



Promising Practice Profiles

Project title	Youth Insearch Leadership
Project practice	Youth Insearch is a 3-stage early intervention program for young people at risk between the ages of 12–18 years. The practice focuses on leadership training and personal development for at-risk young people, primarily from rural and regional communities.
Project undertaken by	Youth Insearch Foundation (YIF)
Start date	June 2005
Focal areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family and children's services working effectively as a team• Early learning and care• Child friendly communities
Program	Local Answers
Issue	<p>Youth Insearch was developed to address 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 governments at all levels including crime prevention authorities.</p> <p>The program was founded by Ron Barr AM, a youth development counsellor, who was frustrated with the limited outcomes he had working one to one with at-risk young people.</p> <p>He met with a group of young the young people he was counselling and asked them how they could achieve better results together. The resulting ideas became the Youth Insearch program. The program which addresses the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that pervades the lives of many young people. These feelings often initiate non attendance at school, drug use, anti-social behaviours, which can lead to crime, incarceration, homelessness, and sometimes suicide.</p> <p>Young people who come through the Youth Insearch program have the potential for a successful future but this is often buried by bad role models, and a range of social difficulties.</p> <p>The Leadership Training Program was initiated to give potential leaders in the program the opportunity to develop personal and facilitation skills to assist with the administration of the program to achieve its goal of young people supporting young people. This also builds self-confidence, presentation skills, opportunities for their future as a result of positive exposure, a willingness and motivation to succeed and also become involved in other community programs.</p>

Program context

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".

Youth Insearch was founded in 1985, and now operates across Eastern Australia, running weekend camps and establishing follow-up support groups for at-risk young people. Many of the young people who attend one Youth Insearch camp will return to subsequent camps. Those with leadership potential and interest are able undertake the intensive training program and volunteer as youth leaders within the program. 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 works in some 60 communities across the country.

Working alongside communities - particularly schools, government and non-government welfare agencies, service clubs and local police - Youth Insearch seeks to build a positive attitude and change in a group forum environment that looks at underlying issues that face young people today. The group dynamic is very powerful. It allows the organisation to work with many young people at the one time so the program is also cost efficient.

Practice description

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

The focus of this Promising Practice Profile is on the third stage - the leadership training and personal development for young people. A separate Promising Practice Profile is available on the first two stages.

Over the weekend program (camp), young people can talk over issues that are affecting their lives and learn from their peers the tools to handle them. Knowing others have had similar experiences develops a sense of hope and belonging. This results in them being empowered to change their direction and set and achieve new goals to live healthy normal lives.

The 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 from these areas commonly experience 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 often resort to self harming risky practices.

Leadership training and development

The final of three stages in the Youth Insearch model is leadership training. Young people who have participated in three or more camps and have made significant progress are trained to give them skills to run the camps. A Youth Insearch Leader is a person who has experienced Youth Insearch on a personal level, believes in and is passionate about assisting other young people, and is an excellent role model for other young people. Leadership is open to any young person aged between 12 and 17 years, who has come through the Youth Insearch program as a participant, has made positive changes in their life, is a good role model to other young people and is living by the Youth Insearch Code of Ethics (written up by the original leaders as guidelines for life).

The following describes the key practice components related to leadership training and development.

Identifying potential leaders

The organisation runs weekend camps for "at risk" young people aged

12–18 years. Here young people come to the camps with a support person who knows them, understands their issues, and is prepared to follow up after camp. The support adult can be a school counsellor, a police officer, a youth worker, a teacher, or a social worker. It is expected that the young people attend support groups following the camps and that with each camp, they make improvement in their outlook on their issues and also their behaviour.

From the camps, potential leaders are identified. The requirement is that those signing up for leadership training should have attended at least three camps (from experience, it is apparent that the young people need to attend at least three camps and support groups in between to effectively start realising positive change), and need to have dealt with the issues that brought them to the camp. This ensures that leaders are positive role models to others and can support newcomers to the program.

