



# Promising Practice Profiles

<b>Project title</b>	<b>Youth Insearch Program</b>
<b>Project practice</b>	Youth Insearch weekend camp and follow-up program is an early intervention program for young people at risk between the ages of 12–18 years. It is peer focused, utilising peers supporting peers to achieve results.
<b>Project undertaken by</b>	Youth Insearch Foundation (YIF)
<b>Start date</b>	June 2005
<b>Focal areas</b>	Family and children's services working effectively as a team Early learning and care Child friendly communities
<b>Program</b>	Local Answers
<b>Issue</b>	<p>Youth Insearch was developed to address the anti-social behaviours and frustrations demonstrated by some young people particularly in rural and regional communities as identified by the Attorney General's Department and government agencies at all levels, including crime prevention authorities.</p> <p>The program was founded by Ron Barr, a youth development counsellor, who was frustrated with the limited time he had to work with at-risk students at the school. He met with a group of young the young people he was counselling and asked them how they could achieve better results together. As a result of this meeting, the Youth Insearch program was developed to fill this gap. The program addresses the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that pervades the lives of many young people.</p> <p>These feelings often result in a young person drifting into anti-social behaviour, drug abuse and crime which can lead to incarceration, homelessness, early school drop-out, eating disorders and sometimes suicide.</p>
<b>Program context</b>	<p>Youth Insearch is a non-government, not-for-profit organisation that aims to empower young people to take responsibility for their lives, by giving them the opportunity and skills to develop their self esteem and play a positive role in society.</p> <p>Youth Insearch was founded in 1985, and now operates across Australia, running weekend camps and establishing follow-up support groups for "at risk" young people. Many of the young people who attend Youth Insearch camps return to an average of three subsequent camps. Since 1985, more than 28,000 young people have participated in this life-changing program. Each year hundreds of volunteers assist the program and in 2007 some 3,000 volunteer hours were recorded. Today, Youth Insearch</p>

works in some 60 communities across the country.

Working alongside communities—particularly schools, welfare agencies, service clubs and local police—Youth Insearch builds trust in a supportive environment and looks at the underlying issues that face young people today. This a powerful group dynamic that allows work with large groups, resulting in a cost-effective program.

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**Practice description**

Youth Insearch provides a 3-stage approach to supporting young people: weekend camps; follow up support; and leadership training and roles.

The focus of this Promising Practice Profile is on the activity of weekend camps and follow-up support provided to young people. A separate Promising Practice Profile is available on the third stage activity—leadership development for young people.

Over the weekend program (camp), young people can talk over issues that are affecting their lives and learn tools to handle them from their peers. The knowledge that others have experienced similar issues develops a sense of hope and belonging. Young people are able to listen to their peers' experiences and learn from them tools to change their attitude and focus. This results in them being empowered to change their direction, set and achieve new goals to live healthy normal lives. These intensive weekend camps (26 per year with an average of 65 people) in Queensland, NSW and Victoria cater primarily for rural and regional communities. Young people are experiencing issues such as: low self-esteem and depression; bullying; socio-economic hardship; family breakdown; social isolation; homelessness; self-harm; crime; poor school attendance; their own, or family drug and alcohol abuse; domestic violence; and sexual abuse.

**Key practices**

The following describes the key practice components.

**Weekend camps**

Troubled and “at risk” young people come together for the weekend with their support people to discuss their own issues and listen to other young people’s point of view in a safe and trusting environment.

The camps, typically involving 50 young people, are administered by six or more trained volunteer youth leaders who have also been through the program, and have overcome the problems that initially brought them to Youth Insearch. They understand and can relate to other young people’s issues and are positive role models. They are supported by five adult leaders and approximately seven other support people. A total of 18 sessions are run over the duration of the camp. Each part of the program is facilitated by one or two of the youth or adult leaders. Communication, self-esteem, trust, assault, parent–adolescent issues, substance abuse and grief are some of the topics discussed.

The camps draw heavily on peer support and peer leadership, and comprise a series of workshops and open discussions on a wide range of issues. There is also the informal component of the camps, including free time, an entertainment night, bedtime tuck-ins, and relaxation skills.

