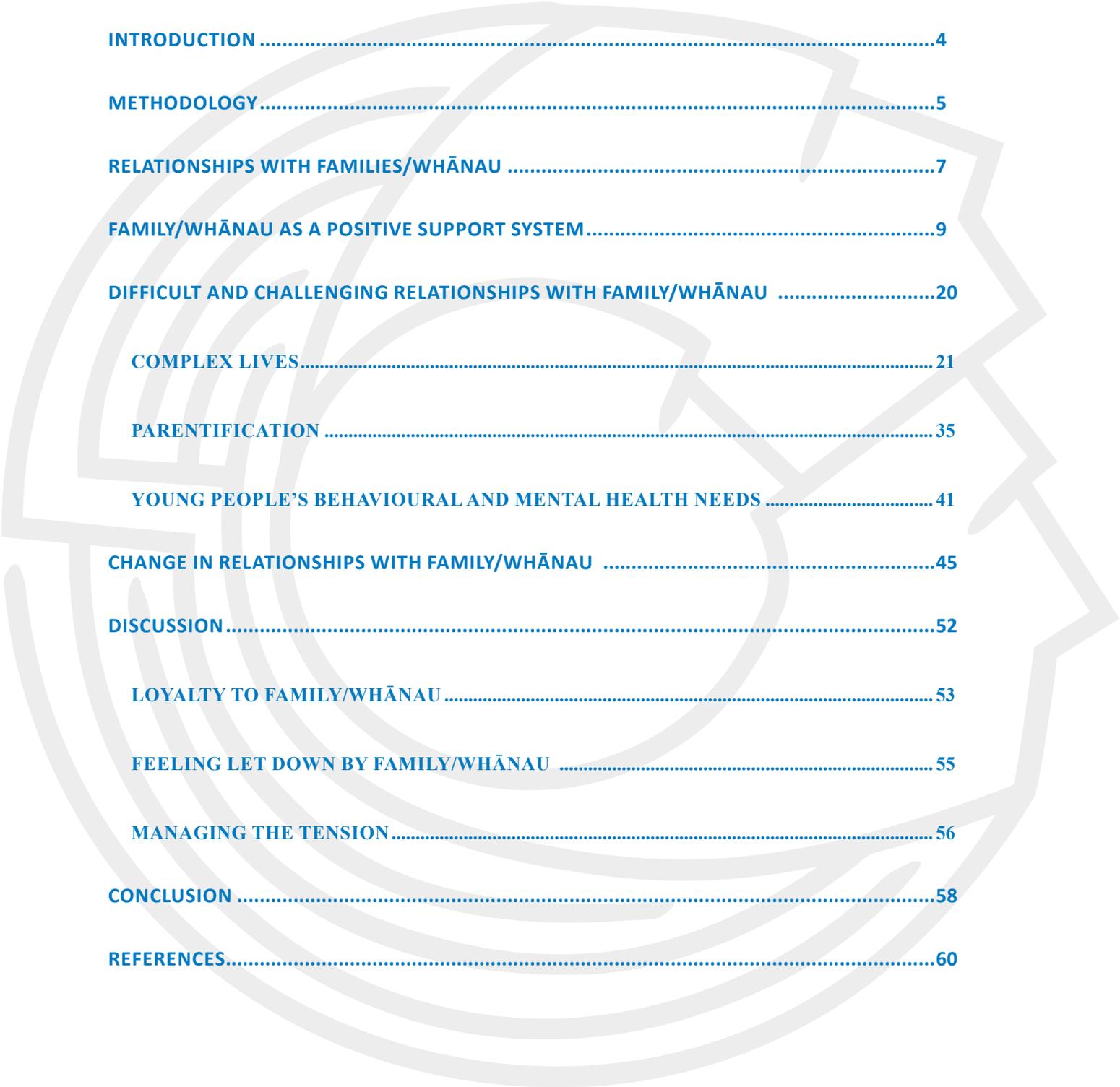# Young people's family/whānau relationships

Technical Report 19

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

critical comment on the research since 2008. We also acknowledge the contribution of The University of Victoria Research Trust and its staff, The Donald Beasley Institute; Youthline Auckland and Otago University. Finally, we would like to thank and acknowledge the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment for funding this research.

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 an ecological and youth-centred perspective, 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, 2007; Berzin, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Stein, et al., 2011). The study had a particular interest in explaining the ways in which the risks confronted by these youth, 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;

Bottrell, 2009; Fleming, 2011; McLaren, 2002; Munford & Sanders, 2004; Sanders & Munford, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

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 data from 1477 youth forms the basis for the research. All of these youth completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the study. This 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: mental health, youth justice, child welfare and educational services additional to mainstream classroom programmes. These services were provided by both statutory and non-governmental (NGO) providers. 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 youth 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 (PMK), 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 qualitative phase of the investigation.

Ungar and colleagues (2013) argue that in order for youth to achieve positive outcomes, resources need to be activated around them that reduce risks at the same time as support is provided which enables

them to harness their own resilience resources. Youth 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 youth 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.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES/WHĀNAU

This paper examines patterns that emerged from the analysis of one thematic node in the qualitative data set, young people's narratives about their relationships with their families/whānau. This paper focuses particularly on young people's narratives about their relationships with their parents/caregivers. A separate paper addresses young people's narratives about their relationships with their siblings. Relationships with family/whānau are critical to children's development (Gavazzi, 2011; Munford et al., 2013; Ungar, 2004). Families/whānau constitute the primary context in which children grow up; parents/caregivers and siblings are the most important people in a child's life (Bolen, 2005; Frederick & Goddard, 2008; Holland & Crowley, 2013; Munford et al., 2013). Family/whānau are responsible for nurturing and caring for children, providing a sense of identity and belonging, and guiding the development of social norms and values (Families Commission, 2014). As children grow up, relationships with their family/whānau change and external influences (for example, from the community and school) also begin to shape young people's experiences and worldviews. Peer relationships become increasingly important as
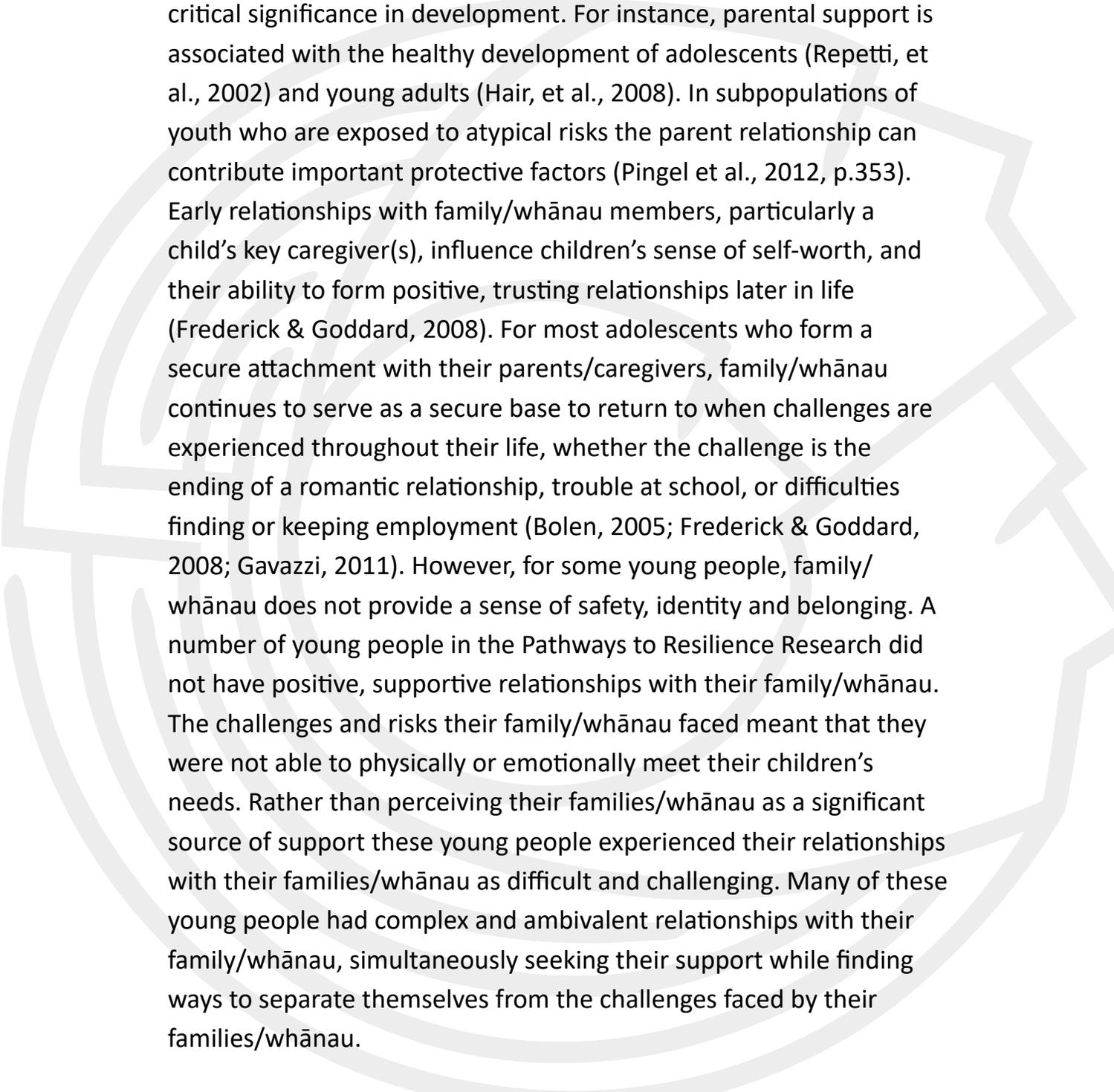
young people seek to develop their sense of independence and identity, but overall, family/whānau, particularly parents retain a critical significance in development. For instance, parental support is associated with the healthy development of adolescents (Repetti, et al., 2002) and young adults (Hair, et al., 2008). In subpopulations of youth who are exposed to atypical risks the parent relationship can contribute important protective factors (Pingel et al., 2012, p.353). 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). For most adolescents who form a secure attachment with their parents/caregivers, family/whānau continues to serve as a secure base to return to when challenges are experienced throughout their life, whether the challenge is the ending of a romantic relationship, trouble at school, or difficulties finding or keeping employment (Bolen, 2005; Frederick & Goddard, 2008; Gavazzi, 2011). However, for some young people, family/whānau does not provide a sense of safety, identity and belonging. A number of young people in the Pathways to Resilience Research did not have positive, supportive relationships with their family/whānau. The challenges and risks their family/whānau faced meant that they were not able to physically or emotionally meet their children's needs. Rather than perceiving their families/whānau as a significant source of support these young people experienced their relationships with their families/whānau as difficult and challenging. Many of these young people had complex and ambivalent relationships with their family/whānau, simultaneously seeking their support while finding ways to separate themselves from the challenges faced by their families/whānau.

This paper explores young people's narratives about their relationships and experiences with their family/whānau, using case

examples[1] to illustrate key concepts that emerged from the analysis of the data. It highlights the complexity and tensions within these relationships, and elucidates the ways in which young people managed these. Discussion begins with an exploration of the narratives of young people who experienced their family/whānau as a positive source of support. It then turns to a discussion of the narratives of young people who had difficult and challenging relationships with their family/whānau. The final section examines the narratives of change in young people's relationships with their family/whānau.

