NATIONAL CHILDREN'S BUREAU

COMMUNITY FUND

Building Resilience in Young People

Insights from the NCB LINKS Programme

Delivered as part of The National Lottery Community Fund's Empowering Young People's Programme in Northern Ireland

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UNITED FOR A BETTER CHILDHOOD

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About Empowering Young People

The Empowering Young People's Programme from The National Lottery Community Fund's (NLCF) Northern Ireland directorate was launched in March 2015 and is making £44.4 million available to fund activities in communities until 2027.

The aim of the EYP programme is to support projects that give young people in Northern Ireland aged 8-25 years the ability to cope with challenges in their lives.

This programme is all about putting young people in the lead. Projects need to involve young people in the planning and delivery, as well as their support networks and the communities which will help them to develop skills to cope with challenges in their lives.

The outcomes that are expected from supported projects include the following:

- More young people are ready for education, work and training
- Young people have better relationships with their support networks and communities
- Young people have improved health and wellbeing.

About the LINKS Support Network

The LINKS Support Network is facilitated by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and is delivered to all of the 70 organisations grant aided by the NLCF under the Empowering Young People's (EYP) Programme.

The support provided by LINKS is delivered in a number of ways: workshops, on a variety of themes based on the issues facing young people (e.g. mental health and wellbeing) and those facing organisations (e.g. sustainability); cluster group meetings, which are informal geographically based meetings and tailored one-to-one support for individual organisations.

The aim of the LINKS programme is to facilitate shared learning, enhance practice and encourage the involvement of young people in all aspects of the projects. NCB also runs a Young Person's Advisory Group (YPAG) for LINKS whose members have an understanding of the challenges young people in Northern Ireland face today. The YPAG provides a 'challenge function' to NCB, ensuring that the programme is relevant, responsive and 'real' in terms of supporting organisations to meet the needs of young people in similar situations.

This insight resource, one of a series from the LINKS Programme, summarises the evidence on what helps to build resilience in young people and highlights the good practice taking place to support young people in organisations within the LINKS family. Given the mix of evidence and practice examples, this resource will be of interest to policymakers and commissioners in drawing upon what is working on the ground in Northern Ireland to support young people, as well as front-line practitioners.

Introduction

Young people's mental health and well-being is a constant topic of discussion in the media. In recent times the impact of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's mental health and the need to help them build resilience has received even greater focus. It is now well recognised that it is not enough to simply treat mental ill-health, more must be done to prevent it in the first place. One thing that is key to preventing mental ill-health is supporting young people to build resilience, particularly those who face adversities or challenges.

In policy terms, mental health received renewed focus in 2020 with the Department of Health's (DoH) Mental Health Action Plan being published (DoH, 2020), which specifically mentions resilience and which complements existing policies and associated action plans, such as the following:

- Protect Life 2 2019-2024, (DoH, 2019)
- The Interdepartmental Action Plan (DoH, 2019) in response to 'Still Waiting' (NICCY, 2018)
- The Children and Young People's Strategy 2029-2029 (Dept of Education (DE), 2019)
- the Infant Mental Health Framework (PHA, 2016)
- The Programme for Government (NI Executive, 2017)
- Priorities for Youth (DE, 2013)
- Making Life Better: a Whole System Strategic Framework for Public Health (Public Health Agency, 2014)

and other developments such as the research undertaken by Dorris et al (2019) which contributed to Informing the Development of an Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland for the Dept of Education and Public Health Agency (ongoing). In addition, June 2020 saw the appointment of an Interim Mental Health Champion by the Minister for Health. The development of these policies pre date the COVID-19 outbreak but they are even more pertinent now as a result of the containment, it impacts and to ensure a successful recovery phase.

This resource:

- Explores definitions of resilience and messages from the evidence, a selection of LINKS grant holders and young people
- Examines some local case study examples of practice that aim to build resilience with young people
- Highlights key learning points
- Provides a self-assessment tool for organisations to evaluate their current practice in **Appendix 1**
- Includes a reference and a resource list for further exploration into building resilience in **Appendix 2**

What is resilience and how is it built?

This section of the insight report provides some definitions of resilience as well as outlining nine practical ways to build resilience with young people that have been identified in the evidence from recently published literature, from our knowledge working with LINKS grant holders and from our direct work with young people.

