

Youth at Risk – Our approach to transformation

Youth at Risk believes that all young people should have a worthwhile future, no matter what has happened in the past or how difficult their current circumstances.

Youth at Risk designs, develops and delivers innovative community programmes which enable some of society's most alienated young people to accept responsibilities and transform their lives.

Youth at Risk works in partnership with central government, Local Authorities, other agencies and sponsoring companies to create long-term, measurable change.

Our methods are challenging. Our success rates have been dramatic.ⁱ

The core issues we address

Trust & Respect

Underpinning our work with at risk young people is recognition of a crucial loss of trust and respect about young people and between young people.ⁱⁱ Trust and respect are crucial values for communities to hold and share, in order to support community cohesion and individual pro-social development.ⁱⁱⁱ

Respect – Although often seen as an external belief, the Youth at Risk approach is that respect is first about ourselves and then about being able to respect others. The lack of self confidence exhibited by our young people^{iv} is clear testimony to their loss of self respect and this provides a clear steer for their development.

Trust – To discover respect, an individual needs to develop trust – trust in themselves and in those around them. If young people can allow themselves to trust, trust is more likely to show up in their relationship to themselves, to the support that's offered to them and in their relationships within their communities.^v

Research shows that if you deal with issues in an active way, you are more likely to learn, change and progress.^{vi} At Youth at Risk we provide opportunities for these concepts to be discovered for themselves through **discussion** and **experiences**. This is the basis of our approach to support for at risk young people.

The Role of Professional and Community Support

Youth at Risk has learnt over its 17 year history that change processes must involve the support structures around a young person in order to create sustainable change and to enable young people and their communities to develop together. This is supported by research and current policy.^{vii} Evidence shows that young people are increasingly spending time in social rather than family situations (more so than young people in any other European country)^{viii} and often turn to gangs to look for all the elements that hold a community together – a common identity, role models, a sense of safety.^{ix} These features need to be commonly understood and worked with within communities in order to build mutual trust and respect between young people and the adults around them.

Who do we work with?

Youth at Risk has, "considerabl[e]... experience... at motivating and engaging the most difficult to reach young people."^x

Who are Youth at Risk's beneficiaries?

There are numerous definitions of what 'at risk' means for young people and, as a consequence, what changes an intervention is making and for whom.

Youth at Risk has developed its own model of who we work with based on our understanding of the issues, the range of intensity possible within our programme interventions and our model of growth and development.

At Youth at Risk we work with ***disaffected and marginalised young people who lack the social and emotional skills to see their potential, access support and connect with their communities.***

Young peoples' current thinking about themselves, and therefore their behaviour, might have led their families, their communities and/or their youth support services to label them as 'hard to reach', 'unresponsive' to support or 'disinterested' in themselves and those around them. Their current risks could be on a spectrum from not achieving their predicted educational grades, to engaging in anti-social behaviour, to being imprisoned for criminal behaviour.

The intensity of work, the level of support from professionals and communities and the focus for our ultimate programme outcomes will depend on the initial assessment of risk for the young people involved (see **Fig 1**).

Youth at Risk's beneficiaries usually:

- are aged **15 to 24**,^{xi}
- **have the presence of anti-social behaviour or underachievement in more than one area of their life** (e.g. behavioural problems at home, not applying themselves at school, bullying or exclusion from school, criminal behaviour, alcohol or drug misuse, or cultural conflict);
- **at least one risk factor** related to the root causes of anti-social behaviour, i.e. low self esteem, low aspirations for the future, little sense of internal control,^{xii} unable to handle negative experiences effectively, no committed family adult, no committed adult outside of the family, or involvement in anti-social networks.

Do we create the willingness to change or work with those who are already ready? A hypothesis about retention

Some external evaluations of Youth at Risk's work^{xiii} have raised the question of whether we only work with those young people who are already motivated to change. Our hypothesis is that **our enrolment process is crucial in creating that willingness to change** and that our programmes help young people to create their own possibilities through this.

We know that the path to self development and achieving goals is rarely a smooth one. For every step forward, there may be another step back. So dealing with setbacks and building resilience are part of our programmes.

Our experience to date is that we are more likely to experience retention issues in our programmes where we do not allow for sufficient time during enrolment to support the generation of that willingness to change within young people who are participating, and / or are not clear with referral agencies what the referral criteria are, and/or we do not have access to train and support key professionals to support young people through the programme effectively. As such, these are three key elements that we see as crucial to successfully developing our programmes.

