	Practitioners Can...
Maintaining: Help individuals maintain connections.	The relationship is stable but still somewhat vulnerable, and the individual or natural support(s) need help understanding how to maintain it.	➤ Work with the individual and natural supports to identify areas of vulnerability and why they exist. Problem-solve together to identify ways to enhance the resilience of the relationship and reduce the risk of breakdown. ➤ Ongoing capacity building around social-emotional learning and relationship skills will be helpful here. (*"14.0 Tools and Resources" on page 53*.) ➤ Encourage a growth mindset and empower individuals to embrace life-long learning and connections.
Transitioning: Help the individual transition to other relationships.	The individual has experienced the end of a relationship or would like to extricate themselves from some of their current relationships and transition to other friendship groups or supports.	➤ Help the individual to make meaning of the loss. (Discussed in the next section: *"10.1 Helping Understand Relational Instability" on page 39*.) ➤ Help the individuals to develop goals and strategies to support the transition. ➤ Draw on the *grief and loss tools* found in the resources section of *www.connectionsfirst.ca*.

10.1 Helping Understand Relational Instability

The continuum of needs and opportunities highlights the various stages of relationships. It speaks to the need to help prepare individuals to make meaning of the range of relational experiences they've had and will continue to encounter—including relationships that disappoint, hurt, or end.

There is a need to work together with individuals, acknowledging the risk involved in building connections with people who may leave or disappoint them, as perhaps their history has been. This is an essential part of the conversation. In conjunction with talking about the benefits of having natural supports, it is important to help normalize relational instability (i.e., the fact that people will always come and go from our lives) and help people to develop effective ways of understanding and integrating these losses. Without this, it could be difficult to inspire any interest in cultivating new connections and risking the vulnerability that often exists in mutually close relationships (Samuels, 2008).

In her study of relational permanence among youth with foster care backgrounds, Gina Samuels found that many youth drew on a poem entitled *"A Reason, a Season or a Lifetime"* to help them make sense of the relational instability they had experienced in their lifetime. The poem (page 50) suggests that there is value in different types of relationships regardless of how long they last.

The poem offers "an alternative interpretation of relational loss" by separating "the value of a relationship from its duration in our lives." Samuels suggests that this helps to cultivate "an alternative coping skill by anticipating change and reframing loss in terms of what is gained.... It is also helpful for underscoring the fact that experiencing an intimate connection to someone does not ensure a relationship's permanence, nor does the end of a close relationship erase the impact or value it had in one's life. As such, it is a complement to coping with one's experience of an ambiguous loss" (Samuels, 2008).

A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime

People come into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. When you figure out which one it is, you will know what to do.

When someone is in your life for a REASON, it is usually to meet a need you have expressed. They have come to assist you through a difficulty, to provide you with guidance and support, to aid you physically, emotionally, or spiritually. They may seem like a godsend, and they are! They are there for the reason you need them to be.

Then, without any wrongdoing on your part, or at an inconvenient time, this person will say or do something to bring the relationship to an end. Sometimes they die. Sometimes they walk away. Sometimes they act up and force you to take a stand.

What we must realize is that our need has been met, our desire fulfilled, their work is done. The prayer you sent up has been answered. And now it is time to move on.

When people come into your life for a SEASON, it is because your turn has come to share, grow, or learn. They bring you an experience of peace, or make you laugh. They may teach you something you have never done. They usually give you an unbelievable amount of joy. Believe it! It is real! But, only for a season.

LIFETIME relationships teach you lifetime lessons; things you must build upon in order to have a solid emotional foundation. Your job is to accept the lesson, love the person, and put what you have learned to use in all other relationships and areas of your life. It is said that love is blind, but friendship is clairvoyant.

- Author unknown

The poem is relevant to other populations, as well. Throughout our lifetime, individuals transition in and out of our lives. This poem can help individuals at many different stages of life make meaning of these changes. As we become adults, we may have fewer friends and contacts because we may be busy raising families and building a career. As we get even older, our children become adults and move away, and our contacts made through our children and work may fade away. When we move to retirement, we may also lose those contacts.

Additionally, as we age, we are faced with losing contacts due to death and illness. We should also note that there are increased barriers to maintaining contacts for individuals who are unable to get out to public spaces or events. Barriers can be financial, physical, mental, or many others.

While natural supports are critical to human development, they can also be a source of pain and disappointment. This approach must include efforts to help make meaning of relational pain and loss in ways that maintain their capacity to allow people into their lives. We also need to help individuals contextualize the various sources and types of risk so they can keep themselves safer in a range of situations. And through it all, we need to remind them why this matters: relationships may be risky, but loneliness is lethal.

Reflection Questions

1. Read the poem thinking about key relationships (past and present) in your own life. How can you use the poem to make meaning of those relationships? How might you use this poem with the people you work with?