Training and skills building

The program has two stages of training annually and each stage is a 6-day block. Each stage of training is conducted by professional trainers (pro bono) and the Training Team in different disciplines. Areas covered include communication skills, presentation skills, values & beliefs, goal setting, conflict resolution, team building, handling aggressive & difficult situations, and facilitating the Youth Insearch program.

Young trainees are flown to the Youth Insearch training centre in NSW (at Youth Insearch's expense). This is a very powerful ingredient as most have rarely been out of their own communities let alone fly interstate. The message this sends is very positive and young people feel very valued by their community as a result.

At this stage, the trainees are encouraged to turn their "disadvantage into their advantage" and to find out where their main skills lie and what they really like doing. Challenging some beliefs and values and setting short-term and long-term goals are integral to training. This also allows insight into the steps needed and the motivation to achieve their goal. They also come to the conclusion that education is an important step. Some will also go onto tertiary education to achieve their goal. This is also an inspiration to camp participants as realistic and achievable for them as well.

After training, they return to their communities and help other young people who are where they once were. The youth leaders are some of the most influential role models to their peers.

After completing Stage 1 and Stage 2 of their training, trainee leaders will complete a self-assessment of their participation, team work and leadership skills. The Leadership Team will also complete an evaluation on each trainee. This information is collated and the trainees are given feedback. Not all trainees who have been through Stage 1 will proceed to Stage 2. This depends on their participation and performance during the training block and by their practical assessment done by accredited leaders on camp and their support person and leaders locally. Stages 1 and 2 and the practical assessments take approximately 12 months and they are expected to be on a camp team for a minimum of four camps to be assessed for accreditation (i.e., one camp between Stages 1 and 2, and three camps after Stage 2).

Accreditation

After completion of their practical assessment, each trainee leader will be asked to do a self-assessment and the results from this and from their camp assessments will be collated. A combination of both assessments will then go toward passing their assessments to be an accredited leader.

The trainees will then graduate at a special ceremony, which is usually held at Government House or somewhere similar. Parents, family and members of their community are invited to attend. Here they are given their certificates and leaders' badges. This is a very fulfilling experience and a highlight in their lives. For some, this is the achievement of a goal

set from their first camp when they watched other young people their own age facilitating their camp.

The key to this is the recognition that young people are given for their efforts. It is important to note that only those who have made an overall improvement in their lives and relationships are accredited as leaders, as they set the standard for the program.

Importantly, the young people who do not make it through to accreditation are supported and mentored by their support person and leaders and they may be able to return the following year to complete training. Regardless of the outcome, not achieving accreditation is not looked on as failure in the program and the young trainees have tools to assist them in their future.

Camp facilitation and program participation

The leaders organise the structure and their sessions at each camp. They have a Leaders Manual, which outlines guidelines for the sessions and policies and practices for the program. Apart from the legal requirements, these practices are decided by the Young Leaders Program Council. This is because the program leaders (who have been through the program) run the sessions. The young people develop 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.

An integral component of the program is that the leaders also facilitate the support group sessions with their support person as mentor. Before and after the weekend camps, young people are supported through weekly support groups within their local areas, where they discuss what to expect at the camp and issues that may affect them.

Mentoring by adult leaders

Youth Insearch recognises that the leaders have limitations, just like everyone else, and need to be guided in a positive and supportive way through their leadership. During the camp sessions, they are assigned an adult or accredited leader who will mentor them in planning for their sessions and facilitating these sessions during the camps. The mentors also work with them in administering the camp and assisting in handling different situations on camp. This increases their knowledge and skills and boosts the trainee's confidence and self-esteem.

On return to their local communities, leaders are also partnered with a volunteer mentor to provide guidance and accountability through the next stage of their journey.

