



## WORKING WITH DISENGAGED YOUNG PEOPLE

# Empowerment Rather Than Control

by Diana Whitmore

### Why is it important?

This article is borne out of frustration – frustration that our troubled young people today are not receiving the quality of care, authentic attention, positive intervention and loving support that they both badly need and deserve. What do we aim for? Do we aim to control their behaviour with no concern for their ultimate wellbeing? Do we aim to turn them into nice, unfulfilled people who don't give society any trouble? In other words, do we just want them to behave themselves?

Or alternatively, can we shoot for the stars on their behalf? Can we value and respect their unique potential, no matter how difficult their behaviour? Can we support the unfoldment of that potential? Can we change consciousness rather than modify behaviour? Can we trust young people to make good life choices once they are able to self-reflect and self-manage? Can we recognize their need for meaning and purpose in life as no different from yours or mine?



## A Vision for Young People

I believe that we can. Actually, having gathered enough evidence through the work of Ecologia Youth Trust, the Growing2gether Programme, I don't believe, I know.

Experience has unquestionably taught us that all young people long to:

- feel that they belong
- feel good about who they are
- make a difference and feel they have something worthwhile to contribute
- have a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

I also think that it does not require highly sophisticated interventions done by *experts* with long years of training in youth development to *fix* damaged youth. Most importantly, the *context* that we bring to our work with young people has a dramatic impact on how they will experience themselves and, consequently, behave. A context is that which illuminates and gives meaning to a particular set of circumstances or life experience. We can approach, relate to and perceive a young person as damaged, problematic, and difficult, expecting little of them. Even worse is when we *expect* them to always be a problem, never change, not amount to anything. By perceiving a young person this way, they will tend to conform to the perceptual box that we have labelled them with.

On the other hand, we can have an alternative context – one which sees this young person as a unique individual, rich with immense potential, who has a purpose in life and challenges to meet. This is not to say that we turn a blind eye to behaviour, but rather that we see the whole person. We give the gift of respecting that young person's potential no matter how obscure it might be. We recognise that consciousness can change and that, through personal development, emotional intelligence can be fostered.



*"I think that the Growing2gether programme should be extended to boys and girls in every school during secondary school to enable them to broaden their knowledge about life and realize that if you don't have an education you don't have anything."*

Female, 15 years

*"Doing Growing2gether helped me to get back into what is right for me and I know I have to finish school if I want to make anything for myself."*

Male, 15

## Principles of a Potential Orientated Way of Working with Young People

### 1 Trusting rather than controlling

When we work with young people, we are being a role model, whether or not we do so consciously and intentionally. The best role model we can be is one that demonstrates authentic humanness, rather than being some kind of unrealistic ideal. If, as role models, we show how it is okay to be human, to make mistakes *and then to deal with the mistakes we make in a positive way*, and if a young person sees us not being perfect, but having integrity around our mistakes, they will learn that it is both acceptable and human to make mistakes.

In our experience of working with deserving young people, we have seen again and again that, if armed with a realistic knowledge of outcomes and consequences, young people will most often make the best decision for their well being. In fact, we can trust them to. For example, on the Growing2gether project, when young people explore risky behaviour and become aware of not only the consequences of risky behaviours, but also the barriers to making the right choices, they then become more responsible for their actions. When young people start the course, which involves mentoring small children in nursery settings, they believe that it is acceptable to have a baby when you are very young. However, after having a *live, hands on experience* of the enormous amount of work, responsibility and indeed privilege it is to have a child, a large percentage change the acceptable age at which to have a child.

None of us can be perfect. To make mistakes is human. It is how we deal with the mistakes, the empathic failures, the errors of judgment, that really matters. If we take responsibility for our mistake, acknowledge it and make amends in some way to *clean up the mess we make*, we are demonstrating a transformative way of being. This is a tremendous gift to give young people. Young people facing tough realities often do not have adults in their lives who have modelled this positive way of dealing with our humanness.