2. Think about someone you have worked with who has developed coping mechanisms that might isolate them from other people. They are probably very aware of the risks involved in close relationships. How can you help them to think about the risks of NOT having close relationships?

Part Three:

IMPLEMENTATION

11.0 Practice Examples

We used case studies extensively in the development of this Framework. We found that working with real-life examples brought the principles to life in ways that helped us to understand how this approach differs from the status quo. The process also helped to surface conflicting values and assumptions. The examples below are based on actual cases. We suggest you work through them on your own and with your team, taking time to reflect on the questions that follow.

Aisha

Aisha was taken into care at age eight due to her mother's substance use and mental health issues, which led to neglect. She moved through various foster placements, always wishing to be with her mom. As a teenager, Aisha began drinking and using drugs, leading to her placement in a group home at 15. The workers there tried to help her with substance abuse and school, but Aisha often ran away to stay with her mom. This forced the workers to either retrieve her or close her bed at the group home. Aisha felt caught between two places: she wanted to be settled and go to school, but she really wanted to be with her mom as well. Her workers wanted to help her but were frustrated with her behaviour.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your first instinct as a professional? Why?
2. Why do you think kids sometimes run away to be with their parents, even when those relationships are potentially abusive?
3. What would be a status quo approach to this situation?
4. How were natural supports principles used to approach this situation?
5. What risks are associated with each approach? Is one approach any riskier than the other? Why/why not?

Ester

Ester wants to stay in her home but struggles with tasks like yard work, vacuuming, and lifting groceries. She feels overwhelmed and pressured to move into a senior facility. She is unsure about what the next steps would be. When Ester thinks about how she could stay in her home, she has a grandson close by but does not want to be a burden to her family.

Ester's grandson, who has a history of being unemployed and taking money, offers to move into her basement to support with her care. Ester is struggling with this decision, and others have expressed concern about potential exploitation. Ester's not sure what to do.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your first instinct as a professional? Why?
2. What does this case tell us about the principle of *do with, not for*, related to clients being active in making their life decisions?
3. What would a status quo approach be in this situation?
4. How could natural supports principles be used to approach this situation?
5. What are the risks of either approach? How do we ensure Ester's safety while using a Natural Supports Approach?

Nina

Nina, a 35-year-old Indigenous woman, is facing mental health challenges and strained relationships due to her tendency to be reactive and, at times, combative with people. Due to these difficulties, Nina struggles to hold employment for long periods and experiences housing instability. She enjoys knitting and uses this as a strategy to manage her life stressors. Nina feels alone and isolated and decides to reach out to Access Mental Health for support.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your initial reaction as a professional in this scenario? Why?
2. What would a status quo approach to this situation look like?
3. What would a Natural Supports Approach look like?
4. What additional information would you look to explore with Nina?

Aamir

Aamir's family immigrated to Canada in 2020 from Pakistan, and they have faced multiple barriers, including challenges in finding employment and a loss of cultural connection. This has led to Aamir and his family becoming overwhelmed and struggling with their mental health. Aamir has experienced depression and thoughts of suicide. In Aamir's culture, the saying "mental health" meant "a psychotic break" where someone would be running down the street naked and screaming. This led Aamir to not reach out for help, with the potential of being embarrassed and ashamed.

The family eventually became involved with a Wraparound team through a professional organization. This team normalizes "mental health care" and vulnerable conversations. This was very challenging for Aamir and his family and caused them to mistrust the professionals. They began to pull away from the support. Aamir is not sure about what to do next.

Reflection Questions

1. What does this case reveal about the role of professionals and the potential for unintentional harm?

2. How can we assist Aamir and his family in overcoming barriers and mental health challenges in a way that is understandable and acceptable to them?

3. What would a status quo approach to this situation entail?

4. How were the principles of natural supports applied in this scenario?

5. What are the risks associated with each approach? Is one approach riskier than the other? Why/Why not?

Michelle

Michelle moves to a new neighbourhood with her 4-year-old daughter, Samantha, who has learning delays and hearing deficiencies. Nervous about fitting in, Michelle learns about a drop-in playgroup at the local community center. The group, run by a community development facilitator, helps parents connect and learn parenting skills. Michelle attends, but Samantha sits alone, and Michelle also isolates herself.

This is a very well-attended group, and despite the facilitator noticing Michelle and Samantha, they did not have the capacity to respond in the moment. This goes on for several weeks, and Michelle loses hope in the meaning of the group. This causes Michelle to approach the facilitator about quitting the group because she does not feel like they belong.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you, as a community development facilitator, handle this situation?
2. What would a status quo approach to this situation look like?
3. What would a Natural Supports Approach look like?
4. What risks are associated with each approach? Is one approach riskier than the other? Why/Why not?

