

The Youth Transitions Study (New Zealand):

Whāia to huanui kia toa

Young People's Relationships: Opportunities and Challenges

Technical Report 29

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Introduction

The Youth Transitions Study is a longitudinal study of young people's transitions to adulthood. These young people faced high levels of risk during childhood and adolescence. The study investigated young people's transitions and explored the role of services and support networks in these transitions. This report draws on the qualitative interviews and explores one theme that emerged in the data analysis: young people's relationships.

Methodology

The research programme¹ involved:

- A survey administered to young people once a year for three years.
- Qualitative interviews with a sub-set of young people administered once a year for three years after completion of the three surveys.
- Qualitative interviews with an adult nominated by the young people as someone they trusted and whom they considered to know the most about them (Person Most Knowledgeable (PMK)).

In 2009, 593 young people were recruited into the study and took part in the first of three annual surveys. A sub-set of 107 young people were recruited into the qualitative phase and participated in three interviews. The PMK also participated in three rounds of qualitative interviews. The research was approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee. The interviews were administered by trained interviewers. A semi-structured interview schedule was used

1 A description of the study population can be found in the report "Starting Points: Patterns of risk, resilience, and service utilisation among a group of vulnerable youth and a community sample (Time 1)" on www.youthsay.co.nz.

to guide the qualitative interviews. These interviews included a range of questions covering life experiences, risks and resources, experiences of family, school and service experiences, community networks, relationships, and the young person's insights into what assisted them through their transitions. The young people were interviewed in a location of their choosing.

Interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed verbatim, and coded using NVivo qualitative software. An initial set of thematic nodes was derived from the qualitative interviews and then a secondary analysis generated other themes. This report focuses on one of these themes: young people's relationships.

The analysis of young people's relationships identified both positive and supportive relationships and difficult and challenging relationships. We begin by exploring positive and supportive relationships and the different forms those relationships took. We then discuss difficult and challenging relationships. We conclude with a discussion of the ways relationships impact upon young people as well as the ways in which services can better accommodate vulnerable young people who have endured trauma and adversity from a young age.

Relationships

Young people's relationships played a crucial role in their overall quality of life. Their relationships determined their social and emotional wellbeing and important relationships, such as family/whānau relationships, impacted upon their physical and material environments; for example, where young people lived and in what conditions they lived. When young people discussed positive relationships, they highlighted how these improved other aspects of their lives. Positive relationships helped young people feel

emotionally supported and understood, stay focused in school, and assisted in transitions to independence by building confidence and autonomy. Difficult and negative relationships, equally, had a pervasive effect in young people's lives. Relationships with violent, unsupportive, or challenging people weighed down young people and could lead to risky behaviour or unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as crime and violence.

This report first explores the positive and supportive relationships in young people's lives and the impact on their overall wellbeing and independence. Later, we explore difficult and challenging relationships and the negative coping mechanisms that were provoked by or adopted in response to the trauma and instability young people faced.

Positive and Supportive Relationships

Young people identified the key elements of positive relationships. At the core of these positive relationships was a connection with a person who was either consistently supportive or was supportive during times of need or pivotal moments in young people's lives. Workers, friends/peers, parents, and other family/whānau members (for example, aunts, uncles, and grandparents) were all identified as providing significant support to young people. The support offered included emotional support—standing by the young person or being there for them—and it was available if the young person sought it out, such as asking for advice or help from family/whānau members.

This section also includes references to positive networks or contacts who facilitated opportunities, such as work experience and education/courses, or taught the young person life skills and coping strategies. Positive networks or contacts were available to support young people to access resources such as employment, services and

accommodation, but these relationships also often provided help by equipping young people with life skills and coping strategies as well as providing role models for the young people to follow. While some positive support took the form of people actively stepping in to assist the young person in securing access to services or employment, the impact of other positive relationships manifested as a change in attitude or outlook in the young person or a reassessment of priorities which resulted in the young person making positive changes in their life.

This section will discuss the main components of positive and supportive relationships including emotional and practical support, material support, and support with community and service engagement.

Emotional and practical support

This section details what factors contribute to emotional and practical support in young people's relationships, including mentorship and guidance, parent and substitute parent figures.

Young people spoke about how positive relationships in their lives provided ongoing emotional support, validation, and motivation. Supportive adults gave young people advice on how to achieve their goals, supported young people in making decisions and planning their lives, as well as fostered stability for them to pursue their dreams. Young people spoke of their close relationships as providing stability and affection and enabling them to feel loved and appreciated. These relationships contributed greatly to their self-esteem and overall wellbeing. As Omoni (pseudonyms are used) recounted in her first interview, she had a very close relationship with her mum which made her feel loved and supported:

Interviewer: You're finding it hard – do you miss talking to your mum when you're staying in town?

Omoni: Yeah, it's not the same as being at home. But my mum and them do call me every night just to see if I'm ok. I find that annoying sometimes, they constantly call, I'm like, oh my god, I'm alright, I'm still alive, I'm texting you, so don't worry about me. But then again I like it when she calls.

Interviewer: You feel loved.

Omoni: Yeah, I do. But then my friends, my roommates always mock me, mummy's little girl, I'm like oh my gosh!

Omoni's closeness with her mum made it harder for her to be away from her family/whānau. She appreciated the consistent support and connection to her family/whānau. Omoni even joked about being so close to her mum that she got teased by other girls, perhaps highlighting how rare it was to have such a close, positive relationship with one's mother.

These relationships were crucial for young people when they were going through hard times; having the emotional support helped young people feel cared about, connected to a larger social group, and valued. Young people also spoke about enduring trauma and the role it played in their lives. When young people had positive supports, they were able to better endure trauma and utilise positive coping strategies. As Hahana described in her first interview, her partner was especially supportive following a sexual assault:

But like yeah, pretty, it's pretty hard-out and we been through a lot, like [name of town]. Me and [Young Person's sister] was up there I got raped and he was there for me and it was just the bomb, he was so fuckin supportive everything, he picked

me up and took me home, drove me all the way there, brought me food, it was fuckin cool, he's the bomb. So we been through a lot and for him to stick by me after that was like I don't know how, I wouldn't expect someone to stay after that happened, coz you're an emotional wreck, no-one wants to be with an emotional wreck person, fuck he pulled me out of that so hard, he's the bomb.

Hahana was especially appreciative of her partner's support and credited him for helping her move past the trauma. Hahana recognised how hard it was to take care of someone following a traumatic event, which made her more grateful for having him in her life. Her partner stuck by her during an extremely challenging time which strengthened their bond and enabled her to develop strategies for coping with difficult times and events.

Young people reflected on the long-term impact of having positive relationships in their lives. When young people had enduring, supportive relationships, they were able to build lasting bonds and experience personal growth alongside evolving friendships/relationships (Dewhurst, et al., 2015). At his first interview, Corey described the supportive relationships in his life, especially the close relationship he had with his mum. He appreciated having a support person who knew him well and could best respond to his needs when he was going through a hard time:

She's know me, she knows how I deal with things she knows me, sort of like not what I physically need, but you know like something, ticks me off and she knows that I need to cool down in my own space I can't have someone in my ear saying you want this you want that, when I just need five minutes alone. And you know she gets that.

It was beneficial for Corey to have someone in his life like his mum who knew him well enough to know how to support him through hard times. He said that a lot of people would respond to him in a way that wasn't helpful and, in fact, would just make the situation worse. Corey felt understood and validated by his mum because she gave him space when he needed it. For many young people like Corey, having positive relationships helped them learn more about themselves and grow in positive ways. Experiencing long-term, reliable positive support provided young people with the space for more personal development. Because their support person would stand by their side, they felt more freedom and security to make their own decisions and experience independence.

Mentorship and guidance

Several young people talked about the role of positive role models in their lives. These role models were often family/whānau members—siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents—as well as practitioners who shared their own experiences with the young people as a model for growth and development. Many young people referred to siblings who had grown up in similar circumstances to themselves—like the young person, they had lived rough, been in trouble, and/or used drugs and alcohol. However, once the siblings turned their lives around, they became mentors and role models for the young person and supported them to make changes in their lives. As Ihu described in his first interview, his sister had also gone through a phase of drinking and getting into trouble. Once she had children though, she took Ihu in and helped him get on the right track:

Yeah, coz me and my sister have gone through the same kind of thing, and she also went through the stage when she was going out every night and getting drunk and stuff, and – but she's like, as you can see, ever since she had her kid, she's like changed every single aspect of her life, and she was kind of like a

shining light to me, you know and she – but she, even while she was going through this stage she always like said to me, you know, I will help you, coz she knew she could see what I was going through, and she was like, oh, one day you'll be living with me, she kind of like, I don't know, predicted the future – here I am now, she's like yeah. She's helping me out now...

Ihu looked up to his sister and used his sister's transformation as an inspiration for his own life. At his third interview, Ihu still remained close with his sister, naming her in each interview as one of his main supports. Some young people also mentioned aunts and uncles who had come from similar backgrounds and then went on to take in young people in the community, supporting them through hard times so that they were not living on the streets or feeling socially isolated.

Mentors and positive supports also took the form of people who helped young people stay out of trouble. Often, young people spoke of partners or friends who were engaged in school, focused on career goals, and on staying away from drugs and alcohol. These individuals motivated the young people to take care of themselves and stay focused on personal growth. Tasha's partner helped show her how to have fun without partying. He also inspired more self-confidence and encouraged her to get a job:

Interviewer: What do you like about him [Young Person's partner]?

Tasha: I don't know, he made me bring out a side of me that I never knew was there like, I used to be a quite a bad, very big drinker and I don't know, I sort of thought that, like that to me was a typical weekend, that's what was to be expected. Like he taught me to enjoy a weekend home in bed, with like movies and like, I don't know he made me

a lot more, what do you call it, not as self-conscious? I used to be real self-conscious about everything whereas like now like I went out and looked for the job that I have got now, I went out and looked for it all on my own.

As Tasha described above, her positive relationship with her partner fostered personal growth and emotional development. Tasha was pleased to discover a new side of herself outside of partying; she had more confidence and motivation thanks to her partner's support and encouragement. Because of this increase in self-confidence, Tasha was also motivated to find a job.

Young people mentioned other forms of mentoring and guidance including help with reading and writing, general help with school work, being taught how to cook, help with grocery shopping and calculating a budget for food. These relationships provided opportunities for young people to cultivate new skills and to exercise decision-making. They also supported young people to develop strategies of value in their transition to independent living.

Substitute parent figures

Many young people spoke of family/whānau or other supportive adults who effectively served as parental figures for the young people. Young people described the parenting these adults offered to them. This took the form of providing for the young people materially—offering housing or accommodation, food, and other financial support. It also took the form of emotional support, guidance, and affection, which young people alluded to as something they desired from parents. Young people who identified substitute parent figures were estranged from their biological parents or had fraught relationships with them and thus were looking for and appreciative of the other people who were prepared to take on

parenting and support roles.

Siblings were commonly mentioned as parental figures for young people. When parents were unavailable, estranged, or did not have the capacity to support the young person, siblings would often take care of young people. Siblings would take care of the young person when they were little, would work to provide for them financially, and would even take over the functional role of a parent in a young person's life. Some young people mentioned that their siblings protected them from violence by either calling the police during dangerous times or removing them from violent environments. For example, in his first interview Rahiri talked about his siblings playing a key role in his education, including attending parent conferences when his biological parents could not attend:

[...] and in school and other stuff, my brother and sister are there for me – coming to the parent interviews and stuff, when my mum and dad couldn't make it – and yeah. When I had that fall-out with my mum and dad, had the support of my sister, which really meant a lot to me, I needed that, needed her, and – yeah – everything, pretty much.