FAMILY/WHĀNAU AS A POSITIVE SUPPORT SYSTEM

Some of the young people in the research experienced their family/whānau as a positive source of support. These young people shared narratives of their families/whānau providing practical and emotional support, encouraging them to face their challenges, and standing alongside them when things reached a crisis point. These narratives illustrated the importance of having a secure family/whānau base for young people who face significant challenges as they grow up. This secure base provides emotional support, assists young people to develop positive coping strategies, and presents young people with a sense of unconditional acceptance and love (Families Commission, 2014; Munford et al., 2013; White et al., 2015). The analysis also highlighted that young people's sense of responsibility to their family/whānau shaped their decisions.

This section offers a discussion of the narratives young people shared about the emotional support provided by their family/whānau, even when the relationships were strained by the decisions young people made. It addresses the complexities young people experienced in

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1 All names and identifying details have been changed.

maintaining positive relationships with their families/whānau, particularly when challenges and risks such as domestic violence, abuse, drug and alcohol misuse, and depression were present. The discussion also explores the narratives young people offered about how their families/whānau supported them, such as by offering practical advice and acceptance when the young people were struggling.

The first case study introduces Grace, a young woman whose family/whānau continued to offer her support and guidance when she became heavily involved in a lifestyle they did not condone.

Grace

Grace grew up with her mother, father, and two older brothers. When she was at secondary school, Grace formed friendships with a group of her peers who were involved with an '*out of it lifestyle*', drinking and experimenting with drugs, truanting from school, and committing petty crimes. Grace found this lifestyle attractive as it was so far removed from her own upbringing. She found the activities brought a thrill that she did not feel at school and in her daily life. What started as a fun alternative to spending her evenings studying soon turned into heavy involvement with drugs, particularly methamphetamine ('P'), alcohol and crime. When she was 14 years old, Grace moved into a flat with a number of adults who had befriended her. When reflecting on this period of her life, Grace said that the ongoing support of her family/whānau was a key emotional anchor:

> *Things just progressed into like gangs, older friends, moving out into flats, treating my parents like crap all the time. Ripping them off, even though they always stood by me, they were always there. They supported me where they could. They were never like 'bugger off' you know, 'we don't want to see*

you'.

Family/whānau provided a strong emotional presence for Grace; even when she was high on 'P', she was drawn back to them:

> *At one point, I got so far into it that I was taken over by methamphetamine... Like I remember sometimes it had gone on for so long that I was kind of grubby and I wasn't really myself when I was just absolutely washed out and I would ring Mum up late at night and I would just burst into tears and be like 'I'm sorry for what I've done, I need to come home, I need to change who I am'.*

Grace's family/whānau did what they could to support her to leave her friends and lifestyle behind; they contacted drug and alcohol support services, arranged for respite care, and never gave up on their daughter. This process was long and painful for Grace and her family/whānau; Grace attempted to leave her flat on multiple occasions, but due to the violent and tense relationships she had with her flatmates, she had to wait until they were not home. Her mother and brothers worked with her for almost 12 months before she was able to successfully leave. During this time, Grace became pregnant. This motivated her to leave her flat and repair her relationships with her family/whānau.

After Grace became pregnant and left her flat, she moved back in with her family/whānau. She worked hard to mend the relationships she had damaged through the decisions she made around her drug use, crime, and leaving her family/whānau:

> *I lived such a disgusting life, like now I know it. And they see how sorry I am. Like sometimes, they bring it up, and 'cause it's them saying it and because it's them I did it to, I can burst into*

tears... My youngest brother and Mum, they're the ones I hurt the most... My brother begged for me to get off the stuff... I hurt him in several ways. We're slowly getting our relationship back though.

The emotional presence of Grace's family/whānau in her life provided her with a strong base to return to when she '*went off the rails*' and started using methamphetamine.

Cohen was another young person whose family/whānau provided him with positive support.

Cohen

Cohen found it challenging to stay engaged with his education; he did not enjoy the classroom environment, and did not feel like he 'belonged' at the secondary school he was attending[2]. He made friends with some older students who encouraged him to truant from school and experiment with drugs and alcohol. Cohen recalled feeling that this was a '*fun*' way to spend his time. He became heavily involved with drug and alcohol misuse and the criminal activity his friends were engaging in, leading to him becoming involved with youth justice services. Cohen was sentenced to six months in a residential placement, followed by a placement in a military-style residential programme when he was 15. During his time in residence, Cohen talked to his mother regularly. Their relationship had been challenged by Cohen's behaviours, and particularly his drug use. However, while Cohen was in residence, he was supported to address his substance misuse, and to develop a more supportive relationship with his mother. He started listening to

2   For more information about young people's experiences of 'belonging' at school and other educational challenges, see www.youthsay.co.nz, The Pathways to Resilience Study (New Zealand): Whāia to huanui kia toa: Navigating the education system, Technical Report 8.

her advice, and discussing his concerns with her:

> *When I was at course [military-style residential programme],
> it was rugged as. Out in the bush, and I was like [speaking to
> workers] 'when you go to sleep, I am out of here'. I was going to
> walk home. I don't know how far it was. I started walking, and
> then thought 'nah' and went back… I called my Mum the next
> day and said 'I am leaving here', and she was like 'no, don't. Just
> think about it. If you leave, you'll be locked up'. And I was like
> yeah I will be locked up. It's better to be a youth and get it all
> over and done with [involvement with the justice system] rather
> than drag it all out. So I went back and finished the course.*

Reflecting on this incident, Cohen noted that if he had returned to his
hometown without completing his placement at the residential
programme, he would likely have returned to using drugs and
alcohol. However, with the support of the programme supervisors
and his mother, he was able to develop a plan to re-engage with
education through an alternative education course and was able to
withdraw from drugs and alcohol and learn how to continue to resist
them when he was back in the community. Cohen continued to find
education challenging; however, his mother encouraged him to keep
trying to complete his course:

> *Interviewer: And so what age did you leave school?*
>
> *Cohen: Ah, it was 15 because I wasn't, I had to do home
> school for a year. I wasn't allowed to just leave, like
> Mum wouldn't let me she was like, 'nah if you are
> leaving school you have to do correspondence or
> something'.*
>
> *Interviewer: And how did that go?*

Cohen: I hated it. But I would do it and I passed a lot of things. Like yeah, I dunno, just sitting at home when I have got a play station and stuff. And mum saying 'nah you have got to do work' and I am looking at work and looking at the TV and that, and I am like 'whatever I will do it later' and it would just never get done. Then yeah I just started doing it, handing stuff in and it come back, and I started getting results, and I was like wow, I passed that. And that sort of motivated me to do more. And then I would get the results back again, and it would be another pass, and I would just keep going,

Interviewer: So was there someone helping you if you came into trouble with your school work?

Cohen: Yeah my mum, mum would go over it with me… Tell me to read it properly, don't rush it because I would always rush through things and then leave stuff out and Mum would just make me read over it again. I would get it most of the time.

For Cohen, his mother's practical support was an important aspect of their relationship. In helping him to stay focused on his education and achieve some of his goals, she was able to provide Cohen with support that was meaningful and effective. Cohen's narrative illustrated a variety of ways in which young people can be supported by their family/whānau; for example, by encouraging young people to face their challenges when they are in a residential placement.

Support from social services also played a key role in fostering this

positive relationship. Social services also assisted Cohen and his mother to lay the foundations for a positive relationship in the future by helping them to address important issues such as Cohen's drug and alcohol misuse and to re-establish effective communication.

Another young person who experienced their family/whānau as a positive support system was Alex. Alex's narrative illustrates a number of key points about the way that some young people held idealised views of their family/whānau, and viewed them as a positive support even when they were not able to protect their young people from exposure to violence and other risks.

Alex

Alex was a young man who had significant behavioural needs. He lived with his mother and two older half-sisters[3], all of whom worked to support him as best they could. His mother sought the support of counsellors, mental health professionals, education support staff, and various other services who she thought might be able to support Alex. Alex's relationship with his mother was primarily positive, though he recalled her bearing the brunt of his outbursts when he was younger. Alex found it challenging to form positive relationships with those who were not in his biological family/whānau, and thus struggled to get along with his step-father and his mother's other partners later in his life.

Alex's relationship with his step-father was volatile; his step-father was often abusive towards him, and Alex recalled feeling forgotten and ignored by him on numerous occasions while he was growing up.

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3   In this report the following definitions to clarify the relationships between step-siblings and half-siblings: when a young person's mother or father gets married to a person and that other person already has a child of their own, that child is considered a step-brother/sister since they are not biologically related. However if a young person's mother or father marries or is involved with another person and has a biological child with that person then that child is considered a half-brother/sister since there is a biological relationship.

Alex's behavioural difficulties made his relationship with his step-father increasingly strained. He reacted to feeling ignored by becoming angry and sometimes violent.

Much of Alex's support came from his half-sisters; they protected him from his step-father's violent outbursts, listened to him when he needed to talk about his experiences with his step-father, and looked after him when his mother was at work. Alex felt extremely close to his half-sisters, viewing them as '*like my mother*'. He also had a strong desire for a relationship with his biological father. Alex's father left before he was born, and Alex had very little to do with him while he was growing up. Alex felt hurt by this, but continued to hold on to the hope that he could one day rekindle his relationship with his father:

> *I want to be close to Dad, but he basically ditched me… Just ditched me. Last time I saw him was when I was about nine or ten… I want to go and live with him. I want to be with him.*

Alex held an idealised image of his father; he saw the relationship his half-sisters had with their father, and wanted the same with his father. However, Alex's father had made it clear on many occasions that he did not want to have a relationship with Alex. Alex's mother supported Alex to try to contact his father, and supported him when he discovered his father was not interested.

While Alex's step-father and father were not supportive of him, his mother and half-sisters served as a strong support system around Alex. Alex's mother identified when his needs became too great for her to manage, and sought the support of social services to assist her. He relied on his family/whānau to support him to manage his behavioural needs (such as his aggressive reactions to tension and stress), and missed them when he was placed away from their care during his adolescence. At the time of his interview, Alex was living

with family/whānau caregivers. He held a strong desire to return to his mother throughout the time he was placed away, and worked with social services to develop a plan that could enable this to happen.

Young people like Alex were supported by their family/whānau in a multitude of ways, even when their family/whānau could not protect them from risks such as domestic violence and abuse. The emotional attachment these young people had with their family/whānau was significant, and even when the relationships were omplex and tempestuous; young people often found significant support through these relationships. Natia's narrative illustrates this.

Natia

When Natia was growing up, she spent a significant of her time with her grandmother while her mother was at work. Natia recalled enjoying spending time with her grandmother, particularly when her grandmother took her to cultural events, such as Polyfest[4].

When Natia was seven, she was abused by a family/whānau friend. She did feel safe enough to tell anyone about her experiences until she was 12 years old:

> I told my Mum, she just broke down. I just explained everything, 'cause I had kept it in for so long… I was asked 'why didn't you say something when it happened?' but I was just like, nah; I couldn't do that because I was scared. I was like afraid, I knew they were going to get some sort of punishment, but just for me and my safety, I was just so worried.

Natia felt worried that her parents would not believe her story if she told them, and was concerned about the consequences for herself

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4   Polyfest is a traditional Maori and Pacific Islands cultural festival.

and her family/whānau. She was aware that child welfare services were involved with her family/whānau regarding concerns about her older siblings' behaviour, and did not want to create more challenges for her family/whānau to deal with. However, she knew that she had to talk to someone about her experiences as they were affecting her ability to stay focused at school, and she was regularly in trouble for bullying other students. Natia reflected in her interview that her bullying behaviour was a reaction to the stress that she was experiencing as a result of keeping her experiences to herself[5].

