

Better Together

Developing Relationship Practice To Effect Change In Young People's Offending Behaviour

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**Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP)
Project, School of Law, University of Limerick.**

Eoin O'Meara Daly, Caitlin Lewis, Jackie Dwane, Seán Redmond.



**UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK**
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

School of Law



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt,
Gnóthaí Baile agus Imirce
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List of abbreviations

- ARP** Action Research Project
- REPPP** Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice
- YDP** Youth Diversion Project

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About the Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice Project

The Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP) project is a research collaboration between the School of Law in the University of Limerick and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in Ireland. Its aim is to improve the evidence base in relation to youth crime and to youth justice policy and practice. REPPP's research activities are informed by, and in support of, the Irish Youth Justice Strategy 2021- 2027.¹

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/publications/youth-justice-strategy-2021-2027/>

Foreword

The notion that relationships and relationship building can add significant value to bottom-up approaches to public policy is generating significant interest.

In the face of seemingly intractable structural barriers such as poverty and the unintended consequences of complex administrative infrastructures that serve to complicate the task of overcoming such social evils, relationships offer alternative agile strategies that can, with the right will, help to achieve small but significant circumstantial improvements for citizens. Within a relational lens, gains may only be made case-by-case, group-by-group or community-by-community but, for the individuals involved, actively co-creating and co-producing solutions with a committed partner also brings with it the acquisition of new skills to negotiate future adversity.

In Ireland, we have for a long time been interested in the potential value of relationship building with targeted youth. Over 10 years ago, we asserted that effective formal interventions in youth justice contexts were impossible without existing effective relationships between young people and professionals² and then further exploring the virtues of relationships as interventions in their own right.³ Since then, informed by development work being undertaken by practitioners in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs), a comprehensive systematic evidence synthesis was commissioned by the REPPP project at the University of Limerick. This further examined the scientific evidence in support of relationship effectiveness.⁴ The report unpicked the elements that make for effective relationships and offered a practical framework for further development.

Building on the evidence synthesis, this report covers the next important part of the story. A committed group of 16 YDPs worked with the REPPP team to interpret the scientific evidence and to share their craft knowledge to transform the evidence synthesis into a workable prototype for experimentation. Over the following three years, the practitioner group trialled, observed and reviewed their implementation of the prototype. The findings from this exercise form the substance of this report.

Our approach to sampling and presenting exemplars is positively focussed. Given the early stage of the science, we highlight productive examples of practice rather than seeking out less effective examples or what does not work. This strategy is in line with the purpose of the report which is to provide model vignettes that produce evidence in a way that practitioners can connect with.

I hope that this report and the wider project being undertaken by REPPP and our practitioner partners - to investigate and tap into the utility of relationships to bring about public good - connects with youth justice practitioners in Ireland and elsewhere. The key elements of productive relationships are of course applicable to other policy domains where implementation depends on human actors and where the aim of policy is to bring about behavioural and circumstantial changes for citizens.

Dr Seán Redmond

Director

Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP) Project, University of Limerick.

² Designing Effective Local Responses to Youth Crime (2009).

³ Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (2014).

⁴ Developing Effective Relationships Between Youth Justice Workers and Young People (2021).

Executive Summary

In this report, we describe ways in which youth justice practitioners⁵ in Youth Diversion Projects⁶ (YDPs) can use the relationships they build with young people to help divert them from crime.

We present evidence from an Action Research Project (ARP) undertaken with 16 YDP case study sites over three years. Our research examined relationships between youth justice practitioners in Ireland and young people involved in or at risk of involvement in crime.

Relationships in youth justice

Time spent building relationships with young people in YDPs accounts for a substantial proportion of the total youth justice budget in Ireland. Those who work in youth diversion often report, anecdotally, that building relationships is key to the work they do, especially in terms of helping to divert young people from crime (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014). Despite the importance that practitioners place on these relationships, there have been few studies of their role in youth justice and, in particular, of the extent to which they may help divert young people from crime (Fullerton et al. 2021). There is therefore a significant lack of knowledge of how relationship building may help with crime prevention. Our action research aimed to close this knowledge gap, provide practical, implementable guidance for practitioners in YDPs and support the policy of intervening to divert young people from crime.

Our research, which built on Fullerton, Bamber and Redmond's systematic evidence synthesis, was funded by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in Ireland and involved collaborating with 16 YDP case study sites from a range of urban and rural locations in Ireland. In total, we worked with 60 youth justice practitioners, their managers and Gardaí (police officers) connected to the projects.

We addressed two questions in our research:

- 1. How can relationships with youth justice practitioners help divert young people from crime?**
- 2. What can youth justice practitioners do to build effective relationships?**

⁵ Throughout this report, we refer to youth justice practitioners or practitioners to describe those who work in YDPs. They include youth justice workers, family support workers, early intervention workers and the direct line managers of these staff.

⁶ YDPs are community-based, focussed youth interventions that address offending behaviour with targeted young people to divert them from further involvement in crime (Reddy and Redmond 2022).

01

How can relationships with youth justice practitioners help divert young people from crime?

We found that effective relationships with youth justice practitioners can help divert young people from crime by supporting them to develop social and emotional or 'soft' outcomes.

The 27 young people whom we involved in the project attributed improvement in the following 'soft' outcomes to their relationships with practitioners:

1. Becoming more trusting
2. Developing optimism and a sense of possibility
3. Becoming better at navigating their own relationships
4. Improving their ability to cope with life's challenges
5. Improving their decision-making and becoming more mature
6. Improving their self-worth and confidence.

Attributing improvement in these 'soft' outcomes to relationships with youth justice workers is limited to direct testimony from the young people in the research; it is not independently verifiable. We also cannot be certain that the young person's relationship with their youth justice practitioner alone caused reductions in offending behaviour. However, it is reasonable to suggest that attitudinal and behavioural improvements have an impact on criminal behaviour in situations where (a) young people are capable of moral reasoning and (b) they possess sufficient agency to bring about the necessary cognitive and circumstantial changes. Such improvement is less likely where, for example, young people are subject to coercive external influence.

02

What can youth justice practitioners do to build effective relationships?

Working in partnership with 16 YDP case study sites, we found that practitioners developed effective relationships by creating a culture of safety, taking the time to build trust, being supportive and responding to each young person as an individual with particular needs. We identified seven additional skills, attributes and practices that youth justice practitioners use to help them build effective relationships with young people:

1. Being fully committed
2. Communicating with empathy
3. Making connections and advocating on behalf of the young person
4. Being flexible
5. Being self-reflective and willing to use their own skills and attributes
6. Being honest and challenging young people constructively
7. Guiding, inspiring hope and building the young person's sense of agency.

These were the skills, attributes and practices that practitioners indicated as the most likely to build strong relationships that can help divert young people from crime. Collectively, they formed the basis for a new co-designed prototype model and guidance for relationships between youth justice practitioners and young people. The model was tested by the youth justice practitioners from the 16 case study sites and systematically adapted as necessary.

Practice Implications

Our evidence supports continued investment in, and further development of, relationship building to help change young people's offending behaviour in Ireland. Our research finds that relational practice with young people is at the heart of youth diversion work and that this can underpin and enhance other interventions, programmes and tools used by youth justice or other human service practitioners.

In conclusion, our research outlines how relationships in YDPs can be supported to be more effective. We believe that quality relationships can increase the likelihood of young people achieving positive change and reduced anti-social or criminal behaviour. Our proposed model should be subject to further scientific examination and development.

Chapter 1: Why Relationships?



Relatively few young people encounter the criminal justice system in Ireland. Roughly 3 percent of those aged from 12 to 17 years old are identified by police each year as being responsible for prosecutable offences (An Garda Síochána 2022). Offences involving breaches of public order, theft or damage to property and the environment account for most offences committed by young people (An Garda Síochána 2019, 2022).⁷ Ireland's response to youth crime focuses on diversion and community-based or family support services and on strictly limiting the use of detention (Cotter 2005; Kilkelly 2008; Seymour 2008; Sargent 2014; Reddy 2022). This is different to other jurisdictions that take a more punitive approach, resulting in higher custody rates of young offenders (Hamilton 2023).

In Ireland, most young people responsible for offences are referred to the Garda Diversion Programme⁸ and, if deemed suitable, to one of 100 area-based YDPs. YDPs employ over 400 professional youth justice practitioners, including family support and early intervention workers. The projects provide individualised developmental programmes to address risk factors that impact young people's offending behaviour and to help divert them from crime (Reddy and Redmond 2022). Risk assessment in the projects is based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (Bonta 2023).

Those who work in youth diversion report anecdotally that building relationships is key to their work, especially in terms of helping to divert young people from crime. Young respondents to the 'Value for Money Policy Review of Youth Programmes' report (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014) said that their ability to improve their lives was associated with 'soft' skills or outcomes acquired through their relationships with youth professionals.

Relationships in youth justice work differ from many of the others in young people's lives. They are neither entirely personal nor professional but are formed and maintained for the purpose of diverting the young person from crime. YDPs aim to improve young people's outcomes through various strategies including evidence-based programmes and interventions to address specific risk factors for criminal behaviour. The relationships established are an important and substantive component of the programme.

Time spent building relationships with young people accounts for a substantial proportion of the total youth justice budget in Ireland. In 2024, 34 million⁹ was allocated to YDPs. In a 2018 survey, youth justice practitioners reported spending approximately 60 percent of their working hours building and maintaining relationships with young people referred to their service (Fullerton et al. 2021). Staff time dedicated to relationship building with young people therefore equates to approximately 56,000 days annually for 400 staff working across 100 projects.

⁷ In 2019, Theft and Related Offences, Public Order and Social Code Offences, and Damage to Property and the Environment accounted for 58.8% of the offences committed by young people (An Garda Síochána 2019).

⁸ The aim of the Diversion Programme is to prevent young people between the ages of 12 and 18 from entering the criminal justice system. Diverting young people from committing further offences is another intended outcome of the programme (see [Garda National Youth Diversion Bureau - Garda](#))

⁹ This figure was obtained from Administrative Officers in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in December 2023 and verified at the annual YDP Conference in November 2024.

However, despite its importance, few studies have explored the role of the professional relationship in youth justice, including the extent to which relationships may help to prevent crime (Fullerton et al. 2021). It has therefore not been possible to fully understand the extent to which relationships can help divert young people from crime or how they might do so. Nor have we been able to fully understand the circumstances and conditions in which relationships are most likely to be effective. This has meant that practitioners and their managers operate in a situation where there is insufficient evidence about effective practice. While many practitioners build relationships successfully, the lack of evidence-informed guidance results in variable effectiveness between individuals, projects and community-based organisations.

Given the need to ensure that all children in Ireland have the opportunity to lead healthy and supported lives, an evidence base for how youth justice practitioners can maximise the effectiveness of their relationships with young people is therefore necessary. Our research aims to develop such an evidence base and to contribute to addressing a gap in knowledge about effective youth justice relationships. Our research has examined the features of effective professional relationships in youth justice with reference to the existing knowledge and in close cooperation with front line practitioners. This means that we can now outline the practical ways in which practitioners see themselves building more effective relationships with young people to reduce their involvement in crime.

Research Questions

We addressed two questions in our research:

- 1. How can relationships with youth justice practitioners help divert young people from crime?**
- 2. What can youth justice practitioners do to build effective relationships?**

To address the first question, we needed to understand how relationships can contribute to reducing criminal behaviour. At a minimum, we wanted to provide practitioners with a better understanding of how their relationships can improve outcomes for young people. We addressed this by consulting 27 young people involved with the 16 case study sites.

To address the second question, we sought to identify the most important features of effective relationships and the skills, attributes and practices that help youth justice practitioners to build them. To identify these features, we documented 'practice wisdom' shared by 60 youth justice practitioners and gathered their knowledge of how to practice relationships. We did this using an action research approach, co-designing an iterative practice model prototype of how youth justice practitioners build effective relationships.

Report Structure

In this report, we present the results of the three-year action research process into effective relationship practice. In the next chapter, we outline the key findings of the synthesis that provided us with international evidence on developing effective relationships. This marks the point of departure and a strong scientific foundation for our engagement with youth justice practitioners.

In Chapter 3, we describe how we addressed the research questions; worked in partnership with participating case study sites; and applied an action research cycle to collect and analyse data before co-designing a new prototype model of practice with accompanying guidance.

In Chapter 4, we present our research findings. We first describe the social and emotional changes or 'soft' outcomes that 27 young people attributed to their relationships with practitioners. We then present the prototype relationship model and accompanying evidence provided by the practitioners involved in the action research process.

In Chapter 5, we consider the findings with reference to the wider literature and discuss practice implications.

Finally, in Chapter 6, we summarise the research findings and conclude the report.



Chapter 2: What Is Known About Effective Relationship Building And Improving Youth Justice Outcomes?



In this chapter, we present what is known about effective relationship building for youth crime diversion. As a starting point, we summarise the findings of previous research by REPPP into effective relationships between youth justice practitioners and young people.

Our Point of Departure

A 2021 REPPP review (Figure 1) synthesised international evidence on developing effective relationships between youth justice practitioners and young people (Fullerton et al. 2021).¹⁰ This was an important point of departure for our subsequent work, providing a clear indication of the key features and characteristics of effective professional relationships that we could apply as a baseline of good practice and build on.

There were three phases to the review:

Phase 1: Review of Reviews

Phase 2: Systematic Evidence Review

Phase 3: A Framework for Relational Practice

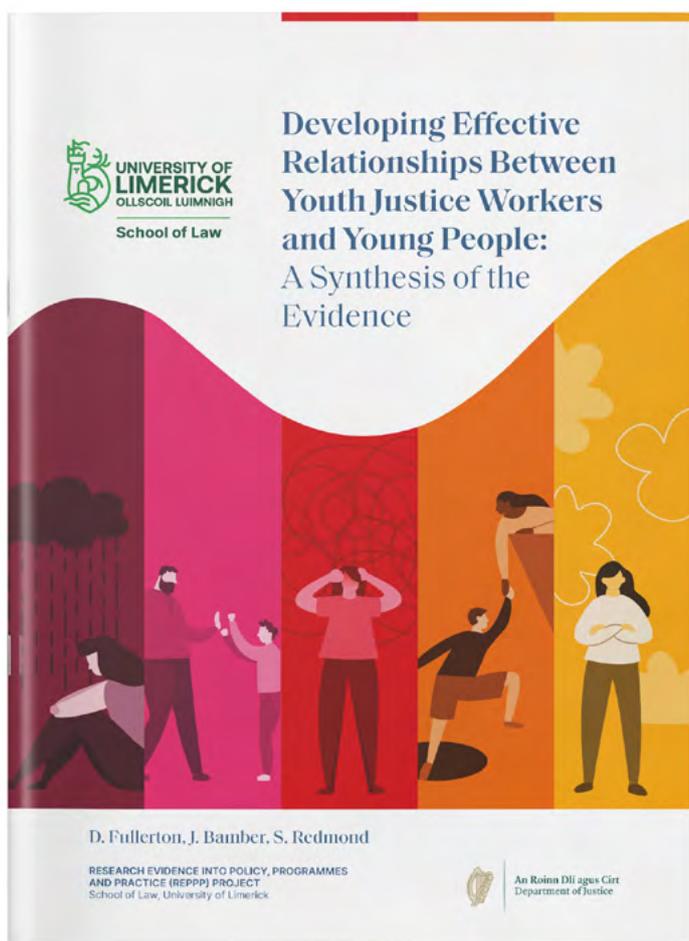


Figure 1: *Developing Effective Relationships Between Youth Justice Workers and Young People – A Synthesis of the Evidence* (Fullerton et al. 2021)

¹⁰ See link to the report: <https://hdl.handle.net/10344/10045>

Summary of Findings

Phase 1: Review of reviews

The first phase of assembling and combining the evidence was described as a 'review of reviews' (for rationale, see Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 20). To gain a deeper insight into relational practice in youth justice, the 'review of reviews' focused on literature covering a wide range of human services including youth work, positive youth development, mentoring, social work and counselling. Fullerton et al. highlighted that many of the positive youth development projects described in the literature adopt elements of youth work that are commonplace in Ireland: for example, planned programmes and interventions to enhance the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary participation (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015).

Four key questions were addressed in the 'review of reviews'. The first three questions identified (i) the features of effective frontline practitioner/young person relationships; (ii) how effective relationships are enabled or hindered; and (iii) the evidence that effective relationships bring about positive change. The fourth question aimed to address the economic benefit of the relationships; however, there was insufficient research evidence to adequately answer this question.

(i) Salient features of effective relationships

Relationship building is heavily dependent on a practitioner's ability to:

- Listen and pay attention.
- Demonstrate genuine interest and belief in the young person.
- Learn about the young person's interests and strengths.
- Use 'teachable moments' to engage the young person in dialogue.
- Model positive behaviours.