As Rahiri states above, his siblings were key support people for him when his relationships with his mum and dad became strained. Rahiri credited his siblings for providing the support and structure he needed during an otherwise precarious time. They helped him stay engaged in school and offered companionship, guidance, and emotional support. In subsequent interviews, Rahiri spoke again about his older sister's support and caretaking—she helped him find a few different jobs and let him live with her.

Grandparents were also commonly mentioned by young people as playing parental roles in their lives. Many young people lived with

their grandparents throughout their lives, offering crucial material support and stability when other parents or caregivers were unable to take care of them. Waka's grandmother served as his mother figure and was particularly supportive during his involvement with youth justice:

Interviewer: Who was there to help you when all that stuff [getting into trouble with the Police] was happening?

Waka: Just my nan. Just my nan ...

Interviewer: When you say she is always there for you, what do you mean by that?

Waka: Ah ... She is always at my court cases. Financially she is there. I remember one time that I haven't seen her and I'm at court. Come bale me out. And yeah, she is always there when I need her.

Interviewer: So she sounds like someone that you can really depend on.

Waka: Yeah, she is kind of like a mother.

Interviewer: Yeah. And what happens, like when you get in trouble. Do you just call her up or do you come home here?

Waka: Na, the cops call her up, and she comes. She don't have a car, but she calls up to my cousin or something and they come pick her up.

Interviewer: She makes her way to get here.

Waka: She always makes her way there.

As he describes above, Waka's grandmother was an important support throughout his life, especially when he got in trouble with the police. Because his grandmother was "always there when [he] need[ed] her", this created a sense of stability and being cared for.

These reliable supports like grandparents and siblings helped fill a gap left by parents who either were not able to parent or were not able to adequately meet the young person's needs.

Material support

In addition to emotional support, young people also spoke of material support as an aspect of their positive relationships. Material support encompassed providing financial assistance, housing or accommodation, rides or help finding transportation, help applying for or managing benefits. Support with child care and parenting responsibilities were especially important for young people who were new parents.

For young people living precarious, often unstable lives, having relationships where support people would provide food, housing and other financial support was extremely important.² Through these relationships young people's basic needs were met which then helped young people feel safe, stable, and more secure. As Mirama shared in his first interview, his ex-partner's financial support was crucial for him being able to take care of himself:

My ex-girlfriend was just pretty much there for me when like my money problems or anything happened. When we were broken up and then, yeah, like she'll send some money down to my card then I'll just go to the ATM and withdraw it out and yeah.

Having someone to call when he was struggling helped Mirama gain stability and meet his basic needs. Polly echoed Mirama's gratitude for having people in their lives who made material support readily

2 For a more detailed discussion of the role positive relationships played in assisting youth to find employment see the technical report "Precarious Employment and Uncertain Futures" on www.youthsay.co.nz.

available. However, Polly and her mum were more reluctant to accept the support, even though it was accessible:

[...] My nanna she knew what was happening and she wouldn't sit back and watch but she had the support there if you wanted it, it just so happened that mum wouldn't really take it because she's bit too proud or too stubborn to do things her own way and doesn't think she needs any help. But nanna's always there if I want to ask her for help she'll help us move or she would drop off some eggs or she'll lend us money. I don't think I have ever asked, I have never borrowed money off anyone but if I needed it if I was stuck I'd have no problem taking it.

Despite her grandmother offering to provide money, food, and help moving, Polly and her mum never accepted this material support. This sentiment was shared by other young people, noting pride and a desire to take care of themselves as reasons for not asking for help. Even when young people refused material assistance, they still expressed appreciation for the support being offered, noting how it provided assurance and stability. Young people knew that if they really needed the support, they had supportive relationships to call on.

Housing was a crucial support provided to young people in the study. Because many were living transient or unstable lives, being supported to find stable housing was also critical for helping young people feel safe and more financially secure. At his first interview, Malcom discussed being able to live with his grandmother and how it meant that he was able to save money and not have to go on the benefit:

Interviewer: [...] Any other people you would consider important in your life?

Malcolm: My Nan here is important because she's the house

we're staying at. It's important to have her at the moment, so I can stay at the house and – I do like her and shit, she's my Nan, but yeah, she's important to me [...] She's important coz she's given us this house, she said, "hey no, I don't need money, come and stay", so we've come to stay, feel real bad, she goes, and she goes, and I said, "I'm going on benefit", she said, "oh no, none of that". She's almost 50 and she shouldn't be having her daughter's son here, living at her house and shit. But it's good, she's good.

Not only did his grandmother let Malcolm live with her, she also did not charge rent. Though Malcolm felt bad about having to stay with her, he was still very grateful for not having to pay rent or go on the benefit. This support from his grandmother meant greater stability that protected him from having to seek government assistance or live in a more precarious, financially constrained situation. By the time of the third interview, Malcolm's nan had passed away and, though he was struggling to cope with the loss of a crucial support person, his mum had "stepped up" and started providing more financially.

Several young people discussed the pivotal role of positive support people in helping them with child care. Many young people spoke of the support they received as integral to their ability to provide for their child/ren. Support with child care took the form of providing material resources for the child (nappies, groceries, toys, and clothes), transportation assistance, babysitting, and even helping young people furnish an apartment after the birth of a child. Hinewai's aunt was a positive presence in her life following the birth of her child. In her first interview, Hinewai reflected on how her partner's aunt helped provide for the baby as well as offered emotional support and comfort:

Hinewai: [...] She is real nice and she comes around here and drops things off, like good bulk nappies, wipes, milk powder and that just saves me a whole lot of money to spend on milk powder and everything. And that is really helpful, I'm glad that, I glad that I met her really.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Hinewai: They are well-off but they don't just do it for anybody, they do it for ones that really need it. I don't tell his [partner's] mum about my life story, but I told her about my life story.

Interviewer: You have told her.

Hinewai: She listens she sits there and listens, she doesn't sit there and look at the TV and listen, I like them to look at me and listen.

The positive influence of a support person when caring for a child cannot be overstated. While the financial support Hinewai received from her partner's aunt helped her immensely, she also spoke of the powerful effect of having someone who really cared about her being there to listen. Young people often struggled to adjust to the demands of parenting and providing financially for a family/whānau. Positive relationships created stability and emotional guidance during this important transition to parenthood. This material support to new parents was particularly significant given the young age of many study participants and how many had not had positive relationships with meaningful adults. Having a trusted adult was crucial for these young people to be able to care for their child as well as feel connected to a supportive adult who could provide comfort and guidance during the transition to becoming a parent.

Support with community and service engagement

A common theme within supportive relationships was friends and family/whānau helping young people engage in and sustain involvement in various services and community groups such as education, employment, and mental health services and groups. Young people also spoke of the support they received during their involvement with youth justice, including support while they were in a residential facility or assistance for complying with the requirements of their sentences, such as attending meetings with their probation officer.³

Support for engaging with school and employment

Many young people struggled with finding and maintaining employment as well as staying engaged with education. Positive relationships played a critical role in helping young people stay motivated and engaged in these prosocial activities. Young people identified family/whānau, peers, and tutors/practitioners as their main sources of support in school and employment. Support persons often helped young people make plans for the future, identify goals, and helped find opportunities for young people to work toward those goals. Support could also entail people teaching young people skills which helped facilitate their engagement in school or employment. For example, one young person's mother taught him English (he only spoke Māori) before he started on a course. Parents also helped facilitate employment by taking their children (the young people) to work with them so they could experiment with different jobs and see what it was like to work. Parents and other adults talked to employers and connected them with the young people and alerted young people when they saw jobs advertised. A key role was in helping

3 For a more detailed discussion of young people's experiences with services, including education, child welfare, mental health, and youth justice, see the technical report "Young People's Experiences with Services" on www.youthsay.co.nz.

young people identify career goals and then providing opportunities to support these. Several young people mentioned that they appreciated the practical daily support parents provided such as waking them up for work or school, washing their clothes, and/or providing them with transport.

Peers played a crucial role in school engagement. Young people described friends with whom they shared educational and career goals and motivated each other to stay engaged. In her first interview, Bethany described a particularly supportive friendship and its impact on her education and career goals:

Bethany: [...] because she only lives down the road as well we spend every day together, it's just, I tell her anything and she tells me anything, and its, we work things, we work through things together and that if she's down I make her happy and if I'm down she makes me happy, it's just.

Interviewer: Does she have the same aspirations as you?

Bethany: She does, she wants to be a lawyer too.

Interviewer: That's a great relationship.

Bethany: We often joke about opening up a practice together and stuff, but nah, she is really good and she's really dedicated to her school work, so we sit down and we study, even if it's 5 o'clock in the morning, it's just, she's a great person...

As Bethany describes, her friend shared a similar drive to do well in school and work toward a career in law. This positive relationship enabled engagement with school, emotional support, and even planning for the future as the friends dreamed of starting up a law firm together. In her second interview, Bethany had moved cities and switched schools due to some of her close friends getting into drugs

and partying, which Bethany was trying to stay away from. At the time of the interview, Bethany had enrolled in a new school and was still passionate about a career in law.

Other support persons identified by young people included tutors, neighbours, and practitioners. Tutors often helped young people stay motivated while on a course, providing encouragement and positive reinforcement. Some young people also referenced tutors who were particularly accommodating to young people's learning abilities and emotional needs. When tutors understood young people well and what they were going through, they were better able to provide young people with a learning/work environment that best suited their needs. For example, one young person talked about his tutor who would give him space to be alone if he was having a hard day, rather than forcing him to keep going with coursework when he was emotionally distracted.

Support with mental health and learning challenges

Young people mentioned a range of mental health challenges: depression, anxiety, learning disabilities, and suicidality. Young people were frequently stigmatised and ostracised due to their mental health challenges, and this could compromise their desire to seek treatment. Mental health challenges also created difficulties for young people in school and employment. Young people felt alone and unsupported when their peers, tutors, or employers did not know about or did not understand their difficulties. Thus, when young people were able to share these challenges with others, this helped create a positive relationship wherein the young person felt respected and understood. These positive relationships, in turn, helped young people to be open to treatment and also to better manage the stigma felt from others. Some young people mentioned support people who assisted them to find treatment and support for their mental health challenges. For example, Eben did not have

a lot of family/whānau support for dealing with Asperger's but had supportive friends; they learned about and understood his symptoms and helped him find a support group:

Eben: School was pretty fun for me, I made a lot of friends and stuff, Asperger's didn't really affect me until I got older, so that was all good.

Interviewer: Are you able to talk about that, your Asperger's, so when you said it didn't affect you until you got older, how old were you?

Eben: I knew I had it but I didn't really think about it until I'm about my age now, just trying to get the support and stuff, it's an ongoing battle with everybody anyway and its quite handy that I've got friends now that do psychology and know how what symptoms I have and what I'm really like and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Yeah, are you able to tell...are you able to tell me how that manifests, you know, what features have you got around that?

Eben: For me it's mainly just the social side of things, I mean I'm good at maths and reading, it is on different spectrums and stuff.

Interviewer: I understand a little bit about it.

Eben: So just for me it's mainly socialising like I really can't talk, go up to like complete strangers and ask for a job and stuff, I need to be like coached into it and if I even go, I sometimes tend to freeze.