Each group of young people attending a camp must be accompanied by a support person from their own area. They are commonly the person who referred the young person to the program and is able to give ongoing support after camp (e.g., a youth worker, school teacher, counsellor, nurse, case manager, police liaison officer).

**Briefing**

Before participating in their first camp, participants are thoroughly briefed to ensure they want to attend and are prepared for the experience—most will do anything to escape the negative anti-social culture. Their families

are also briefed so they can be a part of the process.

All support people are also briefed prior to their first camp and current child protection status is also checked prior to their attendance. They are briefed on the content of the program, expectations, and their role. The support group venue is organised and resources for young people's aftercare researched.

All briefings are usually carried out by Youth Insearch Youth Liaisons.

### **Support groups**

After the camp, young people are encouraged to attend support groups with other young people living in their area, where they discuss how things are going for them since the camp. Many issues emerge during the camp, as the participants feel more comfortable to talk about their issues. Since not all issues can be dealt with at the camp, the support group after the camp allows this to occur. This is also where new goals and directions are established with the support from those that attend camps. These groups typically run every week for the first four weeks after camp, and then fortnightly until the next camp. They are attended by five or more young people—depending on how many young people attend camps from the area. The support groups are facilitated by a youth leader, with at least one support adult in attendance. Young people who require specialist intervention or individual counselling are referred to the appropriate resources in their area.

### **Key ingredients**

- Volunteers and support people.
- Ownership by young people.
- Community driven and peer-based.
- Trust and support.
- Cultural sensitivity.
- Youth Liaisons.

### **Volunteers and support people**

A key ingredient is the network of volunteers and support people who work together to support the young people. More than 200 trained volunteers actively assist the program, nationwide. For example, a police liaison officer might bring along 4–6 young people he is working with, and perhaps one or two volunteer support people will bring other young people from that community.

### **Ownership by young people**

The program works because it is owned by the young people. The youth leaders, who have been through the program themselves as participants, facilitate most of the sessions. The young people draw the guidelines on how the camps should run and have an upper hand in the strategic planning of the program. The young people constantly evaluate the program and the activities to suit their needs.

### **Community-driven and peer-based activities**

The program works because it is community-driven and peer-based. A key to the program's success are the Youth Liaisons, employees who network with government and non government agencies, schools, parents and police in an integrated approach and establish strong community support networks throughout some 60 urban and regional communities.

School teachers, youth workers, counsellors and local police are often involved. Each camp requires the community to participate and provide support volunteers—people who genuinely empathise with the challenges that face many “at risk” youth and seek to contribute towards a solution.

The camps are very effective in that the focus is young people helping young people, communities helping communities. A key ingredient is that young people share their experiences—of rejection, loss, fear, abuse, bullying, loneliness and depression—and others in the group realise they are not alone and begin to share their stories. This process is called “removing the bricks that weigh us down” and one by one they tumble off, relieving the individual of a burden they’ve often carried for years.

#### **Trust and support**

The camp environment is one of trust and support. Encouragingly, participants sit for hours in a room listening to each other’s stories and supporting each other. The more intensive sessions in the camp are facilitated by professional counsellors (and supported by above mentioned volunteers).

Hugs are another important ingredient. As trite as it sounds, most “at risk” young people rarely understand intimate non-sexual care and affection. They learn to hug and receive hugs from the camp community and statistics show this to be one of the most popular aspects of the program (Urbis Young Keys, 2003).

#### **Cultural sensitivity**

Approximately 30% of the participants are Indigenous and are supported by Indigenous volunteers who appreciate cultural sensitivity. This creates a trusting environment for Indigenous people as they can relate to one another and interpret culturally sensitive issues as is unique to them.

#### **Youth Liaisons**

The Youth Liaisons are integral to the success of Youth Insearch. They are full-time employees with a diploma or degree in Youth Work and or Community Services. They network with community agencies and programs. They support and are resources for the volunteer support people and leaders and ensure the aftercare of the young camp participants.

The Youth Liaisons brief all new participants and support people and follow up with parents after camp. This ensures young people and support people have an in depth knowledge of the program prior to participation, and that volunteers are supported and have a resource for debriefing after camp. The standard of the program is also ensured by their presence.