*"I now have **more patience**. I know how to **solve problems cooperatively**. I have learnt to **care more for other people's feelings** and not just mine."*

Female, 15

### 2 Respecting rather than judging

Many a teen has told me that the reason they behave well on our programmes is because we respect them. At risk young people are labelled quite early on as the bad, the difficult, the problematic ones. This label is passed through the system from teacher to teacher, school to school. It should be no surprise to us when that label becomes real.

To have compassion for the suffering of a young person's background, to understand that they may have lacked any positive role models in their life, to have empathy for their need of recognition, to know that their negative behaviour is often a cry for help – is to give a gift that can plant the seeds of *self empathy* – to be a role model of *how* to be empathetic which can then be internalized.

Unconditional positive regard requires that we value young people for who they are, not what they do or how they behave. A youth facilitator can model this through their relationship with the teens, with each other, with colleagues. To have unconditional positive regard as a value for your work means taking a positive approach. *This young person is valuable and worthwhile simply because they exist.* This type of valuing is sorely lacking in deserving young people's lives – whether they are the challenging ones or the quiet, shy ones lacking in self belief. This is not to say that we tolerate unacceptable behaviour or accept disrespectful attitudes. Hard love is an acceptable way of being and, when it comes from a place that values the person and not the behaviour, things can begin to change.

Each young person has a unique path of development or unfoldment. Absolutely everything that a young person encounters on their path of development can be a stepping stone to their growth and learning. With good coaching and role models, whatever situation a young person finds themselves in, they can learn and evolve from it.

*"I have become **more mature** and find it easier' to express my opinion. My mum said I'm **more confident** because I am usually shy."*

Female, 14

*"My parents and friends have seen the changes that I have made during this project, the reason being is because I have a better knowledge."*

Male, 15

### 3 Relating to potential, rather than behaviour

The facilitator's attitude here is, 'I know that who you really are is so, so much more than the behaviour that you are demonstrating'. 'I see more of you than your behaviour'. 'I see who you really are'. From this perspective, a young person can receive challenge and hard love in a way which engages rather than alienates them. If we only relate to a young person's behaviour, we will try to control that behaviour. The situation becomes a battle of wills, someone has to win and someone has to lose. However, if we come from a wider perspective of the whole young person, if we see their rich potential as well as their behaviour, we create a wider field for them to grow and develop within.

Think for a moment about someone in your life who believed in you and saw your potential. Whether a parent, grandparent, teacher or mentor, to be truly seen in our potential has a dramatic impact on us, which we don't forget and, most likely, which we carry for many years inside ourselves. For a significant other to see our potential and believe in us enables us to find self-belief and an empathic inner awareness that does the same.



*"I didn't know what I wanted to be before, but now I want to be a teacher. And my mum helped me to look to see what you need, like what exams and stuff and so now I know I've got to work harder to get my exams at school. So it's definitely made me more focused, cos before I didn't have anything to work towards."*

Male, 15

*"If people show me just a little bit of attention, I give my full. Growing2gether has improved my communication skills with family, friends and toddlers and I have discovered potential in myself which is a nursery teacher or a social worker."*

Female 15

#### 4 Empowering rather than minimizing/fixing

We can trust young people to make their own decisions **if** they first: learn the skill of self-reflection and reflect on the choices that they are making and the consequences of those choices. Perhaps most importantly, from those choices, are they getting the outcomes they want? (Usually not).

Young people can be coached to gain an increased awareness and understanding of the choices they are making in their lives and the consequences of those choices. Having a greater awareness leads to a greater capacity to self-manage and to be empowered to take responsibility. For adolescents, this is a great developmental task, which, once learned, can be applied to many areas of their lives. Is it not better to support young people in learning the skills of self reflection and self management than to try to control their behaviour, because

they are deemed to be lacking and in need of *fixing*? Is it not more effective at promoting change to trust that each young person is capable of finding their own answers, if we provide them with self-awareness and self-belief? We are then teaching a hungry person how to fish – rather than giving them food. The question is always, ‘What choice needs to be made to get the outcomes that the young person really wants?’

