

Executive Summary

This youth development literature review, *Building Strength*, is a review of research on how to achieve good outcomes for young people in their families, peer groups, schools, careers and neighbourhoods/communities.

It is closely linked with, and informs, the *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* that was developed by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and released in February 2002.

Making a positive difference to the lives of young people

The research on youth development delivers some good news. Success for young people is not simply the result of chance or genes. The people who care about young people, or simply come into contact with them, can have a tremendous influence for good. These people include parents, extended family, friends, schoolmates, neighbours, school staff and community members, such as youth and church workers. The circumstances young people grow up in – such as the type of neighbourhood, family income and the way schools are run – can also have a positive impact.

Young people play a part in their own success

This is not to suggest that young people are passive in their own lives. Young people can make a tremendous difference to their own success by things such as the friends they choose, the attitude they have towards education and the decisions they make about who they are and where they want to go in life. Factors outside their control, such as their genetic inheritance, temperament and health as babies, also make a big difference to their success in life. However, this review does not focus on these individual factors, but on the impact of the people and circumstances that surround young people as they grow.

Positive youth development

Each young person has a number of key tasks to undertake on the path to adulthood. How well each of these is mastered affects the degree of success each of them will experience in their adult life. In positive youth development, we are interested in what is needed for young people to grow into constructive, autonomous individuals with a high level of well-being. So it makes sense to look at the research on what needs to happen in order to reach this goal.

What the research tells us

The implications of the research findings are heartening. The most up to date research tells us that parents, schools, peers and communities can make a big difference by providing certain conditions which make it more likely that young people will thrive. Downstream, there are even bigger implications. The whole country benefits when young people grow up to be mentally healthy, well-educated, employed and employable, non-violent, honest and law-abiding, drug free and to become parents only once they have finished their schooling and established careers.

Positive youth development is good for everyone

Young people who experience this type of life success bring many benefits to a nation – a good workforce, healthy population and capable caretakers of the next generation. Good youth development is, therefore, relevant to us all. When young people develop positively, they boost the country's earnings, increase the wealth of national knowledge and use less taxes on health care, prisons, police, welfare benefits and psychiatric services. These funds can then be diverted to education and other vital services. Successful young people function better in almost every sphere of life – as friends, parents, students, employees, spouses/partners, neighbours and community members. They bring a wealth to the community and country that cannot be counted simply in dollars.

The benefits for future generations

The positive implications of successful young people go on for many years. The benefits are inter-generational – young people who experience success and well-being themselves are more likely to be parents who bring up their children also to be successful and productive. Success is used here in the widest sense of the term – happy, stable, constructive and able to use their talents to the fullest, for their own benefit and that of the community.

How do we build strengths that create good outcomes for young people?

These are the benefits that positive youth development brings. But what does the research say about how to achieve them?

1. Surround young people with positive influences

The research makes it clear that different people have a different impact, depending on how close they are to the young person and how much time they spend with them from a young age. Parents, whether biological or adoptive, have the most impact. Peers and schools appear to come next and it is not clear whether one has a greater impact than the other. Peers may have a broader impact in the short-term, but schools have a significant impact on long-term well-being. Neighbourhoods and significant community members have the least impact, although they are still important.

2. Build abundant strengths into young people's lives

The more strengths there are in young people's lives – in their individual traits, parenting, schools, peer group, neighbourhood and community – the more success they are likely to achieve. For young people who are vulnerable to failure in some area of their life, whether because of genetic inheritance, poor parenting or some other factor, strengths in other areas of their lives become even more important.

3. Support young people with rich resources

One factor that makes it more likely that good outcomes will occur across the board is good resources – good family income, good income for most of the people in a neighbourhood, well-resourced schools and communities with rich resources such as libraries and community centres. Where income and resources are greater, young people tend to have better emotional well-being, more crime-free and drug-free behaviour and better educational achievement. Income seems to have an impact partly through reducing parental stress and conflict, thus making it easier for people to parent effectively. It is also associated with occupation and education, and these make it more likely parents will encourage and help their children with education and other key tasks.

4. Deliver optimum parenting

In families, a certain type of parenting makes good outcomes more likely, including educational achievement, emotional and psychological well-being and prosocial, crime- and drug- free behaviour. This is 'authoritative' (nurturing) parenting where parents are nurturing, warm and accepting while at the same time setting clear and firm limits and consequences for breaking them. Discipline is consistent but not harsh and change as young people mature to include them more in decision making.

Families where parents deal with conflict constructively also have better outcomes for young people, especially emotional and psychological. Stable families, whether one or two parent, biological or adoptive, are also better for young people, although two-parent families have better outcomes. This is possibly because they have higher income, but also because there are two parents to provide all the aspects of parenting that young people thrive on.