After Natia told her mother about the abuse her relationship with her parents became increasingly tense and as a result she started spending increasing amounts of time with her grandmother:

> I just had more problems after that [telling her parents about the abuse], just my relationship with my mother, my father, was not a normal relationship. I got kicked out of home three times last year [age 14].

Natia explained that her relationship with her parents was complex. She felt supported by them when she initially told them about the abuse she had experienced. However, she felt that they became angry and frustrated when she did not want to discuss it further with them, resulting in arguments, and ultimately, Natia being asked to leave home.

Over time, Natia and her parents were able to resolve some of the challenges that had made their relationship tense; they attended counselling together, and began to understand each other's experiences and feelings:

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5   For more information about young people's narratives about their behaviours, see www.youthsay.co.nz, The Pathways to Resilience Study (New Zealand): Whāia to huanui kia toa: Young people's behaviour tells a story, Technical report 10.

They went to counselling with an organisation, and I was just like 'wow Mum, you've changed' and like now I can actually talk to her about stuff... Then we went to family counselling... It's a massive change. I can't believe that. It's just like, it's brought us closer. Like we were just falling apart. I was just like me and Mum just didn't know each other, and now it's like bringing us together.

For Natia, family/whānau was an important source of support during her teenage years. She suffered from significant depression, and often felt suicidal. Being able to discuss her challenges with her family/whānau, particularly her mother and grandmother, was one way in which Natia felt she was able to manage her depression:

If I was thinking of committing suicide now, the only thing that would stop me would be my grandmother and my Mum.

While Natia's relationship with her mother remained turbulent at times, she was able to access significant emotional support from her mother. Natia's narrative about her relationships with her family/whānau suggests that family/whānau relationships can be perceived by young people as being supportive even when they are complex. Support from social services to address the challenges in young people's relationships with their family/whānau can bring about significant change. In Natia's narrative, it was evident that counselling, both individual and family/whānau counselling, supported the family/whānau to make sense of each other's experiences and resolve some of their differences. Counselling provided opportunities for Natia and her parents to deal positively with the emotional consequences of the abuse. Interventions that targeted the underlying causes of the arguments in Natia's family/whānau, rather than focusing solely on the crises (such as Natia being asked to leave home) supported them to make lasting changes

to their relationship.

For all the young people in the research, family/whānau relationships were complex. Even when family/whānau served as a positive support system, there were some relationships that remained challenging and problematic. Some young people, like Alex and Natia, viewed their family/whānau as strongly supportive, even when they were not able to protect their young people from being exposed to abuse, domestic violence, or other challenges such as depression. It was important that social services recognised the positive emotional role family/whānau played, even with their relationships with their young people were tempestuous, or the emotional co-presence was imagined, as was the case for Alex and his father. When families/whānau cannot be with young people, it is important to recognise the trauma and grief that young people can experience as a result of this separation (Atwool, 2006; Frederick & Goddard, 2008; Holland & Crowley, 2013; Sternberg et al., 2005). For many of the young people in this study, family/whānau relationships were more problematic than supportive. The next section explores young people's narratives about difficult and challenging relationships with their families/whānau.

DIFFICULT AND CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY/WHĀNAU

Young people rely on their family/whānau for many things, from physical needs, such as food and shelter, through to emotional and relational needs, such as support, acceptance and a sense of belonging (Frederick & Goddard, 2008; Gavazzi, 2011; Munford et al., 2013). However, for some of the young people in the research, the risks and challenges faced by their families/whānau meant that they could not provide the young people with these resources. The challenges faced by the young people's families/whānau were
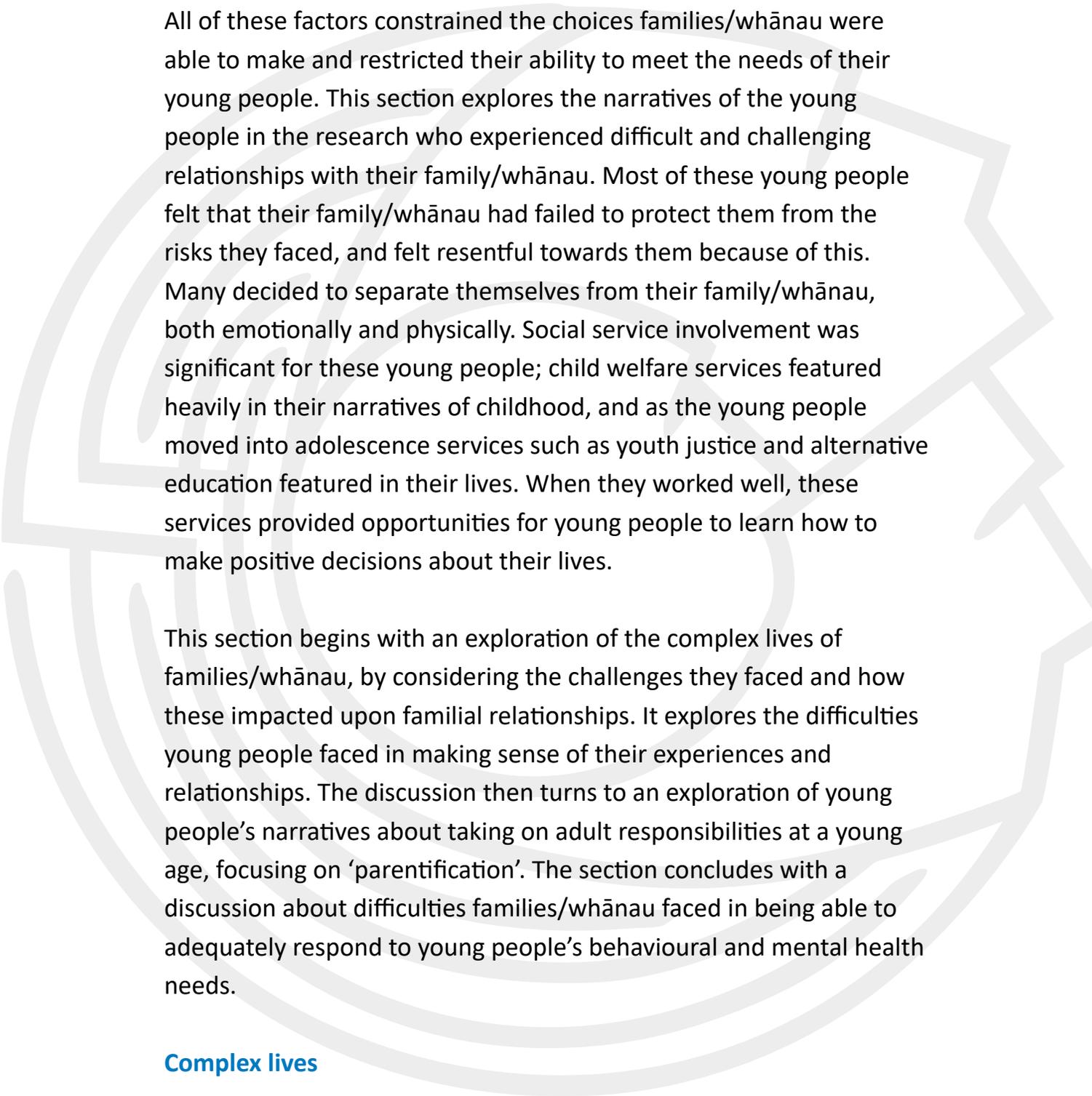
complex and varied. They included domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, mental illness, and financial and material deprivation. All of these factors constrained the choices families/whānau were able to make and restricted their ability to meet the needs of their young people. This section explores the narratives of the young people in the research who experienced difficult and challenging relationships with their family/whānau. Most of these young people felt that their family/whānau had failed to protect them from the risks they faced, and felt resentful towards them because of this. Many decided to separate themselves from their family/whānau, both emotionally and physically. Social service involvement was significant for these young people; child welfare services featured heavily in their narratives of childhood, and as the young people moved into adolescence services such as youth justice and alternative education featured in their lives. When they worked well, these services provided opportunities for young people to learn how to make positive decisions about their lives.

This section begins with an exploration of the complex lives of families/whānau, by considering the challenges they faced and how these impacted upon familial relationships. It explores the difficulties young people faced in making sense of their experiences and relationships. The discussion then turns to an exploration of young people's narratives about taking on adult responsibilities at a young age, focusing on 'parentification'. The section concludes with a discussion about difficulties families/whānau faced in being able to adequately respond to young people's behavioural and mental health needs.

Complex lives

When families/whānau struggle on a range of fronts to care well for their children this has implications for how these children come to

understand themselves and their place in the world. Jordana's narrative illustrates how family/whānau can influence a young person's understanding of the world, and how their choices can be constrained by challenges and risks created by their families/whānau.

Jordana

Jordana's family/whānau faced a complex mix of challenges that included substance misuse, domestic violence, and gang involvement. Jordana also experienced a range of challenges herself; she was abused by a family/whānau member at nine years old, lived on the streets for a period of time in her early teens, and felt she could not discuss these experiences with her family/whānau:

> My family didn't look supportive enough for me to open up to them… It made me hold a lot of things inside and not share them with anybody.

Jordana learned to manage the challenges she was facing on her own. She developed a range of coping mechanisms, including coming home late from school to avoid the domestic violence she experienced at home. She also ran away from home when she was a young teenager, living with friends when she could or on the streets when she could not find a bed. She also stayed with an extended family/whānau member for a short period of time. She felt that her parents bullied her into behaving in ways they found acceptable, such as teasing other family members and staying home instead of going to school, and she also noted that she had a particularly volatile relationship with her mother. Despite the troubled relationship Jordana had with her family/whānau, their influence informed her understanding of the world and how she viewed services:

> My Mum told me not to trust [child welfare services] because they take you away from your family. I actually hated them

[child welfare services] for ages, but when I looked at it from their side, they have a reason because they're trying to look out for young kids like us. I reckon I should have opened up to them when I was younger, seeing all the drugs and that. But I didn't want to be hated by my family.

As Jordana grew up, she began to develop an understanding of the wider world, building this understanding from her interactions with her peers, teachers and service providers. During her time living on the streets, she met a relative, who was also living on the streets. This relative introduced Jordana to some of her extended family/whānau, who provided her with some practical and emotional support. She began to recognise that her experience of family/whānau was different to the experiences of her extended family/whānau. This realisation left Jordana questioning her experiences:

Other people… they look after their children, they show them what they need in life and how to succeed and stuff. They actually be there for their kids… I wonder why my parents didn't do that for us.

She experienced a tension between a sense of loyalty to her family/whānau and feeling let down by them. Jordana felt that her parents had failed to protect her from violence and substance misuse. She also recognised that family/whānau were central to her sense of identity and belonging, and struggled to manage these incongruous feelings. For Jordana, meeting members of her extended family/whānau brought her into contact with adults who she viewed as 'safe'. As a result of their support, she was able to develop an alternative narrative about her experiences that helped her to make sense of the challenges that she and her family/whānau had faced throughout her childhood:

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 why they played up' and 'no wonder they got [abused]'. It's because everyone's so worried about what happened to them and they're too scared to tell other people.