The value this attitude contains is one of *inner freedom*. Rather than having a normative chart on the wall that tells us what a healthy, fully functioning adolescent *should* be like, we can value each teenager finding the inner freedom to do and be what they choose as valuable and worthwhile.

If young people are less dictated to, more encouraged to develop the capacity to think through their goals and the best ways to create outcomes that work for them, the results can be astounding. We can give an adolescent an experience of *‘here and now choices and the power they have to create different outcomes for themselves’*. This dramatically increases their motivation to continue to choose differently in other areas of their lives. For example, changing the negative outcomes of angry reactions into positive outcomes from assertive communication is a major re-framing, in a culture that usually promotes the necessity of ‘keeping face’ at all costs.

Enabling young people to develop reflective muscles will provide a more robust capacity to ‘think through’ challenges and choices in the future. Teaching them to use their minds in this capacity is something the current education system fails to address, and is one of the most important strengths to acquire. Through sharing at both peer group level and one-to-one time with adult role models, young people create new bonds beyond their immediate social life to develop a more clearly individuated sense of themselves.

This process establishes personal responsibility as a keynote in their lives and attitudes, crucial to the creation of a life on large and small scales that they are motivated to aspire towards.

*“I was talking to [facilitator] and we were saying I can try to use the interpersonal skills with my teachers, like the ones who I always have problems with when I go to school. Cos I do want to go to college, but I know I need to go to school more first and try to get along with people better.”*

Male, 15

*“Growing2gether made me understand that before making choices you need to think. It has made a great difference in my life because before I didn’t think twice, now I am aware of my future. I have learned how to control my anger, how to express my feelings and thoughts without hurting someone.”*

Male, 14

## 5 Understanding that young people are values driven

Young people are values driven – even when behaving negatively. Beneath or behind the behaviour is a value that is driving that young person. For example, I have many times asked young men what they gained from being a part of a gang. Inevitably, the response has been, ‘because it makes me feel like I belong’. Take the example of a disadvantaged young person stealing expensive trainers. What value does that fulfill for them? It provides them with a sense of importance and recognition. It is our experience that teenagers are longing to express their values and opinions, to test them out in the world and see what the consequences are.

Young people are at a stage in their lives when they are forming their identities, developing their capacity to think, searching for core values around which to orientate their behaviour and seeking future goals towards which they can aspire.

Many of our young people are at risk of failing to meet these developmental needs in a positive way, instead forming identities around a negative sense of themselves, borne from a sense of hopelessness in the world around them. As a result, the sum total of their aspirations in life is often to make as much money with as little effort as possible, and therefore to fall prey to criminal activities or to make money in ways that exploit them and continue to compound a sense of failure. At best, they will tend towards a rather depressed and passive attitude to life, in which they expect to be looked after by a parental state.

*“The most important thing I have learned is that we must talk politely with elders and youngsters ... we must love our younger and respect our elders. And we should not fight with others.”*

Male, 15

## 6 Providing young people with a new and positive experience of themselves, leads to increasing self-empathy

Life is relational. Young people are relational beings and learn best through each other and through positive role models. Research has shown that the most important factor in enabling a young person to make the transition into adulthood is having one positive role model in their lives.

Giving young people a new and positive experience of themselves builds a new neural pathway to replace existing negative ones. To again and again experience that they have something to contribute to the world, that they can make a difference, that they can do a splendid job and that they fundamentally are a good person builds self-esteem and self-belief. On the Growing2gether project, the combination of intensive adult and peer group

interaction alongside the responsibility of bonding with, and being responsible for, a small child provides a multi-layered set of relationships, that are all designed to give the teenagers a new experience of themselves and the world around them.

The responsibility of having a child to be a role model for can call a young person into parts of themselves that allow them to feel vibrant and alive, and which they also like and respect. The enthusiasm that they display at the end of toddler time usually reflects a fascination with the application of the material they are learning about child development interpersonal skills, as well as a sense of satisfaction in having been needed, wanted and responded to by staff and toddlers. This forms an attitude internally of 'I can,' as they integrate the positive expectations of the toddlers, staff and facilitators.