Danny

Danny, a 28-year-old female, is at risk for sexual exploitation—she is struggling with drug use/addiction, going missing for days at a time, and is not speaking with her friends and family as much as she usually does. Danny is connected to a caseworker for at-risk women, who has arranged a meeting with Danny, her parents, and some of her other professional community support networks in hopes of connecting Danny to a safer environment and mental health support. Danny refused to attend the meeting, stating, "No one on my side is there," and that she would not go to the meeting unless her girlfriend could attend. The parents were concerned as they were sure that this "girlfriend" was the one sexually exploiting her and providing her with drugs. Through safety planning and consultation with the facilitator's supervisor, it was decided that they would invite Danny's girlfriend. Danny agreed to attend the next meeting.

Danny's girlfriend did not show up to the meeting. A second meeting was scheduled, and Danny's girlfriend attended and agreed to help with some actions at the meeting. Danny later shared that her girlfriend did not follow through with what she said he would. Danny said that she did not want her girlfriend to come to the case meetings anymore but did not want to tell her parents because she was embarrassed. She also said that she does not know what the point is to continue the meetings because she "cannot count on anyone."

Reflection Questions

1. What is your first instinct as a professional? Why?
2. What would be a status quo approach to this situation?
3. How were natural supports principles used to approach this situation?
4. What other ways could a Natural Supports Approach be taken in this situation?

Javier

Javier, a 52-year-old male, is coming in for a single-session counselling appointment. He has never been to counselling before and is unwilling to commit to ongoing therapy, which is why he liked the idea of trying out one session. Javier talks about losing his partner to cancer last month and that he feels alone and cannot seem to find joy anymore. You ask what his grieving period has looked like so far. He tells you he took some time off work but is back now. He also had to finalize some will-related things with their adult children. He says his friends have not been able to figure out what to say to him, so they have been keeping their distance. He mostly just goes for walks with his dog in his neighbourhood park. Javier said he needs to figure out a way to find joy and get out of this grief "funk" before he considers "joining" his partner. You immediately notice a need to do a suicide risk assessment and find that Javier does not have a plan but poses a risk of considering suicide.

Reflection Questions

1. What natural supports did Javier identify?
2. Using a Natural Supports Approach, how do you support Javier to build a safety plan and identify ways his natural supports can be involved?
3. What needs and opportunities do you identify in this story?
4. What natural supports principles do you see in this scenario?

Alex

Alex is a 13-year-old nonbinary youth whose pronouns are they/them. Their mother has supported their gender journey since the very beginning, but their father refuses to for religious reasons. Alex is in grade 7 and goes to a public school. They have a very sociable personality and enjoy playing soccer, learning to cook, and reading comics. However, you have noticed that Alex seems overly tired and moody lately when you see them in your programs. You notice that Alex keeps being misgendered by other staff and program participants despite Alex advocating for themselves on multiple occasions. You overhear one of the other youth in your program saying that they *"aren't going to use they/them pronouns because they don't make sense. And besides, what the big deal?"* Alex appears withdrawn in the group, and when you connect with them, they confess that they feel like never coming back.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your first instinct as a professional? Why?
2. What would a status quo approach be in this situation?
3. What natural supports principles could be used to approach this situation?
4. What are the risks of either approach? How do we ensure safety while using Natural Supports Approach?
5. What could you do personally to create inclusion?
6. What would you say to Alex and the other youth and staff?
7. Are there organizational policies that can support you and Alex in this situation?

12.0 Implications for Practitioners

Based on our experience, the biggest implications of this approach for practitioners are that it requires careful examination of our own values and assumptions. Below is a list of some of the common values and assumptions that can create barriers to a Natural Supports Approach. As you read them, think about whether you have had similar thoughts.

- Professionals can meet the emotional and psychological needs of those they support.
- Our role is to rescue people and fix things for them.
- We have a duty to protect people, and that means limiting their exposure to those who could hurt them.
- All vulnerable children and youth come from troubled families
- Children who have been neglected or abused by family or friends have no interest in connecting with those natural supports.
- Family is the original problem, so they cannot be part of the solution.
- We do not have the capacity to address family issues, so we should avoid discussing family with the people we work with.
- Natural supports are dangerous and unreliable, whereas professionals are dependable and will always be there for people.
- The child or youth is the victim, and their perspective is all that matters.
- Natural supports are a "nice to have." You have to attend to basic needs like food and shelter first.
- Relationships are not a valuable outcome.
- Relationships are not measurable, so this work is not valued by funders.
- We, the professionals, know best; we define what success looks like for youth and families.

