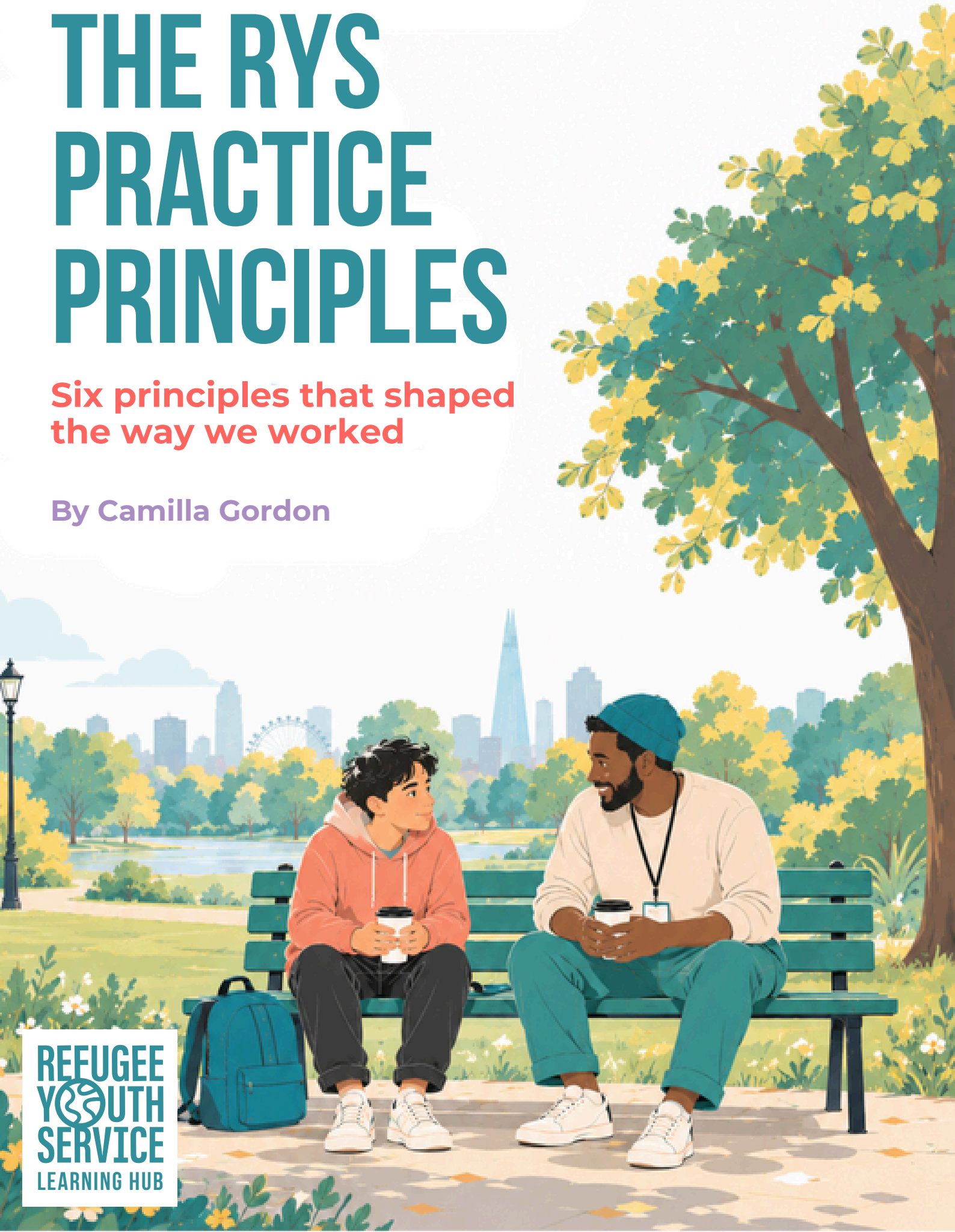
PRACTICE GUIDE 01

THE RYS PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

Six principles that shaped the way we worked

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REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE LEARNING HUB

PART OF THE LEARNING HUB

RYS Practice Guides draw on ten years of frontline work alongside children and young people on the move.