Rewarding the young people

Following the completion of training to the satisfaction of mentors, support people and the Training Team, the young leader is ready to embark on their leadership role. The organisation rewards their leaders at this point providing they do not smoke. With the generosity of one of the donors, the leaders are flown to Double Island (a private Island near Cairns in Queensland) for an all-expense-paid holiday for six days on this 5-star exclusive resort. This "reward" is to thank them for all the effort and hard work they have put into training and the volunteer work they are doing for the program. Leaders who have achieved their milestone targets based on their goals and do not smoke are given this opportunity. It is an incredible experience, as some have never been away from home, let alone this experience. Young participants will commonly commence smoking if their role models smoke, so Youth Insearch encourages any of their leaders not to smoke. Being a non-smoker is not a prerequisite to becoming a leader, however going to Double Island requires leaders to be non-smokers.

Continuous support and capacity building activities

Throughout their time as a trainee, the organisation organises refresher

courses to strengthen the capacity of the leaders. Young people are also chosen to be a guest speaker at conferences and forums where they talk about themselves and their achievements. This is a platform for them to mould their self-esteem, inter-personal and public speaking skills. Due to their presentations, some of the leaders have been given opportunities such as sponsorship through a private school or university, or employment opportunities.

Goal setting

The young people are continually nurtured to utilise their potential and to bring out the best in them. This involves writing down both short-term and long-term goals and being guided and directed while they work towards them. During Stage 2 of the training, a professional facilitator works with the trainees on setting goals and breaking through the negative barriers that hold them back.

Youth driven decision-making processes

The young people are the driving force of the organisation. Because the program's emphasis is on empowering young people, adults do not make the rules on how the young people should conduct themselves or the structural models of the program. The young people themselves elect their Program Council annually. The council is responsible for any program or disciplinary issues from camps or leadership. The Program Council also elects three consultants who are older, experienced leaders on whom they will draw for guidance (along with the *Policies and Practices Manual*). The policies and practices are reviewed annually at the Leaders Summit and any recommendations for changes are discussed formally and decided on. This is received very well by other young people knowing that they are not decisions or guidelines imposed on them by adults or "outsiders".

Research base

Empowering young people

The program provides the 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, pp. 89–112). Furthermore, there is 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 and parents. The Youth Insearch Program is designed to give young people 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 cultures as they enter adolescence. Within a 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).

Professional skills building and training

Education is a major factor in influencing employability. An international forum on youth unemployment concluded that barriers to education, a lack of appropriate education and a mismatch between skills gained through education and job opportunities are factors that contribute to youth unemployment (World Bank, 2003). The OECD maintains that the high rates of youth unemployment can be largely attributed to the fact that numerous young people leave school without the skills needed to enter employment (OECD, 1999). The Youth Insearch program encourages re-engagement with education and training through the provision of training and mentoring that may lead back to education enrolment.

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 participants and leaders.

Empowering young people through planning and decision-making

The active engagement of young people themselves is central to the successful implementation of Youth Insearch programs. Young people are 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 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.

Outcomes

Nationally, almost 2,000 young people have been through the program since 2005 (27,000 nationally since 1985). Positive outcomes include: young people who have found employment, improved self-esteem, ceased drug or alcohol abuse, gone back to school, entered tertiary study, completed secondary education, apprenticeships or have been employed.

Five key outcomes are discussed below:

- overall improvement in behaviour and attitude;
- increased school retention;
- reduced alcohol and drug use;
- improved self-esteem; and

- acquired skills and a drive for a new lease on life.

Evidence of outcomes

The Youth Insearch program undergoes ongoing internal evaluation, and has also been externally evaluated on three occasions (in 2001 by Charles Sturt University, and in 2003 by Urbis Keys Young for the NSW Attorney General's Department and in 2008 for FaCHSIA to evaluate the effectiveness of the program at the end a three year grant). Data from both internal evaluations and the 2003 evaluation by Urbis 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 ($n=32$), 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 times per week)
- 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

Many young people come to the program with lots of issues in their life, however, positive role models, mentoring and training and the responsibility of leadership, their outlook on life changes considerably, which is reflected in the changes in their behaviour and lifestyle.

