

This briefing provides strategies for effective learning and practical ideas for helping young people practise and develop life skills.

## Young people and life skills

*'It's good to learn to take responsibility: if you're in it, you need to solve it.'*

Young person

They may not call them life skills, but that's exactly what the young person quoted above is talking about: skills that help us to negotiate and manage everyday challenges.

Life skills include:

- communicating with people
- working in a team
- making decisions
- taking responsibility for your actions
- respecting others and the differences between people
- resolving conflicts
- solving problems and real-life dilemmas
- managing emotions
- being an active citizen.

Learning these skills is important for all of us. By helping young people to develop life skills, we help them to feel empowered, resist negative influences and have the confidence and motivation to make informed choices and participate. These skills have a major influence on outcomes for young people: it has been argued that these personal and social skills have more influence on an individual's personal and career success than their IQ (Goleman 1996).

Children and young people's health, well-being and life chances are higher up the UK's public policy agenda than ever before. The Children Act (2004) requires all professionals working with children and young people to work towards achieving five national outcomes for children and young people.

The outcomes are to:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being.

*Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) identifies that the development of life skills through PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) in schools, pupil referral units and a range of projects in the community is key to achieving these outcomes. Young people are articulate about the skills they need for everyday life. They understand the benefit of negotiating skills, taking responsibility and problem-solving, but cannot always turn them into a reality themselves. Nolia UK is a partner in the life-skills programme Life Routes. As Mark Squires Head of Communications at Nokia UK says:

'We take seriously our role in helping young people develop skills for life, helping them to understand themselves and others and helping them find their place in the world, realising their dreams and their goals. As an employer, Nokia looks beyond CVs and academic achievement ... We need employees with the ability to make decisions, work on their own initiative and in a team, set goals and plans to achieve them, negotiate and problem-solve and be able to express their views and manage their emotions.'

### Positive learning environments

Children and young people need support to develop emotionally and socially, so

they can use their thoughts and feelings to guide their behaviour positively and develop personal awareness, emotional resilience and social skills. This will enable them to enjoy and manage their lives now and in the future, and to be effective learners and active citizens. The very best work that promotes emotional and social development, as well as a positive approach to diversity and difference, happens when systems, structures, experiences and expectations support learning. Positive, respectful and nurturing relationships within the whole learning community underpin this learning and must be actively fostered.

A healthy setting is one where the ethos, environment and curriculum enable young people to do their best and manage their own health and well-being. The National Healthy Schools Programme ([www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk](http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk)), which is jointly funded by the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health, emphasises the importance of a whole-school approach to promoting health and well-being and provides guidance and advice on achieving 'healthy school' status. Although specifically developed for schools, the principles apply across all settings.

### The four cornerstones of effective life skills

There are four cornerstones to the effective planning and delivery of work on life skills:

- participation and partnership
- policy development
- practice development
- professional development.



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### Participation and partnership

Young People's participation in policy and practice is a good vehicle for the development of life skills. As well as providing opportunities to learn and use communication and other life skills, their participation helps to ensure that their education and support is relevant and timely. Further advice and guidance on developing participation is available in Blake and Frances 2004.

*Every Child Matters* (2004) sets out a clear commitment to ensuring the development of joint educational and health objectives for young people. To this end, all local areas will have a Children Services Authority by 2008, which will be responsible for the full range of children's services. Professionals working with young people also need to work in partnership with parents, carers and the wider community. The benefits of working in partnership include:

- a consistent approach and a shared values framework
- shared skills and expertise, contributing to professional development
- links between schools and community services that improve access to services and inform the development work on life skills.

### Policy development

The process of *developing* a PSHE policy can be as important for the development of teaching life skills as *having one*. Effective consultation and the involvement of key stakeholders in policy development help to:

- generate support for life-skills work
- develop an explicit and shared values framework
- identify the particular needs of young people and their families
- identify strengths and areas for development, where specific input and expertise is needed
- clarify the professional development needs of staff.

### Practice development

To achieve the five national outcomes, young people must have the opportunity to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes that enable them to make responsible and informed decisions about all aspects of their life. The policy framework should inform the planning, organisation and delivery of work on life skills.

### Professional development

Staff need to be confident in delivering life-skills education both in terms of the content as well as the actual process. Local Healthy Schools programmes, local education authorities and other national organisations provide training and support. The National Children's Bureau provides training to build the skills needed to deliver this work, (for information email: [training@ncb.org.uk](mailto:training@ncb.org.uk)).