They include contributions from former staff, volunteers and leaders, presented through case studies, first-person accounts, questions for discussion and practical prompts.

They can be read alone or discussed with a team. They are intended to support reflection and discussion, rather than provide fixed answers or concrete solutions.



This Practice Guide can be read alongside these RYS Learning Hub Resources:

INSIGHT 06

Ending Well

Explores how to approach endings with care, honesty and responsibility.



PRACTICE GUIDE 05

Accompaniment Over Rescue

Looks at how we can support people without taking over their decisions or responsibilities.



TOOL 04

The Boundary Check

Supports reflection on personal limits and more sustainable decision-making within caring roles.





IN THIS PRACTICE GUIDE



These six principles emerged from ten years of frontline practice at Refugee Youth Service. They reflect the relationships, decisions and learning that shaped our approach to working alongside children and young people on the move. They offer guidance rather than fixed answers, particularly when navigating difficult or complex situations.

1 Start with the child, not the problem

See the whole child, respecting their rights, dignity and agency beyond the immediate crisis.



2 A safe space doesn't need four walls

Build safety through consistent, honest and caring relationships, even in unsafe environments.



3 Relationship before intervention

Listen and build trust before rushing to solve problems, while maintaining professional boundaries.



4 Accompaniment over rescue

Work alongside children, building their confidence, agency and independence rather than taking over.



5 Question ourselves, especially when it is uncomfortable

Make reflection, accountability and difficult conversations part of everyday practice, especially around safeguarding.



6 The way we end is part of the way we work

Approach endings with care, helping children build lasting connections beyond our involvement.



THE THINGS WE KEPT COMING BACK TO

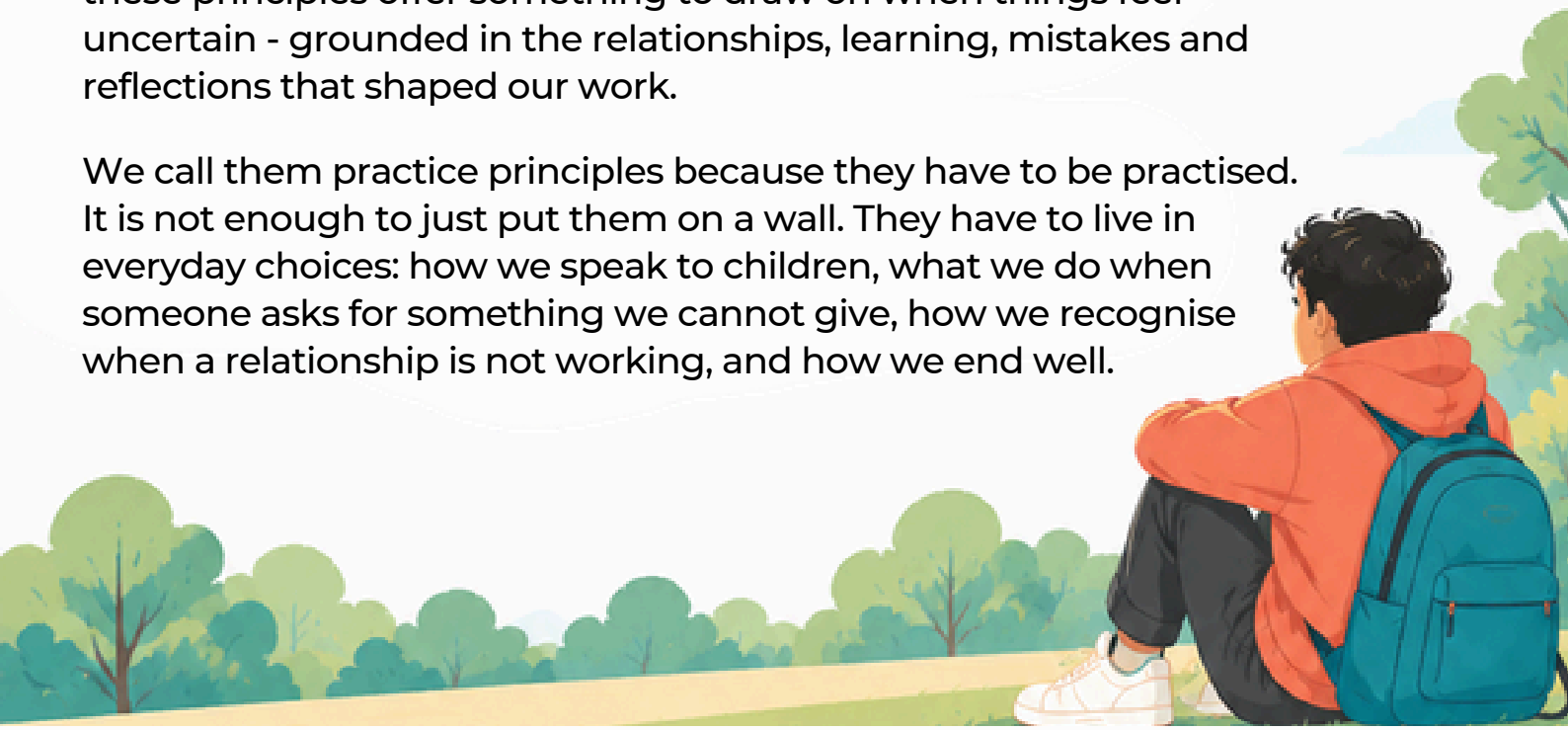
Over ten years, Refugee Youth Service worked alongside children and young people on the move, across different countries, settings and circumstances. Along the way, we developed ways of working that helped us navigate the difficult questions and decisions that came with this work.