What is Resilience?

Resilience has been defined in several ways. The word itself comes from the Latin, *resilire*, meaning to leap back. Sipler and Reynolds (2017) echo this as they claim that rresilience means being able *'to "bounce back" from tough times'*, by having internal and external strengths to cope with difficulties. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015), based at Harvard University defines resilience as '*a positive, adaptive response in the face of significant adversity'*. Masten (2001) maintains that resilience is *'the…capacity to face, overcome and ultimately be strengthened… by life's adversities and challenges* (cited in McArdle & Ward, 2015).

Resilience is widely regarded as a key component of mental health and well-being (see for example the DE, 2019; Allen, 2014). The Protect Life 2 strategy recognises resilience as an important protective factor in preventing suicide and self-harm (DoH, 2019) while the importance of promoting resilience of infants and very young children through enhancing parenting skills has been noted in the Infant Mental Health

Framework for Northern Ireland (PHA, 2016). Building resilience has also been associated with reducing risk-taking behaviour in adolescence (SEHSCT, undated).

Several commentators have mentioned that building resilience is a dynamic process involving building strengths and skills within a person *and* getting support from the external environment: For example, Masten (2001) maintains that resilience is *'a complex relationship of psychological inner strengths and environmental supports throughout a person's life'* (cited in McArdle & Ward, 2015). The Dept of Health (2019) echoes this as it notes that resilience is *'the result of a complex interplay of numerous factors'* both individual and environmental. Similarly the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015) argue that resilience results from a dynamic interaction between internal pre-dispositions and external experiences: *'…it is the* ***interaction*** *between biology and the environment that build capacities to cope with adversity and overcome threats to healthy development'* (2015). It is this interaction, therefore, that builds resilience and helps to turn toxic stress into tolerable stress – simply developing individual characteristics **or** changing social environments alone will not be enough to do so, both are needed.

These ideas are echoed by others such as Worsley (undated) for whom resilience is *'an individual or group's process of continual development of personal competence while negotiating resources in the face of adversity.'* Millar-Karas (2015) maintains that resilience is *'the ability to identify and use individual and collective strengths to live fully in the present moment and to thrive while managing the tasks of daily living'*. Allen (2014) points out that while resilience interacts with characteristics of individuals, such characteristics are not predispositions. Allan refers to the *'social determinants of resilience'* being the experiences, opportunities and relationships that interact with the individual which shape resilience. The PHA (2016) argues that resilience can , with the right support, , be developed and this is supported by the Departments of Education and Health in Northern Ireland (DE, 2019; DoH, 2019;)

The literature recognises that everyday life has its ups and downs, disappointments, setbacks, difficulties and even traumatic events and that no-one is totally immune to any of these no matter their circumstances. While such events may be unavoidable, it is the manner in which people respond to them that can mean the difference between being resilient or not.

Experts have noted that there are some key facts that are often misunderstood when discussing resilience and how to build it. Firstly, resilience requires relationships, not individualism. Secondly, the capabilities that underlie resilience can be strengthened at any age. Resilience is not innate – no one is born being totally resilient and nor is it a resource that can be totally used up. Resilience can be built at any time or stage in life. Thirdly, resilience in the face of some hardships does not guarantee resilience in

the face of all issues, i.e. it can be situation specific (The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

Building Resilience in Young People

A number of factors that help build resilience with children and young people have been identified in the literature, in our work with LINKS members and through direct work with young people themselves. These are summarised as follows:

1. **At least one stable and committed relationship**[1]
   Children and young people need to have at least one adult with whom they can have a stable and committed relationship. While many young people find this within their own families, others do not. Other adults, in addition to parents and family members, have a crucial role to play here[2]. These can be neighbours, youth workers, social workers, teachers, sports or creative activity coaches[3].

   The young people mentioned several ways that adults can provide that stable and committed relationship by being '*someone young people can approach*'. They advocated for adults to *'make solid connections with young people, put the time in to get to know them*' emphasising that '*trust is important'*. They wanted adult to *'talk **with** young people, not **to** them*' and to '*reassure them that they're not alone'*.

