



The Role of Youth Work in Supporting Young People's Readiness to Learn

August 2024



“Youth workers believed in me when I didn’t. They have made so many things happen for me. I had no idea about my future and youth work changed that. I am now going to do a work placement and go back to school next year.” – Young Person



A collaborative approach to learner engagement and attendance

Barriers to school attendance and engagement are complex and schools cannot tackle these issues alone. Scottish Government guidance identifies the need for a collaborative approach with youth work in the development and achievement of local authority stretch aims, including those on attendance.

To inform collaboration, the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programme team at YouthLink Scotland has been gathering evidence to help clarify the impact that youth work can have on young people’s readiness to learn and their attendance and engagement in different educational settings.

The scope of this report

The insights and information in this report are based on evaluation data provided by youth work programmes located in 17 different local authorities across Scotland,¹ involving more than 700 young people aged 9-18. All of the programmes are recent (delivered in the last 18 months). When gathering data, we particularly focused on targeted youth work provision where practitioners are supporting young people affected by poverty, often facing multiple barriers to learning.

Recognising the complexity of the factors that influence readiness to learn, youth workers were asked to provide a range of evidence from a number of different sources (principally young people, teachers and parents), describing the impact of youth work on young people’s:

[1] CLD / youth work teams in Angus, Dundee, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Falkirk, Glasgow, Inverclyde, Moray, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, Perth and Kinross, Renfrewshire, Stirling, West Dunbartonshire, West Lothian and also third sector youth work teams - Spartans (Edinburgh) and OYCI (Clackmannanshire)

- Emotional wellbeing.
- Skills development (tracking progress using the skills and indicators associated with the [National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework](#)).
- Emotional regulation in different learning environments.
- Participation in learning in both youth work and school settings.
- Attendance in youth work and school settings.²

The study has also provided some additional insight about ‘what works and why’ in the youth work approaches designed to support readiness to learn and learner engagement.

The Headlines

1. Youth Work supports young people’s social and emotional wellbeing, as the foundation for successful learning.


As a result of their youth work experiences:

- 90% of young people grew in confidence to participate in learning.
- 77% demonstrated increased resilience, particularly a willingness to keep going even when they are finding things difficult, or to try again after a setback.
- 85% built stronger, more positive relationships that, in turn, enhanced their experience of learning with others.
- 83% were better able to regulate emotions following support in a youth work setting, and more than 40% also showed improvement in their ability to regulate emotions in the classroom.

What works and why?

- Youth workers build strong, trusted relationships with young people.
- The support of a trusted adult helps young people to cope better with situations they find difficult.
- Over time, youth workers support young people to learn coping strategies that help them to manage their own emotions more effectively in different environments.
- Once trust is established with youth workers, young people feel safe to try new learning experiences, and grow in confidence as learners.
- The youth work approach supports young people to establish positive relationships with peers and work more effectively in groups and teams.


[2] Not all projects provided evidence relating to all of these data points.

"I can now manage how I feel and understand the reasons behind these emotions." 


Young Person

"I feel more relaxed...I have learned to keep trying and not to give up when things get hard or I can't do it first time." 


Young Person

"Young people are showing emotional control and the ability to listen to one another, respecting others' views and managing their feelings within difficult peer situations". 


Teacher

"Young people understand how to manage their emotions better within a class environment. Young people have developed coping strategies and have the support of our CLD worker, who they can approach and engage with in and around class time. This support has been highly beneficial". 


Teacher

"Pupils build very strong relationships with [the youth work team] and they build trust, resilience and confidence to then access more of the curriculum." 

Teacher

"The pupils have had fewer negative referrals within school and have formed really positive relationships with each other and staff involved in the [youth work] programme." 

Teacher

"The group has changed him definitely. I have had good feedback from school too. What a difference it has made to us all. He is much better at home as well and not getting into trouble as much. A positive impact all round." 

Grandparent




2. Youth work offers young people a wider range of pathways for learning and achievement than can be offered in the classroom, providing more personalisation, choice and agency in learning:


- 88% of young people consistently attended learning opportunities offered by youth workers, and 60% showed improved participation in youth work over time.
- 65% of young people demonstrated an ability to influence change – in their own lives and in their learning communities.