- Families should be self-sufficient and, therefore, able to handle any challenges that arise.
- In some areas, safety concerns and a lack of trust in the community can lead parents to be more insular and less likely to engage with others in raising their children.
- Online communities and connections are just as valuable as face-to-face connections.
- Friends and peer supports are not as valuable as adult natural supports in terms of safety.
- Families have a seat at "the table." Therefore, they have a voice when it comes to decision-making.
- When people live far from family and long-standing community networks, it is more difficult to ask and rely on them for support.
- People living with significant mental health challenges have burned all of their bridges.
- Natural supports for people with addictions tend to be other addicts and not good influences.
- Natural supports cannot replace what a therapist can provide to a client.
- People involved in the criminal justice system should be isolated and removed from society.
- Once a criminal, always a criminal: there is no hope for rehabilitation and reintegration, so there is no point in seeking out natural supports.

- Personal achievements and self-sustainability are more important than collective welfare.

- If a person rejects their culture, then there is no point in pursuing cultural supports.

- Older adults in health settings are being taken care of and, therefore, do not require natural supports.

- Seniors are less likely to seek natural supports because they feel like a burden.

- Single-session interventions cannot do natural support work like ongoing interventions/sessions can.

- People will not talk about their natural supports during the first contact with a professional.

- If someone is in crisis, it is not the time to talk about natural supports; it is about responding to that crisis.

- If a natural support refuses engagement initially, you should not ask again.

- Natural supports are those that can be available to meet the person's every need.

- We need to support and monitor all contacts and communication between people and their natural supports.

- A young child's caregiver should be their only natural support.

- Independent living means living in isolation.

- Families that have children with disabilities are too ashamed to ask for help.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of these values do you identify with?
2. How do they show up in your work?

13.0 Implications for Organizations and Systems

While many in our sector understand the value of a Natural Supports Approach, organizational and systemic barriers can sometimes inhibit implementation. Working with systems and organizations to address any barriers that might impede our ability to fully implement this approach is vital.

Some of the issues initially identified when this work started turned out to be less significant than initially thought. For example, with this type of approach, many were concerned about the potential for increased risk and liability. At the time, the Change Collective engaged with a lawyer and workshopped case studies with organizational leaders to identify potential areas of increased exposure. It was found that a Natural Supports Approach did not really introduce additional risk.*

In fact, this approach is more likely to reduce risk because it acknowledges the limits of control and focuses on building the capacity of people to keep themselves safe in a variety of situations. It also reduces risks that we rarely consider, including risks associated with social quarantine, psychological homelessness, and social network disruption.

Another issue that was identified early on related to accreditation and professional ethics.** Meetings with representatives from various professional and accreditation bodies suggest that the principles set out in this Framework are generally aligned with the high-level guidelines provided by professional bodies to support case-by-case decision-making. Effective supervision, client-driven case conferencing, and good professional judgement are central to ethical practice, and each plays an important role in protecting professionals from disciplinary action.

The Natural Supports Framework encourages these practices and, therefore, does not seem to be in conflict with the standards developed by professional bodies. That said, one area that needs careful consideration as we move forward involves implementing this approach with younger clients. Issues of consent (e.g., in cases where the guardian does not approve of the supports identified) and safety (e.g., ethical considerations in taking a harm reduction approach with people underage or not able to provide consent) will continue to need to be explored. Organizations may need to develop specific guidelines for enhancing natural supports for these populations.

As with professional standards, accreditation standards are intended to guide the safe and ethical delivery of specific programs. Agencies are expected to provide a rationale for how their program policies and procedures abide by these standards. To this point, programs applying the natural supports principles have been able to work with accrediting bodies to explain the approach and have experienced no issues with receiving accreditation. Agencies will need to continue to dialogue with accrediting bodies as they develop policies and protocols to support their staff in working with this Framework.

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*   The exception to this was reputational risk. We agreed that our professional and organizational reputations
     could be at risk if the public or others in our sector do not understand the rationale for this approach.
     To this extent, the approach may require more communication support than legal support.
** Please see *"Appendix A: Notes on Accreditation and Ethics" on page 66* for a description of four
     key areas to pay attention to when implementing a Natural Supports Approach.

While some of the implications of this approach are not as challenging as we initially thought, there are still several ways in which this approach requires change at the organizational and system levels. The types of changes that are needed include the following:

► Caseloads often need to be decreased to accommodate this work because capacity building and relational development take time. (This has implications for funders' expectations as well.)

► New reporting systems need to be developed (including new outcome measures and indicators) to capture the complexity and dimensionality of this work.

► Organizations will need to review their policies, practices, and protocols carefully to identify and change those that:

　• Limit/undermine vulnerable populations' autonomy

　• Isolate people from their natural supports

　• Incentivize connections to professional supports (e.g., outcome measures based on the number of professional referrals)

　• Restrict the ability of professionals to meet individuals and families in their communities

　• Undermine collective decision-making and case-conferencing in teams

　• Exclude natural supports or clients from case conferencing and problem-solving

　• Create case management or service plans that are not aligned with the capabilities and life circumstances of people and families.