Families tend to act as a filter for every other type of influence. Parents have an impact on who young people make friends with, how often they see them and how much influence friends have. They also influence where young people live, as well as their access to community resources and the amount of contact they have with neighbours. Parents largely choose where young people go to school and influence their attitudes towards the value of education and choice of career. Effective parenting, therefore, has the potential to have an impact on every other part of a young person's life, enabling them to access strengths in every environment that make it even more likely they will succeed.

When families are strong, they protect young people against weaknesses in other parts of their world. Strong families protect against negative peer influence, badly run schools and poor neighbourhood circumstances, such as poverty and dangerousness. When parenting has weaknesses, strengths in other areas become more important, but weaknesses in other areas also become more powerful.

Overall, effective parenting and effective resolution of conflict between parents appear to have more impact on young people than other factors such as income and divorce. However, higher income helps reduce stress and conflict, so there is an interaction between the two factors.

5. Positive peer influence – the power of friends

Peers – whether friends, schoolmates or neighbours – can also have a positive impact. Other young people can enhance emotional well-being, crime and drug free lifestyles, academic success, recreational and sporting involvement, how much young people express their talents and safety at school. They do this largely by expressing positive behaviours and values which other young people then take up, even if they did not show these behaviours and values to start with.

Peers do not have as much impact as family, although when parenting is harsh or lax, peers can become far more influential than normal, both for good and bad. This is particularly true in the area of crime and drug use, where ineffective parenting means antisocial peer influence has much more impact.

6. Provide education that is accepting, sets limits and has high expectations

Schools can also have a positive impact, both through the way they are organised and the way staff relate to young people. Academic outcomes are better when there are high expectations for learning and behaviour, moderate classroom control and teachers treat young people with warmth, positive regard and support. This is especially important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who may be under considerable stress through family poverty or violence. An emphasis on individual programmes rather than competition, smaller schools (whole schools not just classes), and mixed ability rather than

streamed classes also lead to better outcomes. Lastly, the fewer transitions from one school to another that young people go through in their school lives, the better the outcomes are, especially for young women.

Staying at school longer has positive effects on young people too. Young women are more likely to delay parenthood until they have finished their education and started a career, if they stay at school. Young men are less likely to become involved with antisocial friends and activities if they spend more years in education. More education also increases the chance of success at work, which has an effect on income and, as we know, can affect the next generation of young people. So overall, valuing education and getting actively involved in learning can have a large and long-lasting effect.

In the work world, part-time work while at school does not appear to make success more likely. But as long as it does not go beyond 20 hours per week, it appears to have no adverse outcomes. Parents again have a positive impact on what choices young people make about education and career by providing living examples and advice.

7. Place young people in well-resourced communities with supportive neighbours

Neighbours and significant adults in the community can also have a positive influence, but less so than families. Neighbourhoods and communities can aid success in education, crime and drug-free, prosocial lifestyles, emotional well-being, and delayed parenthood. Their influence can be both direct and indirect. Direct influence is on the experiences and activities young people are exposed to. Indirect influences are by reducing parents' stress so they can parent more effectively. Close ties with neighbours, good income throughout the area, good community resources and help and support from local people all reduce parental stress. Another indirect impact is through supervision of peer groups. Neighbours who share values and work together to maintain local standards can ensure that groups of young people in the neighbourhood are an influence for good rather than ill.

The characteristics of neighbourhoods that appear most important include income, occupation and education levels of residents. People not moving often, close ties between people and working together for the common good are also helpful. The characteristics of buildings and land use also make a difference. The pathways by which these factors have an impact on young people are complex and are explored in more depth in this review.

Strong neighbourhoods can be protective when parenting is weak especially through support and supervision by neighbours and significant local adults. When neighbourhoods are strong, young people are protected by nurturant parenting with strong supervision, neighbours working together for good, residential stability and participation in organised activities.

8. Involve young people in constructive activities outside school and work

Participation by young people in out-of-school activities is a significant protective factor, although again not as strong as families. Young people who participate in extracurricular activities, whether at school or elsewhere, tend to stay longer at school, show less antisocial behaviour and drug use, drink more responsibly, attend school more often, show better attitudes to sex and have better academic and career success. This appears to be particularly the case when activities are organised and supervised by skilled adults and when their friends are also involved. Parents can encourage young people to participate in these activities by being involved in the community themselves, or showing warm support for their children when they get involved.

The good news about positive youth development

Overall, the news is good. Young people have a much better chance of success in many areas of their lives when the world they live in is full of strengths. This should give hope to parents, young people, educators and community members that they can make a positive difference – and a big one.

Strong blocks make strong walls, and strong walls make strong buildings

Each strength that is achieved by a young person is like adding a block to a strong wall, and provides a basis for achieving the next strength. When a certain strength or task is not achieved, then the wall has gaps in it that weaken it and make it vulnerable to stress. The more strengths there are in a young person's life, the stronger the life they build. When strengths are not present in any abundance, the foundations for the next stage of life are weaker and young people are more likely to build shaky lives. The key to good outcomes for young people then is building as many strengths into their lives as possible, so that they can build in strength as they move towards adulthood.