In constructing this different narrative about her experiences, Jordana was able to recognise that the challenges faced by her family/whānau shaped her development, but that interventions from social services had not addressed the underlying causes of the crises they had experienced. Interventions had been episodic, crisis-focused, and focused on each person as an individual rather than working with the family/whānau as a whole (Sanders et al., 2014). The support from her extended family/whānau enabled her to begin to make practical changes to the way that she was living. By the time of her qualitative interview, she had stopped participating in the crimes her siblings were committing and was spending more time with her extended family/whānau. Because she was supported by her extended family/whānau and had been able to engage with services she was able to recognise the risks and challenges her immediate family/whānau faced. With the support of others she was able to start to take steps towards 'breaking the cycle' of substance misuse and domestic violence. Recognising that every family/whānau member had their own story enabled Jordana to come to terms with some of the pain she had experienced and to construct her own, more positive, forward looking story.

In contrast to Jordana's experiences, Hana did not have the support of extended family/whānau members or other supportive adults. She faced significant challenges in life, including a conflicting and unpredictable relationship with her mother, exposure to domestic violence, destructive relationships, and limited access to supportive

resources.

<u>Hana</u>

Hana and her older sister were brought up by their mother, Moira. As a single mother, she faced significant financial challenges and basic necessities such as food were often scarce. However, Hana reported that her mother worked hard to make sure her daughters had a stable home when they were young. When Hana was young, she felt that she had a positive relationship with her mother:

> *She [Mum] is probably the one that raised me the most, because she was a single mum for a long time. So I guess it was that, that is why I was so close to her.*

Moira met Stuart and married him when Hana was five years old, giving Hana a step-father and later a new half-sister. Hana felt that having a step-father and a younger sister provided her with a sense of security and normality:

> *It was kind of like a structured family. Especially when Stuart came along. It was like a normal family. Not that I knew what a normal family was. I just thought living with my Mum was a normal family.*

For a short time, Hana felt that her family/whānau conformed to a 'normal' nuclear family/whānau model. She had a mother, step-father and two sisters. She viewed Stuart as her father figure, and felt that he supported her and her family/whānau well. Moira and Stuart separated when Hana was 11, and Moira worked to shelter her children from what was happening:

> *My mum actually moved out of the house and we stayed in the house with Stuart, but my mum would come back during the*

day, she would work nights and she would come back in the morning and get us ready for school pick us up from school and then go to work and come back in the morning and get us ready for school. We never noticed that she had moved out. Not until she actually told us.

During this time, Moira met another man, Grant. Moira and her daughters moved in with Grant shortly after Moira and Stuart's divorce. However, Hana did not get along with Grant, which began to cause tension in her relationship with her mother. Grant was sent to jail shortly after Hana and her family/whānau moved in with him, leaving Moira and the girls on their own again. Hana's older sister had moved away from home by this stage, and her younger sister decided to go and live with Stuart, her father. Moira soon became involved with another man, Rick. Hana viewed Rick as a violent and untrustworthy man, and she did not approve of her mother's relationship with him. His relationship with Moira was violent, which led to child welfare services becoming involved. Hana was placed away from her family/whānau for a period of 12 months after Moira went to stay with Women's Refuge to get away from the domestic violence. Hana described her foster care as '*warm and safe*', and felt that her foster caregivers were supportive people. However, she struggled with being separated from her family/whānau, especially her sisters. She also felt that before they intervened, practitioners should have asked her what her feelings were about being placed away from her mother. Hana viewed her mother as a strong protective person in her life, and felt safe when she was around, despite the fact that Moira's relationships were exposing Hana to domestic violence.

> Interviewer: Would there have been something that would have been helpful for you... what could people have done to have made your life easier?

Hana: Ask what we wanted. There is a novel thought. But
            that is probably it; just ask how we are feeling.

Interviewer: And what would you have said?

Hana: That I felt that staying at mum's was a safe place.
            That I didn't feel in danger, because I never did.

When Hana was allowed to return to live with her mother, their relationship became increasingly strained. Hana began to realise that her mother was not always truthful with her about what was going on in her life, and she began to resent her mother for this. Moira told Hana that she had split up with Grant, though she continued to see him when Hana was not around:

She lies to me about going to see Grant again... She kind of guilt-trips me, because I have grown to not hate her, but to not like what she is doing. And so when she lies to me, I don't want to be around her.

Hana felt betrayed by this, but continued to feel a sense of responsibility towards her mother. She recognised that her extended family/whānau had 'disowned' Moira, as they did not approve of her relationship with Grant. This meant that Hana was not able to access the support of her extended family/whānau. This sense of responsibility felt like a burden for Hana, as she believed that she was the only one who would continue to 'be there' for Moira and was thus responsible for taking care of her:

Well she has already lost my little sister, my older sister, like most of my family because all my family don't like him [Grant] they are like, they know what he is like. I am all she has got... I feel

like I have to stay there the rest of my life.

Hana's conflicting emotions about her relationship with her mother led her to seek the emotional attachment she needed in a relationship with a boyfriend, Tim. In many ways their relationship mirrored the relationship between Moira and Grant; Tim was controlling and occasionally violent. However, as Hana stated:

I don't get any love from anybody else. I just get it from him [Tim] and I don't care if it's in a bad way or not.

Hana recognised that her relationship with Tim was destructive and potentially harmful to her mental and physical wellbeing. However, her need for emotional connection and acceptance was overwhelming, and the fact that she felt this when she was with Tim outweighed the negative aspects of their relationship. On multiple occasions, Hana had observed her mother prioritising her partner's needs over her own needs and those of her children. Hana mirrored this in her own intimate relationship. Hana repeated the family/whānau patterns established by her mother. This illustrates the importance of modelling in the family/whānau environment (White et al., 2015). Family/whānau shape children's understanding of social values, norms and morals (Families Commission, 2014; White et al., 2015). Children and young people observe the patterns of interaction in their family/whānau and use these to build an understanding of 'how' to be a family/whānau. This understanding shapes their future experiences as young people interact with others in ways that mirror this understanding (Holt et al., 2008; White et al., 2015).

The complexity in Hana's relationship with her family/whānau was intensified by factors such as domestic violence, Moira's refusal to seek support from social services, and Hana's own desire to support and care for her mother even though she did not approve of the

decisions Moira was making. Appropriate service intervention may have been able to support Hana and her mother to develop a positive relationship and address the various challenges they faced with domestic violence, a lack of support from family/whānau, and conflicting emotions around their relationships. However, consistent social service intervention did not occur for this family/whānau because they often moved house, because their extended family/whānau networks abandoned them, and because Moira's secretiveness made it difficult for Police and social services to determine the level of violence within the household

Gemma also talked of complex relationships with her family/whānau, a product of her parents' violent relationship and her awareness that she 'should have' been protected from the violence.

Gemma

Gemma was exposed to a high level of domestic violence when she was growing up. Her father would regularly abuse her mother, and the Police were often at their house. Gemma felt that she had to 'take sides' when her parents fought:

> *I always took my Dad's side, 'cause I know how Mum is. She always talks and talks and points the finger and stuff. So I took my Dad's side. But once I sort of grew up, I thought 'well I should have taken my Mum's side because my Dad was in the wrong'.*

Gemma was torn; she knew that domestic violence was 'wrong' but she wanted to have a positive relationship with her parents. She recalled feeling safe at home, a feeling which was enhanced by the regular Police presence:

> *Interviewer: Did you ever feel unsafe [at home]?*

Gemma: Not really, I just felt sad for my Mum 'cause she was getting hit.

Interviewer: How often would the Police come around?

Gemma: Maybe once a week.

Interviewer: What did they do to make it feel safer?

Gemma: They took my Dad away. But then I sort of felt like 'my Dad's gone and I don't know when he is going to be back.' Like I didn't even know what was going to happen with him. I didn't know there was a court when I was a kid, and so I would sort of think 'oh they will let him go and then he will be all good until the next time they play up'.

Despite being regularly exposed to domestic violence and financial hardship, Gemma felt a strong sense of loss when her father was removed from their home. Like many young people who grow up exposed to domestic violence (Bolen, 2005; Frederick & Goddard, 2008; Holt et al., 2008) Gemma was exposed to significant harm but she also felt that her parents were a source of support for her. She held an idealised view of what a family/whānau should be and drew on that to support her emotionally when the reality diverged from this. Gemma's father died when she was 15 years old. Her mother became involved in another violent relationship and this escalated the tension between her and her mother. Gemma also harboured a strong dislike for her new step-father, and felt that she had to protect her mother from his violent outbursts. As Gemma grew up, her relationship with her mother improved slowly, and Gemma began to recognise the important role her mother played in her life:

Interviewer: So who are the important people in your life, Gemma?

Gemma: My Mum. My Mum is the most important person in my life now.

Interviewer: Why?

Gemma: 'Cause she has been there since I was little, and even through Dad [domestic violence] she has been there. She has made bad choices, but she is still there.

Even though Gemma experienced a closer relationship with her mother as she grew up, she had experienced her family/whānau as an unreliable source of support throughout her childhood. The ambivalence around her relationship with her mother illustrated some of the effects of witnessing domestic violence throughout childhood. Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent risk factors that impacts upon children's social, emotional, psychological and physical development. In New Zealand, statistics indicate that 10% of secondary school children have witnessed an adult in their household physically hurting another adult or a child (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2014). Additionally, in 2012-2013, Child, Youth and Family received 148,659 reports of concern. Of these reports of concern, 22,984 led to findings of abuse or neglect of children (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2014, p. 1).

Research has shown that exposure to domestic violence can interrupt children's attachment with their parents, and in turn undermine their capacity to form positive relationships with others as they grow up (Atwool, 2006; Frederick & Goddard, 2008). Attachment theory maintains that children's early experiences of

relationships with their parents or caregivers, whether nurturing and reliable or unreliable and distant, inform their sense of self-worth and their ability to form positive, trusting relationships in later life (Atwool, 2006; Frederick & Goddard, 2008). Young people like Jordana, Hana and Gemma found forming positive relationships with their family/whānau challenging. Their family/whānau members were often unavailable, either physically or emotionally, to support them during their childhoods, and their understanding of relationships was built around these early experiences. Hana, in particular displayed the effects of forming an insecure attachment with her parents; she did not have a strong sense of self-worth, and found it challenging to trust people. This, accompanied by her overwhelming desire for love and acceptance, led to her seeking love in an abusive relationship and feeling compelled to remain with her mother to provide ongoing support.

Many of the young people in the research were exposed to multiple risks including domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, and criminal activity through their family/whānau. Their narratives revealed a strong sense of disappointment in the lack of care and nurture they received. Some young people felt that their parents/ caregivers had put their own needs and the needs of their partners above all else. They harboured feelings of anger and resentment towards their parents for this. Charlotte explained how she felt.

