



Youth Development in NSW

A review of evidence to support youth services
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Youth Development in NSW: A review of evidence to support youth services

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About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. Our work helps build the capacity of young people, youth workers and youth services, and we advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups.

It is the role of Youth Action to:

1. Respond to social and political agendas relating to young people and the youth service sector.
2. Provide proactive leadership and advocacy to shape the agenda on issues affecting young people and youth services.
3. Collaborate on issues that affect young people and youth workers.
4. Promote a positive profile in the media and the community of young people and youth services.
5. Build capacity for young people to speak out and take action on issues that affect them.
6. Enhance the capacity of the youth services sector to provide high quality services.
7. Ensure Youth Action's organisational development, efficiency, effectiveness and good governance.



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Introduction

Across NSW, youth services provide a range of excellent supports for young people. Research shows that these types of supports are key during this essential period in an individual's life, directing life-long trajectories. To help a young person's development go well, the work of youth services must be based in evidence around young people, their needs, and how they develop. But this is being applied unevenly across the state.

This paper is the first of its kind in NSW, combining the research with the considerable expertise within the sector, specifically relating to the development of young people and supporting prevention and early intervention approaches.

In combining the research, it seeks to help youth services continue to design, evaluate, innovate, research and improve services in line with the developmental needs of young people.

This paper will provide an overview of:

1. The case for investment in youth services, as adolescence is a time where investment is pivotal, and
2. How to direct the focus and practice of youth services so they can support young people through evidence-based practice.

This paper makes reference to both 'young people' and 'adolescents.' The term 'young people' is used by the World Health Organisation (WHO), Youth Action and others to mark the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, defined in NSW as ages 12–25. This wide age range recognises the ongoing nature of transition during post-adolescence into early adulthood, which often includes secondary transitions, such as further education and employment. The term 'adolescence' (or 'adolescent') is narrower and is used throughout to refer to research relating to a life stage marked mainly by biological and physical development (including neurological

development). The WHO (2014) 'defines adolescents as those people between 10 and 19 years of age.'

Role of this Paper

This paper is part of a larger project which aims to support evidence-based practice in the NSW youth sector. This review will contribute a foundation and evidence base for youth development in NSW. It will be followed by two parts:

- Practice Principles which provide high-level guidance on the ongoing development of evidence-based practice, and
- A Practice Framework made up of a series of trainings and practice guides, to support the adaptation of evidence-based practice to particular contexts (e.g. schools, families) and with particular client groups (e.g. Aboriginal young people, young people in contact with the juvenile justice system).

Part 1:
Foundation and
evidence base

Why invest in adolescents/young people?

What things generally help young people to be
well and develop?
10 Developmental Elements

Part 2:
Practice principles

How should youth services approach practice and
programming to turn evidence into practice?

Part 3:
Practice framework
and practice guides

How should principles be applied in practice to
create outcomes for young people?

Part 1: Why support young people?

There are many reasons to support young people at a critical transitional juncture in their lives:

1. Adolescence is a time of change which is open to influence

The transition from childhood springboards individuals into adulthood. The World Bank (2007) identifies that transitions occur in the areas of:

- Family: from dependent child to autonomous adult
- Learning: from primary to secondary and later education
- Work: from education into the workforce
- Citizenship: the transition into responsible and productive citizenship including voting, driving etc., and
- Health: from recipients of children's healthcare to adults responsible for their own healthcare.

There is substantial literature that highlights the importance of early childhood development as a time of rapid growth, which creates the foundations for life-long trajectories (e.g. Felitti et al., 1998; Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007). Adolescence is also a time of rapid biological and developmental change. Recent developments in neuroscience reveal that brain development spikes during adolescence and continues into early adulthood (Steinberg, 2010). This period results in significant changes in social, emotional and cognitive functioning that springboard young people into adulthood but can leave them vulnerable to a range of issues.

The Chief Medical Officer of England (Viner, 2013, p. 8) states:

Adolescence is a second opportunity for intervention after very early childhood. A rational early intervention approach targets critical periods of rapid development, i.e. adolescence as well as very early childhood.



