

"She's a Legend"

The Role of Significant Adults in the Lives of Children and Young People in Contact with the Criminal Justice System



WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

This report is about the role of adults in supporting and protecting the rights of children and young people who may get into trouble with the law.



WHAT IS NICCY?

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (also known as 'NICCY') is an organisation which tries to make sure that the Government respects children's rights. The Children's Commissioner is Patricia Lewsley-Mooney and she has a team of people who help her in her work.

WHAT IS THE UNCRC?

Children's rights are listed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, also known as the 'UNCRC'. The UK Government signed up to this in 1990. This means it has promised to respect the rights of children and young people and to make sure that all children enjoy their rights equally.

The UNCRC protects different rights which are important for children. This includes the right to:

- be heard and have their views taken seriously,
- be healthy,
- get a proper education,
- be supported in their family or wherever they live,
- be able to play and take part in leisure activities.

Most importantly, the UNCRC says that the best interests of children should always be considered when adults are making decisions about them.

The UNCRC AND YOUTH JUSTICE

The UNCRC says that children should be treated with respect and dignity when they get into trouble with the law and that they should only ever be sent to custody when it is absolutely necessary and then for the shortest possible time.

WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

Studies in the United States and elsewhere in the UK, for example, have shown how adults who are not family members can have a positive influence on young people’s lives.

Children and young people can meet such adults through school, youth or mentoring projects and so on. NICCY therefore asked a team of researchers to talk to children and young people, and to adults who support them through different organisations in Northern Ireland, to find out what kind of help young people need and how it is provided.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers talked to children and young people, who had been in trouble with the law.

They may have been given warnings or fines by the police or were involved with the Youth Justice Agency in restorative conferencing. Some had been in custody – either in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) or the Young Offenders Centre (YOC) at Hydebank Wood. Five girls and young women and 15 boys and young men took part in the research. Eight of these young people had experience of being in care.

An organisation called ‘Include Youth’ also talked to boys and young men in the JJC and YOC about the research and their views are also included.

All the children and young people were asked which adults were important in their lives and what adults do that is helpful for them, including when they get into trouble.

The researchers also talked to 22 workers and volunteers in different projects. They worked with young people on education and training or provided more general mentoring support. The researchers asked these adults how they could best help young people, especially when they have been in trouble with the law.



CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SAID ABOUT THEIR LIVES

Difficult experiences

Many of the young people in the study had experienced serious difficulties in their lives. Although some of the young people had good family relationships, others experienced violence and abuse in the family and in their communities. This is what one of them said:

"My Mummy and Daddy were [...] just arguing, fighting [...] And we fought the bit out, everyone, my brothers and sisters, we fought [...] We hit and it wasn't just fists or kicks [...] We've stabbed each other..."

Sometimes the young people had problems with drugs and alcohol, or mental health difficulties. Some had tried to take their own lives or experienced friends self-harming or dying.

Access to Education and Employment

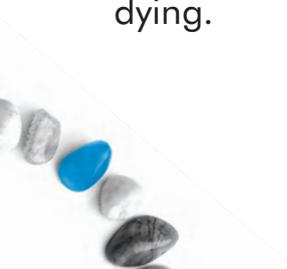
Young people have a right to effective education or training, but most young people who took part in this study experienced difficulties in school and some had dropped out at an early age. Some liked their teachers, but others felt that teachers didn't understand them, or their needs or had labelled them as troublesome. This young person was frustrated with school because he wasn't able to do the subjects he liked:

"In third year in school, the school chose your subjects for you and they dropped you out of science, music, Irish, they'd have dropped you out of lots of subjects that you enjoyed."

There are few jobs available for young people now, and having a criminal record or no qualifications makes finding work even more difficult. Young people said that when they had nothing to do, they were more likely to get into trouble with the police or paramilitaries. It was agreed that there is a need for more activities and places for young people to go. Young people also wanted more training and employment opportunities and felt that this would help them stay out of trouble.

One young man felt the Government is failing young people who are trying to get jobs:

"The Government wrecked this country for young people [...] I feel the whole... young people have been let down. "



Somewhere safe to live

Young people have a right to somewhere safe and comfortable to live, but finding accommodation was a huge challenge for those who couldn't or didn't want to stay in their family homes. This was especially true for young people leaving the JJC or the YOC. Some young people and adults said that hostels are not always safe and that young people shouldn't have to live in places where they would have contact with adults who have problems, for example, with alcohol or drugs.

How the Northern Ireland conflict has impacted on children and young people

It was clear from the research that the conflict in Northern Ireland still has a big impact on young people. Young people have the right to be safe and protected from harm, but they can be drawn sometimes into dangerous situations, such as rioting or coming under threat of violence from paramilitary organisations. As this young man recalled:

"The paramilitaries used to have us tortured.

I got a few hidings and all from them – I remember when I was 17, I was going to get my legs blew off [...] they used to chase you, used to get you and beat you with hurls [hurling sticks] and baseball bats."