<u>Charlotte</u>
Charlotte explained that domestic violence was a central feature of her home life. Her parents had a violent relationship, and her father would also regularly abuse her. Her mother was reluctant to involve social services, as she was afraid of the consequences. Charlotte recalled knowing that if social services became involved, she would be placed in the care of someone outside the family/whānau. She also recalled her mother's fear of what her father might do if social

services became involved. When Charlotte was seven years old a concerned aunt found out that Charlotte was being abused and contacted child welfare services:

> *Charlotte:*   *Yea they [child welfare services] came and had a meeting and then they asked Mum what was going on. And then Mum was saying that I was getting the bash [being abused] and then they said that if Dad keeps on giving me the bash then they were going to take me away from Mum.*
>
> *Interviewer:* *Ok. And what happened as far as your Mum and your Dad then, did your Dad continue giving you the bash or did he leave?*
>
> *Charlotte:*   *Nah he continued giving me the bash but Mum wasn't saying anything to the social worker, Mum was too scared to, he might give her the bash, and might kill me.*

Charlotte grew to resent her mother's actions; she felt that her father should have been subject to serious consequences for the abuse. She also felt that her mother should have taken better care of her. Charlotte's exposure to violence had serious implications for her wellbeing; she found it difficult to trust people, developed anxiety and depression, and sought escape through drug and alcohol use. She was placed away from her family/whānau when she was 11 years old, and for the first time in her life felt safe:

> *In here [residential care] I feel safe… Because in my life, it hasn't really been safe. It's been basically violent. And [now] that's the only way I can cope, with violence. That's why I'm violent towards the people who are trying to help me.*

In the residence Charlotte told her social worker about being abused at home, she felt confident that they would be able to do something about it. This was the first relationship Charlotte recalled as being trustworthy, supportive and warm. Her social worker helped her to access support for her anxiety and depression and also for her drug and alcohol misuse. Through her involvement with social services, Charlotte reflected on her experiences and built an understanding that her parents should have protected her and prevented her from being exposed to violence.

Children and young people may not disclose abuse to social services for various reasons. Research into young people's delayed or partial disclosure of childhood sexual abuse indicates that factors such as family/whānau relationships, particularly the presence or absence of support, fear of not being believed, shame, and fear of the consequences of disclosure influence young people's decisions to disclose various forms of child abuse (Crisma et al., 2004; Deblinger & Runyon, 2005; Foynes et al., 2009; McElvaney, 2013; Ungar et al., 2009) as well as other types of victimisation such as dating violence (Black et al., 2008). These reasons for non-disclosure across all types of abuse were also present in the narratives of the young people in this study. In Charlotte's case, she did not disclose her experience of physical abuse until four years after it began. She was fearful that if she told social services about the abuse, she would be placed away from her family/whānau.

Other young people did not disclose their experiences of physical abuse for similar reasons; some were embarrassed to admit that their family/whānau was violent, while others were afraid of what would happen to them if they did tell someone. Fear that telling social services about violence in the home would likely result in the young person being placed away from their family/whānau was a significant barrier to disclosure for many young people, as was the fear that the

abuse would escalate if they told someone and the perpetrator became aware of this. Other young people were concerned that no-one would act and nothing would change even if they did disclose the abuse.

Many of the young people in this study had to take on adult responsibilities at a young age; 'parentification' is one example of this.

Parentification

Some families/whānau were unable to provide adequate care for their children. This resulted in some of the young people taking on parental caregiving roles within their family/whanau (parentification). Research has shown that parentification is common when families/whānau experience challenges such as parental substance misuse, alcoholism, or disability/chronic illness, and when family/whānau systems are unpredictable and relationships are disrupted (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Burnett et al., 2006; Hooper et al., 2008). Temporary parentification is considered to be normal by many, and may be associated with developing responsibility, competence and autonomy in children and young people when they are provided with adequate support and acknowledgement for their caregiving role (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Burnett et al., 2006). However, taking on caregiving roles for prolonged periods or from a young age is thought to be damaging to children and young people. It interrupts normal childhood development, as the caregiving tasks are developmentally inappropriate and children and young people are not adequately supported to fulfil these roles (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Burnett et al., 2006; Byng-Hall, 2002; Earley & Cushway, 2007; Hooper, 2007).

For some of the young people in the research, parentification added

an extra layer of complexity to their family/whānau lives. These young people were not only managing family/whānau relationships that were problematic, unpredictable, and often unsupportive, they were also responsible for managing the needs of their siblings and sometimes their parents. One young person who experienced this was Rhiannon.

Rhiannon

Rhiannon remembered her early life as being unpredictable. Her parents separated when she was two, and she moved regularly to spend time with each of them. She felt that neither of her parents were particularly supportive of her; both moved house frequently, were financially unstable, misused drugs and alcohol, and expected Rhiannon and her eight younger siblings to take care of themselves. Rhiannon reflected on her experiences and noted that she learned to be independent and take care of her younger siblings at a very young age:

> *I learnt how to cook and clean. Like I was seven years old and I would be waking my brothers up for school, have their lunch made and their uniforms washed and cleaned.*

Rhiannon resented the fact that her mother expected her to take on these roles. She felt that it should not have been her responsibility to take care of her siblings, and did not understand how her mother could spend so much of her time misusing substances:

> *Interviewer: What would you have wanted her [mother] to do differently?*

> *Rhiannon: Be a Mum instead of just trying to be young and make her kids be the Mum. I hated it. I still do hate it. But she is my Mum.*

Rhiannon felt a tension between recognising the relationship that should have existed between her and her mother and feeling let down by her mother's actions. The statement: '*she is my Mum*' highlights that Rhiannon wanted to recognise the importance of her mother's role in her life, but felt conflicted about their relationship. This complexity was challenging for Rhiannon to understand as a child; it illustrates the centrality of family/whānau to a sense of identity and the concurrent tension that can be present in young people's relationships with family/whanau when parents are not able to fulfil their roles. Rhiannon recognised that her mother had not provided her with care and support. This was confusing for Rhiannon who recognised the importance of family/whānau but also recognised that her mother was not a source of support:

> *I might be a kid and have been through a lot of things, but I know what is right and what is wrong. And most of the shit that my Mum used to do to me was wrong.*

As Rhiannon grew up, she increasingly became involved in fulfilling the parental role in her household. She left school for a short period when she was 12 and worked with her mother and step-father. However, this led to feelings of jealousy in her relationship with her step-father, particularly when he realised that she was keeping the money she earned for herself; he felt she should be contributing to the household finances. The tension in her relationships with her mother and step-father continued to increase, leading to her being kicked out of home.

> *When Mum kicked me out, I hitched [hitch-hiked] all the way down to [city 500 kilometres away] and I've never been back. I was 13. I will never ever go back... 'Cause I can do it by myself. I don't need anyone else.*

Rhiannon established an independent life away from her mother at a young age. She ran away from home when she was 13 and moved in with friends and supported herself by stealing whatever she needed. Her fierce independence was fuelled by the difficult relationship she had with her mother and the parentification she had experienced as a child.

Social services worked with Rhiannon to address some of the challenges she faced at home. When Rhiannon started running away, child welfare services worked to support her to return home. Unfortunately, Rhiannon did not want to live with her mother, and made efforts to tell her social workers this. She felt that her social workers did not listen to her concerns or recognise her independence; she recalled that they would talk to her mother, who would ask for Rhiannon to come home. In her interview, she also reflected that she struggled to tell some of her social workers the full extent of what she was experiencing at home. She was asked what she thought could have been done differently to support her to be safe and happy:

> Sometimes I think it's like the parents, like a kid might be too scared to tell you something, 'case when they go home you are going to end up telling their parents. You're gonna ring up their parents, and you're gonna say 'well, I have been talking to your kid today and blah, blah, blah' and you are not going to be there when the kids get a hiding or get told not to say that any more. You are only going to come around the next day and the kid's going to be like 'I'm sorry for lying', even though they didn't lie, they were telling the truth. I think sometimes you just need to listen to the kids.

Rhiannon felt that it was very important that she was listened to and that her views were taken into account when plans were being made.

As Rhiannon became older and left home, she became involved with youth justice services because she stole to feed and clothe herself. She found her social worker very supportive, especially when she was sent to a youth justice residence for four months:

> She listens to me and asks me what is wrong instead of telling me what is wrong.

An important part of Rhiannon's relationship with her social worker was that her social worker listened to her, recognised how important it was to involve her with planning and decision-making, and believed her when she said that she did not want to return home.

Young people like Rhiannon experienced a significant level of complexity in their relationships with their family/whānau, and in particular with their parents/caregivers. The tension that these young people experienced between having a strong desire to have connections with their family/whānau and feeling let down by them was significant and often challenging for them to understand. Alongside this, the demands that had been placed on them to provide care for family/whānau members created very independent and self-reliant young people. Accordingly, it was important that social workers took the time to listen to them about their experiences, and worked with them to develop plans that utilised their independence and competence in constructive ways. In this way, workers helped construct a life narrative that made sense of their experiences and provided a pathway forward.

The next case study introduces Seth, who was also responsible for the care of members of his family/whānau.

Seth
Seth grew up with his mother, father, and two older sisters. He

recalled feeling that his sisters were '*treated like princesses*' by their father while he was left to '*bite my tongue*' and manage as best as he could. Seth noted that these experiences felt 'normal' for him:

> *They were treated like princesses; I was treated like shit… I thought it was normal to grow up with that.*

Seth's parents separated when he was four years old, and he stayed with his mother. The relationship between his mother and father became increasingly problematic, which led Seth's mother to develop severe anxiety and depression. As Seth was the only one living at home with his mother at this time, he became responsible for significant amounts of her care from the age of seven:

> *She got quite bad depression and anxiety. She got quite unwell. So I was pretty much looking after her and me since a young age…Yeah, but I had quite a lot of time off school - which is pretty much why I'm at [Alternative Education programme]. Because when you have that much time off at school by the time you go back to school it's like an alien concept, so I didn't really fit in, started acting out a bit.*

As Seth highlights, his responsibility for the care of his mother impacted upon other areas of his life. He was often unable to attend school, which resulted in him being excluded and asked to attend an alternative education programme. Seth was ill-equipped to deal with the responsibility of caring for his unwell mother. He was not able to access support from outside of the family/whānau to assist him so Seth learned to manage his challenges on his own and not discuss his emotions with anyone else:

> *He [Dad] pretty much taught me from a young age that showing emotion is a weakness; you're not a man if you do.*

Seth did not feel able to tell any of his counsellors or service providers that he had to care for his mother. This meant that service providers were not able to put resources around him and his mother. Seth continued to care for his mother and separate himself from the conflicting and troubling emotions he was experiencing. He noted that it was easier to manage if he did not think about what was going on for him emotionally and instead just dealt with the practical elements of what he was managing. Seth's challenges eventually came to the attention of social services when he mentioned to a counsellor that he was having '*a falling feeling*'. The counsellor interpreted this as a mental health issue and was concerned that Seth may try to harm himself. Seth was placed away from his mother when he was 15, having taken responsibility for her care since he was seven.

For young people like Rhiannon and Seth, the impacts of parentification were wide-spread and long lasting. Rhiannon separated herself from her family/whānau both physically and emotionally, working to make an independent life for herself. She disengaged from education, faced challenges with forming positive relationships and developed a strong independent identity in response to the responsibility she was expected to manage at a young age. Seth found that he was not able to attend mainstream school whilst caring for his mother and so enrolled in alternative education. He also separated himself from his experiences by holding his emotions inside and not thinking about them or discussing them with those who may have been able to offer him support.

Young people's behavioural and mental health needs

Many of the young people interviewed had serious mental health and behavioural needs. Some of these young people, such as Mark, felt that their family/whānau were unable to meet their needs.

