

Youth Borders



Youth Work and Trusted Adults



Foreword

Youth work is all about relationships. It is characterised by the young person and youth worker as being partners in learning.

Each week at YouthBorders we hear, through our members and partners, about the significant impact that youth workers make on young people's lives in the Scottish Borders. Often the youth work process is unseen, the how and the why remain hidden—the focus of measurement, of funding, of policy is often all about the outcome.

When YouthBorders were approached by a psychology student from the University of Stirling to come and do a work-based placement with YouthBorders we agreed. We would use this opportunity to shine a light on the “how and the why” of the youth work relationship. Our student, Dearbhail McNamara, has conducted this short-life project to understand and explore the role of youth workers as Trusted Adults, with a focus on identifying the qualities and characteristics of the youth worker.

I would like to thank Dearbhail for her work on this project and to our members who have engaged with this opportunity by meeting with Dearbhail to develop the four case studies included in this report.

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Chief Officer, YouthBorders
April 2020

About YouthBorders

YouthBorders is recognised regionally as the strategic voice of third sector youth organisations and is the network of voluntary and community-based youth organisations across the Scottish Borders.

YouthBorders works closely with partners in the public sector to improve outcomes for young people by supporting and promoting good quality youth work. As a membership organisation, YouthBorders supports voluntary and community-based youth organisations, their volunteers, trustees, youth workers, and other partners by facilitating networking opportunities and events, providing information and representing the interests of the sector strategically in local, regional and national forums.

YouthBorders vision is to create a voluntary and community-based youth work sector which is connected, collaborative, respected, and recognised; working together to improve the lives of young people in the Scottish Borders. Working in partnership with our members, YouthBorders aims to improve young people's lives through their participation in quality voluntary and community-based youth work.



Introduction

YouthBorders is a network of 38 community-based youth work organisations in the Scottish Borders. Our membership comprises small and medium sized charities, social enterprises, and voluntary groups. Within our network there are 615 Youth Workers in a mixture of sessional, part-time and full time positions, supported by 418 volunteers, providing opportunities to in excess of 3300 young people.

YouthBorders is a member of the Scottish Borders Strategic Youth Work Partnership alongside seven locality lead youth work organisations. Collectively this group received funding from the National Lottery Community Fund to create a three-year project, Stepping Stones, in 2018. Stepping Stones has big ambitions to improve the emotional health and wellbeing of targeted young people across the Scottish Borders within a universal youth work setting. The project is designed to make a step change in the way opportunities and support are given to improve the lives of young people. Support is focused on those young people identified as the most vulnerable and the work delivered is joined up, effective and built on trust and reputation. Young people choose to take part in the project.

It is within this context that we have sought to highlight the role of youth workers as Trusted Adults. Our aim is to connect our workforce with the evidence base of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trusted Adults through this report, and to highlight examples of local practice of Youth Workers as Trusted Adults.



Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trusted Adults

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adolescent years are a particularly sensitive time of young people's development when social, environmental, economic and built environments, shape adult behaviour, mental health and wellbeing. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) describe a range of stressors during childhood which can have a profound impact on an individual's present and future health [1]. ACEs which have been identified include, but are not limited to, abuse (physical, verbal and sexual), neglect (emotional and physical) and household adversities (mental illness, incarcerated relative, domestic violence, parental separation and substance abuse).