   Being that committed adult in a young person's life does not necessarily require training. What it does require however, is an understanding that, as the committed adult, you are like a human 'safety net' ready to catch a young person if they fall as they navigate the challenges of life. Young people need to know that you will be there for them come what may.

2. **Meet basic needs**
   Unless and until basic needs are met (e.g. safety, security, food, shelter, education etc) it will not be possible to build young people's resilience skills. Basic needs provide a 'foundation' from which other skills, capacities and

[1] The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015)
[2] Allen (2014)
[3] Szalavitz, M and Perry, B (2010)

knowledge can be built. For example, a young person who is homeless or who lives in a home where domestic abuse occurs is unlikely to feel safe and secure, so their ability to then develop resilience skills is more likely to be compromised. Adults can create physically and emotionally safe environments for young people, provide food, assist with helping young people find accommodation, education and training places[4].

We know from our work with grant holders that many of them invest a lot of time and effort ensuring they meet basic needs, spending time creating safe physical and emotional spaces for the young people they work with, providing food to ensure young people are well nourished and other basic necessities (e.g. toiletries, clothing and in some cases, washing facilities). When we run YPAG meetings, we are careful that the choice of venue is a safe space for the young people, we provide food as we do not assume they will have eaten beforehand and travel expenses are also paid, so that the young people are not out of pocket as they volunteer their time with NCB.

Sometimes, it can be easy to overlook basic needs and take for granted that these are being met elsewhere. In working with young people, there is a need to pause and reflect on how we ensure safety and stability, so that basic needs are met before attempting to build resilience skills.

3. Develop physical health

The link between physical health and mental well-being has been well documented. In order to develop young people's resilience, therefore, there is a need to also focus on their physical health through encouraging and facilitating physical exercise[5],[6]. This is not just through sport, but also through creative activities such as dance[7] and holistic activities such as yoga, ensuring that snacks are healthy and that accurate information about physical health is provided in an age and ability appropriate way to young people[8],[9].

[4] McArdle & Ward (2015)
[5] Lubins et al (2012, cited in Alcock, 2018)
[6] Allen (2014)
[7] Doubney & Doubney (2017) & Thompson & Tawell (2017 both, cited in Alcock, 2018)
[8] Allen (2014)
[9] McArdle & Ward (2015)

Several of our grant holders engage in the development of life skills to support physical health, such as teaching young people how to plan and cook healthy meals on a budget, outdoor activities, exercise and mindfulness exercises.

The young people also mentioned that they could be helped to *'improve their lifestyle through better diet, nutrition and exercise'* to improve their physical health and well-being.

Adults have a key role to play in the development of young people's physical health, not only in the provision of healthy food or opportunities for exercise but also in terms of being positive role models for young people. Lifestyle choices that promote good physical health are observed by young people, so there is a good opportunity for adults to demonstrate how to be physically healthy as well as informing young people how to be so.

4. **Help young people build self-efficacy (mastery)[10].**
   Building self-efficacy is different to helping build self-esteem. Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves and our worth whereas self-efficacy (or mastery) is a person's belief in their own ability to overcome challenges and achieve goals. Self-efficacy can be built with young people through a range of suitably challenging activities/tasks[11]. Achieving small goals can prove to young people that they can tackle issues or problems and therefore give them the belief that they can then overcome larger issues or react positively to bigger challenges. Of course, this might mean they need training or support to do so, but that is also part of building self-efficacy. For example, a young person knows how to use the public transport system because s/he has been supported to read timetables, know where the bus stops or train stations are, how much it will cost and what kind of ticket is best value. They know they are more mobile and independent because they have practiced using the transport system.

   Focusing on strengths and positives can help young people to feel more confident and develop the self-efficacy that they need to then start addressing areas of their lives that are weaker, more challenging or negative[12].

[10] The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015)
[11] Clarke et al (2015, cited in Alcock, 2018)
[12] Russell, C (2016)

Young people need to know that they are doing well, working hard or making a great effort. They will only know this if it is acknowledged by others, not in a patronising, superficial way, but through genuine, positive interactions.

Sometimes young people might need to be reminded of their strengths, that they do know how to do certain things and that they can meet challenges. Taking the learning from one situation, highlighting to the young person what they have learnt from it and then using that to help build self-efficacy in another area is common among the LINKS grant holders.