Practitioner attributes include respect, persistence, dependability, openness and enthusiasm. Practitioners can demonstrate commitment to the young person by providing emotional and practical supports and advocating on their behalf. Person-centred and strengths-based approaches underpin joint working, decision-making and goal setting and can contribute to establishing a "positive working alliance" (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 39). The quality of this alliance is associated with the attributes of practitioners: for example, flexibility and the ability to empathetically engage with young people.

Employing a "firm but fair" approach involves negotiating, encouraging, managing problems and challenging ways of thinking and helps young people achieve their goals and sustain change while recognising their achievements (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 39). Being a 'trusted adult' is important for building resilience in young people but such relationships can be challenging to establish and require commitment and dependability over a long period (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 39).

(ii) Enabling or hindering factors

Creating a supportive culture is important. "Interventions are optimal in a safe and non-judgemental environment, which includes respectful youth/staff interactions" (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 40). Appropriate staff recruitment, training, support and supervision are cited as enabling factors for good relationships. Partnerships and networks with other services are important in securing practical supports for young people. The organisational environment needs to enable not only learning and development of staff but also evaluation and review of interventions.

Factors that hinder the relationship include "overly formal relationships; lack of training/supervision (particularly important with volunteer mentors); poor communication; labelling of the young person; failing to build trust; and organisational constraints, such as lack of time and lack of training and support for staff" (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 40). The organisational climate - for example, frequent staff turnover - can interfere with the interactions between a young person and practitioner or can sever the relationship entirely. Administrative processes that prioritise form filling, for example, can result in less time given to relationship building (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 40).

(iii) Evidence of positive change

It was evident in the Fullerton et al. review that only a small number of studies attempted to measure outcomes for young people using standardised tools. Some described the benefits of process type measures - for example, engagement measures - while others prioritised the recording of softer outcomes and protective factors such as more resilience, self-esteem and social competence. Most studies agreed that 'soft' types of outcomes, such as cognitive improvements and increased hopefulness, can enable young people to achieve longer-term 'hard' outcomes in areas such as health, employment and reduced offending.

Phase 2: Systematic Evidence Review

Phase 2 aimed to understand the key aspects of building, sustaining and developing professional working relationships with young people. The main themes uncovered in Phase 1 were further examined in Phase 2 by means of a systematic evidence review of single primary empirical studies. This phase placed a strong emphasis on the mechanisms of change that are considered most likely to lead to positive outcomes. These have been described as “potent” mechanisms and include skills and personal attributes needed to engage young people or the approaches most likely to secure and maintain relationships (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 40).

The phase examined several important features of relationships:

- Justice workers’ personal qualities are of equal importance to their skills and abilities (balanced relationship).
- Trust is central to securing and sustaining relationships.
- Strengths-based approaches make a difference to outcomes for young people.
- Forming a strong working alliance and collaborating as a team on goals and tasks benefit the young person.
- Demonstrating belief in the young person’s ability is important.
- The potential for change grows when the worker reveals aspects of their lives through openness and self-disclosure.
- Having a role model and feeling cared for is important for the young person.
- Young people need workers to commit long-term to the relationship as well as providing practical supports.

Phase 3: A Framework for relational practice

The final phase of the research involved condensing the findings from Phases 1 and 2 into a theoretical framework of relational working in youth justice settings (Figure 2). The framework describes the potential beneficial results of effective relationships described in terms of “intermediate, proximal (soft) and distal (hard) outcomes” (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 63). While the framework acknowledges external factors in terms of the positive or negative moderators that can affect outcomes, the central focus is on the interactions between the young person and the practitioner.

Fullerton et al. observe that the evidence of the effectiveness of relationships is not conclusive but provides useful insights into what can work in terms of building and sustaining effective relationships.

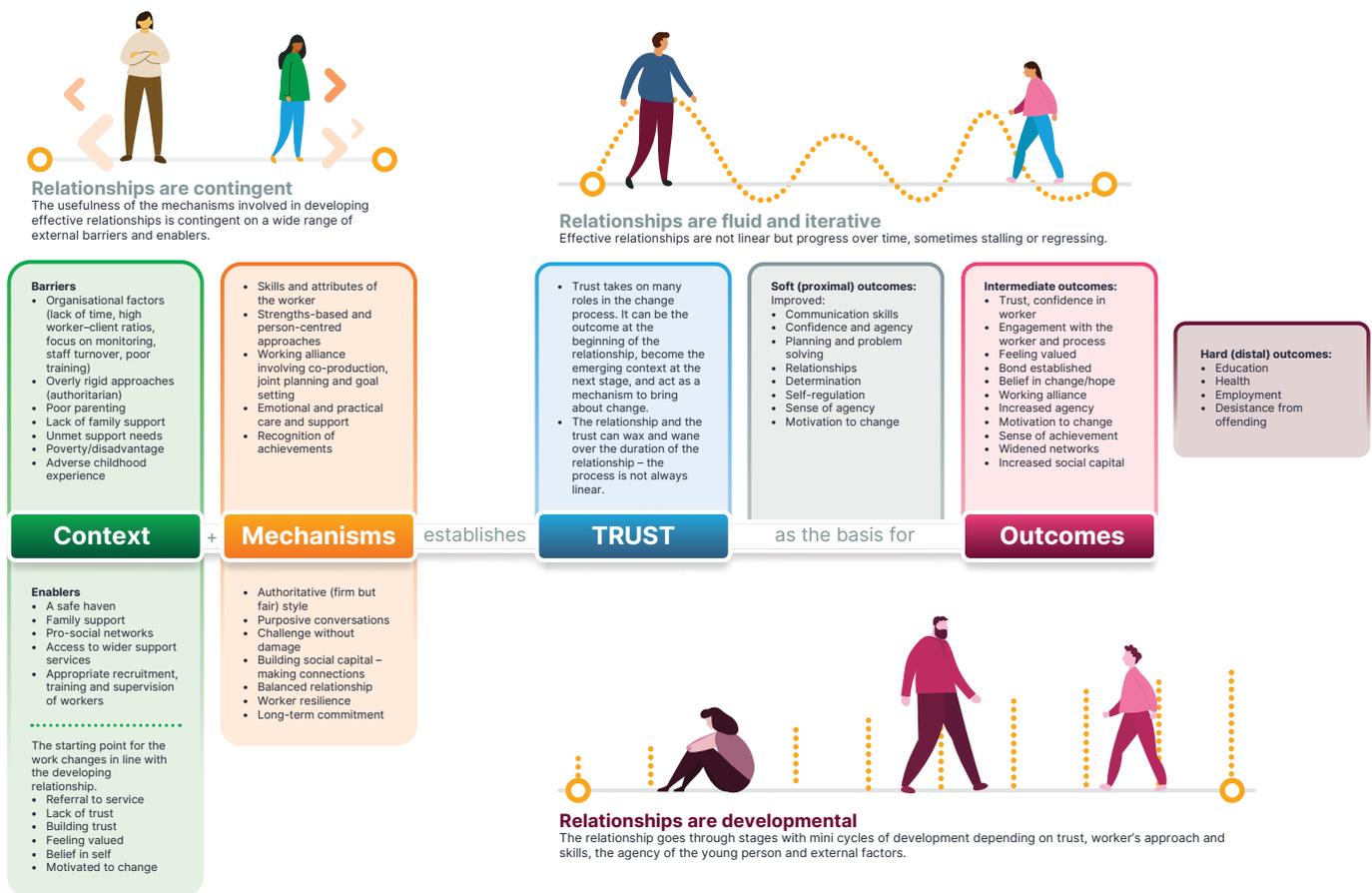


Figure 2: Relational Framework (Fullerton et al. 2021)

Conclusion

The review findings provided us with a summary of the international evidence on building and maintaining effective relationships between practitioners and young people in youth justice settings. The review suggested key practices and core skills involved in developing effective working relationships with young people including “active listening, taking the time to get to know the young person, empathetic responding, advising, guiding, modelling pro-social behaviours and challenging ideas and behaviours in a non-threatening or judgemental manner” (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 8). There is, however, no “magic bullet” for relational working (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 9). The practices and skills identified have resonance with our action research project findings. In the next chapter, we describe how we synthesised the findings of the review and combined the evidence with practitioner knowledge from 24 interviews on what works in YDPs in Ireland.

Chapter 3: Our Approach

An abstract graphic consisting of several interlocking puzzle pieces. The pieces are colored in two shades: a vibrant orange and a dark teal. The pieces are arranged in a way that they fit together, with some pieces overlapping others. The overall shape is irregular and occupies the lower two-thirds of the page.

In this chapter, we outline our methodological approach in addressing the research questions. We first focus on our action research project and the process of co-designing a relationship practice model and accompanying guidance with 16 case study sites over the three-year period of the research. We then explain how we engaged with young people to examine how effective relationships can potentially divert them from crime. We discuss how we analysed the data from both processes and conclude with the advantages and limitations of our approach.

The Action Research Project

Action research is a flexible research approach that aims to understand a system by changing some aspects *in situ* and then examining and responding to those changes through an iterative process of review and reflection (Mac Naughton 2001; Lienert 2002). Stringer et al. (2004) outline the four key steps of action research (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Four Key Steps in Action Research

The four steps of Plan, Act, Collect/observe and Reflect inform iterations in terms of which changes are documented and used to update further action implemented in real time by practitioners working in the field (Orr 2017). In our study, the model informed the collaborative process of action research with youth justice practitioners from the 16 YDP case study sites with which we worked.

Sampling

Figure 4 shows the names of the participating projects, their management or community-based organisation and their locations.

Northern Project Names	Organisation	Location
1 SMART	Crann Support Group	Trim, Meath
2 LEAF/Falcarragh	Foroige	Raphoe/Falcarragh, Donegal
3 YAPS	NC, Youth Work Ireland	Sligo and Leitrim
4 High Voltage	Coxes Demesne	Coxes Demesne, Dundalk
5 Team	Muirhevnamore	Muirhevnamore, Dundalk
Southern Project Names	Organisation	Location
6 Rathkeale	Foroige	Rathkeale, Limerick
7 KDYS	Youth Work Ireland	Kerry
8 RAY	NTDC	Roscrea, Tipperary
9 BLOCK	Foroige	Portlaoise, Laois
10 EDGE	WST, Youth Work Ireland	Carrick on Suir, Tipperary
Dublin Project Names	Organisation	Location
11 JAY	Foroige	Tallaght
12 UCAN	Crosscare	Lucan
13 BYB	Crosscare	Ballymun
14 KEEP	Kilmore West Ltd.	Kilmore West
15 Cabra for Youth	Cabra Step Up	Cabra
16 North Fingal	Foroige	Balbriggan

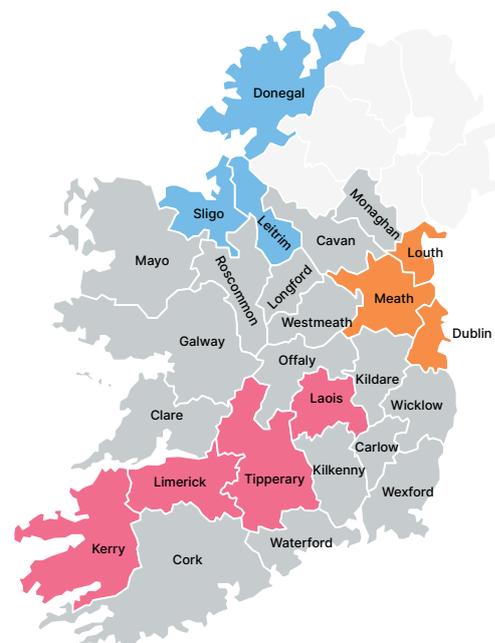


Figure 4: Participating Case Study Sites

The participating projects were managed by community-based organisations including Foróige and Youth Work Ireland (the two largest managing organisations in the network), Crosscare and other independently managed projects. In total, approximately 100 professionals took part in the research over the three years, including 60 youth justice practitioners, managers from the respective organisations and Gardaí connected to the projects. There were also 27 young people involved from the 16 sites who were either current or former participants of the YDP.

Each project was deliberately selected by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration before the start of the action research project. The selected YDPs represented a reasonable mix of management organisations and different types of catchment areas (urban and rural). However, the final group represented projects that were willing to subject themselves to a rigorous research and development process. This selection of project champions was a deliberate strategic decision.

The importance of recruiting project champions

The purposeful engagement of actors engaged in a change process to lead from within “is an often-overlooked part of implementation” (Damschroder et al. 2009, p. 2) and is particularly relevant to action research where barriers to progress may be obscured and yet to emerge. The science relating to project champions is still evolving (Shea 2021) although research in the area of champions has attracted significant attention in recent years (Miech et al. 2018). Evidence supports the possibly common-sense assumption that individuals within or across organisations who have significant credibility with their peers also carry weight and commensurate influence (Proctor et al. 2011; Proctor et al. 2013) that can “assist in faster initiation and persistence in the application of novel interventions” (Wood et al. 2020, p. 7).

Much research relating to implementation refers to the bedding-in of either evidence-based programmes/practices or policy/procedures/guidance with clear descriptions of “the thing” to be implemented (Curran 2020, p. 2). In some examples, specific fidelity measures provide the means by which implementation can be accurately calibrated. However, a key distinguishing feature of action research is a wait-and-see quality along with hypothesised outcomes from conscious attempts to plan, do and test different approaches and tactics. The inevitable uncertainty created by a process where measurement, particularly of short to medium term outcomes, is elusive can be significantly moderated by carefully selecting individuals or groups “who dedicate themselves to supporting, marketing, and driving through an implementation, overcoming indifference or resistance that the intervention may provoke in an organization” (Powell et al. 2015, p. 9).

The project champions in this action research were required to actively associate with and support the intervention during implementation, an important positionality according to Wood et al. (2020). Nascent proposals for potentially promising practice emerged unsteadily in the face of multiple adversities. This is inevitable when engaging with and challenging practice norms. The combination of unknowns in the operating environments together with the untested relationship model led us to favour ‘positive’ experiences of relationships (emerging models) between young people and practitioners: a formative documenting of positive experiences as opposed to a more conventional, circumspect examination.

Trust Contract

Importantly for the community-based organisations that were managing the 16 projects involved, we developed a ‘trust’ contract (see Appendix 1) through which we agreed with practitioners how best to work together to manage the risk of an unknown demand on their time. We established a workload agreement by asking practitioners and their managers to indicate how much time they were prepared to spend on the research project each week. Together, we agreed that each practitioner involved would spend on average no more than 5 percent of their full-time weekly workload on the project. The purpose of the agreement was to provide reasonable assurance about the time that youth justice practitioners and other project staff would dedicate to the research and to provide them with greater certainty about how the project would impact on their overall workload and their time with young people.

Co-designing effective relationship practice

Fundamental to our action research was to ask each case study site to begin to critically evaluate their own experiences of building and maintaining effective relationships with crime-involved young people. We described this as projects ‘examining their own relationship practice’. This enabled us to document what effective practice looked like and establish ‘bottom-up’ practice guidance that was co-designed by practitioners and researchers yet bounded ‘top-down’ by constant reference to existing scientific knowledge and the youth justice policy objective for positive behaviour change. To guide our action research process, we developed the following action research cycle (Figure 5).

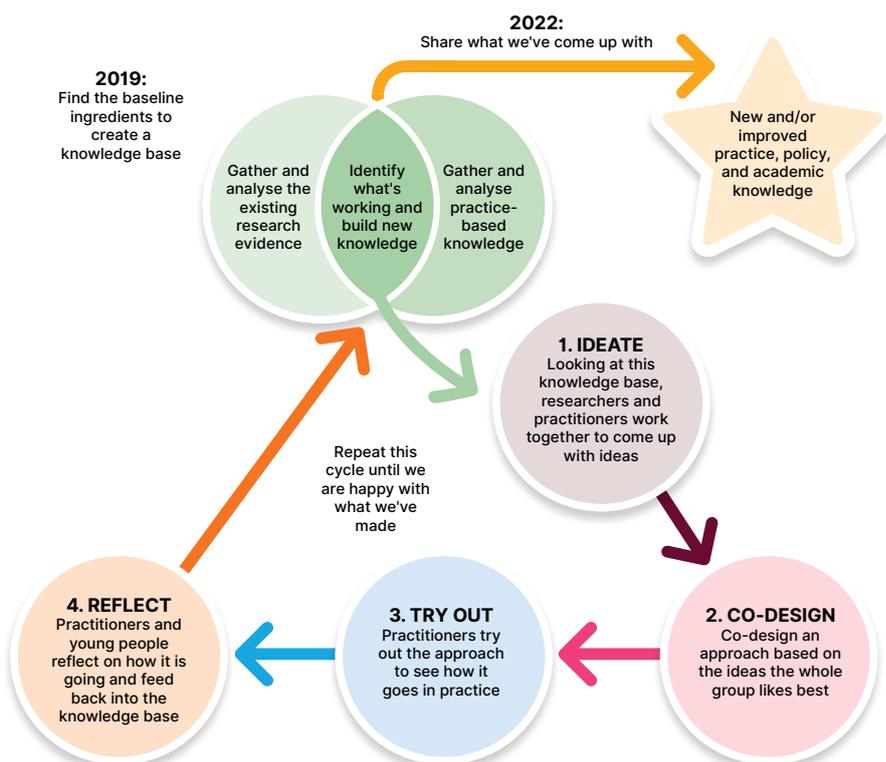


Figure 5: *Our Action Research Cycle*

Operationalising the action research cycle

Action research enabled us to learn from the collective knowledge of the participating youth justice practitioners. Fullerton et al. (2021) provided us with synthesised evidence of the key features of effective professional relationships in youth justice and several other settings including counselling, psychotherapy and social work. We augmented the Fullerton review findings by interviewing 24 youth justice practitioners from the 16 participating YDPs to find out how they were building effective relationships.