Additionally, the project provides a strong sense of community for adolescents, often a strongly missing link in their lives, yet one that they desperately need. So much of their culture today teaches a myth of isolation and individualistic self at the expense of providing a sense of interconnection and belonging. The formation of their group within the nursery, the peer and facilitator relationships, and the sense of community within the nursery itself stresses the importance of being inter-dependent, and that therefore their behaviour has a strong impact on others. The de-sensitisation that comes through the breakdown of community allows young people to be anaesthetised to their surroundings and makes it acceptable to harm and exploit others. Bringing them into relationship over a period of time sows seeds that enable them to bring a sense of pride to the caring, sense of belonging and positive impact they have on their community.

Providing young people with a new and positive experience of themselves gives them something worth towing the line for, and therefore sufficient motivation to have a positive experience of engaging with respect and an ability to integrate other's rules and expectations. On Growing2gether, mentoring small children, feeling listened to and engaged with in debate during classroom time, and experiencing a peer group outside of school and the usual social circles - in a more focused way that encourages honesty, listening, respect and intimacy – are all very strong motivating factors for the young people to behave and interact in new and more useful ways. Bonds to their peers and facilitators made here are often much deeper and provide a blueprint for possibilities of relating respectfully and productively beyond the project.

Increased self empathy is the outcome of all of the above factors. Gradually, an internal sense of identity is formed – a deeper identity and inner relationship with Self, a stable reference point and a continuity of being. Having experienced empathy from a positive role model and having developed empathy for others, the young person internalizes this experience and builds this inside, developing an inner centre, leading to the capacity for self empathy to evolve.

*“Because I always use interpersonal skills that I learned from this project and my uncle say to me ‘you are very respecting in these days, from what you’ve learnt from the project’. So, my family say I’m respecting them every time.”*

Female 15



## In summary

In summary then, what is unique about a potential orientated approach?

- It is a consciousness changing approach, rather than a behaviour modification one.
- It works to enable young people to grow and evolve, rather than control their behaviour, so that they are empowered to make choices that are constructive and to their own benefit.
- It perceives each young person in their totality as a highly unique individual, with many latent gifts, qualities and potentialities.
- It promotes an exploration of values, which supports young people finding their own values, potential and place in the world.
- It recognizes the need of all young people for meaning and purpose in their lives.
- It provides young people with new and positive experiences of themselves which build self esteem and aspiration.
- It develops emotional intelligence, particularly in the areas of self awareness and self management.
- It encourages educational attainment, through building awareness of life goals and the choices and actions needed to make those goals real.
- It builds a sense of community and an appreciation and respect for difference.

In conclusion, the challenge to those of us who work with young people is not a minor one, but one which requires that we, too, are consciously evolving and engaged with our own personal development. Transforming young people rather than modifying their behaviour means that we must aspire to transform ourselves. We cannot do/be some of what this article is promoting unless we can walk our talk and embody what we teach. For in the end, it is who we are, rather than what we do, that will lead to empowerment rather than control.



## CASE STUDIES

### Andrew

Andrew is a 14-year old boy who attends the local Academy in S3. He is very outspoken and aggressive in his dealings with adults, especially teaching staff at the school. Andrew was often sent out of classes, given detentions as well as a couple of exclusions for speaking out and asserting his opinions and thoughts. There was very little self-regulation or awareness of the impact he was having on others.

Andrew was disruptive in the Growing2gether group sessions, again asserting what he thought in our group discussions. He often tried to monopolise the conversations and did not really listen to his colleagues. To the point of bragging, Andrew regularly talked about the past - the fights he has been in, police involvement and his trouble with the police in the past. It was clear to me that he was looking for reassurance from his peers and from me, all the time, but his way of getting the attention he so badly needed was to be unpleasant and disruptive. Recognising that this behaviour was the only way Andrew had learned to get attention, I set about finding other more positive ways of giving him what he needed, that attention.