5. **Help develop strong executive function (e.g. skills for planning, organisation) and self-regulation skills (manage emotions, behaviour)[13],[14]**
Stress is part of everyday life. Not all stress is bad and indeed without some stress nothing would get done! However, stress that threatens to overwhelm us is not good and we all need to be able to adapt to stressful situations in order to cope. Young people are just the same. They need to be helped to recognise and evaluate what kind of stress they are facing (e.g. the loss of a mobile phone is not life threatening, it is an inconvenience; failing an exam is disappointing and frustrating, but it can be taken again) and then assisted in managing how they respond to this stress and why they respond in this way. Over time young people can learn that while a situation may be stressful, such stress can be managed. Key to the management of stress is the development of executive function and self-regulation skills[15].

Young people who have well developed executive function skills are more likely to be able to pre-empt challenges, to make contingency plans, reduce unnecessary risk and avoid chaos being the 'norm'.

The development of self-regulation skills with young people will help them manage their own behaviour and understand their emotions which in turn can help them not to be overwhelmed by such emotion when faced with adversities.

The young people mentioned different ways that adults can help them develop self-regulation skills and to gain some perspective such as to *'focus on the here and now'* and help young people to *'compartmentalise things, i.e.*

[13] The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015);
[14] PHA (2016)
[15] South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust (undated)

what to worry about now, what to worry about later.' They also mentioned helping young people to develop skills to enhance their coping skills such as learning *'mindfulness tips on how to deal with situations like stress'*; using a challenge *'as a learning experience'* and helping them to *'find alternative ways to express emotions.'*

6. Build optimism and hope[16]

For some young people being optimistic and hopeful can be very difficult. They may have experienced significant trauma or adversity. However, building optimism and hope is absolutely necessary in order to build resilience. Being optimistic can help the young person to see that, while the past cannot be undone, it does not have to mean that it completely defines the future. There can be a better way, a more positive situation and a more hopeful one. Adults can help build optimism and hope with young people[17] by focusing on the positives of a situation with young people (e.g. noticing when things go well and acknowledging this), helping young people to learn from experiences/happenings, highlighting the achievements of the young person in a previous situation.

One way to build optimism and hope identified by the young people was for adults to be *'encouraging'*, to help put things in perspective and to enable young people to build on their experiences, to become more optimistic. They also felt that it would be good for adults *'to understand what ACEs'*[18] (Adverse Childhood Experiences) are and their impact on young people as well as knowing about *'trauma informed practice'*[19] as one way to build optimism and hope.

7. Help young people to build social connections with peers and community

Human beings are social creatures. We all need to have ongoing connections and face to face communication with others. This need is intensified in adolescence, therefore young people need to connect with their peers even more than adults[20]. Social connections to the wider community are also necessary for young people so that they can seek support from others in the community *and* also find their

[16] Sipler & Reynolds (2017)
[17] McArdle & Ward (2015)
[18] https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/
[19] https://bit.ly/38nfM0A
[20] Allen (2014)

place and role in that community, which in turn will help build a sense of belonging[21],[22].[23]

Some commentators advocate that young people should be supported to participate in faith or cultural traditions as part of building that sense of belonging[24]. Young people who have their roots in affirming faith or cultural traditions tend to be more likely to respond positively when they face adversity[25]. In any society there are numerous faith or cultural traditions that young people may be part of. Adults supporting these young people do not necessarily need to be part of these traditions themselves, but should facilitate young people's involvement in them if the young person so desires, in order to build that sense of belonging.

The young people felt that adults were in a good position to help young people make more community connections as adults would know of other organisations or projects that would help meet the need to *'make connections and reduce isolation'*. They believed that through LINKS that there was great potential for organisations to *'draw on work of other grant holders, to share skills and experiences'*. It was not necessarily the case that one organisation had to meet all of the needs of young people, but through collaboration more needs could be addressed if connections to other groups with similar experiences were made.

The young people felt that the grant holders' connections would also be able to help young people access professional help if and when necessary. They stated that at times young people might need mental health professionals or treatment such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

Research has indicated that parents with good social connections within a community are able to ensure that their children also benefit from such connections[26]. It could be expected, then that other adults with good social connections within communities can also help young people develop more community connections, thereby helping to create a sense of belonging in those communities.