The 24 interviews were semi-structured and undertaken in person by three researchers from the REPPP team. The interviews ranged from 30 to 55 minutes long, with a mean time of 44 minutes. We recorded interviews on digital voice recorders and transcribed them for analysis. Transcripts were examined and thematic analysis¹¹ was used to generate meaning from the data. The process of analysis is described in more detail later in this chapter.

¹¹ Thematic analysis can be described as pattern recognition to identify categories and then themes that explain the meaning of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The interviews provided insights into how a sample of positively orientated youth justice practitioners in Ireland perceived effective relationship building. We consciously focused on what practitioners believed was working for them in terms of relationship building. The thematic findings generated from the interviews with the practitioners were synthesised with the evidence from the systematic review (Fullerton et al. 2021) (see merged circles in Figure 5) to inform a 'top-down' (policy and research-led) and 'bottom-up' (practitioner tacit knowledge-informed) practice guidance prototype.

The research team and practitioners then proceeded through the following four stages of the action research cycle (Figure 5):

- 1. Ideate:** 48 practitioners attended an opening workshop at the University of Limerick in June 2019. Here, researchers and practitioners reviewed the interim findings and draft of the combined themes from the Fullerton et al. (2021) review and the 24 interviews with practitioners. Practitioners generated ideas, recorded on flipcharts, on how to apply the combined thematic findings in their practice.
- 2. Co-design:** The feedback was assessed by the research team and initial draft guidance on how to build effective relationships was developed. The output of this process was shared with participating practitioners inviting further observations to inform the model. Prototype practice guidance was then prepared for testing in the 16 participating YDPs.
- 3. Try out:** In regional workshops (North, South and Dublin), practitioners were asked to plan how their individual projects would implement the draft practice guidance. All projects in the trial (n=16) then used the plans to test the draft guidance with young people in their local areas. The trial lasted nine months (January to September 2020). Each project documented the process of early testing and shared this with the research team via feedback templates.
- 4. Reflect:** Thirty-two individual project meetings were facilitated by the research team; each project participated in two online meetings, one at the beginning and one at the end of a six-month period in 2021. Each project reflected and provided written feedback on their experiences of applying the different approaches. The research team reviewed the feedback and prepared a second draft of the practice guidance complete with an overarching practice model (see Chapter 4: Findings). The practice model was shared with the practitioners and, in a second trial over six months (January to June 2022), the projects tested the newly developed practice model and guidance (see Figure 6 for a visualisation of this process)

The research team received feedback on the progress of the second trial from each project via a further round of online meetings (n=16). The team then reviewed and refined the model and guidance, and larger regional online workshops (n=3) were held to finalise the cycle of action research.

The following figure presents the development of the prototype 'Model and Guidance for Effective Relationships in Youth Diversion Projects'

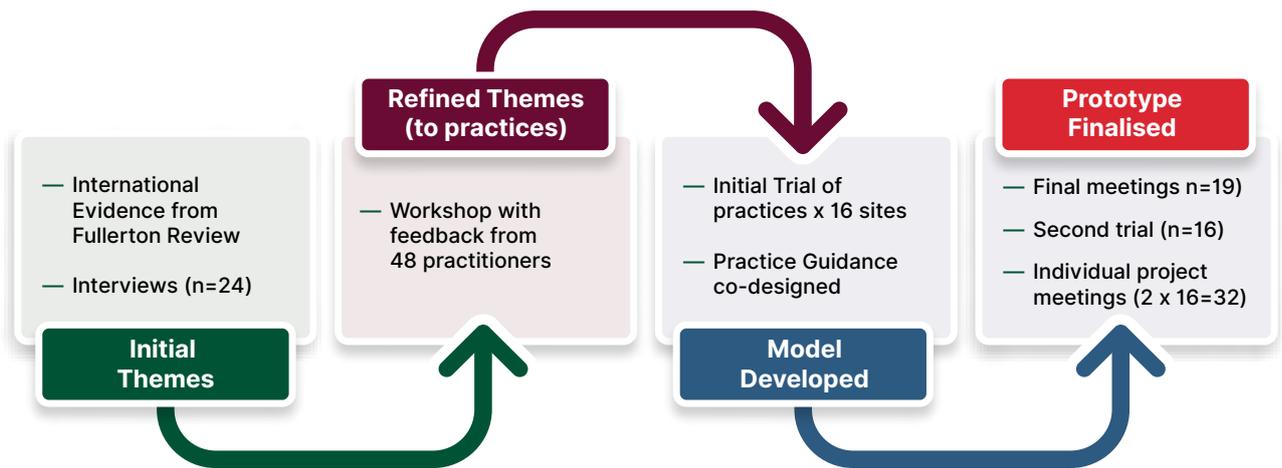


Figure 6: Development of the Prototype Model

How we estimated the impact of relationships on improving youth justice outcomes

When we reached the **reflect** stage of the action research cycle, we intensified the focus on finding out how effective relationships with youth justice practitioners can divert young people from crime. We asked the youth justice practitioners from the 16 sites to interview or speak to young people and ask them about the impact their professional relationships had on their lives. By doing this, we followed other studies that have used third parties to choose and interview research participants that they were familiar with and record the results of the conversations (Tavory and Swidler 2009).

We were specifically looking for evidence of social and emotional changes or 'soft' outcomes - the positive results or consequences that emerge from relationships, guidance, support and other human interactions. These 'soft' outcomes as referred to in Chapter 2 include improvements in social and emotional well-being, self-esteem, resilience or self-confidence or other changes in attitudes or beliefs that the young person might identify. As supporting literature has found, these changes can be important in enabling young people to move away from crime, achieve longer-term 'hard' outcomes in areas such as health, employment, substance misuse, academic achievement and reduced offending (Fullerton et al. 2021).

Sample of young people

The youth justice practitioners were free to decide which young people they spoke to as long as they were past or present project participants with whom they had built relationships. Ten practitioners spoke to 27 young people in total via informal methods/conversations, semi-structured interviews or focus groups. The young people were aged between 15 and 26 with an average age of 19. There were equal numbers of males (n=13) and females (n=14). All participants were either current (n=17) or former (n=10) participants of the 16 YDPs. All who participated were met in advance by the ten respective practitioners and given information about the research and an opportunity to ask questions before providing informed consent.

We provided opportunities for the practitioners to attend basic training in interview methods with us and gave them briefing information with guidance to assist them (see Appendix 2). Importantly,

we permitted the practitioners to select their preferred method of data collection: for example, an informal walk and talk, interviews or artwork. This meant that practitioners could consult with the young people and select an approach that was most suitable for them. In most cases, young people and practitioners opted for informal one-to-one conversations. However, two semi-structured interviews and two focus groups (involving several project participants) were undertaken.

For consistency, we asked the ten youth justice practitioners to focus on two overarching areas of enquiry:

1. What personal changes happened for you as result of this relationship?
2. What did you gain from your relationship with your youth justice worker?

In the briefing information, we included a feedback sheet to record the conversations and add any additional observations (see Appendix 3). Three practitioners provided us with transcripts of two interviews and one focus group.

The ten youth justice practitioners undertaking the research were also asked to record any changes they had noticed in the young people; this was provided for on the feedback sheet. These observations, often based on their experiences of working together over multiple years, provided separate but supplementary data documenting changes that practitioners attributed to the relationship. As the ten youth justice practitioner observations were minimal, we combined both data sets (young person and practitioner) in our thematic analysis.

How we analysed the data from the action research cycle and conversations with young people

We recorded and transcribed the 24 practitioner (baseline) interviews undertaken at the start of the action research cycle. We uploaded them to NVivo¹² and reviewed the data. We used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) and the six steps¹³ illustrated in Figure 7.

We began by reviewing the data line by line and attaching meaning to, or 'coding', sections of text. We then defined the codes and generated categories and subcategories by reviewing and grouping units of similar meaning together combining those that "looked/felt alike" (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, p. 136). We refined initial categories, generating further subcategories and core categories. We reflected on the core categories and subcategories and refined again where necessary. Finally, we generated themes that represented the combinations of the refined categories.

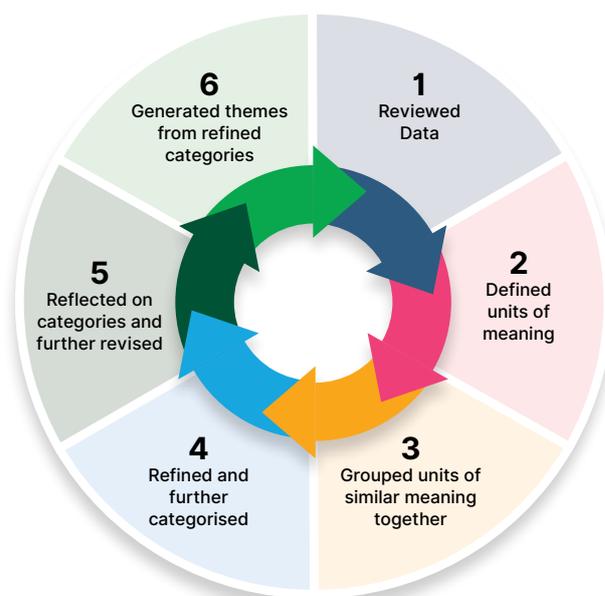


Figure 7: Our Approach to Data Analysis

¹² NVivo is a computer software program or form of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) used to aid the analysis of qualitative and mixed-methods research (Bazeley and Jackson 2013).

¹³ These were based on similar steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Three researchers were involved in the analysis. We met numerous times following data collection to reflect on the development of codes, categories and themes. At times, we repeated some of the steps to further the analysis and present a clearer thematic picture of the data.

We repeated this process, developing codes, categories and themes, in our analysis of the records of the conversations between practitioners and young people and when we received feedback from practitioners at various points in the action research process (see Figure 6). Most of the data from the young people came from the pre-designed feedback sheets (see Appendix 3) returned to us by practitioners. We categorised in the same way any additional statements regarding changes the practitioners had noticed in the young people. Practitioner statements were provided for by a free text box in the feedback sheets.

For the feedback from practitioners at various points in the action research process, we had a combination of flipcharts (after the initial workshops at the University, for example) and Word documents sent to us by projects after each trial of the guidance. Although it was easier to apply thematic analysis as described in Figure 7 to written material, we found ourselves reverting to more traditional physical arrangements for data analysis with the flipchart material: “a room with walls on which visual displays of data and other information can be adhered to” (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, p. 131). From there, we were able to see and group units of meaning in a collaborative and iterative way usually on additional flipcharts (see Appendix 4 for example of flipchart feedback received at the initial workshop with 48 practitioners).

Limitations and strengths of our approach

For our action research cycle, we applied qualitative methods. Qualitative research is concerned with the nature of and understanding of things and focuses on in-depth inquiry (Ryan-Nicholls and Will 2009). While the focus on depth was particularly important for understanding practice, there were limitations. For example, asking practitioners what they think is effective in their own practice requires trust and honest reflection, but subjective recall is inherently open to bias. Nonetheless, favouring positive modelling of good practice as opposed to critique of less effective practice was consistent with our overall change strategy.

The primary advantage of using action research, as distinct from any other research method, is that it enabled us to build our evidence base developmentally and iteratively. The approach prioritised the collective ‘practice wisdom’ of the youth justice practitioners and was informed by Fullerton et al. Practitioners’ knowledge of what works combined with their experiences of trialling the model and guidance was important to test the practical application of the co-design process. Using action research allowed us to adapt and respond to the changing needs of the projects and the young people they were supporting in each case study site, including the needs that emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviewing potentially vulnerable young people

Youth justice practitioners participating in the study were asked to undertake interviews with young people with whom they had relationships. The principal advantage of this was that it provided safe albeit indirect, access to a potentially vulnerable group who may otherwise have been unwilling to talk openly to outsiders about the intimate subject of relationships (see Tavory and Swidler 2009; Swidler and Watkins 2015). The disadvantage was that the youth justice practitioners may have selected young people whom they knew would provide safe or socially desirable¹⁴ answers.

While we felt this was the more appropriate option for the sample, it also meant that we were reliant on information provided by practitioners that was susceptible to additional bias. Additionally, the feedback templates were secondary sources, sometimes limited to brief remarks - whatever the young people were willing to divulge to practitioners. These potential disadvantages combined with selection and desirability bias means that some of the evidence may be limited to descriptive rather than evaluative accounts.

Nonetheless, indirect reports of how young people felt about their relationships with youth justice practitioners are seldom heard but give distinctive and important insights into the mechanisms through which relationships are most likely to divert young people from crime.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the research process

The initial trialling of the model and guidance by projects was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Government health restrictions limited many of the services available to young people including YDPs; this delayed aspects of the research process. Government bans on travel also forced us to delay and, in some cases, cancel regional and national workshops with the youth justice practitioners. To adapt to these changes and continue to progress the project, we switched to using online meeting tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams and used feedback templates to collect some of the data as these could easily be sent to us in emails.

Ethics

The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Limerick. Participation in the research was voluntary for the YDPs, the youth justice practitioners and the young people who participated.

In this chapter, we have presented our approach to addressing the research questions while outlining how we collected and analysed the data. In the next chapter, we document our findings.

¹⁴ Holden and Passey (2009) describe social desirability in research as the tendency for one to present in a generally favourable fashion.

Chapter 4: Findings



In this chapter we present our research findings. First, we address how relationships with youth justice practitioners help divert young people from crime. Here, we describe the social and emotional changes or 'soft' outcomes that young people and youth justice practitioners identified along with evidence from the selected data collection methods. We then address what youth justice practitioners can do to build effective relationships. Here, we describe the findings that led to the development of the prototype relationship model and guidance, along with evidence from our action research process.

How relationships with youth justice practitioners help divert young people from crime

From testimonies of 27 young people who took part in the research¹⁵, we identified six key social and emotional changes. Figure 8 presents these changes, or 'soft' outcomes, which are weighted from 1 to 6 according to the frequency of their mentions¹⁶ by the young people and practitioners.



Figure 8: 'Soft' Relational Outcomes Described by Young People and Practitioners

¹⁵ The data came from 27 young people in total via informal conversations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The data also contained supplementary observations on feedback sheets from ten youth justice practitioners. See chapter 3 for more details.

¹⁶ For example, becoming more trusting was the most mentioned 'soft' outcome according to young people and practitioners.

1. More trusting

Young people stated that their relationships with practitioners had helped them to become more trusting and to learn to trust other people, including those in authority. One manifestation of their growing trust was their increased willingness to talk openly with others. As one young person said:

"I can talk to my worker, and she listens. I would never talk to anyone before."

These changes were also observed by some of the practitioners. For example, one noted that:

"One [young person] has opened up and over time has gained trust to share her feelings and story. As their confidence in the relationships grew, others have become more willing to trust others in authority, including teachers, social workers and Gardaí."

Another practitioner noted that a young person with whom they had worked had shown increased levels of trust with other staff from the YDP and had discussed personal issues, criminal behaviours and attitudes. Practitioners noted that several young people described certain characteristics that had made it possible for them to trust each other. This included reliability, their willingness to listen without judgment and their patience in allowing the relationship to develop at a natural pace. Some young people reported that practitioners often stayed in regular contact and were readily available to help them. Some practitioners also described their efforts to stay in contact with the young people with whom they had worked previously, noting that this contact appeared to have a positive impact on them. As one practitioner noted:

"We try to stay in a young person's life even when they've stopped coming [to the Youth Diversion Project]. Simple things that take little effort but make a huge difference: stopping the car to say hello, sending Christmas cards, checking in [with the young person]."

In some cases, the consistency of this approach typified that of other close, natural relationships. For example, one young person remarked about their practitioner that they were:

"Like an older sister, always there when you need something or help to get a problem sorted."