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### **Research base**

#### **Empowering young people**

The program provides youth leaders with an atmosphere where they can exercise decision-making power to determine circumstances regarding their participation in the program.

There are indications that a proportion of young people feel varying degrees of isolation, depression, rejection, loneliness and feelings of poor self-worth (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003). Furthermore, there is a relatively high rate of mental disorders and dysfunction as shown in the recent mental health survey of Australian children and young people (Sawyer et al., 2000).

This evidence suggests that many young people grow up in environments that are less than suitable in moulding them to become responsible and mature adults. The Youth Insearch program is designed to give them the skills to beat these odds at a young age. This responds to evidence from long-term follow-up studies that show “that early childhood and adolescent intervention programs can have positive cost–benefit ratios, indicating the value of prevention and early intervention” (Vimpani et al., 2002, p. 1).

#### **Peer education and support**

Most young people begin to immerse themselves in youth culture as they

enter adolescence. Within youth culture, young people share the same social language and exchange social information. They also tend to interact less with their parents and other significant adults and more with their peers (Spooner et al., 2001). Some also develop strong, if transient, oppositional tendencies. As a consequence, other young people seem more credible and have a greater influence, whereas adults are seen as less credible and therefore their influence diminishes (Jessor, 1982, cited in Fors & Jarvis, 1995; Mudaly, 1997; Ward et al., 1997).

The Youth Insearch program emphasises delivering services using peers. This is because over the years it has evidently emerged that young people are more comfortable to talk in an environment where they feel that there is a level of equality and shared interest among the group. The influence of the social group is particularly strong for young people (Prendergast & Miller, 1996). This influence is strong if information is conveyed by an individual whose opinion is highly valued within the social group (Baklien, 1993).

According to a study carried out by the University of Technology, Sydney, peer education draws on behavioural theories that asserts that people make changes not because of scientific facts and figures but because of the subjective judgement of close, trusted peers who have adopted changes and who act as persuasive role models for change (Flowers, 2001).

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring is a well-documented practice in research literature (Wilcznski, 2002; Beier, 2000; MacCallum & Beltman, 2002).

Role modelling focuses on how the role model is perceived by the young people concerned and the young person's desired goal, whereas mentoring focuses on explicit action by the mentor to assist the young person to reach their goal. (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002, p. 8)

Youth Insearch uses both role modelling and mentoring concepts in the program. Adult leaders, support people and staff members all act in these roles to young leaders and participants.

### **Empowering young people through planning and decision-making**

The active engagement of young people themselves is central to the successful implementation of the Youth Insearch program. Young people are the key to solving their own problems and not merely there to be given handouts by adults. This notion is supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). The convention introduced a new philosophy with regard to children and young people, recognising their importance as individuals and whose dignity must be respected. It promotes the principle that youth are entitled to express their views on all matters that affect them and to have those views taken seriously. Article 12 of the convention makes it clear that participation is a substantive right of all children and young people.

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## **Outcomes**

Nationally, almost 2,000 young people have been through the program since 2005. Positive outcomes include young people who have returned to school, completed secondary education and/or gone onto tertiary education and apprenticeships, found employment, improved self-esteem, ceased drug or alcohol abuse and become involved in their local community programs.

Outcomes relating to the camps and follow up support include:

- overall improvement in behaviour and attitude;
- increased school retention;
- skills building;
- reduced drug and alcohol use; and

- lowered incidence of crime.

## Evidence of outcomes

The Youth Insearch program undergoes ongoing internal evaluation, and has also been externally evaluated on two occasions (in 2001 by Charles Sturt University, and in 2003 by Urbis Young Keys for the NSW Attorney General's Department). Data from both internal evaluations and the 2003 evaluation by Urbis Young Keys is used below. The Urbis Young Keys evaluation involved pre- (n=73) and post-camp (n=68) survey data collected at two camps, follow-up phone interviews with young people at six months post camp (n=32), and a postal survey of support adults and government workers in contact with identified young people. Surveying of young people included use of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to determine changes in self-esteem.