► Organizations will need to create time, processes, and structures to support reflective practice and supervision. Leaders will also need to consider how to further foster organizational cultures in which questioning and learning are valued.

► Organizations will need to re-examine perspectives and policies related to risk and safety. They may need to develop protocols that enable collective and case-by-case decision-making and create opportunities to support people and natural supports to build their capacity to assess and manage their own risks.

► Service providers often exist in separate professional streams. Organizations will need to develop ways to support increased integration and to work more effectively with family-oriented professionals and services.

► Funders will need to support professional development in this area, and organizations will need to work with their staff to build their collective capacity for this approach.

14.0 Tools and Resources

14.1 Organizational Audit

The *Enhancing Natural Supports Audit* is meant to be used internally by organizations to examine their values, policies, practices, and procedures. Copies of the Audit can be downloaded at *burnsfund.com/wp-content/ uploads/2018/03/Enhancing-Natural-Supports-Organizational-Audit.pdf*.

The Audit is intended to generate dialogue about the implications of this approach and help organizations to:

- ➤   identify ways in which they are currently facilitating or impeding this approach
- ➤   identify priorities
- ➤   develop ways to increase organizational capacity to implement a Natural Supports Approach

The Audit is designed to be used by Leadership Teams; however, we recommend finding ways to include frontline staff, supervisors, and managers in the discussions—particularly those who have participated in Natural Supports Training. We also recommend revisiting the Audit annually to track progress and develop new priorities and ideas for ways to further align organizations with a Natural Supports Approach.

14.2 Assessing Social Support Needs

To enhance natural supports for people, we need to understand something
about their social needs. This kind of assessment can happen informally
through questions about existing supports. For example:

- ➤ Who are the most important people in your life? Why?
- ➤ Who do you call when you have had a bad day?
- ➤ Who do you call when you have had a good day?
- ➤ Who shares your past with you or knows your life story?
- ➤ Who do you have fun hanging out with?
- ➤ Who can give you good advice or help with problems?
- ➤ Who can you share your feelings with?
- ➤ Who could you call in the middle of the night if you had an emergency?
- ➤ Who do you wish could help you with this situation?

A more formal assessment can also be conducted. The one below, excerpted from
Skills for Psychological Recovery: Field Operation Guide (Berkowitz et al., 2010), is helpful
because it looks at needs and the individual's capacity to extend support to others.

Table 4: Types of Social Support Worksheet

Name	Description	How You Get It & Give It	Need?	Can Give?
Emotional Comfort	Feeling 'heard,' understood, accepted, and loved or cared for	Listening (without giving advice or judgment), giving a hug or a 'shoulder to cry on'	☐	☐
Social Belonging	Feeling as if you fit in, belong, and have things in common with other people	Spending time with friends and family members, participating in enjoyable or recreational activities with others	☐	☐
Feeling Needed	Feeling that you are important and valued by others	Words of appreciation or gratitude, showing someone that you enjoy their company	☐	☐
Self-Worth	Feeling that you are a valuable and appreciated member of a family, group, or organization and that your contributions make a difference	Words or acts of appreciation for your skills, knowledge, talents and contributions; being asked to help or participate; feedback that you have faced and handled challenges well	☐	☐
Reliable Support	Feeling that you have people you can depend on to help you if you need it	Being available to help someone when they need or ask for help	☐	☐
Advice, Information, Problem-Solving	Having someone who can offer good advice, show you how to do something, give you information, or mentor you	Giving information on how to obtain the service or items that (you or someone else) needs; helping you think of options you have or ways to fix a problem	☐	☐
Physical Assistance	Having people who help you carry out physical tasks or run errands	Helping someone do something you need, such as home or car repair, paperwork	☐	☐
Material Assistance	Having people give you tangible assistance	Giving items such as food, clothing, medicine, building materials or a loan	☐	☐

14.3 Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports

The degree to which we can work with natural supports will vary depending on our role, program, and agency—but even taking small steps to engage family, friends, and community can make a significant difference in the lives of our clients.

In many ways, the approach that is needed to work with natural supports parallels the approach needed to work with vulnerable individuals:

➤ The work is context-sensitive, so it requires high levels of professional judgment.

➤ The five principles outlined in the Framework apply to both.

➤ A trauma-informed approach is critical, as is the cultivation of empathy.

➤ Section *"10.0 Continuum of Needs & Opportunities" on page 35* can be used to identify entry points for working with natural supports.

➤ The work involves ongoing coaching and capacity building.