Mark

Mark was diagnosed with ADHD when he was four years old. He was sent to live with his aunt as neither his mother nor his father, who were separated, could manage his behaviour. Mark felt that he had been abandoned by his parents, and that his younger siblings were the reason he had been made to move into his aunt's care:

> *I went to live with Aunty Rae because Mum couldn't handle me, because she had Jason and Emma [younger siblings] to look after... when Emma was born, I was too much, 'cause yeah, I needed more one-on-one attention. Mum couldn't give that to me. Dad's just useless, he couldn't handle me either.*

Mark's disdain for his father and disappointment with his mother intensified as he grew up. He did not have a trusting relationship with either parent, and struggled to open up about his emotions with his aunt. In combination with his behavioural challenges, this led to Mark being excluded from school on many occasions. He attempted to attend alternative education, but was excluded from there also. Eventually, he turned to correspondence lessons in an effort to remain engaged with his education. Neither the services that became involved in Mark's life, nor his family/whānau were able to create a trusting relationship with him that made him feel sufficiently safe to be able to discuss the challenges he was facing nor the intense emotions he was experiencing. This eventually led him turning to alcohol as a way of managing his intense feelings:

> *Interviewer: Who would you go to if you had, you know, some problems that you had to talk through?*
>
> *Mark: No one.*
>
> *Interviewer: No one, why not?*

> *Mark:*   *I don't need to... I just deal with it myself. I find it hard to trust, so I go and buy some piss [alcohol]. Get on the piss and the next day I'm pretty sweet.*

Mark's relationship with his parents influenced his ability to form positive relationships later in his life; he did not experience his parents as reliable sources of support when he was younger, and developed a sense that he was not worthy of their support. He partially blamed himself for his parents' inability to meet his needs, but also recognised that it was their responsibility to seek support when they experienced difficulties in their roles as parents. Given that he had to seek out his own sources of support Mark became self-reliant, to the point where he had few close friends and refused to discuss his challenges with anyone. As a teenager, Mark did not have a relationship with his father and a difficult relationship with his mother, characterised by heated arguments and a lack of support and acceptance.

Samuel also felt unsupported by his family/whānau.

Samuel

Samuel felt from an early age that his mother and aunt, his primary caregivers, were not supportive of him. His family/whānau struggled financially, and they were often aggressive towards one another. Samuel recalled his mother and aunt, in particular, putting him down and getting angry on multiple occasions, including when he made the decision to dis-continue with alternative education after being excluded from mainstream school. Samuel was sent to live with his grandparents, in his parents' country of origin. He suffered significant physical and emotional abuse and neglect while he was living there, and so made the decision to return home. He started spending his days on the streets to get away from his family/whānau, which led him towards a group of friends who were heavily involved with drug

and alcohol use. He began to experiment with drugs and alcohol, and found that he enjoyed the feelings of freedom they gave him. He saw himself as extremely independent, and did not talk to anyone about what he was experiencing or why he was experimenting with drugs:

> *Actually I just make my own choices… I never told them [family/ whānau] what I was going through… I just kept it to myself.*

Samuel used music, particularly lyric writing, as a way of managing his emotions and reflecting on his experiences. He realised that this was a powerful tool he could use to communicate with others who had similar life experiences. Samuel eventually started attending an alternative education programme which allowed him to focus on developing his skills in lyric writing, after a cousin suggested he give it a go. Lyric writing gave Samuel a pathway away from his drug use, and helped him to reflect more on his experiences and how they shaped his dreams and expectations. He realised that he wanted to 'break the cycle' and not end up in the same situation his family/ whānau were in, struggling financially and not being able to communicate about their emotions without fighting:

> *Yeah, it, music, can take you anywhere, so if you're willing to do something that you passionately love, don't give up on it, don't waste your time doing drugs when you know that you want to get out of trouble. I just wanted to talk to everyone, that you know I'm not just some dumb [person] sitting at home waiting for things to happen. I am going out there to prove to the world [that I can be successful]. I proved it to myself and to everyone else. Push it out you know, so that when I become that person, I come on top of the world you know, rub it in their faces. See how they liked it. I still get put down every day by my Mum and my aunty but you know I just take it in and take it on the lyrics and do what I want now.*

Samuel found a way to balance his difficult relationship with his family/whānau through writing lyrics that reflected his feelings. He worked hard to achieve his goals, and build an independent life for himself, away from his family/whānau. However, his resentment towards them remained a prominent emotion, reflected in his desire to '*rub [his] success in their faces*'.

For young people like Jordana, Hana, Gemma, Charlotte, Mark and Samuel, family/whānau was not a supportive resource. Many of the young people in the study experienced difficult relationships with their family/whānau. Some young people were exposed to considerable risks by their families/whānau; drug and alcohol misuse, criminal activity, and abuse and neglect were common factors in the narratives provided by the young people.

For a number of young people in the research, relationships with their family/whānau fluctuated over time. Sometimes, and often with the support of social services, changes occurred in young people's relationships with their families/whānau. The next section explores young people's narratives about these changes.

CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY/WHĀNAU

Many of the young people discussed changes in their relationships with their family/whānau, particularly their parents, as they grew up. For some of the young people, the changes were positive; they began to form closer and more mutually supportive relationships with their parents, siblings, and other family/whānau members as they grew up. However, for other young people the changes were not so positive; some began to realise that they did not want to live in the same way as their family/whānau, and others found that the escalating needs and risks faced by their family/whānau meant that they were no longer able to provide them with support. The changes

young people experienced in these relationships were not always lasting; some young people noted that their relationships with their family/whānau became strained for a short time before they were able to access extra support. Other young people who had difficult and challenging family/whānau relationships found that a combination of factors, such as the introduction of a new parent figure, the birth of a baby, or service involvement, meant that their family/whānau was supportive for a short time. Often due to the nature of the challenges faced by families/whānau, this change was only temporary.

The discussion in this section explores three key examples of change in young people's relationships with their family/whānau, and particularly with their parents/caregivers. The first case study introduces Isabelle, whose family/whānau relationships improved after a significant life event. This example illustrates the way in which changes in young people's circumstances can impact upon their relationships with their parents/caregivers. The second case study introduces Drew, and explores change in family/whānau relationships as a result of a process of 'growing up' or maturation. Finally, Anaru's narrative illustrates change as a result of a service intervention.

Isabelle

Isabelle's parents separated when she was a baby, and she felt that neither of them wanted her when she was a child and young teenager. She lived with her father, Greg, and his new wife, Joanne, with whom she had a tense relationship. Isabelle felt that her father paid more attention to Joanne's children and was inclined to ignore her needs:

> I did feel really rejected by him [Dad], like hard out, because he really loves those other kids [Isabelle's step-siblings] and he does everything for them. But he couldn't reach out for me and do

that little bit extra that I needed at the time.

Isabelle began to search for ways to meet her own needs; she started to run away from home to be with friends when she was 13 years old. She felt that her friends were more likely to listen to her and give her the support and acceptance she was seeking. Her choice of peer group influenced her other decisions, and she began to experiment with drugs, alcohol, and crime. She also disengaged from education. This led to her coming to the attention of child welfare and later youth justice services. She was placed away from her family/whānau and referred to counselling for her drug and alcohol use. While Isabelle experienced her involvement with drug and alcohol counselling services as helpful, she did not find the same for her engagement with child welfare services. She felt that her support workers wanted to control her, and she responded by absconding from her placements:

> *If they tried to make me stay where I didn't want to stay, then that was the end of it. I would break windows to get out. I would take off in the middle of the night. It didn't matter where they had me, I would still make it to [hometown] before too long, with all my stuff. Yeah, I would get away with it for a couple of weeks before I came to the attention of the Police again.*

In addition to feeling controlled by service providers who she felt did not understand her needs, she felt that being involved with child welfare services meant her parents could forego their responsibility for her. This fuelled her resentment for her child welfare support workers and her family/whanau, thus continuing her cycle of running away and refusing to engage with the service.

Isabelle became pregnant when she was 17 years old. She became concerned that her child might be placed away from her after she

gave birth, due to her previous involvement with child welfare services. To help prevent this from happening, she began to engage with parenting courses and committed herself to staying away from drugs, alcohol and crime. Isabelle's pregnancy also changed her relationship with her family/whānau:

> *Mum is back [in my support network] and my grandparents and stuff... I think it is more because of the baby than me... but it has really got me an easy ticket back into my family... It has made it a lot easier on me knowing that I don't have to be worried that they won't want to be involved. Because they are, they do want to be involved.*

While Isabelle's improved relationship with her family/whānau was conditional, centring on the impending arrival of her baby, it provided her with the opportunity to develop a closer bond with her mother and grandparents. This new closeness encouraged Isabelle to develop new ways of managing her challenges; she began to consciously use friends and family/whānau as a support system, turning to them for assistance rather than using drugs and alcohol to manage her feelings. For Isabelle, developing a closer relationship with her family/whānau provided her with a secure base and a sense of family/whānau unity for the first time in her life.

Other young people experienced change as a result of a process of maturation and growing up. One young woman who experienced this was Drew.

Drew

When Drew was 13 years old, she and her brother were placed in their grandmother's care after their mother contacted child welfare services for support as she was in a violent and controlling relationship and was finding it difficult to meet her children's needs.

The complexity in Drew's relationship with her mother stemmed from Drew's conflicting feelings about being placed into her grandmother's care; Drew struggled with being separated from her mother after she was placed away from her care, but had previously run away from home on multiple occasions, rebelling against her mother's rules and guidance and seeking escape from the violence that was present in her home. She felt abandoned and let down by her mother, and was not able to understand the point of view of the child welfare service providers, who were concerned for her safety:

> *It was sort of the relationship Mum was in, so she done the best thing for us. But as I was growing up I was like real bitchy to her. I was like 'you gave us away, you don't care about us'.*

The feelings of resentment Drew harboured towards her mother's actions were fuelled by her confusion at being separated from her. Drew did not feel that the reasons for being placed away were adequately explained to her, and she rebelled against this. She became increasingly involved with a peer group who encouraged her to misuse drugs and alcohol, and run away from her grandmother's house. She was placed in residential care for a short period of time, which helped her to begin to address her drug use and make sense of her relationship with her mother. Talking to counsellors about her experiences was somewhat helpful for Drew, although she often felt that her friends were more understanding and accepting of her and were able to provide the support that she was unable to receive from adults.

As Drew grew up, she began to realise that being placed with her grandmother had been for her benefit, even though it had been a painful and traumatic experience being separated from her mother:

> *As I have gotten older, I sort of understand the situation and*

now that I am older I realise that Mum did the best thing for us so we were safe.

The recognition that her mother's actions had not been an indication of a lack of love helped Drew to mend her relationship with her mother. Their relationship continued to be ambivalent, with Drew simultaneously seeking her mother's support while pushing her away. However, Drew was able to see her mother as a source of support in her life:

The relationship with me and Mum is kind of iffy... It comes and goes. We will fight, two minutes later we will be friends. Fight and then I would run off... But I have done some really bad stuff to my family and they've still stuck by me... I've realised that they do care. I do have a good life with them.

Ambivalence towards family/whānau was a common feature in many of the young people's narratives about changes in their relationships. It was difficult for the young people to accept the changes that were happening, particularly when their past relationships with their family/whānau had been challenging and unpredictable. Anaru explained how he managed the changes in his relationships with his family/whānau.

