

Delivering Good Youth Work

A Working Guide to Surviving and Thriving

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Introduction

If you work with young people, full or part time, paid or voluntary, this book is for you!

How many times have you heard youth workers say something like:

What keeps me in the job is the young people...they drive me mad but they make me laugh...I get such a buzz when one of them does something that shows that they're growing up...It's fantastic when they achieve something beyond your wildest dreams. After all this time, it still makes me feel great because I've done something that really counts...

...paperwork, hassle and no recognition: that's the real downer. I know its all got to be done, but there's so much, and it hangs over me and gets me down...I don't work as well as I want to and that's depressing in itself.

...No one can tell you how to cope, you must learn what works for you...What you do need is lots of support...in all these changes, that seems to have gone. We work in far more isolated situations than ever before (Vicky, experienced part time worker)

This book is about coping, surviving and thriving in order to work more effectively with young people. It is about dealing with the issues that Vicky describes, using a range of techniques including planning and delivering high quality youth work, the management of yourself and others and working with other agencies.

We have also placed workers' experiences in a wider context:

- Theory

The right amount of appropriate theory often helps you to think through and analyse what is happening. It enables you to make effective plans for action to help your work with young people.
- The social, political and economic background

We live and work in a world of change. All of us are affected by changes that occur at local, regional, national, international level. Examples of this include changes in the systems of benefit, transport and health. These factors affect young peoples' lives too. Youth workers must be aware of these changes so that they can help young people cope; and to be able to speak out for, and with, them on their issues.

The aims of the book

This book is based on workers' experiences and their feelings about them. It aims to provide insight to help you analyse your situation and to:

- Understand the forces acting on the lives of the young people you work with.
- Be able to identify their needs.
- Plan strategically and develop action plans.
- Design, deliver, monitor and evaluate work to meet their learning needs.

- Reflect on your work and learn from your experience.
- Build your credibility by recording and publicising your work.
- Manage yourself, your staff and your managers.
- Identify how other organisations work and understand your own organisation.
- Work effectively with management committees and steering groups.
- Build and maintain an effective youth forum and advocate on behalf of young people and the service.

In the process of doing this, the book develops strategies for coping, surviving and thriving as a worker in order to deliver more effective youth work:

- time management
- boundary management
- stress management
- building a support network

The World of Change

The only constant thing is change.

(Anon)

Here are a few recent examples which affect all our lives:

- Movement in employment away from heavy industries and towards the service and IT industries.
- Technology and the information revolution.
- The 24 hour society.
- 'Fast' foods.
- Drugs and illegal substances more readily available.
- Decline in the nuclear family.
- Decline in membership of organised religions.

These social, political and economic changes impact on:

- The young people we work with.
- Us, as members of communities, families and as individuals.
- The organisations we work for.

Youth workers need to be aware of these changes and how they affect young people's lives in order to:

- Advocate on their behalf.
- Inform managers so that youth work is developed in a way that is relevant and appropriate to the young people's needs.
- Keep our own practice current.

These changes cause pressures on young people which makes the process of growing up more difficult. Some young people do not adjust well to these pressures and are harder to work with and more demanding.

Organisations that employ youth workers are themselves under pressure. For example changes in funding, Health and Safety, Child Protection and the introduction of Best Value and the Connexions Service all require organisational responses. This means that, more and more, people have to learn to work in a different way.

The Government policy of 'joined up thinking' means that youth work is now carried out by a range of agencies such as social services, health authorities and schools. People carrying out this work may not have been trained as youth workers. The effect of this is that there is often less common understanding of what good youth work might be and more difficulties in working with other agencies.

Many local authority youth services as we knew them are shrinking, as are some voluntary youth organisations. As funding regimes change, there are more short term projects and consequently workers with short term contracts. This work is often tightly targeted and driven by the need to achieve measured outcomes. In principle this is good practice, however if the outcomes are not achievable or the workers feel that they are diverted from meeting the needs of the young people, then the process is extremely frustrating. Those workers that have to continually seek short term contracts find that:

- Their lives lack stability.
- Their professional development is often stunted.
- The projects often cease because of change in or lack of funding rather than for professional reasons.

For those on long term contracts, there is often a mismatch between the needs of the communities in which they work and the available funding. Further there is often pressure to seek external funding for what was previously mainstream work.

All of these changes put further pressure on youth workers.

The Kipper Effect

You, the face to face youth worker works under difficult conditions. There are pressures from all sides: the result of these pressures can be that the youth worker who started as a well rounded person gets squashed flatter and flatter. In the words of the old joke, they finish up like a kipper. As everyone knows, a kipper has no backbone, is flat (one dimensional) and looks both ways at once! This book will help you avoid being 'kippered'.