Some young people noted that their practitioner would listen to them without judgment, for example, saying they felt they could:

"Say anything and things that I wouldn't have been talking to other people about."

Other young people noted that, because youth justice practitioners were open-minded and were not judgmental, they felt more inclined to turn to them for assistance in times of difficulty. In turn, such approaches often provided practitioners with additional opportunities to demonstrate their trustworthiness to the young people with whom they worked.

Some young people also commented on the time required to build trust and noted that it had been possible to do so, in part, because the practitioner had not rushed them but had waited for them to become more open and willing to engage. One young person noted that they could:

"Talk for ages [with the youth justice practitioner and]...never felt rushed to leave"

2. Increased optimism and hope

Young people described becoming more optimistic, hopeful and focused on their future because of their relationships with their youth justice practitioner. They described learning to look at events, situations and even some aspects of their lives differently. In many cases, this included an increased ability to see other options available to them. For example, one young person suggested:

"Old normal is now not normal due to the relationship, I see with more clarity how things were and how they could be different."

Practitioners suggested that, for some young people they spoke to, increased optimism and hopefulness manifested as an increased interest in education and work and stronger aspirations for the future. Others suggested that, in some cases, the young people related the changes in outlook to being more open to listening to the views of their youth justice practitioners and other adults. Some young people also said that they benefited from getting practical help in finding work or enrolling in further education. Their success in doing so contributed to their growing optimism and hopefulness. At the same time, some young people related their increased optimism and hopefulness to the support and encouragement of the practitioners, which broadened their sense of what they could achieve in their lives. One practitioner reported:

"Notably, some of the young people also acknowledged the need to do more for themselves to improve their circumstances. By helping them to see what they could do, see how things in their lives could change for the better, and how they could exercise greater control over their lives they could achieve more."

3. Better at navigating own relationships

Practitioners noted that several young people reported becoming better at managing their own relationships with others - for example, with their own family members - because of their relationships with their youth justice practitioner. Practitioners noted that some young people became more comfortable, willing and able to talk more freely and were better at explaining their thoughts, feelings and needs. Some young people reported that their improved self-expression had made other people whom they knew more likely to listen to them and better able to understand their points of view. For example, one young person explained:

"This helped me greatly with my relationship between me and my Mam...me and my Mam get on great now, which is a massive plus, and these changes wouldn't have occurred without them [the youth justice worker], so I'd say the changes are a result of it"

For many practitioners, improvements in communication aided self-expression and a greater sense of being heard which, they suggested, resulted in noticeable improvements in the young person's relationships. They also suggested that improvements in communication may also have helped young people to listen and thus develop an increased awareness of other people's feelings.

4. Improved coping skills

In interviews, some young people described how their relationships with practitioners had helped them to learn the skills required to cope more effectively with challenging circumstances. This included learning to recognise signs that they were struggling to cope with the difficulties of life: for example, deteriorating mental health. By becoming better able to recognise stressors in their lives and their emotional responses to them, some young people found themselves becoming better able to cope with strain. Reflecting on the changes they had observed in the young person with whom they had worked, one practitioner noted:

"[the young person] has much better self-control and when a situation on the last day of school occurred...she rang [me]. Unlike in the past, when she would have lost her temper, she remained calm and could talk about her frustration".

One young person credited their improved ability to cope under duress to the support, encouragement and belief the youth justice worker had shown them. The young person suggested that the non-judgemental approach used by their practitioner encouraged them to seek support in dealing with difficult situations, noting that:

"The relationship...has helped me because I can turn to them for anything, whether it's something happy or negative, and I know they will never judge me in a million years. It's helped me better deal with situations with friends, family, and school".

5. Improved decision making and maturity

Young people described themselves as becoming more mature and better at making decisions, with some influence attributed to their relationships with youth justice practitioners. They described being better able to control their impulses and, based on discussions they had with workers, to think more carefully about the consequences before acting. Some young people also discussed these changes in the context of improvements in their ability to interact with others and to deal with disagreements and other interpersonal disputes. For example, speaking in a focus group, one young person said:

"The relationship that we have with ye has changed the way we look at situations. It's made us think about what we do instead of just going straight at the problem. For example, if we get into fights with friends or family, instead of going straight to talking back at them, we now think about what we say and do".

Some young people described general improvements in self-regulation and self-control and in considering the long-term consequences of their actions. For example, one young person stated:

"I think the [project] has had a huge impact on me because I feel I am after maturing a lot with school because they have taught us that getting cheeky and being rude to the teachers isn't going to get us anywhere. I try to focus on keeping the head down and getting on".

Another young person described this increased maturity as improvements in their ability to make decisions, saying:

"I feel like I think things through a lot more now, and this is the case because of their help... Through them walking me through my decisions, and kind of analysing them and showing me how to make stronger ones".

Other young people demonstrated recognition of the factors that could contribute to their offending, including how they tended to react to arguments and other interpersonal disputes. Some said that, because of their relationships with their youth justice practitioners, they had been better able to recognise these dangers and triggers and to make better choices by avoiding situations that were costly.

6. More self-worth and confidence

Young people described gaining self-confidence and developing better self-esteem. Some attributed this change to feeling valued by the practitioner, which had helped them to see themselves in a more positive light. One young person suggested that, because of a positive relationship with a worker, they felt safe and comfortable with who they were. Other young people explained that they had become more confident, more accepting of themselves and more self-assured because of their relationships. For example, one young person explained how, after every meeting with the practitioner, they:

"Felt lifted and more positive about my life as I didn't really think much of myself before."

Some young people described a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence at the time they first met their youth justice practitioners. For example, one young person stated:

"[I]am nicer, friendlier, now I know it's OK to make a mistake and it's OK to be me. I hated my body...now [I am] happy out with who I am".

One young person spoke in detail about the practical and emotional support they received from their youth justice practitioner and the effect their relationship had. They explained:

"[they] helped change my view of myself and had made me feel valued, I was able to be myself and have confidence to do things I wouldn't normally do. I can honestly say she saved my life."

Youth justice practitioners also made observations of changes in self-esteem and happiness. For example, one practitioner shared:

“[they] always looked frightened and walked with [their] head down when they first engaged in the project, but now there is always a smile”

In some cases, the young people described how they had developed the belief to change unwanted patterns of thinking, feeling or behaviour. For example, one young person described having developed the confidence and self-belief to think and do better. Another described how their increased self-belief had enabled them to change their external circumstances by finding work and spending less time with troublesome friends.

The next section of the findings presents the evidence from our action research process and the development of the prototype relationship model and guidance.

What youth justice practitioners can do to build effective relationships

Based on the 24 baseline interviews with youth justice practitioners, combined with the interim findings from the Fullerton et al. (2021) review, we identified 18 practice approaches that described what practitioners can do to develop effective relationships with crime-involved young people. These approaches, listed in Table 1, are not prioritised or weighted in terms of frequency of mentions by practitioners. Those attending our consultation workshop (n=48) agreed that all were significant areas to focus on for a relationship to develop effectively.

Table 1: Initial Practice Approaches Agreed with Practitioners

Being trustworthy	Mentoring, guiding, and role modelling
Taking the time to build the relationship	Playing a unique role
Being persistent and consistent	Being honest and genuine
Taking a holistic approach	Caring and listening
Supporting and advocating	Being respectful and non-judgemental
Making connections and links	Providing structure
Valuing the young person	Providing security and safety
Challenging in a constructive way	Using personality and own experiences
Going the extra mile	Inspiring hope and building agency

The practice approaches outlined in Table 1 helped us, in consultation with practitioners, to create a first draft guidance for effective relationship practice that was then tested over two trial periods.¹⁷ The first trial lasted nine months (January to September 2020) and the second six months (January to June 2022).

¹⁷ For a detailed account of the methods we applied, see Chapter 3.

Practitioner evidence on effective relationships

The following evidence is provided from baseline interviews, flipcharts, feedback sheets and additional documents we received from practitioners during both trial processes.

Safe environment

Practitioners from every project noted that they could not build effective relationships without first creating a safe and supportive culture in which young people could engage with the project and its staff. They described five prerequisites of effective relationships which they felt were important for the creation of safety:

1. Providing structure
2. Providing security and safety
3. Being respectful and non-judgmental
4. Being honest and genuine
5. Valuing the young person.

Practitioners stressed the importance of explaining to young people the purpose of their projects and how they operated, often by inviting new participants to document their expectations of the project and discussing openly what the project and its staff could reasonably expect from them. For example, one practitioner explained:

"Each [young person] is informed that the project will engage with all stakeholders involved in their life and that it will not be hiding information from...stakeholders, or from the young person."

The practitioners noted that this approach had helped some of the young people to better understand the project, including its rules, and to respect appropriate boundaries. Having a clear sense of purpose helped empower some young people and demonstrated that project staff respected and valued them. For example, a practitioner from one project talked about how they had made young people more aware of their rights as children by printing and displaying posters and leaflets within the project and by involving all participants in drafting a charter.

Staff from another project discussed the importance of explaining to young people that the information they shared with the youth justice practitioners would be treated confidentially. One practitioner stated:

"We always inform any young person...referred to the project that all conversations are confidential and that the only information we are required to disclose is either about abuse, the intention to self-harm or harm someone else. Ensuring the participant is aware of this greatly increases their willingness to talk openly"

Other practitioners noted the importance of ensuring that young people felt physically safe when engaging with the project. For example, one noted:

"one-to-one sessions (were) scheduled...when a young person felt it would be safe for them to engage...We have had situations where drug debt collectors were waiting for our return to the centre following an activity"

In addition to promoting a sense of physical and emotional safety, practitioners also described the importance of developing a welcoming and warm atmosphere within the project by offering participants coffee or tea and a snack when they met. These small positive actions were described as helping to reinforce the sense that the project was a safe place and that the young person's safety and comfort was valued.

Trust, Time, Support and being Young-Person Centred are core features of the relationship

Practitioners specified the importance of *Trust, Time, Support and Being Young-Person Centred* as core features of effective relationships.

1. Trust - being trustworthy

Practitioners described a variety of behaviours that they used to demonstrate their trustworthiness to young people. Practitioners from one project explained how they sought to explain to the young people in a clear and transparent manner how they worked and the principles to which they adhered, including outlining the purpose of the project and its crime diversion emphasis.

Practitioners from one project also described using incidents as a teaching moment in which they could discuss the importance of trust within relationships and demonstrate their own trustworthiness. They noted:

"We had an opportunity to show that we truly hold young people in unconditional positive regard – we proved over time that they can trust our word. Over time these young people demonstrated their trust in (us) by seeking our advice and support on (various) issues from relationships, well-being, family, education, and trauma".

Some practitioners also asked the young people who had been participating in the project for longer periods how they viewed trust in the project. They concluded that the young people viewed the practitioners differently from other adults, including teachers, Gardaí and their parents. For example, in one feedback sheet a practitioner noted that a young person said their youth justice practitioners:

"Didn't give out – even though we don't always agree."

Other practitioners noted the benefits of having developed long-standing relationships in the community in terms of helping them build trusting relationships with the young people and their families. They believed that having a consistent presence in the area helped as it enabled them to draw on the project's history with a family or community to establish trust. For example, some practitioners explained how they had known some young people through different stages of their lives from childhood to adulthood.

Some practitioners worked with multiple members of a single family over many years. As a result, consistency was developed in terms of offering support over longer periods or through challenging times. One practitioner described supporting a young person during the public health restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and working with them to develop education and behaviour plans. The practitioner helped the young person to access tutoring to support their educational goals and one-to-one sessions to develop strategies for effective anger management.

Other practitioners also modelled trustworthiness by being consistent in their interactions with young people and their families. As one youth justice worker noted:

"We do this by saying what we mean and meaning what we say. This helps trust."

2. Time - taking the time to build the relationship

All the practitioners involved in the research agreed that relationships take time to develop. As participation in YDPs is voluntary, they also emphasised the importance of allowing the relationship to develop at the young people's speed. As one practitioner explained:

"Relationship building is the cornerstone of our work with young people...and the time it takes depends on the individuals. Young people ultimately deciding to engage leaves the power in their hands and emphasises their role in choosing to make positive lifestyle changes."

It was recognised that giving relationships time to develop, in the context of a programme that aims to deter young people from crime, can be difficult. At times, it may require practitioners to be patient and avoid focusing immediately on the young person's level of risk, the reasons for their offending, or trying to directly challenge their attitudes and behaviours. One practitioner explained the importance as follows:

"Rushing [the relationship] is not seen as genuine by young people, and the gradual progression of a relationship can take time. Young people will see through you if you are not genuine, so we try to focus on shared interests to break the ice and lay the relationship's foundations"

3. Young-person-centred - supporting and advocating for the young person

Many practitioners stressed the importance of supporting and adopting a young-person-centred approach. As one practitioner said:

"it's about all of the young person, all of their life experiences. You have to overcome your fears to work on their terms in their space sometimes to get a holistic view of their life to support them."

Some practitioners emphasised their readiness to engage the young people irrespective of their circumstances or their willingness or ability to change. Nonetheless, most practitioners consistently recognised that the primary purpose of their engagement was to change their behaviour and to support their desistance from crime.

Other practitioners discussed the importance of focusing on each individual young person. One described this approach as a way of acknowledging that the initial stages of engagement with a project was the young person's time. The practitioners also discussed the value of keeping their interactions informal and focusing their early conversations on the young person's interests and not on the reasons for their referral. For example, one practitioner explained their approach:

"I think the best way to do this is to find out what they like to do. So, for one example, before starting work with a young person, I spoke to their parent, and subsequently the young person, about what they enjoyed doing in their spare time. The young person was interested in outdoor activities...So, I then asked the young person for details of all these activities and learned about his animals, their names, feeding and cleaning patterns, etc. I would ask him regularly at the beginning of meetings, and he eventually brought me pictures of his pigeons and magazines related to pigeon racing. We also planned and went horse-riding and fishing and continued this at regular intervals".

Practitioners described seven characteristics of effective relationships

In this section, we present seven characteristics of effective relationships that practitioners described (Table 2). Evidence is provided from a combination of the baseline interviews, flipcharts, feedback sheets and additional documents that we received from practitioners during both trial stages.

Table 2: Seven Characteristics of Effective Relationship Building

	Characteristic	Description
1.	<i>Being fully committed</i>	Practitioners are dependable and will not give up on the young person.
2.	<i>Communicating with empathy</i>	Active listening and practitioners' choice of words are important.
3.	<i>Making connections and advocating for young people</i>	A 'wraparound effect' supports the young person and provides them with a voice if needed.
4.	<i>Being flexible</i>	Being able to adapt to needs at a given time – adapting programmes, interventions and meeting schedules, for example.
5.	<i>Reflecting and using themselves or their own experiences</i>	Self-awareness and using 'personality' or life experiences in a controlled, safe way to connect with a young person.
6.	<i>Being honest and challenging constructively</i>	Being honest, genuine and supportive comes with constructive and safe challenging.
7.	<i>Guiding, inspiring hope and building agency</i>	The relationship is a vehicle for the young person's development. Practitioners give a clear message that change is possible.

1. Being fully committed

Practitioners identified the importance of being fully committed to the young person and the relationship. They felt it was important for young people to know that they could depend on them which they demonstrated by being persistent and consistent and 'going the extra mile' where appropriate and necessary. One practitioner explained:

"Our extra mile is not exceptional or preferential. It is in the provision of a consistent, responsive, person centred, positive service to the young people. I remember assisting one young man who was no longer engaged in the project following his release from detention after he had asked for the project to be involved with his release."

Some practitioners noted that setting daily or weekly meetings or communications with young people was critical to demonstrating their commitment. Many noted that having consistent meeting times could help young people feel more secure and supported. At the same time, being flexible enough to make allowances for young people who were not able to meet at a specified time could also help demonstrate their commitment to them. Some also reported that young people could contact them at any time during the operating hours of the project.

Several practitioners described the value of having all staff in a project maintain the same consistent approach when working with young people. For example, some found that having all members of the team follow the same process in introducing activities and programme supports was important and could help increase certainty for the young people involved. One spoke about the value of being actively present. This meant not being distracted by other things, such as using their phones, while with young people.

One practitioner indicated that being fully committed required them to be consistent and to persist in their efforts to build relationships, despite setbacks, as this persistence created stronger relationships over time. The practitioner described efforts to establish regular meetings with one young person who was considered high-risk:

"We consistently called twice a week to home, making phone calls to...[the] caregiver and young person for about 6 months. Throughout that time, we kept in regular contact with the JLOs [Juvenile Liaison Officers] who supervised the young person, especially when they visited the young person and their family at home and even visited the home of the young person's grandparents. Even if the young person did not turn up, we would follow up with a phone or a house call. This persistence continued for a few months, and then the young person would be much better at attending the one-to-one sessions, and we began to see progress even though limited at times. The relationship became much stronger...[which] became evident through the one-to-one meetings."

