



*Yfoundations has identified five foundations as integral to the process of ending youth homelessness. These foundations should be accessible to every young person. Furthermore, all services that work with young people experiencing homelessness should be considering these foundations within the work that they do.*

## **Connections**

Family & friends | Society and Community | Belonging | Inclusion | Positive Engagement| Resilience

*It is vital that all young people are given the opportunity to develop and nurture the connections in their lives. Connections to friends, family, community and society promote resilience and social inclusion. The development of positive connections during the formative stages of childhood and adolescence enables a young person to build a strong positive foundation and prepares them for adult life.*

A young person cannot successfully end their experience of homelessness without a strong support network. Connections are key determinants of the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents<sup>1</sup>. It is important that young people have the ability to preserve and nurture these connections. The 'Connections' foundation refers to any positive connection, which may include family, friends, support workers, a mentor, work colleagues, or members of a group (community, cultural or spiritual). The foundation also refers to those connections between services and government agencies that work with young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Connectivity, participation and cooperation significantly influence human well-being. Groups of individuals working together are, on average, safer, stronger and more efficient than individuals working alone.

The *Connections* foundation is concerned with belonging. Being linked to and associated with, someone, something, or some physical or spiritual place, through a common element. A connection to a physical or geographical community, sporting, cultural or spiritual community, may foster the development of moral actions such as honesty, altruism, and caring<sup>2</sup>. Belonging implies being part of something and could refer to something physical or metaphysical. The idea of social inclusion is also intrinsically linked to *Connections*, as it refers to the need to be able to participate in society and feel

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<sup>1</sup> Bernat, D. H., and Resnick, M D. (2009) Connectedness in the lives of adolescents. *Adolescent health: Understanding and preventing risk behaviours*, 375-389.

<sup>2</sup> Fuller A, A blueprint for building social competencies in children and adolescent, *Australian Journal of Middle Schooling*, 1, 40-48

valued<sup>3</sup>. Social isolation and disconnection is said to be equally as threatening to young people as tobacco use in terms of mortality<sup>4</sup>.

Resilience is an important component of the 'Connections' foundation. Research indicates that connectedness and belonging fosters resilience. Resilience in young people reduces health risks such as problematic substance abuse and promotes positive social and emotional health<sup>5</sup>. For example, young people may still experiment with drugs however positive connections and feeling a sense of belonging reduces the likelihood that young people will maintain illicit substance use on a permanent basis. Factors that promote resilience are family connectedness, peer connectedness and fitting in at school.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of family connectedness (defined as closeness to parents, perceived caring, satisfaction, feeling loved and wanted)<sup>7</sup> has been widely recognised within academic literature. It is identified as one of the most powerful protective factors in the lives of adolescents<sup>8</sup> against unhealthy risk behaviours including emotional distress, suicide, violence, substance use, early sexual debut and pregnancy. Strong bonds between parents and adolescents protect youth from engaging in health risk behaviors, particularly when parents recognize, value, and reward pro-social<sup>9</sup> behaviors<sup>10</sup>. Adolescents typically look for parental guidance during this stage of their life<sup>11</sup>.

However, in the absence of a positive parent, other connections are still vital in providing the necessary support and guidance to young people, as they offer a secure environment in which young people have the freedom to learn and explore. For example, a strong mentor can be a hugely beneficial connection for a young person. Mentoring affects youth through three interrelated processes: (1) by enhancing their social relationships and emotional well-being, (2) by improving their cognitive skills

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3 Ridge, T. Childhood Poverty: a barrier to social participation and inclusion In Kay, E., Tisdall, M., Davis, J.M., Prout, A & Hill, M. (Eds) Children, young people and social inclusion, participation for what? The Policy Press, University of Bristol

4 Putnam, R. D., Feldstein, L. M., & Cohen, D. J. (2003). Better together: Restoring the American community. New York: Simon & Schuster.

5 Hawkins JD, Catalano RF, Miller JY. (1992), Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: implications for substance abuse prevention. Psychological Bulletin, 112(1): 64-105;

Resnick, M.D., Bearman P.S., Blum R. Wm., Bauman K., Harris, K.M., Jones, J., Tabor J., Beuhring, T., Sieving R.E., Shew M., Ireland, M., Bearinger, L.H., Udry R.J. (1997) Protecting Adolescents From Harm. Findings From the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, JAMA; 278(10): 823-832; Rutter M. (1987), Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. 57(3): 316-31.