Given that health and health behaviours track strongly from adolescence into adult life, the way that health is promoted and protected during adolescence is key to the health of the whole population and the economic development of the nation.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) identifies early adolescence (10–14) as a key time for positive intervention, in order to have a significant effect on the foundations of young people’s lives (Hemphill & Smith, 2010). This early adolescent phase is a time when hormonal change and significant life transitions, such as primary to secondary school, coincide. Young people generally develop a greater awareness of their environment, which includes a greater awareness of the effects of social status and marginalisation (Inchley et al., 2016).

Early adolescence is also a time when bullying reaches its peak in schools (Cross, Shaw, Hearn et al., 2009), and when educational disengagement, risk-taking behaviour, and long term physical and mental health issues often first become apparent (Redmond et al. 2016; Kessler et al., 2005; Peper & Dahl, 2013). Similarly, research examining changes in protective factors during adolescence has found that many protective factors decrease during early adolescence (Kim et al, 2015; Scales et al., 2016).

Without structures, environments and supports that enhance protective factors for our young people, their lifetime outcomes are left to chance.

2. Evidence shows that investment in young people gets results, and nets returns

Early childhood is recognised as a key period for support, with significant funding going into programs aimed at improving developmental outcomes. There is currently not a similar level of focus on programs and supports during adolescence and early adulthood. Research from the

National Audit Office (NAO) in the United Kingdom highlights that if childhood interventions are not continued or followed up, then early childhood investments can diminish or vanish (NAO, 2013).

Many studies have examined the economic value of programs supporting young people across a range of issues. For example, an American cost-benefit analysis found a benefit of \$5,250 per young person when taking into account reductions in juvenile crime and reduced tobacco use (Kuklinski et al., 2012). Other studies repeatedly show between five to ten times cost savings on investment in adolescent programs, including areas such as health, mental health, educational disengagement, teenage pregnancy, substance use etc. (Sheehan et al., 2017).

Part 2: Evidence of structural forces impacting young people

Much of the work of youth services is with young people themselves in order to support them during vulnerable periods – trying to both impact the world of the young person (e.g. their school, their family), and their responses to this world.

Beyond the sphere of the young person there are many wider societal factors which are often definitive in the development of children and young people. These societal forces influence life trajectories from conception. They include marginalising factors such as politics, race, class and location, community characteristics and opportunities, as well as family factors including poverty, disability, mental illness, alcohol or drug addiction, and caring responsibilities (see, for example Skattebol et.al. 2012 and Lareau, 2003).

These forces create a tension for workers in the youth sector. The forces which most influence outcomes for young people are almost always beyond their control and are operating before they

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become aware of them. A young person's lifelong development is shaped by these forces, and by the time a worker comes into contact with them, there have been years of compound impact.

Therefore, there are three key roles in supporting young people as a group:

1. To contribute to the development of individual young people, within their individual circumstances and developmental progress
2. Developing the world around a young person/people (through changing systems and their ecology), achieving more sustainable and long-lasting changes in circumstances (and avoiding placing the young person as the 'problem')
3. Changing the larger systems which disadvantage young people, thereby improving outcomes on a larger scale for young people who are to come.

This paper will present 10 Elements which focus on points 1 and 2 above. However, it is important to acknowledge the wider context in which much youth development work occurs and ensure that all workers and organisations maintain a commitment to wider systemic and social improvement to benefit young people, as highlighted in point 3.



Part 3: The 10 Elements underpinning the development of young people

There is extensive research that tries to understand the complex factors that most influence the trajectory of young people's lives (e.g. Huang, Murphy & Hser, 2012; Warren, Wray-Lake, Rote, & Shubert, 2016; Willoughby et al., 2007). The number of factors which contribute to the wellbeing of young people are substantial – as an example, the Search Institute identifies 40 Developmental Assets in the lives of children and young people (Search Institute, 2017). This research becomes more complex because it also sits across many fields of inquiry, such as psychology, criminology, anthropology and sociology.