### Emotional well-being

Young people need positive experiences with adults and peers to develop their confidence and self-esteem and to feel empowered. These in turn lay the foundations for – and are an integral part of – the development of life skills. Young people may lack life skills because they have not had the opportunities and experiences necessary to develop them. Learning how to recognise and manage our feelings and relationships is a continuous process. When young, in a caring, nurturing relationship a parent or carer matches our sounds, gestures and expressions when things go badly or well. Children who have a poor experience of this 'emotional matching' can be left feeling isolated, and this can lead to later difficulties forming relationships and empathising. This isolation can be exacerbated through childhood if there is a lack of support from a significant adult, and can ultimately limit a young person's ability to solve problems and make rational choices in challenging situations. At any stage however, adults can help to build emotional well-being and self-esteem in young people who have experienced emotional damage or neglect (Bird and Gerlach 2005).

### Being a good educator

Positive educational and relationship experiences are essential for young people to develop the skills and confidence they need. This is especially important with vulnerable young people who are cynical and mistrustful of others and authority, and who have had largely negative experiences. Vulnerable young people benefit from being in relationship with caring, skilled and motivated staff who are willing to make time on a regular basis to talk to – and listen to – them. This contact is a major factor in promoting young people's emotional and social development.

In order to work effectively with vulnerable young people, adults need to be emotionally literate, self-aware and willing to demonstrate how to manage their emotions. This includes getting

things wrong and admitting it, and using mistakes to learn what to do differently next time. Staff also need to ensure that they are well supported by managers and others so as to avoid being drawn in to behaving in ways that may be manipulative, withdrawn or aggressive towards the young people and each other.

Being a good educator also means:

**Being an effective role model.** If an adult talks about respect when they are not being respectful, young people will respond with cynicism and mistrust. By modelling appropriate behaviours, staff can help young people to develop behaviours that reinforce their learning. (See Table 1 for examples.) This includes listening, keeping calm, problem-solving, showing empathy when faced with the emotions and difficulties of others, and being open enough to name and manage your own emotions.

**Giving positive feedback.** Young people may not have much experience of the positive feedback that is essential in building a sense of their self-worth. If the learning has been difficult, acknowledge this, be encouraging, inspire them with a vision of success and celebrate their successes big or small. Displaying work produced by the young people helps to build their self-esteem and is useful for consolidating learning. It also helps staff to gauge how much has been understood.

**Being a good facilitator.** This means being able to motivate and enthuse young people to develop their ideas and express their feelings; provide boundaries for young people to feel safe, but be willing to let go and not control every aspect of the activity; be alert to the natural opportunities that arise from the activities and subsequent discussion to deepen and consolidate learning. It is important that prejudice is challenged creatively and in a non-threatening way, and issues of difference and diversity are integrated into all work, as well as focused on in specific work on prejudice and inequality.

**Having self-awareness.** Think about how you handle activities. Are you able

to name your own emotions? Do you know what upsets or triggers a response in you? Regulate your own emotional state and take responsibility for your actions.

### Table 1: Helping young people to manage feelings and develop coping skills

If you can display the following behaviours...

- separate the behaviour from the person: don't take it personally
- stay in emotional contact with the young person
- stay calm and demonstrate that you are thinking
- lower pitch, tone and volume in voice and body interactions
- articulate what might be going on for the young person without judging
- model problem-solving and practical responses.

...it can result in young people developing an increased capacity to...

- recognise emotional states and their associated physiological reactions
- think about feelings and sensations
- think while experiencing the feelings and sensations
- be able to keep the problem in proportion
- name the difficulty and ask for help
- organise personal and other resources
- generate and consider options
- have choice about different responses and behaviours.

### Creating a safe environment

A safe, supportive and positive environment is an essential prerequisite for group learning. Young people need to feel safe in order to learn well. This is particularly the case when working with

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vulnerable young people to develop skills such as managing emotions, working with others, taking responsibility and resolving conflict.

### Teaching and learning

We all learn differently and good teaching relies on using methods that suit both the learning aims of the lesson and the different learning abilities of the participants. The most effective teaching and learning is when:

- Young people are involved in planning and can start to take responsibility for their learning.
- There is a safe learning environment and ways of behaving are explicitly agreed through working agreements.
- Active learning methods are used to provide a process for young people to practise and demonstrate emotional and social skills and reflect on their learning.
- The energies and interests of the group are engaged. This is particularly important with vulnerable young people who often find things boring.
- Diversity and difference are integral parts of the learning process, and prejudice is creatively challenged.
- Questioning and enquiry is encouraged and ideas and thoughts are reflected back and summarised at regular intervals.