Other practitioners emphasised the importance of being flexible in their interactions with young people, noting that meetings with a young person were fixed but that there was flexibility in response to what the young person needed. It was suggested that some young people were sometimes not ready to engage with the project and might view persistence as unwelcome pressure which might reinforce their resistance. Some also described how they created informal opportunities to interact with the young people. In such circumstances, they might avoid trying to arrange formal sessions and instead focus on building connections slowly by finding incidental

opportunities to talk. At the same time, they would ensure the young person understood that the project was always open to them and that they could call them or other project staff at any time.

One of the clearest ways in which practitioners said they demonstrated consistency was by being available to them even after they had disengaged from the project or 'aged out' of the diversion programme (usually after turning 18). Several noted the importance of ensuring that young people knew they could contact them even when their involvement in the project had officially ended, describing cases of young people who had continued to engage with them as young adults. Many also stated that they tried to ensure that the young people's families knew they could contact them after their child had disengaged from the project (whether or not the disengagement was planned).

2. Communicating with empathy

Practitioners described communicating with empathy by actively listening to young people and by demonstrating that they had been listening by paraphrasing or summarising what was said. Many also suggested making a habit of asking young people about things they had previously mentioned, to follow up on these things and check in with them. One practitioner explained how this practice of listening and revisiting was important:

"It's important because...if it's important enough for them to say it, then it's important enough for us to remember it and show them we have".

Practitioners explained how they demonstrated that they valued the young person with whom they worked by reflexively responding to changes in circumstances or needs that had not been anticipated. They reported how they would be available for the young people in periods of personal crises: if they were arrested or encountered other forms of trouble, for example, or if they were assaulted or threatened by others. They used their actions to show the young people that the project and its staff were aware of their circumstances or the events in their lives and were available to help them.

3. Making connections and advocating for young people

Practitioners recognised the importance of helping young people and their families to access the support they needed in multiple areas of their lives, including education and training, employment and housing as well as the youth and adult criminal justice systems. To that end, they often focused on making connections between the young people and their families and relevant services and on supporting and advocating for them.

Practitioners spoke about the value of connecting young people to other sources of pro-social opportunities and support within their communities. They often sought to introduce them to groups, activities or experiences which offered an alternative to offending. Many also described the importance of recognising the limits of their knowledge and expertise and the importance of connecting young people directly to the services they required or that could not be provided by the project: for example, counselling services. Practitioners noted they often helped young people find the professional support they needed even if that required them to contact those services directly on their behalf, make appointments for them, take them to those appointments and even accompany them. One practitioner described how their project had:

"Served as the conduit through which some young people were able to access other services".

These services included Tusla,¹⁸ the local authority, education services, adolescent addiction services and mental health services. In some cases, project staff reported liaising directly with school principals and teachers, Gardaí, solicitors, the courts and probation services and recognised this as a core part of their work.

Staff from one project explained how they would attend case management and related meetings concerning a young people with whom they worked, wherever possible. However, in doing so, they still emphasised their duty to ensure the young person's autonomy was respected and supported. One practitioner described meeting a young person before a case management meeting to discuss how they could best contribute. They also reported that young people appreciated these efforts, noting that:

"It bolstered the relationship that I would advocate for him and mediate, diffusing situations, and the part that worked is that he saw me doing all that for him."

It was suggested by other practitioners that the projects also do more than act as a broker for other services. One practitioner explained:

"The success of links made is often dependent on the ability of the young person to engage with the service provided in a meaningful way. Where this desire is absent, the project will seek to re-engage the young person with the appropriate links later. In the interim, the project continues to create awareness with the young person, linking their behaviours and attitudes impacting other areas of their daily life."

Despite the importance of making connections and advocating for the young people, some practitioners also highlighted the importance of encouraging them to be self-reliant and discouraging them from becoming overly dependent on the project. Instead, they believed that it was critical they teach them to advocate for themselves and to be heard where possible.

In making connections, some practitioners described building relationships with the families of the young people with whom they worked. Others described their efforts to provide families with positive narratives about their children, sending regular text messages to their parents or caregivers or visiting them at home when they had some positive news to share about the young person. They also described taking the time to remember and commemorate key events and dates in the young people's lives, sending them birthday wishes or celebrating other significant milestones: for example, the anniversary of a positive achievement. By emphasising positive developments, practitioners noted that they were able to strengthen their relationships with the young people and their families.

4. Being flexible

Practitioners described the importance of being flexible in their approach to working with young people. They described doing this in a holistic way by considering all the needs of the young person. Being flexible included planning programmes based on the strengths and interests of the young people. Several practitioners said they developed bespoke plans for each young person

¹⁸ Tusla is the statutory Child and Family Agency in Ireland that has responsibility for promoting and monitoring the safety and quality of care and the support of children.

depending on their needs and their personal circumstances. One noted how they adapted their approach to suit the young person:

“We meet them where they are at (in their lives) and instead of trying to fill awkward gaps in conversations by talking, we sometimes focus on trying to get used to silence because it’s what’s needed.”

For some practitioners, being flexible meant changing the way they worked with the young person as their relationships progressed. For example, one described how they had changed their engagement plans to create new opportunities for young people:

“When it’s obvious that a participant’s life experience is lacking in certain things like activities, trips, visiting a restaurant, it pays to push the boat a bit and expose them to things they may never have experienced.”

By being flexible enough to try new experiences, practitioners believed they were able to strengthen their relationships with the young person. For example, one discussed taking up a sport with the young person and how their shared experience of struggling together as beginners had helped their relationship to develop.

For other practitioners, being flexible also required them to be willing to re-evaluate their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour and to try new things. One practitioner noted:

“Just as I challenged the young person, the young person sometimes challenged me to grow and change my viewpoint and assumptions or to move out of my comfort zones. I was willing to learn and change. I was open to learning from the young person and improving my professional practice based on this learning. We are not an authority or expert over the young person’s life.”

5. Reflecting and using themselves or their own experiences

Practitioners described drawing on their own backgrounds and lives to identify common interests and experiences with young people and use these to develop stronger and more genuine connections with them. By sharing information about themselves, several practitioners found they could more easily interact with young people at the beginning of their relationships. For example, as one practitioner explained:

“When getting to know my first referrals, I tried to find some sort of common ground...and, in as many instances as possible, I tried to relay my life experiences and relate to this common ground. When it came to things like boxing, I talked about fights I’d seen or been to. With music, I spoke about my own experiences playing guitar and learning music. With school, I relayed my own experiences of getting through school and my experiences as a mature student returning to education. Whatever it was, I tried to find a suitable angle for sharing an experience that was relevant.”

Others noted that this approach could also help overcome some of the apprehension that young people might have had about the project. One practitioner noted:

"In sharing some level of personal experience and life, we exposed ourselves in a small personal way, which put young people at ease. They realise(d) that they are not just interacting with a project but are, in fact, interfacing with a person they can come to know personally."

Other practitioners described additional benefits to sharing information about their personal and life experiences as the relationship developed. For example, one practitioner, using an opportunity that became available, described how he communicated regularly with a young person who had suffered an injury during the COVID-19 lockdown. Having also been injured at roughly the same time in a separate incident, the practitioner and the young person decided to complete an online rehabilitation programme together. The practitioner sent the programme to the young person and the two of them established a regular habit of calling one another to motivate each other to complete their exercises and finish the programme.

Some practitioners noted that sharing life experiences and skills also led to opportunities for them to have challenging conversations with young people in which they sought to directly change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. For example, one practitioner described sharing their own experiences of the death of a parent with a young person who had a similar experience:

"it enabled the young person to feel more at ease discussing their feelings with staff members. In turn, it opened the door to discuss other issues and goals the young person wanted to achieve. Without this connection, the process of engaging would have been much longer. The young person would regularly start a conversation with 'Do you know the way you lost your Mam?' and further the conversation."

Other practitioners emphasised the importance of balancing this personal rapport with professionalism, being mindful that the conversation should be based on the young person's experience and not on the youth worker's. To use their own experiences effectively, however, practitioners also noted the importance of being self-aware and engaging in regular self-reflection and self-examination. As one practitioner remarked:

"You can't relate to a young person if you don't first know yourself and reflect on your own life and personality."

This practitioner also emphasised the importance of self-examination given the suspiciousness of many crime-involved young people of those in authority positions.

6. Being honest and challenging constructively

Practitioners described the importance of being honest and genuine with young people and challenging them constructively. Some described how they used conversations at appropriate junctures to challenge young people. In contrast to an authoritarian approach that focuses on enforcing rules and criticism for non-compliance, practitioners explained the value of honest reflection. Specifically, they said they asked questions that encouraged young people to express their opinions. They also listened to their views but used reason and honesty to explain the basis for

rules and other standards of behaviour. In doing so, they felt they were able to use conversations with young people to encourage them to consider alternative points of view and to challenge inappropriate attitudes and beliefs.

For example, one practitioner described working with a young person who had negative attitudes to school and their own education based on their experiences with other students and teachers. By discussing their experiences openly, the practitioner encouraged the young person to explore alternative explanations for those experiences and to think about what they might have done differently to have changed the outcome of events. In doing so, the practitioners said they believed they had helped the young person develop the skills to better manage situations and make better decisions. They noted that:

"This approach to challenging negative behaviours was unique and was different to the approach parents, school, the Gardaí and others might take."

According to some practitioners, when honest constructive challenging was used their relationships became stronger and young people began to confide in them more and came to rely on them. Some suggested that honesty helped the young people to address the issues that had contributed to their involvement in crime and their referral to the YDP, challenging them to change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. They also maintained that challenging the young people respectfully in ways that helped strengthen the relationship further was best. For example, one practitioner said that staff in their project began the process of challenging constructively by trying to understand the young person's reasons for their behaviour, including their criminal conduct, asking each young person:

"Help me understand why you're doing this and how we can help you row back from this?"

Given the importance of challenging young people from a sound foundation, other practitioners acknowledged the practical difficulties of trying to challenge some young people, especially those who may be less engaged with the project. As one practitioner noted, chaotic engagement makes challenging difficult. Following gaps in engagement, practitioners often focused on trying to re-establish their relationships with young people before they could successfully engage them in difficult conversations about their attitudes, beliefs or behaviour. In fact, many of the practitioners noted that consistent participation, routine and structure were necessary before they could challenge young people effectively. This, in their view, was because it takes young people a long time to trust and to be open to listening to other points of view.

Some practitioners also described how, when trust was established, they could challenge attitudes and beliefs that were harmful to the young person's long-term welfare even if they did not contribute directly to their involvement in crime. For example, one practitioner noted that:

"We challenged preconceived notions or hearsay...particularly around the justice system. Many of the young people we work with have been schooled by the criminal network around the justice system and their rights within it. Much of the information is inaccurate, misguided and created around the protection of the wider pro-criminal network, ensuring the young persons' limited engagement with the prosecution process. This misinformation is rarely in the best interest of the young person involved."

Practitioners felt that challenging young people in an honest, constructive and supportive manner need not be limited to trying to counter or correct harmful attitudes or behaviours. It can also involve working to provide positive reinforcement for positive attitudes and behaviours, especially when they are modelled by young people. One practitioner pointed out that highlighting the positive things that young people do (or think) can be a very effective method of promoting changes in their behaviour, helping them to desist from crime and to achieve positive life outcomes. By acknowledging when young people express positive attitudes or beliefs and model pro-social behaviour, practitioners can help young people to recognise more generally accepted normative standards of conduct and their attitudinal or moral foundations. According to practitioners, positive reinforcement for sound behavioural choices can also encourage *more* pro-social behaviour in the future and may even help boost young people's self-esteem.

7. Guiding, inspiring hope, and building agency

Practitioners suggested several methods to inspire hope, build agency and mentor, guide and act as role models for young people. These included offering young people praise and celebrating their achievements, including acknowledging their movement away from crime. The practitioners noted that these efforts could help reinforce positive behavioural choices, boost self-esteem and self-confidence, help young people to become more hopeful and strengthen their aspirations for the future.

Practitioners discussed using their relationships with young people to support their social and emotional development. As one noted:

"Once the relationship was established, we could take advantage of the timing to develop other skills like decision making because the groundwork was done."

Practitioners said they intentionally sought to encourage young people to be optimistic, including gauging their chances of improving their lives through their own actions. One said they did this by pointing out opportunities available to the young people and encouraging them to see those opportunities as achievable. One practitioner said they found it helpful to show young people examples of others in similar circumstances, such as past project participants, who had managed to avoid crime and change their lives for the better.

Other practitioners said they focused on the strengths of the young people, emphasising their skills and attributes as much as possible and supporting them to acknowledge those things for themselves. A practitioner noted that:

"Many young people involved in the diversion programme suffer from low self-esteem; while they struggle to find positive things to say about themselves, most can easily identify their deficiencies."

Practitioners from one project described helping several young women to establish a regular meeting group within the project, which the young women led themselves. Each week, a different member of the group would volunteer as its group leader. She would then choose the topic of discussion, purchase anything the group needed and lead the conversation. The practitioners used their relationships with the young people to support the group, attending meetings but limiting their professional involvement to encouraging the young women and offering them praise. The group reported consistent attendance, which the practitioners believed demonstrated its value to the young people and vindicated their approach to devolving responsibility.

Several practitioners described their efforts to support young people to reach normative goals such as getting a job. However, such efforts often take place in a context of hopelessness. As one practitioner noted:

“Many young people feel unemployable because they feel they lack the skills required to find meaningful jobs”.

To address negative self-impressions and help disadvantaged young people to enter the labour market, many practitioners said they actively encouraged them to do job-related training and acquire new skills. Some believed their support throughout the process helped show young people that they mattered to others. For example, one described encouraging and supporting a young person to enrol in a college course. Very few people in the boy’s family had completed post-secondary education. However, with encouragement from his youth justice worker, the young person completed a certificate course and began exploring opportunities to attend university. Similarly, another practitioner described how they supported a young person who was struggling at school. The practitioner emphasised some of the young man’s strengths, encouraging him to identify their other strengths and be confident about their ability.

The 'Relationship Model'

Our efforts in synthesising extant scientific knowledge and examining professional practice wisdom on 'what works' permitted the development of a prototype 'Relationship Model' (Figure 9). The model reflects a base and core layer combined with characteristics that youth justice practitioners agreed are associated with effective relationship-building for crime diversion. The model was described by practitioners involved in the research as '*the relationship journey*'.

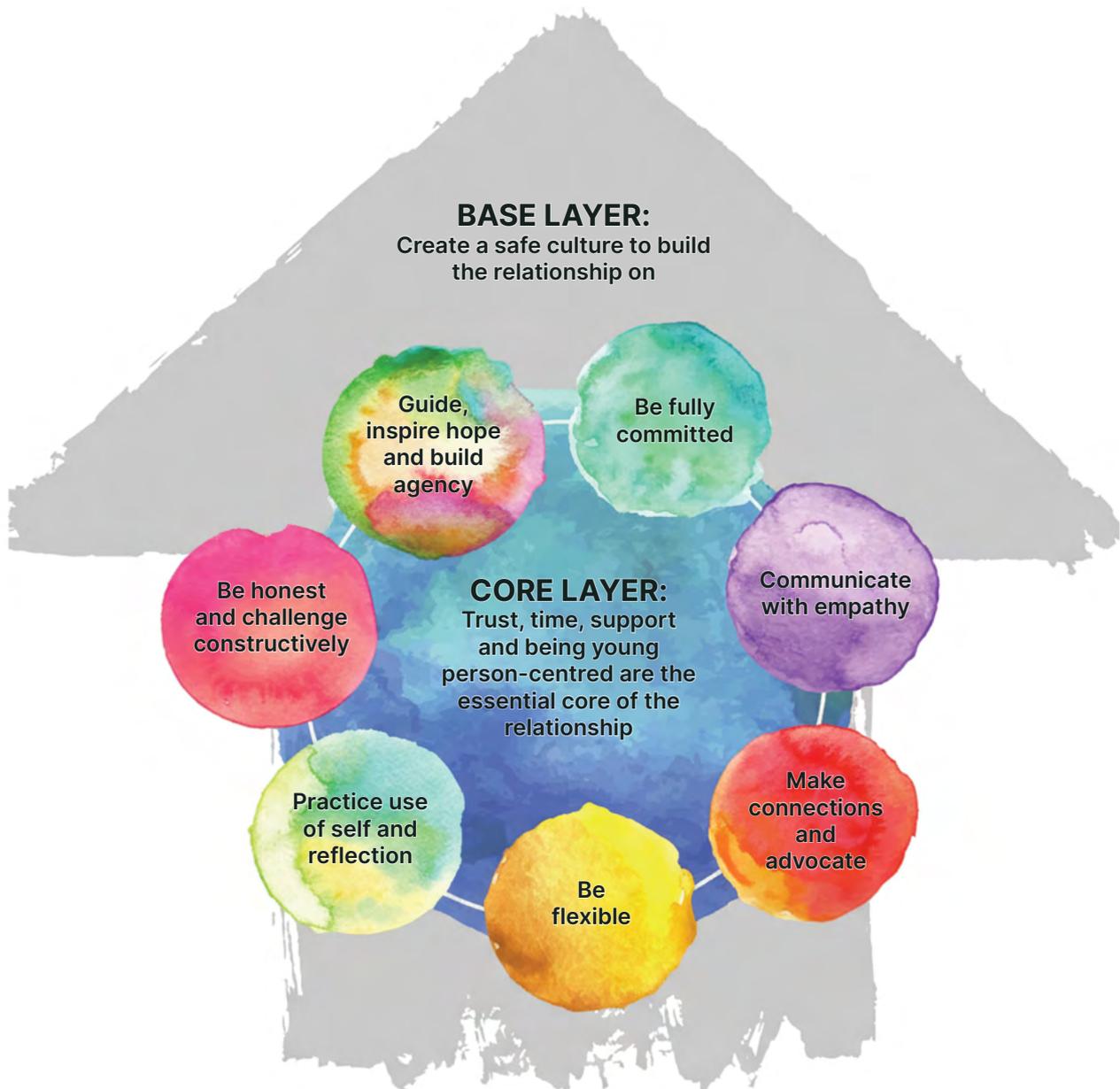


Figure 9: The YDP Relationship Model

Relationship building – an artistic analogy

We have attempted to illustrate *‘the relationship journey’* at Figure 9 by comparing it to layers of a painting that builds up with each brush stroke. Relationship building is thus conceived as an exercise in both science (accumulation of available evidence) and art (application of practitioner craft skills). The grey base layer, to ‘create safety’, acts as the foundation or undercoat on which all the other elements are built. This base layer points north which depicts the direction of intervention towards the agreed policy objective: to divert young people from crime and anti-social behaviour.