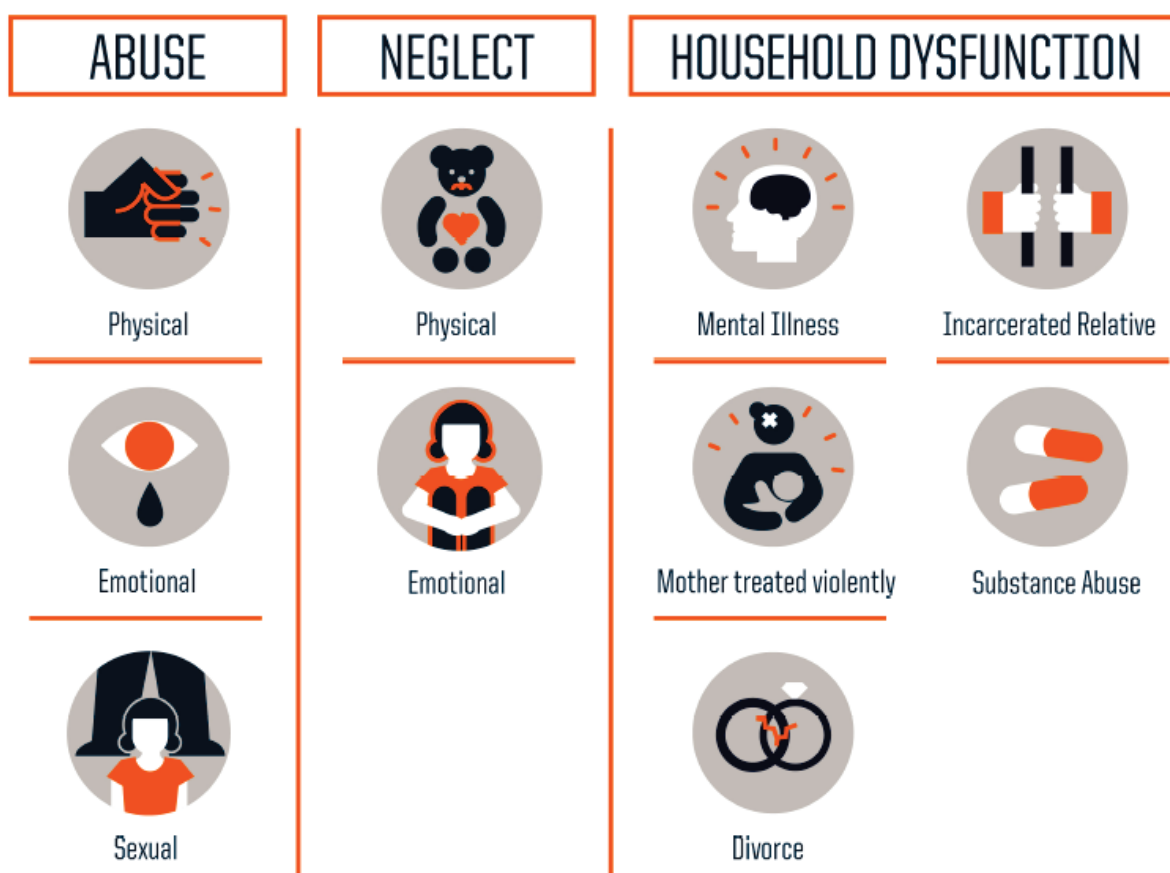


Figure 1: Three types of adverse childhood experiences (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) [2].

Although there has been no data collected specific to Scotland, in a Welsh study almost 50% of people reported experiencing at least one ACE, with 14% of Welsh people [3] and 8% of English people having had four or more ACEs [4]. ACEs profoundly impact young people's ability to learn and participate in school life. Experiencing ACEs has additionally been linked with a variety of health harming behaviours and illnesses as well as criminal behaviour. As the number of ACEs increases, so too does the risk of negative outcomes [5, 6]. At this juncture it should of course be noted that ACEs are not a predictive formula, instead their association with adverse adult outcomes is useful for identifying young people who may be vulnerable.