The following quote represents the views of 100% of the 30 young leaders who were interviewed after their training in 2007:

Youth Insearch let me be honest with myself. It helped me to recognise what I was so sad and bitter about all of the time. I went through a rehabilitation centre and I became a Youth Insearch Leader...I have become a well known role model for youth in my community. (Jessica Johnson, 21Years, Youth Insearch Anniversary Book)

Some of the criteria to get into Leadership Training include:

- regularly attending school (no wagging);
- if unemployed, actively look for employment and present yourself and live your life as an employable person;
- being involved in your local support group;
- a positive role model in all areas of your life;
- taking pride in your personal appearance and hygiene;

- to respect and obey the law (this includes no underage drinking or taking illegal drugs);
- display leadership qualities in your life;
- be aware of other people's needs and feelings;
- to have dealt with your own issues, so you can effectively assist others;
- show empathy and understanding to others; and
- to seek and accept guidance when necessary (Leaders Manual).

In order to attend leadership training and undertake leadership roles, young people must comply with the above criteria, bringing about significant changes in their lives.

Increased school retention

The young leaders are provided with opportunities and exposure to encourage them to attend and complete their schooling. On some occasions, they are invited to speak to guests during luncheons where they have the opportunity to meet with corporate people. The respect and admiration shown by these people gives them a sense of self-worth and aspiration.

Without Youth Insearch, I don't think I would be at school and I don't think I would have a job - I have been working part time. I have also learnt that you have choices in life and I now feel as though I can achieve anything I set my mind to. (Chantelle, Youth Insearch leader)

The school retention for leaders is 100%, as it is a requirement that leaders are either in school, college, university or in some form of employment.

At the end of each weekend camp, Youth Insearch conducts an evaluation of all the participants at camp. These evaluations reveal an increase in school retention of participants. In 2007, after attending the camps, of 779 young people interviewed, 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.

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, or the effect that a family member abusing drugs and or alcohol has affected their lives. Strategies and methods used by others to give up their use are also discussed so that young people have options to consider and the support after camp to help them through (often with professional rehabilitation and counselling).

It is a requirement that three months prior to applying for Leadership Training, young people are not to have used any illegal drugs or underage use of alcohol. Leaders are role models for other young people and it is imperative that they set an example to them.

From the post-camp surveys (internal evaluation) conducted in 2007 (in which the leaders form 10% of the participants), 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 Keys Young (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).

Improved self-esteem

The program helps the young people to develop a positive self-image and to gain the needed confidence to enable them to relate to others and to meet the demands of leadership.

Your organisation has turned Craig around - he is now so positive in his outlook and his self-esteem is sky-high. He now attends TAFE full time and loves it - he ... carries me around the house saying "I love you mum" - what more could a mum want. (Glynis, mother)

Cumulative data from independent review and camp evaluations evidence show 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 Keys Young evaluation identified a pre-camp baseline 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, Keys Young, 2003). This partly reflects the youth leaders' hard work in facilitating the programs and positive influence on the young participants.

Acquired skills and a drive for a new lease in life

Those who have trained as leaders have gained skills and are given opportunities to practice these skills. This is both within the camps and in the community.

Through leadership, I have gained communication skills - how to better relate to people and how to deal with angry situations. If something is flaring up, I have learned how to calm people down, just how to live a good life. (Henry, Youth Insearch Leader)

Similarly, 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.

Policy analysis	The project is a positive example of a practice targeting "at risk" young people through peer support, mentoring and leadership opportunities.
Evaluation	The project has been evaluated by both an internal and external evaluation. The external evaluation was conducted by Urbis Keys Young Keys 2003 and Urbis in 2008.
Project related publications	Urbis Young Keys. (2003). <i>Youth Insearch evaluation final report</i> . NSW: Urbis Young Keys.
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Contact

Matt Davidson, CEO
 0419 655 656
 02 9659 6133
matt@youthinsearch.org.au
 PO Box 6570
 Baulkham Hills BC, NSW, 2153

Website

www.youthinsearch.org

More information

More information on the Youth Insearch's weekend camp program and other Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.



Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne Vic 3000. Tel: (03) 9214 7888. Fax: (03) 9214 7839.

Email: cafca@aifs.gov.au. Web www.aifs.gov.au/cafca

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