In addition to the higher-level principles already outlined in the Framework, the suggestions offered in the tables below might be helpful, particularly if you are working directly with natural supports. *"Table 5: Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports" on page 57*, outlines strategies to initiate and sustain engagement with natural supports. *"Table 6: Addressing Challenges Associated with Engaging Natural Supports" on page 59*, outlines suggestions for addressing many of the challenges that arise in this work.

Table 5: Strategies for Engaging Natural Supports

Need or Opportunity	Suggestions
Initiating engagement with a natural support	► Work with the individual to develop a strategy for approaching the natural support they have identified. Should they initiate the call, or should you? What are the potential risks and benefits of both approaches? What needs to happen before the call (e.g., What possibilities will you need to prepare them for)? Even if they are not in a position to initiate engagement, they can still be involved in the process.
	► Keep in mind that the goal of first contact with an identified support is to lay the foundation for a relationship, not to meet an instrumental need or get something from them. When we are overly focused on what a support can do for our clients, we risk alienating or scaring them off. Furthermore, a 'What can you do for me?' approach does not reflect the principles of healthy relationships. Remember that the relationship is the goal. Begin the process by asking questions and developing rapport.
	► Be curious about the type of relationship the natural support would like to have or how they would like to engage. For example, you might say: "This person has identified you as an important person in their life. If you were to be part of their life, what could your role be? What could that look like?"
	► Take an appreciative, strength-based approach: "What is good about this relationship? What would you like to grow in the relationship?"
	► Figure out what is in it for them. Work with the individual to make a compelling case for the natural support's involvement.
	► Draw out and validate their stories, hopes, and needs, just as you would with a client.
	► Seek to understand their fears and potential points of resistance. Some natural supports will have had past experiences with social systems that left them feeling disempowered, judged, or under-appreciated. Some might be worried about letting the person down, while others might hesitate because of past experiences with them. Validate their concerns and help to address them where you can.

Need or Opportunity	Suggestions
Nurturing and sustaining the relationship	► Help the individual and natural support to manage their expectations. Encourage them to start small and slowly build from there. Help both to understand that relationship-building takes time. Play the role of 'point person' (as needed) while the relationship is being established.
	► Be careful not to overwhelm the natural support (discussed further in *"Table 6: Addressing Challenges Associated with Engaging Natural Supports" on page 59*). Let them decide on the terms of engagement, and make sure they are not the only support in the person's life.
	► Consider explicitly mapping out expectations and commitments. For example, you could: · Work with the natural support to develop an understanding of what they can offer and when. · Work with the individual to develop an understanding of what they can offer and when. · Capture both sets of expectations and commitments in writing to prevent misunderstandings. · Revisit and revise the document occasionally, as expectations and commitments might change.
	► If the relationship is relatively new, spend time doing 'getting to know you' activities. If it is more established, identify fun activities that can help to strengthen the bond.
	► Understand that most system-involved people have learned to work with professional supports, not natural supports. Help them to develop the skills required for reciprocal relationships. Use role play to practice their skills, anticipate various scenarios, and help them think of concrete ways to nurture the relationship. (For example, one practitioner encouraged her client to schedule their natural supports' birthdays into their phone so that they could reach out to them on that day with a card or a telephone call.)
	► Some natural supports need coaching—including coaching about healthy relationships, reciprocity, boundary setting, conflict resolution, managing reactions, and problem-solving. They may also need to be supported to understand development, trauma, grief and loss, and relevant disabilities (e.g., FASD, Autism, etc.). You may need to draw on other professionals to help to provide this support. Do not feel like you have to do all of this on your own.

Table 6: Addressing Challenges Associated with Engaging Natural Supports

Challenges	Suggestions
The natural support feels overwhelmed and starts to pull away	*Natural supports sometimes feel like they are the only ones supporting the individual, and that pressure can be overwhelming. Some of the ways to prevent this situation include the following:* ► Ensure they are not the only support! Building redundancy into people's support systems is critical so that the load is shared. Remind them that they can play whatever role they like—even if it is something really small, like calling once a month to check in and see how the person is doing. ► Ask them about their fears and concerns. Work with them to try to problem-solve around those. ► Help to manage expectations on both sides. Have open and ongoing conversations about roles and expectations. ► Manage your own expectations: Try to be realistic about what the natural support can and cannot do—and understand that situations will change. ► Ensure that the natural supports have natural supports. Often, they are just as isolated and are not getting the kind of support that would help them to be a positive influence in the person's life. ► Celebrate the work in an ongoing way. We tend to be really problem-focused in our work. Talk about the good things that have happened. Help the person understand how to express gratitude in consistent ways. ► Let them know that they are not alone in this—that there is a team to support them as they try to support the individual. ► Do not push. Engaging natural supports is like a dance where you need to be responsive to the other person's lead. Slow down and consider the bigger picture.