This paper groups similar areas of this substantial and diverse literature to produce 10 Elements, aimed at providing direction to youth services in NSW, as follows:

Life Skills

Element 1:

Critical thinking and cognitive skills

Element 2:

Coping and self-management

Element 3:

Social and moral skills

Element 4:

Communication

Positive Relationships

Element 5:

Involvement in positive activities

Element 6:

Connection to family

Element 7:

Connection to peers

Element 8:

Caring and safe adults

Element 9:

Caring community environment

Element 10:

Positive school experience

What is an Element?

Elements can be seen in several ways. As:

1. A summary of a cluster of research
2. Protective factors in the lives of young people
3. Contributors to the development of young people
4. Short-term outcomes which can be the focus of service delivery

Taking any of the above, the Elements have been found to impact the lives of young people, either through their presence or absence. Where appropriate, the research constructs within an Element are closely related to each other, with the Element heading providing a guide to the literature.

How do Elements link to outcomes?

There is significant work being done on the outcomes of human services more broadly (e.g, FaCS (2017) NSW Human Services Framework). Outcomes are the result of effort – what changes for clients as a result of the work of human services.

The 10 Elements are the building blocks of longer-term outcomes for young people. Elements are what evidence shows are useful in the healthy development of young people to either:

- Protect them
- Support them
- Serve as a platform for their growth and success.

In this way, the Elements are the link between daily youth development practice and a number of larger priorities outlined in State and Federal policy documents, such as:

- The Nest, a synthesis of literature published by ARACY examining the most important outcomes to be achieved for Australia’s children and young people



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- The NSW Government's Premier's Priorities, which include outcomes relating to improved education results, reducing youth homelessness and protecting children
- The NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework, which aims to unite government efforts in achieving key outcomes for the NSW population
- The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People's *Strategic Plan for Children and Young People*.

An example of how the Elements link to longer-term outcomes can be seen in school results and retention. There is a strong link between educational achievement and Element 2: Coping and Self-Management Skills. Developmental youth services work with young people broadly to develop the skills to manage their own mental health, their emotions, and skills such as patience and grit. It has been well-established that young people are likely to succeed at school or work if they have these skills. Therefore, by contributing to Element 2, developmental youth services are improving the likelihood of young people's success at school, and thereby contributing to longer-term, more significant outcomes.

Where did the Elements come from?

The 10 Elements are a combination of headings from two sources – The Jacobs Foundation's (2017) *Life Skills for Youth Development Framework* (Switzerland), and the Administration for Children, Youth and Families' (ACYF) *10 Positive Youth Development Constructs* (Washington).

Effort has been made to ensure that the 10 Elements do not violate any Australian research, and, where possible, listen to the voices of young people. For example, the 2016 the Australian Children's Wellbeing Project (ACWP) (Redmond et.al., 2016) looked at how the 'middle years' (10–14 year-olds) conceptualise their own wellbeing. Participants were asked to rate the importance of a range of factors which they considered made up 'the good life'. In order of importance, they ranked: 'family',



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'health', 'friends', 'school', 'community' and 'money'. The findings from young people themselves under the ACWP align closely with several of the Elements.

A meta-review is a summary of existing research. Where possible, we have made use of meta-reviews to group research rather than re-assessing or referencing primary research. For example, the ACYF framework has been used to synthesise the field of Positive Youth Development, and ARACY literature reviews summarise a great deal of Australian and international research.

The 10 Elements are also intended to add to the work of other peaks and research bodies, such as the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (Australia)'s (2016) *National Youth Settlement Framework*, and Yfoundation's (2013) *The Foundations* to end youth homelessness.

It is important to note that the heading for each Element is just a name for a group of constructs or ideas. The description that follows gives a better coverage of the multi-faceted nature of the Elements, and a list of relevant research constructs is provided below in the grey text box. Many of the Elements are strongly interdependent, with relationships existing between them, or one often being a pathway to other Elements.

Life skills



According to the WHO (1997), life skills are 'abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life' (p. 1). Life skills are critical inter- and intra-personal abilities which underpin a range of longer-term outcomes in the

lives of young people. Including a focus on these life skills will improve outcomes for the young people involved in programs.