There were plenty of moments when there was no neat answer to the problems we were trying to address. We might be in France, Greece or the UK, thinking about safeguarding, meeting a child for the first time, deciding how much to step in, or making a difficult organisational decision. The context kept changing, but there were a handful of things we always came back to.

Those things became the RYS Practice Principles. They are not a finished diagram or a set of steps that tell you exactly what to do. They describe a way of being and a way of doing, particularly in moments when the obvious answer might not be the right one.

We do not claim to have all the answers, or believe there is only one right way to work with children and young people on the move. But these principles offer something to draw on when things feel uncertain - grounded in the relationships, learning, mistakes and reflections that shaped our work.

We call them practice principles because they have to be practised. It is not enough to just put them on a wall. They have to live in everyday choices: how we speak to children, what we do when someone asks for something we cannot give, how we recognise when a relationship is not working, and how we end well.



01 START WITH THE CHILD, NOT THE PROBLEM



Every child and young person we meet is more than the situation they are in. They have their own story, personality, relationships, hopes and worries. Understanding and respecting all of these things is where we start.

We are clear about the word children. We do not use it to make people sound small or helpless. We use it because, if someone is under 18, they are a child and they have rights. It can be easy to forget that when a child looks older or has had to deal with things that no child should have to deal with. None of that makes them less entitled to protection and care.

Seeing the whole child means considering:



Their hopes and dreams



Their fears and worries



Their culture and identity



Their family and important relationships



Their choices and agency



Their many and sometimes contradictory sides

That is the starting point: see the whole child, not just the immediate crisis or the version of them that makes most sense to a service. A child who needs a jacket may want to choose their own jacket. A child who needs a snack may have allergies, a health condition or a favourite food. It is not enough to turn up with a packet of quinoa and feel like we have done the job. The everyday details are part of dignity.

A child may be physically on their own while still deeply connected to people who love them, or worried about people they cannot find. Their world is bigger than the place where we meet them. If we reduce them to the immediate moment, we start making choices for the wrong reasons.

It also means allowing children to be complicated. They make choices and experience consequences. They can be funny, difficult, guarded, generous, capable and scared, often all at once. If a child's behaviour is hard for us, the question is not simply, “How do we make them stop?” It is also, **“What is making this hard for me?”** and **“In what context might this behaviour make sense?”** The point is to recognise their agency while remembering that they are still children.

