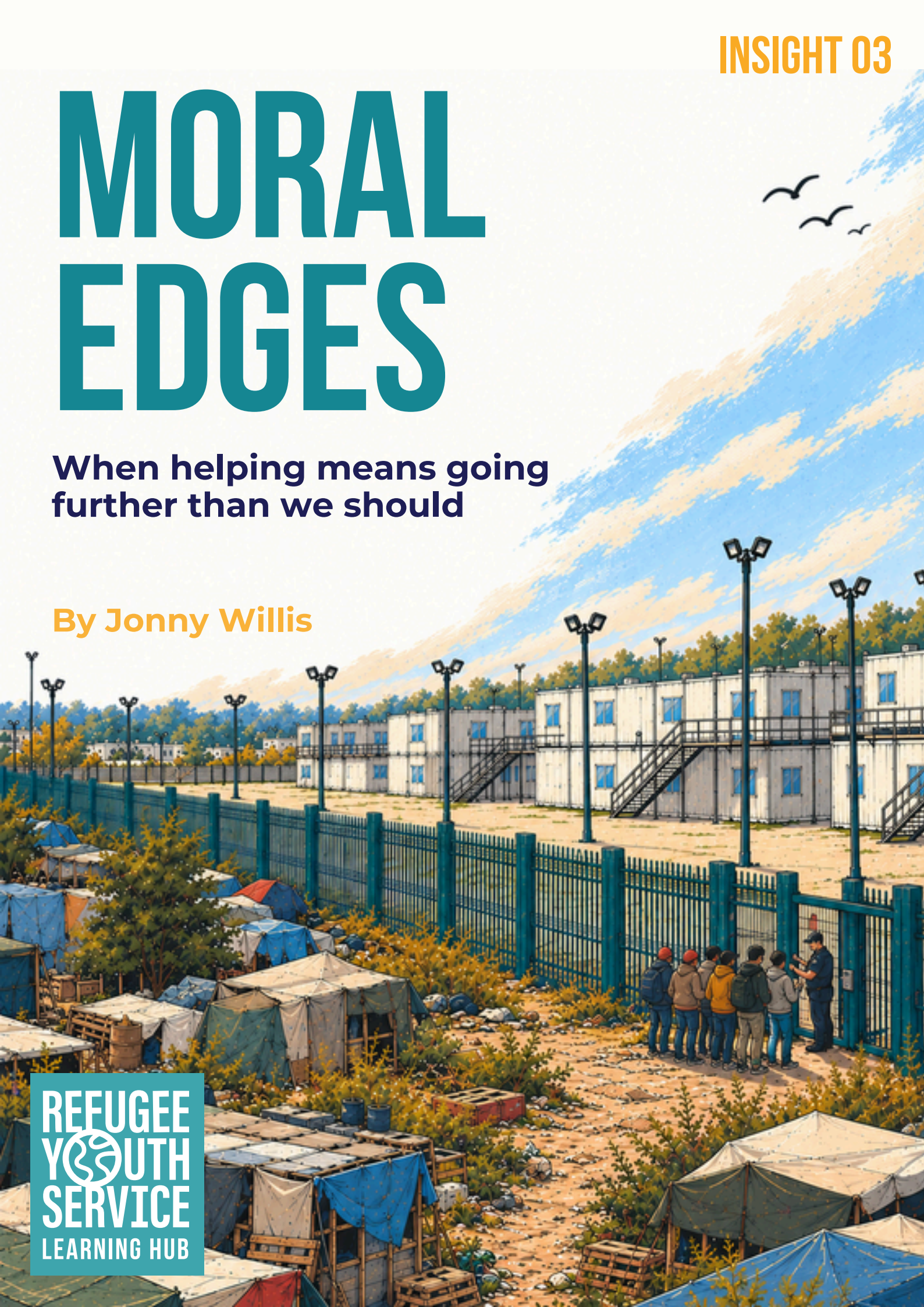
INSIGHT 03

MORAL EDGES

When helping means going further than we should

By Jonny Willis



REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE
LEARNING HUB

PART OF THE LEARNING HUB

This Insight is part of the Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub, which brings together practical tools, guidance and reflections from ten years of working alongside displaced children and young people.

Our Insights draw on experiences from frontline practice. They explore difficult questions, decisions and lessons learned, not to offer definitive answers, but to encourage reflection and discussion.



Explore related resources

TOOL 03

Finding Our Moral Edges

An accompanying practical tool for anticipating difficult situations, examining authority and complicity, and deciding how to respond.

INSIGHT 01

The Pull Towards Suffering

Explore how the desire to respond to suffering can shape our decisions, responsibilities and relationships.