The core layer of the relationship journey is presented as a deep blue colour at the centre of the model. This layer of ‘trust, time, support and being young person centred’ describes the elements in a functioning positive relationship between a young person and practitioner. Building trust and giving time and support were described by practitioners as fundamental practices that propel the relationship forward.

The model includes seven grouped skills, attributes and practices that can progress each relationship with a young person, and which can be applied at various points in the relationship journey. These skills, attributes and practices encourage practitioners to ‘be fully committed, communicate with empathy, make connections and advocate, be flexible, practice use of self and reflection, be honest and challenge constructively’ and, finally, ‘guide, inspire hope and build agency’.

Beginning with the foundational elements and then applying the combined layers throughout the journey aims to improve the quality of relationship building. However, it must be acknowledged that practitioners can encounter unknowns and face setbacks along the way. The model should be considered as a practice compass for each individual relationship journey. It offers a small number of memorable guidance pointers (listed as elements and characteristics) rather than lengthy manualised instructions that assume professional competence in their use. The intention is that the practitioner uses the model to point the relationship ‘north’ while recognising that every relationship differs. Practitioners are incentivised to find their own way when developing the relationship with each individual young person, using the model and guidance as an accompanying resource and the overall mission toward reduced offending as practice guide rails. This approach acknowledges that every relationship must be necessarily agile, operating in an environment that can be unpredictable. The model also recognises that relationships by their nature are organic.

The detailed practitioner guidance that accompanies this model, complete with case examples provided by practitioners, can be seen at Appendix 5.¹⁹

In this chapter, we have presented our findings and described some of the ways in which relationships with youth justice practitioners positively affect young people. We outlined a new prototype model of relationship practice for YDPs, co-designed with practitioners. With examples, we also described the evidence that practitioners provided to us, throughout the action research cycle, about how relationship-building manifests itself in real life. In the next chapter we consider these findings with reference to the wider literature.

¹⁹ The practitioner guidance at Appendix 5 was twice tested by practitioners. The model and guidance were created with a view to dissemination and scaling out of the prototype model to all YDPs in Ireland.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The background features a dark teal color with a large, bright pink abstract shape that resembles a stylized puzzle piece or a splash. The pink shape is positioned on the right side and extends towards the bottom left, creating a dynamic, modern aesthetic.

In this chapter, we interpret our findings and discuss some of the practice implications.

Our research has drawn on data from three years of action research on relationship practice between practitioners and young people in 16 YDPs in Ireland. We documented ‘practice wisdom’ on how to build effective relationships that can divert young people from crime. This involved collaboration with 60 youth justice practitioners and with others connected to the projects such as senior managers in community-based organisations and Gardaí. The result is an evidence-informed prototype model and accompanying guidance for building effective relationships in YDPs.

We also asked 27 young people, past and present YDP participants, to share accounts of changes in their behaviour that they attributed to their relationships with practitioners. We have described some of the ways in which relationships with youth justice practitioners can impact and influence young people’s behaviour and improve a limited number of social and emotional changes or ‘soft’ outcomes.

Research on crime prevention among young people has tended to focus on the influence of specific risk and protective factors on offending (Bonta 2023). Risk factors can include school disengagement, substance misuse or engaging with anti-social networks while protective factors can include the effectiveness of specific interventions and evidence-based programmes (Farrington and Welsh 2008). Where relationships have been the subject of research in youth justice, it has tended to concentrate on the influence of natural relationships that feature in the routine lives of children and adolescents: for example, ties to family, friends and teachers rather than relationships with specialist youth justice practitioners (Fullerton et al. 2021).

Our research highlights the importance of practitioners’ demonstrating trustworthiness over time with young people. This connection of trust and time to building mature relationships to help divert young people from crime has also been highlighted in a review of international evidence (Fullerton et al. 2021). Increasing trust among young people through professional relationships may also have other indirect effects on crime. Trusted adults can help crime-involved young people build resilience and improve their social and emotional welfare (Bamber et al. 2016; Bellis et al. 2018). This could enhance their ability to cope with adverse circumstances without resorting to crime or related behaviours such as drug misuse.

International evidence also highlights that young people need supportive and caring relationships in their journey to adulthood (Pineau et al. 2019; Sandu 2019, 2020; Welch et al. 2018 cited in Fullerton et al. 2021). Our research supports the evidence that indicates young people benefit from “different types of supportive adult relationships, including coach-like (offering practical support), friend-like (offering social support) and parent-like (offering practical, social and emotional support) mentors” (Fullerton et al. 2021, p. 8). Practical support is important to help workers meet young people’s immediate needs and may help to address some of the factors believed to contribute to their offending.

Our research supports the evidence that providing practical support and guidance can help young people to access services, find employment, engage in school or enrol in further study as well as strengthening the relationship with the practitioner (Sandu 2020). The importance of supporting crime-involved young people in areas such as school engagement is highlighted in a recent meta-analysis of 548 studies aimed at reducing juvenile delinquency (Wilson and Lipsey 2024). This meta-analysis identified several school-related change levers - for example, improved attendance and reduced truancy - and how these are associated with reduced delinquency. It also highlighted that peer relationships and academic achievement were not associated with reduced delinquency (Wilson and Lipsey 2024). However, offering crime-involved young people practical, social and emotional support can advance the process of building relationships that leads to reduced involvement in crime by, for example, increasing opportunities for prosocial alternatives.

Consistent with our research, it is suggested that transformational relationships require persistence (Orsi et al. 2010; Bamber et al. 2016; Lewing et al. 2018; Sandu 2019, 2020; Winter 2015, cited in Fullerton et al. 2021). Youth justice practitioners who are proficient in building and sustaining effective relationships with young people demonstrate genuine commitment. They repeatedly try to initiate relationships (even if young people are initially reluctant to engage) and, once established, they work to maintain their relationships through often difficult circumstances (Fullerton et al. 2021). Importantly, if a young person chooses to disengage, a committed youth justice practitioner also provides opportunities for them to return (Fullerton et al. 2021). Persistence is necessary because the desistance process can involve a series of 'zigzag' moves in which young people 'drift' into and out of crime (Laub and Sampson 2001).

Fullerton et al. (2021) suggest a new theoretical framework for relational practice that acknowledges the many factors that affect contact time with young people. In addition, the six 'soft' outcome areas identified in our research could form the basis for a framework that evaluates the effectiveness of relationships in YDPs. Documented routinely and systematically, insights from relationship building to secure these outcomes with young people could inform project performance and practitioner tactics in building effective and efficient relationships with young people. There is of course no guarantee that certain practices or approaches can assure intended outcomes but there is evidence to suggest that they will improve the chances.

Considering the time devoted to relationship building in youth justice, few studies have explored its role in practice. This means that to date we have not been able to fully understand the extent to which these relationships can divert young people from crime or how they might do so. The model and guidance generated from this research acknowledges that every relationship is distinctive and that practitioners need to be able to respond individually and according to the presenting circumstances of each young person. Nonetheless, a practitioner can use certain skills, attributes and practices that have been tested by their peers in analogous contexts. In summary, our findings can significantly contribute to the evidence on effective relationship building for youth crime diversion.

Practice implications

Our action research project intentionally focussed on modelling effective relationships rather than highlighting ineffective or bad relationships. This was a conscious strategy in an area of limited science to build confidence in practitioner-led design and the cultivation of new creative ideas. The corollary is that the propositions we have presented in the model are still part-tested and narrative-led, albeit with a significant scientific and practical evidence base. Further testing, observation and measurement are required as the model is scaled out and there are further iterations.

Further research will help to determine whether a small number of guiding heuristics for practitioners can better assure policy-aligned practice than can prescriptive procedural manuals. Of note, there is evidence that manualised approaches to complex situations can create the conditions for greater discretion due to capacity limitations to implement a myriad of requirements (Munro 2009). Using the model as a resource, practitioners can reference what they are doing well and what they might need to focus or improve on. This process obviously requires honest, critical reflection.

Managers can also foster better practice by facilitating and supporting their staff to reflect on their relationship building. The model challenges the current youth justice convention that relationship building with a young person should prioritise gathering intelligence for risk assessment. Instead, our research suggests that beginning with trust building, meaning and purpose for relationships is preferable, with risk assessment deferred to a suitable later stage in the process.

Our research finds that relational practice with young people is at the heart of youth diversion work and that this can underpin and enhance other interventions, programmes and tools used by youth justice or other human service practitioners. Our model offers a small number of evidence-informed signposts for practitioners. The compliance requirement is small and intends to guide rather than mandate.

Resources permitting, the findings could be shared beyond youth justice settings: for example, with other human services where collaborative relational approaches are used. Our research could be developed and shared with other agencies via workshops or other knowledge-sharing fora, noting that the findings are provisional and ready to be tested more widely on the ground.

In this chapter, we have discussed our findings with additional practice implications. The next chapter concludes our report with a summary of the important messages.

Chapter 6: Conclusion



In this chapter we summarise our research findings and reiterate the main messages from the overall project.

Summary of the research

A systematic evidence review of developing effective relationships in youth justice provided our initial evidence base (Fullerton et al. 2021). We combined this evidence with local baseline data from 16 YDP case study sites on what constitutes effective youth justice relationships in Ireland. Informed by Fullerton's systematic evidence synthesis, this research sought to address two related research questions:

1. How can relationships with youth justice practitioners help divert young people from crime?
2. What can youth justice practitioners do to build effective relationships?

To address the first research question, we asked the youth justice practitioners from the 16 sites to interview or speak to young people and ask them about the impact that their professional relationships had on their lives. In doing this, we followed other studies that have used third parties to choose and interview research participants with whom they were familiar and to record the results of the conversations (Tavory and Swidler 2009). The practitioners spoke to past or present project participants using interviews or focus groups. In all cases, the participants were young people with whom the practitioners had a continued relationship. Through interviews and focus groups, the practitioners spoke with 27 young people in total and fed back the data using pre-designed documents (see Appendix 3).

We asked the practitioners to focus specifically on social and emotional or 'soft' outcome changes that young people attributed to the relationship. We also provided space in the feedback sheets for practitioners to give us additional feedback on the social and emotional changes they recognised in the young people they spoke with. We identified six 'soft' outcomes. These included young people feeling more trusting; and learning to trust others such as those in authority, peers and family members. A reasonable 'pace' of relationships between practitioners and young people helped to develop this trust.

Young people described having increased optimism and sense of possibility. The relationship enabled them to see alternative options and what they could achieve. They described how the relationships helped them to improve their communication skills and awareness of others. This led to better relationships with family, peers and others and they reported feeling happier as a result. Young people described having improved coping skills. This included more self-awareness and self-management in adverse or conflict situations. They described being better able to identify negative situations and remove or protect themselves from them. They described improved decision making and maturity. The relationship helped them to become more responsible and to think about the consequences of their actions. They described more self-worth and confidence along with a more positive image of themselves.

To address the second research question, we used action research to examine and document how practitioners build relationships that can divert young people from crime. We gathered data by interviewing 24 youth justice practitioners. The data provided us with initial thematic areas that were then discussed and further developed in 'co-design' workshops with 60 practitioners from the case study sites.

Through this co-design process, we identified key relationship practices and approaches with the practitioners in a first draft guidance of effective YDP relationships. Practitioners then applied these approaches in their projects over two trial periods. While the practitioners trialled these approaches, they reported progress back to us on a regular basis. This resulted in the generation of a prototype model accompanied by a guidance document (see Appendix 5). The relationship model provides outline guidance on how to build an effective relationship with a young person, described by practitioners involved in our research as the 'relationship journey'.

The relationship journey begins with the base layer, to 'create safety'. This acts as the foundation on which all the other elements are assembled. Next, the core layer of 'trust, time, support and being young person centred' have been described by practitioners as the essential elements of a functioning positive relationship between a young person and practitioner. Practitioners described building trust, spending time developing this and supporting the young person through engagement as priority areas which are core to the relationship journey and propel the relationship forward.

Finally, there are seven grouped skills, attributes and practices that can help build each unique relationship with a young person. These can be applied at various points in the relationship journey and encourage practitioners to 'be fully committed, communicate with empathy, make connections and advocate, be flexible, practice use of self and reflection, be honest and challenge constructively' and 'guide, inspire hope and build agency'. There is sufficient evidence to believe that applying these skills, attributes, and practices can help practitioners to address the policy objective of intervening to divert young people from crime and anti-social behaviour.



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Appendices

Appendix 1: Trust Contract

‘Trust contract’, our 7 principles of working together

1. **Mutual intent** - let have open and honest communication.

2. **Focus on young people** - we are about behavioural change and improvements for young people.

3. **Mutual respect** - time is precious.

4. **Workload** - agreed by all.

5. **Joint discovery** - action research is a journey; innovations will be co-designed.

6. **Stickability** - commitment is key, stick with us through the slumps.

7. **Mistakes but not conspiracies** - trust the process.

Appendix 2: Engaging with Young People - Information Pack

Action Research Project Outcomes Task: 'Conversations with young people'

Info Pack

This pack contains:

- An explanation on why we are doing the task and an overview of the task focus (page 1).
- A step-by-step description of the task, with accompanying tips (page 2).
- Additional prompts and ideas for completing the task (page 4).
- A summary sheet to capture the young person's main feedback, to be written in bullet points (page 5).

1. Introduction

This info pack provides colleagues from the 16 GYDP sites with details and direction on how to complete the REPPP Action Research Project (ARP) outcomes task: 'Conversations with young people'.

2. Background and rationale:

Speaking to young people about the outcomes that matter to them is an exciting and necessary next step in our collaborative ARP process. We spent Phase 1 of the ARP:

- figuring out what an effective relationship with a young person looks like;
- capturing how exactly youth justice workers actively practice these relationships in YDPs.
- and co-designing an interim guidance on GYDP relationships that captures the above.

To accompany our work on relationships in Phase 2, we now need to try to capture the impact of these relationships, in order words the soft outcomes. In doing this we hope to answer: What does the young person gain from an effective relationship with a youth justice worker?

What are Soft Outcomes?

Soft outcomes are results or consequences that emerge from relationships, guidance, support, and other human interactions, which are somewhat difficult to measure or capture. Soft outcomes measure success according to participants' perceptions of progress towards their own and project goals (Zepke et al, 2010). They can vary widely as they are sensitive to context.

Soft outcomes include things like improvements in social and emotional well-being, self-esteem, resilience, self-confidence, self-motivation, team working, agency, a belief in change, social interaction, problem solving, quality of life, and many more which the young person may identify. They are important to enable young people to achieve longer-term 'hard' outcomes in areas such as health, employment, substance misuse, academic achievement, and reduced offending (Fullerton, 2021, in progress).

