

# Someone to turn to:

## Being a trusted adult for young people



# Introduction

Our purpose, vision and mission are hugely ambitious, but we are confident we can make them a reality. One of the key pillars of our YoungMinds strategy is all about making sure young people have adults around them who can really help. We have extensive experience supporting parents and professionals but recognise from our work with young people that there is a broader circle of adults playing an active, positive and crucial role within communities, and they too need our support. These adults are “**trusted adults**”.

To inform the development of our work for trusted adults, we commissioned UK Youth to produce an ethnographic research study with young people and the adults they turn to for support to examine what makes an adult trusted, the importance of representation and the barriers to accessing support. The definition and insights gathered have helped identify the mental health information, resources, and training needed so that tens of thousands of adults can provide crucial, early mental health responses that young people need from them.

This is a shortened version of the full report produced by UK Youth.

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# Background to the research

When a young person is having a hard time with their mental health, they will often first reach out to a trusted adult in their life.

This research project is the first step in YoungMinds' broader strategic goal of understanding trusted adults and the work they do to support young people with their mental health and wellbeing.

The research comes with two distinct objectives:

1. To produce a youth-led definition of what a trusted adult is. This will not only comprise of characteristics, but also detail the outcomes and benefits that young people gain from these relationships.
2. To validate and expand on the youth-led definition of a trusted adult with youth workers. Using this definition, and drawing on youth workers' own experiences, this research will make a series of recommendations on what tools trusted adults need to support young people with their mental health and wellbeing.

The research project has a particular focus on the perspectives of Black and minoritised people, as a group traditionally underserved by existing mental health services. This is a broad term but is intended to represent a range of minoritised communities including (but not exclusively) Black African, Black Caribbean, Asian, Gypsy, Roma and Jewish.

The project used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data and evidence, with fieldwork conducted by Eido Research.

This research defines a young person as someone who is under 25. The lower limit of what makes a young person, for this research project, is someone in their early teens. Due to ethical considerations, this research project focused on older young people.



# Defining a trusted adult

## A definition of a trusted adult

Based on the findings from the academic literature and the extensive conversations that this research undertook with young people and youth workers, a youth-led definition of a trusted adult, which has been adopted by YoungMinds, is

A **trusted adult** is chosen by the young person as a **safe figure** that listens without judgment, agenda or expectation, but with the sole purpose of **supporting and encouraging positivity** within a young person's life.

This definition is comprised of the characteristics that young people identified as constituting a trusted adult, which were verified and further developed through conversations with youth workers. The definition was also influenced by the outcomes, expectations and benefits young people saw themselves as receiving. This includes the informal mental health support that was often implicit but intrinsic and fundamental to their relationship.



# Where and who are trusted adults

Trusted adults are not adults who have been assigned to young people through a formal programme, but instead are **adults who young people have independently chosen to trust.**

Young people found trusted adults in a **range of settings**, including in their local youth club, in pastoral teams in schools, in their extended family or in places of worship.

In general, **teachers were not viewed as trusted adults**, perhaps because the structures and expectations of education impact on their ability to build these types of relationships with students.



# Characteristics of a trusted adult

The key characteristics of a trusted adult include:

Coming with **no expectations** of what young people will achieve or how they will behave.

Being **non-judgemental** and refraining from trying to 'fix' a young person; instead trusted adults help young people to work through issues in their own way.

Ensuring relationships with young people have **clear boundaries and limits**. Trusted adults should understand when a situation extends beyond their skillset.

Being a **good listener**, using silence to give young people space to open up and guide conversations.

Prioritising **honesty**, asking hard questions when necessary and being vulnerable with young people.

Being **reliable**, through making themselves available to young people and engaging with them in a consistent way.

# Outcomes of a trusted adult relationship

The previous section examines the characteristics that define a trusted adult. Another way to define a trusted adult is through the outcomes that the relationship achieves.

An important finding from the academic and policy literature, is that overall a trusted adult leads to positive mental health outcomes. Indeed, McPherson et al. (2014) found that children and adolescents reported fewer mental health challenges when they had a support network of high-quality relationships with peers and trusted adults outside of their immediate family.

The evidence strongly suggested that when young people are struggling with their mental health, the “big emotional support” that they get from a trusted adult is invaluable.

**The outcomes that young people can experience through relationships with trusted adults include:**

## Improved mental health and wellbeing

as a result of having someone to turn to who enables young people to explore issues in a safe environment without judgement.

## Mitigated effects of abuse and trauma

as those with trusted adults in their lives can be more protected from child abuse, and protected against the long term effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

## Positive educational outcomes

as those with access to trusted adults are more ambitious in their educational expectations and goals due to having a positive role model.