Interviewer: So when you were at school did people help you with that?

Eben: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I have had a lot of support especially here, the tutors all help me they all want me to succeed and all my friends support me

as well.

As Eben describes above, having supportive friends and tutors was especially beneficial for him. He could tell that they cared about him and wanted him to succeed. They helped him learn more about the way that Asperger's affected him in order to help facilitate his engagement with school, work, and improve his overall wellbeing. Other young people also mentioned tutors who provided support to them so they could learn how to manage their learning disabilities.

As with Eben's experience of having peers help him learn more about Aspergers syndrome, young people also mentioned having practical support from peers while at school. This practical support took the form of help with school work, emotional support during the day, and advocating for the needs of the young person (for example, additional help from tutors, adaptations to school routines and procedures). In his first interview, Oscar described struggling with reading in school due to mental health challenges. He was able to find a fellow classmate who would sit next to him and help him read during class:

Oscar: [...] I had a mate that was in all my classes, so all the school tests he'd sit next to me and give me, well help me read it.

Interviewer: Yup

Oscar: And then I'd just help him out with wood work and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Oh ok.

Oscar: So all the practical stuff.

Interviewer: So it was sort of a two-way helping.

Oscar: Yeah, it was mean.

Interviewer: Ok, so how did that, you know having that help during class?

Oscar: Oh it was a big difference. Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok that's cool, so you think that would be useful for other young people?

Oscar: Oh if you struggle with reading and writing, yeah definitely having a buddy, like a mate that can help, you know. Coz usually your mate just picks about it, you don't mind coz you know they're not serious about it, but yeah, but you know having a mate that knows you can't read and can give you a hand, it's good.

Interviewer: Yup, so having someone who understands.

Oscar: Yeah, well they don't have to understand, but knows you can't read and you're not going to be picked at, you know.

Oscar's peer was a crucial support for his learning. His friend not only made himself available to assist Oscar but also did so in a non-judgmental way. Furthermore, the pair formed a "two-way helping" relationship wherein Oscar helped his friend with wood-working in return for reading help. This arrangement was important because of how it allowed Oscar to contribute to his friend's development by helping him with practical skills and knowledge while his friend helped him with reading. Stories like Eben's and Oscar's highlight the need for young people to have meaningful support when they struggle with mental health and learning challenges. It also highlights the importance of creating opportunities for young people to have reciprocal relationships where they can give and receive help. These positive relationships helped facilitate their continued engagement in school and community while also helping young people feel accepted and understood and also to feel competent. This acceptance was especially important since many young people expressed feeling rejected and stigmatised by others due to their mental health struggles.

Support for engaging in youth justice services

Young people involved with youth justice services spoke of the important role of positive, supportive relationships in helping them navigate these experiences. Young people mentioned support people attending court hearings with them, bailing them out of jail, providing transport so they could attend legal proceedings, and staying in touch while young people were in residential facilities. One young person spoke of the crucial role her friend played while she was in prison. Her friend wrote to the young person frequently and helped the young person organise a present for her daughter's birthday while she was in prison. This friend was a positive influence, helping the young person stay connected to her daughter and motivated to stay out of trouble while in prison so she could get out sooner and get back to her family/whānau. In his first interview, Matai shared how his mother was unexpectedly supportive of him while he was in prison:

Interviewer: So over the last few years since I've seen you, who's been the most support to you? Who's been the most helpful in your life?

Matai: My mum.

Interviewer: Ok.

Matai: She'll be here the whole time when I'm in jail, trying to get me out. She's sent me phone cards and everything.

Interviewer: Yep.

Matai: I mean my mum, that's when I went to jail, when she wanted to make me.

Interviewer: Oh, ok.

Matai: Yeah, she was worried as. She was the complete opposite of what I thought she would be.

Interviewer: Isn't that interesting?

Matai: I thought she'd be like, "Ah good job that'll teach

you a lesson". But she was like, "Are you all right, are you hungry? Is anyone picking on you?" and that, stuff like that. Yeah my mate [friend's name] was in there too and he didn't have anyone visiting him. My mum was giving him stuff too. Sending him the money for phone cards too.

Matai expected his mum to be mad and distant when he was sent to prison. Surprisingly, she stayed in touch with him, sent him phone cards, cared for his wellbeing, and even helped support some of his friends who were also incarcerated. This consistent support throughout the challenging period of incarceration meant Matai remained connected to his family/whānau. At his second interview, Matai was no longer in jail but was on home detention. He identified his mum, partner, and son as influences to stay out of trouble. Having ongoing support and contact with positive relationships helped young people to stay motivated to keep out of trouble and reinforced their self-worth despite having broken the law. These positive relationships provided stability, comfort, and emotional connection during especially challenging times where young people were separated from their families, were punished and felt shamed.

In this section, we learned about the positive and supportive relationships in young people's lives and how they assisted in their wellbeing, growth, and independence. Emotional support meant young people had someone in their life who would encourage or model healthy coping mechanisms. Mentors and substitute parents figures were critical supports for young people, offering guidance, work experience, support for developing and working toward goals, and parenting, when needed. Young people who received material and practical support were provided with a safe, stable home environment, resources such as food and clothing, as well as assistance with child care. Positive relationships also helped

facilitate young people's continued engagement with their communities through education, employment, youth justice, and mental health services.

The next section will focus on difficult and challenging relationships.

Difficult and Challenging Relationships

This section provides an overview of relationships in the young people's lives that did not offer satisfactory emotional support for them either consistently (that is, over a long period of time) or at critical times in the young person's life (that is, in times of need). Difficult and challenging relationships contributed to the vulnerability of young people. These relationships took many forms including the withholding of affection, neglect, bullying or not supporting the young person during times of need. Young people experienced violence, abuse, and many did not have their basic needs met (that is, food, housing, clothes). They were often caught in unsafe, violent environments and in the middle of other contentious relationships (for example, between fighting parents).

This section covers specific experiences of neglect and lack of affection or support. This includes the absence of relationships, grief and loss, the way young people were impacted upon by their parent's relationships, and the lack of material support their parents provided. Abuse, bullying, and other forms of violence in the home, school, and community will also be discussed, including the emotional support young people received during these times. Challenging and difficult relationships also involved negative influences, gang affiliation and criminal activity, as well as access to drugs and alcohol. We then examine the instances where young people's family/whānau put unrealistic expectations on them, including the expectation that young people would take care of their siblings or other family/

whānau and expecting young people to provide for themselves financially. Although young people experienced difficulties in their relationships, it was not uncommon for these difficulties to take place in otherwise positive relationships, highlighting the tumultuous and complicated nature of relationships.

Neglect and the absence of affection and support

Young people reported on the negative relationships they had with family/whānau and practitioners. These relationships were devoid of affection and general emotional support. Some young people were not given emotional support when they were going through a hard time and needed help with specific issues. Young people were often dismissed and even patronised by family/whānau, peers, and practitioners when they asked for help; they were told to “*harden up*” or to “*learn it yourself*”, meaning they needed to figure out how to cope with life on their own. It was not uncommon for young people to be told by key people in their lives that they were a disappointment, that they would not accomplish anything, or that they were useless. As Shane described in his first interview, the lack of confidence his social worker expressed in him had a negative impact on his self-esteem:

[...] Like, I – no respect for [statutory agency]. Yes, I understand where other kids and stuff need to go to foster homes and stuff, but when you're a criminal and you're involved with [statutory agency] it's no help unless you've got a decent social worker. My social worker was just - they didn't have no hope in me, were always just thinking I'm going to reoffend and mess up again. And it didn't work on my mentality. My social worker, was meant to be big support person, thinks like that of me. Yeah, didn't work, I didn't like him.

Shane's social worker, ostensibly one of his main supports, was so openly sceptical of his potential, and this had a significant impact on Shane and undermined his confidence in his ability to make positive changes in his life. He hoped for a social worker who would believe in him and help motivate him to be successful. However, Shane was disappointed to have such an unsupportive social worker and felt hindered by such a negative relationship. Furthermore, this problematic relationship with his social worker also coloured his impression of the service that was meant to help him; he lost hope in them because of the lack of support he received. In his second interview, Shane reiterated his reluctance in working with statutory agencies and their tendency to pre-judge him because of his criminal record. When asked what would have helped him get on the right track, Shane said social services and practitioners could help, they would just need to be less-judgmental, authoritarian, and more down to earth. For Shane, this meant working with a drug and alcohol counsellor who was also in recovery and could identify with his struggles.

As with Shane's experience, key workers were often mentioned as unsupportive, unhelpful, and inefficient. These insufficiencies and lack of support often led young people to feel isolated and some experienced further trauma as a result of their interactions with services. At her first interview, Paeta reflected on the long-term consequences of inaction by key workers. She did not receive the support when she needed it—during times of abuse—and was forced to relive it all years later due to a clerical error:

I had ... one [social worker]. When I called, because I was living with my aunty and uncle this one time, and I was sniffing and I ended up getting a hiding from my uncle, and then I went to school the next day and my social worker came to see me. And then I told them that my uncle had kneed me in the face, and

then she goes "oh ok then, we feel that it's not safe for you to go back to that house", so they put me in the CYFs home. And I just blocked everyone out. Didn't talk to anybody, I just went to school, you know, act normally. And when I did this interview when I was 12 ... a couple of weeks ago I was watching the interview, and they go "oh what did you like about school". "Oh just PE", explaining all this stuff that I liked about school, and they go, "what was your worst part of school", and I go "going home" and they go "oh why's that?" and I go "I don't know, I just don't feel free at home, I don't feel safe at home, where I should feel safe in my own home", and then they just go ok. A couple of years later I got locked up, about a couple of years after that they brought it up again. Because they had just pushed, after doing all these statements, going through all this stuff that I was going through for all the abuse that was happening in my past, they just pushed it down to the bottom ... lost my file after that. Couple of years later they ring me up and I'm like "oh hello, what do you want", and they're like "oh we've just found your file", and I'm like "aye, what's that for?" And they go "for all the abuse that was happening". And I goes "oh, why now? I did that a couple of years ago", and they go "sorry but da da da". And I was like "but why now?" I was locked up in YJ at the time, I had just buried it you know. I had moved on from it, and then they bring it up again. And then every time I bury it, like just recently, I had just buried it and then they tell me that I had a trial. I was like what the hell, they bring it up now, and then later, and then later after that. And I'm trying to move on, I'm just trying to do my time and move on from everything. But they keep bringing it up, shoving it in my face, and then I have to go through the same situation again and again and again. That's not fair on me.