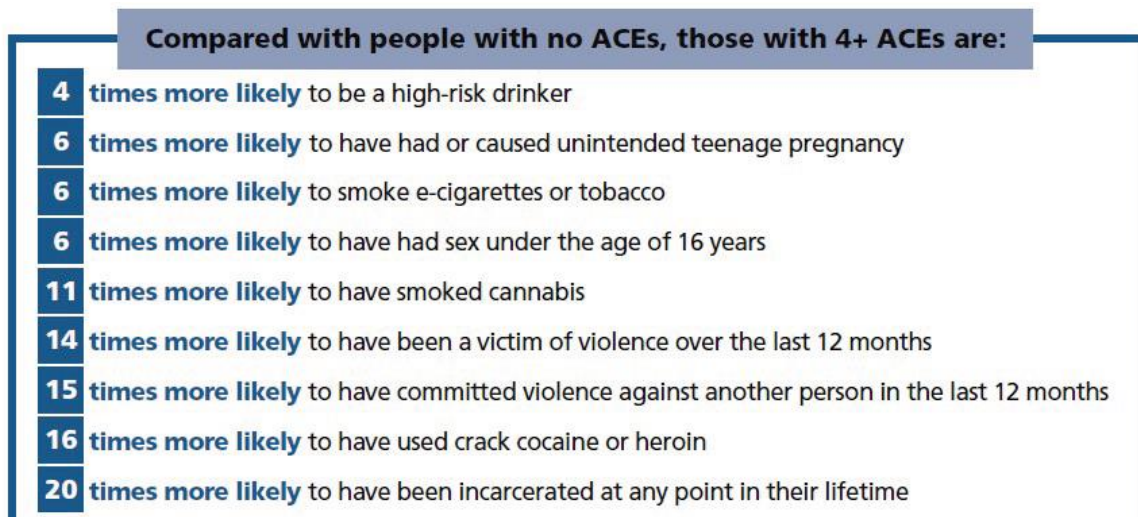


Figure 2: Infographic – available from Welsh Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study [3].

What is a Trusted Adult?

Young people who do well despite such adversity usually have a trusted adult in their life. This idea has been otherwise referred to as ‘one good adult’ [7] – describing an adult who ‘children and young people may turn to for help, and will take them seriously’. Young people recognise Trusted Adults as a positive asset which enable them to improve educational attainment, optimism, self-efficacy and internalising symptoms such as anxiety and depression [8].

The presence of such a relationship has a powerful moderating influence on young people’s lives, providing a context within which healing can occur and the young person’s unique experiences can be understood and responded to [1]. A large body of research suggests higher quality and longer-term contact with adults typically improve the impact on adolescent outcomes [8].

Having a trusted adult affects life satisfaction, building self-esteem, increasing resilience and promoting a sense of belonging. While the absence of a trusted adult is linked to higher levels of distress and anti-social behaviour, and an increased risk for suicidal behaviour [7].

Who are Trusted Adults?

The Trusted Adult in a young person’s life could be a supportive parent or caregiver [9], but are not limited to this [10]; teachers have also been identified as key figures in a young person’s life, and can provide very important relationships for young people [11]. However, early disengagement from school, poor attendance and exclusion are associated with ACEs [12], thus reducing the likelihood of positive teacher-student relationships.

Another important factor of a young person’s relationship with a trusted adult is that the trusted adult is chosen by the young person, rather than the relationship being forced [8]. By the very nature of youth work, young people must choose to participate. As household dysfunction is a category of ACE in itself and many of such at home factors are related to exclusion from school [13], youth workers have a unique capacity to reach young people who may be particularly vulnerable by filling the gaps left by home life and school.

The Impact of Community-based Universal Youth Work in Scotland identified Trusted Adults as one of a number of attributes of youth workers [14]. The study reported that many young people spoke about their recognition of the youth worker as a trusted adult. Youth workers provide young people with a point of contact for advice and support, while also offering praise



and encouragement. Frequently, youth workers are aware of the young people’s individual circumstances and needs, and are able to provide help and support in relation to specific issues, problems or queries. Most significantly, in some cases, youth workers are the only trusted adult presence in a young person’s life [14].

Furthermore, there are a number of practitioner attributes and approaches identified by *The Impact of Community-based Youth Work in Scotland* study, which have also been highlighted as facilitators of trusted adult relationships. Youth workers, by principle, engage in long term relationships. A significant number of young people involved in the research had been engaged in youth work for a considerable number of years. Youth workers in turn had fostered long term supportive and nurturing relationships the young people resulting in positive impacts over the course of many years. In some cases, this led to demonstrable long-term change such as positive career choices.

The improved outcomes associated with the presence of a trusted adult overlap with the definitive characteristics of youth work as set out in the *Nature and Purpose of Youth Work* [15]. Furthermore, the taxonomy of a trusted adult created by Pringle et al. [16] includes elements relating to the presence, emotional qualities and functions of Trusted Adults in a young person’s life.