McPherson KE, Kerr S, McGee E, Morgan A, Cheater FM, McLean J, et al. (2014) “The association between social capital and mental health and behavioural problems in children and adolescents: an integrative systematic review” BMC Psychology, 2:1, page 7.

# Better representation in trusted adult relationships

Whether a trusted adult needs to look and sound like the young person they are supporting is a challenging, nuanced and personal aspect of the relationship that is dictated by the young person.

While young Black and minoritised people spoke of having excellent relationships with trusted adults from different racial backgrounds, there were occasions, incidents and experiences that could only be dealt with by someone who shared that experience because they came from a similar background. Both youth workers and young people alike spoke of the importance of the quality of the relationship and that this often trumped differences of ethnicity, but there was always a need to respect that there are some things that a person from a differing ethnic background does not understand.

Young Black and minoritised people spoke consistently of the struggle to find Black and minoritised trusted adults. They related this to struggles to gain support for issues they were working through and living with. The young people openly stated that they wished there was more representation and counsellors, teachers, or youth workers that looked like them.

## To summarise:

In general, **the quality of the relationship between a trusted adult and a young person matters more** than whether they share life experiences, background or look and sound the same.

Representation is not as simple as a Black and minoritised young person needing a trusted adult that looks like them. **Ethnicities are not monoliths**, so it should not be assumed that people of the same ethnicity will be able to build trusting relationships. For some young people, other characteristics such as gender, class or sexuality may be more important.

That said, there were certain situations, such as where a young person had experienced trauma or been a victim of racism, where it was felt **only an adult with first-hand experience of such issues** would be able to offer adequate support.

It is important to stress that **trusted adult relationships are voluntary**, so representation and shared experiences should be the defining aspect only if the young person chooses it.

# Barriers to accessing trusted adults

When looking at the barriers to young people accessing trusted adults, it is important to look through two lenses. Firstly, there are the barriers that stop adults becoming trusted adults. Secondly, barriers exist that prevent young people from accessing a trusted adult.

## Barriers to accessing trusted adults include:

**Safeguarding policies**, which mean young people choose not to disclose certain types of information for fear it will trigger a larger response than they want.

**Past experiences of a lack of support from adults**, meaning young people are reluctant to make themselves vulnerable again.

**The taboo associated with speaking about mental health**, particularly as the young people we spoke to uniformly discussed mental health “issues” and understood mental health through a negative lens, rather than as something that everyone has.

**A sense of being a burden to others**, which was felt particularly keenly by Black and minoritised young people for cultural historical reasons. Black and minoritised young people also spoke of lacking the language to describe how they were feeling.

“I think that there is definitely the fear of being judged, especially I see with young Black people my age, hearing [the] older generation talk about their struggles, whether that’s the Windrush generation or just living back in Jamaica and the hardships there or the mad reality of slavery. It’s difficult to hear all of that and come with your problems because living that life must have been hard, and it’s not that it’s a competition or a comparison, but it’s difficult to talk about your issues when you know that they’ve been through so much. Also a lot of those older people in our lives haven’t had the time or haven’t had the resources and definitely haven’t had the education around mental health to really know how important it is for them and for us, and that can be a real barrier.”