Paeta called attention to the abuse she was suffering at several points

throughout her life. Often, her social workers did nothing or, more problematically, responded so long after the abuse that their intervention caused harm. When Paeta spoke up about abuse and received no help in return, this made her feel disregarded and unimportant. She was forced to take care of herself following traumatic experiences and, because of that, grew increasingly distrusting of social services. Paeta's experience illustrates that key workers' inability or unwillingness to adequately support young people meant they were often further isolated from support systems and community, as well as feeling increasingly hopeless about how to find the support they needed. These experiences highlight the need for responsive, trauma-informed services that take into account a young person's needs.⁴

Negative family/whānau relationships also featured in the stories of young people. Given changing life circumstances many young people were moved around to live with different family/whānau members, placed in foster care or in residential programmes. However, many recounted that often they were placed in environments that they did not choose and that did not enhance their wellbeing. These situations often led to strained relationships, lack of emotional support, uncertainty, and disruption. At the time of her first interview, Anika was forced to live with her father and step-mother when she could no longer stay with her mum. She found the experience extremely isolating and detrimental as her step-mother was abusive and actively intervened to undermine Anika's other relationships and education:

Anika: Yeah. She, coz my real dad he used to work from really early in the morning until quite late at night,

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of young people's experiences with services, including education, child welfare, mental health, and youth justice, see the technical report "Young People's Experiences with Services" on www.youthsay.co.nz.

so I didn't really get to see him and I guess I was to all of them, [name of stepmother] my step-mum and all her kids I was you know, just come along and interfered in their little family or whatever. But I didn't ask to go there. But her kids used to do stuff and blame it on me so, she would always believe them rather than me so. I had to go to bed way earlier than her children and have one of children, [name of stepsister] she was really quite mean to me, you know how little girls have their diaries I used to write stuff all my personal stuff in there and she used to go into my diary and write really mean stuff about my mum and one day, she had come out and ripped my diary in half and called mum really mean names and she didn't really know my mum. And so that night I got my other sister's compass and slit my arm and then my dad saw it but it was just like that for the whole two years. When I first went there, coz I had never really spent a night away from mum and so I used to wet the bed and I would get into really big trouble for that. [...] when the kids used to do stuff to get me in trouble, they blamed me. [Stepmother] used to say to me that they were going to send me away to some other family/whānau, I would never see my mum and stuff again. I don't understand why she would say that to a 10 year old girl, it just quite crazy.

Interviewer: Do you remember what school was like then?

Anika: Yeah, it was not really great, my step-mum told the school that I haven't been at school for a year coz I was the same year as her daughter, and she didn't want me to be, you know taking over her

friends, same friends as her daughter so she said, mum hadn't put me in school for a whole year, and I had been. So they put me down a year. I didn't really have much friend's coz they were all my sister's friends [...]

Anika's story highlights the instability, abuse, and relational tension that characterised so many young people's lives. After moving away from her mum who she was very close to, Anika hoped to be welcomed into the home and comforted by her father, step-mother, and other siblings. However, what she encountered was a lack of emotional support, bullying, and malicious intervention in her life. Anika's education was delayed and manipulated by her step-mother which made the transition away from her mum's house even more challenging. Furthermore, when Anika began self-harming, her father did not intervene, express concern, or provide emotional support. Similar to Anika's experience of her step-mother interfering in her life, namely in the way she interrupted Anika's education, other young people echoed these stories of family/whānau interfering in their lives in negative ways. More particularly, young people talked about family/whānau who interfered in their involvement with services because of how it would reflect on the family/whānau. That is, a young person's family/whānau could prevent them from accessing certain benefits (such as the Independent Youth Benefit) because the family/whānau did not want it to go on record that they were not willing or able to provide for their child and had a strained relationship with them.

Partners were also mentioned as creating challenging relationships. They were sometimes unsupportive of young people's goals, made it harder for young people to take care of themselves financially, or were abusive. Since many young people lived with their partners, these relationship complications were magnified when young people

were financially tied to their partners. Some young people ended up in debt or had to take care of their partner financially because they were unable or unwilling to work. In her second interview, Judy spoke of her partner's disapproval of her goal of wanting to be a make-up artist:

Interviewer: So what keeps getting in the way of you actually continuing on with wanting to be a receptionist, or wanting to do make-up artistry or hair styling? Is there something that keeps coming up against you or – ?

Judy: Well, first was – [Young Person's baby's] dad doesn't like me going to boy-girl course –

Interviewer: Ah, where there's other males?

Judy: Yeah.

Interviewer: So he kind of chose, he sort of said, nah, girl only! That kind of narrows the options.

Due to her partner's jealousy, Judy had to change her career and education goals. Examples such as these speak to the all-consuming effects of negative relationships on the lives of young people.

Many young people reported that they felt disparaged, belittled, and unsupported by key people in their lives. Young people often turned to negative coping mechanisms like drugs, alcohol, crime, and socialising with negative peer groups when they did not feel cared for and supported. Tane elaborated on this experience in his first interview:

Interviewer: And did you get that attention and love when you were a kid?

Tane: Nah. Nah, that's why I can say so much. Because what I didn't have is what every kid should have.

And there's a couple of us in here [drug and alcohol unit] now who didn't get any of that. And it's all just starting to come out of us now, you know? That's the reason why we went the way we did, that's the reason why we went and smoked drugs, it's the reason why we went and got drunk, it's the reason why we're fighting and – yeah, it's the reason why we're going out to do burglaries, home invasions, aggravated robberies.

Interviewer: Trying to get that attention? And that love.

Tane: But from the wrong people and in the wrong way.

Tane saw a connection between the lack of attention and affection he received during childhood and his drinking, drug use, and fighting later in life. He also astutely pointed out how he attempted to compensate for a lack of attention by seeking it out elsewhere, albeit from negative sources. Tane and other young people's stories highlight the need for consistent, reliable support and companionship and their power to mediate the enduring impacts, and negative coping mechanisms, associated with trauma.

Relationships between parents

Relationships between parents were commonly cited as a negative influence in young people's lives. They were often caught in the conflict in their parent's relationships or were neglected due to their parent being consumed by and more invested in a romantic relationship. Young people spoke of the tension between their parents (or one parent and a romantic partner) that often escalated to include the young person. Parents would often pressure the young person to choose sides and support one parent (for example, live with one parent or spend more time with them) or would talk negatively about the other parent to the young person. If violence was occurring between parents, it was also common for young

people to witness the violence or even become victims to it as well. In some cases, young people remembered being blamed for conflict between their parents. At her first interview, Reese discussed her relationship with her parents who separated when she was about six years old. She reflected back on her parents fighting and how it prevented her from spending time with her dad as often as she would have liked:

[...] well mum and dad were together until I was five, almost six, and they separated, which was a very messy separation, which was quite hard. And I was living with mum and her new partner, which is my now little half-brother's dad. So we were living out on the farm and stuff, and everything had been going quite well. And I didn't get to see dad very often, which was hard, mum and dad always bickering, as they do. Parents tend to always make it about themselves and not focus on their kids so much.

Reese was subjected to her parent's fighting and tense relationship. In fact, Reese's needs were put on hold and subordinated because her parents' attention was on their relationship, rather than on Reese's needs.

Polly shared Reese's experience, reflecting on how relationships between parents impacted upon young people. These tensions often involved a parent prioritising their romantic relationship and as a result they neglected the needs of the young person. As Polly described during her first interview, the attention and care she received from her mum was dependent upon the state of her romantic relationship:

Interviewer: What is it about your home that means that your brothers and sister can't really stay here?

Polly: Right now it's actually good coz mum's left the guy



that she was with he was a big part of it because it's a matter of her putting her relationship, it is kind of putting your relationships first, she gets so wound up with trying to make a relationship perfect that she kind of forgets what is really influencing her and what her priorities should be, which is her kids, which is really sad. Their relationship and the home environment was really hard to be in [...] When it got physically violent coz I actually hit him and then got kicked out that's because he was being verbally abusive to my mum. It wasn't a good situation to be in but my sister ended up slashing his tyres and moving out the first time because he was just an idiot. [...] And my brother couldn't handle it either because when mum was with their father I was only, I would have been about three when they got together and he was abusive as well so, in my mind that was like this time I could do something about it. I was actually able to defend mum not just go hide under my bed like I used to have to, for me it was big change and I think that's why I got so loud about it and so confrontational because I was no longer too little to do something about it. It was like she was defenceless and she isn't she is a very strong person when it comes to everyone else but when it comes to being in a relationship she just crumbled, she just changes completely for that person. So that is why we couldn't be at home because all of us ended up cutting, we all had really bad depression and we saw a doctor about getting medication and things like that. My brother turned to drugs, he smokes weed regularly now

I think, he's 17, I think he has just turned 17. He drinks quite a bit and we try and get him to come to family things or just come play games like to around and stuff with us just so he knows that we're still here. But for him he's often in his own little world and my little sister is just a miniature, she doesn't drink coz it makes her feel funny, but she has admitted to doing weed quite a bit. Just quite sad but I had ended up turning to alcohol myself so I understand, that's why I try and talk to them about it because it's not a matter of me thinking I'm up on a pedestal I know how shit it is to be in that situation.

Polly's home environment was quite challenging during the times when her mum was preoccupied with a romantic partner. Polly said the home environment was unsafe for her and her siblings because of the way her mum prioritised romance over her children. Due to her mum's neglect of her parental responsibilities and the witnessing of violence and fighting, Polly and her siblings all suffered. They would get physically violent with their mum's partner when he was being abusive; that is, they would hit the mum's boyfriend to defend their mum against further harm. Each of the siblings struggled to cope with the violence in the home: they resorted to drugs and alcohol, suffered depression and self-harmed. Polly was actually kicked out of the house for fighting with her mum's partner and some of her siblings also moved out to get away from the partner. At the time of the interview however, her mum had left her partner and Polly seemed more hopeful about her mum being able to take care of her and her siblings. In subsequent interviews, Polly and her mum had grown closer, in part because her mum did not seem to be in any negative relationships and thus had more attention for her children.

The neglect from parents was destructive to the parent-child relationship in terms of taking the parent away from their responsibilities for providing for their children and led to less/ decreased bonding and emotional attachment. This prioritisation of other relationships also made young people feel unimportant and at times a burden. As a result, young people often grew resentful of their parents for not being there for them, but also grew accustomed to them not being around. Many young people in this study identified their parents as unreliable and stopped asking for anything or reaching out to them because they were constantly let down.

The absence of relationships, grief and loss

Parents constituted the largest category of people noted as being absent in young people's lives. More specifically, young people reported that fathers were more likely than other key adults to be absent from their lives, often from an early age. In her first interview, Ruiha discussed the experience of growing up with a father who was in and out of prison, thus cycling into and out of her life:

Ruiha: Like when is it ever gonna stop, like you know when can I turn around and say to people "oh my dad's out of jail now, "oh he's gone back in" you know so when can I say "oh my dad can come around and do that" like you know, "I can just go ask my dad" nah I've never had that. I just think it's sad.

Interviewer: Do you see your mum as part of that too.

Ruiha: My mum had every opportunity to stop what my dad was doing. Like you know she could have told him, like she, she knew what he was doing. But it's her being greedy at times.

Interviewer: So for you moving away...

Ruiha: Bestest thing I've ever done.

While Ruiha resented not having her father around, as well as her mum's enabling of his bad behaviour and criminal activity including her own, by the time of the interview, she had accepted this and had come to see his absence as a good thing. Eventually she chose to move away from her family/whānau, for her own sake. At the second interview, Ruiha was living with her mum and dad again but was feeling hopeful about the positive changes her parents had made. Her dad was out of jail and they were being much more emotionally supportive. However, by the third interview, Ruiha's dad was back in jail and her mum was "on the bracelet" (an electronic device fitted to track a person's movements as part of a criminal sentence) and had kicked her out of the house several times. Ruiha was planning to move away from her family/whānau again, recognising the toxicity of her family/whānau's bad behaviour and how hard it was on her. Peter elaborated on this experience of having an absent father, noting the particular sadness of not having a male role model:

Interviewer: [...] Is there anybody in your life over the last couple of years that you've really had to cut out because they were bringing you down?

Peter: My father. Yeah, my old man, my old boy. Yeah, I cut him out for a while, only because I hated him for not being there, and then while I was young, really young, like baby young, he was in and out of jail for 8 years. And I didn't know him, I didn't know him at all. I wish I did, but that's – every teenage or young boy's only dream, is to know their father and to grow up with him, to have a male figure in their life. For their whole life and the rest of their life. That's all I wanted, was just for my old boy to be there for me, but he wasn't there.