PRACTICE GUIDE 05

Accompaniment Over Rescue

Explore how to support people through difficult situations without taking over their decisions or responsibilities.

IN THIS INSIGHT

People working alongside others in difficult situations are often asked to step into gaps left by failing systems. Sometimes stepping in feels obviously right. Someone needs help, the consequences of doing nothing are serious, and we may be the people best placed to act. But good intentions do not automatically make every action ours to take.

This Insight explores those moments when helping can take us further than we should go. It asks how we recognise the moral edges of our role, what happens when urgency pushes us across them, and how we can remain alongside someone without taking on authority that is not ours.

01 | THE GAP

When systems fail, somebody is often pulled towards filling the space.



02 | THE LINE

Seeing a gap does not mean we should immediately fill that gap.



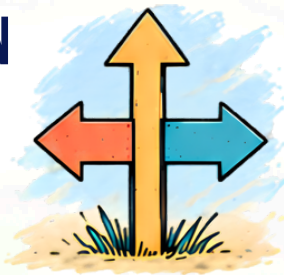
03 | THE PRESSURE

Urgency makes exceptions persuasive.



04 | THE THIRD OPTION

The choice is not always “step in” or “walk away.”



05 | DRAW THE LINE EARLY

Do not wait for the crisis to decide what you will and will not do.



06 | WHEN THE LINE MOVES

What was once beyond the line may become part of our role when the circumstances change.



01 THE GAP

When systems fail, or are absent entirely, somebody is often pulled towards filling the space.



During the final evacuation of the Calais Jungle, unaccompanied children were being moved into a fenced compound beside the camp. Inside were rows of white portacabins. Outside, the Jungle was being cleared around them.

A colleague and I were walking past when we saw a group of children waiting by the entrance. They had only a few belongings with them: a small bag, a folded blanket, a plastic carrier.

The person running the entrance looked at them, then at us.

“I can’t tell which of them are children.”

There was no list, no clear process and no plan that we could see. Because we knew some of the children, he asked us to help.

And I stepped forward.

The system had a responsibility it could not fulfil. We were nearby. We had useful knowledge. And the consequences of doing nothing felt serious.

That combination is powerful. When a system fails, responsibility has a way of travelling towards the people closest to the problem.

In frontline work, gaps like this appear all the time. A service cannot respond. An authority does not act. A decision needs to be made. Something important is simply not happening.

When you are standing closest to that gap, **filling it can feel less like a choice than a necessity.**

That was certainly how it felt to me. If a child might otherwise be excluded, surely it was better for someone who knew them to step in?

But the existence of a gap does not tell us who should fill it.

Sometimes the most important question is not “Can we help?” but “Is this ours to do?”

02 THE LINE

Seeing a gap does not mean we should immediately fill it.

We spoke quietly to people in the line. When we believed someone was not a child, we told them they would not be allowed into the compound.

At the back, one young person insisted that he was younger than he looked. We tried to explain our decision. Eventually, he walked away.

That was the line crossed.

The problem is not simply that we might have been wrong. It was that we had accepted authority that was never ours to hold. And in doing so, we had become complicit in a process we should have been questioning.

We had moved from knowing children, supporting them and advocating for them to making judgements about who was a child and who could enter a state-run facility.

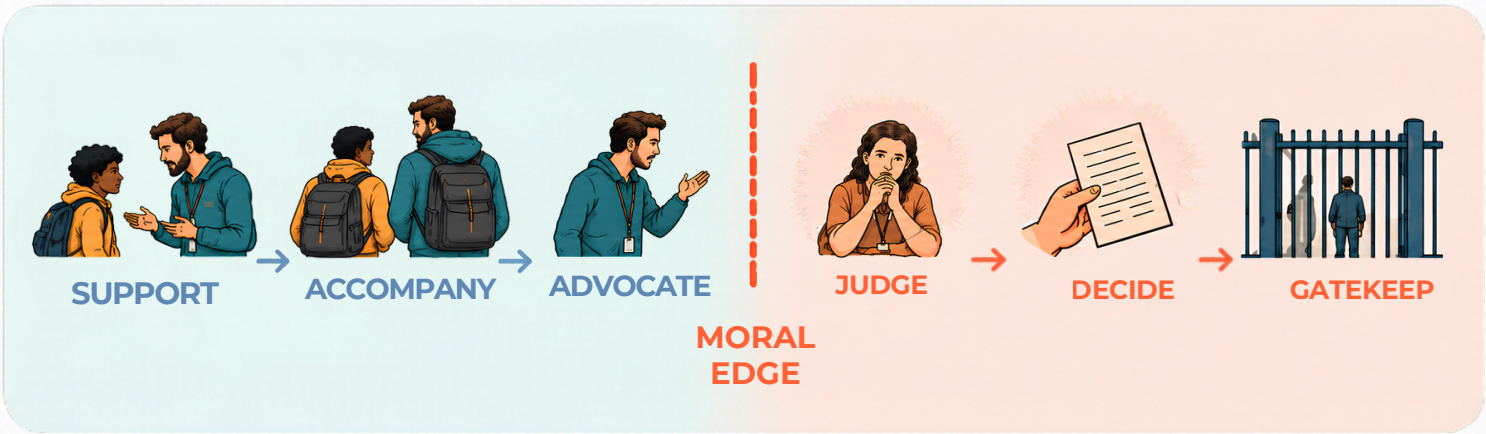
That distinction is what I mean by a moral edge.