6 Resnick M.D., Harris L.J & Blum R.W. (1993) The impact of caring and connectedness on adolescent health and well being, Journal of Paediatric Child Health 29; Fuller, A., McGraw, K., Goodyear, M. (1998) The Mind of Youth.

Department of Education, Melbourne.

7 Ibid

8 Resnick M.D., Harris L.J & Blum R.W. (1993) The impact of caring and connectedness on adolescent health and well being, Journal of Paediatric Child Health.29

9 Prosocial behaviour generally is defined as voluntary, intentional behaviour that results in benefits for another; the motive is unspecified and may be positive, negative or both. Eisenberg, N. (1983). The development of reasoning about prosocial behaviour. In N. Eisenberg (Eds), The development of prosocial behaviour (pp. 219-249). New York: Academic Press.

10 Resnick, M.D., et al (1997) Protecting Adolescents From Harm. Findings From the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, JAMA; 278(10): 823-832

11 Ungar, M. (2004). Nurturing hidden resilience in troubled youth, University of Toronto Press

through instruction and conversation, and (3) by promoting positive identity development through serving as role models and advocates<sup>12</sup>.

Many low socio-economic youth have limited contact with positive role models outside their immediate family and believe opportunities for personal success to be limited<sup>13</sup>. Further, a young person's determination of global self-worth is based not only on their self-evaluation of competence in activities they consider to be important, but also on their perception of acceptance, support, and regard from significant others.<sup>14</sup> A mentor's positive appraisal therefore becomes incorporated into the mentee's sense of self.

Connection to community is another significant network for young people. It has been associated with lower levels of health risk behaviours and higher levels of pro-social behaviour. Connection to community can encompass other groups outside one's physical community. 'Community' can encompass a group of people that share a common interest or spirit. These groups may be concerned with spirituality and faith, education and training or sport and hobbies. These connections contribute to positive and healthy adolescent development<sup>15</sup>.

*So what do connections mean to a young person experiencing homelessness? And are they considered important?*

Often young people tell us (Yfoundations) they have found family on the street, in a way they have not experienced before. "There's a certain bond between all of us. There's a whole community of us where everyone knows everyone and they're all like trying to help each other" (17-year-old female). Whether the connection is romantic, companionship or protective, these relationships are intense for young people and incredibly important. It is therefore vital that these connections are respected and supported. Young people must be given every opportunity to nurture existing connections and encouraged to develop new ones. At the same time it is recognised that belonging to a community of the homeless can have negative impacts on some young people. For example it can increase the risk of drug and alcohol misuse, criminal involvement and of becoming entrenched in homelessness<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Rhodes, J.E. (2002). Stand by me: The risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Blechman, E.A. (1992). Mentors for high-risk minority youth: From effective communication to bicultural competence. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 21, (2), 160-169.

<sup>14</sup> Harter, S (1988). *Manual for the self-perception profile of adolescents*. Denver: University of Denver

<sup>15</sup> Bernat, D. H., and Resnick, M D. (2009) Connectedness in the lives of adolescents. *Adolescent health: Understanding and preventing risk behaviours*, 375-389.

<sup>16</sup> Maycock Paula & Corr Mary-Louise (2013) *Young People's Homeless and Housing Pathways*, The National Children's Strategy Research Series, Department of Children and Youth Affairs: Dublin.

Young people have told us that sometimes they feel as if their relationships are not considered as important as adult relationships because of their age. Yconnect staff frequently receive information from young couples regarding the difficulty in finding suitable housing, for either temporary periods or longer term, within Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) or the private rental market. Young couples and young families are sometimes forced to separate due to the shortage of housing options available for couples. While this may be in part due to limited housing and resources, it is important that the relationships of young people are always considered when making decisions about their welfare. It must always be asked, “Are we always respectful of the relationships and connections of young people and is this reflected in our work? How are we making every effort to support the connections this young person already has? What are the implications for the young people if they are forced to separate? We may also need to think about how we can access and support young people who prefer couch surfing because of the connections they may feel it provides – either through family connections or being able to stay with friends<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> There is anecdotal evidence (information obtained through conversations with young people via Yconnect hotline) suggesting that young people would prefer sleeping on the couches of people they know rather than stay in a refuge with strangers. Similarly young couples prefer sleeping in a tent in the park than be split up. (information also obtained via Yconnect)