As Peter and Ruiha highlight above, sometimes young people chose to cut off their relationships with challenging or unsupportive people. Even though young people wanted their parents in their lives and yearned for a “normal” relationship with their parents, their relationships sometimes became so dangerous and unhealthy that young people had to distance themselves.

Young people also discussed the impact of the loss of a loved-one or illness in their family/whānau/peer group. One young person still had nightmares about his sister’s death, while others turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with their grief. Some young people noted that the death of a loved one made them reassess what was important to them. In several instances, the young person could not cope with the loss or expected loss of a loved one. At the time of her first interview, Polly struggled in anticipation of losing her step-mum, who had been diagnosed with cancer:

[...] I figured out that I’m not actually as equipped with coping with grief as I thought I would be. My step-mum’s just gone in for another operation she’s having a hysterectomy coz they found cancer cells or something. So people dying in my family/whānau, losing people is probably the biggest thing I am worried about. I mean I could lose my house, I could lose money but realistically money doesn’t really have any meaning to me, it would be a necessity because how society is but realistically I could do without the money.

Not only was Polly worried about losing her step-mum, the potential loss ignited other concerns about losing any family/whānau member. Her step-mum’s cancer brought up questions about what really mattered to Polly, realising that her family/whānau and relationships were more important than her material possessions.

For some young people, grief often followed an abortion or failed pregnancy or the loss of friends. When it came to the deaths in their friend/peer groups, suicide featured prominently in the young people's narratives. Several of Whina's friends had died, sometimes from suicide. As she reflected on this, she noted how this experience of losing friends influenced her to seek out help for herself:

... I've had so many friends that have passed away, just by, like, depression and stuff, and we didn't even know what was going on. Like even some of my mates...we didn't know what was going on, like we just wish that like, they talked to us, and I'm so glad that I talked to somebody, like, I finally just grew up and took responsibility for myself, it always gets better, you just need to hang in there.

After losing multiple friends to suicide, Whina became committed to her own mental health and sought the help of a counsellor. Noting how she had not known that some of her friends were suffering, she reflects on the silent epidemic of depression and the importance of taking responsibility for your own health and seeking out help. While it is sometimes hard for young people to “hang in there” or take responsibility for their health when they are experiencing depression or trauma, Whina's story sheds light on the need for varied and multi-faceted support systems for young people.

The absence of material support

Neglect also took the form of young people's material needs not being met by their caretakers. Material needs typically referred to housing, food, facilitation of good hygiene and clothing.

Unfortunately, many young people shared stories of not being fed properly, of having ill-fitting or old clothes, and living in unsafe and unhealthy homes (for example, not being adequately heated, too many people in one house). Young people's responses to these

conditions varied; some were able to seek these resources elsewhere, from other family/whānau, friends, or practitioners, while many had to suffer and continuously struggle or resorted to criminal activity to take care of themselves. For some young people, this material deprivation served as a turning point for them in terms of forcing them to start working or taking care of themselves and their family/whānau. As Mareikura described in her first interview, her parents' inability to provide food and clothing for her resulted in her having to start living independently at age seven:

Interviewer: When would you say you first started living independently? How old would you say you were?

Mareikura: Young, very young, my parents were like, they were around but they weren't around. Like my mum, we moved to this country house in [place name], just out of [place name] and I was living with my dad and my brother [brother's name] that I live with now and my mum and I – don't know – mum just said that she was going to [place name] one day and she never came back. So she kind of left me with my dad, and that was real bad coz like he used to drink a lot and violence and all that crap.

Interviewer: How old were you then?

Mareikura: About seven. Yeah so like I was going to school with no food, no shoes, shit clothes, eating like shit for tea. Like you know, like not a meal, like pasta and salt or something. That's what was for tea like, it was real hard, coz mum wasn't around when I was a kid, like my dad brought me up when I was a baby coz he used to drive trucks. And I used to live in his truck, he used to like take me all around the North Island with him, so that was cool, I liked that. And as I got older I don't know I just

witnessed things and yeah, it was hard. I didn't really have parents I kind of just brought myself up since I was like seven or eight. But I moved to [place name] when mum was here and she still kind of the same things she wasn't around. I did my own thing, whatever I wanted whenever I wanted. Sometimes I wish like I had, they were better parents or something, like you know role models, like tell you the rights and wrongs and the do's and don't's that would have been nice.

Mareikura became accustomed to taking care of herself from an early age. Although she had maintained relationships with her parents, she could not rely on them to provide food, clothing, and shelter. She reflected on the long-term effects of having to grow up so early, prematurely becoming an adult and missing out on parts of being a child. Mareikura lamented her parents not being role models and teaching her skills and being absent while she was growing up.

Many of the young people talked about how their families' struggles to meet their basic needs also led to restricted opportunities to participate in school and community activities. As Awhina pointed out in her first interview, she resorted to criminal activity because she did not have everything she needed and burglary was the only way she knew how to take care of herself:

Awhina: Nah, I did that all by myself.

Interviewer: Do you, was it a struggle for you, did that create problems for you do you think?

Awhina: No, I think that's why I turned into a criminal. Like, I think I started doing more burglaries because I needed the stuff and that that was the only way I knew how to score it.

Awhina connected her involvement in criminal activity to not having her needs met elsewhere. At the time of her second interview, Awhina was in jail and expecting her second child. She reflected on the connection between lack of money and her criminal history; she often resorted to stealing to make up for whatever resources she was lacking—food, drugs, clothing or things for her children. This experience was shared by many young people; they had to resort to criminal activity—stealing and fighting—in order to get what they needed. Even though Mareikura and Awhina learned to live independently and take care of themselves, in different ways, they still wished they were able to find moral guidance and emotional support from parents and other adult relationships.

Abuse, violence and criminal activity

Several young people recounted how their families had not supported them at key moments in their lives, had let them down when they needed their help and assistance, or did not try to understand them and the decisions they made. Young people were often let down by their parents at times when they needed their help, such as when they got into trouble at school, when they were suffering abuse at the hands of other family/whānau members, when their mental health care needs were not taken into consideration, or when they had difficulty relating to their parents' partners. This section will detail young people's experiences of abuse and bullying, including the lack of support from, or even greater harm caused by, family/whānau and practitioners. We will then discuss young people's involvement with substance use, crime, and gang activity as well as the relationships between their participation, histories of abuse and neglect, and difficult and challenging relationships more broadly.

Abuse

Abuse—physical, sexual, and verbal—played a critical role in the

negative relationships of young people. Abuse was common, young people described relationships that were either abusive themselves or were unsupportive of young people who had experienced abuse and were requesting help and support.

When young people suffered abuse, they often struggled to talk to anyone about it. Since they were often quite young during these experiences, young people felt ill-equipped to talk about trauma, not knowing who to talk to or how to talk about it. This sometimes led to young people feeling isolated, unsupported, and at a loss as to how to cope with their experiences of trauma. At the time of her first interview, Paeta was incarcerated and discussed the impact of not being able to talk to anyone about the abuse going on in her family/whānau:

Interviewer: What do you think your family could have done differently?

Paeta: To be honest, I wouldn't have been in here [prison] if they heard my voice, if they heard my cry out for help. I wouldn't be in here. I'm not blaming them for it, coz it's what I did. I've done it. But if they heard my cry for help, I believe that I would have been a better person, you know, if someone believed in me. And now that I've pushed charges against those people and now that I'm locked up, they finally believe me. When I brought it up when I was on the outside, they wouldn't believe me. They didn't want nothing to do with me.

Interviewer: So thinking about when it was in your life before you came in [to prison]. How long before that, how many years, from what age to what age, was that part of your life where you felt like you were

turning to drugs, pretty much every day?

Paeta: Would have been when my stepdad and them first started doing it to me when I was six. I was holding it in. And it wasn't until I was 10, 10 I brought it up. And it went on for years. I was too scared to even talk about it because of their threats you know. I just did that to numb myself. Self-harmed, tried to commit suicide a couple of times. Just to numb myself because I didn't wanna be here anymore. Because no one around here believed me.

Paeta did not receive the emotional support she needed and, in fact, felt silenced by her family/whānau. She felt isolated and alone as she kept her abuse a secret, as well as perpetually afraid since her abuser threatened her if she did talk about it. She struggled to deal with her trauma and the only viable options she saw were through escape (that is, drugs, alcohol, and self-harm), highlighting the need for continued emotional support, validation, and understanding. When she finally did mention her abuse, no one believed her. It was not until she was incarcerated that her family/whānau started to offer support. In her third interview, Paeta expressed fear that her family/whānau would stop supporting her once she was released from prison:

Just recently, you know, I got the support of my family, even though they come and visit me all the time, I still got the support of my family/whānau and I fear that when I get out, that I won't have that any more, you know what I mean? Like, it will go back to the way it used to be, before I came to jail, and then if that's going to be the case I get scared because, it's gonna make me want to come back to jail to get that comfort from my family, you know what I mean?

Because Paeta's family/whānau did not believe or support her while she was suffering abuse, she was sceptical about whether she could count on her family/whānau in the future. With impending threats from one of her abusers (he continued to threaten her while she was in prison), Paeta was reluctant to leave prison, where she had strong emotional supports, and return home to a family/whānau that may or may not support her. When young people are not believed, this not only perpetuates the emotional turmoil of abuse but also creates more anger and hostility toward family/whānau, practitioners, and other people who should ostensibly be supporting them.

Many young people shared Paeta's experience of asking for help only to be disappointed by the response (or lack of response) of the people in their lives. Normalisation, minimisation, and non-action were common responses mentioned by the young people. They reported that often others would act as though abuse was normal, that it happened to everyone and that young people were overreacting to it, or that young people deserved the abuse because of their own behaviour. Many young people talked about not being believed when they would reach out to someone about the abuse they had suffered. Ria described how her family/whānau and the police normalised the physical abuse she was experiencing and the lasting effect this had on her:

Ria: [...] I felt like I needed somebody to understand me and not tell me that "oh, it's normal to get a hiding", even the cops were saying that to me: "it's ok, because my granddad, my dad, used to beat me up", eh?

Interviewer: Really?

Ria: I'm like, no, this is not good for me, this is not good for me, I know what's wrong and what's right.

Interviewer: So people were telling you it's normal to get a

hiding?

Ria: Yeah, it's normal to get a bash, you're lucky to have grandparents. And I'm like – yeah, but that's how people are, that's how the cops are, that's how the family/whānau group conference ended up, as – it's how my parents think, still. It's really whack. But I'm the teenager with the attitude and the behaviour problems, so it's my fault.

Interviewer: Well, you know, it sounds like these things happened to you that shouldn't, like getting hidings and things, and that – and then it got – your reactions to them, you got pointed – the finger for –

Ria: I was just getting angrier and angrier at them and reacting the worse way I could have ever reacted, but just nobody was there for me. I felt like – a lot of kids don't say anything because – because nobody really does want to listen, they listen and – yeah, they understand where they're coming from, they feel sorry for them, they say, "are you all right, are you sure?" But really they've got their whole lives to deal with, and everybody has problems and other issues in their life to deal with, other than little things. You might see it as a little thing, like getting a growling, but then again it does go to verbal abuse and physical abuse and mental abuse. [...]