Element 1: Critical thinking and cognitive skills

The ability to problem solve is a skill that becomes more important during adolescence (ARACY, 2014). This Element groups together a number of constructs which relate to how young people make decisions and solve problems. Critical thinking and cognitive skills are foundational and relate to:

- flexible and creative thinking
- abstract thought
- autonomous thinking and the ability to weigh up options
- self-reflection
- problem-solving, and
- decision-making.

Without these skills young people can find it hard to solve problems, overcome barriers, set goals, persevere, and make more complex decisions. This includes both social (e.g. rules and boundaries, expectations) and task-related problem-solving.

- Problem-solving (ACYF, 2013; ARACY, 2014).
- Future orientation/achievement motivation (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Personal goal setting (Bird & Markle, 2012).
- Clear standards for behaviour (ARACY, 2009).
- Responsible decision-making (Zaff et al., 2016).

Element 2: Coping and self-management

This Element relates to skills in managing thoughts, feelings and emotions. These skills impact strongly on behaviour, social interactions, mental health and feelings of wellbeing.

This Element has emotional, cognitive and behavioural components, and has flow-on effects in many areas of a young person's life (e.g. education, substance use, crime). It includes important constructs such as:

- Self-regulation (the ability to control feelings and behaviour)
- Self-efficacy (belief in capability)
- Self-esteem (general sense of worth).

- Self-regulation (ACYF, 2013).
- Self-efficacy, self-esteem, strategies for stress, psychological safety, good health habits and risk management (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Self-efficacy, self-esteem (ARACY, 2015 [11–14 years]).
- Emotional competence, improve coping (ARACY, 2014).
- Self-awareness, self-management (Zaff et al., 2016).
- Self-esteem, life satisfaction, health (Warren et al, 2016).
- Healthy beliefs (ARACY, 2009).

Element 3: Social and moral skills

Relating to others and a growing sense of self are important in the development of young people.

Social skills are the ability to relate to and interact with others, while moral skills relate to the capacity for developing an individual sense of right and wrong, and relate to judgement, values, and experiencing emotions related to moral violations (such as sympathy, guilt, and shame) (Bloom, 2013, p.9). Both social and moral skills govern important areas of life such as the ability to manage conflict, set personal boundaries and standards of behaviour, and navigate the world with a sense of individual identity and values.

Key sub-skills identified in the literature that contribute to this Element include a sense of social responsibility, empathy and caring for others, values, ethnic identity and respecting and appreciating others (ARACY, 2015; Bird & Markle, 2012; Zaff et al., 2016).

- Relational skills (ACYF, 2013).
- Communication skills and empathy (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Interpersonal relations (Bird & Markle, 2012).
- Social awareness, relationship skills (Zaff et al., 2016).
- Enduring values (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Ethnic identity (Gonzales-Backen, Bamaca-Colbert, & Allen, 2016).
- Promotion of gratitude (Bird & Markle, 2012).

Element 4: Communication

Communication skills are foundational and underpin other important life skills. Through them young people are able to communicate needs, feelings and emotions with a range of people in different situations. Emotional intelligence and assertiveness are key to communication.

- Communication skills and empathy (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).

Positive relationships



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Positive relationships are core contributors to the development of young people. Relationships include important people, but also extend to institutions, activities and their community.

The Positive Relationships group acknowledges the disproportionate role the ecology or world of young people plays in their development.

Element 5: Involvement in positive activities

Community and after school activities have often been valued for their diversionary nature – occupying young people to ‘keep them out of trouble’. However, involvement in structured activities provides young people with a range of opportunities to develop many of the 10 Elements listed, such as caring adults, positive peers, the opportunity to build self-regulation and other important skills.

Positive activities include volunteering, mentoring, hobbies, skill-building, new experiences and extracurricular activities.

- Talent or hobby valued by others (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Participation in extra-curricular activities (ARACY, 2015 [11–14 years]).
- Positive Youth Development (ARACY, 2014).
- Structured mentoring and life coaching, structured extra-curricular activities (Bird & Markle, 2012).
- Volunteering and mentoring (ARACY, 2014).

Element 6: Connection to family

This Element is about the importance of home and family in the development of young people. Families (which are not defined by biology, but as the young person defines the concept) can be a source of support and protection, or a place of conflict and pain. This Element is about the good

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parts of family and home – stability, belonging, nurturing, relationships and acceptance. It also includes the capacity of parents/carers to support young people with skills, warmth and boundaries.

