

Our asset-based approach to working with young people

Version 2.0

October 2025



**Think
Forward**

Coaching
Connecting
Inspiring
Young People

FOREWORD

Thank you for your interest in Version 2.0 of our asset-based approach guide.

We launched Version 1.0 in February 2024, with a focus on asset-based language. We are delighted with the reception that V1.0 received, with many of our volunteers and funders reporting feeling increased confidence in communicating with young people. We are also pleased to have received opportunities to share our guide and learnings with other youth charities.

“I found the language guide really useful as it helped me understand the most appropriate terms to use and gave me extra confidence to present to, and engage with, the young people.”

- Volunteer from UTB, one of our business partners

“This guide originated from feedback from our young people about how they like to be described. The guide reflects our effort to not be tokenistic about youth engagement. We are pleased with the feedback from our employer partners following V1.0. Many of our partners have told us that they felt supported by the guide and wanted to adopt the same principles.”

- Ashley McCaul, ThinkForward CEO

In V1.0 we stated that we would be regularly updating the guide, as we recognise that language is constantly evolving. We are pleased to present V2.0, which we have broadened to cover an asset-based approach to working with young people, considering factors other than just language. We are also delighted to include a resource that our Youth Advisory Board have produced, titled **‘Young Voices, Big Respect’**, with their tips and requests for adults to consider when working with them, particularly with regards to co-production.

We will continue to share this guide with any adults who come into contact with the young people we support.

INTRODUCTION

An asset-based approach focuses on defining people or communities by their strengths and capabilities, rather than defining people by the systemic challenges they face. An asset-based approach places the focus on institutional injustices that lead to inequity, rather than attributing blame on the individual. Using this approach helps us to recognise from where the issues stem i.e.

historical and systemic forces.² Defining people or communities by their aspirations and potential supports them to use their strengths to lead change and amplifies their voices.

"How do we create equitable outcomes for all members of our community? We can start by defining people by their aspirations, not their challenges."

- Trabian Shorters ¹

A deficit-based approach which emphasises statistics and disparities tends to ostracise the groups of people who are involved. It focuses on what's missing or what's 'wrong', which can perpetuate stereotypes and communicate the idea that these are inherent characteristics rather than the result of circumstances. It can also risk excluding or alienating people and have a stigmatising effect. We believe language should be people-centred, so as not to dehumanise groups of people, and should be specific, to avoid generalisations and ambiguity.

We believe that in order to create inclusive spaces in which young people can thrive and succeed, we must be mindful of how we communicate with, and about, young people. We want to share our knowledge and evidence surrounding our approach to working with young people and the language we use to describe young people we work with to raise awareness and initiate change.

We want to use positive, empowering language to describe our young people, however we are aware of the reality of their situations. We want to acknowledge that statistically the odds are stacked against our young people because of the circumstances they were born into, but we won't emphasise the expectation of negative outcomes or low attainment for them by using language or attitudes that perpetuate that.

Research has shown that focusing on young people's strengths can lead to increased rates of academic and social-emotional success.⁴

We particularly want to change the narrative around a heavily used term to describe young people in our sector – 'disadvantaged.' 'Disadvantaged' puts emphasis on the individual and 'weaknesses' within that individual's upbringing or life experiences. The young people with whom we work are underserved by societal systems, and we are keen to move away from negatively defining people who have neglected needs. Therefore, we believe that using the term 'underserved' will help to create a fairer and more inclusive society for our young people, as it helps to reinforce the notion that inequity is a result of societal disparities rather than individual circumstances.

However, we also recognise that in certain situations we may be faced with having to mirror language that funders use, or mirror language used to demonstrate the severity of the issues faced by our young people and the urgency and gravity of our work. If others ever use language such as 'disadvantaged', we will always counter or preface it with the emphasis on environment and circumstance rather than describing young people as a homogenised 'disadvantaged' group.