8. Develop a sense of purpose

We all need to have a sense of purpose, something that 'makes us get up in the morning'. Sometimes young people do not have a sense of purpose. They may

[21] Russell, C (2016)
[22] Harkins et al (2016, cited in Alcock, (2018)
[23] South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust (undated)
[24] McPherson et al, 2014, cited in The Sax Institute (2019)
[25]The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015)
[26]McPherson et al, 2014, cited in The Sax Institute (2019)

tend to think in the short term only and want immediate gratification or 'quick wins' for all areas of their lives. Seeing the long term and the necessity to put effort in now to reap benefits in several years to come can be hard to grasp. Everyday effort therefore needs to be encouraged and nurtured as small steps to something bigger. In other words, young people need to feel fulfilled in small ways so that they can see their purpose, their significance. This is not to say that a sense of purpose is only to focus on the individual him or herself. The sense of purpose needs to go beyond the individual to others so that the young person can see how they can make a difference to others as well as themselves, e.g. through volunteering or part-time work.[27],[28] Young people need to know that they are needed.

9. Support parents/carers in developing their own skills and resilience[29]

Sometimes parents/carers are not very resilient themselves and so their capacity to help build their child's resilience is diminished. Adults working with young people, therefore, need to ensure that assumptions about parents' or carers' abilities are not made. Often the LINKS organisations which work with young people also find that it is really valuable to also work with parents/carers. Helping parents/carers to build their resilience through all of the ways mentioned above can also then create a 'positive ripple' effect so that they in turn can empower their children in these ways too[30].

Doing such work with parents/carers can help ensure that young people have more than one committed adult they can turn to, they have more than one 'safety net' in their lives, thereby increasing the chances of building resilience.

Having established these nine key factors in building resilience, NCB has developed a self-assessment tool to support organisations further enhance work in this area. The tool is intended to encourage organisations to reflect on current practice across the nine key factors, to assess where their practice is currently, how it can be further developed and to identify what, if any, assistance might be needed for further development. The tool is contained in Appendix 1

[27] Allen (2014)
[28] South-Eastern Health & Social Care Trust (undated)
[29] Dorris et al, 2019
[30] Allen (2014)

Case Studies: Examples of Practice from LINKS

Several different approaches to resilience-building work are being used by the LINKS organisations. Each organisation shares the overarching aim of enabling young people to overcome the challenges that they face. Examples of some of these are outlined below.

The Resilience Doughnut

used by the Access for Success Project at Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD)

Project Overview:

Leonard Cheshire Disability supports individuals to live, learn and work as independently as they choose, whatever their ability.

Access for Success aims to support young adults in the west of Northern Ireland (Western Health & Social Care Trust area) aged 18-25 years who experience physical or sensory disability. The aim of the project is to build resilience amongst the project members.

The Resilience Doughnut is a practical, strengths-based model, which originated in Australia, for developing resilience in children, young people and adults. It identifies and combines strengths needed to thrive in a modern world.

The Resilience Doughnut consists of seven areas of life, called factors:
Parent, Skill, Community, Education, Money/ Work, Peer and Family

In this model, young adults answer a survey which identifies the three strongest factors. These three factors provide the starting point for action – the model automatically builds on the positive, so as to build confidence with the young people. Based on the findings of the survey young people are then offered a 12 week group programme of workshops and activities on the three strongest areas, which they agree with the project staff. Some of this is done as part of a group, but individual work plans are also an element of the programme.

All workshops are based around improving positive mental health, building new relationships, encouraging young people to develop new skills and helping them to access their community facilities and networks. Examples of topics covered in the workshops include cyber safety, laughter yoga, money management, developing positive coping techniques and Mood Matters. Where necessary, external agencies are brought in to deliver specialist topics.

Following participation in the 12 week workshop programme, online surveys are completed by the young people before they embark on their individual pathways. Each member choses their individual pathway based on what they enjoyed, what they want to improve on or what they feel they need further support with. These pathways focus on community connections, volunteering and influencing (i.e. campaigning).

A follow up survey is completed by young people three months after the end of the group programme of activity to ascertain the longer-term impact of the work using the Resilience Doughnut.