What's our approach to supporting young people and communities?

Youth at Risk's basic hypothesis is that **all young people have potential to achieve**. However, they need support and a coherent framework to realise it and act upon it.^{xiv}

Our model is grounded in years of reflective practice.^{xv} The methodology we use in order to create sustainable breakthroughs in young peoples' self perception, trust and respect was originally developed in the USA amongst a group of international practitioners experienced in working with severely disaffected young people and communities. Our UK model continues to develop from Youth at Risk's reflective practice and evaluation. Our approach works in a similar way to a range of theoretical and psychological frameworks, but in fact offers our own unique blend of techniques that ensure young people and their support communities learn, develop, grow and change and then embed that development and change during and after the programme. We've expanded on our approach and techniques and how they may be similar to other frameworks in the **appendix** to this paper.

Our Change Process

Our programmes are not offering skills and knowledge in the way that many forms of 'training' do; our programmes focus on **mindsets, beliefs and human relations**.^{xvi}

We focus on helping individuals to **create and sustain that change for themselves**. In this sense, we operate in a similar manner to Transactional Analysis^{xvii} approach to supporting young people on an **adult to adult** basis – ensuring that they see their own responsibility for their choices and actions. This approach within our work has been praised by MORI as a crucial element to forming sustainable change with young people.^{xviii}

“The coaching training provided by Youth at Risk has allowed our students to investigate different ways of thinking and to consider a whole new approach to resolving issues. In the well planned, safe and supportive environment, students were encouraged to openly and honestly share their goals with the rest of the group. They were challenged in a positive way to consider both their strengths and weaknesses in light of their future goals. Students developed confidence as they worked productively with other members of the group to learn and model what a coaching relationship is.... The nature of the training really encourages students to think and question. Consequently, the philosophical aspects of the course can prove an academic and mental challenge to even the brightest student.”^{xix}

In a similar manner to **George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory**,^{xx} Youth at Risk believes that support needs to work through a series of 'layers' of self beliefs and perceptions that young people may have about themselves and the world, in order to create a breakthrough in young peoples' motivation to change, to reframe their view of themselves as one of possibility, to build the attachment process of trust and respect, and finally to support them in shifting their behaviour to make and sustain positive choices, access support and to make steps towards goals they have set themselves.

The crucial layers of personal construct that need to be developed in order to create sustainable changes in young peoples' self

perceptions; trust and respect are outlined below and expanded upon in the **appendix**.

- **Layer 1** – Creating **motivation to change**, a belief in young peoples' possibility and their responsibility to change through the enrolment process and continue to develop this through the intensive training and follow-ups.
- **Layer 2** – The intensive training, follow-ups and (where used) physical and mental challenge^{xxi} are used to **release trauma and negative personal constructs** by exposing young people to their fears in a safe environment.
- **Layer 3** - Trainers support young people to **reframe their views** of themselves and others positively and to **build trust and respect** in themselves and in others. Ready to accept and work with support, they explore what their possibilities are, what their choices are and their responsibility to act.
- **Layer 4** – With a life coach committed to the young person's possibilities, the young person develops goals, works towards achieving them and **builds resilience** by exploring choices when confronted with challenging situations, mistakes^{xxii} and achievements. Through this process, they will **develop trust in themselves, others and community**, as well as possibility, choice and responsibility.
- **Layer 5** –, **Professionals and / or community members are developed and supported** all through the programme^{xxiii} to leave a lasting legacy of support and commitment to young peoples' goals and to develop mutual respect and trust.

What are our core values that bring about change and sustain developments?

Our methodology supports people to reframe their views of themselves and their possibilities through four key principles that have been developed and redeveloped through years of reflective practice in the UK and internationally:

- **Responsibility** - We work on the premise that when each of us chooses to be responsible for our own lives, we gain the power to be accountable and

answerable for ourselves, realise our goals and contribute to our communities. Being responsible, keeping promises and dealing with mistakes are fundamental to the success of our change programmes.

- **Possibility** - We believe that individuals take action consistent with what they see is possible. The learning experience of our programmes allows young people to envision new possibilities and a worthwhile future.
- **Self Expression** – Self expression is key to experiencing self worth, developing relationships and participating in a supportive community. Developing self awareness, articulating thoughts and feelings, learning to communicate effectively and exploring other means of effective self expression are essential elements of our programmes.
- **Community** - Building and sustaining a supportive community based on respect and appreciation in which everyone contributes and where there are clear boundaries for acceptable behaviour is a primary commitment of Youth at Risk. We coach participants to develop their commitments and skills in being part of such a community.