- Parental/carer warmth, cohesion and care with family, positive communication with parent/carer, appropriate structure (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 Years]).
- Time in emotionally responsive interactions with parents/carers, consistent and language-based discipline, parental/carer wellbeing (ARACY, 2015 [11–14 years]).
- Strong bonding to family (ARACY, 2009).
- Low adolescent-parent/carer conflict, parental/carer warmth, parental/carer monitoring, parental/carer encouragement of autonomous decision-making (Chand et al., 2013).
- 'Family' (Redmond et.al, 2016).

Element 7: Connection to peers

Adolescence is a time of reducing parental influence and increasing social connections with peers. For this reason, the role of peers is an important and influential aspect of their development. This Element covers feelings of friendship, connection, bonding, and the ability to get support from friends when needed. However, it should be noted that the negative influence of peers can be a risk factor which is potentially harmful or isolating, with resulting impacts on mental health.

- Sociability, positive social norms (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Positive peer relationships (ARACY, 2015 [11–14 years]).
- Social support (ARACY, 2014).
- Strong bond with peers (ARACY, 2009).
- Interpersonal relationships (Bird & Markle, 2012).
- Connection (Warren et al., 2016).
- 'Friends' (Redmond et.al., 2016).
- Overt and covert bullying behaviours (Cross, et al., 2009).

Element 8: Caring and safe adults

Positive relationships with adults outside the family have been found to be an important factor contributing to positive development. Caring adults offer opportunities to develop many of the other Elements, such as the internal competencies covered in Coping and Self-Management, and are closely tied to young people feeling like their community cares about them (Meltzer, Muir and Craig, 2016a & Meltzer, Muir and Craig, 2016b).

- Encouragement and assistance (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Relationships with adults outside the family (ARACY, 2015 [11–14 years]).
- Volunteering and mentoring (ARACY, 2014).
- Connection (Warren et al., 2016).

Element 9: Caring community environment

It is important to consider young people's place within their wider community context (Damon, 2004). Having a safe, supportive and a pro-social community is associated with more positive outcomes for young people (ARACY, 2014; ARACY, 2015). A positive community sees young people as valuable assets, not as 'trouble', and takes steps to make them feel welcome, acknowledged, contributing and cared about.

- Physical safety, supportive communities (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Pro-social community interactions (ARACY, 2014).
- Strong bonding to community (ARACY, 2009).
- Connection (Warren et al., 2016).
- 'Community' (Redmond, et al., 2016)

Element 10: Positive school experience

A positive school experience can offer young people the opportunity to become lifelong learners and opens the door to economic participation. A positive school is a place of safety, support and engagement with learning. This is produced through positive connections between students, teachers, parents and administrators (ARACY, 2009; 2014).

The opportunity to feel achievement (whether academic or otherwise) and positive opportunities for skill development are associated with more positive developmental outcomes.

- Intelligence and academic achievement, opportunities for positive school experiences, safe schools (ARACY, 2015 [14–25 years]).
- Early academic achievement in literacy and numeracy, positive relationships with teachers, belonging at school (ARACY 2015, [11–14 years]).
- School connection (ARACY, 2014).
- Strong bonding to school (ARACY, 2009).
- 'School' (Redmond, et al., 2016).
- Poverty and children's outcomes (Cooper & Stewart (2013).
- 'Money' (Redmond et al., 2016)

Part 4: Conclusion

The 10 Elements presented in this paper are crucial factors for improving outcomes for young people. They are a series of research clusters that help guide youth service provision in NSW to achieve key outcomes for the development of young people. By making sure a combination of these elements are present in the activities conducted by youth services, they can have confidence that they are making a difference and that young people are moving in the right direction. The Elements

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also provide a natural impetus for youth services and other sectors to work together holistically for young people, in order to achieve much greater outcomes than can be achieved alone.

The evidence in this paper provides guidance to the creation of the Youth Development Principles and Practice Framework. This framework will be an evidence-based structure to guide service provision to and with young people.



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