

HighLight Key – Youth Worker as Role Model

The importance of this key is well documented. Students are always positively or adversely affected by the model their leader presents. Students should expect the example of the teacher/youth worker to be one of maturity, integrity and dedication to their welfare.

Case study

As the front door opened I was reluctantly invited in by a sceptical mother. I walked into the front room and sat on the floor next to a lad staring at the TV screen. His hair flopped in front of his eyes and he made no acknowledgement towards me. I asked if he minded me joining in with his game. He didn't say no so I grabbed a controller and plonked myself down. For the next two hours, we sat in near silence as we played FIFA together. Daniel (name changed) had a school attendance record of below 10% this 12-year-old had been made known to Nomad via a referral from the local secondary school. They had been unable to get into the house and all efforts to engage with Daniel had failed. Daniel rarely left his house and his mother told me later that I was the first non-family member to enter their house in a very long time.

Over the next couple of months, I made several visits to see Daniel and his mum at home – more often than not we played FIFA. On one occasion, I asked if Daniel would like to come into our office in town to play some pool. To my surprise, he said yes.

Not long after I was able to invite a teacher to our office to meet Daniel and we started to talk about school and after much discussion made a plan for Daniel to go back to school on a reduced timetable.

3 years on Daniel now has a good attendance record (over 80%). Has it been a quick fix? Certainly not! I have been sworn at; had a snooker cue and cricket bat swung in my direction. I have made frequent home visits where Daniel has point blankly refused to speak with me. At the lowest point the Police were called because behaviour had deteriorated so badly. Behaviour continues to be very challenging at home and at school. However, the young man I see today who is a volunteer helper with one of our football projects for younger children, willing to speak openly about his challenges and readily able to show his appreciation for support given to him is a million miles from the scared and frightened boy I met 3 years ago, hiding behind his hair.

Not giving up, enduring the bad situations, staying hopeful, being consistent, persistent and patient does make a difference.

Managing a team of youth and family support workers for a locally based Youth and Community Project, our team is often faced with all too familiar sad situations, where desperate and vulnerable young people face incredible difficulties and challenges in their lives.

How do we begin to get alongside these young people? Can we make a difference in their lives? I believe that we can make a difference. Working relationally is absolutely crucial if we are to support

effectively and have a positive influence in their life. Often, we need to adopt a flexible approach and move away from the rigid format of a structured and planned meeting. Should we be surprised if a young person, (often with a very chaotic life) fails to make an appointment we have carefully planned in advance and slotted neatly into our busy day? They probably don't have a diary! We need to meet the young person where they are at. We have to find out what they enjoy; what makes them tick. Some might argue that playing FIFA with a young person for a couple of hours and having no real dialogue with them was a waste of time. The value of spending time and getting to know the young person is enormous. It earns their trust. Once you have earned their trust you can begin, (you have earned the right) to challenge behaviour patterns and speak into their specific situation.

One of the biggest influences we can have on a young person is the way we live our lives. Young people are like sponges. They are watching our every move. The language we use, how we speak and relate to others, our honesty and attitudes are constantly being observed. How we conduct ourselves in everyday tasks? Are we being real and honest? Do we live with integrity? How do we handle stressful situations? When people (often the young person) let us down how do we react? Our responses to these questions can leave a lasting impression on the young people we support.

No-one is perfect and we all make mistakes. That is normal and we shouldn't be afraid to make them. We need to model a good way of handling the mistakes we will inevitably make. Young people need to see a good way of responding. Be real, honest and be quick to apologise!

'No man is an island' is a well-known saying by poet John Donne. He was a man who understood the need for partnership and that it often requires a number of people, agencies and organisations working together to achieve a positive outcome for one person.

That is certainly my experience and the reality for our project. Over the years, we have worked hard to establish some very positive relationships with local churches, schools, Councils, Police, Social Workers etc. as we have sought to make a difference in the lives of the children, young people and families we serve in the local community. Working in isolation is not good practice.

How do you measure success? It is often very hard to know whether or not you are making a difference in the life of a young person you are supporting. Often you are just planting seeds.

Case study

I met Michael 5 years ago when he was in school. His school experience and home life wasn't great to say the least. Michael's father had died following a drugs overdose, domestic violence in the home was common practice. He frequently lost his temper, often refused to go to school and ultimately under achieved in his final exams. Whilst at school I worked intensively with Michael. He took part in mentoring, life skills group work and activity residential weeks. During the holiday seasons, I organised lots of activities with him such as: day trips to the beach, cinema outings, meals at TGI Friday, playing football and visits to football matches. When he finished school, Michael decided that he didn't want any continued support from me so we didn't have any further contact. I had to respect his decision and it was quite a sad moment for me.

Learning when to let go is important. You cannot force people to accept support.

The other day, Michael (now 18) burst into my office. I had not seen him in about a year. He was very positive and keen to see me. He had researched a college course that he wanted to apply for and wanted some help with his application form. The seeds that I had sown with him a few years earlier enabled him (when he was ready) to feel comfortable and confident to seek me out and ask for help. I was really pleased to see him and readily agreed to help him.

If you take time to build relationally with young people, earn their trust sow seeds you can expect to see positive outcomes and changes in their lives.