When he first joined the group, Andrew was wary and ambivalent about whether he had made the right decision by coming on the programme. He was very keen to voice his opinion and often came up with stories to see if he could shock us and how we would react. Three others of the group had gone through Primary School with him and he knew them well and felt secure in the group. He tried to take over the conversations at times, but very gradually he learnt to listen to the others too. This was the result of giving him the attention he so sorely needed.

Andrew attended the same nursery and primary school we are partnered with. When we entered the nursery in week two, he appeared slightly nervous, but this disappeared quite soon. Surprisingly, he became very calm and sat himself on the floor amongst the children, clearly demonstrating his compassion, empathy and interest in them. Very quickly he made connections with the children. He asked if he could mentor a young boy who struggled at times to cope when things didn't go his way, had difficulty when he had to share with others, or was given an instruction.

Andrew got to know this little boy well over the following weeks and he was clearly becoming proud of the impact he was having on the child. He showed a tremendous amount of patience, teaching him to cope with frustration and disappointments and regulating his emotions. It appeared that through doing this with his mentee, Andrew was also learning these interpersonal skills for himself. He had to set boundaries and stick to them – which was an additional new skill for Andrew. He worked mainly on his own and even if the activities were monotonous and repetitive, he stuck with it! We didn't see the boy who needed to be in charge, talk back and take over at all during nursery time.

Half way through the programme, Andrew started talking about his own personal time at Primary School. He mentioned he “ran” the school, was bossy and rebellious. He and his two friends were the school bullies, especially in P7, and were continuously in trouble. I strongly believe that getting very positive feedback from both the Head Teacher and the nursery staff on a regular basis gave him a chance to give something back to the school now. He redeemed his past behaviour at the school. Andrew thrived on the respect he was shown, as people began accepting that there had been a change in him.

In school, the guidance teacher has reported that she has seen a massive change in him. He is less confrontational and more interested in his learning. And, he has been heavily involved in organising the junior dance - a massive achievement!

*“It has been so much fun here at nursery with the little ones. I have learned so much and it has been a blast.”*

## **Lisa**

Lisa is an S3 pupil who struggles with confidence and her inability to voice an opinion, even when she is knowledgeable about the topic. Her voice is quiet, which she believes to be a disadvantage. At the start of the Growing2gether programme she was clear about this when we spoke to her on a 1:1 basis. It was the only time she would really speak at all. As we got to know her she began to converse a little en route to the nursery, and slowly trust between Lisa and the facilitators began to build. She held the opinion that everyone would judge her negatively, and therefore that it was not worth saying anything.

Initially, working in the nurse environment was a challenge; Lisa picked her way around delicately, almost as if she had no right to be there, and the staff did comment that she was very quiet. They cleverly matched her with a very shy child with whom she found it easy to bond. They enjoyed drawing and reading together and every week the smile on the child's face was matched by the one on Lisa's.

As time progressed, the positive affirmation from the child, our weekly observations about Lisa's developing interpersonal skills, and gentle acknowledgement from the staff, all helped her to realise that she was doing 'an okay job'. Indeed, she was doing much more than that.

In the group, she also began to change her position and it was wonderful when her peers pointed this out to her. It was obvious that this had made an impression. She went from strength to strength and began to share more of her personal details, hobbies and aspirations with the group; she seemed surprised that we were interested. We used one of the coaching exercises to produce some options for her to move forwards with a particular aim she had regarding a hobby, and a few weeks later she reported her success in carrying out her plan. Another noticeable aspect of her behaviour was that she began to ask a lot of questions about topics which are related to teenage life. She let us know how helpful the ensuing discussions were and how they made her realise that she wasn't alone with her concerns and queries.

In nursery, she managed to push her limits and intervene in a dispute between some of the children. Lisa used her voice appropriately and the children listened to her and the situation was resolved. I witnessed this, and to begin with I thought I would need to intervene on Lisa's behalf because she might need help. This was not the case.