As discussed at the start of the ARP process, we have been looking to involve young people in a meaningful way. It is important that young people in GYDPs co-design aspects of this research with us and we believe that young people are best placed to identify their own soft outcomes by telling us how the relationship has benefitted them.

3. What we are asking you to do:

We want you to identify a young person that you have a good relationship with and ask them in one form or another to identify relationship-focused outcomes or 'What changes have happened for them as result of the relationship?'

How this is done is up to the workers and young people involved as we feel that you will know the most appropriate method. Discussions with young people on sensitive matters like this are not always easy and we want to ensure both of you are comfortable with the task. Potential methods are exemplified later in section 4 but to ensure consistency we need all methods to have the following central focus.

The focus is on finding out from the young person:

'What changes have happened for you as result of our relationship?'

Steps	Description	Additional info
Step 1	Decide whether participating in this aspect of the research is possible for your GYDP team and young people.	It is ok if not. We are conscious that the ongoing Covid situation remains challenging for both workers and young people, and that some GYDPs may not be able to participate.
Step 2	Familiarise yourself with the task: The focus is on finding out from the young person <i>'what changes have happened for you as result of our relationship?'</i>	Remember we are looking for 'soft' outcomes that can be reasonably attributed to the relationship. We are focusing mainly on changes that the young person links to your relationship. Have a conversation with your regional researcher at your April project meeting to tease this out further if you need to.
Step 3	Decide which young person you want to engage. Ask them if they would like to be involved.	<p>Make sure to choose a young person you have a good relationship with, who would be open to talking to you, and who would be okay with you later sharing their answers for the purpose of the research. Our aim is at least 1 young person per project (but 2 or more if possible!)</p> <p>As the ARP is research on GYDP relationships, we want to put that relationship front and centre of the entire process. As such, we want to use the relationship itself as the vehicle for gathering this information from a young person. We think the experience will be much more meaningful for the young person to if they engage with a worker they trust, rather than someone 'objective' that they may not know as well.</p>
Step 4	Once you have confirmed who will be involved from your GYDP, get in touch with your regional researcher to let them know, to discuss the next steps, and to plan gaining consent.	We will provide you with additional support, as well as all documentation needed (e.g. information letters and assent forms for young people under 18 and consent forms for their parents/guardians or those that are over 18).
Step 5	Have a conversation with the young person in advance to explain the research and prepare them for the task.	Talk to the young person about the process, letting them know in the following or similar words: "This is what we have been doing as part of a research project we are involved with: we have been thinking about the way we work with you and the relationship we have and how these relationships can be helpful. Can you do the same with me? Think about the work that we do and the relationship we have built up and if or how that has helped you personally?"

Steps	Description	Additional info
Step 6	Decide how you are going to approach this with the young person. Talk to them about it. 'How' you will do this task together is up to you and the young person, whatever way suits you both best.	While the task has a set focus (focus on finding out from the young person 'what changes have happened for you as a result of our relationship?'), you know best what method to use from having the professional relationship with the young person. See prompts in section 4 for some ideas.
Step 7	Decide how you are going to capture the main points of what the young person is saying. It is important to ask the young person what they would feel most comfortable with.	You can capture the main points by video, voice recorder, or writing - or maybe the young person will want to be the one to capture the main points themselves. Where the recording of conversations or video data is considered, please review the information letter and consent forms in addition to following your own organisation's policy in relation to this.
Step 8	Complete the task with the young person.	This may take a number of sessions or could be done quite quickly in one meeting. Please trust your professional instincts.
Step 9	Fill in the summary sheet below and return to your regional researcher.	<p>The sheet provides space for you to summarise the main points focusing on the outcomes the young person identifies – these main points should be the changes the young person talked about in the conversation. There is also space for you to add any changes you have observed in the young person as their worker that they might not have identified themselves.</p> <p>If you need help with completing the summary sheet, please contact your researcher.</p>

4. Prompts and ideas

The focus is on finding out from the young person:

'What changes have happened for you as result of our relationship?'

a. Some ideas for methods of engaging young people:

- conversation(s) with an individual young person (e.g. informal chat or interview style)
- conversation(s) with a group of young people (e.g. focus group style)
- informal chats (maybe more than one)
- world café style discussion
- storyboards, word storm or visuals
- something creative like collage, drama, art, etc.
- using technology like texting, social media, video, or sound recording

... but remember that this list is not definitive, and you can carry out this task in whatever way suits you and the young person.

b. Conversation starter question and follow-on prompt questions if required:

Remember we are focusing on finding out from the young person: ***What changes have happened for you as result of our relationship?*** Please make sure you have done all the steps to prepare yourself and the young person for the conversation you are going to have, so they will know what the questions are about. We wanted to give you some extra ways to engage the young people on this topic, in case the primary question is not enough. Here are some ideas for ways you can ask the same question:

- What changes have happened for you because of the relationship you have with me?
- How has our relationship helped you?
- Has our relationship made a difference for you? If yes, can you tell me in what way?
- What changed in you that got you to a place where you could _____?

c. A few more tips:

- The young people can be current or past participants. The important thing we are looking for here is a strong relationship to work with.
- Choose a method based on what works for the young person and the worker! Make sure you both feel comfortable.
- Use your own professional expertise as a youth justice worker to engage the young person. Make it work for you. Treat this task as you would any new activity or programme you introduce to the young people you work with. There is real scope for creativity and individuality here. Trust yourself and your professional expertise.
- Encourage the young person to be open and honest with you. Hopefully your good relationship will be a strong foundation for this. Be aware that they may want to please you or give you the "right answers". Have an open and honest conversation with them about this if you need to.
- If the young person wishes to record the main points themselves, please let them do so.

Remember to keep it simple!

Appendix 3: Practitioner Feedback Sheet

Feedback Summary Sheet

GYDP:

Worker name:

Young person: Age Past or current participant? Gender:

Please summarise the main points from your conversation with the young person. What changes have happened for them as a result of the relationship?

Bullet points:

-
-
-
-
-

Any other changes that you have noticed that the young person may not have mentioned or recognised in themselves?

Bullet points:

-
-
-

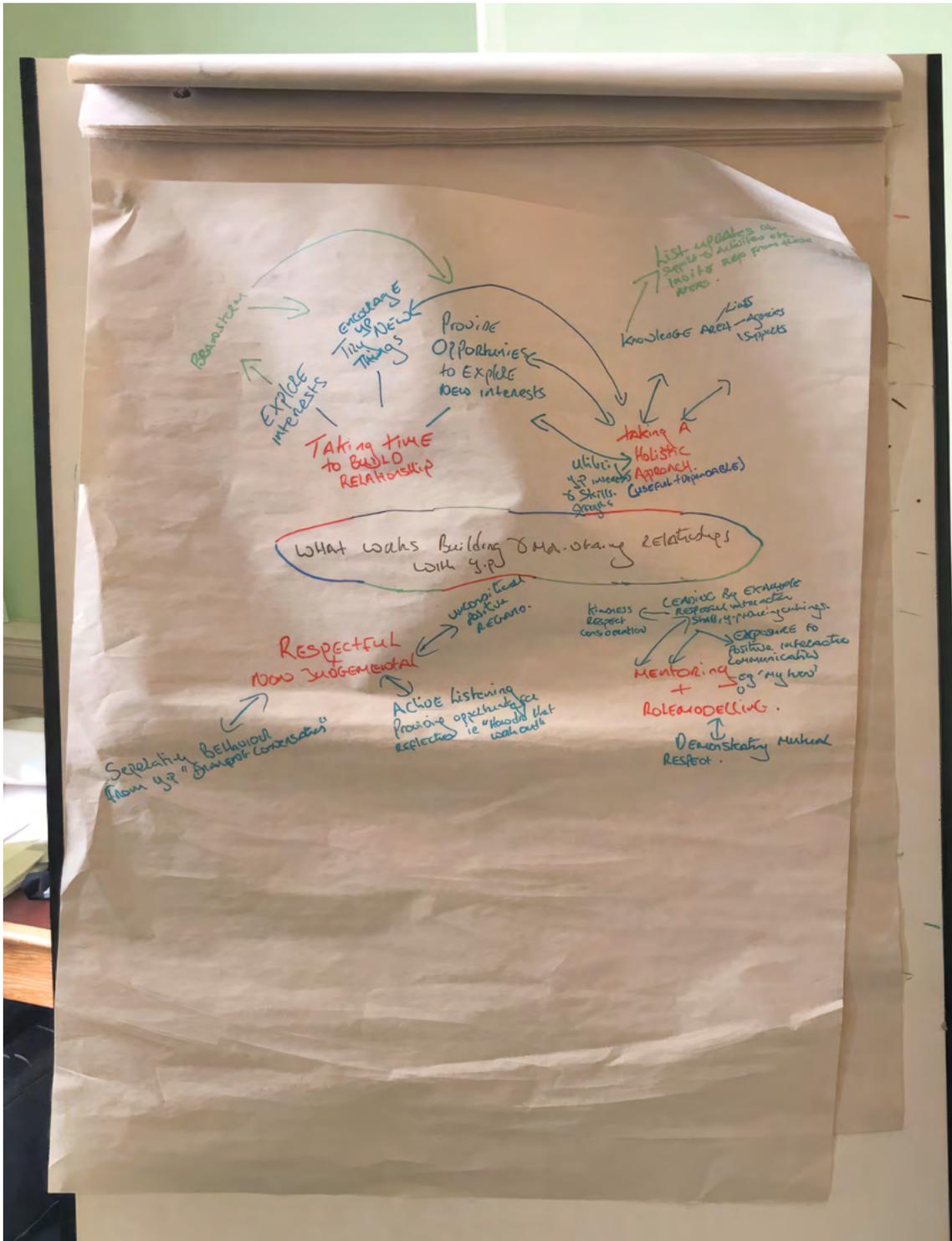
Description of how you completed the task? (e.g. conversation, artwork, etc)

Bullet points:

-
-
-

Please continue on a separate sheet if necessary. When done, send to your regional researcher.

Appendix 4: Example of Flipchart Feedback Received



Appendix 5: Relationship Guidance (to accompany model)

Base Layer: Create Safety

Youth Justice Practitioners highlighted that it was important to provide a safe and secure foundation to build the relationship on.

“The safe space grows as the relationship grows”

Here are ways suggested to create safety and security for young people within a Youth Diversion Project:

- Create a safe and comfortable space where the young person feels secure. Try to provide a clean, warm, welcoming, and safe physical space where young people can feel at-ease and comfortable. Take into consideration the basic needs of the young person, for example, by providing food when needed. Recognise the value of the young person having a space where they feel a sense of ownership, for example, youth spaces with their artwork and photos on display.
- Create an emotional safe space for the young person. Practitioners should try to take the approach that this is ‘the young person’s time’ and make them aware of that.
- Explore the young person’s level of comfort before introducing them to different situations. Getting to know them includes learning what makes them ‘tick’ and what ‘presses their buttons.’
- Introduce the young person to everyone that works in the project. This relationship building helps transitions within the project if a young person’s key worker is absent or unavailable.
- Maintain an informal approach in contrast to a more formal authoritarian one. Work with the young person to understand their preferences and views rather than, for example, telling them how to behave or where to sit. This informal approach at the early stages of the relationship can be important for building rapport.
- Inform the young person of the purpose of the project. For example, what to expect and any practical aspects such as opening hours. Projects have policies and procedures to ensure the safety of all young people. Try to display relevant policies and discuss them with the young person.
- Involve the young person in identifying appropriate boundaries and expectations, e.g. mutual respect. Endeavour to include the young person in any decision-making regarding changes of expectations, especially in terms of their engagement.

- Ensure the young person and their families understand the confidential nature of the project. Practitioners should not discuss a young person or their families in front of or with another young person or family. At the same time, practitioners should inform young people early on that although they can keep certain things confidential, there are limits to this and they must follow through on child welfare and safeguarding concerns.
- Build a respectful ethos that is inclusive of culture, ethnicity, and individuality. Treat all young people with equity, celebrate diversity and design programmes or activities with this in mind. Practitioners should make it clear that the project is a place for all. In groups promote a supportive inclusive approach, where all can express their opinions and share their stories and experiences.
- Be sensitive to personal situations and individual circumstances, for example, struggles a young person or family might be having at a particular time and offer support.
- Try to be aware of where the young person feels most comfortable and safe. When offsite, avoid spaces where they feel exposed, at risk or judged.

Case Example:

I worked with a young male for approximately a year. This young person engaged quite well, meeting on a weekly basis. At times, engagement would be reduced due to his drug use and mental health difficulties. This young person felt very isolated and lost in trying to find a way back into family life. Due to drug use and physical and verbal abuse within the family home, the relationship with family suffered greatly.

Given the difficulties faced by this young person, I would try to be as flexible as possible in arranging a time and place to meet each week. The young person seemed relaxed and comfortable in the meetings. We got to a safe place where he said he felt listened to and heard while discussing really difficult aspects of his life. Throughout the meetings, I would regularly feedback what was talked about and try to get the young person to come up with possible solutions. At times when the young person found it difficult to come up with solutions, I would make suggestions, but the young person was always aware that the decision to commit to anything always rested with him.

Core Layer: Time, Trust, Support and Being Young Person Centred

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted that time, trust, support and being young person centred were core, essential elements of building an effective relationship with a young person.

“Relationship building is the cornerstone of our work with young people ... and the time it takes depends on the individuals”

Here are ways suggested to practice these four elements:

- Recognise that relationships take time and cannot be forced or rushed. Practitioners should allow relationships to form naturally over time. Some will take longer than others. Be patient and committed to investing time in building the relationship.
- Focus on the young person and the relationship itself, and less so on the reason for the referral at the early stages of relationship building. Try to do as much as possible to find out about the young person, this includes learning what makes them ‘tick’ and what ‘presses their buttons’. Strive to get to know the young person for yourself. Don’t allow others’ accounts to influence you.
- Model trustworthiness. Build trust by saying what you mean and following up on promises. Keep the young person informed of all actions related to them and admit when you make mistakes. Be aware that each young person sets their own pace regarding when and how they trust the practitioner.
- Build on longevity of relationships in the community to establish trust. Draw on the family and community’s history with the project and other connected projects. Build rapport ‘on the doorstep’ by calling to houses. Although not always possible, it helps if practitioners are visible, known locally or have long standing relationships in the community.
- Support the young person on their personal journey. The youth justice relationship can involve a process of the young person learning to self-regulate, through feedback, guidance, and motivation from the youth justice practitioner. Support them in areas they are interested in and topics that will help them, e.g. advice on maintaining a healthy lifestyle.
- Maintain a broad focus, not limited to the offending behaviour. Even if you disagree with a young person’s behaviour or attitude, always accept the young person for who they are. Look for the good and recognise that all young people have their unique identities.
- Be respectful of the young person’s environment. A youth justice practitioner should reinforce a respectful and supportive stance for the young person and people in the young person’s community. The approach should not be contrived, but genuine - ‘walking with’ the young person.
- Mark special occasions or significant dates, for example, record the young person’s birthday at the beginning of the year in the diary and acknowledge their special day. It may also be important to remember an important anniversary or loss.

Case Example:

A young person was referred to the project through the Community Gardaí. He was finding it difficult to cope in school and was spending a lot of time hanging around the estate. He was very volatile and finding it really difficult to manage his behaviour. When he would attend the project he would invariably end up getting frustrated and shortly after arriving, he would say something or act out and then storm out of the building. I would follow up afterwards by calling up to the house to see how he was doing, and we would chat for a few minutes at the door. I didn't push the issue of what had happened as our relationship was still very new. I kept it about checking that he was ok.

Through these conversations and his regular attendance at the project we gradually got to know each other. In the first few months his behaviour remained an issue and often resulted in an early exit. I had a lot of concerns about how it would potentially land him in a lot of trouble out in the community.

As our relationship grew he was able to be more open about his triggers. We both agreed that he would start to come to the project a bit early to have a chat and settle in. This gave him the space to talk about things that might have gone wrong at school or at home before we started into a session or activity. We also developed a routine where he began coming back to the project for a chat if something went wrong during a session so we could work through whatever was going on.

As the relationship developed I had a much better understanding of the young person, and he began to trust in me to discuss various aspects of his life. The time and space that we allowed to bring the relationship to a point where we were comfortable talking about what was going on really helped to develop a positive route for the young person. From there, and with agreement from him, I was able to engage with his family and school to build additional supports around him. This story is from twenty years ago, but I still remember the young person so vividly.

Skills, attributes, and practices:

1. Be fully committed

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted that being fully committed shows the young person that they are dependable, they care about them, are there for them and will not give up on them.