What works and why?


- Young people enjoy experiential learning and different contexts for learning, including practical learning and learning outdoors in their community.
- Young people value the opportunity that youth work gives them to shape their own learning and develop a greater sense of personal agency.

“The staff take your ideas into consideration and use them. They are also very fair with how you act and give you chances. This programme has made me more confident and better behaved.” 


Young Person

“Great to be doing something worthwhile. I love coming here and feeling part of something special. I feel as if I am doing something for local families as well as something for the planet.” 

Young Person

“Youth work has significantly enhanced the number of accredited achievement opportunities we are offering young people, and we are seeing increases in participation across the school. In addition to this, our youth work is having a significant impact on skills development and improving pupils' readiness for a post-school positive destination.” 

Teacher

“They began the year just looking for a place to be that wasn't school and now have applied themselves to multiple Nat 4 qualifications and contributed to their local community. They turn up every week and get stuck in.” 


Youth Worker

3. The youth work approach offers young people opportunities to learn core skills that are relevant for life and work:


- 86% of young people grew in confidence and effectiveness to contribute as part of a group or team.
- 82% of young people improved their communication skills.
- 74% developed stronger problem-solving skills.
- 65% became more confident to weigh up and take responsibility for decisions.
- 43% developed their leadership skills.
- Almost half of the young people in this cohort gained accredited awards or qualifications.

What works and why?


- Youth workers establish strong relationships and safe spaces for learning.
- The National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework provides a clear focus for setting and reviewing learning goals that feel relevant to young people.
- Youth workers start with young people's interests and motivations and move at their pace.

"I've done lots of group tasks where I've had to make decisions. I've learned I need to listen to other people's views and together we can decide what's the best way to solve the problem." 


Young Person

"I can talk freely, safely and openly with friends and youth workers in the group. I can communicate in different ways in and outside of the group." 

Young Person

"The pupils involved have been able to have the confidence to improve the way in which they communicate with both adults and peers." 

Teacher

"The pupils showed that they could take on a new level of responsibility and encouraged each other to participate." 

Teacher

4. Youth work also supports young people's reengagement in learning in the classroom, and beyond, encouraging them to seek out new learning experiences:

- 46% of young people showed an improvement in participation in the classroom when they have opportunities to learn in youth work alongside the formal curriculum.
- 49% of young people showed an improvement in school attendance.
- A number of young people in the study are clear that youth work has motivated them to get back to school after a period of absence.
- Other young people highlight new learning opportunities that they have been motivated to seek out as a result of their youth work experience.

What works and why?

- As a result of their experiences in youth work, young people have a greater sense of ownership for their next steps in learning, and often have clearer goals that they feel motivated to achieve.
- Young people have more confidence and self-belief and stronger relationships to support learning. This enables them to persevere in situations that they might previously have preferred to avoid.

"She wasn't interested in school and walked away but since attending the project she is talking about going back next year. She has started to say, "It's ok to not know stuff mum," and this shows how her head has shifted. She might just find it in her to go back. I can't believe it."

Parent

"Young people now keen and willing to take part in new activities without questions, doubts or hesitation."

Teacher

"64% have improved attendance since the work started which is encouraging!"


Head Teacher

"Three young people are returning to school full time next year [following their experience of learning in a community-based youth work setting]."

Youth Worker

"As a result of attending [this youth work programme], three of the young people have now started attending other youth work provisions and have expressed an interest in other volunteering opportunities."

Youth Worker

"I have started volunteering in a local care home after doing my sessions with the youth worker." 

Young Person

To access support to develop youth work and school partnerships that can improve attendance, visit YouthLink Scotland's [website](#) or contact Marielle Curran mcurran@youthlink.scot or Gill Gracie ggracie@youthlink.scot.

With thanks to local authority CLD / youth work teams in Angus, Dundee, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Falkirk, Glasgow, Inverclyde, Moray, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, Perth and Kinross, Renfrewshire, Stirling, West Dunbartonshire, West Lothian and also third sector youth work teams - Spartans (Edinburgh) and OYCI (Clackmannanshire). Thanks also to Dr James Bowness and the West Partnership team who supported data gathering and analysis in the West Region.





#YouthWorkChangesLives



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