Anaru
Anaru began to question his experience of family/whānau when he was 11 years old. His family/whānau struggled with finances, and there was often insufficient food in the house. He recalled spending little time at home after school, and would instead roam the streets with his friends. When Anaru was 11 years old, he was stood-down from school for fighting. During his days away from school, he met and befriended a number of gang members. They introduced him to drugs, alcohol, and stealing to get money. Anaru felt that the gang

respected and accepted him. He compared this to the way he felt with his family/whānau who were disappointed with the choices he had made in becoming involved with the gang and criminal activities:

> *[When Mum found out about the gang] that's when all the dramas started... My family hating on me... like showing me no respect, putting me down, saying I wasn't going to make it... that I was going to get incarcerated.*

Anaru felt resentment towards his family/whānau; he felt that they were not supportive of him, and that they could not see that he was searching for someone who could give him the respect and acknowledgement of his skills that he desired. He started to push his family/whānau away, becoming increasingly involved with the activities of the gang, including taking drugs. When he was 14 years old he was excluded from school for taking drugs onto the school grounds. Youth justice and alternative education services worked with Anaru to address his offending and Anaru began to realise that his actions would have consequences for his future. His workers supported him to make sense of his family's/whānau reactions and he started to draw on his family/whānau for support, recognising that they were concerned about what his future was going to hold if he did not make changes to the decisions he was making:

> *Anaru: I was locked up for two weeks and then I was transferred to a boys' home.*
>
> *Interviewer: And who was supporting you during this time?*
>
> *Anaru: My Mum, my family.*
>
> *Interviewer: How do you feel they supported you?*

Anaru: Coming to my court cases, coming to my meetings.

Anaru was disappointed and confused that his family/whānau could not offer him the support that he wanted prior to his time in residential care. He was not able to recognise that their questioning of his decisions was their way of showing that they were concerned about him. However, as Anaru's decisions began to lead to consequences such as incarceration in youth justice facilities, he began to recognise the role his family/whānau and particularly his mother could play in his life. He began to involve her more in his decisions, and felt that she was a positive person he could turn to if he needed support.

Changes in relationships with family/whānau were often difficult for young people to make sense of, particularly when the relationships had been unpredictable or unsupportive in the past. It was important that parents/caregivers and social services recognised the conflicting emotions young people experienced around these changes, and supported them to make sense of their experiences and thus redefine their relationships.

DISCUSSION

For the majority of young people, family/whānau is a significant source of support throughout the life course. Family/whānau can provide emotional, relational, and physical resources that support young people to successfully navigate the challenges associated with growing up. Family/whānau provides a secure base to return to when life is problematic. However, for most of the young people in this study, family/whānau relationships were difficult and challenging. Many of the young people were exposed to multiple risks, including domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, criminal activity, poverty, lack of access

to material and emotional resources and many of these risks were encountered within their families/whanau. The young people were often not able to protect themselves from these risks, and relied on their family/whānau members to do this for them. However, due to the challenges their families/whānau were facing, and the decisions they were making, this protection did not often happen. For these young people, the part of their support network that should have been the most supportive and protective was often the most problematic. One of the central themes that emerged from the analysis of young people's narratives was that of having to manage dissonance in their feelings about their relationships with parents/caregivers.

The narratives of young people who experienced difficult and challenging family/whānau relationships highlighted the tensions that they experienced in trying to manage these relationships. There were two main points of tension: a loyalty to their family/whānau and an awareness that being exposed to multiple risk factors through their family/whānau was not a 'normal experience'. This led to a sense that their family/whānau has let them down through their inability to protect the young person from these risks.

Loyalty to family/whānau

Most of the young people in the research discussed feeling a strong sense of loyalty to their family/whānau, often despite the role their family/whānau played in exposing their young person to complex and multiple risk factors. These young people felt that even though their family/whānau had not protected them as much as they 'should' have, they were still an important part of the young person's world. This was shown in Gemma's narrative when she stated that despite the fact that her mother did not protect her from her father's physical violence, her mother was still the most important person in her life.

Similarly, Rhiannon felt a strong loyalty to her mother, despite feeling that her mother did not fulfil her parenting responsibilities.

Young people's loyalty to their family/whānau was indicative of the attachment they had with at least one of their parent figures. Children form critical attachments with their parents/caregivers. These attachments provide a model for how relationships function later in life (Bolen, 2005; Frederick & Goddard, 2008). Secure attachments develop as a result of parents/caregivers responding consistently and sensitively to children's needs; the child learns to view adults as reliable and available. Where parents/caregivers are not consistently available, physically or emotionally, the child may develop an insecure or avoidant attachment and the relationship between the child and parent/caregiver is likely to be characterised by hostility and anxiety (Bolen, 2005; Bowlby, 1988; Finzi et al., 2001). In situations where children are abused, or exposed to domestic violence, they often form an insecure attachment with the abusive parent/caregiver, while maintaining a more secure attachment with the non-abusive parent/caregiver (Bolen, 2005; Finzi et al., 2001; Sternberg et al., 2005). For many of the young people in the research, the presence of a protective parent/caregiver was one of the factors that increased their sense of loyalty to their family/whānau. For example, Hana and Charlotte both identified that their mothers were very important in their lives. Young people who had access to supportive adults, whether parents/caregivers, other family/whānau members, or service providers, often viewed these adults as someone safe they could turn to when they felt they were in danger. They felt that even if the adult they viewed as protective was not always so, they were still a key person they could draw on for support.

Young people's loyalty to their family/whānau was displayed in a variety of ways. Some, like Charlotte, refrained from telling social services that they were experiencing abuse, out of concern that they

would be removed from their family/whānau. Other young people felt a sense of responsibility to their family/whānau and felt that they were at least partially responsible for protecting their family/whānau members. This was shown in narratives such as Hana's, who chose to stay with her mother to care for her despite wanting to live elsewhere, and Seth's, who was reluctant to move away from his mother after being her primary caregiver for most of his childhood and adolescence.

Feeling let down by family/whānau

Many of the young people who faced multiple and complex risks at home discussed how they felt let down by their families/whānau. Through exploring the young people's narratives, it was possible to see how the feeling of being let down by one's family/whānau grew out of a growing awareness that being exposed to multiple risk factors is not a 'normal experience'. As a child, family/whānau is central to one's understanding of the world. Family/whānau members are the most important people in a child's life; they represent the key relationships children form, they mediate a child's engagement with the rest of the world and are the people children rely on to meet their needs (White et al., 2015). As children move into adolescence, they begin to pay increasing attention to the experiences of others, and how these are similar to and different from their own experiences. As young people reflect on their experiences and draw on the influence of others to shape their worldview, they begin to realise that not everyone they know has to deal with the same complex mix of risks that they have faced (Bolen, 2005; Frederick & Goddard, 2008; Holt et al, 2008; White et al, 2015). These young people drew on their peers' experiences of family/whānau to shape their understanding of how a family/whānau 'should' operate. They realised that their childhood experiences of family/whānau were 'wrong' and 'hurtful'. This added to the feeling

that they had been let down.

Young people such as Jordana highlighted this experience; Jordana's understanding that other parents '*actually look after their children*' showed that she was aware of the differences between her experiences and the experiences of others. As she moved through adolescence, Jordana felt increasingly that her family/whānau had let her down; she felt that they had not provided her with a safe childhood and that their actions had limited her ability to seek support when she needed it. Rhiannon also experienced this; her recognition that she should not have been in a parenting role at such a young age illustrated her awareness of her peers' experiences of family/whānau.

Managing the tension

The young people who experienced problematic family/whānau relationships had to negotiate a space, both physically and psychologically, within which they could manage the tension between loyalty to their family/whānau and feeling let down. They were aware that their parents/caregivers had not fulfilled a protective and supportive role, and had instead contributed to the multiple risks and challenges they had to navigate. The result of this was that they lost opportunities to develop to their full potential and they had to carry, often on their own, the burden of grief and trauma that were a consequence of their experiences. Many of the young people who experienced these conflicting feelings about their family/whānau had to work hard to make sense of what they were feeling.

Some of the young people in the research had support to make sense of these conflicting emotions. These young people were able to talk about their experiences, reflect on the emotional impact of their experiences, and develop positive narratives about their lives,
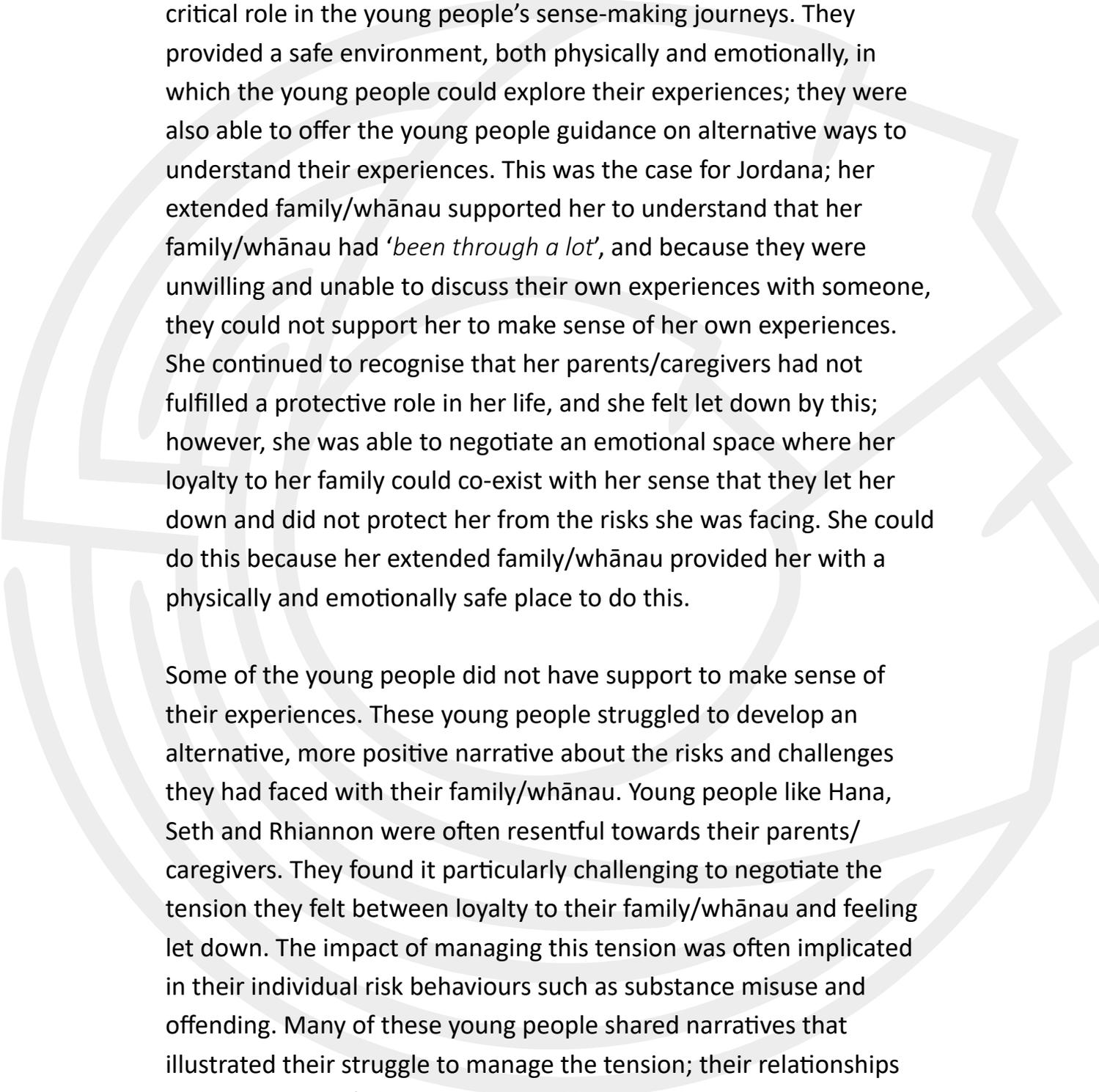
supported by people such as extended family/whānau, teachers, support workers and other service providers. These adults played a critical role in the young people's sense-making journeys. They provided a safe environment, both physically and emotionally, in which the young people could explore their experiences; they were also able to offer the young people guidance on alternative ways to understand their experiences. This was the case for Jordana; her extended family/whānau supported her to understand that her family/whānau had '*been through a lot*', and because they were unwilling and unable to discuss their own experiences with someone, they could not support her to make sense of her own experiences. She continued to recognise that her parents/caregivers had not fulfilled a protective role in her life, and she felt let down by this; however, she was able to negotiate an emotional space where her loyalty to her family could co-exist with her sense that they let her down and did not protect her from the risks she was facing. She could do this because her extended family/whānau provided her with a physically and emotionally safe place to do this.