Moral edges are not simply professional boundaries designed to protect our time or wellbeing. They help us recognise where the authority of our role ends.

We may know someone well. We may understand a situation better than the people officially responsible. We may believe that stepping in will prevent harm.

But caring about the outcome does not automatically give us the authority to decide it.





03 THE PRESSURE

Pressure can make going further feel necessary.

Moral edges are much easier to see from a distance than they are in the middle of the work.

There can be very good reasons for wanting to go further. A crisis needs an immediate response. Someone you have known for months asks you personally for help. Other people or organisations look to you to take responsibility. And sometimes the pressure comes from us: from guilt, fear of letting someone down, or a strong need to be useful when something is going wrong.

These are real pressures, and holding a line can have real consequences. Sometimes it means watching a problem remain unresolved, disappointing someone who trusts you, or leaving responsibility with others when you have little confidence in their response.

Under those conditions, the question **"Is this ours to do?"** can easily be overtaken by a more immediate one: **"What will happen if we don't?"**

None of these pressures automatically means that stepping in is wrong. There will be situations where going beyond the usual limits of a role is justified. The difficulty is that the same pressures can also make an exceptional response feel so obviously necessary that we stop examining what we are taking responsibility for, and whether it should be ours at all.



URGENCY

There is little time to think, and delaying action may have consequences.



RELATIONSHIP

We know the person and they trust us. Refusing what they are asking for can feel like letting them down.



EXPECTATION

Other people or organisations look to us to act. Refusing responsibility can feel harder than accepting it.



OURSELVES

Our own guilt, sense of responsibility or need to be useful can influence how far we are prepared to go.

04 THE THIRD OPTION

The choice is not always “step in” or “walk away.”

There is often another possibility. We can stay alongside someone without taking over. We can witness what is happening, challenge the people responsible, advocate, document and escalate, while refusing to take on authority that is not ours.



TAKE OVER

We make the decision. We fill the gap.

STAY ALONGSIDE

We remain involved, without taking on a role that is not ours.

STEP AWAY

We withdraw and leave it to others.

Rather than helping to decide who should be allowed inside, I could have asked what criteria were being used, who had responsibility for making the decision, and what should happen when someone’s age was disputed.

I could have challenged the process and used what we knew about individual young people to advocate for them, without accepting responsibility for deciding who should be admitted.

I should have borne witness to what was happening without becoming the mechanism by which it happened.

Years later, RYS was working in the UK with unaccompanied young people who had been treated as adults by the authorities and were challenging decisions about their age. Our role was to help them understand their rights and navigate the systems around them.

There were times when local authorities expected us to act as the go-between between them and a young person, including asking us to tell a young person that the outcome of their age assessment had gone against them.

We knew the young person needed that information. We also knew that refusing to pass it on might mean they remained in limbo for longer. But delivering that decision was not our role.

So we refused to become the messenger. We could continue supporting the young person, advocate for them and press the local authority to communicate its decision properly, but responsibility for delivering that decision remained with the authority that had made it.



WITNESS ADVOCATE CHALLENGE ESCALATE

05 DRAW THE LINE EARLY

Do not wait for the crisis to decide what you will and will not do.



BEFORE THE CRISIS
Discuss, agree, prepare.

→

DURING THE CRISIS
Refer back, question, adapt.

At the gate in Calais, we were making decisions under pressure, without having properly considered what responsibilities we should refuse to take on. We knew what we wanted to achieve, but we had not thought carefully enough about the limits of our role.

Those conversations needed to happen before we reached the gate.

During the same eviction, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) faced its own difficult decision about whether to participate in the operation. It chose not to take an active role, instead remaining present as individuals and observers.