Outcomes

To date the survey results indicate very positive outcomes for each young person, with the scores for areas of strengths improving further, while the scores for adversities have reduced. For example the following data demonstrate the outcomes for a group in Derry and Omagh 2018-2019:

An increase in the community factor, indicating ***more involvement*** in the local community. One young person stated: 'taking part in Access for Success has made me realise the importance of being involved in my local community and how this can have a positive effect on my mental wellbeing'

A decrease in the family factor, indicating ***more independence*** from their family. A young person said 'I realise I don't rely on my family as much as I did before'.

An increase in the peer factor, indicating making **more positive choices** in forming and maintaining friendships. One young person stated 'I have realised the understanding of good friendships more – I have a new groups of friends who are better for me'.

An increase in the skill factor, indicating an ***increase in confidence*** and willingness to learning new skills. A young person commented 'I feel a lot more confident in what I am good at now. Before I was not as open to try new things, but now I feel like I can'.

An increase was also recorded for ***personal competence*** indicating that the young people had more ability to make plans and stick to routines and an increase in hope and determination.

An increase was recorded for ***social competence***, indicating improved communication, willingness to initiate activities, flexibility in social matters, being more extravert and having a more cheerful mood.

A decrease in emotional symptoms, indicating ***a reduction*** in symptoms of anxiety and depression.

A decrease in peer problems, indicating an ***improvement*** in making and keeping friends.

To find out more about the Access for Success project contact:

Jackie Kelly: Jackie.Kelly@leonardcheshire.org
Katherine McElroy: Katherine.McElroy@leonardcheshire.org

Or look here:

- https://www.leonardcheshire.org/where-we-work/northern-ireland
- https://www.resiliencedoughnutuk.com/

The Circle of Courage

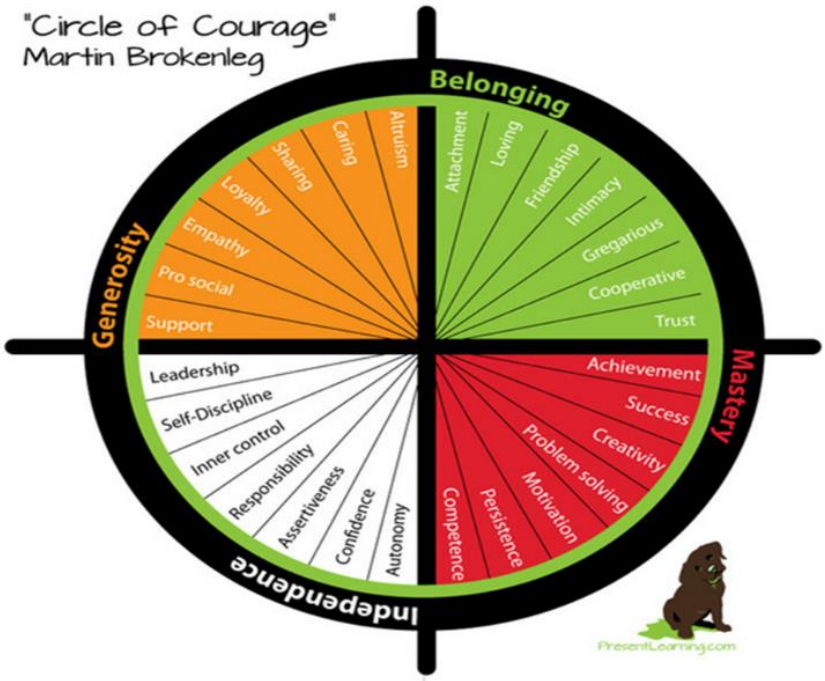
used by the Hidden Communities Project at St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre

Project Overview:

St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre is a voluntary youth centre in the Divis area of Belfast. The organisation uses informal education to enhance the personal and social development of young people in a safe and caring environment.

The Hidden Communities project aims to work with children, young people, parents and local schools to help young people avoid anti-social and criminal activity and self-harming as well as enabling them to develop ways to build personal safety.

The Hidden Communities Project uses the Circle of Courage model in its work with young people and their families (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990). The Circle of Courage model is based on contemporary developmental research, the heritage of early youth pioneers, and Native American philosophies of child care. The Circle of Courage, is a holistic approach consisting of four equally important elements: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity.