Conflict with paramilitary organisations sometimes meant young people had to move away from their homes to somewhere safer, leaving family and friends behind.

Care-experienced young people

Children living in care have a particular right to be looked after well. Nearly half of the children and young people taking part in the research were care-experienced. Some had very good experiences and spoke highly of foster parents or care workers, but sometimes young people had feelings of rejection and of not being accepted by their peers and some adults. Dealing with such feelings was difficult and sometimes young people had turned to drugs or alcohol or self-harm to cope. Living in a stable home was really important as this young man commented

"People take it for granted, living with the family in their own home and they don't realise what they've got. But for somebody in care, it's a really important thing because they can be moved around all the time, you know, and not actually get to form a relationship with the family members they are staying with."

What were young people hoping to do in the future?

Young people knew that it might be difficult for them to get jobs. However, they were working hard, with the help of adults, to get qualifications that would give them a better chance in the future. They spoke of wanting to become car mechanics, chefs, youth workers, police officers, office workers, charity workers and fitness instructors. As this young woman said,

"I want to do everything. I don't want to stop. But – you know what I mean – like I want to be the boss! That's what I want to be so I just, I will keep going until I can sit back and say "right – I've done enough", you know."



WHAT

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SAID ABOUT THE ADULTS IN THEIR LIVES

Children and young people talked about the important adults in their lives. Many mentioned their parents as the people who they trusted and relied on.

"My Mum, she really is the one that helps me mostly.

The Dad's the man of the house; he's the one you look up to."

Others said grandparents gave them support when they needed it, and some mentioned older brothers or sisters. However, for many reasons, some children and young people couldn't count on their family for support. They often turned to adults such as social workers, youth and community workers and project volunteers.

Sometimes the adults who were important to young people were not seen as 'positive role models' by others. As one young man said,

"They don't necessarily have to have a good job though, or be someone who doesn't do crime. It just could be someone who loves you, who's there for you, someone you feel confident speaking to – they can give you a structure for your life, guidelines, help you out when you need it."

How do young people want to be treated by adults?

Young people have the right to be heard and to take part in decision-making about their lives. Young people said that they liked adults to listen and be non-judgemental.

"She's (Woodlands worker) a legend! She's just here to, you know, talk to you, so you don't feel, you know, alone."

Relationships were more likely to be successful when young people played an active role in deciding on the kind of support they needed. Having their say was important:

"What makes this one [foster placement] work is that I'm actually old enough to be able to have an input into the relationship."

Young people appreciated adults having a sense of humour, and being able to take a joke about themselves:

"[...] he's easy to talk to, I guess, he can take the slagging!"

They liked adults who were 'straight talking' and recognised which adults were 'real' and genuinely cared about them. Being respected was especially important when some young people experienced disrespect from many other adults:

"Most of them looked at you as if to say [makes a tutting sound]. [...] But [X] wasn't there and judging you nor nothing. He was just getting on with it, and he was helping you to do things."

Young people wanted to be 'given a break' and had better relationships with adults who understood the pressures they faced and who gave them 'space'. They appreciated adults who were patient and supported them in a calm and respectful manner. As one young man said about a family friend,

"[I] felt like throwing the head up so many times, and he just had a wee quiet word with me and he never shouted or never lost his head or he always had time for me."

Finally, young people explained how important it was that adults stood by them and continued to encourage them even when they were going through hard times and threatened to reject the relationship.

"She didn't give up, you know, even though I was pushing her away [...] I was like, this is going to be somebody else that's gonna let me down [...] She didn't give up."

The help given by adults to young people

Adults and young people saw encouraging self-belief as important. As one young person said,

"I think it's just that they [project workers] make you believe that you can do it. [...] They just make you feel that you are able to."

In terms of practical support, adults often helped young people to access services to which they had a right, such as counselling, training and education programmes and accommodation. They showed them how to make telephone calls and arrange appointments, and helped them fill in application forms and prepare for job interviews.

"I couldn't use the phone. I was terrified, you know, using the phone for phoning the doctors to make a doctor's appointment."

She takes me to places and all. Like if I have to go for an interview or something. If she wasn't to go with me nobody else will go with me."

Young people valued the encouragement provided by adults to achieve their goals:

"She sort of helps, you know, whenever I'm doing something she helps me set sort of targets. [...] If I was just by myself sitting about, you know, I probably wouldn't have anyone to give me that wee kick up the bum [...]"

Young people have a right to recreation and play and young people in this study enjoyed getting involved in activities with supportive adults. They liked an informal approach of just 'hanging out' and chatting with project workers and volunteers. Such 'activities' were often about getting a break. Sometimes young people wanted to experience things that others take for granted. As this young person said,

"It was kind of like [the volunteer] was offering things that I never really, normal, I suppose normal things that I hadn't really experienced then."

Children and young people said that the support offered by adults meant they achieved a lot of things which they may not otherwise have done.