02 A SAFE SPACE DOESN'T NEED FOUR WALLS

Sometimes it has wheels

At RYS, we learnt that creating safety was not always about having the right physical space. Sometimes we had a youth centre or a room of our own. Often we did not. We could not always change the conditions a child was living in. We could not make a camp, a hotel, a van or a piece of tarpaulin in Calais safe by pretending that the wider situation was okay. But we could think about what it meant to bring safety into the spaces that existed.

Sometimes that was simply showing up. Volunteers came back and sat with children where they were having tea in the morning: calm, predictable, honest and kind. It did not make the circumstances safe, but it could offer something important: a relationship in which a child felt safe enough to breathe, talk, ask a question or just be.

Creating safety also means being honest about what we can and cannot do. It can be tempting to say everything will be okay, especially when a child is frightened and we want to reassure them. But a promise we cannot keep creates another adult relationship that has failed to deliver. Children deserve the truth in a way they can understand. Safety is warmth, but it is also clarity.



03 RELATIONSHIP BEFORE INTERVENTION

When someone is facing difficulties, it can be tempting to focus immediately on what needs to be done. But we learnt that you often cannot properly understand a problem without first understanding the person experiencing it. Relationship before intervention means slowing down enough to ask, listen and notice. It does not mean delaying support when it is needed, but taking the time to understand what is happening for someone before deciding how best to respond.



Built in ordinary ways

Often, a relationship is built in ordinary ways. You notice that someone who usually talks has gone quiet, stopped coming or seems less settled than usual. People will not always tell us directly when something is wrong. They may not have the language, the trust or the sense that anyone will listen. Knowing them, even a little, makes it more likely that we will notice these changes and check in.



Professional, not personal

But relationship does not mean becoming someone's friend, parent or sibling. We are there in a professional capacity. In our work with children, we needed to be the adults so that children could be children. That is not distant or cold. It is what gives the relationship its steadiness. It means the person we are supporting does not have to look after our feelings, worry about being our favourite or feel responsible for keeping us close.



You don’t need to know their whole story

It is also easy to assume that building a relationship means needing to understand someone's story. But we don’t need to know everything someone has been through. People should be able to build trust at their own pace, without feeling pressured to share personal or difficult experiences. Sometimes, the most important thing we can do is simply be present, listen and allow the relationship to develop naturally.

04 ACCOMPANIMENT OVER RESCUE

When we care about someone we are supporting, it can be tempting to want to make everything better for them and, as a result, take over. Sometimes we do need to advocate or step in. But there is an important difference between standing alongside someone and becoming the person who does everything for them.

A simple example: the dentist

A child needing to see the dentist is a useful example from our work. It shows the difference between taking over and accompanying someone in a way that builds their confidence and experience.



We could complete a child's forms, sign them up, book the appointment and take them there. That might be quicker, but it does not necessarily help them build confidence or experience of doing it themselves.



Accompaniment might look like explaining the forms to them, helping them complete them, and helping them work out how to get to their appointment. We are there. We are helping. But they are still doing the thing.

Whose needs are we meeting?

Rescue can make us feel good. It can make us feel useful, needed or like we have made a difference. But if our actions are driven by our own need to feel that way, we risk losing sight of the person we are supporting. The more we do for someone, the less space there may be for them to do for themselves. We have to keep asking whether we are building agency or quietly taking it away.

Knowing our limits

Accompaniment also means being honest about what we cannot do. We cannot fix everything or remove every difficulty through care alone. But we can tell the truth, offer options, help someone understand what is happening and support them to work out what they want to do next. That is not less caring than rescue. It is often the more respectful thing.

05 QUESTION OURSELVES, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT IS UNCOMFORTABLE

Questioning our own practice

Good intentions do not always lead to good decisions. Even when we care deeply about the people we support, we can be influenced by our own emotions, assumptions, relationships and interests. At RYS, we believed it was important to keep questioning not only what we were doing, but why we were doing it, and whose interests our decisions were really serving.

Reflective supervision and group casework supervision gave us space to examine our decisions, motivations and emotions. They helped us notice when our actions were driven by good practice, and when they might be shaped by our own needs or assumptions.

Our external casework supervisor would sometimes ask:

> **“Who are you doing that for, them or you?**



It was a simple question, but a powerful reminder that good intentions can sometimes serve our own needs.

