

Understanding Our Trio's Wicked Problem:

How might we effectively support early-career social service workers in developing skills needed to work with youth and families and to thrive, grow and be retained in the sector?

Our Starting Point:

Early career social service workers require the rapid development of interpersonal and relational skills to engage effectively with youth and families. In today's non-profit/social service sector environment, supervisors and managers often have limited time or resources for hands-on, in-depth one-on-one coaching, leaving new workers to bridge the gap between theory and practice with less direct guidance and feedback. Generational differences in communication styles, workplace expectations, and approaches to learning can create friction, and, present opportunities in teams. It's crucial that we understand how non-profit organizations can effectively support skill development, enabling us to grow confident and effective practitioners who can deliver high-quality services to youth and families.

Community Partner's Reflection:

I see how much potential we lose when emerging social service workers are not given the support they need to thrive. Relational skills can be developed with the right attitude, but only when we invest intentionally early on. Growth happens at the edges of our comfort, yet without guidance and confidence building, new workers can burn out long before they find their footing. Our sector depends on people both with strong values and the ability to help others navigate difficult realities, yet we cannot always retain the most experienced staff. We need to learn how to bridge the gap between theory and practice and build mentorship structures that work within real constraints so great humans stay in this work to make the impact they are capable of.

Faculty Mentor's Reflection:

This topic resonates with many of the challenges I see across human-service fields: high expectations, limited time for supervision, and the emotional demands of front-line practice. Investigating how organizations can nurture skill development in this environment feels both timely and important. I look forward to mentoring the student fellow through this inquiry and supporting a research process that is thoughtful, grounded, and responsive to sector realities.

Our Journey of Learning: What Does The Research Tell Us?



20 to 40%

of early career social workers in child and family services will leave profession in first three years

Chronic Underfunding

Social services, public and non-profit lack needed support

Global Issue

Burnout and high turnover rates is not unique to Canada, this is a global issue

Precarious Employment

Short term contracts, low wages, limited advancement

Culture of Blame

Failure and struggle are seen as a weakness, success is a sign of strength

Trauma and Human Crisis

Social workers are exposed to secondary trauma, stress, and compassion fatigue

Workload and Work Guilt

This combination leads to burnout



Recovery Paradox

Child and family social workers least likely to engage in recovery activities

Misaligned Missions

Front line workers asked to focus on symptoms instead of root causes

Management Training

Managers may lack training or they are trained in for profit management techniques

Culture of Blame

Failure and struggle are seen as a weakness, success is a sign of strength

Managerialist Approach

Focus on measurable metrics, risk avoidance, administrative functions

