

REVOLVE

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PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING RISK

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Young people experiencing risk include those who are presently at risk of harm. They may be involved in, or exposed to drug use, crime, homelessness, mental illness, unemployment, suicide/self-harm, early school leaving, truancy, abuse and/or neglect. This group of young people make up a large proportion of the young people YFC work with. This issue of Revolve will present various statistics regarding key issues for young people experiencing risk. It will also describe good practice program principles as highlighted in a recent study by the Australian Institute of Criminology regarding sport, physical activity and anti-social behaviour.

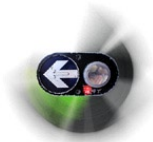
THE FACTS

- 21% of persons aged 14-17 years had used marijuana/cannabis in the last twelve months, 4% had used amphetamines and 3% had used ecstasy/designer drugs (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003: 47).
- Two thirds of teenagers (14-17 years) had consumed alcohol in the previous twelve months (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003: 45).
- The offender rate among juveniles in Australia is 4,165 in 2000-2001 (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2002: 41).
- There was an estimated 26,060 young people (aged 12-18 years) who were homeless during census week 2001 (a rate of 14 per 1,000 of the youth population) (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2001: iv).
- 14% of Australian children and adolescents aged 4-17 have mental health problems (Mindframe-Media, 2002a: 2).
- 15.4% or 211,000 teenagers were not in full-time education or full-time employment in May 2002 (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2002: 4).
- The average national completion rate of Year 12 in schools is 67%, with a completion rate of 74% for teenage women and just 61% for teenage men (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2002: 4).
- The suicide rate for males aged 15-24 is 19.0 per 100,000. For females the rate is 5.7 per 100,000 (Mindframe-Media, 2002b: 4).

UNDERLYING ISSUES

Young people experiencing risk are often embedded in a variety of complex circumstances and situations. For example, high youth unemployment rates (due to insufficient employment opportunities for young people), economic hardship, family conflict and breakdown, domestic violence, lack of recreation, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, unresolved grief and loss, eviction and lack of affordable housing, family poverty and consequent stress, unequal opportunities and discrimination, relationship struggles, rejection and lack of emotional support are all factors that contribute to young people's hardships and difficulties

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



The awareness of these external, institutional and social factors cause us to realise that the problem is not solely located within the young person, but is located outside the individual in the context of an adverse society. We cannot attempt to help young people experiencing risk if we are ignoring these factors that are contributing to their struggles. Therefore, a holistic approach to working with young people is required. The Centre for Adolescent Health & the Australian Youth Research Centre has suggested that practice (and policy) with young people is moving away from “the notion of young people ‘at-risk’, towards the concept of creating communities that generate support and resilience. This concept involves a shift away from a focus on individual youth and towards an understanding of young people’s connection with their community” (Wierenga, Wyn, Glover and Meade, 2002, p.4). Furthermore, it has been identified by the Victorian Government that providing opportunities for positive community involvement is one of the most important protective factors linked to decreasing social, behavioural and health problems and promoting positive development in young people (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2000, p.9). For Christian youth workers and YFC, this may involve further networking with local churches and community service providers to help young people connect with their communities.

- In what ways do we consider the societal context of young people’s lives in our work with them?
- How well are we working with communities and the various groups and churches within these communities?
- How can we serve communities and assist in generating support and resilience for young people?

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING RISK

Providing physical activity, sport and adventure-based activities is a key method for promoting participation and the positive development of young people. Providing recreation for young people experiencing risk is therefore an important component of interventions that seek to assist young people through difficult circumstances. Physical activity, sport and adventure-based activities also provide opportunities for other individuals and groups within the community to work with YFC or Christian ministries generally, which enhances a connection between young people and their community. The Australian Institute of Criminology's (AIC) recent publication about methods to reduce antisocial behaviour and adverse risk activities through sport and physical activity reinforces the contention that sport and physical activity programs positively affect the personal, emotional and social development in young people. It has been shown elsewhere that such recreational activities improve the emotional and cognitive skills amongst young participants, particularly in the areas of self-esteem and problem solving. These improvements can impact directly on behavioural risk factors, and thus reduce the occurrence of risk-activities (for example, drug use and crime).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



It is great that YFC does have a national focus on providing recreation to young people experiencing risk. AIC's recent publication suggests 7 key program principles, based on their research, that could improve sport and physical activity programs provided by YFC and other Christian ministries. These principles are also applicable to other youth ministries and programs. Below are these principles taken directly from this publication:

Good practice program principles

Administrative

- Have clearly set out aims and outcomes that are monitored and, where possible, evaluated so that programs maintain their relevance to youth and resources are targeted effectively.
- Ensure that staff are interested and enthusiastic about the programs.

Environment

- Create an environment in which youth feel physically and emotionally comfortable and safe:
 - Promote voluntary participation at all levels;
 - Have minimal rules and reduced competition.
- Ensure staff are people youth can trust and develop positive relationships with.

Activities

- Offer novel and challenging activities that are engaging and relevant for youth.
- Ensure individual and team-oriented activities and program delivery are specific to the target group (for example, male/female).
- Run low-cost activities outside school hours and on weekends when youth are more likely to be unoccupied and/or bored.

Youth Involvement

- Provide leadership opportunities for youth in organising and deciding activities.
- Engage youth in promoting the program.
- Consider promoting peer mentoring and support networks.

Accessibility

- Ensure the program is easily accessible to youth by providing transport after dark.

External support

- Develop links and provide information about other services and resources available to youth in the local community.
- Provide a continuing contact point for youth.

Underlying Issues

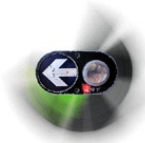
- Promote fairness and equality.
 - Be aware of self-esteem, family and social issues affecting youth behaviours.
 - Engage with youth as individuals; don't just focus on their behaviour.
 - Promote the relevance of activities for other life areas.
- (Morris, Sallybanks, Willis, Makkai, 2003: 5)

SUMMARY

A significant proportion of Australia's young people are experiencing risk. These young people are often facing a variety of behavioural and social issues. Christian youth workers and YFC should continue to place emphasis on reaching these young people, who are often the most in need of support and Jesus' love. Providing this is part of the task of every ministry. As Christian youth workers, we believe that Jesus can bring healing, wholeness, stability, forgiveness, relationship, intimacy, security and other wonderful things that these young people can't get anywhere else. We need to be purposeful in sharing this love with young people experiencing risk.

Some of the principles listed above, in particular those regarding administration, external support and underlying issues are applicable to all YFC programs. If we want to impact the lives of young people involved in drug use, crime, self-harm, suicidal behaviour, those who are unemployed and out of the education system, those who have been abused or neglected and those struggling with mental health issues, we must continue to emphasise and improve our current approaches (such as adventure-based activities), as well as developing further strategies that contribute to building supportive communities that generate resilience in young people.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



- How do we address the underlying issues that predispose young people to various risks?
- How purposeful and responsible are we in sharing Jesus' love with young people experiencing risk?
- How can we incorporate these good practice principles to improve our various ministries and programs?

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REVOLVE

Revolve is a quarterly document that provides an update on the current trends and issues pertinent to young people in Australia. Revolve provides an interpretation as to what the research means for YFC and Christian youth workers, which incorporates recommendations about how we can do our ministry and mission better. Revolve is a means by which we can be attuned to the issues and needs of Australia's young people so as to better meet and respond to them.

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