# Youth workers as trusted adults

## Youth workers as good mental health advocates.

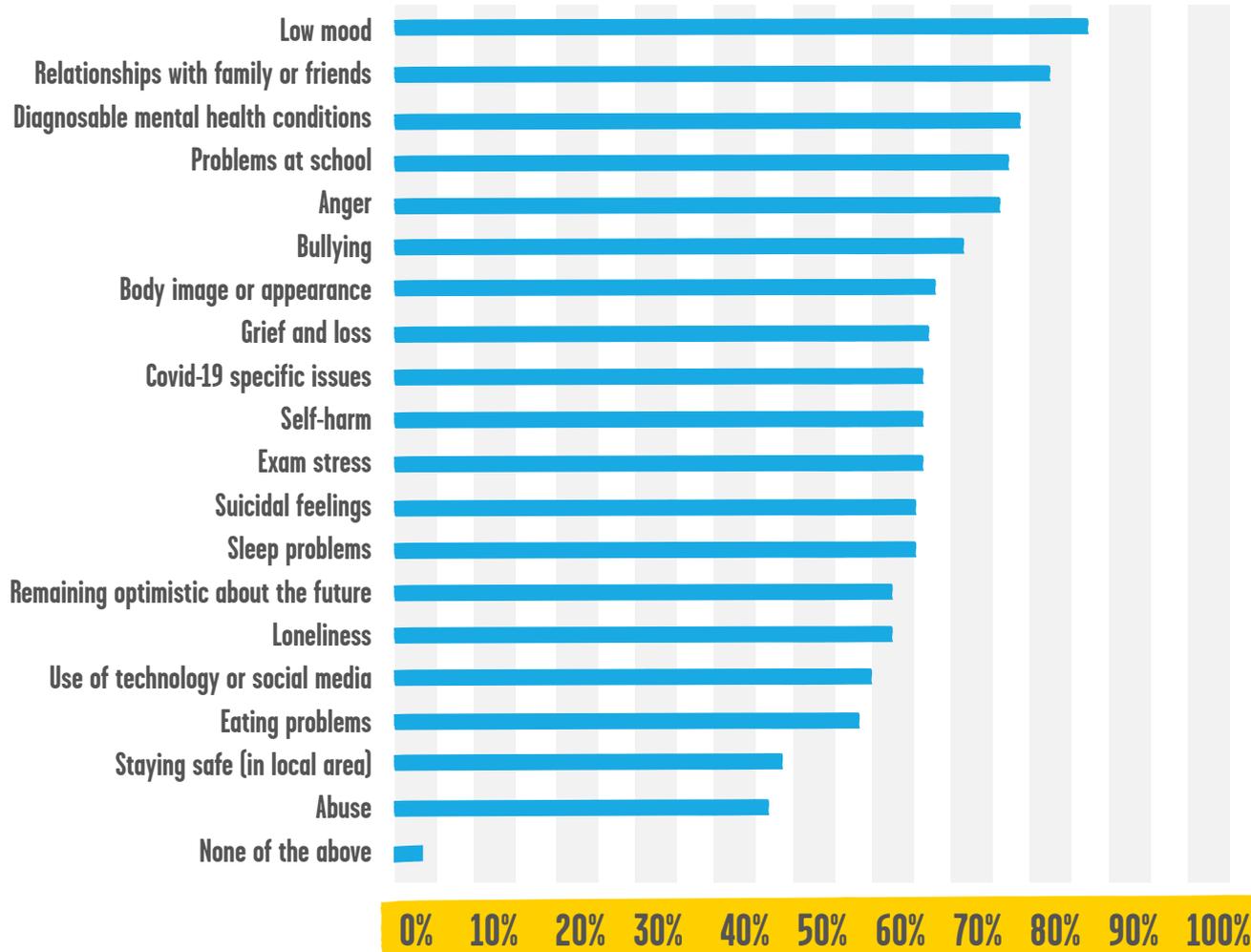
The starting point of this research project was that youth workers are trusted adults. Indeed, when defining a trusted adult, it is hard to separate the concept from definitions of a youth worker.

Youth workers told us that while they are not mental health workers, mental health was a cornerstone of their job. This was inseparably linked to their status as trusted adults. All those surveyed acknowledged that they support young people with their mental health as part of their role. 87% said that they do this “frequently”.



**87%** support young people with their mental health “frequently”

## What kind of issues have you supported young people with when it comes to their mental health?





## Youth workers on mental health training

Youth workers told us that despite the training on offer, they felt under-equipped to spot the warning signs of distress in the young people in their care. Youth workers spoke of the need to better able to spot “changes in language or demeanour” and know how to respond appropriately. Youth workers, as trusted adults, arguably fill a gap where formal mental support is not quite appropriate, but some caring and considerate listening is a crucial intervention that prevents issues from escalating for young people.

## Referring and signposting young people

When understanding the support that trusted adults can give it is important to understand the distinction between referring young people and signposting them. Youth workers told us that being able to signpost and refer young people is the most important tool they have when supporting them with their mental health.

Youth workers reported that during referral, young people experienced a lack of confidence, uncertainty about what to do and dealing with new people, and that these challenges were often faced alone.

## To summarise

Youth workers, or trusted adults, are like a **first line of defence for good mental health** among the young people they work with. They arguably fill a gap where formal mental health support is not quite appropriate, but some caring and considerate listening is a crucial intervention that prevents issues from escalating.

Youth workers told us that while they are not mental health workers, **mental health was a cornerstone of their job**, with 87% of those we surveyed saying they support young people 'frequently' with these type of issues.

Despite the training on offer, youth workers we spoke to generally **felt under-equipped to spot the warning signs of distress** in the young people in their care.

The process of **referring young people**, while integral to the mental health support youth workers provide, **is not straightforward**. Only 54% of youth workers we surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they felt well supported by mental health specialists.

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# The role of community

A common thread through our discussions with young people and youth workers was the role of community and organisations around them. A fundamental takeaway is that even if an adult does not see themselves in a position of trust within their community, a young person could see them very differently.