Ria was told by police that she was exaggerating the abuse she was suffering. In fact, they told her to get over it and be thankful for being taken care of by her grandparents, even when “being taken care of” meant getting regular hidings. These frequent interactions with police and practitioners (via the family group conference) served

to downplay the abuse Ria was experiencing, placed the blame on her, and depleted her faith in the system to do the right thing. Ria became the scapegoat for the abuse and was chastised for reacting the way she did—getting angry. Ria described the long-term impact of living in violence and of not being supported through it and astutely pointed out the flaws and contradictions in the system. Despite being established to protect communities and help young people flourish, the police and family group conference practitioners became complicit in the abuse by denying its significance and by minimising Ria's needs and wellbeing.

Not being believed by practitioners was a common experience for the young people. In particular, many young people spoke of the difficulties of trying to seek help when their parents or caregivers would intervene and try to shift the narrative. That is, caregivers would often try and discredit the young people, proclaiming that no abuse was happening or that the young person was exaggerating or lying. At the time of her first interview, Maia felt hopeless as she tried to get help from practitioners. Her family/whānau manipulated the situation to escape blame:

Maia: [...] You know, adults' word always goes before the child's word, so we never got a proper chance.

Interviewer: So you didn't really get listened to in the FGC?

Maia: No I didn't at all. I spent most of my time crying throughout the meeting, coz I wasn't listened to. And my step-dad was at the meeting too and they both lied. [...] Coz my mum can twist things a lot, and she's lived off [agency that provides financial assistance] for most of her life, so she scams the system quite well, she's quite good at manipulating and twisting everything. She's good with words, I'm not. I just swear or scream, it's so frustrating, I

can't, you know I am not too smart with vocabulary.

Interviewer: When she lies?

Maia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So how do you react when she lies?

Maia: I have a cry or swear at her. Because it's so frustrating I just can't make any words come out my mouth that will make sense, so I just swear or I don't respect you so many times I get frustrated and cry or scream. So I look like the mad person.

Similar to Ria's experience described above, Maia grew increasingly angry when trying to get help from practitioners for the abuse she was suffering. However, the angrier she would become, the more this seemed to distract from the abuse; Maia and Ria became the focus of the meetings or practitioner involvement rather than the abusive individuals. They both had negative experiences with services; their accounts of the abuse were not believed. This led to a distrust in the practitioners whose role it was to support vulnerable young people.

While the above example illustrates how service providers were unresponsive to young people experiencing violence, young people also spoke of practitioners and services putting them in residential placements that were violent, without due diligence in evaluating the households or caretakers. Eruera detailed some of the unhelpful decisions made by practitioners while he was living in violent and unsupportive placements:

Interviewer: And looking back over the course of your life, how would you rate CYFS?

Eruera: Quite useless, to be honest, very useless. Like they're supposed to be putting you in a safe environment and you're getting into an

environment with other dangerous kids, who've had worse – who've have had bad lives, putting you with families that they didn't even know, paid them to look after you, the caregivers still beat you and everything, that what goes on behind closed doors is completely like they can be all honest and act all innocent but they're not, they're quite nasty to the kids. [...] My sister had been raped while we were staying with [statutory youth agency] and – we were being neglected and getting scabs and stuff, a whole lot of crap, eh.

Eruera's experience with the statutory youth agency highlighted the frustration shared by other young people; that young people cannot trust a service agency that is meant to protect them. Being placed in households with other violent young people, as well as with violent caregivers, meant young people were often left with few options in terms of where to go during these challenging times. Since the statutory agency proved unable to provide them with a safe home, young people began losing hope in the system.

The experiences of abuse and violence shared above highlight the need to support young people following these events and also emphasises the consequences of inadequate support. Young people need ongoing support throughout their lives so that, as they grow up, they are able to continue to process traumatic experiences and relationships in healthy ways. At her first interview, Pania reflected on the cycle of violence and the adverse outcomes she experienced from growing up around violence:

Interviewer: So it sounds to me like you were hanging out with your brothers and doing all this, you know, getting up to no good with your brothers, and yet you had

a real shy streak too.

Pania: Yeah, I wasn't really shy, I was just – yeah – I didn't know what people would say about me and – you know – if they said anything bad all I'd do is just beat them up, coz that's all I knew what to do, is just beat them up. Or if they started trying to be mean to me I'd just beat them up, you know – coz it was the only thing that I knew how to do, coz that's what my brothers taught me. Beat them, you know!

As Pania pointed out, when young people are not given healthy models for how to deal with conflict and emotion, they often resort to the unhealthy coping mechanisms they grew up around—violence and abuse. In subsequent interviews, Pania had distanced herself from negative influences and was focusing on getting a job, staying on course and helping take care of her nephew. This underscores the need for young people to be taught positive coping skills and conflict resolution, particularly as it relates to stopping the cycle of violence in families and communities.

Bullying

Young people spoke of being bullied and this was connected to an absence of emotional support, affection and taking care of young people's needs. Young people were bullied and picked on by fellow students at school, peers in the community, and teachers. Being bullied by peers often took the form of verbal taunting (for example, putting the young person down for the way they looked, telling them they were stupid or worthless, or making fun of their family/whānau) and, sometimes, it included physical violence.

Teachers and practitioners were also mentioned as bullies in the lives of young people. Bullying from teachers often took the form of

putting the young person down (for example, telling them they wouldn't amount to anything, that they were stupid or worthless), openly criticising them in front of others in class, and clearly favouring some students over others. Several young people commented on the effect of having the same teachers as their siblings. Teachers would sometimes judge young people based on their sibling's behaviour, assuming they behaved the same or were on similar life paths. Furthermore, when young people had behaved badly in the past, they often found it hard to move past those circumstances, feeling permanently labelled by that one incident. This negative labelling felt constraining to young people, as though they would not be able to prove they had changed. If young people misbehaved on multiple occasions, they saw this as reinforcing their negative labels; it was as though they were just proving the label as correct and that no progress could be made or good will fostered. In his first interview, Nikora reflected on the negative, targeted treatment he received from teachers:

It felt like me and my friends were always picked on and when stuff went wrong in class I was first to be blamed by (teacher) and stuff... When you get in trouble, other students – a lot of them – might only get detention and stuff, I know I would ... I know one case the guy that I hit, I got in trouble and the reason I left school was because of him, but you know he never got a detention for all the stuff he did, to try and rough me up and fighting and stuff. I used to because I'd been in far too many, you know that's why they always put me in detention was because I had been in fights in here and they had only been in trouble for rubbish and stuff.

Even though he and his friends were getting into fights, he felt unfairly blamed and disproportionately punished. Nikora goes so far as to attribute this negative treatment to his label as a troublemaker.

When he misbehaved in the same way as other students he felt he was punished more harshly because of his reputation for fighting and causing trouble. This bullying by peers and teachers led Nikora to resent his school environment as well as to a sense of futility about changing his ways. Because he felt he would always have a negative reputation, he wondered if there was any point in trying to change his behaviour.

These experiences highlight the importance of having positive relationships, particularly with people who will practice forgiveness, empathy and understanding during times of misbehaviour or failure. Young people need to know that it is okay to make mistakes and that there is always potential for change and self-improvement. Likewise, they need people who will support them when they are bullied, who will help facilitate positive coping strategies and build their self-esteem. Young people need positive reinforcement during these challenging times; consistent messages that they are still worthy, valued humans despite their behaviour or the negative messages received from bullies.

Substance use, gang affiliation and crime

Young people made many references to friends, peers, and family/whānau involvement in substance use, gangs and other criminal activity. These negative influences often encouraged young people to become involved in crime, gangs and/or drug and alcohol use or did not stop the young person from engaging in illegal, harmful activities. In some instances when young people had insufficient material support, involvement in gang and criminal activity enabled young people to access this support.

Flatmates were commonly listed as negative influences, particularly with regard to drugs, alcohol, and criminal activity. Many young people mentioned living with flatmates who openly used drugs and

alcohol, were unsupportive of young people trying to stop drinking or drug use, or who were taken care of by young people as a result of their drinking and drug use. A few young people also mentioned flatmates who took advantage of them financially or who created financial hardship for young people when they would not pay their rent or bills, forcing young people to compensate for them. At her first interview Ruth reflected on this dynamic of living with challenging flatmates:

[...] I went back to mum's house after I got out [of prison] and that was a blur for about five months. I end up living with, other people, like the house was like this tinny house all the crack-heads were coming around and just smoke heaps of drugs at our house. Yeah it was really dumb that's how we got so bad, I was bad before I was in jail but then got real bad and also I was obliged to shoplift like to put food in the cupboards for me and all my friends and we didn't eat anyway but still. Like cleaning products and everything I just got a few things, used the money on nothing but "P" and smokes and weed so yeah that was real hard like we didn't even pay the rent I don't think or power.

Not only had Ruth just been released from prison and struggled to adjust to life back on the outside, she was also living with flatmates who used drugs heavily and could not pay the rent. While living there, Ruth experienced a lot of peer pressure to use drugs and then struggled financially as a result of buying drugs. Ruth took it upon herself to steal food and supplies for the house, since no other flatmates seemed to be contributing.

Like Ruth, other young people reported that their engagement with criminal activities was necessitated by needing food, clothing, or shelter. Several young people mentioned being involved with gangs and/or other criminal activity as way to provide for their material

needs or achieve a certain lifestyle. These activities were often influenced by young people's relationships; family/whānau or friends were also engaging in criminal or gang activity and pressured or encouraged the young person to become involved.

Some young people's families were involved with gangs over generations, meaning young people had historical connections to gangs and as they grew up gangs were a normalised part of their lives. Ari was involved with youth justice from the age of fifteen. At the time of his first interview Ari, now twenty, was in prison and reflected on learning about gang life and his family/whānau's involvement from a very young age:

Interviewer: And how did you get involved in that [gangs]?

Ari: Just family.

Interviewer: Just family?

Ari: Yeah – nearly every single one of my older cousins are all with the Nothing but Ruthless or gone with the Black Power now.

Interviewer: So Black Power and Nothing but Ruthless, both of them have family connections for you?

Ari: Yeah.

Interviewer: How young were you when you remember being aware of that?

Ari: Well – probably 11, knowing that – this is the gangs.

Interviewer: Ok. And did they have any expectations of you?

Ari: Just always proving what you can bring to the table.

Interviewer: So what kind of stuff did you do to prove yourself?

Ari: Just show them that I can do more crime and – yeah.

Interviewer: And how do you feel about it now, being involved in

gangs when you were 11?

Ari: Mmm – it was a waste of life, just being around gangs, probably could have - end up doing some probably even badder – yeah.

Ari did not see much of a future outside of gangs because so many of his family/whānau were involved and had served time in youth justice and prison or were currently incarcerated. He described having to prove himself by committing crime and that he often committed crimes with family/whānau members. In the second interview, Ari was still incarcerated and, even though he was still affiliated with a gang, he was trying to disassociate himself, in part because of prison rules prohibiting gang activity and also because he wanted to practice good behaviour to improve his chances of getting out early. Ari was still incarcerated at the third interview but spoke about wanting to work with youth after he got out, hoping to talk about his experiences and encourage other young people to stay away from crime.

Sione reflected on what drew him to gang life, particularly the influence of family/whānau members' involvement in gangs:

Interviewer: How come you think you got involved then in gangs and drugs and you weren't the churchy one?

Sione: Coz like my cousins, my first cousins, they were – well known and that in the drug trade and that, they were feared, everyone was scared of them and that. I don't know, I just thought that – I liked it, eh, the kind of lifestyle they were living and that.