What change are our programmes making?

“The children have articulated the most fantastic achievements, personally I’ve learned to focus on the positive and look for opportunities & possibilities where previously there appeared to be none and has taught me how to deal with individual pupils on different levels. Pupils are more confident, have higher self-esteem and are more focused in lessons. Feedback from teachers suggests that the participants are more active in their lessons and relationships are better.”^{xxiv}

Our interventions turn at risk young people away from anti-social and risky behaviours, violence and self-harm, to positive engagement, having and achieving life goals.

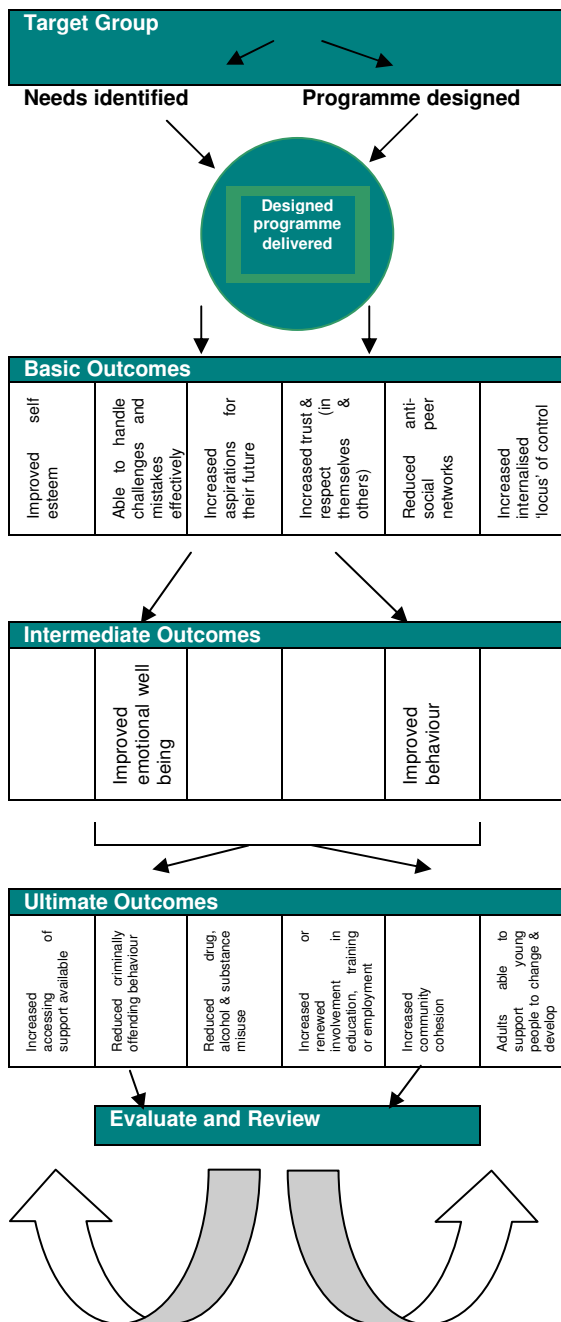
Youth at Risk has a grounded approach to developing the core skills needed to empower at risk young people to make active, positive and sustainable choices. Our programmes equip young people with the social and emotional tools to access the knowledge, skills, information, structures, systems and processes needed to achieve the outcomes within key Government youth and workforce development policies.^{xxv} They provide a sustainable framework to build Government’s ambitions for families and communities.^{xxvi}

Youth at Risk has developed a model of change that builds on insights from external evaluations, to explain why and how our approach works. This is outlined in **Fig. 1** and summarised below. The key features that make our approach effective include:

- **Tailored interventions:** For each programme, the ‘target group’ of young people, professionals and community members is identified with the client(s), and the programme is specifically designed with input from clients and young people.^{xxvii} This means that we can successfully address locally defined needs.
- **General and tailored outcomes:** For each programme, the basic outcomes will be achieved in the short term (**see Fig. 1**). Specific focus on longer term ‘intermediate’ and ‘ultimate’ outcomes is agreed and assessed for each programme, making impact clear, relevant and measurable.
- **Holistic and sustainable development:** Young peoples’ social, emotional and resilience skills are developed through the intensive training, coaching and, for our five star programmes, through the practice disciplines. In parallel to this, sustainable support skills are developed for professionals, community and family. This way, we leave a lasting legacy of support for young people and communities.