Language has the ability to reinforce inequitable practices and power structures.³ We hope that by increasing awareness and understanding of the impact of language, we can harness it as a powerful tool in the pursuit of equity and inclusion.

Research has shown that focusing on young people's strengths can lead to increased rates of academic and social-emotional success.⁴ Research has also found that words have an impact on the 'beneficiaries' receiving aid. It found

that language that conveys dignity and empowerment diminishes shame, increases confidence and motivates recipients and that words suggesting neediness had the opposite effect.⁵ This highlights the importance of using an asset-based approach and strength-focused language to positively influence outcomes for young people.

We would like to echo and honour the words that HereToHere used in their language guide, as we think they have put it perfectly: “This Guide is a resource for advocates, educators, employers, members of the media, and others to investigate the words they use when working with or for young people. Understanding that language is constantly evolving, we know that this resource requires regular updates and continued input from young people to stay relevant. We also acknowledge that context matters, and what’s appropriate in one setting may not be in another.”⁶

Asset-based Approach	Deficit-based Approach
Focuses on young people's strengths and potential	Focuses on what young people are missing or what is 'wrong'
Is opportunity-focused	Is needs or problem-focused
Places responsibility on systemic issues and circumstances ⁷	Places responsibility on the individual ⁸

OUR COMMITMENT

We continually listen to our young people, as well as our staff and trustees who have lived experience of the issues our young people face. 50% of our trustees and senior leadership team would have qualified to be on our programmes when they were at school - we are keen to use this insight and it drives our commitment to be mindful of the language that we use.



We will:

- **Ensure that we are never tokenistic**
- **Take care around the language we use**
- **Brief funders and business partners on the language and behaviour they should or shouldn't use in front of young people, as well as how to use an asset-based approach**
- **Be cautious about referring to people in the third person by using 'they' or 'them', to avoid othering or grouping people with reductive labelling**
- **Brief and prepare young people before they enter new environments where they may hear adverse language, for example funding pitches, and explain that we may have to mirror funders' language e.g. using 'disadvantaged'**
- **Include asset-based approach and language guidelines in the inductions of all new staff**
- **Continuously learn as language continues to evolve, and update this guide to reflect any changes**
- **Ensure staff are trained in areas relating to our work, including race, disabilities and school exclusion.**

OUR GUIDE - LANGUAGE

This is the asset-based language we recommend to use when talking to or about young people.

Do say	Don't say
Young people	Kids
Underserved, under-resourced	Disadvantaged, underprivileged, troubled
Young people with special educational needs or disabilities	SEND young people
At risk of being excluded from school	Disengaged
Person with a learning disability	Mentally handicapped, mentally disabled
Person with autism	Suffering from autism
Person from a global majority background	BAME person, ethnic minority
Care-experienced	In the system, vulnerable
Multilingual	Has English as a second language
Pre-verbal	Non-verbal

This approach centres the person, before their attributes.

OUR GUIDE - BEHAVIOUR

Tips for working with young people in an asset-based way:

1. Don't make assumptions about young people and their circumstances.

Remember every young person is facing different circumstances.

2. Make an effort not to 'other' people by centring one specific group.

For example be mindful that creating spaces or resources that centre heterosexual, white, cisgender people as the norm can be exclusionary for others.

3. Be aware that everyone's normal is different and remain neutral.

For example, instead of asking 'did you go abroad over the summer?', ask 'how was your summer?'.

4. Recognise and praise individuals for progress towards their personal goals.

Celebrate the 'small' wins, for example, arriving on time if they have been late before or answering a question if they didn't in the previous session.

5. Manage young people's engagement, rather than their behaviour.

Instead of telling them what NOT to do, focus on what they can do and support them to get involved.

6. Focus on young people's strengths and positive attributes.

Recognise their individual qualities and strengths.

7. Use a trauma-informed approach.

The intention of trauma-informed practice is an increased understanding of the ways in which present behaviours and difficulties can be understood in the context of past trauma. Instead of thinking about 'what is wrong' with someone, consider their experiences which may cause them to present certain behaviours and treat them with compassion.