The program has been effective in engaging "at risk" young people. Of those young people attending camps surveyed as part of the Urbis Young Keys evaluation:

- 56% lived with one or both natural parents;
- 11% lived in a shelter or hostel;
- 25% identified as having bad relationships with their family;
- 26% were not engaged in any kind of education;
- 48% of current school students did not intend to complete Year 12;
- 45% of those who had left school had done so prior to completing Year 10;
- 45% identified as frequent drinkers (once or more per week), and 34% got drunk on a weekly basis;
- 25% used drugs on a weekly basis;
- 64% had been in trouble with the police;
- 58% had self-harmed; and
- 44% had made suicide attempts (with 60% having thought about this).

### Overall improvement in behaviour and attitude

Emily has only recently found her smile. She bravely shared her issues with likeminded supportive teenagers, many of whom had been to the camps before. In doing so, she learnt invaluable coping techniques that she now practices when confronted with old demons. (Emily's support person)

Independent analytical outcome data from Urbis Young Keys (2003) indicated the program's success in improving behaviour. Anti-social behaviour is reduced by up to 30%, self-harming is reduced by 25% and criminal behaviour reduced by 40%.

During the camp process, over 78% of support adults reported immediate positive change in attitude and behaviour (Urbis Young Keys, 2003, p. 33). In terms of effectiveness one youth refuge worker who attended as a support volunteer stated: "I think this is the most effective program I've ever been involved with" (Urbis Young Keys, 2003, p. 35). Another also stated: "It wasn't just a camp, it was [an] ongoing program run by professionals" (Urbis Young Keys, 2003, p. 36).

Cumulative data from independent review and camp evaluations evidence that the program has a success rate of 80% in that most young people return to their communities challenged for change and results are long lasting. The Urbis Young Keys evaluation identified a pre-camp base line of 41% of young people with low self esteem (a Rosenberg Self-Esteem Index score of 15 or less). Post-camp results show immediate self-esteem improvement of up to 25% and long term gains are in a range of 42–76% (Urbis Young Keys, 2003).

In 2006 evaluations conducted at the end of each camp revealed that 86% of the participants made new friends (96% in 2003 evaluation); 71% of them met others with similar problems (82% in 2003); and 70% felt loved at camp. Further, the 2003 evaluation data identified that 79% felt better about their life after the camp (Urbis Young Keys, 2003). This evidences that the camps are a good environment for the participants who often feel neglected and uncared for.

#### **Increased school retention**

At the end of each weekend camp, Youth Insearch conducts an internal evaluation of all the participants at camp. These evaluations reveal an increase in school retention of participants. In 2007 after attending the camps, 19% of participants decided to go to university/TAFE, 15% decided to go back to school, while 27% decided to go to school more regularly. The 2003 Urbis Keys Young evaluation was unable to collect sufficient data to evidence increased school retention.

#### **Skills building**

I remember sitting in the office of the Prime Minister and thinking, "well, what a contrast, I grew up in poverty and disadvantage, and here I am a few years later discussing Youth Affairs with the Prime Minister". You see, the great thing about Youth Insearch for me was that it gave me skills to open up my life to many opportunities. (Heath Ducker, 21Years, Youth Insearch Anniversary book, p. 27)

The Urbis Keys Young (2003) evaluation found increases in a range of skills as reported by young people six months after attending camps. These included: 69% reported an increase in self confidence, setting goals and resolving issues; 50% reported an increase in problem solving skills; and 47% an increase in conflict resolution skills.

#### **Reduced drug and alcohol use**

During the camps, the young people tackle issues on drugs and alcohol, they share their experiences on why they drink alcohol and use drugs and how they have been able to overcome it. From the post-camp surveys (internal evaluation) conducted in 2007, the following improvements were noted:

- 21% revealed that they drink less;
- 28% revealed that they gave up drinking all together;
- 12% reported that they do not smoke cigarettes after their camp attendance;
- 17% reported that they smoked less;
- 19% reported that they do not use drugs after attending camps; and
- 6% reported using less drugs.

Similarly, the Urbis Young Keys (2003) evaluation found that a significant proportion of young people had decreased the frequency of alcohol and drug use six months after camp participation. As one reported: "Just changed me completely. Used to be really bad on drugs and stuff" (Urbis, Young, Keys, 2003, p. 42).