- **Evaluation and continuous improvement:** All programmes are reviewed and evaluated and results are fed back into future programme development, making for a system of continuous improvement.

Fig 1: Youth at Risk's Model of Change



Quality Assurance & Evaluation

Youth at Risk's approach to quality is to ensure that our trainers are of the highest possible caliber, and are supported by continuous training and development.

The **appendix** to this paper gives the core characteristics required of trainers. These are continually developed through regular coaching and professional development sessions and opportunities for reflective practice during and after programmes sessions.

We continually evaluate and review how effective we are at achieving programme outcomes, managing programmes and managing relationships. Where possible, we encourage external evaluation of our work. Internally, we evaluate and monitor participants' views on the quality of our training, our delivery of programme outcomes and 'distance traveled' by each of our programme participants. Our website provides more information about our evaluations and track record.

"I have learnt how to communicate so much better with all different kinds of people and how to stick to my word....And when hard times do cross your path I can tell myself to keep going and that will help me in my future, I'm sure!"^{xxxviii}

Need More Information?

For more information about Youth at Risk's approach please contact Jon Down on jon@youthatrisk.org.uk or 01763 241120

ⁱ Please see Youth at Risk's 'Track Record' and external and internal programme evaluation reports on www.youthatrisk.org.uk for programme impacts.

ⁱⁱ For example, adults and the media routinely associate young people with anti-social behaviour and do not want young people 'hanging around'. Young people are highly aware of their anti-social label. See MORI/Young People Now, 2005, Young People & the Media; YouthNet/British Youth Council, 2006, Respect? The Voice Behind the Hood. Both cited in DCSF, July 2007, Aiming High for Young People: a ten year strategy for positive activities, p.4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, April 1999, Social Cohesion and Urban Inclusion for Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods, Ref: 4109. See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/foundations/4109.asp>

^{iv} See for example, Elmer, Jn., 2001, Self Esteem: the Costs and Causes of Low Self Worth, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Quoted and acknowledged in DCSF's 2007 Aiming High for Young People: "...evidence is clear that disproportionately it is young people from poorer backgrounds and communities who lack the circumstances through which they develop these skills and so are at greater risk of poor outcomes." p.7.

^v For example, see Sandler et al, 1989, who highlights that a child must believe in the security of their networks for them to act as a protective mechanism. Also see Runyan et al (1998), Children who Prosper in Unfavourable Environments: the relationship to social capital, Pediatrics, 101 (1 Pt.1): 12-18. "Social capital has been found to be more positively correlated with child well-being in disadvantaged families than any other indicator." Both quoted in Newman, T., and Blackburn, S., Oct 2002, Report for the Scottish Executive Education and Young People Research Unit: Transitions in the lives of children and young people: resilience factors, No78 in the Interchange Series (ISSN 0969-613X) pp.17 and 30.

Also see Innes & Jones, 2006, Neighbourhood security and Urban Change: risk, resilience and recovery, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the importance of social networks within communities in tackling issues.

^v For example, Martin Seligman claims that self esteem can only result from developing and testing competencies in real life situations, (1975:98) Helplessness: on depression, development and death, San Francisco: WH Freeman. Cited in Newman and Blackburn, *ibid.* p15.

^{vii} Catan's synthesis of youth-based research supports our approach here, as do many current policy agendas, such as DCSF's Aiming High for Young People. See Catan, L., 2004, Changing Youth Transitions in the 21st Century: a synthesis of findings from the ESRC research programme; DCSF, July 2007, 10 Year Youth Strategy: Aiming High for Young People. Both highlight that parents and families are the strongest influence on young people's lives, shaping their values and aspirations.

Hauser et al (1985) identifies three protective factors for children exposed to a wide range of stressors: personality, social milieu and family structure. Hauser, S., Vieryra, M., Jacobson, A., and Wertlieb, D., (1985) Vulnerability and resilience in adolescence: views from the family, Journal of Early Adolescence, 5, 1:81-100. In Newman and Blackburn, 2002, *ibid.* p.12.

^{viii} Dixon, Margo, Pearce & Read, 2006, Freedom's Orphan – Raising Youth in a Changing World, London: Institute for Public Policy Research

^{ix} Princes Trust, 2008, The Culture of Youth Communities.

