

Profile:

Meet Chris Lynch, Youth Worker

Chris has been a youth worker for 17 years. We talked to him about what keeps him interested in this work, how it intersects with the family violence sector and how to apply a gendered lens to youth work.

Tell us about your background

I'm a qualified youth worker with a graduate diploma in counselling and I've studied Gestalt Therapy. I've been working at Maribyrnong City Council for 17 years. When I started there weren't any men doing this sort of work and there still aren't many men in the sector.

The work I do in preventing violence against women is underpinned and defined by the long legacy of work women have done, and continue to do. How men practice in this area and their willingness to work in collaboration with women's organisations can be the difference between success and failure.

What would your typical day look like?

A typical day involves challenging the way people think about gender equality. I challenge male colleagues to think about decisions they make on behalf of women, how they dominate a conversation and encourage them to apply a gender lens to the work they're doing. We wanted to get a better gender balance in a male dominated sporting program so we introduced female soccer tournaments. On International Women's Day we highlighted the gender disparity in televised sports. We asked the young men why the Socceroos are valued so highly when the Matildas are more successful.

What keeps you engaged in this work?

I'm interested in how young men see and understand themselves in relationships with women, how they respect women, how they respect themselves and how they can challenge stereotypes about masculinity that impact on these relationships. I put more focus on young men getting in touch with their feelings of vulnerability, including sadness, grief or even anger but in a positive way. Boys are taught not to cry, not to be vulnerable, but a true intimate relationship is about being able to be real with yourself and your partner.

What's unique about young people's experience of family violence?

We use a strengths-based framework that works with young people to identify what they need and what they can do rather than telling them what we think they need. What's unique to young men's experience of family violence

is the challenge to their idea of masculinity. They can put themselves at risk trying to protect their mother or siblings, so we work to promote their safety. Group work can also provide the opportunity to offer tools to manage emotions, understand equality, and how to break away from stereotypes of what it means to be a male or female.

What's the best way to support young people living with family violence?

We let them know what services are available, what numbers to ring, and how to make a safety plan. But they don't have a lot of choices; unless the perpetrator is removed, it's very difficult for them.

There are online resources, Kids Helpline, or identifying who they can trust within the family: is there an aunt or uncle they feel safe with? Can they spend the night with friends? Do we need to contact the supportive parent? Do we need to contact Child Protection?

For a youth worker, it's also about creating a safe environment for young people. School is a very important place where young people feel safe and belong; you want to connect them strongly to it. We'd ask if there's anyone in the school they feel safe talking to about what's happening at home.

We encourage all staff to attend family violence training. We're really clear on the boundaries of their relationship with young people and understanding who else in the community can support this young person because young people need resources outside of 9 to 5, Monday to Friday.

Are there any gaps in the family violence service system for young people?

Family violence response is under-resourced and there are limited accommodation options for women escaping family violence, and even less for young people, especially young males. What supportive housing options are there specifically for young people? They're already vulnerable, so youth hostels and youth housing are not necessarily the best place for a young person who's experienced family violence. We would alert Child Protection that this person is not in a safe environment, but we recognise their limits. You can raise concerns, but Child Protection is under-resourced too.



What do youth workers need to support their work with victims of violence?

Youth workers have to understand their own unconscious biases and privileges. They need clear boundaries, to understand appropriate referrals and what's available. They need to be committed to ongoing professional development. They also need to access internal and external supervision, especially for debriefing.



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MARIBYRNONG YOUTH SERVICES
 Maribyrnong Youth Services is home to Phoenix Youth Hub, a place for young people aged 12 to 25, who live, work, study or play in the City of Maribyrnong.