What are the forces that cause 'kippering'?

Youth Work: A Definition

Given this fluid and pressurised situation we felt that it was important to be clear about the component parts of good youth work. When you are clear about what you are doing and how you undertake it you are in a position to:

- analyse and develop your practice
- describe and market your work

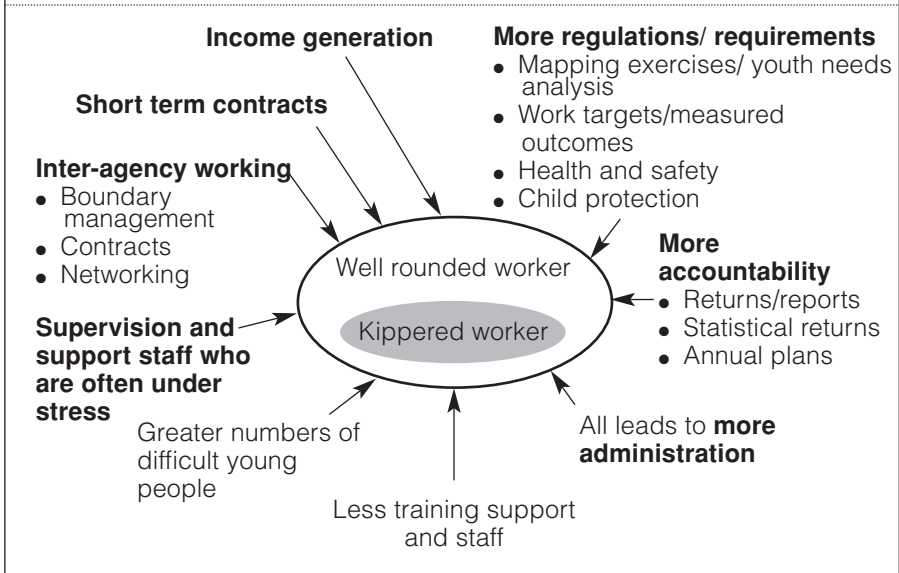
both of these are 'anti-kipper' techniques.

Youth work is a learning process in which:

- Youth workers and young people come together voluntarily.
- The youth worker forms a caring, equal relationship with the young people.

The purpose of this relationship is to provide a context in which:

- The young person's learning needs can be identified.

Figure 1: The forces that cause kippering (Ingram, NYA)

- The needs are met in a way that moves them towards achieving the autonomy to take control of their lives in a responsible way.

The learning is offered:

- In a safe climate within a framework of equality of opportunity.
- In a participative, planned and evaluative way.

...and is relevant, appropriate and fun for each individual or group of young people.

The worker assists the young people to move towards independent adult lives.

The general increase in demands placed on workers comes from a number of factors outlined above, all of which produce more administrative pressures. In order to be an effective worker, you need to understand the factors which are 'kippering you' and employ strategies to deal with them (see table below).

Factors

Young people are becoming increasingly more demanding to work with.

Strategies

Understanding their situation.
Analysing their needs
Designing programmes which meet their needs.
Annual planning.
Recording, monitoring and evaluating the work.

Supporting and managing others.

Being an effective manager.

	Staff development. Line management and supervision.
A wider and more demanding job description. Time management.	Boundary management.
Short term contracts.	Stress management. Support frameworks. Assertiveness and saying 'no'.
The general increase in demands placed on workers: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– income generation– inter-agency work– increased administration– working to targets	Having a clear vision of the work. Building your credibility by recording and publishing successes. Reflecting on your work and learning from your experiences. Understanding your organisation. Understanding service level agreements and frameworks of agreement. Managing your manager. Working with management committees and steering groups. Building and maintaining effective youth forums.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 provide an analysis of why we are being 'kippered': the rest of the book looks at practical, real and workable anti-kipper strategies.

As you read this book be critical and keep asking:

- Is this my reality?
- How do I feel about this?
- How do I modify and develop this analysis to make it relevant to my work and the lives of the young people I work with?

This book is a tool, use it as such. This means that you should take, modify and develop the ideas according to your needs. Pass your successful thoughts and methods on to others. The process of sharing and developing ideas is what has kept field work relevant to young people in a changing world. It is also why the field has always led the way in the development of good practice. Be part of that process...

Jean Harris has a wide experience of working with young people, including running an SRB project and Duke of Edinburgh's Award Schemes in London and Doncaster. She has undertaken a number of roles for the Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council's Youth Service, and currently manages a Connexions team of personal advisers.

Since **Gina Ingram** qualified as a youth worker in 1972, she has been involved in youth work as a field worker, manager, trainer and consultant. Throughout this time she has been concerned with the growth and development of young people and youth workers.