Table 1: List of facilitators that encourage trusting relationships between young people and adults [8].

Facilitators of Trusted Adult Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth able to choose their preferred adult • Genuine, empathetic and proactive support offered • Confidentiality • Reliability of adult (keeping promises, appointments etc.) • Ability to raise any issue without judgement • Patience on behalf of youth and adult • Mutual respect between youth and adult • Structures or activities that promote regular, long-term engagement • Shared interest between youth and adult • Youth and adult matched on sociodemographic criteria (sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) • A willingness of the adult to ‘go the extra mile’

Table 2: Essential and Definitive Features of Youth Work [15].

Features of Youth Work	Explanation
Young people choose to participate	The young person takes part voluntarily. She/he chooses to be involved, not least because they want to relax, meet friends and have fun. The young person decides whether to engage or to walk away.
The work must build from where young people are	Youth Work operates on young people’s own personal and recreational territory - within both their geographic and interest communities. The young person’s life experience is respected and forms the basis for shaping the agenda in negotiation with peers and youth workers.
The young person and youth worker are partners in a learning process	The young person is recognised as an active partner who can, and should, have opportunities and resources to shape their lives. The relationship and dialogue between the young person and youth worker is central to the learning process.



Case Studies

Case Studies of Youth Work in the Borders

For those within youth work, their role as a trusted adult is intuitive however, there is a lack of research documenting this. The following case studies highlight the function of youth workers as Trusted Adults, specifically within the context and challenges of the Scottish Borders.

Table 3: Overarching categories and qualities or skills of a trusted adult [16].

Category and Description	Qualities or Skills
Access – Elements relating to the presence of the trusted adult in the young person's life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Approachable• Attentive• Available• Engaged• Interactive• Involved• Reliable• Responsive
Emotion - Emotional qualities that the person acting as the trusted adult might display	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authentic• Caring• Empathetic• Nurturing• Sensitive• Supportive• Understanding• Warm
Function - Functions that are fulfilled by trusted adult support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advisor• Coach• Confidant• Inspirer• Listener• Motivator• Non-judgemental• Honest• Trustworthy• Responsible• Persuasive• Role model



Case Study 1: Rowlands (Selkirk)

Rowlands is a youth project based in Selkirk. They provide an inclusive and safe environment for young people ages 12 to 18, offering group sessions, drop-in sessions, as well as some one-on-one work. They work closely with the local high school and open up a positive dialogue with young people's parents allowing them to understand their members' circumstances in school and at home.

Rowlands staff pride themselves in being transparent with young people. Having conversations including young people, rather than about them, helps them to maintain honesty and integrity. Consistency is another value at the heart of their youth work; rules are firm and clearly communicated. These boundaries and reliability foster trust between young people and youth workers, as young people know what to expect from youth workers. Youth workers strike the vital balance of being non-judgemental while also imparting upon the young people that if something they confide in them requires a response that appropriate action will be taken. Rowlands endeavour to be available to young people as much possible, at times and in spaces led by the needs of young people.

Case Study 2: Works+

Works+ is an employability charity based in Galashiels who help young people aged 16-24 to obtain a positive destination in life. They provide person-centred support for service-users, many of whom are disengaged from school, struggling with mental health issues or lack of confidence. Due to their independence from schools and the Job Centre, Works+ hold great integrity for young people, enabling them to empathise with young people's frustrations and be firmly on 'their side'.

Their youth workers describe themselves as un-shockable and non-judgemental. This, alongside shared life-experiences with young people, further enables them to build trust and rapport with young people, who feel they can open up to youth workers about things that they can't share with other adults in their lives. The young person's willing choice to participate is a vital component of the programme offered by Works+, which runs three days per week over the course of ten weeks. Although it is hard work the youth workers keep their young people motivated, and 'having a laugh' is a key component of the organisation's approach. All the while, youth workers model good social interaction, both with peers and in a professional environment.