"[The project] is, it's amazing, like, to be honest [...] When I first started [in the project], I had nothing, didn't, I didn't go to school, did nothing, just really couldn't be bothered but [the project], they sit down with you and help you do the work and do qualification by qualification and you keep building up. I've what... 20 qualifications from it."

Young people returning to education or training really enjoyed the experience, particularly when given one-to-one support. Others gained employment with the assistance and advice of adults. Some young people also said that the support they got from adults helped them to stay out of trouble and make more positive choices in their lives. As one young man noted:

"Whenever I lived in the children's home, I had, I've been arrested for several things. [...] And you know, whenever I moved into [the foster placement] that all stopped. You know, it just shows, you know, the environment you live in, you know, how that impacts on the sort of behaviours that you have."

Young people have the right to be supported in trying to stay away from crime. The young people in this study were keen not to get into trouble with the law but recognised that this could be a tough challenge. They needed to 'break wee barriers', build up confidence and learn things others may take for granted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After thinking about all the things said by children and young people and the adults who support them, the researchers made 10 recommendations. These are pieces of advice for Government, NICCY and others who work with young people:

1. It is important that more people know about the positive work of significant adults, including the work of the different projects talked about in this research. For this to happen, there should be more research and publicity for this work.
2. There should also be more research done to find out how positive relationships with adults can assist children and young people to access their rights.
3. Projects which support children and young people should be given enough money to be able to continue such work in the future.
4. Children and young people should have a say about what works for them and how they would describe the ‘success’ of their involvement in different projects.
5. Children and young people should be involved in deciding what kind of support they need and how they want to work with the different adults who can support them.
6. Organisations which are working with children and young people to support them should always respect children’s rights.
7. It is important to recognise that the support given by adults to children and young people can help young people to stay out of trouble.
8. Government should help families to support children and young people who may have difficulties with education or health or who get into trouble with the law.
9. NICCY and others, including the media, should challenge the negative stereotyping of young people, including those who have experience of the criminal justice system.
10. NICCY should continue to highlight the difficult situations some children and young people are in because of discrimination or because they are not well off.



northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

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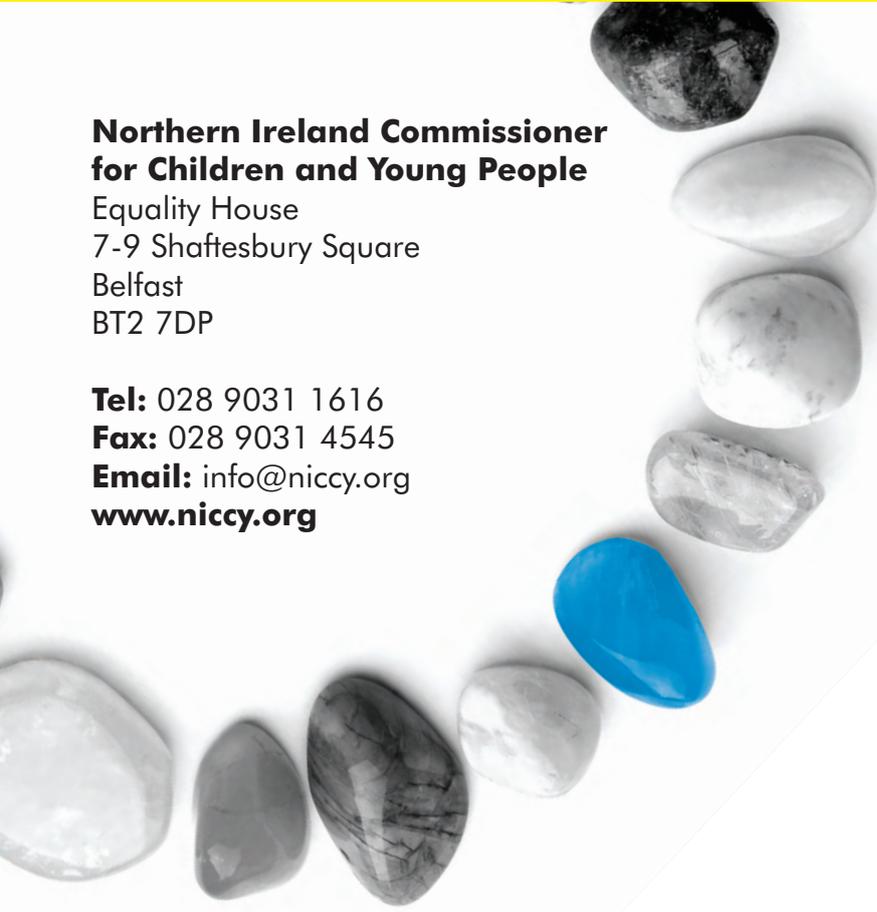
Equality House
7-9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast
BT2 7DP

Tel: 028 9031 1616

Fax: 028 9031 4545

Email: info@niccy.org

www.niccy.org



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You can also contact us by Minicom on **028 9031 6393**, or by using the Relay Services to contact NICCY's telephone number (**028 9031 1616**)

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