^x Lancaster University's Applied Social Science Unit for Research (2007) Evaluation of the Enterprise Gateway Partnership, working with young men in Lancaster Farms Youth Offenders Institution. See www.youthatrisk.org.uk.

^{xi} Age ranges will vary per programme, but this age range is the usual one within which we effectively target our interventions. However, we also work with adults (professionals, families, adult unemployed groups), for whom the methodology is adapted.

^{xii} This is referred to as 'internalised locus of control'. See Rotter, J.B., 1954 Social Learning and Clinical Psychology, New York: Prentice-Hall and Rotter, J.B., 1975, Some Problems and Misconceptions Related to the Construct of Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement, Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 43, 56-67.

^{xiii} For example, see Berry, V., Axford, N., Little, M., and Cusick, G.R, 2007, An Evaluation of Youth at Risk's Coaching for Communities Programme, Dartington Social Research Unit.

^{xiv} As part of their review on resilience evidence and based on Bernard and Marshall's, 1999, Resilience Framework, (Planning Framework for Tapping Resilience), Newman and Blackburn state, "While specific interventions may promote resilience in different contexts and at different points in the lifecycle [of support], these individual strategies should be based on a strategic approach, the foundation of which is a belief that children are capable of positive change.", Newman, T., and Blackburn, S., 2002, *ibid.*, p17.

^{xv} By 'reflective practice' we mean thinking critically about experiences and identifying lessons to be learnt and changes to be made. This methodology has most famously been developed by Donald Schon, 1983, The Reflective Practitioner.

^{xvi} See Leibling et al's, (2008) forthcoming evaluation of Youth at Risk's Cascade Programme, working with Professionals in two Young Offenders Institutions. See www.youthatrisk.org.uk for publication once available.

^{xvii} Berne, E., 1964, Games People Play, New York: Grove Press; 1975, What do you Say After you Say Hello?; Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy

^{xviii} MORI, 2007, Young People and British Identity, London: Camelot Foundation. See www.youthatrisk.org.uk.

^{xix} Evaluation of Youth at Risk's London Challenge Programme, 2008, Simon Payne, Teacher, Longford Community School. See www.youthatrisk.org.uk.

^{xx} Kelly, G.A, 1955, The Psychology of Personal Construct, New York: Norton.

^{xxi} This can take the form of our ropes course in our residential and non-residential Coaching for Communities Programmes, through to performance arts and sports employed through our five star experiences, such as Ballet Hoo! See www.youthatrisk.org.uk.

^{xxii} Research supports that to build resilience, it is necessary to promote children's ability to resist adversity, as well as moderating the risk factors. Cited in Newman and Blackburn, 2002, *ibid.* pp14-15.

^{xxiii} Our full community programmes will develop professionals, community and family. Our 'lighter touch' programmes, such as coaching for success in education, will focus on developing professionals. However, based on our reflective practice, we are developing more support work for parents.

^{xxiv} Evaluation of Youth at Risk's London Challenge Programme, 2008, Audrey Morris, staff co-ordinator, Bethnal Green Technology College

^{xxv} For example, the Department for Children, Schools and Families' 10 Year Youth Strategy: Aiming High for Young People and Every Child Matters agendas.

^{xxvi} For example, meeting additional policy ambitions within the Department for Communities and Local Government's Community Cohesion and Home Office's Crime Reduction agendas.

^{xxvii} The flexibility in our programme design has been criticized on the basis that our programmes cannot be systematically evaluated or compared to each other. (See for example, Berry, V., et al, 2007, *ibid.*.) However, social researchers argue that Randomised Control Trials are not suitable for all types of intervention and while RCTs may tell us the impact of a programme compared to a specific other group, they do not tell us why this impact has happened. Nor do they hold as valuable or capture the meanings and interpretations that participants give to the change the programme has made. We evaluate all our programmes externally where the funding is available, and internally where not. We focus on understanding the change that has taken place, why certain approaches work (hence our emphasis on reflective practice), and who they work for. As such, and as happens with much youth-based interventions outside of RCTs in psychology and psychiatry, lessons on effective practice and opportunities for replication can be developed out of users' evidence.

^{xxviii} Christina – young participant in our Ballet Hoo! Programme. See Leaps and Bounds to Ballet Hoo! Summary Evaluation, p.16, February 2007. www.youthatrisk.org.uk