Some of the young people did not have support to make sense of their experiences. These young people struggled to develop an alternative, more positive narrative about the risks and challenges they had faced with their family/whānau. Young people like Hana, Seth and Rhiannon were often resentful towards their parents/ caregivers. They found it particularly challenging to negotiate the tension they felt between loyalty to their family/whānau and feeling let down. The impact of managing this tension was often implicated in their individual risk behaviours such as substance misuse and offending. Many of these young people shared narratives that illustrated their struggle to manage the tension; their relationships with their family/whānau alternated between being very close and very distant. These young people often separated themselves from their family/whānau, both physically and emotionally, and rather
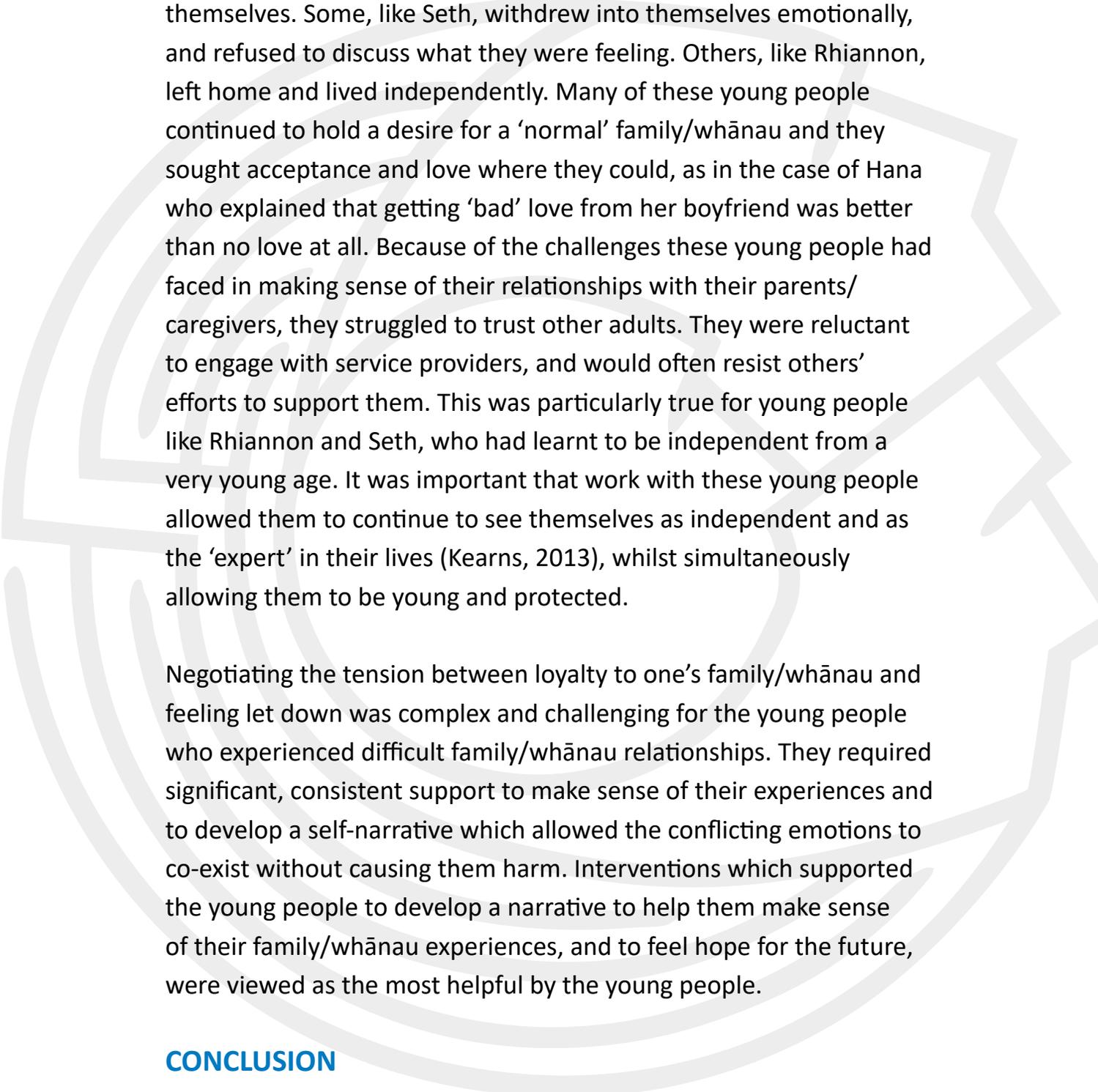
than a self-narrative that prominently featured family/whanau, their narratives were of strong, independent young people who relied on themselves. Some, like Seth, withdrew into themselves emotionally, and refused to discuss what they were feeling. Others, like Rhiannon, left home and lived independently. Many of these young people continued to hold a desire for a 'normal' family/whānau and they sought acceptance and love where they could, as in the case of Hana who explained that getting 'bad' love from her boyfriend was better than no love at all. Because of the challenges these young people had faced in making sense of their relationships with their parents/caregivers, they struggled to trust other adults. They were reluctant to engage with service providers, and would often resist others' efforts to support them. This was particularly true for young people like Rhiannon and Seth, who had learnt to be independent from a very young age. It was important that work with these young people allowed them to continue to see themselves as independent and as the 'expert' in their lives (Kearns, 2013), whilst simultaneously allowing them to be young and protected.

Negotiating the tension between loyalty to one's family/whānau and feeling let down was complex and challenging for the young people who experienced difficult family/whānau relationships. They required significant, consistent support to make sense of their experiences and to develop a self-narrative which allowed the conflicting emotions to co-exist without causing them harm. Interventions which supported the young people to develop a narrative to help them make sense of their family/whānau experiences, and to feel hope for the future, were viewed as the most helpful by the young people.

CONCLUSION

Young people in this study shared a wide range of narratives about their families/whānau. Some found that their parents/caregivers
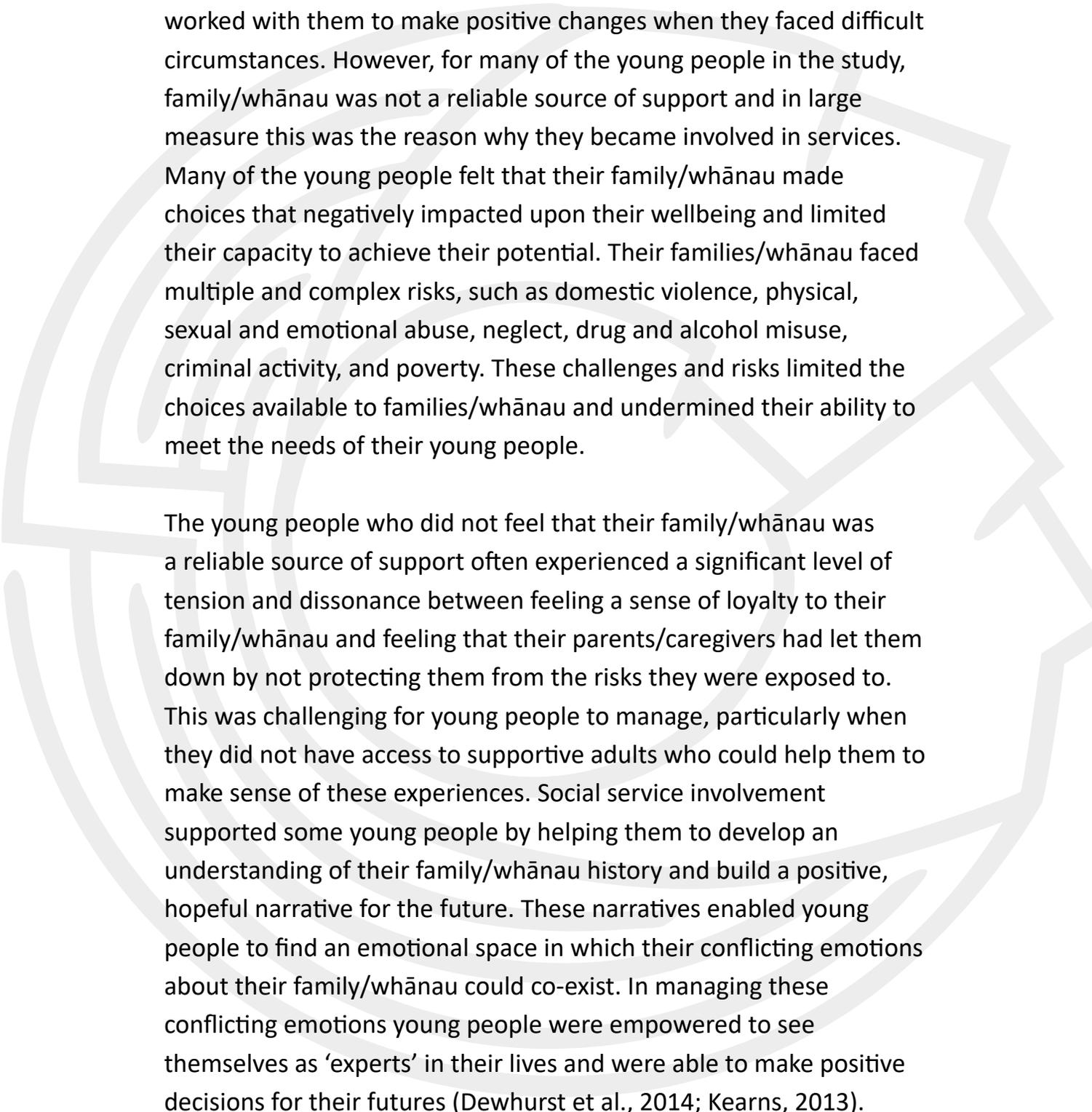
were supportive of them when they faced challenges. These young people knew that they could rely on their parents/caregivers and worked with them to make positive changes when they faced difficult circumstances. However, for many of the young people in the study, family/whānau was not a reliable source of support and in large measure this was the reason why they became involved in services. Many of the young people felt that their family/whānau made choices that negatively impacted upon their wellbeing and limited their capacity to achieve their potential. Their families/whānau faced multiple and complex risks, such as domestic violence, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, drug and alcohol misuse, criminal activity, and poverty. These challenges and risks limited the choices available to families/whānau and undermined their ability to meet the needs of their young people.

The young people who did not feel that their family/whānau was a reliable source of support often experienced a significant level of tension and dissonance between feeling a sense of loyalty to their family/whānau and feeling that their parents/caregivers had let them down by not protecting them from the risks they were exposed to. This was challenging for young people to manage, particularly when they did not have access to supportive adults who could help them to make sense of these experiences. Social service involvement supported some young people by helping them to develop an understanding of their family/whānau history and build a positive, hopeful narrative for the future. These narratives enabled young people to find an emotional space in which their conflicting emotions about their family/whānau could co-exist. In managing these conflicting emotions young people were empowered to see themselves as 'experts' in their lives and were able to make positive decisions for their futures (Dewhurst et al., 2014; Kearns, 2013).

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