Using these four components project staff aim to build the resilience of young people. This is done through a variety of age- and ability-appropriate activities, delivered to groups and individuals such as the following: outdoor education; arts, crafts and drama; exploring issues such as health, wellbeing and behaviour; social action and community participation; community relations work; study visits; residential trips; complimentary therapies; supporting teenagers to gain qualifications and prepare for employment; conflict resolution and mediation work; housing support and harm reduction as well as work with parents to enhance their parenting skills and ability to support their children.

Outcomes:

Belonging: young people have ***an enhanced sense*** of connection and belonging to community, family and positive peer relationships

Independence: young people have ***an improved ability*** to be independent and take responsibility over actions, behaviour and life's pathways

Generosity: young people have ***improved and increased participation*** in actively serving others through service learning and social action, improving civic identity

Mastery: young people have an ***improved sense of achievement*** and accomplishment including social and life skills preparing young people for adult life as proactive members

Affect: young people have an ***improved ability to effect change*** in their own and others' lives including peer, family and community life

Communication: young people have an ***improved ability to communicate needs,*** aspirations and wants effectively with others creating non-confrontational communication channels

For further information about the Hidden Communities Project contact:
Mags Rowan Devenney: mags@stpetersimmaculatayc.org
Conor Largey: conor@stpetersimmaculatayc.org
or see here: https://www.stpetersimmaculatayc.org/

You can read more about the Circle of Courage here:
https://www.academia.edu/7847130/The_Circle_of_Courage_Developing_Resilience_and_Capacity_in_Youth

The Young Shoulders Project at the Cancer Fund for Children

Project Overview:

Cancer Fund for Children (CFC) works with children, young people and their families who have been impacted by cancer to empower, connect and strengthen them so they feel equipped to cope.

The Young Shoulders project is for young people aged 8-17 years who:

- Have a parent diagnosed with cancer and
- Who need some aspect of support in relation to their parent's cancer

Young Shoulders Specialists, who are professionally trained in issues facing young people are assigned to provide support following referrals from hospital, healthcare professionals, parents or self-referrals.

The programme has been designed to tackle issues such as:

- isolation
- uncertainty around their parent's illness
- separation anxiety
- fears for the future
- coping with school and family life and
- the stresses attached to difficult caring roles.

Having a parent diagnosed with cancer can often cause huge levels of emotional distress for children and young people, there are many questions, significant anxiety and many children and young people report feeling alone. Building resilience with young people is part of a total package of support that is offered on both an individual and a group basis. This is done through

- needs-led individual support
- whole family therapeutic work
- health and wellbeing days
- using creative arts and
- experiential learning with young people, often on a residential basis at purpose built accommodation.

Staff at CFC have developed several tools to help build young people's resilience. These include the Positive Planner, the Power Jar and the Letter to your Future Self.

The Positive Planner aims to get the young person to focus on aspects of their life they would like to improve, who they would like to spend more time with and identify anything new they would like to try out in life but have been afraid to try to up that point.

The Power Jar is a jar that has been painted by the young person to tell a story about them. It may contain colours of their favourite team or music notes for their taste in music etc. Then throughout a 4 month closed group the young people have the opportunity to add comments into the other people's jars so when they finish the therapeutic process with CFC they can open the jar at any stage and read some positive affirmations from other young people.

The Hammock Session with the Letter to Your Future Self is based around the young person reflecting on their current situation and developing their thoughts into an action plan for the six months ahead.

Outcomes:

Empower: Young people have improved resilience, reduced anxiety and feel more confident. They are better able to identify and express emotions.

Strengthen: Young people have improved family relationships and a more positive outlook. They have an increased understanding of the impact of cancer on their family.

Connect: Young people feel less isolated and have opportunities to meet others in similar situations. Young people have developed supportive relationships and have an increased knowledge on the support available to them.

Young people have stated:

Thanks to Cancer Fund for Children I met other young people who had been through what I had been through and were out the other end. This provided me with a sense of hope and a belief that I was going to make it.

I didn't talk about my Daddy having cancer, I just didn't even know what to think about it, but now I have met others and talked openly about it and I feel better and lighter now.