### Tips for creating a safe and supportive learning environment

- Do not ignore inappropriate behaviour, but try not to take it personally: behaviour provides powerful clues about the life skills and additional support that vulnerable young people need. Stress the importance of keeping to the working agreement.
- Try to be flexible and prepared to respond to any issues that may arise from the work. If a topic is causing concern, continue exploring the issue and if, as a result, the planned objectives are not met, record them and revisit them at a later date.
- Set short tasks with clear learning objectives. Keeping activities short avoids boredom and disruption.
- Develop a working agreement. This agreement will set boundaries around the work and engage the young people in defining what behaviours are acceptable and unacceptable.
- Make it clear at the beginning of each session and activity what is going to happen and what people are going to do. Find out their expectations and address their concerns.
- Take time to build group trust and cohesion. Introduction games and icebreakers can help with this.
- Be clear about the limits of confidentiality. You may find it helpful to remind young people that it is not appropriate to talk about personal experiences in the group, as it is not possible to guarantee confidentiality. Let them know how to access confidential help and support if they need to talk about something personal.

- Activities are differentiated so everyone achieves at their own level.
- Assessment forms part of the learning process.
- Learning is linked to other sources of confidential information and support in school and the community.
- Young people feel confident in the methods they are being asked to use, for example, using worksheets to begin an activity.
- Activities are kept short and have clear learning outcomes.
- Extra support, including one-to-one support is available when necessary.

### Active learning

It is established best practice to use active learning methods for teaching about personal and social issues. Active learning involves:

**Planning** Preparing to do the activity; working out how to do it and what will be needed for it.

**Doing** Taking part in a structured activity, such as gathering information, exploring beliefs and values and practising skills.

**Reflecting** Pupils are helped to reflect on the process through the use of open questions i.e. questions that require a discursive answer and cannot be answered with just a 'yes' or 'no':

**Practising** By critically working out what happened, and discussing possible strategies for managing the situation.

**Learning** At this stage the learner is encouraged to think about what has been learned and how they might use that learning in the future. Active learning works best when the group works together as a team. The experience of listening to others' views and beliefs, practising skills, observing others and developing relationships, all help to support learning and can provide important learning experiences.

## Assessing learning

Assessment of what has been learned is an integral part of the learning cycle. It helps to ensure that young people have learned what had been planned, that they identify their progress and what they have learned as well as identifying future learning needs. Assessing learning and celebrating success is extremely important when working with young people to develop life skills because:

- If young people are aware of what they have achieved, they are likely to be more motivated and committed to using the skills they have learned in future.
- If they are able to reflect on what they have learned, their learning will be reinforced. This potentially helps them to translate their ideas from a conceptual level into actual behaviour.
- Identifying areas for development and improvement provides the basis for setting future goals and targets.
- Recording, recognising and celebrating their achievements can enhance self-esteem and contribute to recognition of success in plans such as Personal Education Plans and Records of Achievement.

Taking a structured approach to assessment from the start helps to maximise young people's opportunities to engage with, and become motivated about, their own personal development. It is helpful to think about the following:

- It is important to include reflection time as this may be the only opportunity the young person has to reflect on the skills, knowledge, values

and attitudes they are developing. Allow enough time at the end of each session for this reflection.

- Active learning methods can be used to encourage young people to reflect and assess what they have learned, so you might want to build them into the reflection time.
- Identify a range of opportunities for young people to assess what they are learning. Examples include preparing a presentation, writing a diary, participating in a management meeting or taking part in a group discussion or debate.
- Work produced during the sessions is important evidence of learning. It can be used to feed into monitoring and evaluation systems. You can use this material formally and informally to:
  - provide feedback to young people
  - identify whether there are individuals or groups who may need additional support
  - identify future learning needs so as to inform planning
  - celebrate success.
- Reflect on and assess your own learning to identify successes and areas for future development, both personally and in relation to how you run the programme. This can also be used to feed into monitoring and evaluation systems.

## References

Bird, J and Gerlach, L (2005) *Improving the Emotional Health and Well-being of Young People in Secure Care: Training for staff in local authority secure children's homes*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Blake, S and Frances, G (2004) *Promoting Children and Young People's Participation Through the National Healthy School Standard*. London: National Healthy School Standard.

Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Every Child Matters: Change for children. Working with voluntary and*

*community organisations to deliver change for children*. London: DfES.

Goleman, D (1996) *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury.

## Websites

[www.makeaconnection.org.uk](http://www.makeaconnection.org.uk)  
[www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

## Healthy Schools

[www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk](http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk)

## Resources

*Life Routes: A practical resource for developing life skills with vulnerable young people*

*Make a Connection: Life skills, Teachers Manual, Lessons and Activities*

You can download the Make a Connection schools resource and a sample pdf of *Life Routes* from: [www.makeaconnection.org.uk](http://www.makeaconnection.org.uk) or for further information email: [liferoutes@ncb.org.uk](mailto:liferoutes@ncb.org.uk)

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