“Being persistent and consistent creates stronger relationships over time”

Here are ways suggested to practice this:

- Create routine and structure. Persistent and consistent approaches by the practitioners help to establish structure and routine so a young person knows what to expect.
- Try to meet with a young person consistently but also be ready to respond to what the young person needs. Ensure the young person knows they can contact or call in to meet a worker at other times (within reason) when they need to.
- Send out routine reminders, for example, texts the day before a session or written reminders. These are important after certain periods such as the summer or Christmas breaks. The young person should be reminded of any goals and plans for the following week at the end of a session.
- Be conscious and consistent in use of language. Try and have a positive focus when wording requests, especially when addressing absences from the project or other challenges, for example ‘we missed you this week, what’s going on?’
- Be consistent during positive and challenging times. Remain available, even when a young person is not engaging. If a young person can’t make it, practitioners can let them know they still have a place and can link back in for support when they are ready and able to engage.
- Follow up when a young person does not show up or has not engaged. Where engagement is proving difficult, practitioners should persist with calls to the home to parents or other identified caregivers.
- Remain persistent and patient with the young person. Be aware that a high risk, vulnerable young person may have had agencies and professionals fall in and out of their life and be prepared for the young person to test them before fully engage in the relationship.
- Know when to pull back and give space. Continue to engage and maintain contact with parents and guardians during this time and try creating informal opportunities to maintain engagement with the young person. Be proactive in recognising when to take the pressure off and ask other services to support if appropriate.
- Go the extra mile when needed and within reason. Be willing (when appropriate) to meet a young person when they are in a crisis or at unusual hours or circumstances, for example, with a solicitor, or at Garda Stations and hospitals.

Case Example:

A young person who was out of education for two years began training in the local training workshop. We assisted the young people in securing a place, met with the manager and linked each day with the young person at the beginning of the process to ensure that they were supported and helped to settle in a bit easier. Of note, I went with the young person on the morning of the first day and this was acknowledged by them and very much appreciated. This demonstrated going the extra the mile for that young person.

Skills, attributes, and practices:

2. Communicate with empathy

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted that communicating with empathy was important for helping a young person feel heard, cared for and valued.

**“That must be scary...
I’m worried about the
risks you are taking”**

Here are ways suggested to practice this:

- Reiterate and remind the young person that part of the practitioner’s role is to provide support and guidance. Be encouraging and complimentary, remind the young person of their strengths, and that their stories and experiences are important.
- Use a selection of tools to support communication. This can be done individually and in groups, using skills and approaches learned in training, for example motivational interviewing and restorative practice. These among other techniques are helpful to guide a young person through unfamiliar processes and help them deal with challenges in their lives.
- Recognise and acknowledge when something might be going on for the young person, by being attentive to cues such as body language.
- Create spaces to listen attentively. It is important to hear what the young person is saying and witness their stories.
- Listen to the young person’s views. Facilitate them to take opportunities to feedback and voice their opinions. Explain why their opinions are valued. Short- and long-term goals should be developed collaboratively with the young person.

Practitioners should actively listen to the young person, being mindful to:

1. Hear what the young person is saying and focus solely on the young person during the conversation. Try not to become distracted by taking notes. Reflect the conversation back to the young person, by paraphrasing and summarising.
2. Intentionally use silence at the right time. Silence allows the young person to gather their thoughts and discuss what is on their mind.
3. Reassure the young person that you hear them, empathise with what they are going through, and that they are not alone.
4. Show the young person that there is no judgement, acknowledge their truth and clarify any misconceptions.
5. Try to capture and remember the little snippets of information that a young person shares. Consciously check back on what the young person told you in the previous session, asking about things they previously mentioned or reminding them of something positive that they said.
6. Consciously stop jumping in to offer advice, listen, and make suggestions only when needed.

Case Example:

I worked with a young person aged 16 for a 12-month period. We arranged to meet on a weekly basis, at 4.30pm after school. The first thing we did was go to the kitchen, cook noodles, have a cup of tea and a bar of chocolate. As a worker, I felt the importance of creating a safe space to help him feel listened to and respected.

The young person had been involved in several offences including theft, minor assault, burglary, and possession of a weapon. He would have been very easily influenced. He would just go along with others to feel connected and have friends, regardless of the negative activities they got involved in. He had few positive influences in his life.

The young person engaged really well in the project overall. He always enjoyed coming in after school to have something to eat. We talked about how school was going, how his sporting activities were going, keeping fit and positive mental health. We slowly built a relationship based on trust, understanding and respect. Starting the 'Life of Choices Programme' gave me the chance to explore crime and offending behaviour with him. We focused on decision-making, impulsivity control, victim empathy, motivation to change and peer influences. He also took part in restorative practice, hand-writing a letter of apology to a victim for his wrong-doing. As time went on, his level of risk reduced significantly. He didn't reoffend again on completion of the programme.

The young person pulled away from a number of negative influences in his life and is now doing really well. 6 months after he left the project, he phoned me after receiving his Leaving Certificate results to let me know how well he did. I could see he had a huge sense of pride, having completed his exams and doing so well. Having built such a strong working relationship

Skills, attributes, and practices:

3. Make connections and advocate

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted the importance of making connections for the young person. This meant spending time advocating for and linking with the young person's family to connect them with other relevant services.

"A wraparound effect to support the young person in all aspects of their life is important"

Here are ways suggested to practice this:

- Regularly link with parents, guardians, and families to include them and act as a source of support and contact. Promote a positive relationship between the young person and their families, for example, by arranging family outings to spend stress free time together and have some fun.
- Identify and signpost the young person and their family to other appropriate services when needed. This ensures the parents or carers are aware and equipped with the right information to engage. Aim to de-mystify services for families by supporting them in a step-by-step process and encouraging them. When needed, arrange transport, accompany, and support the young person at appointments and meetings.
- Explore all options with the young person and family. Some young people and families may not be ready to engage with another service. Provide support to help them prepare or engage.
- Connect, collaborate, and co-operate with a range of services such as schools, Gardaí, further and third level education, employers, courts, drug and alcohol and mental health services. Link with Juvenile Liaison Officers on house calls if appropriate, attend court proceedings and engage with probation services, on behalf of the young person if suitable. Be mindful of over dependency and ensure autonomy is respected and supported.
- Advocate on behalf of the young person at meetings and act as the young person's 'voice' at times if needed, hearing what the young person wants and then presenting that at inter-agency meetings, e.g. at case conferences, hearings, and school. Make a point of emphasizing positives about the young person during interactions with other services.
- Teach the young person to advocate for themselves and use their voice when they are ready. Support the young person to have their voice heard at meetings, asking them their views, and helping them practice in advance.
- Actively help prepare the young person for when their time with the project is finished, e.g. by introducing them to adult supports, services, and programmes.
- Highlight for others the unique role taken by the project and how it differs from other services, e.g. by taking a deliberately informal approach.

Case Example:

We had a 16-year-old participant who had received two cautions for anti-social behaviour. This young person missed a lot of time from their training programme and was putting their place at risk. Education was not a priority. While putting together their plan with the project, the young person expressed an interest in farming. We discussed it and contacted the coordinator to see if they could get a placement on a farm to be included as work experience. The coordinator was happy to facilitate any ways that would support the young person to remain with them. We got in contact with a social farming service, set up meetings and went to meet the farmer. The young person engaged well, feedback was positive and overall attendance was consistent. The collaborative approach really helped the young person remain in education.

Skills, attributes, and practices:

4. Be flexible

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted the importance of being flexible, changing or adapting to facilitate programmes and strategies based on the strengths, needs and interests of the young person.

“This is reflected in the individually tailored response to each young person”

Here are ways suggested to practice this:

- Flexibility in approach. This involves meeting the young person ‘where they are at, in the here and now’ and focusing energy on their current needs. It also means exploring elements or areas of the young person’s life that they want to work on and not allowing for the sole judgement of the worker to decide on areas they feel need to be addressed first.
- Consciously respond to what the young person needs in a particular moment, space, and time. Prioritise the young person’s well-being, particularly during periods of stress or concern. Recognise the cues and respond, check-in with them, ask how they are and respond accordingly.
- Work together with the young person on personal development plans and give them more ownership of their own plans where feasible.
- Engage in reflective cycles of reviewing programme content with the young person and be willing to change direction when needed.
- Be flexible at specific times of year. This includes being innovative and open-minded especially during certain times, for example, changing ways of working at times of the year such as Christmas or summer, adapting to change when needed.

Case Example:

We supported a previous participant looking for help regarding access to third level education. The young person, now aged 23, reflected that the project had been the one constant support, outside of family, he had since they were 13. He said that it was always somewhere he turned to for support in different areas of their life, and mentioned addiction, education, and referrals to other appropriate services. He said that other services and staff in certain roles came to an end and even though he was disengaged from the project when he was 17, he continued to link in with the service.

Skills, attributes, and practices:

5. Practice ‘use of self’ and reflection

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted the importance of using their own personality and life experiences in a safe way to connect with a young person. Reflecting and self-awareness was viewed as important for the practitioner. Their unique role was seen as providing a platform for transformation for the young person.

“You can’t relate to a young person if you don’t first know yourself and reflect on your own life and personality”

Here are ways suggested to practice this:

- Be yourself and use your personality and attributes to support the relationship. Reflect on the information given to the young person and shared experiences and struggles where appropriate. Where relevant, use aspects of your own identity and life story to support the challenging of stereotypes.
- Identify common interests and experiences, and share these, where relevant and appropriate. Sharing stories and examples from life experiences can help the young person and strengthen the relationship. Share useful life experiences and honest accounts of scenarios that can potentially help the young person in their lives. Actively find common ground with the young person, for example, a love for animals or certain hobbies. This can spark a connection that can be built upon.
- Reflect on practice individually and together with the team with the view to becoming more self-aware. Space for this reflection should be built into your work.
- Be self-aware. Know your own traumas, triggers, and projections and how these might impact relationships at times.
- Play a specific role in the young person’s life that’s different to that of authority figures and other adults they know. Meet the young person ‘where they are at’ and build a constructive working relationship that is unique, different, and positive for them. Be aware of how the relationship serves a particular function.
- Help build a young person’s confidence and self-esteem by passing on skills you have, e.g. creative skills like woodwork or art.

Case Example:

One project provided the practice example of a staff member that was the victim of knife crime which changed their direction in life. Years later this staff member started working with a 17-year-old who had committed knife crime and was subsequently referred to the project. The practitioner felt it important to share this experience with the young person and talk about how it affected them. The practitioner felt the young person was genuinely concerned for them. This shared experience brought about a discussion about victims of crime and the impact on the person, families, and the community. The practitioner felt using this experience helped the young person in terms of their empathy and their future.

Case Example:

When I first met him, he was living in residential care. He had a very complex background. Even after he had been attending the project for quite a while, he was still very closed and reluctant to open up to me. The use of conventional programmes did not work with this young person.

It was discovered that he had a great interest in boxing, as coincidentally did I. As time went on, I found that after taking part in a training session, he would be far more open to talking to me about himself and life's problems. We had many long conversations while recovering from strenuous training sessions. I decided to always focus the interventions with him on a training session followed by motivational interviewing. Over time the relationship between us grew to the extent that the young person travelled 30km just to bring me a Christmas present.

Unfortunately, his historic cases of criminality and continuing substance misuse built up against him, and he was sentenced to six months detention. Apart from his parents (with whom he had reconnected as they had restored more order in their lives) and his residential home, the only other person on his call list was me. I contacted him at least twice a week during his stay. I received an invitation to visit, becoming his only visitor during his time there. He became a model detainee and worked hard to get his life back on track.

On the day of his release, he had a scheduled court appearance. I met him and gave him a present on behalf of the project. It was a pair of boxing gloves and other training gear. He was delighted with these and vowed to join the local boxing club when he settled back in. Before he got in the car to start his journey home, he said goodbye to me with a very genuine display of emotion. He is now living back at home with his parents. He is attending a youth education programme and is studying for his exams. He is also making good use of the boxing gloves and training gear, and most importantly, he is engaging with the substance misuse counsellor. He remains drug free and has not come to the attention of the Gardai since his release.

Skills, attributes, and practices:

6. Be honest and challenge constructively

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted the importance of constructively challenging a young person. They emphasised that being honest, genuine, and supportive comes with constructive challenging. Practitioners acknowledged that challenging a young person can be tricky. Consistent engagement, routine and structure can be helpful, and it takes time before you can really challenge on a deep level and encourage a young person to take responsibility for their actions.

“Constructively challenging a young person to be their best self is an important practice”

Here are ways suggested to practice this:

- Be transparent with the young person and their family. Within reason up to date information about progress or lack of, can be important for the relationship with the young person and their family.
- ‘Call it as it is’. Give an honest account of something that happened while being cognisant and aware of individual triggers. This involves recognising the right time to challenge, away from others and in a safe manner. Giving honest feedback can lead to growth and moving forward.
- Facilitate the young person to understand the consistent boundaries and limits established in the project.
- Focus on building the young person’s capacity by firstly supporting them and then challenging them to take responsibility for their actions when needed. When challenging negative behaviours, endeavour to highlight positive behaviours displayed by the young person in the past.
- Take responsibility and accept when you have done something is wrong. Be willing to admit mistakes and apologise for it.
- Use a consistent approach when challenging behaviour. Workers should take into consideration what may work for the individual young person at that moment in time and the stage the relationship is at. Practitioners should support each other when challenging young people.
- Use creative approaches to challenging negative behaviour, such as humour where appropriate.
- Listen to all perspectives and hear what all parties need and want during conflict situations. Then present back alternative perspectives and translate these into tangible and appropriate actions that both parties can do.
- Use evidence-based tools for managing disagreement and conflict, e.g. restorative practice.

Case Example:

A young person in our project spoke about his negative views on young females. This was challenged by the youth workers, but at the same time we gave the young person a platform to express a different opinion. The young person wasn't told they were wrong, rather encouraged to see it from a different point of view, and to look at gender stereotypes. I remained calm and consistent but challenged honestly. The goal wasn't to win the argument, rather to challenge the young person to think about their views, where they came from and to consider others.

Skills, attributes, and practices:

7. Guide, inspire hope and build agency

Youth Justice practitioners highlighted the importance of positive reinforcement with young people, continually pointing out progression. Practitioners can offer praise to promote positive behaviour and boost self-esteem and confidence. The relationship is a vehicle for the young person's development, and practitioners can give a clear message that change is possible.

“Encourage transformation and facilitate the young person to find the way”

Here are ways suggested to practice this:

- Provide a sense of possibility and optimism for the young person. Discuss issues through a lens of acceptance and empowerment. Building the young person's voice, agency and independence are important aspects of relationship work. Youth justice practitioners believed in second and more chances.
- Take opportunities to communicate positive news stories and affirmations to parents or guardians using suitable methods to send positive reinforcement messages home. Make a conscious effort to 'catch young people doing well', intentionally acknowledging it or highlighting it to them.
- Ask parents, guardians, and other services to identify the young person's strengths and point these out. Recognise the young person's achievements, for example, on finishing a programme.
- Support the young person to see and identify their own strengths and potential. This provides an opportunity for both practitioner and young person to explore strengths to build on.
- Actively look for opportunities to give the young person responsibility by assigning them appropriate roles, duties, activities, and tasks they might not normally be asked to do.
- Help set realistic goals with the young person, reviewing them regularly and being a constant source of support for the young person to complete the given task or goal.
- Provide opportunities to learn new skills, develop aspirations and encourage further education and training.
- Connect the young person with clubs, groups, projects, activities, or experiences that can support them to engage in pro-social behaviours and with the wider community. Work with them to support participation in community initiatives and projects.
- Engage in fun-based activities that broaden horizons while building relationships with others and creating good memories. Try bringing the young person to events outside of the project which benefit their interests, for example, trips to competitions or special interest. Try a mix of engagement strategies such as fun activities that are strengths or interest led. Talk to the young person informally about topics of interest, for example, music, art, sport, and find out what helps the young person to relax during a session such as a cup of tea, or icebreakers. Activities can be planned based on things the young person is good at and likes.
- Get involved in activities with the young person. Doing activities with young people can help build relationships. Endeavour to attend positive events with the young person where possible also, for example, a match they are playing in.

- Engage the young person in evidence-based programmes and practices that encourage greater reflection, better decision-making, and aid change, for example, motivational interviewing.
- Facilitate the young person to get involved in decision making structures, where available, to inform planning, programmes, and youth participation.

Case Example:

One project provided the practice example of organising a young women's group made up of past, present and younger YDP participants. The group was entirely youth led, with a different participant leading the group each week. They were required to choose the theme, purchase what was required for the group, and facilitate. The group was particularly aimed at one individual who had been referred as a primary referral. Working with the family support worker the project seized the opportunity to reinforce the young person's progress by giving them a leadership role. This was a huge success for the young person and group with full participant attendance throughout. It also gave the opportunity to praise the young people individually and as a group, and in the long-term this continued to be used as a reference point for future group activities.



Shining a light on the relationships that help young people feel seen, supported and capable of choosing a different path.



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