For further information about the Young Shoulders Project contact:
Gareth Beattie:
gareth@cancerfundforchildren.com
or see here
https://cancerfundforchildren.com/

Key learning about resilience

This resource presents a range of valuable information to support the understanding of resilience, which can help inform the development of policies and practices that can support resilience-building work with young people. Key learning can be summarised as follows:

Building resilience is essential to mental health and well-being

Building resilience with young people is, as the evidence shows, essential to mental health and well-being and is particularly important in preventing problems in later life. It is something that can be built on throughout a person's life, i.e. it is not just about interventions in the early years.

Building resilience is a joint responsibility

Resilience is the result of a combination of factors, both individual *and* environmental. The creation of safe environments is not a young person's responsibility. There are certain things such as deliberate harm and abuse that no-one, including young people, should have to be resilient against: such things should not be happening.

The key to building resilience is relationships so as to enhance individual capacities and build safer environments. It stands to reason, therefore, that the responsibility to build resilience with young people does not lie with any single government agency or voluntary body. It is a joint responsibility between all, requiring collaboration and partnership at all levels.

Building resilience is a process

Building resilience is a process, not an event. It takes time to build a respectful, trusting, relationship with young people and their parents/carers that is a necessary foundation upon which other activities can be developed.

Building resilience requires partnership in policy development and implementation

In terms of policy development, it is heartening to see the role of resilience building recognised in policies across a range of different departments and government bodies such as the Dept of Heath, Dept of Education and PHA through, for example, the Protect Life 2 Strategy, The Children and Young People's strategy and The Infant Mental Health Framework. The community and voluntary sector has a vital role to play in contributing to the outcomes of such strategies. Policy makers and commissioners of services need to draw upon the valuable work that is being done with young people by voluntary and community organisations on the ground to ensure this good practice is reflected, shared, built upon and incorporated into future action plans.

It is neither necessary nor feasible for one organisation or project to do all of the nine things identified as helping to build resilience[31]. Collaboration with other agencies can help to enhance the resources available to young people, build those community connections as well as promote shared learning and practice among adults, organisations and communities.

Building resilience can be achieved in different ways

The overall aims of the NLCF's Empowering Young People's programme is to build the resilience of young people by helping them overcome the challenges they face. The case studies featured here highlight different approaches that are working to build resilience. These range from licenced evidence-based models that require specific training (such as The Resilience Doughnut and Circle of Courage) to more 'ordinary, everyday' interactions with young people that do not require such training. As Dr Karen Triesman tells us "every interaction is an intervention"[32]. Often, it is in these 'ordinary, everyday' positive relationships between adults and young people where resilience building happens.

[31] These are: at least one stable and committed relationship; meet basic needs; develop physical health; help build self-efficacy; help develop strong executive function & self-regulation skills; build optimism & hope; help build social connections with peers & community; develop a sense of purpose; support parents/carers in developing their own skills & resilience

[32] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pBkXbCP3Q4

The LINKS grant holders' projects featured in this report show promising signs of impact in terms of resilience-building and are enabling organisations to contribute to the evidence base by collecting data on this impact.

Building resilience can be transformative

Adults undertaking resilience-building work with young people cannot undo the events of the past for any young person. However, what we, as adults who are supporting young people, are asked to do in this work is to help young people learn from and give meaning to the challenges that they face. If we can do that, then as Millar-Karas (2015) maintains:

'the response can be transformative for both the individual and the wider community'

Appendix 1: Self-Assessment Tool

The document below outlines several ways in which organisations might build resilience among young people. It is intended as a self-assessment and reflective tool to ascertain what is currently being done, what else might be done and what support might be needed to achieve this.

Factor	What my project/organisation does already	What else could we do in this area?	What support, if any, is needed to enhance practice in this area?
At least one stable and committed relationship with an adult			
Meet basic needs			
Develop physical health			
Build young people's sense of self-efficacy (mastery) or ability to overcome difficulties			
Develop strong executive function (e.g. skills for planning, organisation) & self-regulation skills (manage emotions & behaviour)			
Build optimism & hope			
Build social connections with peers & wider community			
Develop a sense of purpose (e.g. via volunteering; goal setting)			
Support parents in developing their own skills and resilience			

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