

Introduction

Young people and life skills

They may not call them life skills, but that's exactly what these young people are talking about: skills that help them 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, but particularly so for vulnerable young people who often have behavioural or emotional difficulties that have led to their exclusion from mainstream education. Research by the Mental Health Foundation (Cole and others 2002) has found that excluded young people tend to:

- display pronounced behavioural difficulties, usually involving a degree of violence and aggression
- experience emotional and social difficulties that interfere with educational progress
- experience an unsettled home life that has led to low self-esteem and damaged confidence.

They may also have experienced traumatic life events involving family breakdown and loss and bereavement. As a result of these experiences, they are likely to be less resilient and have fewer coping strategies to deal with difficult situations. This in turn exacerbates their vulnerability, and puts them at risk of poor outcomes in later life.

However, 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).

About this resource

This resource is for all those working with vulnerable young people aged 13 to 16 in a range of settings, to help them develop life skills.

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.

I want to be able to explain what I want and discuss it with other people in a positive way, without losing my temper.

15-year-old girl attending a pupil referral unit

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

15-year-old boy attending a pupil referral unit

I think, go on try, and then I just think – what is the point?

Nine-year-old boy

Every Child Matters (DfES 2003) identifies that the development of life skills through PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) in schools, PRUs and a range of projects in the community is key to achieving these outcomes.

Life Routes is in two parts. The first part sets out strategies for effective learning. The second part is divided into five units, with each unit addressing the elements of the five national outcomes most relevant to the needs of vulnerable young people. Each unit includes activities designed to help and promote young people's life skills within the national policy framework. The activities apply recognised active learning methods and are grounded in real-life situations that young people tell us are relevant to their everyday lives.

The length of time each unit takes will vary depending on teaching style, the level of the young people's interest, and the abilities and special needs within the group. Given the often transient nature of the groups you are working with, the resource is designed to be used flexibly, and can be adapted to particular activities that seem relevant. The order of the activities can be changed or adapted to focus on particular topics as appropriate to your work.

All units follow the same format and include:

- an introduction
- learning outcomes
- preparation and materials needed
- facilitator's notes
- activities, including introduction games and icebreakers
- reflection time.

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. *Life Routes* offers practitioners practical ideas for helping young people practise and develop their life skills.

A positive learning environment

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), which is jointly funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department of Health (DH), 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.

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 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 the activities included in Life Routes 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. NCB provides training to build the skills needed to deliver this work, for information email training@ncb.org.uk