

# Executive Summary



*Contemporary strategies to help young people avoid problems and experience success focus on reducing risk factors and enhancing protection using a positive youth development framework.*

*Positive youth development programs aim to build competencies and strengths in young people.*

The accompanying report examines the evidence around what works to improve the health and well-being of young people in New Zealand. Based upon systematic reviews of current evidence, the report examines the components of effective interventions that address common youth health concerns. Here are some of the findings.

## **Close and caring relationships between parents and youth should be promoted and strengthened.**

A strong relationship with parents is fundamental requirement for healthy youth development.

When relationships with parents cannot be strengthened, connections with supportive adults elsewhere within the family or community should be encouraged.

## **Youth need support from and opportunities at school.**

Schools remain vital for the health and well-being of young people. While the most successful schools already support healthy youth development through academic and extracurricular activities, schools can do more to promote healthy youth development.

More supportive school environments and recognition of the impact that teachers have on the health and well-being of students are areas that can be strengthened in schools. Schools can also be settings for interventions that enhance the healthy youth development for students at risk of poor outcomes.

## **Youth need opportunities to contribute and participate.**

Young people are too often seen as problems, rather than part of the solution. A shift in perspective that allows for meaningful contributions and participation by young people in their communities is required.

## **Interventions need to be intensive and sustained.**

To foster the growth of healthy and vibrant young people takes time. Interventions and programs that hope to improve the health and well-being of young people need to be intensive and be of sufficient duration to make a significant impact on the lives of young people. Investment in young people is a long term investment in the health and well-being of society.



*Positive youth development programs views young people as resources to be nurtured, not problems to be fixed*

# Ways forward



## **Form alliances and partnerships with other agencies**

Successful approaches to improving the health and well-being of young people are often multi-component and require cooperation between sectors and agencies. No one service (generally) has the capability or capacity to meet all the needs of young people to ensure their optimum health and well-being.

## **Look for existing programs that have been well evaluated and have clear implementation procedures**

Programs need to be well structured and implemented to be effective. This is best achieved through the use of well established programs that have been successfully evaluated. Along with using existing programs, try to provide intensive exposure to a variety of program activities over the long-term.

## **Build evaluation into programs**

There is limited evidence to what works to promote healthy youth development, especially among youth most at risk. Any new efforts or programs need to provide evidence that they are effective. Resources are too scarce to be wasted on ineffective interventions. As new efforts or programs are demonstrated to be effective by rigorous research, then the effective components of the program should be available to guide future refinements and advance what we know on 'what works' in promoting health youth development.

## **Involve young people in the planning and running of programs**

Without youth participation, programs risk becoming inappropriate and irrelevant. Having young people involved in the planning and running of programs means that programs are more likely to remain dynamic, changing and responsive to the needs of the young people. Many programs struggle to retain young people for the duration of the program. Program factors that encourage youth to stay are: meeting young people's needs, providing a sense of belonging and providing high quality relationships with staff.

## **Attract and engage hard to reach young people**

Young people who are most in need of intensive and prolonged interventions often miss out. Factors such as socio-economic disadvantage, family disruptions and stressors, or previous poor education or vocational experiences may mean that these young people are difficult to engage. When services face such difficulties engaging these young people, they often turn their attention to 'less risky' young people. Successful interventions work hard at engaging young people with the highest needs and utilise resources such as youth outreach workers who have the ability to relate well to young people in their environments.