#### **Less incidence of crime**

In terms of post-camp change, Urbis Young Keys (2003, p. 42) reported that of a sample of 18 youth who had been in trouble with police previously, only 3 reported further incidents in a period of six months after the camp. Additionally, 44% reported increased ability to control illegal behaviour six months after camp attendance (Urbis, Young, Keys, 2003).

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#### **Policy analysis**

The project is a positive example of an early intervention practice targeting "at risk" young people through peer support, mentoring and

	leadership opportunities.
<b>Evaluation</b>	The project has been evaluated by both an internal and external evaluation. The external evaluation was conducted by Urbis Young Keys in 2003.
<b>Project related Publications</b>	Urbis Young Keys. (2003). <i>Youth Insearch evaluation final report</i> . NSW: Urbis Young Keys.
<b>References</b>	<p>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2003). <i>Australia's young people: Their health and wellbeing</i>. Canberra: AIHW.</p> <p>Baklien, B. (1993). Two-step drug education in Norway. <i>Journal of Drug Education</i>, 3(2), 171–182.</p> <p>Beier, S. R., Rosenfeld, W. A., Spitalny, K. C., Zansky, S. M., &amp; Bontempa, A. N. (2000). The potential role of an adult mentor in influencing high-risk behaviours in adolescents. <i>Archive of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine</i>, 154, 327–331.</p> <p>Flowers, R. (2001). <i>Peer education practice. Different notions of good peer education practice</i>. Viewed at <a href="http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/projects/peer_education.html">http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/projects/peer_education.html</a></p> <p>Fors, S. W., &amp; Jarvis, S. (1995). Evaluation of a peer-led drug abuse risk reduction project for runaway/homeless youths. <i>Journal of Drug Education</i>, 25(4), 321–333.</p> <p>MacCullum, J., &amp; Beltman, S. (2002). <i>Role models for young people: What makes an effective program?</i> Hobart, Tas.: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.</p> <p>Mudaly, B. (1997). A strategic alliance in Springvale: An innovative drug education strategy for young people and parents of diverse cultural backgrounds. <i>Youth Studies Australia</i>, 16(2), 20–25.</p> <p>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (1999). <i>Employment Outlook</i> (editorial). Paris: OECD.</p> <p>Perry, C. L., Grant, M., Ernberg, G., Florenzano, R. U., Langdon, M. C., Myeni, A. D., Waahlberg, R., et al. (1989). WHO Collaborative Study on Alcohol Education and Young People: Outcomes of a four-country pilot study. <i>International Journal of the Addictions</i>, 24(12), 1145–1171.</p> <p>Prendergast, N., &amp; Miller, S. (1996). Reducing the risk: The Juvenile Justice peer oriented approach. In <i>Conference proceedings. Re-shaping the future: Drugs and young people</i>. Melbourne: Australian Drug Foundation (pp. 277–286).</p> <p>Rosenberg, M. (1965). <i>Society and the adolescent self-image</i>. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.</p> <p>Sawyer, M. G., Arney, F. M., Baghurst, P. A., Clark, J. J., Graetz, B. W., Kosky, R. J., et al. (2000). <i>Mental health of young people in Australia, 2000</i>. Canberra: National Mental Health Strategy.</p> <p>Spooner, C., Hall, W., &amp; Lynskey, M. (2001). <i>Structural determinants of youth drug use</i>. Canberra: Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD).</p> <p>United Nations. (1990) <i>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</i>. Geneva: United Nations.</p> <p>Urbis Young Keys. (2003). <i>Youth Insearch evaluation final report</i>. NSW: Urbis Young Keys.</p> <p>Vimpani, G., Patton, G., &amp; Hayes, A. (2002). The relevance of child and adolescent development for outcomes in education, health and life success. In A. Sanson (Ed.) <i>Children's health and development: New Research Directions for Australia</i> (Research report no. 8). Melbourne: AIFS.</p>

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**Website**

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**More information**

More information on the Youth Insearch leadership training and personal development program and other Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website at [www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html)



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