Interviewer: What were they living that you liked? That you didn't have?

Sione: Like nice houses, nice cars, money – they had it all.

Gang life appealed because of the money and respect that came with it. Sione was drawn to the lifestyle he saw his cousins living, especially considering he felt he could not access the wealth and respect they had been able to access by being involved in a gang and criminal activity.

In addition to influencing gang involvement, family/whānau also featured in young people's stories about the negative influences of drug and alcohol use. Young people struggled to stop drinking and using drugs when they were surrounded by family/whānau who also used drugs and alcohol, often family/whānau members supplied them with drugs and alcohol. A few young people mentioned being released from jail or a residential treatment facility only to return home and have easy access to drugs and alcohol because of their families. At his first interview, Matai discussed growing up around so much drinking and the impact it had on him:

Interviewer: So if this is a growing up thing, what could have been done to make that process for you easier so that you weren't tempted by all of this rough, tough stuff?

Matai: Probably I reckon living in a normal house.

Interviewer: Right.

Matai: Not with people who were getting drunk all the time and that.

Interviewer: Right, ok. Alcohol's got a lot to do with it?

Matai: Yeah.

Interviewer: So is there still lots of alcohol in your house or ...?

Matai: No, I kicked them out.

Interviewer: So you took responsibility.

Matai: Yeah, my mum and her mates and that came home and they were all drunk as. I nudded out at them. Screaming at them. They all walked out with their

heads down and took off.

Interviewer: Oh ok.

Matai: I said: "that's right you do that". I thought I am not going to argue with them. So I said "I will ring the police if youse don't go".

Interviewer: Ok. So you're kinda leading the way in your family?

Matai: Yeah, yeah I am now.

In order to address the alcohol use and other bad influences, Matai had to ask his mum to leave the house. This then enabled him to step up to take care of his family/whānau. Reflected in his story is a sense that Matai wanted his parents to be positive influences and to be around during his childhood. However, the negative pressure to drink and use drugs became too much—Matai knew those were dangerous activities and that he and his family/whānau did not need to be around them. While it was positive that Matai took responsibility and spoke out about alcohol use in the home, it meant he had to take on the parenting role in the family/whānau and, as a result, severed his relationship with his mum.

Harley echoed Matia's experience of having to cut off her relationship with her sister. In her first interview, Harley described how she grew apart from her sister as her sister started using drugs heavily:

Harley: [...] Me and [sister's name] we used to be really tight but ever since she's been getting into drugs and I'd given up drugs, since then we've been separated I think, we don't have as much things in common.

Interviewer: And she's not someone you'd look up to?

Harley: No.

Interviewer: That you'd want to be like.

Harley: No way.

As Harley notes, she was willing to end a relationship with her sister when it became too challenging and unhealthy. By the time of the second interview, Harley and her sister were living together again with other family/whānau. Even though her sister was still drinking and using drugs heavily, Harley spoke of keeping her distance and not wanting to get swept up in her sister's drama and bad behaviour. She also mentioned her sister as someone who motivated her to stay on the right track because she doesn't want to end up like her, "*doing nothing*". This dynamic highlighted an important aspect of young people's resilience: taking care of themselves through trying to maintain positive, prosocial relationships. While Harley was saddened to grow apart from her sister, she was clearly prioritising her own wellbeing and personal growth.

This theme of cutting off relationships or young people distancing themselves from bad influences (that is, those that encouraged or modelled substance use, criminal activity, and involvement with gangs) was common. However, the consequence of these interrupted relationships was that young people sometimes became more isolated and unsupported. This highlights the need for young people to have positive support networks that will help facilitate prosocial behaviours, including moving away from negative peer groups.

Unrealistic expectations of the young person

Difficult and challenging relationships also involved others having unrealistic expectations of the young person. These unrealistic expectations often came from parents, family/whānau, and practitioners. Expectations related to young people having to take care of themselves, their siblings, or their family/whānau financially and materially. Young people were expected to provide child care or care for family/whānau who were mentally or physically unwell. This

could mean staying home—often missing school—or having to get a job in order to provide for others. As a result of these expectations and obligations, young people expressed that they had to grow up too quickly and miss out on key parts of being a child.

Taking care of siblings or other family/whānau members

Young people were often tasked with taking care of their siblings or other family/whānau members because their parents or caregivers were not able to do so. For example, some parents or caregivers were unwilling or unable to take care of their families due to drug and alcohol or mental health issues. In other cases, families struggled financially and young people were pushed or volunteered to get a job in order to help make ends meet. Despite some young people wanting to help take care of their families/whānau, it generally seemed that young people were often forced into these caretaking and providing roles. In Hana's case, her mum frequently made her come home from school during her lunch break to do chores around the house:

Hana: [...] I never had the right uniform, or shoes or stationery or school books. Coz my mother never wanted to buy any of that stuff so it just made it hard for me at the beginning [at school]. I remember I had to wear high heels, these strappy high heel things, sandals high heeler things, because my mother wouldn't buy me proper shoes. I was always in the office every day because of my uniform and never had the right books and that was really, that was a pain. I used to have to go home to my parents' house to my mum's for lunch just to help her in the house, I really hated that. It wasn't to go home to have lunch it was to help out, peel the potatoes and hang out the

washing then I had to race back to school, I didn't have any time with my friends.

Interviewer: Did you have to look after any younger family members?

Hana: No, they were at kindy.

Interviewer: But basically your mum didn't support you to be at school.

Hana: No, half the time I wasn't there because we had my two nieces living at home and I had to help them. And mum was sick and when I was naughty at home I would have to stay home. School ... not go to school, not going to school was a punishment. My mum knew that I liked school and when I was naughty she would keep me home from school. Not like a normal parent who let their kid go to school.

Hana's story highlights the sacrifices young people had to make when their families were not able to adequately provide for them or had expectations that, as Hana recounts, were not fair and not what a "normal parent" would do. Hana was expected to take care of her nieces and to help out around the house. Because of this, she missed spending time with her friends. Her mum would punish her by making her miss school; a harsh punishment since Hana liked school and wanted to see her friends. By the third interview, Hana was no longer in contact with her mother and spoke about the difficulty of having to take care of herself from such a young age. Although she was only twenty-one, she said she felt "like 51" because of all she had endured.

Reese's story also highlights missed opportunities for experiencing ordinary childhood activities. She reported that she missed many childhood activities because she had to parent her siblings. Due to

her child care responsibilities, she was extremely stressed and overwhelmed from a young age:

[...] it got to the stage of my little brother calling me mum, up until he was about two and a half, three years old. [...] I think that finally took a toll on me with the amount of stress, and I finally did get that feeling of having the weight of the world on my shoulders, like I was always having to get up and do things for him, and never being able to just go and hang out with my friends, and stuff like that. So, for me, I feel like for about, from the age of about 10 up until I went to high school, like I missed out on a huge amount of just being. Just being a kid and exploring the world still. And like I did grow up much too fast, of course, being bought up around, you know, alcohol and drugs and people you probably shouldn't be. [...]

Shockingly, Reese's child care responsibilities were so great that her brother referred to her as "mum" for several years, highlighting the crucial role she played in his upbringing and also the burden she carried. While it can be seen as positive that Reese was able to provide for her sibling, it certainly came with consequences since she was also a child herself. She missed out on so many opportunities for normative social and developmental activities and on "just being a kid".

Having to take care of family/whānau—both emotionally and materially—meant young people were confronted with stressful decisions and often left to navigate these heavy situations on their own. Young people expressed having to subordinate their own needs in order to take care of others. For example, at the time of the first interview and following his sister's death, Eruera had to take care of his parents who were both struggling with suicidal thoughts:

Yeah, this has actually been a real difficult year, this one. The beginning of the year started off really good, we had a good year starting off. Then my sister passes away, then my mum and dad just went absolute down, my mum was gone into a real bad alcoholic – like she goes on about silly things like suicidal thoughts, and my dad has had suicidal thoughts. I've got both of them, and they're pissed, in my head, crying and stuff like that, like. [So I have] got them, both on my shoulder pulling me down like 100kg weights and it's like – I'm trying to get up, do my own stuff, and they're just pulling me straight back down, it's like – and now that they've had the separation I think they've got even worse. Like, I've got my dad walking around like a miserable old goat, I haven't heard from my mum in a few weeks.

While Eruera was worried about his parents, he also felt weighed down by them. Because he felt obligated to look after them, he described not being able to really take care of himself or process his own grief following his sister's death. In subsequent interviews, Eruera was living with one or both of his parents. At various times, he said he was responsible for paying the rent, with his parents contributing much less financially. This sentiment was echoed by several young people: feeling so overwhelmed by others and an obligation to take care of them that they had to neglect their own feelings and needs for the sake of others. This heavy emotional burden meant young people missed out on some crucial aspects of childhood: playing with friends, going to school, exploring the world and making mistakes, and being taken care of by others. Young people were forced into making big decisions such as getting a job to support family/whānau, and emotionally supporting those whom they depended on for nurture and support. When young people took on parenting and adult-roles, they sacrificed parts of their childhood and were forced prematurely into adulthood and/or independence.

The next section extends our discussion on young people's relationships and explores the broader societal impacts and connections between young people's relationships with family/whānau and community. It presents recommendations for how to better serve young people with challenging and changing relationship dynamics.

Discussion and Implications

The young people in the Youth Transitions study experienced complex relationships. They faced an accumulation of life disadvantages and a persistent absence of their needs being met (Elder, 1998).

Participants in this study were less likely to live with one or both biological parents; they experienced a relative absence of enduring, positive caregiver presence in their lives; reported high levels of emotional and physical disengagement from mainstream schools; and, higher health and wellbeing risks (Sanders et al., 2013). They experienced violence, abuse, substance use and alcohol problems, unstable relationships, and disengagement from school.

This report has explored both the positive and challenging relationships experienced by young people. Positive relationships opened up opportunities for the young people. Young people's positive and supportive relationships consisted of emotional and practical support, mentorship and guidance, and substitute parental figures. In these relationships, young people felt cared for, accepted, important and valued. Supportive relationships helped young people stay engaged with school, mental health services, and youth justice programmes. These support people facilitated personal growth, career planning, financial stability and independence. Supportive adults were also critical relationships when some young people became parents, offering emotional support as well as practical support (that is, childcare or financial assistance) and guidance. They

also helped young people access interventions, programmes, services for emotional support and assisted them to develop skills. Material support was a key component of these positive relationships, assisting young people to access resources such as shelter, food, clothing and safety.

Many of the young people in the study identified their family/whānau as primary sources of support while growing up. During challenging times, their family/whānau offered emotional and material support, a secure base to return to, as well as connecting young people to other community resources. However, while young people's families/whānau were important positive relationships, they were also major sources of strain or lacked essential support that young people needed. Many young people were exposed to multiple risk factors because of their families/whānau including domestic violence, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, drug and alcohol use, neglect, criminal activity, and lack of access to material and community resources (Dewhurst et al., 2014). Young people could not always protect themselves from these risks and, as a result of poverty and generational trauma, their family/whānau were also unable to protect them from these risks. This created tension in family/whānau relationships since the support network young people hoped for and expected was not there and, in fact, was oftentimes detrimental and problematic.