Whether or not we agree with that decision, there was something important about how it was made. MSF had considered its position in advance, rather than leaving individual workers to decide in the middle of an unfolding crisis.

For smaller organisations, that kind of preparation can be harder. Roles evolve, relationships deepen and responsibilities accumulate without anyone formally deciding where the limits should be.

We need to make time, as teams and organisations, to ask what we are prepared to do, what responsibilities are not ours to accept, and how we will respond when refusing a role might leave someone facing immediate harm.

These conversations will not resolve every dilemma. Circumstances change, and sometimes an exceptional response may be justified. **But having considered our moral edges in advance gives us something to return to when the pressure is greatest.**

06 WHEN THE LINE MOVES

Sometimes circumstances justify going further. The danger is when the exception becomes normal.

Moral edges are not always fixed. There may be circumstances in which the risk of doing nothing is so serious that we decide to take on a responsibility we would ordinarily refuse.

That does not necessarily mean abandoning our principles. **Sometimes it means recognising that an exceptional situation calls for an exceptional response.**

But moving a moral edge should be a conscious decision, not something that happens gradually because the pressure to act never goes away.

If we decide that circumstances justify going further, we need to be clear about why, what additional responsibility we are accepting, and how long that arrangement should last. We should also be prepared to explain and review the decision with others.

The danger is not only that we might make the wrong decision in the moment. By repeatedly filling a gap, **we can become complicit in sustaining the very system whose failures we are trying to address.** Temporary arrangements can become permanent without anyone noticing.

We accept a responsibility once because there is no alternative, then again because we did it last time, until eventually it is simply expected of us.

The exception becomes routine. The workaround becomes the system.

This is why moral edges need both conviction and flexibility. We need to know where our lines are, but also be willing to reconsider them when circumstances genuinely demand it, without allowing every difficult situation to redraw them for us.

01 AN EXCEPTION

A government service has no interpreter. With an important deadline approaching, a charity agrees to provide one.



02 AN EXPECTATION

Another meeting is arranged. The government service asks the charity to provide an interpreter again.



03 THE NEW NORMAL

The charity is now routinely providing interpreters, filling a gap that the service is no longer under pressure to address.



THE EXCEPTION BECOMES ROUTINE. THE WORKAROUND BECOMES THE SYSTEM.

WHAT I CARRY FORWARD

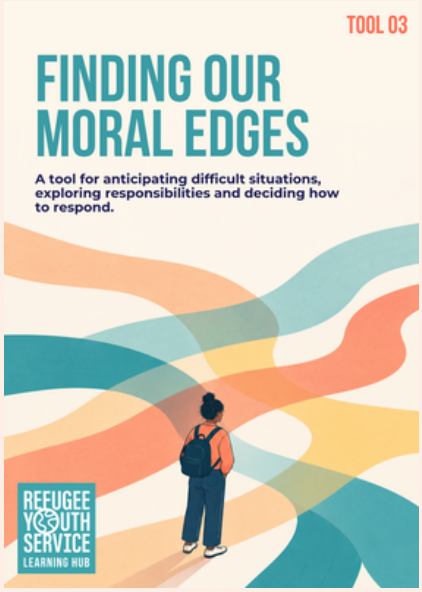
Some decisions stay with us long after the moment has passed.

I still think about that day at the gate in Calais. In particular, I think about the young person who insisted he was younger than he looked, and who eventually walked away. I don't know what happened to him afterwards. I don't know whether we were right about his age. And I cannot remember exactly what I said to him. But I do know that I took part in a decision that was not mine to make.

It remains one of the moments from my time at RYS that I feel least comfortable looking back on. I can understand why we stepped forward. We cared about what happened to those children, and we were trying to prevent harm. But understanding why I made that decision does not mean I can justify it.

That experience has changed how I think about responsibility. These days, I try to consider the difficult situations I might encounter before they arise. I think about what I might be asked to do, where the limits of my role lie, and what my involvement could make me complicit in. Just as importantly, I try to have those conversations with the people around me, so that difficult judgements are not left to individuals in the heat of the moment.

I don't always get it right, and there will always be situations we cannot anticipate. But I have learned that caring deeply about an outcome makes it more important, not less, to question the part we choose to play in it.



COMPANION READING · TOOL 03

Finding Our Moral Edges

A practical tool for individuals and teams to anticipate difficult situations, examine the limits of their responsibilities, and decide how to respond before the pressure arrives.



THANK YOU FOR READING

Continue exploring

This resource forms part of the Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub, which brings together Insights, Practice Guides and Tools developed through ten years of work alongside displaced children and young people.



REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

Published 2026
Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub