

**The Pathways to Resilience Research Project (New Zealand):**  
*Whāia to huanui kia toa*

## **Young people's experiences**

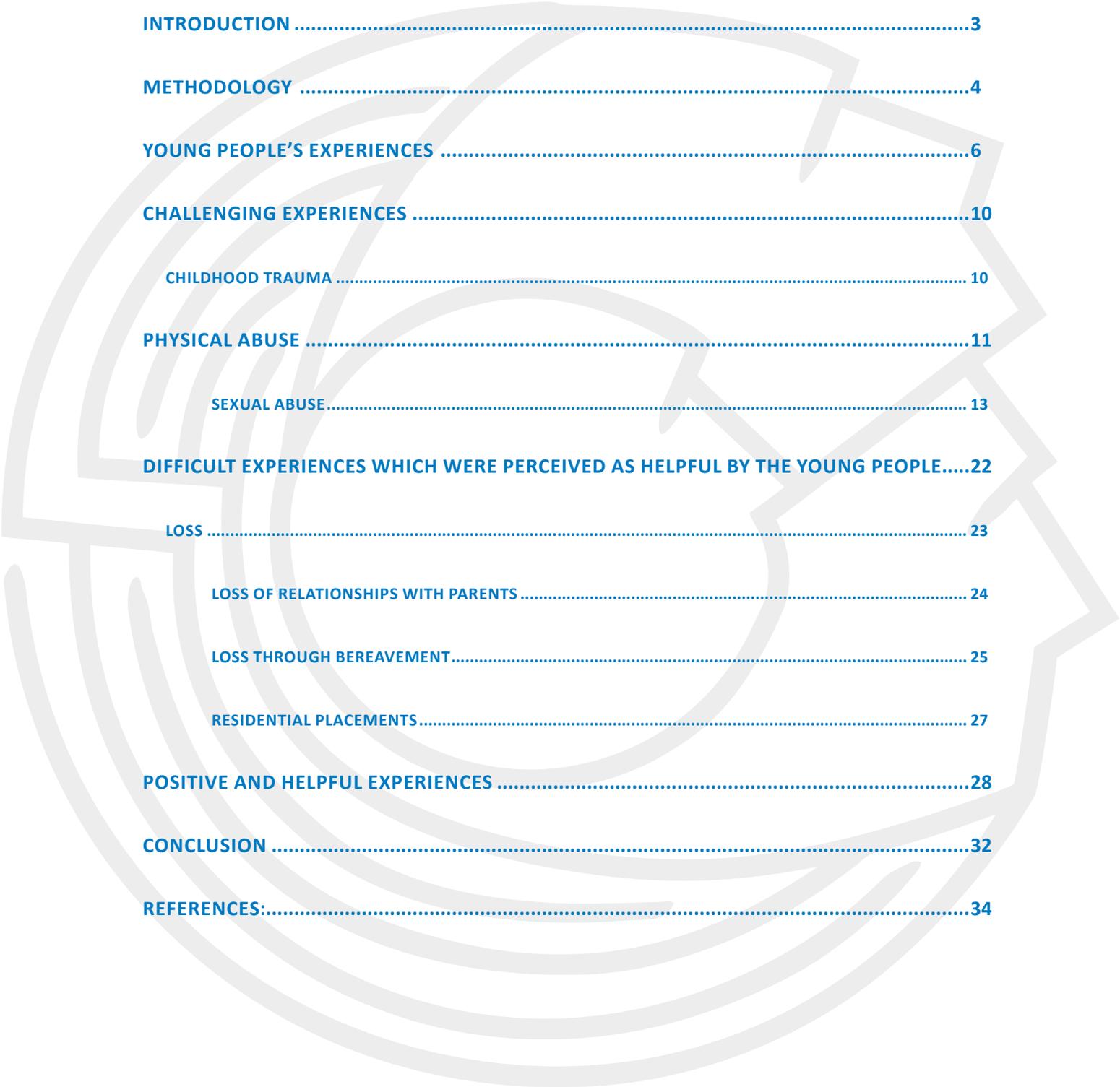
### **Technical Report 23**

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## INTRODUCTION

The data presented in this paper was collected as part of a larger study, the Pathways to Resilience Research Program, a five-country (Canada, China, Colombia, South Africa, and New Zealand), mixed methods study of youth resilience and risk. Data for the study was gathered between 2009 and 2013. Linked to its parent study based at the Resilience Research Centre in Halifax Canada, these were the first studies anywhere in the world that investigated the ways in which experiences across service systems influenced outcomes for youth with complex needs. Taking ecological and youth-centred perspectives, the research not only considers multiple service experiences, it also takes account of patterns within the social and material environment as well as interpersonal relationships within the lives of youth who are clients of multiple services. In this way it focuses on explaining the ways in which youth “negotiate” for, and “navigate” (Ungar et al., 2013) towards the social determinants of wellbeing with their families/whānau and the service systems that provide them with support, treatment and care.

The purpose of the study was to identify the factors that were related to the achievement of positive outcomes for youth who were users of multiple services. These were very vulnerable young people who faced a complex mix of challenges in navigating safe pathways through adolescence and into adulthood (Allard, et al., 2007). The study had a particular interest in explaining the ways in which the risks confronted by these young people, their resilience and wider social ecologies, combined with supportive and remedial services to create different patterns in outcomes. While data was collected from a number of sources, the research placed a particular priority upon providing spaces for youth themselves to explain their own experiences and to reflect upon the factors that made a positive difference in their lives (Bolzan & Gale, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

The research programme was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork commencing (MUHEC approval 08/33). In addition to this University Ethical approval, ethical approval was secured from any organisation that supported the research in terms of either facilitating access to assist with recruitment or providing access to information such as case file data (see file reviews technical reports). This included Research Access Committee (RAC) approval from the Ministry of Social Development, approval from the Department of Corrections, District Health Boards, as well as approvals from schools and a wide range of NGO organisations that supported the research. The research has several distinct components:

- A survey of Multiple Service Using (MSU) and Comparison Group (CG) youth aged between 12 and 17 years;
- A survey of adults nominated by MSU youth as knowing the most about them (PMK - person most knowledgeable);
- Qualitative interviews with a subsample of MSU youth and their PMK;
- Reviews of case files held by a range of organisations that worked with the subsample of MSU youth.

Taken together, these four components constituted the New Zealand Pathways to Resilience Study. The study built upon the Canadian Pathways to Resilience study (<http://resilienceproject.org/>).

In total 1477 youth participated in the research. All of these youth completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the study. This

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<sup>1</sup> A description of the methodology is provided in [The Pathways to Resilience Study \(New Zealand\): Whāia to huanui kia toa: Methodological Overview: Technical Report 2.](#)

figure of 1477 was composed of 872 youth who formed a comparison group, and 605 (40%) youth who were the primary focus of the investigation. The 605 youth were purposefully selected because they were concurrent clients of two or more service systems; they were multiple-service using youth. The service systems included: youth justice, child welfare, mental health, and educational services additional to mainstream classroom programmes. These services were provided by both statutory and non-governmental (NGO) providers<sup>2</sup>. Youth were recruited into the qualitative sample, which is the focus of this paper, from the 605 multiple-service using youth on the basis of their risk and resilience scores in the survey phase. Youth who scored above the mean on a composite risk measure and who also either scored above the mean on a resilience measure or below the mean on this measure were interviewed for the qualitative phase. Youth were interviewed by trained interviewers, and a semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the interview which covered topics such as relationships with family/whānau and peers, experiences of school and other services, the risks young people identified in their lives and how they managed these, their definitions of what it would mean to achieve successful outcomes, their understanding of health and wellbeing, and their suggestions about how effective services could be provided. Youth were interviewed individually in a location of their choosing. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Youth were also asked to nominate a person who knew the most about them, and this person completed a qualitative interview as well. Finally, youth were asked to give permission for researchers to access up to four of their service case files and 291 files were reviewed as part of this process. The current paper focuses on youth in the New Zealand sample and specifically on a subset of 109 youth whose data was used for the

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2 A description of the study population is provided in [The Pathways to Resilience Study \(New Zealand\): Whāia to huanui kia toa: The Human Face of Vulnerability- Characteristics of the Pathways to Resilience Youth Population: Technical Report 3.](#)

qualitative phase of the investigation.

Ungar and colleagues (2013) argue that in order for young people to achieve positive outcomes, resources need to be activated around them that reduce risks at the same time as support is provided that enables them to harness their own resilience resources. Young people who are most at risk of poor outcomes are typically clients of more than one service (Garland et al., 2003; Hazen et al., 2004; Jones, Gutman & Platt, 2013; Loeber et al., 1998), however, neither the significance of links between education, child welfare, mental health and youth justice system engagement, nor the ways in which young people and their families/whānau experience accessing resources and supports from multiple service systems, have been systematically investigated. The Pathways to Resilience Research Programme seeks to address this gap in knowledge and the current paper focuses on one part of this larger research endeavour.

## **YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

This paper examines patterns that emerged from the analysis of one thematic node in the qualitative data set, the experiences of young people. Experiences were conceptualised and discussed in terms of both the positive and negative affects they had on the developmental trajectories of young people. Many young people showed insight into the ways in which difficult experiences in childhood and adolescence had provided them with the opportunity to experience or learn something positive, and identified particular life experiences that had been pivotal in shaping their sense of self. Insight and capacity for self-reflection was evident in the young people's analysis of how difficulties and risk factors in their lives such as the experience of abuse, trauma and loss, had reinforced their capacity to cope with crises and their sense of self-efficacy.

Many of the young people in the study had significant experiences of disrupted attachments; they had complex family backgrounds, lived in communities with high levels of social and economic deprivation, had been exposed to risk factors such as parental drug and alcohol use and family violence, and had struggled with mainstream education (Dewhurst, Munford & Sanders, 2014). Experiences such as physical and sexual abuse were common within young people's narratives and described the impact of childhood trauma on their developing identity and self-perception. Many young people expressed a perception of self which was inherently "bad" and felt a sense of powerlessness over their circumstances. Research on trauma (for example Herman, 1997) indicates this self-blame is congruent with the thought processes of traumatised individuals of all ages who search for faults in their own behaviour in an effort to make sense out of what has happened to them.

Drawing on data from the qualitative interviews with young people, this paper discusses the impact of significant experiences and focuses on the way in which they were interpreted by the young person. Experiences were explored in relation to both the positive and negative effects they had on the developmental trajectories of young people. As Ungar (2007) asserts, these youth faced numerous risks in their personal and social worlds, however they were also strong capable young people with much potential and had navigated to resources and supports in their social networks. The way in which their experiences were construed as either "helpful" or "unhelpful" is examined within an ecological approach, which focuses upon how individuals and their social and material environments interact together to create different outcomes (Munford, et al., 2013).

The discussion begins with the narratives of young people<sup>3</sup> who had

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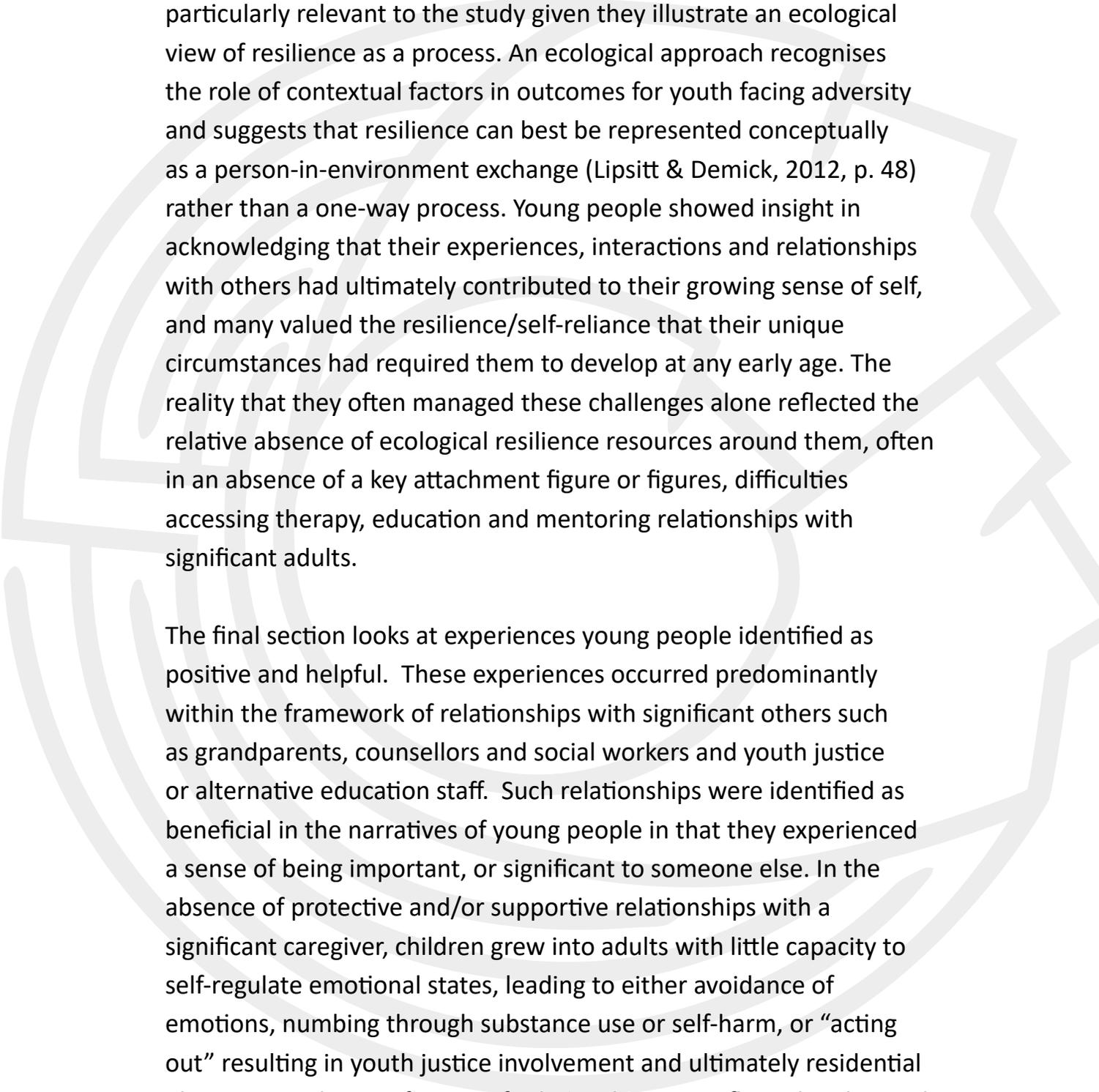
3 All names and identifying details have been changed.



challenging and traumatic experiences, particularly abuse, both physical and sexual. This discussion illustrates the impact of these experiences on the young person, in particular their developing sense of self and identity. The significance of childhood trauma as discussed by Briere (1992) is explored given the young people's reflections that the effects of their abuse became increasingly evident as they traversed adolescence and began to make links between negative emotional states and thoughts, with past experiences of abuse. The absence of a secure, protective attachment and its relevance to risk of exposure to further abuse are explored.

The discussion looks firstly at young people's experience of physical abuse. Many of the young people identified that they were physically abused within their family/whānau home by both immediate and extended family/whānau. The psychological effects of physical abuse, alongside the effects of witnessing physical abuse of siblings, or parents, are discussed within this section. The impact of abuse on the developing psyche was evident in the narratives of young people, many searching for faults in their own behaviour to give some context or meaning to their experience. This internalisation of inherent fault or self-blame was also evident in the narratives of young people who experienced sexual abuse which is also discussed. The responses of family/whānau as well as the inherent risk for some young people in having no secure attachment figure or protector present in the home resulted in many young people remaining vulnerable to further abuse occurring throughout their childhood.

The next section discusses the experiences that young people identified as challenging and/or difficult, but were ultimately helpful for them. The most prevalent theme identified here was that of the experience of loss. Many young people identified that the loss of family/whānau relationships, loss through bereavement and loss



of freedom due to residential youth justice placements significantly changed their development trajectory. These experiences are particularly relevant to the study given they illustrate an ecological view of resilience as a process. An ecological approach recognises the role of contextual factors in outcomes for youth facing adversity and suggests that resilience can best be represented conceptually as a person-in-environment exchange (Lipsitt & Demick, 2012, p. 48) rather than a one-way process. Young people showed insight in acknowledging that their experiences, interactions and relationships with others had ultimately contributed to their growing sense of self, and many valued the resilience/self-reliance that their unique circumstances had required them to develop at any early age. The reality that they often managed these challenges alone reflected the relative absence of ecological resilience resources around them, often in an absence of a key attachment figure or figures, difficulties accessing therapy, education and mentoring relationships with significant adults.

The final section looks at experiences young people identified as positive and helpful. These experiences occurred predominantly within the framework of relationships with significant others such as grandparents, counsellors and social workers and youth justice or alternative education staff. Such relationships were identified as beneficial in the narratives of young people in that they experienced a sense of being important, or significant to someone else. In the absence of protective and/or supportive relationships with a significant caregiver, children grew into adults with little capacity to self-regulate emotional states, leading to either avoidance of emotions, numbing through substance use or self-harm, or “acting out” resulting in youth justice involvement and ultimately residential placements. The significance of relationships are reflected in the work of Garmezy (1993) who identified a supportive family milieu and an external support system that encourages and reinforces a child’s

coping capacities as two of the primary protective factors against risk of poor outcomes. Consideration is given here to understanding the ways in which factors in the social and material environment interact with individual characteristics to create different patterns in outcomes for young people facing stress and adversity (see for example, Antonovsky, 1979, Schoon, 2012).

## **CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES**

Challenging or difficult experiences were conceptualised as experiences which exposed the young person to risks or disadvantage and thus increased their vulnerability to poor life outcomes. Risk is perceived as a multi-dimensional construct that refers to ongoing exposure to multiple social and economic disadvantages that can be observed in factors such as impaired parenting, exposure to high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, abusive or neglectful families, regular exposure to conflict and violence, instability and an accumulation of adverse life events (Blanz, et al., 1991). This discussion focuses on young people's experiences of abuse and the way in which these experiences impacted on their sense of self. Research (for example Briere, 1992) into the effects of childhood trauma illustrates that abused children experience significant psychological distress and dysfunction. Analysis of the young people's stories in the current study identified ongoing issues with relationships, a negative sense of self and self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and the adaptation of self-soothing techniques such as drug and alcohol use.

### **Childhood Trauma**

The significance of childhood trauma, particularly the experience of physical and/or sexual abuse is well documented and associated with a wide range of psychological symptoms including anxiety,

depression, anger and “acting out” behaviours. Hodges et al., (2013) observed a significant linear relationship between the number of trauma types experienced before the age of 18 and the number of different trauma symptoms reported simultaneously in adulthood. The next section explores the narratives of young people who experienced physical abuse and illustrates the impact of this experience on the young person’s developing sense of self.

## **PHYSICAL ABUSE**

Young people experienced physical abuse such as punching, slapping and “hidings” within their families, often perpetrated by both immediate family members within their home and extended family, including grandparents, aunts and uncles and step-parents. An absence of positive, supportive relationships with their family/whānau was common in this study and young people in these situations often reported living within a family/whānau which they experienced as volatile and traumatic. Young people recalled experiences of being moved to a different home after a disclosure of abuse, often being placed with a member of their extended family in which they experienced further physical abuse at the hands of a different perpetrator/family member. Young people frequently reported living within a family/whānau environment which they experienced as frightening. These young people described their relationships with their parents and caregivers in volatile terms and there was an apparent lack of parental capacity to be emotionally responsive or available for their child(ren).

In addition to being subject to violence themselves at the hands of family/whānau, many of the young people in this study witnessed domestic violence between their parents and from their parents to siblings or between siblings. Physical violence was common in the households inhabited by most of the young people in this study.

Young people witnessed their siblings or other parent/caregiver being physically abused and reported conflicting feelings of distress and relief at not being the victim in these instances. Despite the presence of family violence, many young people stated that they wanted to remain within their family/whānau as they felt a sense of safety and protection through a close relationship with one parent/caregiver. Interventions from agencies to remove young people due to the presence of family violence were not always experienced as helpful by the young people. This was Laura's experience when she was separated from her family because of her mother's violent partner:

*It would have been helpful to ask what we wanted. There is a novel thought! Just ask how we are feeling, as I would have said that staying at my mum's was a safe place. That I didn't feel in danger, because I never did.*

A New Zealand study completed by Dr Kay McKenzie (2005) of children who disclosed physical abuse revealed children rarely tell anyone about their abuse unless they are directly asked about it. Physical abuse by multiple perpetrators, having a parent with poor mental health and witnessing family violence and aggression were all factors which limited children's ability to make disclosures of physical abuse (McKenzie, 2005). These were all common experiences contained within the narratives of the young people in the current study.

The impact of physical abuse on a child's developing sense of self has also been identified as a factor that influences their decision not to disclose physical abuse. McKenzie's study illustrated that children who are abused by violent parents/caregivers are unlikely to feel confident or good about themselves and are unlikely to perceive others as interested in their wellbeing (McKenzie, 2005). If a young

person repeatedly experiences a primary caregiver failing to meet their needs, they are likely to develop the understanding that no adults will be appropriately responsive to them (Dewhurst, et al., 2014). This was Ani's experience as he described his difficulty in trusting people after experiencing physical abuse during his childhood:

*You know it took years to actually like trust someone. Every time those social workers used to say to me, I won't tell anyone, and they'll tell, their workers, their boss. Then when we have a meeting they'll bring it up and aunty would be like "oh well that's not true, that's not true". She would look at me like, every time we go home I would get like the meanest hidings there like just for speaking the truth aye, I hated it. That's why I just didn't trust anyone aye, takes a while for me to trust people.*

Neglect and abuse at the hands of parents and caregivers results in young people struggling to build self-confidence and self-esteem and often wrongly seeing themselves as at fault and deserving of the abuse. These feelings can pervade their lives, making it difficult to overcome feelings of guilt, blame and helplessness as adults (McKenzie, 2005). These feelings are also reflected in the narratives of young people who experience sexual abuse which is discussed in the following section.

### **Sexual Abuse**

The experience of sexual abuse as a child or young person is significant and has far reaching consequences throughout the individual's life. In Aotearoa New Zealand it has been estimated that, up to one in three girls will be subject to an unwanted sexual experience by the age of 16 and for Maori, the likelihood of sexual violence is nearly twice as high as the general population (Fanslow, et al., 2007). Although individual responses are varied and influenced

by factors such as the nature and severity of the abuse, research into the impact of the abuse on the individual's developing sense of identity and perception of self, clearly establishes that sexual abuse is experienced as a significant trauma (Briere, 1992). Young people who disclosed sexual abuse reflected that the impact of this became increasingly evident as they traversed adolescence and began to link negative emotional states and thoughts in the present with these traumatic past experiences of abuse. For instance, Rebekah talked about the impact of her abuse on her sense of identity as a young woman:

*I told my family when I was 15; I wrote it in a letter. There were lots of other things that I was starting to go through as a teen. I was looking at opportunities and stuff, but when I tried to go for it, I found it so hard. I didn't really understand the consequences and stuff of what had happened.*

Child abuse exposes children to trauma during a critical developmental period of their life; when assumptions about self, others, and the world are being formed; when their relations to their own internal states are being established; and when coping and affiliated skills are first acquired (Hodges, et al., 2013). When the perpetrator is a loved and/or trusted figure in the victim's life it is confusing for the young person to view them in a negative light, thus rendering them incapable of seeing what happened as not their fault. Perpetrators of sexual abuse are often known to the child, who is often subjected to intense "grooming" via compliments, treats, and so on. This special attention shown to the victim by the abuser increases their vulnerability to sexual abuse. Individuals who experience sexual abuse consistently have difficulty externalising the abuse, instead internalising it as an experience which causes guilt, shame and self-blame (Hall & Hall, 2011).

Hanna showed insight and awareness of the impact earlier abuse had upon the difficulties she was experiencing as an adolescent. Hanna had experienced a traumatic childhood, growing up in a gang-affiliated family. She experienced physical and sexual abuse at an early age and she was sexually abused by a different perpetrator when she was in her early teens. Hanna described feeling unprotected as a child and of having no experience of being safe from sexual abuse:

*I was sexually abused by two people. Ah, that is why I became very suicidal and I started to turn to drugs and everything. I just didn't care about life anymore, thought it was over. I didn't know a lot of things and I didn't want anyone to help. I didn't want anyone near me. That's why I write my emotions, that's why I'm emotionless. I have never been able to really love people. I write about how I feel. I write about how my life has been. I don't think you should ever go through what I went through.*

The absence of a secure attachment to a significant other who acts as a protector of the child is a key factor in exposure to risk factors. Relationships can therefore either buffer or exacerbate risk (Zeanah, 2012).

Infant-parent relationships are the conduit through which infants experience environmental risk factors; the nature of the experience of caregiving relationships mediates the impact risks have upon factors impact upon infants. In the absence of a parent who is emotionally responsive, young people become vulnerable to abuse as there is effectively no adequate protector present. Briere's (1992) research on child abuse illustrates the crucial role of parents and caregivers in keeping their children safe; parents are expected to provide a child with protection from harm or abuse.

In the current study, the lives of young people were complex and for many the experience of abuse occurred within the context of a challenging family/whānau environment. Maia was brought up within her extended family and recalled being sexually abused by different perpetrators, often family/whānau members who came in live in her home for periods of time. Maia's story illustrates how the absence of a secure protective attachment in her childhood contributed to her vulnerability to sexual abuse by different perpetrators within her own home. Maia talked about an experience that occurred when she was twelve:

*That guy came to live with us and he did heaps of stuff to me. My Aunt met him and said sweet, he can come and live with us, so he moved in and lived with us for about 4 or 5 months. I was 12 and he started touching me and stuff. At first I thought, he's from a different country and he just doesn't know. It just ended up a real weird situation. Horrible, sad, depressing, everything. I started drinking, smoking pot, started smoking cigarettes, things like that. For myself to feel better, you know it was a life saver for me, just something to take my mind off it.*

Young people identified recurring patterns of having no safe person to disclose to, to talk with about their abuse, to seek protection from the abuse, and of having to manage their distress by themselves. The use of drugs, alcohol and deliberate self-harm were adaptive ways of managing the difficult emotions as a result of sexual abuse and young people appeared to utilise these to make life bearable. A key determinant in the way a young person creates internal understanding around their experience of sexual abuse is the manner in which their parent or caregiver responds to their disclosure (Briere, 1992). A number of young women in this study identified that their mother had been unable to emotionally support them after they disclosed sexual abuse. In these cases it was

common for mothers to react to disclosures with disbelief, anger and even to blame their daughters for the abuse. Other young women talked about their awareness that their own mothers had been sexually abused as children and that sexual abuse was in fact an intergenerational experience within their family. This is supported in Benward and Densen-Gerber's (1975) research, which identified mothers who had been sexually abused struggled to give their daughters emotional support or protect them from future abuse. Samantha disclosed being sexually abused at a young age by her mother's partner. Samantha stated that she no longer had contact with her mother as she had not believed Samantha's disclosure.

Samantha reported:

*My mum's still living with him. The reason I don't live with him anymore is because he tried making sexual advances towards me when I was in my bedroom in bed. That was pretty much the biggest blow I've had-he did that and my mum believed him. We won't have a close relationship until I get an apology out of her.*

The following case study illustrates the journey of a young woman who experienced sexual abuse over a prolonged period of time. It highlights the common dynamics within families, which can reinforce a young person's decision not to disclose their abuse or seek assistance from outside their family. Amy's experience is of a young person who had no significant attachment figure to "contain" her distress. As such Amy finds safety in other places such as school and in relationships with peers and teachers. Amy's experiences illustrate the absence of supportive relationships within her childhood, a critical period of development where early relationships with family/whānau members, particularly a child's key caregiver(s),

influence children's sense of self-worth and their ability to form positive trusting relationships later in life (Frederick & Goddard, 2008).

### Amy

Amy lived with her parents and siblings until the age of 14, at which time she ran away and became transient. Between the ages of nine and thirteen Amy experienced sexual abuse from a family member. Amy disclosed her experience of sexual abuse to a female cousin who was living with her at the time, however she felt unable to tell either of her parents about her abuse and she described having little attachment to her mother:

*I reckon I was just wasting my breath trying to be there for her. I can't really say I actually love my mum 'cause I haven't really heard the words from her. So I don't know if she feels the same way. I'm too scared to tell her that I love her, but I wanna hear her say that. She's never actually hugged me before, like when I was young when I used to hug her she would like stand there stiff.*

Amy was aware that her own mother experienced sexual abuse as a child, and that Amy was not the only other family member to have been sexually abused. This "normalisation" of sexual abuse is evident in Amy's story:

*Mum finds it hard. She went through a lot in her life. My family's been through a lot. They've all got their own story and if you talk to all of us it's going to be weird if you put it all together. It's going to be "oh, no wonder they played up" and "no wonder why she got molested". Even my brother got molested. Most of my sisters. It's only my young brother that has never been molested. He's my dad's favourite.*

At primary and intermediate school Amy found safety in school and relationships with peers and teachers. Amy talked of not wanting to come home after school and recalled completing jobs for teachers; doing everything possible to avoid leaving the school grounds. Amy described school as her safe place where she could feel normal and where no one knew what was going on for her within her family/whānau. When asked in her interview if she had ever thought of confiding in anyone at school about her home life Amy responded:

*Mmm, nah. I would have but I love school because they didn't know anything about me. They just know who I am and who I've been within that school. And that's how I like to keep it.*

Amy described her transition to high school as difficult and at 14 she was asked to leave school due to drug related offences and fighting. Amy stated that she wrote a letter to her mother telling her about her abuse and her expulsion from school, before running away and living between abandoned houses and the homes of extended family members. Amy's mother made no attempt to contact Amy at this time and actively discouraged her sisters from looking for Amy. Amy stated that she used drugs and alcohol on a daily basis as a way to numb her feelings and emotional distress:

*Drugs are like a pain relief. Pretty much like a medicine, but it's quick. I never wanted to do any drugs, but it's just hard. 'Cause it's still inside me and I can't, I can't solve it. I'm just letting it sit there and eat me. So I'm supposed to get counselling, but I don't want to.*

Amy's life story reveals her attempts to manage feelings of powerlessness through investment in maintaining self-control, not accepting support from anyone. Despite her insight into her emotional difficulties, her suppression of intense feelings resulted

in a reluctance to engage in therapy or talk about her feelings. Amy identifies substance use as a way of self-soothing or “medicating” her inner distress. Research indicates that substance use is often inextricably associated with chronic childhood experiences of maltreatment and pain, and that such substances are often used for temporary relief and survival of post-abuse trauma (Hodges, et al., 2013).

Ariana is another young person whose life story also illustrates many of the points outlined above regarding the trauma associated with childhood abuse and neglect and the resultant impact on a young person’s sense of identity and self-worth.

#### Ariana

Ariana and her family/whānau became involved with care and protection services Ariana was seven years old. Ariana’s father was physically abusive towards her and she was sexually abused by a family friend. Ariana disclosed to her aunt that she was being physically abused, but never told anyone about her experience of sexual abuse. This reluctance to tell a parent is often reflective of a young person who assumes responsibility for their parent’s emotional wellbeing, seeking to protect their parent from distress by attempting to contain their experiences themselves:

*I got sexually abused by my Dad’s friend. My mum doesn’t even know about it. So if you talk to my mum don’t tell her this, because she would be upset.*

Ariana remembers that social workers held a series of meetings with her mother in which she was encouraged to leave Ariana’s father due to the violence in their relationship. Ariana’s mother struggled to leave her father and Ariana experienced further physical abuse from her father:

*He continued giving me the bash, but mum wasn't saying anything to the social workers. Mum was scared too- he might give her the bash and might kill me. He used to give me the bash like hard.*

Ariana stayed with her family and siblings and experienced ongoing physical abuse from her father, despite several disclosures to her social worker(s) and family members. At the age of 11 Ariana was voluntarily placed by her mother in care after Ariana became enraged at school, breaking windows and attempting to set her classroom on fire after being wrongly accused of smoking by a teacher. Ariana's angry behaviour is consistent with a young woman who has experienced years of physical and sexual abuse:

*Mum had put me in care because she was too scared that dad was going to bash me to death. When my dad bashes me, he bashes me like he's going to kill me. It's so hard to talk about really.*

Ariana was subsequently expelled from school and attended an alternative education programme which she described positively as she found her teachers were respectful of her and spoke to her politely. Ariana appeared insightful of the impact her abuse had on her life and described the experience of being in a safe respectful environment as confusing, in that she felt undeserving of the care and respect shown to her by staff due to her perception of herself as "bad". Ariana described her ambivalence around being in this environment as both a positive and negative experience:

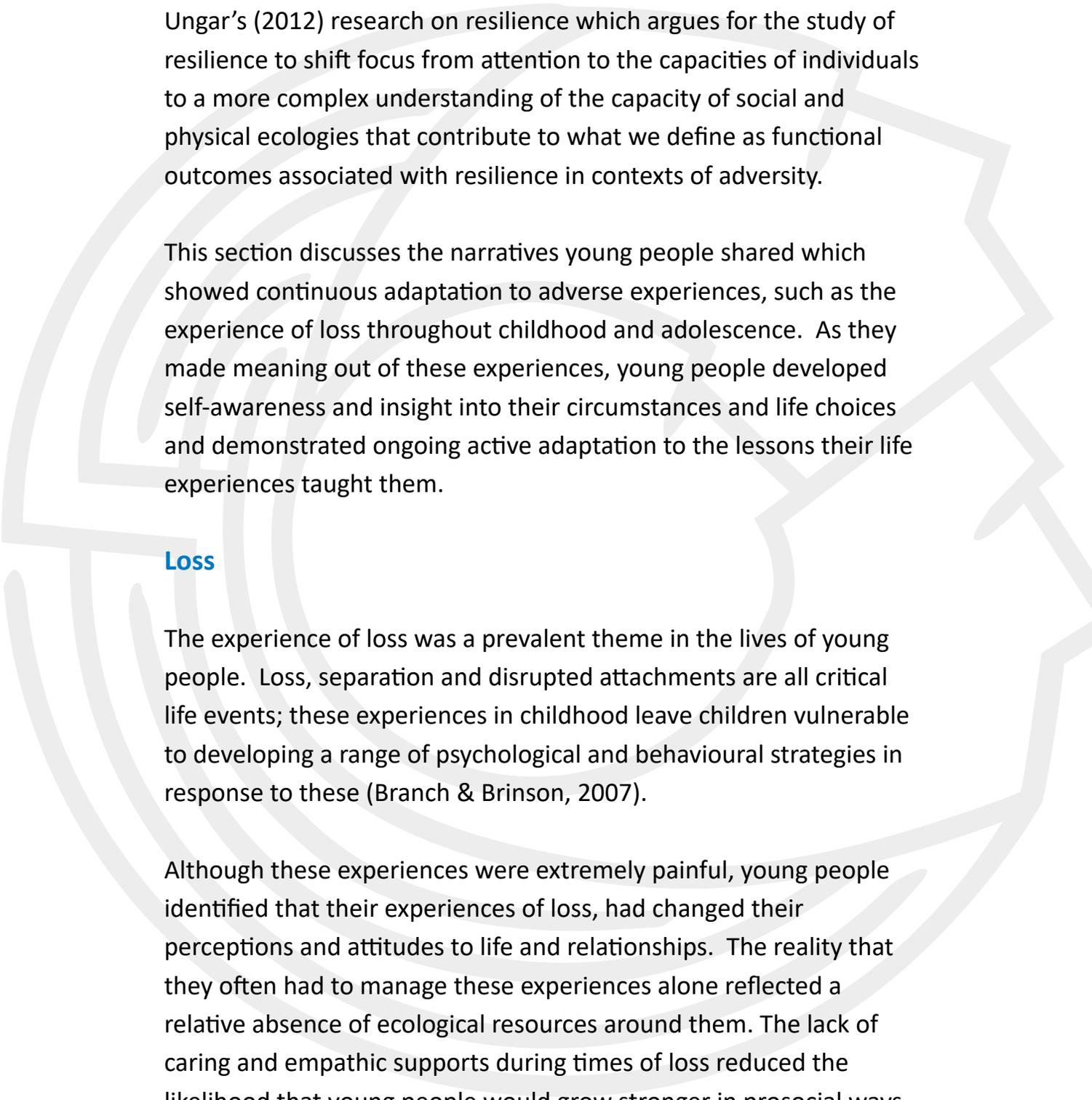
*Positive, it's safe for me and I feel like the staff are supporting me while I'm here, caring for me. Negative, sometimes I feel bad when I'm here, I feel like I'm a bad person. In my life it hasn't really been safe, it's basically been violent, It's*

*really hard to be safe, because the only way I've been brought up is with violence. That's why I have always been violent to the people that are trying to help me.*

The impact of abuse on a young person's developing psyche is evident in the narratives of the young people discussed above. Self-blame is congruent with the thought processes of traumatised individuals of all ages who search for faults in their own behaviour in an effort to make sense of what has happened to them (Herman, 1997). The adolescents in the current study described having developed negative perceptions of self, difficulty in forming relationships and struggling to contain overwhelming feelings of anger and the resultant behaviours such as aggression, and violence towards other people and destruction of property. The next section discusses the experiences young people identified as difficult but which were ultimately helpful in the construction of their identity as being self-reliant and resilient through this exposure to adversity.

### **DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES WHICH WERE PERCEIVED AS HELPFUL BY THE YOUNG PEOPLE**

The young people demonstrated considerable insight and capacity for self-reflection when they spoke of how the difficulties and challenges they had faced contributed to their development. They valued the self-reliance their circumstances had required them to develop at a young age. Often this manifested itself in statements that reflected pride in their personal strength, self-efficacy, independence and capacity to solve problems themselves. Findings from an Australia phenomenological study of vulnerable young people reported that young people's meaning and identity constructions were fluid and interrelated; the way young people felt about themselves, the world around them and their place in it had a profound effect on how they lived their lives, the relationships they



formed and how they saw their futures (Noble-Carr, et al., 2014). This interaction between individual and social ecologies is reflected in Ungar's (2012) research on resilience which argues for the study of resilience to shift focus from attention to the capacities of individuals to a more complex understanding of the capacity of social and physical ecologies that contribute to what we define as functional outcomes associated with resilience in contexts of adversity.

This section discusses the narratives young people shared which showed continuous adaptation to adverse experiences, such as the experience of loss throughout childhood and adolescence. As they made meaning out of these experiences, young people developed self-awareness and insight into their circumstances and life choices and demonstrated ongoing active adaptation to the lessons their life experiences taught them.

## Loss

The experience of loss was a prevalent theme in the lives of young people. Loss, separation and disrupted attachments are all critical life events; these experiences in childhood leave children vulnerable to developing a range of psychological and behavioural strategies in response to these (Branch & Brinson, 2007).

Although these experiences were extremely painful, young people identified that their experiences of loss, had changed their perceptions and attitudes to life and relationships. The reality that they often had to manage these experiences alone reflected a relative absence of ecological resources around them. The lack of caring and empathic supports during times of loss reduced the likelihood that young people would grow stronger in prosocial ways and increased the risks that the coping they learned from these powerful events would expose them to more harm later in their lives.

Some young people showed insight into the way in which the loss of a significant relationship had changed the trajectory of their life and assisted them in seeking supports and resources through other relationships or environments.

The next section discusses young people's experiences of loss. Loss of relationships with parents, loss through bereavement, and loss of freedom due to residential youth justice placements were all present in the young people's narratives and identified as a turning point in their lives. It begins with a young person who experienced significant loss of relationships in his early childhood and adolescence.

### *Loss of relationships with parents*

#### Simon

Simon's father left the family when he was three and Simon's relationship with his mother was difficult. Simon found some solace in his relationship with grandparents. Simon talked about his experiences of getting into trouble as a child and adolescent and the shame he felt around this due to his grandfather's influence and care for him:

*Our dad walked out on us when we were kids, so I looked up to my grandfather. You know, it's like he is still disappointed in me for the things that I did.*

As an adolescent Simon's grandparents assumed care for him due to his difficult behaviours, challenging relationship with his mum, and his escalating involvement with Youth Aid. Simon's grandparents were clearly protective factors in his life in assisting him to make different choices in his lifestyle and relationships. Simon identified this relationship with his grandmother as a turning point in his life, particularly when his grandmother sent him to live with relatives in

the Pacific Islands:

*She was a big figure to me because of the things that she did for me. She gave up her own free will and her own free time to say, listen son I love you as my grandson but you're just getting too out of control. I need to send you somewhere to appreciate things in life and not take them for granted. So I appreciate things now. Like I actually feel happier and I am doing things I would never have done.*

### **Loss through bereavement**

Other young people experienced significant loss through the death of a loved one and identified this as a time of intense personal introspection or a “wake-up call”. The concept of a wakeup call is embodied in the work of Giddens (1991) who proposes that individuals are involved in a “project of self” within which they experience “fateful moments and times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences” (Giddens, 1991, p.113). Wake-up calls frequently coincided with an external experience and contributed to young people’s reflective and critical processes (Urry, et al., 2014). Many young people identified the significant effect that the death of a loved one had had on them, acknowledging it as a turning point in their lives that had provided motivation to take a different life path.

Raymond described the death of a relative as an experience that he felt “gutted” by as they had a close relationship. At the time of this bereavement Raymond was completing a rehabilitation programme. Raymond identified that this death was a significant turning point for him from which he became able to commit to and continue his rehabilitation for substance addiction:

*He died and I was gutted because I was trying to call him and when I heard about his suicide, it had happened the day after I was trying to get through to him. I'm really gutted because I thought if only that call had gotten through he wouldn't of, you know. So I decided to use it as motivation.*

Manu also identified the sudden death of a friend following a car crash as an experience which motivated him to make changes in his life. At the time of his friend's death Manu was in a Youth Justice residential facility due to his offending. He reported he had been "heading off track", smoking cannabis on a daily basis and was dis-engaged from any form of schooling. Manu talked about the shock he experienced at his friend's death and the impact it had on his life:

*When I heard that my mate had passed away, it woke me up. I said I'm still not finished, I've got a lot to do you know, this is just the beginning. You know his death woke me up. When he passed away I just started crying hard out and saying to myself I'm so glad I never got into stealing cars and all that. I've never stolen a car in my life, but you know I want to experience everything once just so I can talk about it. You know since that happened with him, the stolen car and car crash and all that, I think I will pass on that one.*

Manu and Raymond's experiences illustrate the impact of bereavement, identifying it as a key turning point in their lives that provided motivation to make positive changes. While wake-up calls frequently coincided with an external experience or influence that stimulated the young person's reflective and critical processes, for them to be effective in creating lasting change, it was necessary that family/whānau, social services and caregivers responded positively by providing a significant support to scaffold the young person through

the change process. Both Manu and Raymond were able to access external supports through residential placements to assist them to keep on a positive trajectory. Other young people's experiences of residential placements are discussed in the following section.

### *Residential placements*

Residential placements were experienced by young people as a loss of both their freedom and for many the loss of their familiar environment and or lifestyle. Despite this, placement within a youth justice residence represented a positive turning point for many young people. "In addition to taking them out of difficult environments and providing structure, activities and routine, residences offered many programmes that addressed unmet educational needs, drug and alcohol use and anger issues" (Urry, et al., 2014, p.29). Young people who were placed in residential programmes identified this experience as initially very difficult; however, they also acknowledged that placement away from familiar environments and relationships had provided different and more positive opportunities. Placement in a youth justice facility was often pivotal in facilitating the education re-engagement of young people in this study. They noted that although they had lost their freedom, the experience had other significant benefits for them. Ungar (2004) writes that the experience of an out-of-home placement can offer young people options for the construction of a new identity that is positive and that challenges the stigmatising identities that have burdened them in their communities. Other young people found the experience of being away from the influence of their family/whānau helpful because it helped them to make changes to their lifestyle.

Anaru described his experience of being placed in a youth justice facility as life changing as for the first time he was able to access resources for his mental health issues. Anaru's family had previously

not supported him in seeing a doctor or mental health professional due to their own beliefs and stigma regarding mental illness:

*I wanted to get away from my family and I feel better for doing it. When I was in youth justice I asked them to put me on some medication which I had discussed with the mental health people that came and saw me. That caused a bit of drama with my family because none of them supported that. They didn't support my decision-making or anything. So that kind affected my relationship with a lot of my family.*

Anaru's narrative highlights the reality that for some young people placement away from home environments can enable the construction of a different and ultimately more positive sense of identity. For some youth it provided the opportunity to engage with resources they had previously been unexposed or restricted to such as therapy or mentoring. The next section discusses the key relationships young people identified as positive experiences in their lives and illustrates the way in which these were an important turning point in terms of the capacity to sustain changes in their lives.

## **POSITIVE AND HELPFUL EXPERIENCES**

Positive experiences were conceptualised as the occurrence of good and positive things providing the opportunity for the young person to develop, or experiences which worked out well for the youth. Although youth in the study population identified high levels of stress, they also reported on positive experiences particularly in regard to their relationships with significant others such as extended family/whānau members, most often grandparents, teachers, youth workers, social workers and counsellors. As stated by Hughes (1997) in his work on developmental attachment, all children, at the core of their beings need to be attached to someone who considers them to

be very special and who is committed to providing for their ongoing care. The role of the parent(s) or primary caregiver is pivotal in providing a safe and contained environment in which the infant can develop relationships, emotional regulation and an internal working model of self. When this primary attachment to a parent and caregiver had not occurred, subsequent relationships with other adults of significance, such as grandparents, social workers and teachers were regarded by young people as providing a sense of connectedness to others. The relationship between Marcus and his grandmother illustrates this; he identified his relationship with his grandmother as pivotal in changing his behaviours following a breakdown in his relationship with his family. Marcus was caught stealing by the police and at this time he was smoking drugs and drinking:

*I was just getting worse and out of hand. I wasn't listening to my mum and I wasn't listening to my dad. I felt like no one wanted me and my wake – up call was like everyone hating me and having no one to talk to.*

At this time Marcus's grandmother made the decision to send him to live with extended family/whānau. Marcus's family were financially struggling after his father left when Marcus was young:

*My nana said you know what, you're out of control, you're getting out of hand and I think you need to see what other people have to deal with to see what you've got.*

Marcus credits the time he spent away as changing his viewpoint and lifestyle. Marcus reported that his nana encouraged him to attend church which had subsequently become a big part of his life:

*Like I thank her every day you know. If it wasn't for her, where*

*else would I be? I could be dead in a ditch or gone to prison. All that you know, to do stupid things for what? Then I would hate myself for good.*

Young people also experienced close relationships with social workers and or counsellors. These relationships provided a feeling of security and acceptance of the young person as having value as an individual. “These young people found the means of accessing the support and resources they needed to make positive change, through having a relationship with someone who believed in them and encouraged them to do their best “(Dewhurst, et al., 2014, p. 26). Maggie described her relationship as giving her a purpose, particularly in her school achievements:

*My social worker is really supportive and wants me to succeed at school and stuff. I feel like I don't want to let her down. I wouldn't have that feeling if I had someone who's just clocking their hours and going home.*

Maru found his relationship with a counsellor helpful in assisting him to deal with his anger:

*He helped me figure out how to deal with it and what really pushes me in a certain way that makes me smash things and makes me angry. He made me see that it's better to walk away than to confront people, that it's just a waste of time getting in trouble all the time. He did a lot of listening and not a lot of talking like the other ones did. When we got into it I realised I was in the wrong for doing what I did and it just didn't need to happen.*

Other young people had spent time in a youth justice residential facility and regarded this experience as an opportunity which had

given them time to reflect and make changes in their lives. Andrew was placed in residential care under supervision orders and reflected on the experience as a positive one, describing his time away from his family as a “detox”:

*It gave me what I needed; it was actually a bit of a detox. That was the best thing I've done in my life. It gave me what I needed to think about in my life and understand that this is where I would end up if I kept going the way I'm going. The reason I was doing that was because I was angry at the other people. So I just needed to let that go, if I wanted to go any further in the right direction.*

During his time in residence Andrew formed relationship with other residents and staff in which he found shared experiences of difficult childhoods and exposure to risks such as drug and alcohol use, family violence and abuse. Andrew expressed that the similar life experiences of other residents provided him with a sense of connectedness to them and enabled him to find meaning in his own feelings and behaviours:

*The other residents had been coming and going out of that place and I could just see that all of us were going to end up in shit. They were going through the same stuff as me. They pretty much had the same upbringing as mine, if not worse, so I mean, I could totally pick out the stereotype of all of us in there. We were just the lost generation that had shit parents and were angry at everyone in the world and were doing the same type of shit. That's how I saw myself- we were all in there for the wrong reasons. For nothing- because we were angry because someone did us wrong. So they helped me a lot to figure out where I was going and what I was doing.*

Research and practice has consistently proven that a sense of belonging comes from interconnectedness between people and place (White & Wyn, 2013). For many of the young people, the experience of a consistent relationship gave them a sense of being important to someone and therefore of having value. The significance of a secure emotional attachment is now well established. For example Bowlby (1999) illustrated that the formation of emotional attachments contributed to the foundation of emotional and personality development.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has reported on one theme that emerged in the analysis of the qualitative interviews and file reviews: the experiences of young people. Experiences were conceptualised as either challenging or helpful for the young person and were explored within an ecological framework, focusing on how individuals and their social and material environments interact together to create different outcomes (Munford, et al., 2013). Young people's experiences and their developing sense of self and construction of identity were clearly interwoven. Childhood experiences of abuse were linked with feelings of a negative sense of self, perceived low self-efficacy and anger. Many young people navigated challenging childhood experiences and transitions with little support.

The way these young people linked these intense experiences to their developing sense of who they were and to the ways in which they coped with life stress illustrates resilience as a dynamic person-in-environment exchange (Lipsitt & Demick, 2012). Insight and capacity for self-reflection was evident in the young people's analysis of how difficulties and risk factors in their lives, particularly painful experiences such as abuse and loss had resulted in a reinforced sense of self-efficacy and capacity to cope. This individual resilience enabled them to continuously adapt to the world around them. Less present

in their experiences however were reports of the way in which interpersonal relationships and contextual resources supported them to both build resilience and also to be able to avoid being exposed to further harm. Sometimes through chance, and sometimes as a result of the direct actions of adults around them (family/whānau, friends or service providers) young people made a significant connection to another person and these were instrumental in helping them to build a sense of purpose and meaning. As Ungar (2007) asserts, these youth faced numerous risks in their personal and social worlds, however they were also strong capable young people with much potential and had navigated to resources and supports in their social networks.

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