The length and intensity of the programme allow young people to form meaningful and long-term relationships with youth workers. Despite the fixed-period of the programme, twelve months of aftercare is standard, young people can stay in touch with youth workers for as long as they wish to, through Facebook messenger and weekly drop-in sessions. Progress made during the Works+ programme is measured via attitudes toward life changes, positivity about oneself, wanting to improve oneself, problem-solving, talking to others, listening to others and making positive things happen - all of which mirror the positive outcomes associated with trusted adult relationships.



Case Study 3: Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones works with young people aged 10-18, who have been identified by youth work organisations and their partners as “the most vulnerable and disengaged in their communities”. Project workers use their valuable skills and knowledge to support each young person based on their personal needs throughout the project, helping them to improve their lives.

Stepping Stones is a model of Trusted Adult support as young people chose to participate, giving them the option to approach their youth worker to join the project. Project workers can listen to young people talk about any worries, concerns or problems they may be facing and provide guidance, support and advice to build a confiding relationship. Project workers can begin to understand the young person and motivate them to identify personal goals. They support the young person based on their needs, offering dedicated one-to-one support, targeted group work sessions and tailored activities throughout the project. There is no time limit on the relationship between the project worker and the young person.

Progress is recorded and monitored throughout the young person’s journey. In order to measure project outcomes, young people answer a series of personal questions at baseline, 6-8 week intervals and at the end of the project. This provides an opportunity for young people to reflect with their project worker and jointly plan further engagement. Working with the project worker, the young people are supported to be fully integrated into the regular drop ins or groups that the organisation provides and young people have access to their youth organisation even in later adolescence – strengthening the concept that youth worker are not just Trusted Adults but that the youth work organisation is a Trusted Organisation.

Case Study 4: Connect Berwickshire Youth Project

Connect Berwickshire Youth project are a community-based organisation focused on helping make the world around them a better, happier place. They work out of Duns, Coldstream and Eyemouth holding drop-in sessions and one-to-ones for young people. Their partnership with schools allows them to provide alternatives to formal education for those who are disengaged from school.

Connect youth workers are informal educators and mentors who provide wrap-around care; by recognising each young person as a unique individual, they help them to explore new ideas and find inspiration. Through weeks and months of engagement, youth workers and young people develop their relationship, and young people realise they have a grown-up they can trust with them every step of the way. Spending time outside at allotments, doing adventure activities and at exciting residential experiences, including sailing voyages, young people become more socially resilient and noticeably increase in confidence.

Connect also ‘grow their own’ youth workers; young people who have an interest will be encouraged to pursue a career in youth work and coached through the process, should they choose to do so. There are many benefits to such an approach, namely, in the context of this report that youth workers and young people are thus matched along certain demographics and experiences, which facilitates the formation of trusted adult relationships.



Concluding Remarks and Acknowledgements

Concluding Remarks

This report provides an introduction in to the role of youth workers as Trusted Adults and the importance of such adults as a protective factor on improving the outcomes for young people at risk of experiencing adverse childhood experiences. Evidence shows the value that such roles can bring to a young person's life, as having a healthy attachment to a trusted adult is an important factor in helping young people thrive. Youth workers use their skills and knowledge to respond sensitively and supportively to help young people open-up about their problems, worries or issues.

When the approaches taken by Rowlands, Connect, Works+, and Stepping Stones are considered within the context of the evidence, including the qualities of a Trusted Adult and facilitators of trusted adult relationships, the parallels can be clearly seen. These are just four examples of youth work that takes place in the Scottish Borders and we could hypothesise that these qualities are also evident in the services delivered by the wider membership of the YouthBorders network.

This report is intended to prompt a conversation within and between youth groups; between youth workers and their managers; between young people and youth workers; and between funders and youth work organisations.

This report is about increasing recognition and understanding of the role of youth workers as Trusted Adults.

This report is likely to spark an interest to find out more about this area of research, and youth workers should be encouraged to engage in further reading and participate in continuous professional development which would support them to recognise and realise their role as Trusted Adults and the impact of ACES on the lives of young people in their communities.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Dearbhail McNamara supported by YouthBorders staff, Susan Hunter and Carly McAllan. Dearbhail is an honours student in psychology at the University of Stirling and produced this report as the outcome of her work-based placement with YouthBorders between January and April 2020.

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