Challenges	Suggestions

The relationship is conflictual and is at risk of 'blowing up'	*What do you do when there is conflict between the individual and natural support? How do you work to ensure that the conflict does not lead to irreparable damage? Here are some ideas for taking a preventative approach to conflict:*
	
	► Help the natural support and the individual to set limits and establish healthy boundaries. Ask them how you can support them in maintaining those boundaries.
	
	► Work with them to develop conflict resolution, problem-solving, and other social-emotional skills. Use role play to help them anticipate encounters with one another.
	
	► Identify common ground and shared values.
	
	► Coach them around taking responsibility for what happened and asking for forgiveness. This skill does not come naturally to everyone and needs to be learned.
	
	► Support problem-solving by:
	  • Working with both to identify the primary need (i.e., what is needed to ensure this relationship can go forward). If there are several or complex needs, break them down into manageable chunks and prioritize them.
	  • Brainstorming ways to meet that need. You can encourage creativity here by offering suggestions that are fun or impractical. This modelling helps them to understand that you are not evaluating solutions at this point and that they are free to offer ideas that are 'out of the box.'
	  • Helping them assess all the potential strategies and identify ones they want to try.
	  • Developing an action plan. (This includes thinking about the potential challenges in implementing the plan and how they could address them.)
	
	► Help them to develop realistic expectations of one another. In some cases, unrealistic expectations are related to a lack of knowledge/understanding around trauma, adolescent development, or disabilities like FASD. Coaching and education are critical in these circumstances.

Challenges	Suggestions
The relationship is conflictual and is at risk of 'blowing up' continued...	► Help them to be forward-thinking rather than constantly rehashing what happened. One way to approach this is to get them to think about who they are today and who they want to be going forward. ► Draw on different tools to help support reconciliation and to process grief, loss, trauma, and conflict. Help them to develop realistic expectations about how long it takes and how difficult (but rewarding) it is. ► Be a buffer and help to champion the hard work of reconciliation. *Note: The best way to manage conflict is to prevent it in the first place. Help both natural supports and the individual to anticipate potential sources of tension and build a strategy for dealing with them throughout the relationship. Check in often about how they are communicating and managing tensions as best they can.*

The natural support does not seem to be a safe or positive influence	*Often, the people individuals identify as important have their own struggles, triggers, or history of trauma, and this can make it difficult for them to be a positive influence. Here are some suggestions for working with natural supports that we may have concerns about.*
	
	► Draw on the same principles and practices you would use for working with people who are struggling with trauma or overwhelming life circumstances:
	  · Shift from "What is wrong with you?" to "What is happened to you?"
	  · Try to remain curious, empathetic and non-judgmental.
	  · Draw on your coaching and motivational interviewing skills.
	
	► Be sure to engage the natural support in safety planning rather than solely planning with the participant. Work with them to identify potential concerns and ways of creating safety. Explore the 'what-ifs' and support them in creating their own plan for helping so that they feel empowered.
	
	► Help them to develop their own system of support. Many are just as isolated and need help connecting to a broader range of natural supports.
	
	► Know your limits and develop the confidence to say, "I am not a clinician," when the situation is beyond your capacity to manage. Stop and make a new plan.

Challenges	Suggestions
Other professionals prohibit the involvement of the natural support	*In some cases, the fears and concerns of other professionals may impede your ability to engage natural supports. For example, a case worker might forbid all forms of contact with a particular individual. Some ideas for dealing with this challenge include the following:* ➤ Help the professional to understand the dangers of loneliness and psychological homelessness. (Draw on the information in *"3.0 Why Are Natural Supports Important?" on page 7*.) ➤ Work through potential scenarios. What is likely to happen if we forbid contact? Will the relationship go underground? If so, what risks are associated with that? ➤ Draw on the same skills you use with the people you work with. 　· Be empathetic. 　· Genuinely try to understand their fears so that you can figure out how to address them. 　· Validate them; ensure that they feel heard. 　· Avoid appearing judgmental.
Parents question your competency because you are not a parent yourself	➤ One of the most effective ways to meet this challenge is to be humble and relinquish the role of the expert. Genuinely position yourself as a learner. ➤ Affirm that they are the expert when it comes to their own lives. Rather than offering advice, ask questions, help them tell their story and feel heard. Draw on all of your Active Listening skills.