This required us to challenge one another and accept challenge without becoming defensive. The aim was not to find fault, but to learn, stay accountable and make better decisions for the children and young people we supported.

Safeguarding and Accountability

Questioning ourselves is particularly important when it comes to safeguarding. Some situations require difficult judgements about risk and a child's wishes. Others involve clear boundaries that must not be crossed.

No one should be above scrutiny, and everyone should know how to raise concerns, including about those in positions of authority.



Questioning our organisation

Questioning ourselves wasn't just about individual practice. We also needed to regularly examine whether our organisation was doing the right things, for the right reasons. At every board meeting, one of our trustees would ask the same question:



> **Can we still justify our existence?**

This wasn't a challenge for the sake of it. It was a deliberate way of keeping us accountable to our purpose. Were we still needed? Were we making a meaningful difference? And were we still the right people and organisation to be doing this work?

Looking at power and influence

We also needed to question whose interests shaped our decisions. Were we prioritising the people we supported, or being influenced by funders, partners or those in positions of power? This was particularly important when making difficult decisions, such as whether to continue a project, change the way we worked, or say no to funding that didn't align with our values.

Without this scrutiny, small compromises can become normal, and our priorities can gradually shift. Questioning ourselves helps us recognise this drift before it becomes part of how we operate.

Being prepared to act

Asking difficult questions only matters if we are willing to respond to the answers. At RYS, this meant being prepared to change programmes, challenge established practices or reconsider our role when we felt these were no longer serving the children and young people we supported.

This kind of accountability requires more than reflection. It means accepting that decisions we once believed were right may no longer be appropriate, and having the humility to change course, even when doing so is uncomfortable or comes at a cost to the organisation.



06 THE WAY WE END IS PART OF THE WAY WE WORK



How we end a relationship, a service or even an organisation matters just as much as how we begin. Endings can be difficult, particularly when we have built strong relationships with the people we support. But our responsibility to them does not disappear when our involvement comes to an end.

Thinking about endings from the beginning



From the outset, we need to recognise that we should not become the only source of support in someone's life. At RYS, we might help a young person get a sleeping bag, but we also wanted them to know where they could get one the next time they needed it.

This meant building connections with other people, services and organisations, rather than making ourselves the only route through. The aim was to leave young people with more support around them, not more dependent on us.

Ending relationships with care



When a young person could no longer be supported by us, we tried to make the ending clear and honest. That meant explaining what was happening, making introductions or referrals where possible, and giving the relationship a proper ending.

It can be tempting to keep a relationship going because saying goodbye feels difficult. But allowing things to slowly become uncertain can be more harmful than acknowledging that our involvement is ending.

Taking responsibility for what comes next



We learned this lesson at an organisational level too. When we recognised that a British organisation was no longer the best structure for our work in northern France, we could have simply walked away. Instead, we spent two years searching for a French organisation that could take the work forward responsibly.

It was not an easy process, and at times it felt like it was never going to happen. But we believed that a commitment to children also meant taking responsibility for what happened when it was no longer right for us to be there.

THANK YOU FOR READING

Continue exploring

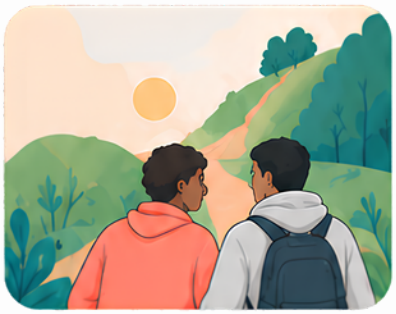
This resource forms part of the Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub, which brings together Insights, Practice Guides and Tools developed through ten years of work alongside displaced children and young people.

The RYS Practice Principles are explored in greater depth across the Learning Hub. Two resources in particular build on the ideas introduced here:



Insight 06: Ending Well

Reflections on endings, transitions and our responsibilities when relationships or services come to an end.



Practice Guide 05: Accompaniment over Rescue

Practical guidance on supporting people without taking over, and recognising the importance of agency and power.

REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

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