OUR YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS

We have consulted young people on our programmes to ascertain their views on language that is often used to describe our programme participants.

They said:

"I feel like saying 'challenges holding them back' is negative and makes assumptions about me."

"It makes me feel good. Positive words. When people use the words disadvantaged, it's stereotyping."

'All the words are positive, that's good because we need positivity. We don't like words that show people negatively.'

"We love the word empowered, it makes us think we have a voice, it makes us feel confidence, strength and hope."

Young people we spoke to said they like being described as:

- Promising
- Good role model
- Resilient
- Ambitious
- Bright
- Independent
- Mature
- Motivational
- Responsible
- Powerful

2025 Update

In 2024/25 our Youth Advisory Board created a resource designed to tell adults how they want to be treated and communicated with. They decided to call it **'Young Voices, Big Respect.'** In the spirit of co-production, we have embraced their language - everything on page 9-14 is written by our young people.

Young Voices, Big Respect



**RESPECT IS A TWO-WAY
STREET**



This project is brought to you by:

**ARALYN, BRUCE, HARRY, KIENNA, LARELL,
NEVEAH, RYAN AND SHYANNE**

Young Voices, Big Respect



[Click here](#)



We have been working on a project to help adults know how to work with us and communicate with us. We have named this project 'Young Voices, Big Respect.'



On each page you will see a button like this that you can click to hear what we have to say.



Thank you for taking the time to read and listen to our project.



**ARALYN, BRUCE, HARRY, KIENNA, LARELL,
NEVEAH, RYAN AND SHYANNE**



When teaching us new information, adults should...

- Understand that listening looks different amongst different people.
- Provide quiet environments.
- Respect us – we don't want to be spoken down to.
- Use a calm tone when talking to us.
- Give us the opportunity to ask questions afterwards.



**TEACHING ISN'T ABOUT DEMANDING
OR TELLING US WHAT TO DO – IT'S
ABOUT MAKING US UNDERSTAND.**

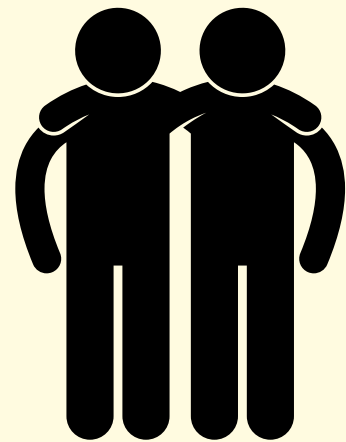
Support Us



[Click here](#)

To support us, adults should...

- Give us space to explain our own experience.
- Take the time and effort to understand.
- Recognise the pressure that young people are feeling.
- Don't say you've been there without listening.
- Treat us compassionately.



**SUPPORTING US MEANS HELPING US
OUT WHEN WE ARE GOING THROUGH
SOMETHING.**

Trust Us



[Click here](#)

To build trust with us, adults should...

- Not underestimate what young people can do.
- Give us a chance.
- Not assume we're lying because we are young.
- Show respect and assume we are mature enough to understand.
- Not judge us.

TRUST



'TRUST US' CAN BE A RANGE OF THINGS: TRUST US TO DO RIGHT, TRUST US BY INVESTING YOUR TIME AND ENERGY INTO US.



To show us that you're listening, adults should...

- Use open body language.
- Ask us how we want to learn and communicate.
- Give us space to get stuff of our chest.
- Recognise that different people learn differently.
- Put our individual skills to good use.



HEARING US IS UNDERSTANDING THAT WE WANT OUR EXPERIENCES, FEELINGS AND IDEAS TO BE VALUED.

WE WANT TO BE INCLUDED IN DECISIONS THAT AFFECT US.

CONTACT US

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GET IN TOUCH



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Sources:

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