Challenges	Suggestions
The individual identifies a natural support who refuses to engage	*This may be the most difficult challenge. Here are some suggestions for how to manage it.* ► Try to discern the reason for not engaging. Sometimes, it will have more to do with you, the practitioner, than the individual. Some natural supports have had bad experiences with professionals. In some cases, cultural issues may be involved (e.g., a male practitioner engaging a female support is not acceptable in some cultures). If you think the issue might be either of the reasons listed above, 　• Identify someone else to engage the natural support (e.g., another natural support or the individual). 　• Try to engage the natural support's partner (if they have one). ► In some cases, natural support will refuse to engage because the individual has hurt them in some way. If this is the reason for not engaging, try the following: 　• Offer mediation between the individual and the natural support. 　• Help the individual to make amends. 　• Help the natural support to set boundaries with the individual (this may include safety planning with the natural support). 　• Use letters and photos as an engagement tool. 　• Continue to include the natural support in communications about the individual's progress, where applicable and with consent. ► If the natural support continues to refuse engagement, 　• Work with the individual to explore their grief and loss around this relationship. (See *"10.1 Helping Understand Relational Instability" on page 39*.) Remember, we cannot always fix things; loss is a normal part of life. 　• Help the individual to figure out what they need to feel like they have some closure (e.g., write a letter, create a video, let a balloon go, etc.) ► Work with the individual to understand the need(s) that the non-engaging natural support met. Explore other supports who might potentially meet that need.

Challenges	Suggestions
Working with natural supports feels overwhelming or out of scope	*This approach adds scope and complexity to the work of professionals, and it can feel as if you are taking on a whole new set of clients. This can be really challenging, especially when the current systems and structures have not yet changed to accommodate this approach (e.g., lower caseloads).* ► Remember that you do not have to do all of this on your own. Draw on support from your teams and other professionals within and beyond your own agency to help with this work.

14.4 Additional Resources

A list of additional tools and resources, as well as the first two versions of the Framework, can be found at *www.connectionsfirst.ca*. This website includes topics such as

- ► A guide to building naturally supportive communities
- ► Common language
- ► Social snacking toolkit
- ► Navigating your natural supports journey
- ► Articles and Books
- ► Additional quick links

15.0 Conclusion

While the importance of natural supports is largely recognized across the social services field, many organizational and system-level structures that influence our work are not yet aligned with this approach (e.g., policies, procedures, caseloads, funding and reporting mechanisms, etc.). For this reason, we need to continue to collectively advocate for this approach and support one another in its implementation.

As we practice, we will encounter challenges with this Framework; however, the impact of social isolation further exacerbates people's physical, cognitive, and psychological health issues. Strengthening people's support networks is critical for healthy development, positive well-being, and thriving communities.

Appendix A: Notes on Accreditation and Ethics

The Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) and two accreditation bodies (CAC and CARF) suggest that practitioners and agencies may need to pay special attention to the following four areas when applying the Framework to their work:

Protecting Privacy and Consent

- ► Ensuring that the professional has permission to contact the natural support(s)
- ► Ensuring that the professional has consent to share information with the natural support(s)
- ► Ensuring that information shared by the natural support is protected and confidential and not shared without the consent of the natural support

Professional Relationships (Section 7 of the ACSW Standards of Practice)

- ► When working with clients and their natural supports it may be challenging sometimes to determine who is the primary client and how to best service the needs of multiple people. The ACSW representative consulted during the development of the framework recommended using professional judgement and support from supervisors to decide if the social worker can provide quality support and services to both parties. Social workers should seek additional supports when they feel they are beyond their scope of practice.
- ► Special care should be taken in cases where a professional relationship has ended, and both parties would like to stay in touch as friends. The standards of practice prohibit sexual and/ or financial relationships with a client for 24 months after the professional relationship has ended. Other types of relationships (mentoring, natural support) are not prohibited, but these relationships must be in the best interest of the client rather than serving the needs of the professional. Again, reflective practice and discussion with peers and/or supervisors will enable social workers to make good decisions about forging natural relationships with clients once the professional relationship has been terminated.

Maintaining the Reputation of the Profession

- ► Concerns are often raised about reputational risk when using a harm reduction approach to relationships as part of the Natural Supports Approach. There is nothing specific in the Code of Ethics or Standards of Practice regarding this other than case-by-case decision-making with supervisors and peers, referring to the standards for guidance. (In many cases, a harm reduction approach is likely to keep youth safer in the long run). Practitioners should use the risk mitigation strategies outlined in the Framework (e.g., collaborative decision-making and case conferencing.)

Working with Minors

- ► The issues set out above are especially important to pay attention to when working with minors.

- ► When working with a young person under 18, parent/guardian consent is needed to contact and/or share information with natural supports. In cases where the parent/ guardian does not approve of the natural support, the issue of consent will be complicated.

- ► Harm reduction could cause the parents/guardians to question the appropriateness of the contact being made. If this is made public or handled by the media in an insensitive way, this could create some reputational risk for the agency or practitioner.

Ultimately, regular supervision, case conferencing and good professional judgment are central to protecting professionals and organizations from any kind of disciplinary action by the ACSW or the accrediting bodies

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