Afterwards, in the group, I mentioned the incident. Lisa spoke up, "Actually that's not what happened ...." and shared the actual sequence of events with her peers. This was a real turning point for her, as she challenged the adult's incorrect version (some important learning for me clearly) and proceeded to relate the tale. Her peers were impressed and so were we. I acknowledged my mistake and delight in Lisa's obvious progress.

In one of the final sessions Lisa and a facilitator took part in a coaching exercise where Lisa was the coach. I witnessed her ability to pose open questions and listen attentively to the responses before processing the information and moving on appropriately. The facilitator felt it had been a powerful and helpful conversation and she thanked Lisa. By the end Lisa had a full understanding of the process she had undergone and of her effort and achievements. She wrote a beautiful review of her Growing2gether time thanking us for our support.

*"I started off shy and with all the inspiration I have become the most confident I have ever been."*

Staff in school reported an increase in confidence, which is resulting in Lisa taking part in more classroom discussions and being able to express her opinions. As she moves towards her National 5 subject choices, this ought to be highly beneficial. A parental feedback slip was returned; the comments tell the same story and added that she is now a more thoughtful person.

It has been a delight to witness the progress made by this incredibly hardworking and committed young person, who attended every session of the programme.

## **Sammy**

Sammy arrives on the first day looking like she so does not want to be there. She is chatting away to her friends one minute, and then in the group clams up with a fixed expression that is more a frown. She has good eye contact and seems to watch and listen well, but never offers anything in the first few weeks. There is lots to suggest that she is popular, appearing animated and engaged with her friends. But, as soon as there is an adult present, she closes down. I check with all group members at the start if they want to be here and stress to them that it is so important that they have chosen to do this. Sammy remains still and quiet.

After a few weeks, whenever the group is asked to do something she mutters under her breath to her neighbour, and soon I pick up that it is some sarcastic or negative comment. e.g. "oh God! I so don't want to do this," or "Tell me she is joking, "or" No way, I am not doing that!" or just an audible groan.

About week 5, I spoke to her individually and asked her if she wanted to be here, as I had noticed that she did not seem to be enjoying the group time. There were long silences, but she finally told me, with the frustration of being bothered by something pesky, that she did not like 'the group thing' much, but she wanted to come because she wanted to work with children when she left school.

The following week, I observed her in the nursery with the children. She was not talkative, but completely focused. She listened to the children and I heard her reflecting back what they had said in a very natural way. Her face was not frowny at all. She looked content, and every now and then would smile if one of the children looked at her. She looked after one child who wanted to play with the same toys every week over and over again. It must have been very boring for Sammy, but she never became impatient or showed any sign of frustration. Sammy remained calm and engaged, supporting the child through their chosen play, and only redirected them when the nursery staff asked the children to tidy up or it was snack time.

In the check-in after the group, she usually said something disparaging about her experience; she was bored and that the kids were boring. This did not match with how I had seen her

responding to them when she was around them in the nursery. One of the group said aloud one week “Why do you do that Sammy? Why do you always say something negative about everything?” It was naming an elephant in the room, and all eyes were on Sammy to see how she would react. Another girl said “That’s just the way she is...there’s nothing wrong with that.” Sammy then said words to the effect of what was the point of being any different, as bad things always happen to her anyway.

Sammy befriended and supported a child, building a bond and enjoying the time she spent in nursery. At the end of the project she said that she had achieved what she set out to do, and that she was clear that she would work with children as a career. When she said goodbye to her child, I could see she was genuinely sad and she talked to the group about her feelings. Right at the end she found her voice and spoke of her experiences to the group.

In the penultimate session, Sammy had some very bad news about a member of her family. The whole group rallied round her, expressing how they wanted to help her and hugging her. Then she left. She returned the following week and completed her Portfolio and said thank you for the opportunity of attending Growing2gether. It was immensely sad. Yet in the midst of Sammy’s Growing2gether journey was the lived experience of experiencing deep enjoyment, being with a young child in a mentoring role.