## Barriers to trusted adults accessing community support

There are numerous barriers to trusted adults working with their communities. The most pressing of those is that local community organisations often struggle to join up their operations. Youth workers spoke of not always knowing what support to refer a young person to due to not knowing who was in mental health roles across local services. Another challenge to joined up working was that organisations were so busy with their own business that they did not know of anything else going on in their local community. This echoed the young people who said a lack of knowledge of what was on offer was a barrier to accessing youth services.

### To summarise:

**A trusted adult can be anyone:** even if an adult does not see themselves in a position of trust within their community, a young person could see them very differently. This includes those in roles that are most accessible to young people, such as barbers.

Youth workers reported appreciating the **importance of partnership working** but recognised the challenges associated with it. Even those who had successfully forged relationships felt there was room for development.

**Schools and places of worship were seen as two key settings** with significant reach to young people that could benefit from embedded trusted adults to provide informal early intervention mental health support.

**Umbrella organisations and local authorities were seen as playing an important role** in convening organisations, as joined up working continues to be a struggle for local community groups.



# Recommendations

As a result of the research findings, this report recommends the following course of action:

## 1 Youth-led responses

We found that there is a strong appetite among youth workers to be the trusted adults young people deserve, but there is also a need for more training, support and guidance to do this. Youth workers told us that young people “need to co-create and help deliver the training.”

## 2 Specific support for Black and minoritised young people

Young people from Black and minoritised backgrounds told us that they struggled to find trusted adults, so a focus should be to work with these groups specifically to enable them to find this support.

## 3 Easier referral pathways

There is a huge amount of support available to youth workers and young people to help with their mental health. The challenge is accessing it. A recommendation is to seek to make accessing support easier and more straightforward, through putting together a guide to referring young people, or managing an up-to-date directory of mental health and wellbeing providers.

## 4 Cheerleading good mental health

It needs to be consistently remembered that youth workers, as trusted adults, take on a lot of emotion, distress and upset from the young people they work with. Therefore, more should be done to protect the mental health of trusted adults, so they can role model good mental health to the young people they support.

## 5 Focused early intervention support

A common concern raised by youth workers is that they are not sufficiently trained in mental health. This report recommends the development of training that promotes good mental health in young people, which includes a strong focus on identifying and understanding the early warning signs, specifically for youth workers.

## 6 Emboldening peer support

Many young people we spoke to said that their best friend was their trusted adult or that if they had a problem, friends would be the first person they would speak to. This report recommends embracing this peer led support, through targeted campaigns and the development of resources.

## 7 Changing the narrative through partnership

A key finding of the report was that trusted adult relationships thrived where community support was behind them. It is important to convene organisations and coordinate networking opportunities so that local groups can better support one another and ultimately improve outcomes for young people.

# Conclusion

The mental health crisis that is brewing among young people needs our attention. The evidenced rise in young people needing formal mental health treatment, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the effects still to come from missed education opportunities speaks to a need for the youth and mental health sectors to join forces to tackle this head on. Trusted adults are the space where the youth and mental health sectors collide.

This report sought to develop a young person led definition of a trusted adult. Based on the findings:

A trusted adult is chosen by the young person as a safe figure that listens without judgment, agenda or expectation, but with the sole purpose of supporting and encouraging positivity within a young person's life.

A trusted adult relationship is built from a voluntary starting point when a young person sees in someone something that they can trust. This has to be initiated and led by the young person and is dictated by their needs rather than a criterion to be fulfilled.

Representation matters with trusted adults. When it comes to offering support for mental health, having a role model, having someone to listen to you or having shared experiences is important for young people. As young people choose their trusted adults and the relationship is entirely voluntary and led by the young person, quality of relationship and the empathy a trusted adult can bring are arguably more important.

Accessing a trusted adult is not necessarily as simple as joining a youth club. Access to the youth sector is an enormous barrier to young

people finding their trusted adult and, indeed, to youth workers being able to reach the young people that need their support.

Supporting young people with their mental health is fundamental to youth workers and a cornerstone of their role. But being a trusted adult means understanding and acknowledging the limits of the support you can provide.

Referring young people to formal mental health services, or local informal mental health spaces was the most important tool in a youth worker's command, when listening was not enough. However, referring young people to further support is not without challenge.

The recommendations made by this report look to enhance the ability of the trusted adult. They focus on youth-led, co-created resources that enhance a young person's ability to help themselves and their friends, while identifying how to access trusted adult support. The report also recommends easier pathways for youth workers to refer young people to help. Changing the narrative around mental health is important to this, and so is working with local communities to make that happen.

While academic literature points to very real outcomes, time and time again young people highlight the simple idea of having someone to turn to, and the sense of safety and tranquillity that can come with this, as the most valued thing that trusted adult relationships offer.

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