This tension with family/whānau relationships had varying impacts on young people. Despite being exposed to multiple risks like violence, abuse, and poverty, many young people still expressed allegiance and loyalty to their family/whānau (Dewhurst et al., 2014). Even though young people acknowledged their harsh living conditions and relationships, some still felt grateful for the role their family/whānau did play in their lives. Family/whānau was still mentioned by several young people as the most important thing in their life, highlighting

how relationships could be both positive and negative simultaneously. In these accounts, young people would explain away fighting or neglect as normal or say that family/whānau were just trying the best they could despite their circumstances. Loyalty to family/whānau was also reflected in the narratives of young people taking on more responsibility in the home—taking care of family/whānau members, doing house work, or finding employment to support the family/whānau financially.

However, young people also expressed feeling let down and disappointed by family/whānau. When family/whānau were unable to meet young people's emotional and material needs, this led to resentment, disappointment, and isolation. Many young people discussed how difficult it was when they realised that their upbringing and family/whānau were not “normal” and that they wished they could have had a more stable and supportive childhoods and relationships. Living in challenging households and experiencing difficult parental relationships led to a range of responses. Some young people were placed in the care of other family/whānau members or placed in foster care while other young people chose to move away from and distance themselves from their family/whānau and other problematic influences. Unfortunately, though, there were still young people who were unable to find more supportive living arrangements and support networks. Young people often resorted to violence, criminal activity, and drug and alcohol use as a means of coping with trauma and difficult relationships.

The difficult and challenging relationships many of the young people experienced with adults and others who were supposed to be supporting them meant that young people had to seek emotional support and connection elsewhere. Peer groups offered this, helping young people develop a sense of belonging as well as feel understood, more so than with caregivers and other adults (Smith

and Thornberry 2003; Urry et al., 2015). Some young people even referred to friends who provided them with basic resources like food, shelter, or help in finding work. However, these peer relationships often involved harmful and risky behaviours; for example, truanting, fighting, drug and alcohol use and other criminal activity. Furthermore, through involvement with these negative peer groups, some young people became disengaged with education and/or involved with the justice system.

While some young people attached to new peer groups in the absence of emotional and practical support from family/whānau, there were still young people who struggled to make any connections outside the home. Many young people faced difficulties forming new relationships. The consequences of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and bullying meant that they had difficulty forming trusting relationships. Other young people had developed coping mechanisms that involved acting-out and aggressive behaviours and hostility towards other young people which meant that they had difficulty developing positive relationships with adults and other young people (Urry et al., 2015). Young people who took on more responsibility within the home, such as taking on child care or household work, also became isolated and found it difficult to connect with their peers. As a result of these responsibilities these young people felt older than their peers and struggled to relate to those close in age.

Young people's acting out through fighting, drug and alcohol use, or self-harming was a result of the harm they experienced throughout their lives (Litrownik et al., 2003; Rivera and Widom, 1990; Salzinger et al., 1993). This speaks to the cycle of violence and young people taking on and exhibiting many of the violent, unhealthy behaviours that they witnessed or were victim to growing up. Young people spoke frequently of bearing witness to violence, drug and alcohol use,



gang and other criminal activity inside the home and among family/whānau. Some young people felt great pressure and expectations to join a gang or use alcohol and drugs, feeling they had few prosocial options or resources at their disposal. Considering the economic and material deprivation many young people confronted the appeal of gang life and criminal activity is understandable. Gangs and criminal networks offered young people opportunities to not only provide for themselves financially but also a place to belong, feel cared for, and build narratives of resilience (Smith and Thornberry 1995; Thornberry et al., 2005; Ungar, 2004). Research has shown that young people from socially disadvantaged families are particularly at risk of offending following abuse (Fagan, 2005). Because of the impact of trauma over generations, services must be responsive to victims of abuse, intervening early or promptly to assist young people in dealing with trauma as well as harnessing prevention efforts so that victims of violence will not later become the perpetrators of violence.

Connected to generational trauma, family/whānau violence, and negative social networks, are the experiences many young people shared of trying to move past or disconnect from these experiences and relationships. Some young people were able to physically move away from family/whānau or homes where violence, neglect, or drug and alcohol use were prevalent. More commonly, though, young people expressed difficulty or an inability to distance themselves from these problematic relationships. Many young people recounted that their gang involvement came from familial influences. Generations of some families/whānau were all part of the same gang, making distance or dropping out all the more complicated. Young people who were incarcerated expressed reluctance at being released and sustaining the positive changes they made while in justice facilities. Their reticence stemmed from being returned to unhealthy or unsafe home environments and communities where they anticipated being surrounded by gang life, drugs, alcohol, and other

criminal activity or violence. To avoid these negative environments, some young people became transient as a way to escape conflict and/or to seek support and prosocial connections elsewhere. However, this sometimes led to young people feeling more isolated as they searched for a new community.

Referred to as the “peer paradox”, this dynamic involves young people struggling to cope as they distance themselves from negative relationships (Sanders et al., 2017). Although their intentions are well-meaning—to create and sustain positive support systems—young people often felt dismayed and alone in their search for prosocial relationships. Without additional supports from adults, peers, or practitioners, the intentional distancing from difficult and challenging relationships leads to greater social withdrawal. These findings highlight the importance of young people having multiple and varied supports activated around them. Service providers are critical for broadening and strengthening social networks and resources available to young people, acting as a bridge between young people and their natural support systems (Ungar et al., 2015).

As a result of challenging relationships and being exposed to multiple risk factors, young people lost opportunities to grow and learn. They often had to rely on themselves to manage trauma, grief, poverty and other trying circumstances. While young people developed coping capacities and built resilience, their childhoods were accelerated and compressed. As many young people stated, having tumultuous home lives and problematic relationships took away from their experience of being “just a kid” while growing up. They were forced to mature early, having to demonstrate independence, financial stability, and caretaking responsibilities from a very young age. Having to take on greater responsibility contributed to resentment and frustration. Coupled with this pressure was the persistent lack of support many young people experienced, leaving

them ill-equipped to process their experiences and establish positive identities (Sanders and Munford, 2017).

Some young people were able to successfully seek support from peers, practitioners, and other community members. These young people were able to talk about and make sense of their life experiences with the help of these supportive networks. Supportive adult relationships outside family/whānau included teachers, practitioners, and coaches. Young people spoke favourably of the effect of understanding, non-judgmental and targeted approaches and being valued. When teachers, for example, tailored assignments and the learning environment to meet the young person's needs and abilities, they felt better supported, included, and cared for at school and as a result were more likely to complete their education.

Although key workers featured prominently in young people's positive and supportive relationships, key workers were also frequently implicated in negative relationships with young people. The powerful influence key workers had on the young people, and particularly their ability to have a significant impact on young people's lives can be seen in the way that they were identified as both the go-to people in young people's lives and as also representing some of their most problematic relationships. Educational workers, in particular, let the young people down or did not support them adequately when they needed help. For example, several young people noted that teachers/principals/deans did not step in when they were being bullied or were having difficulties at school (in some instances the teachers were the bullies). These young people often felt that they were pre-judged or targeted by educational workers and were therefore not given the help and support they needed to improve their behaviour and/or learning outcomes.

When practitioners acknowledged the hardships young people

experienced, respected their autonomy and fostered their independence, young people were likely to be more engaged in services and trusting of service providers and as a result were more likely to gain benefits from the involvement of services in their lives (Alessi et al., 2018). Examples such as these highlight the importance of relational approaches to working with young people: services and support must be based in building a genuine, caring relationship with a young person. Furthermore, these relationships must emphasise long-term connections, acceptance that change is non-linear, and that young people lead unpredictable lives, requiring flexibility and persistence from practitioners and supportive adults (Stevens et al., 2014).

Sanders and Munford (2016) highlight this need for relationship-based approaches to service delivery through the development of their PARTH model. PARTH builds on the idea that the relationship between services and young people can actually serve as a therapeutic intervention in itself (Bower, 2005; Ruch, Turney and Ward, 2010). It emphasises perseverance, adaptability, relationships and respect, time, and honesty. With the goal of facilitating positive engagement with services, building resilience and independence, PARTH principles come to life in the form of commitment and long-term support, flexibility and adaptability, transparency, reliability, and actively discouraging young people from internalising negative labels. Young people described effective practitioners—many of whom demonstrated an orientation to PARTH—as good listeners and people who would go the extra mile for the young person and to whom the young person could go to if they needed help or advice. Another notable character trait of a supportive key worker was their enthusiasm for their work, that is, they were doing the work for the love of it and not out of a sense of obligation. Some young people also mentioned that when the worker had a similar background to them, this made them more likeable or easier to

respect/connect with (Alessi et al., 2018).

While the PARTH principles can be adopted by service providers, they are also universally useful to other adults, and peers, supporting young people. Positive relationships have the power to create a ripple effect in the lives of young people, meaning that a small change (for example, a healthy relationship) can trigger a series of changes which could improve their wellbeing and resilience (Gilligan, 2000). Supportive relationships that prioritise independence and interdependence, as well as help young people take care of their basic needs for safety, shelter and food, contribute to young people being able to better address challenges and adversity in their lives (Bernath and Feshbach, 1995). Positive and supportive relationships serve as protective factors for young people, encouraging personal growth, community engagement, and emotional connection.

This research was particularly interested in transitions in the lives of young people and the specific impacts over time of shifting dynamics, relationships, and service involvement. Across the interviews, relationships were commonly discussed as central components of young people's lives and influences on their wellbeing. Young people's relationships evolved over time, sometimes growing stronger while at other times these relationships became strained. Young people often talked of growing closer to people as events brought them together over time.⁵ There was also frequent talk of young people's relationships deteriorating or even ending. This had a lasting impact on the young person. Many young people grappled with grief over these absent or strained relationships and the loss of a loved one. Due to the fluctuating and non-linear nature of young people's relationships, formal systems such as social services,

5 For a more detailed description of chance events or opportunities and how they impacted young people's life courses, see the technical report "Chance and Sense of Self" on www.youthsay.co.nz.

education, and mental health statutory agencies, as well as informal networks within communities and families, can remain vigilant and accessible for young people, especially those who are vulnerable and transient.

Conclusion

The experiences of the young people in the Youth Transitions study highlight the paradoxical nature of relationships. Parents, peers, and practitioners all featured in both positive and negative accounts of young people's relationships. Due to accumulated disadvantage and exposure to numerous risk factors, young people in the study were particularly impacted upon by difficult and challenging relationships. The negative influence of these relationships exacerbated already existing trauma and material deprivation as well as promoted coping strategies that resulted in new or further engagement in unhealthy and dangerous activities. Young people were often caught in a web of misfortune—isolated from prosocial networks, unable to access material and practical resources, and forced to grow up too quickly. Some young people harnessed these circumstances as an opportunity to move away or become more independent, although they still struggled without and yearned for a community and a sense of belonging. Young people highlighted the importance of building and maintaining relationships with positive role models. In the short-term, these role models provided emotional support and validation and, in the long-term, contributed to young people's resilience, wellbeing, and emotional adjustment. While the positive and supportive relationships varied in character, the quality of the relationships was consistent. Young people desired and thrived in relationships built on mutual understanding, emotional support, and safety. Supportive individuals fostered independence and autonomy, namely giving space to young people to make their own decisions and be the authors of their own narratives, identities, and life stories.

Relationships help protect young people against adversity through facilitating access to resources, taking care of basic needs, goal setting and future planning and they also provide a critical sense of belonging and emotional safety. Relationships must be prioritised in families/whānau, communities, and services due to the crucial role they play in the lives of young people—building self-esteem, fostering resilience, opening up opportunities and improving wellbeing.



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